Indigenous Cultural Competency is an appreciation and understanding of indigenous Australian issues contextualised within the discipline and the wider society. At the launch of the inaugural 2011 – 2012 Reconciliation Action Plan Professor Kerry Cox said:

“ECU’s vision for reconciliation is to provide a learning environment that values Indigenous Australian people, knowledge and culture, which contributes towards Indigenous Australian people receiving the same life opportunities as other Australians in a society which respects diversity, equality, and the contributions of all.”

The University promotes access to, and successful participation in, its teaching programs for Indigenous Australians, providing a supportive organisation ethos which values and respects Indigenous Australian culture and knowledge.

Why is it important?

Data collected in the Higher Education sector shows traditionally poor rates of enrolment, success and retention of Indigenous students. As part of the government’s policy to “Close the Gap” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the University actively encourages participation of Indigenous students at a rate similar to their representation in the community. In 2009, 1.35% of ECU’s domestic student enrolments were from Indigenous Australian students against a backdrop of an estimated 2.5% of Indigenous Australians across the population. The university therefore aims to support the experience for Indigenous Australians at ECU because of their unique historical, colonial, social, political, cultural, economic and contemporary experiences.
What does the ECU policy say?

The ECU Policy for Recognising Indigenous Australian Peoples and Country states that:

“ECU is committed to reconciliation and to recognising and respecting Indigenous Australian Peoples in our history and place. ECU recognises and respects its continuing association with the traditional custodians of the land upon which its campuses stand and programs operate, and their rights and responsibilities.”

In addition to this policy there are a few important documents on this topic, namely ECU’s Statement of Commitment to Indigenous Australians, the Indigenous Action Plan 2008-2010: Delivering on our Commitment to Indigenous Australians and the 2011 – 2012 Reconciliation Action Plan.

What are the key principles?

The Aboriginal Cultural Competence Framework developed by the Victorian Government suggests a helpful summary of the key points that are fundamental to Aboriginal cultural competence:

- cultural awareness – understanding the role cultural difference and diversity plays;
- commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and building respectful partnerships;
- cultural respect – valuing Aboriginal peoples and their cultures;
- cultural responsiveness – having the ability and skills to assist people of a different culture;
- cultural safety – creating an environment that is safe and welcoming for Aboriginal peoples;
- cross-cultural practice and care – being able to relate and provide services to Aboriginal peoples; and
- self-reflection – being able to see how your culture and dominant culture generally impacts on Aboriginal peoples.

Ideas for embedding Indigenous Cultural Competences in teaching, learning and assessment

We have a tremendous teaching resource available in the form of Kurongkurl Katitjin, ECU’s Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research. (Kurongkurl Katitjin, pronounced koor-ong-kurl cut-it-chin, is a Nyoongar phrase meaning ‘coming together to learn’.) The Centre’s mission is to "provide excellence in teaching, learning and research in a culturally inclusive environment that values the diversity of Indigenous Australian history and cultural heritage". Academic units across the University can work independently or with the Centre to embed indigenous Cultural Competences into courses and units in any of the following ways outlined below.

- Include an indigenous cultural competency unit, conducted in conjunction with Kurongkurl Katitjin staff as a core unit in the course.
- Include an elective unit in a course offered through Kurongkurl Katitjin and in conjunction with Kurongkurl Katitjin staff.
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- Include activities about relevant issues in units or courses to facilitate the development of knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian issues such as:
  - pre-colonial and post-colonial Indigenous history in Australia;
  - the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their cultures;
  - cultural practices;
  - cultural identity;
  - society needs;
  - the concepts of whiteness, privilege, value systems, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices and propensity to stereotype;
  - land use; and
  - contemporary issues of concern.

- Incorporate examples of indigenous art, music, dance and/or theatre in courses and explore its place in contemporary Australian society.

In her literature review of Cultural Competency at University Level, Ellen Grote (2010) lists a number of teaching, learning and assessment strategies used in Universities in Australia that can be used to enhance Indigenous Cultural Competence:

- didactic lectures and seminars delivered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff members working in partnership;
- guest lecturers or speakers, e.g. Indigenous scholars, professionals or prominent members of the local Indigenous community who present alongside other Indigenous colleagues;
- panel presentations involving prominent Indigenous community members;
- cultural immersion activities, e.g. visits to Indigenous communities or organisations;
- informal meetings with local Indigenous organisations;
- guided cultural field trips, e.g. to museums or art centres;
- workshops prepared and presented by students;
- case study or ‘paper cases’ (Furman & Dent, 2004, p. 27), i.e. longitudinal case studies for discussion and analysis;
- scenarios used for discussion and analysis;
- film excerpts used for discussion and analysis;
- readings about life experiences (fiction and non-fiction);
- analysis and discussion of critical incident reports, i.e. a collection of direct observations that have critical significance, usually gathered through the medium of storytelling;
- continuous reflective activities, e.g. journaling, identity narratives about self and others, reflections on readings, or presentations;
- portfolios containing e.g. media texts collected by students, personal critical incidents or analysing texts for white ‘cultural scripts’;
- role plays; and
- games simulating cross-cultural encounters, e.g. BaFa BaFa; Welcome to the State of Poverty;
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- choice of essay topics requiring students to engage with and reflect on culture and professional cross-cultural interactions;
- use of central website with links to relevant resources, organisations, etc. which can be used for cultural competency foundation and integrated units;
- on-line discussion forums (e.g. available on Blackboard);
- oral presentations by individual students or groups, e.g. on aspects of culture; and
- reflective responses to guest speaker presentations.

Where to find out more?

- Contacts: Kurongkurl Katitjin has a special role to play in providing support for activities and programs across the University, as well as specific teaching, research and support activities in relation to Indigenous Australian people and their cultures.
- Professional Development opportunities: Graeme Gower & Dr. Matt Byrne from Kurongkurl Katitjin have developed a cross-cultural awareness program for staff that includes content about Indigenous Australian history and culture, contemporary issues, effective communication strategies used in Indigenous contexts and interactive activities to demonstrate culturally appropriate protocols and practices for interactions with Australian Indigenous people.
- Examples of embedding Indigenous Cultural Competences in teaching, learning and assessment can be found in the CLD Curriculum 2012 example booklet, available from CLD.
- Recommended references:


Acknowledgements

This document draws on material from the ECU Policy on Recognising Indigenous Australian Peoples and Country, the ECU 2010 Indigenous Education Statement, a report by Graeme Gower for Universities Australia about Cultural Competency @ ECU, the Curriculum 2012 Booklet: Examples for Teachers and the Course Coordinator Handbook, both available from CLD.