

For advancing undergraduate marketing students' cultural competency and fostering respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through embedding Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum.

Overview: Graduate attributes aim to equip students with transferable, work-ready skills that extend beyond disciplinary knowledge. However, the integration of Aboriginal graduate attributes remains slow, inconsistent, and lacking in clear accountability (Bullen & Flavell, 2022). Many Australian academics continue to prioritise disciplinary content over the development of cultural competencies (Barrie, 2007), with efforts often limited to surface-level awareness. Such shallow engagement mirrors broader societal attitudes toward Aboriginal knowledge systems and avoids deeper exploration of their value and complexity. In contrast, involving local Elders and communities as knowledge experts offers students authentic learning experiences that can better prepare them for global challenges and foster a sense of social responsibility (Bullen & Flavell, 2022). Consistent with this, Universities Australia (2017-2022) advocates for the genuine and systematic inclusion of Indigenous content aligned with students' future professions.

Embedding Indigenous knowledges in university teaching is a shared responsibility, yet many non-Indigenous educators hesitate to engage, often due to a lack of confidence, resources, or fear of making mistakes. This reluctance places undue pressure on Indigenous staff, who are frequently overburdened, limiting students' opportunities for genuine engagement with Indigenous perspectives, truth-telling, and culturally informed learning. With nearly 98% of the School of Business and Law's undergraduate students at Edith Cowan University (ECU) identifying as non-Indigenous, embedding cultural learning is crucial. In response, we (Melissa Fong-Emmerson and A/Prof Claire Lambert), both non-Indigenous Australians and guided by Malgana Yamatji colleague, Rebekah Dougan, launched an initiative within a second-year undergraduate marketing unit in Semester 1, 2021. This initiative aimed to build students' cultural competencies through direct collaboration with First Nations business owners. The redesigned unit shifts beyond a traditional Western framework by incorporating Indigenous knowledges and applying a decolonising marketing lens. It offers a strengths-based, applied learning experience that reinforces core marketing concepts while embedding Indigenous perspectives in a respectful, authentic way. Through culturally grounded, real-world assessments, the unit provides a rare example of embedding meaningful Indigenous content within marketing education, directly addressing what Raciti (2022, p. 210) identifies as "an epistemology of ignorance."

Criterion A: Positively impacted on student learning, student engagement or the overall student experience

Cultural immersion was key to prompting students to consider "whose authenticity is at stake" (Forsyth & Evans, 2019, p. 748). To support this, students received an early cultural briefing from the University's Indigenous Centre before engaging with First Nations retail business owners through authentic, project-based assessments. This aligns with McArthur's (2022) vision of authentic assessment that fosters societal impact, student belonging, and community connection. Students were also supported with resources such as respectful language guides and the *State of Reconciliation in Australia* report, while Indigenous and marketing knowledges were scaffolded through case studies of local First Nations businesses. A highlight was the respectful collaboration with Indigenous business owners, who shared their journeys and business contexts with students early in the unit and later reviewed the students' marketing strategies, creating a meaningful and reciprocal learning experience. This approach fostered cultural competence and respectful engagement, with students applying their skills in real-world contexts while demonstrating genuine understanding of cultural values. Several have since gained employment with the Indigenous businesses, with Olivia reflecting on her experience: *Since completing the unit, I have gained work with the small Indigenous business, Kitikiti, by being offered to assist in the re-creation of their website based on my assignments from the unit. This has been such an amazing and positive experience for me (Unsolicited student email, 2022).*

Reflection was intentionally built into activities and assessments to help students transform experiences into deeper learning. Through learning diaries, they developed critical thinking, challenged

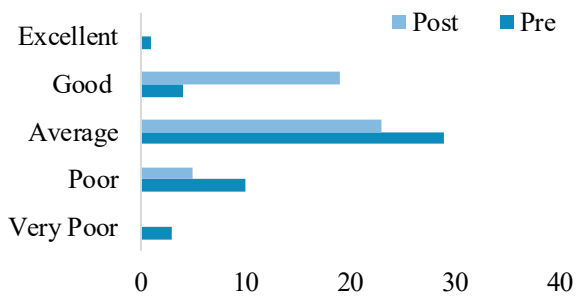


Figure 1 – Students' rating of their knowledges

assumptions, considered diverse perspectives, and shifted worldviews. To evaluate impact, we launched the research project *'Measuring the effect of embedding Indigenous culture on enhancing higher education student learning (2021-2024)*, assessing students' knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures before (pre) and after (post) the unit (see Figure 1). Results showed many students critically engaged with the content, identified gaps in prior knowledge, and achieved significant learning gains. As 21-year-old Kate, an international

student, reflected: *In addition to gaining an understanding of retail market strategy, this unit has also afforded an invaluable insight into and knowledge of First Nations business practices and the immense value they bring to society (Student reflection, 2021).*

