Embedding Indigenous Perspectives: A Consideration of Place in Local and Transnational Education

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Abstract

This paper discusses a program of work undertaken by RMIT University, Australia, to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum in both its Australian and off-shore campuses. It takes a first step in the consideration of the complexities that arise when First Peoples' knowledge systems and cultural practices are exported—and frequently collide—with the idea of the global. It does this through a consideration of 'place', place being so vital to Indigenous cultures. While the paper is case specific, its discussion of how to frame the significance of place in the context of higher education and understanding how this might translate globally has relevance for all education institutions wishing to create inclusive education environments.

Keywords: Place; Indigenous perspectives; Transnational education; Inclusive education.

1. Introduction

Commitment to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (*UNDRIP*), (2007) and more recent Australian national policies including the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics* (2020) and the Universities Australia (UA) *Indigenous Strategy 2017-2022* (2017) have led to a flurry of activity within higher education institutions as they attempt to redress their colonial past and develop research and learning and teaching environments that safeguard cultural heritage and foster Indigenous aspirations (*Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Act* (*RMIT Act*), (2010). Much attention has been paid to the internationalisation of higher education (Denman, 2007; Kleibert et al., 2020); furthermore, the World Indigenous Network Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) has posed a challenge to the barriers for First Peoples demanding inclusive education in western universities (Robertson et al., 2012). Discussion around the

complexity of exporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture via off-shore campuses, however, remains nascent.

This paper discusses a program of work undertaken by the Office of Indigenous Education, Research and Engagement at RMIT University, Australia, to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in curriculum in both its Australian and off-shore campuses. It then offers a first step in the consideration of the complexities that arise when First Peoples knowledge systems and cultural practices are exported—and frequently collide—with the idea of the global. It does this through a consideration of 'place', place being so vital to Indigenous communities. While the paper is case specific, its consideration of how to frame the significance of place in the context of higher education, and how this may translate globally in the creation of inclusive environments in educational institutions.

2. Background and Context

RMIT University is a dual sector, global institution, and Australia's second largest university. It has over 90,000 students and more than 10,000 staff with campuses in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, and Danang, Vietnam; it also offers programs through a range of Asian and European partners. The focus of this paper rests with RMIT's Melbourne campuses, which exist on Kulin Nation's Country, and offshore campuses in Vietnam, offshore being an independent form of transnational education whose colonial antecedence is shadowed in their 'full control' of curriculum, qualifications and campus development (Kleibert et al., 2020).

The university's governance of the Indigenous perspectives program of work was primarily driven by its commitment to *UNDRIP* (2007). Through its declaration, the United Nations recognises that Australia and its institutions have responsibilities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the right to 'establish and control their education' without discrimination (Article 14, pp. 13-14), and the right to have Indigenous cultures and aspirations reflected in education (Article 15, p.14). At a national level, the UA *Indigenous Strategy 2017-2020* (2017) recommends that all students studying at Australian universities be given the opportunity to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content throughout their studies and develop cultural competency.

3. Embedding Indigenous Perspectives in Curriculum

The Indigenous perspectives program of work began in early 2019, initially with an environmental scan of Australian universities to gain insight into relevant strategies for curriculum development and learning and teaching models. A critical review was also undertaken of approaches for embedding Indigenous perspectives adapted in higher education institutions in Australia, as well as New Zealand and Canada. As the environmental scan and

critical review was being completed, a pilot study was established to set the foundations for the development of a framework of guiding principles for embedding Indigenous perspectives in curriculum. Discipline leads and program managers from RMIT University's three higher education colleges were invited to collaborate on this work. The participants included five staff from the College of Sciences, Engineering, Computing Technologies and Health and Medical Sciences, three staff from the College of Business and Law and six staff from the College of Design and Social Context. Participants initially completed a curriculum audit of all courses in one chosen program using guiding questions or prompts, which would later inform mapping activities. The next step involved collaborating with program managers and coordinators to create curriculum maps in the disciplines of Environmental Engineering, Surveying and Geospatial Science, Creative Writing, Early Childhood Education, Sustainability and Urban Planning and Human Resource Management programs (for further discussion see, Murray & Campton, 2023).

The purpose of mapping curriculum was to capture current initiatives and activities that involved Indigenous content and culturally safe behaviours occurring in disciplines, and to understand how best to develop the capability of educators to embed Indigenous perspectives in discipline knowledge, practices, protocols and skills (Uchiyama & Radin, 2009). Through curriculum mapping and collaboration a framework of Principles was developed, modelled on a helix with six domains of action: Belonging, Collaboration, Power dynamics, Relationality, Responding to context and Strength-based (see *Figure 1*).

