

Are the sciences Indigenisable: Of course they are!

Rhonda Hagan and Henk Huijser (Conference 2008)

Rhonda Hagan is a proud Ma:Mu woman from Innisfail in Far North Queensland and is actively involved in the Indigenous women's network in her community. She works in the Centre for Australian Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Southern Queensland. Rhonda has a Bachelor of Arts Degree, Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching and Learning and is currently enrolled in a Masters Degree in Professional Studies. Rhonda's main interest is in delivering effective and meaningful programs at the tertiary level that will ensure retention of Indigenous graduates but advocates that the transmission of appropriate and culturally sensitive Indigenous knowledge be embedded in curriculum.

Henk Huijser grew up in the Netherlands and has taught in the field of media and cultural studies in New Zealand and Australia. He is currently a lecturer in learning enhancement (communication) in the Learning and Teaching Support Unit at the University of Southern Queensland, and a researcher in the Public Memory Research Centre. His research interests include multiculturalism, Indigeneity and educational applications of new media.

Abstract

When embarking on an Indigenising the curriculum project across all faculties, a number of barriers need to be overcome. Some of these are systemic in that such a project is often seen as desirable by university hierarchies, but is rarely backed up by adequate resources to make a serious impact. In other words, mere lip service tends to be paid to Indigenising the curriculum, which manifests itself in the employment of a single Indigenous academic, often on a contract basis, to take on this enormous task. The second barrier is more subtle, and relates to a strong perception that such a project lends itself more to some faculties and disciplines than others. This perception is based on deeply ingrained stereotypes about what constitutes 'Indigenous issues'. Within such perceptions, Arts is seen as 'naturally' more open to Indigenising its curriculum, because of the 'cultural component', while it is often seen as irrelevant to for example the sciences. This paper will address both these barriers and discuss how they are interlinked and reinforce each other, while arguing that Indigenising the curriculum requires a systemic and ongoing commitment to be truly effective.


Henk Huijser: Good morning to you all! We would like to begin by acknowledging the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains on whose land you are meeting today.

My name is Henk Huijser and this is Rhonda Hagan. I work in the Learning and Teaching Support Unit at the University of Southern Queensland, where Rhonda was my colleague until recently, but she now works in the Centre for Australian Indigenous Knowledges. She will talk a little bit about this change in a moment.

Before we start, we would like to thank the organizers of the conference for giving us the opportunity to present our paper in this 'virtual' way [Henk and Rhonda sent across a pre-recorded video presentation]. We are sorry we can't be there, and we really appreciate the opportunity to still take part.

I will begin our presentation by outlining a framework and some background to our experiences at USQ in trying to 'Indigenise the curriculum', and then Rhonda will take over to have a yarn about her own thoughts on this process.


To give you an overview, we'll begin with defining what we mean by Indigenising the Curriculum; then we'll discuss some of the barriers to this objective, and what would need to happen if it is to be successful, and actually make a difference.



Overview

- What do we mean by Indigenising a curriculum?
- Project? Or ongoing engagement?
- Institutional barriers
- Indigenising the Sciences and 'culture change'
- Case study: how do we get beyond 'ad-hocery'?

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Elements of Indigenising the curriculum

- Inclusive pedagogies
- Cultural relevancy & cultural safety (trust)
- Promoting self-determination
- Critical pedagogy → challenging the status quo
- Communication across cultures

→→ Social transformation

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So what do we mean by Indigenising the Curriculum? In our view it is a broad objective that cuts across all sections of the university, and is not only Faculty based, although our first starting point has been in the Faculties.

The ultimate goal is social transformation, in the sense that the ultimate objective is to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across the whole social spectrum. In our view, universities can play a key role in this process, but for that to happen, the key words are *trust* and *respect*.

In other words, universities need to provide a context where Indigenous Australians feel 'at home', because research shows that a main reason for not going to university or for dropping out is a sense of alienation within a university context.

To change this, the curriculum needs to be culturally relevant to Indigenous students and there needs to be an atmosphere of cultural safety where often difficult and uncomfortable issues can be discussed without putdowns.

