

For advancing cultural competency and respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by embedding Indigenous perspectives into undergraduate marketing students' learning and development.

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 lacks accountability (Bullen & Flavell, 2022). Many academics still prioritise discipline-content over cultural competencies (Barrie, 2007), with efforts often limited to surface-level awareness. This shallow engagement reflects 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 can better prepare graduates for global challenges and promote social responsibility (Bullen & Flavell, 2022). Universities Australia (2017-2022) also calls for authentic, consistent 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 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, Rebecca 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. This redesigned unit shifts beyond a traditional Western framework by incorporating Indigenous knowledges and 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 incorporating meaningful Indigenous content in marketing education, addressing what Raciti (2022, p. 210) describes as "an epistemology of ignorance."

Sub-category 1: Developing teaching practice, curricula or learning environments that foster inclusion for a diverse range of students.

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 briefed students on their journey and business context early in the unit and later reviewed their marketing strategies, creating a meaningful and reciprocal learning experience. This approach supported the development of cultural competence and respectful engagement. Students applied their skills in real-world contexts while showing genuine understanding of cultural values. Several students have gone on to gain 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. Students kept a learning diary to enhance critical thinking, challenge assumptions, consider diverse perspectives, and foster shifts in worldviews. To strengthen our practice and evaluate impact, we launched a research project (2021-2024) titled: *'Measuring the effect of embedding Indigenous culture on enhancing higher education student learning.'* The study assessed students'

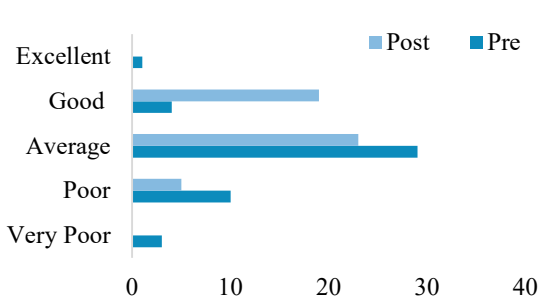


Figure 1 – Students' rating of their knowledges

knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures at the beginning (pre) and end (post) of the unit to identify growth in understanding (see Figure 1). Results showed many students critically engaged with the content, recognised gaps in their prior knowledge, and demonstrated 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 also essential. This approach repositions relationships by centring Indigenous voices and valuing their knowledge and insights. Through experiential learning, students gained insight into both the challenges faced by First Nations businesses and the strengths inherent in Indigeneity. As Bullen and Roberts (2019) note, critical reflection is key to transformative learning. This was evident in student reflections, which revealed shifts in beliefs, assumptions, and behaviours. Many students also described 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 foster transformative learning experiences that advance reconciliation, equity, and teaching excellence. Industry partners have commended the students for their creativity, culturally 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 Kurongkurl Katitjin: *Through engaging Aboriginal businesses in this manner, the team is breaking down barriers between large institutions and the Aboriginal community and are 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, it was highlighted on the ECU website as an example advancing students' cultural competency and respectful collaboration with Indigenous communities: *'ECU students gain real-world experience through partnership with Indigenous entrepreneurs' during Reconciliation week 2025 (ECU Newsroom, 2025).*

Our work has been shared at major academic forums, including the WA Teaching and Learning Forum (2022, 2023), 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 the team to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the entire Bachelor of Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations, co-delivered by Schools of Business and Law, and Arts and Humanities. In 2025, the team was invited to present at the University of Western Australia (UWA), where our work inspired UWA marketing academics to form 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 meaningful response reflects the broader ripple effect of our work, encouraging colleagues across institutions to critically engage with Indigenous perspectives and embed them meaningfully within marketing education.

Criterion C: Shown creativity, imagination and/or innovation

Although Indigenous cultural competencies offer significant potential, there is often a gap between policy, practice, and outcomes. As Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2019) note, this is further complicated by disciplinary differences and ongoing debates within Indigenous Studies. Nakata's (2007) Cultural Interface theory offers a valuable framework for understanding these tensions, highlighting the complexity of the space where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems intersect, often marked by competing expectations and demands. In marketing education, these challenges are heightened by an already crowded curriculum and the need to balance both generic and discipline-specific skills. Our approach responded to these pressures through the seamless integration of 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 novel approach was commended by Professor Braden Hill (ECU) during a 2024 presentation delivered by Professor Martin Nakata at Edith Cowan University on Indigenising 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. Through real-world tasks, it prepares students to tackle practical, 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 aligns well with, and is informed by, contemporary scholarly literature related to diversity, equity, and inclusion and the embedding of Indigenous knowledges and voices into the curriculum. We work collaboratively and respectfully to include these cultural perspectives in the students' learning experience. We begin each semester with a cultural briefing to ground domestic and international students in cultural respect and set the tone for meaningful engagement. The teaching team recognise that universities have historically lacked robust inclusion of Indigenous content (Universities Australia, 2011), and 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 involves 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 decolonises the curriculum by challenging deficit discourses and embedding resilience, cultural appropriateness, and empowerment (Fforde et al., 2013), while centring the leadership and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Bryant et al., 2021). This scholarly approach underpins both our curriculum development and research practice, with our contributions recognised and disseminated through a 2024 peer-reviewed publication titled '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; it not only reflects societal values but actively shapes them, positioning marketing educators with the responsibility to ensure graduates are equipped to engage ethically, inclusively, and reflexively (Wilkie et al., 2023). This initiative reconfigures traditional power dynamics by centring Indigenous voices and perspectives into the unit and assessment design, prompting students to reflect critically on their assumptions and position (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2019). Our efforts to build cultural competency in marketing students align with the Universities Australia *Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025* and the *Universities Accord* (Universities Australia, 2022), echoing respected marketing Indigenous scholar 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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