Fostering a strengths-based approach was central to the unit, placing Indigenous voices at the forefront and valuing their knowledge and insights. Through experiential learning, students gained insight into both the challenges faced by First Nations businesses and the strengths of Indigeneity. As Bullen and Roberts (2019) note, critical reflection is key to transformative learning, a principle evident in student reflection that shifts beliefs, assumptions, and behaviours. Many also shared strong emotional responses, particularly to the history of First Nations peoples. As Gina reflected: *Like many of my classmates, the Kevin Rudd apology speech was when I cried. I got overwhelmed by sadness and guilt watching how relieved First Nations were when they received an apology – an apology that should have been given many years prior. It is evident that this changed my perspective, challenged my thought process, and impacted how I viewed societal issues. This was something that I absolutely did not expect from a Retail Marketing unit (Student reflection, 2021).* Others shared how the insights enhanced their confidence: *I was taught Aboriginal history in school, but not from the direct perspective of Indigenous people. I now feel more confident to effectively work with Indigenous businesses in the future (Student reflection, 2023).*

Students valued the safe and supportive environment, which allowed them to develop their cultural competencies and engage with Aboriginal cultures in a respectful and meaningful way. *I am very conscious of the fact that I don't have a network of people around me with any Indigenous culture at all. I think the beauty of [this] unit, and the message behind it, is that this is the place to have those kinds of conversations. Teaching university students to have these kinds of conversations, empowers them to have these kinds of conversations once they leave university (Olivia Warner, student, ABC news, 2024).*

Criterion B: Gained recognition from colleagues, the institution, and/or the broader community.

This work demonstrates how decolonising pedagogies, inclusive teaching, and authentic community collaboration can drive transformative learning that advances reconciliation, equity, and teaching excellence. Industry partners praised students' creativity, cultural sensitivity, and genuine enthusiasm. As one partner reflected: *the enthusiasm and creativity of the students stood out. The students' dedication and contributions to our project were commendable. I would endorse and highlight their work to potential employers, knowing their valuable insights and creative approaches could significantly benefit any organisation (Kirrikin Australia, 2023).* Over the past five years, our team has continuously refined the unit through a shared commitment to culturally responsive curriculum design, earning significant recognition. The work was recognised by ECU's Indigenous Centre, Kurungkurl Katitjin: *Through engaging Aboriginal businesses in this manner, the team is breaking down barriers between large institutions and the Aboriginal community and is providing their students with a rich insight into real-life marketing contexts with the added layer of cultural understanding and competency. I am very excited to see this approach embedded across the University into the future (Shaun Wright, Student Success Officer, 2022).* Most recently, the initiative was featured on the ECU website during Reconciliation Week 2025 as an example of advancing students' cultural competency and respectful collaboration with Indigenous communities: *'ECU students gain real-world experience through partnership with Indigenous entrepreneurs'* (ECU Newsroom, 2025). In the same year, our work was recognised with the Vice Chancellor's Learning and Teaching Award for a Citation for Sustained Commitment to Enhancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Our work has been showcased at major academic forums, including the WA Teaching and Learning Forum (2022, 2023), the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Conference (2024), and Australia New Zealand Marketing Academic Conference (ANZMAC, 2024). It was also featured by the ABC during Reconciliation Week (Shepherd, 2024), highlighting its broader cultural impact. Building on strong student and stakeholder feedback led to funding from ECU's Centre for Learning and Teaching to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the entire Bachelor of Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations, co-delivered by the Schools of Business and Law, and Arts and Humanities. In 2025, the team presented at The University of Western Australia (UWA), inspiring UWA marketing academics to establish a reading circle and begin adopting similar approaches in their teaching. Associate Professor Jo Sneddon (Marketing, UWA) acknowledged the significance and importance of this work: *Thanks so much for this reading list and for your time. As discussed, we are going to put the call out for marketing academics to join a reading circle. Hopefully, we can build this into a community of practice (Unsolicited email, 2025)*. Dr Uwana Evers, from the UWA Business School, reflected on the initiative and its influence in her report to the School of Indigenous Studies: *Inspired by the work Melissa Fong-Emmerson and her team are doing at ECU, I wanted to begin the journey of embedding Indigenous perspectives into my own teaching practices (Report, 2025)*. This response reflects the broader impact of our work, inspiring colleagues across institutions to critically engage with and meaningfully embed Indigenous perspectives in marketing education.