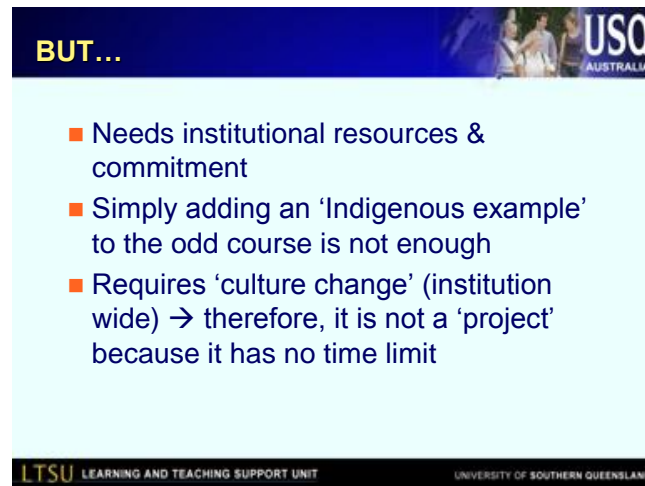
And this is what inclusive pedagogies are about: the inclusive part relates to cultural relevancy, or in other words, a curriculum in which Indigenous students feel a sense of ownership of the material covered, and a sense that this material is directly relevant to their everyday lives.

Inclusive pedagogies are not about simply adding the odd 'Indigenous example' to an existing curriculum, because that keeps the centre firmly in place, and keeps Indigenous issues marginalized as 'warm and fuzzy oddities'.

Instead, inclusive pedagogies need to be informed by critical pedagogy, which challenges the status quo, rather than reinforcing it. Again, this can be uncomfortable at times, and indeed it should be, because change is not always 'comfortable'. In this case, it can be uncomfortable, because it requires both Indigenous and 'mainstream' students and staff to really listen and question their long-held assumptions about their fundamental values.

In the sciences for example, it involves questioning the role of science (as a cultural construct) in Australia's history, including the role of science in colonisation, but I will come back to that in a moment.

Overall, for this to succeed, we argue that it needs a *whole-of-institution approach*, and this was a point that Wendy Nolan and Rob Ranzijn made very strongly when they visited us earlier this year.



BUT...

- Needs institutional resources & commitment
- Simply adding an 'Indigenous example' to the odd course is not enough
- Requires 'culture change' (institution wide) → therefore, it is not a 'project' because it has no time limit

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A whole-of-institution approach can be advocated 'from below', but it definitely needs institutional resources and a strong commitment to its objectives 'from the top'.

Like I said before, simply adding 'an Indigenous example' to the odd course, and then promoting this as 'Indigenising the curriculum' will not have any significant impact, in relation to the outcomes we talked about before.

Instead, a whole-of-institution approach requires 'culture change'. This means that it should be seen as an ongoing commitment, rather than a 'project', because a project has a time limit, which can be detrimental to the overall objectives. In our case for example, Rhonda was employed to 'embed Indigenous perspectives across all five Faculties at USQ, and she was given two years to achieve this...

Now, of course she has done a great job during that time, with very limited resources, but what happens next is anyone's guess...

So this is one aspect of institutional barriers, and it is a result of frequently changing university priorities. Indigenising the curriculum is clearly not a priority anymore...



Institutional barriers

- Hierarchies of priorities
- Difficult to get beyond individual 'champions'
- Deeply entrenched attitudes about what 'Indigenous' means → Indigenous 'issues' as 'appendix to core business'


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And even though there are a number of people, including us, who still want to move this forward, there is at the moment a heavy reliance on 'individual champions'. This is risky, because the whole thing can grind to a halt when individual champions leave.

Again, to make it sustainable as something ongoing, we need strong advocacy to get it included in policy, so that it becomes an integral part of the university's 'core business'.

At the moment, it is more of an 'appendix' to core business, which is reflected in the lack of adequate resourcing.

Okay, before I hand over to Rhonda, I'll talk a little bit about the main question we ask in this presentation: "Are the sciences Indigenisable?"



Indigenising the Sciences

- "What's Indigenous about science"?
- Does Arts lend itself more to Indigenising its curriculum (because it is about 'culture')?
- Critical pedagogy →
 - questioning the role of science
 - questioning what constitutes science
 - questioning the legacy (both positive and negative) of science (e.g. colonial legacy)

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This question is based on questions we often get from colleagues when we talk about Indigenising the Curriculum, like "What is Indigenous about science"? Or "Science is about facts and hard data; what does it have to do with culture?" And by extension, "should we leave this to the Arts Faculty"?

And this is where 'culture change' comes into it. The attitudes that underlie such questions come from the 'cultural centre', where a whole lot of stuff is seen as 'naturally so', rather than socially and culturally constructed. In this way, science is seen as 'just science' rather than a particular way of looking at the world that is informed by cultural values.

If we were to Indigenise the science curriculum, we would therefore employ critical pedagogy to firstly question the role of science in both contemporary and historical contexts. Secondly, to question what we mean by 'science', and how this relates to Indigenous ways of doing things. And finally, to question the legacy of science (both positive and negative).

This can then form the foundation for a critically informed way of thinking about the future role of the sciences in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. This, in turn, will lead to the social transformation I talked about earlier.