Criterion C: Shown creativity, imagination and/or innovation

Although Indigenous cultural competencies hold great potential, gaps often remain between policy, practice, and outcomes. As Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2019) note, these are complicated by disciplinary differences and debates within Indigenous Studies. Nakata's (2007) Cultural Interface theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the tensions at the intersection of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, marked by competing expectations. In marketing education, these challenges are intensified by crowded curricula and the need to balance generic and discipline-specific skills. Our approach addressed these pressures by seamlessly integrating Indigenous content into the unit. Students collaborated directly with First Nations business owners, gaining practical insights into Indigenous cultural knowledge while applying core marketing concepts in real-world contexts. This approach also addressed resource constraints in Indigenous centres by involving Indigenous allies in curriculum decolonisation, with the guidance of Indigenous mentors and communities to ensure cultural integrity and respectful engagement. This approach was commended by Professor Braden Hill, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Students, Equity and Indigenous) at ECU, during a 2024 presentation held at ECU by Professor Martin Nakata AM, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Education and Strategy) from James Cook University, who spoke on Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy. *This is an impactful result of non-Indigenous academics learning and being guided on how to do this work respectfully and meaningfully alongside Indigenous colleagues (Professor Braden Hill, LinkedIn post, 2024)*.

What distinguishes this unit is its strengths-based approach to embedding Indigenous perspectives, an approach still uncommon in marketing education. Real-world tasks prepare students to address professional challenges with cultural awareness. In 2023, Nyikina artist and business owner Molly West (Bilya Djinda) reflected on her experience as an industry partner, noting how centuries of silenced Aboriginal voices have disrupted knowledge sharing and left many stories untold (Shepherd, 2024). She affirms: *This experience has reinforced the immense value of collaboration and diverse perspectives. Engaging with the students taught me the importance of remaining open to fresh ideas, embracing innovation, and leveraging the power of collective creativity to drive business growth. The current teaching approach aims to create an authentic learning experience by acknowledging and integrating Indigenous perspectives, histories, and cultures. It's a positive step toward inclusivity and diversity in education.*

Criterion D: Drawn on the scholarly literature on teaching and learning to inform the development of initiatives, programs and/or practice.

Our teaching is guided by contemporary scholarship on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and on embedding Indigenous knowledges and voices into the curriculum. We work collaboratively and respectfully to integrate these perspectives into students' learning, beginning each semester with a cultural briefing to ground both domestic and international students in cultural respect. Acknowledging that universities have

historically lacked robust inclusion of Indigenous content (Universities Australia, 2011), we see it as our responsibility to contribute to the decolonisation of higher education and equip non-Indigenous students with the knowledge and skills to engage respectfully with Indigenous communities. As Bullen and Flavell (2022) argue, decolonising the curriculum requires rethinking pedagogies, privileging Indigenous knowledges, and challenging Western dominant narratives to enhance graduate employability. Grounded in Nakata's (2007) Cultural Interface Theory and strength-based pedagogy (Bullen & Roberts, 2019), our work challenges deficit discourses and embeds resilience, cultural appropriateness, and empowerment (Fforde et al., 2013), while centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and knowledge (Bryant et al., 2021). This scholarly approach underpins our curriculum design and research, recognised through our 2024 peer-reviewed publication 'Enhancing marketing students' Indigenous cultural competencies through a decolonisation and authentic assessment approach' in the *Australasian Marketing Journal*.

Marketing sits at the intersection of commerce and communication, reflecting and shaping societal values. This positions marketing educators with the responsibility to ensure graduates engage ethically, inclusively, and reflexively (Wilkie et al., 2023). Our initiative reconfigures traditional power dynamics by centring Indigenous voices and perspectives in the unit and assessment design, prompting students to critically reflect on their assumptions and positionality (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019). These efforts align with the Universities Australia *Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025* and the *Universities Accord* (Universities Australia, 2022), echoing Raciti's (2022) call for marketing educators, practitioners, and students to build cultural competencies and 'to embed in non-Indigenous graduates the knowledge and skills necessary for them to provide genuinely competent services to the Australian Indigenous community' (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 6).

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