At this point, I will hand you over to Rhonda who will reflect on her experiences of being solely responsible for Indigenising the Curriculum at USQ.

A presentation slide titled "Equity Contract" in yellow text on a dark blue header. The header also features a small image of three people and the USQ Australia logo. The main body of the slide is light blue and contains a bulleted list with three items, each preceded by a small orange square: "Indigenous Education Consultant", "Two year contract (Equity funded)", and "Various Supervisors". The footer is dark blue and contains the text "LTSU LEARNING AND TEACHING SUPPORT UNIT" on the left and "UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND" on the right.

Equity Contract

- Indigenous Education Consultant
- Two year contract (Equity funded)
- Various Supervisors

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Rhonda Hagan: Thanks Henk. I would like to acknowledge the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains on whose land you are meeting today. I would like to pay my respects to our Elders past and present and thank them for their knowledge and wisdom and showing us the way to survive today. I am a Ma:Mu woman from Innisfail in Far North Queensland and I pay my respects to my Elders.

Henk mentioned earlier that I was employed to Indigenise the curriculum across all five faculties and given two years to do it. It is a fantastic initiative for USQ, but not a new one to higher education. My friends and colleagues in other universities weren't sure of the role I was to undertake given the limited timeframe of only two years.

My initial position description, **Indigenous Education and Outreach Consultant** was a two-year position created in 2006 and funded by the Equity Support to embed Indigenous perspectives in curriculum. It was to also address the access and retention of Indigenous students to USQ.

When implementing this role, the Director of LTSU at the time of my appointment, was completing his term and handing over responsibility to an Interim Director until a new Director had been appointed. We discussed a plan to meet USQs Strategic Plan in line with LTSU plans.

The newly appointed Dean of Students, assumed the role of acting Director pending the appointment of the new Director in October 2006. A proposal was developed to support embedding Indigenous perspectives.

As a result of LTSU planning under the new Director, and consultation between Equity management and LTSU, the Indigenous Education and Outreach Consultant role had changed due to the nature of

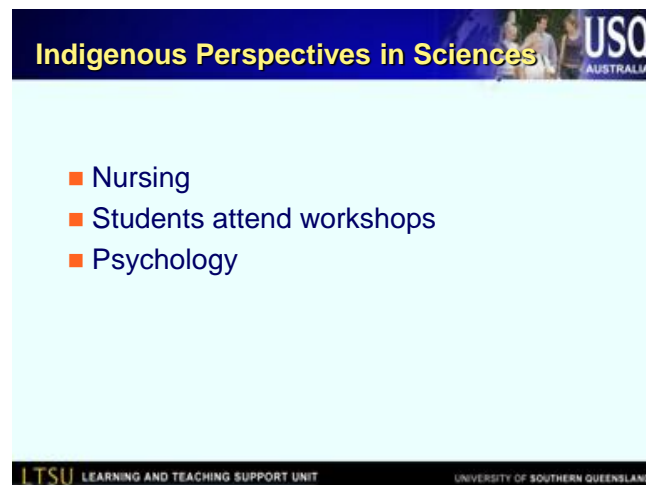
the work to be undertaken, as detailed in the LTSU design. I considered the outreach component too cumbersome and the original position description unattainable and as such recommended successfully to HR the deletion of the term from the position. This established my role in the LTSU section on par with the general function of other staff in line with an emphasis on Learning and Teaching Design. By phasing out the term Outreach from my position description I was no longer required to undertake extensive travel to recruit students to the University.

It was decided that it would be far more productive for the Indigenous Education Consultant to work with Learning and Teaching Development (LTD) staff and make the connection to faculties through LTDs.

I was then given a new supervisor after HR approval. A program for systematic implementation of professional development activities was prepared as part of the ongoing monthly review and forward planning meetings. I had to design a way for staff to embrace Indigenous history, issues and peoples in order for them to feel comfortable with embedding pertinent Indigenous specific content within their programs and courses. This was a side step for me, as I thought it may take a little while out my of two years to develop something like this, then have all the staff attend workshops. At this point, I could not see the timeline for the professional development, then curriculum development and implementation, then evaluation, within the 18 months I had left on my contract. All I could see at this point was the professional development, before my contract expired.

During this stage of uncertainty I was fortunate to have witnessed a workshop conducted through Education Queensland, called Crossing Cultures, and was so impressed that I immediately sought permission to use it within USQ. This was granted and I underwent facilitators training, also provided through workshops conducted by Education Queensland, over the next couple of months.

Since the commencement of this project I have provided culturally appropriate training for some USQ staff in normal workshop format.



In addition I have delivered equivalent training to over 300 undergraduate final year nursing students through support from a Nursing Lecturer in the Faculty of Sciences. The principal reason for working within the Sciences Faculty with this workshop, in particular Nursing, is that nurses are required to prepare culturally appropriate care to a diverse community, also with a particular focus on people with an Indigenous background. Students had to research culture, history, protocols in order to complete these tasks. While working with nursing students I believe I was successful in imparting knowledge through the workshops on the causal nature of the current abysmal Indigenous health statistics provided by the ABS, through a specific address of historical events. The positive outcome of having Indigenous perspectives in Sciences has assisted in a more proactive group of new nurses. We have

confidence that the students we have engaged will, on graduation, provide culturally appropriate care to Indigenous people.

So, this is one particular area within the Sciences where Indigenous perspectives is so important.

Our Psychology department belongs to the Faculty of Sciences, and the leadership of the program has embraced Indigenous perspectives, and has made a commitment to embedding Indigenous perspectives. So that's Nursing and Psychology. What about the other strands: biology, maths and computing, information technology? I am confident those staff I have worked with will continue to ensure the content reflects Indigenous perspectives.

Crossing Cultures has been successful to encourage people to consider perspectives within their own disciplines. Their concern was how to do it. I make reference to the flyer on the LTSU website titled Embedding Indigenous Perspectives. I also discuss the evaluation tool designed in consultation with my colleague from LTSU, to determine the integration of Indigenous perspectives at a program level. It will be used to plan the reconceptualised programs for all faculties at USQ.

I have developed an ongoing working relationship with academics who have been and will continue to be critical to the effective delivery of the Embedding Indigenous Knowledge training for their respective faculties:

Engineering and Surveying;

Business — Law;

Human Services;

Journalism; and

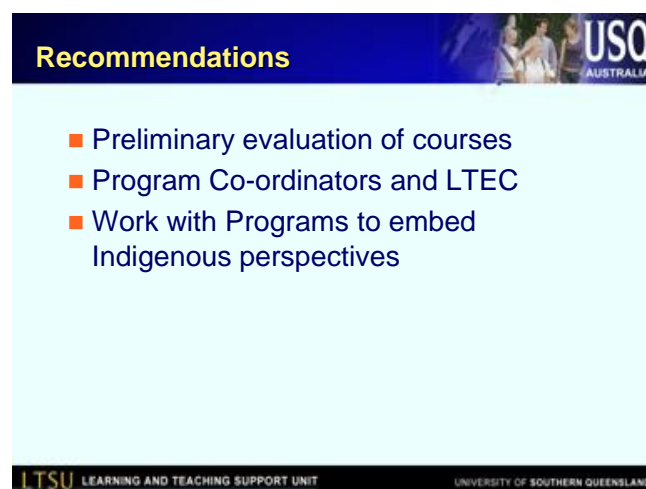
Nursing

Development of resources are listed on the LTSU website, with the very kind assistance of Henk. The website is on the last slide for your information.

USQ is undergoing a review called *Realising Our Potential*. This project has inadvertently affected my role as faculties were unsure of whether their courses and/or programs were being considered under this review for cancellation.

My recommendations in December last year are as follows:

I recommend the following for the future of the Indigenous Education Consultant.



- 1) Conduct a preliminary evaluation of all programs using the Evaluation tool.

- 2) Provide each Program Coordinator and Learning and Teaching Committee with a report, which will include recommendations of Indigenous perspectives, resources, and contact organisations and/or individuals which relate to programs/disciplines.
- 3) Work with each Program Coordinator and academic staff to embed Indigenous perspectives, initially targeting the top 20 courses/programs identified in the USQ *Realising Our Potential* project.

The suggested process above will require the Indigenous Education Consultant to continue in an ongoing position within LTSU if parity of best practice modeling is to be attained.

Unfortunately, this report was only submitted to a committee in March, three months before my contract was due to finish. There was no funding allocated through Equity, the LTSU did not commit to funding the position, but it was still included in program revitalization, and still is for the next 18 months. All the staff in LTSU have their leadership roles, and taking on Indigenous perspectives is not something I would expect them to carry as an additional duty.

I am uncertain and rather sceptical of what the future holds for Indigenous perspectives and curriculum development at the USQ, but as Henk mentioned earlier, it must be a whole of institution approach.

I can only hope that visionary leadership may one day see the significance of my early work and allocate appropriate resources to ensure the continuity and maintenance of the hard yards gained to date.

More information can be found at the website showing on the screen.

<http://www.usq.edu.au/learnteach/teach/keystrat/indig/default.htm>

If you have any questions or comments about today's presentation, please contact us on the address provided on the screen.

- Henk Huijser – huijser@usq.edu.au
- Rhonda Hagan – hagan@usq.edu.au

Cheers and thanks for having us.