The Indigenous perspectives program of work produced a framework of guiding principles to structure learning across disciplines and programs; and identified reflexivity, critical thinking, and relationality, detailed in *Figure 1*, as necessary capabilities for educators to accomplish this work (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, the implementation stage of the program of work was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Melbourne, Australia, where RMIT University's main campus is located, the government's response to the pandemic was particularly severe for education institutions, with lockdowns, empty campuses, the departure of international student cohorts and ensuing staff losses. With a return to some kind of normality in 2023, a rethinking of the work and its initiatives was undertaken in response to new policies and changing learning environments. A review began in mid 2023 to assess whether the work was still relevant and fit for purpose in a rapidly, changing learning environment.
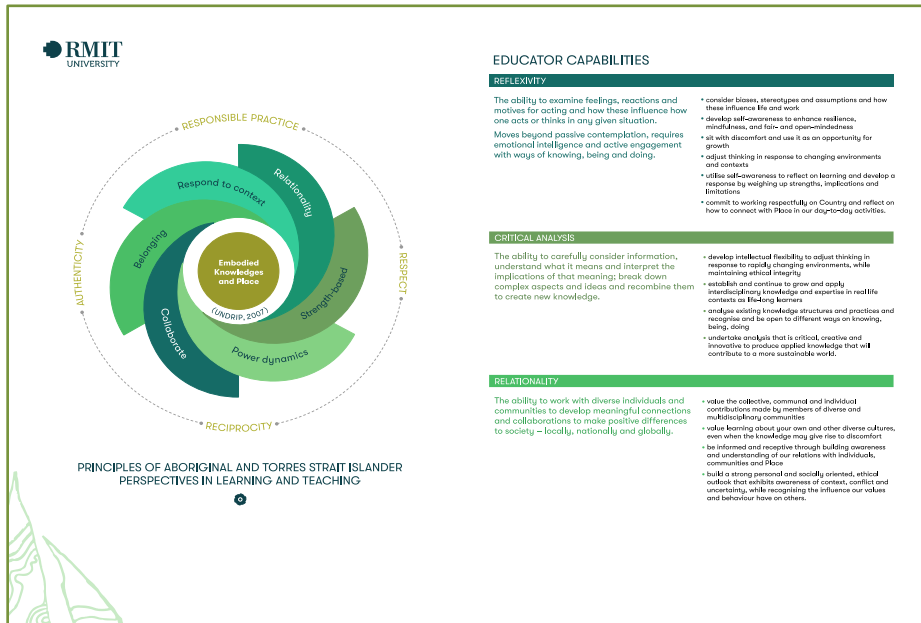
Figure I. Guiding Principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives Framework.

4. A Rethinking of the work

The review surfaced two issues that required serious consideration; 1, had the exponential developments in artificial intelligence (AI) specially, for example, the Large Language Module, ChatGPT effected the behaviours and activities required by educators; 2, were the principles identified in the framework applicable in all RMIT's geographies, specifically the off-shore campuses in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, Vietnam. To briefly attend to the first issue; including Indigenous perspectives in curriculum requires ethical integrity and a shared values proposition. At RMIT University, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems are understood as constructed by applying collective, community-based ways of knowing, being and doing to the production of knowledge (Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Watson, 2014). This knowledge, whether it be in the form of research or curriculum content, is owned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities and protected from human and technological misuse by *Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights* (ICIP, Janke 2022) and *Indigenous Data Sovereignty* (AIATSIS, 2019).

Obviously, the ensuring of an ethical approach to Indigenous knowledge systems requires further discussion—perhaps the focus of another paper—however, in review, the framework of Principles fulfilled the requirement of guiding staff in ethical behaviour and developing their

critical and reflexive capabilities to engage with Indigenous knowledges with integrity. The discussion of RMIT's geographies and the relevance of place requires further attention.

5. Shifting Perceptions of Place

The initial focus of the Indigenous perspectives program of work was on curriculum development at RMIT University's Melbourne campuses. However, at off-shore campuses, students are taught the identical curriculum, often without consideration of the local learning environment. Students receive the same degrees which are recognised professionally within the home country's employment ecosystem (Kleibert et al., 2020). A workshop held in July 2023 with both RMIT Australian and Vietnamese based staff evidenced feedback from educators and students that there was a level of unease around the requirements to embed Indigenous perspectives in curriculum along with other cultural practices at the Vietnam campuses.

Connection to place is vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples' identities, but in many countries this relationship is less familiar. Vietnam is a multiethnic country that recognises 54 ethnic groups, 53 of which are ethnic minority groups—the 54th being Chinese. Although Vietnam voted in favour of *UNDRIP*, it does not recognise ethnic minorities to be First Peoples and nor has it ratified ILO Convention 169, the major binding international convention concerning First Peoples (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, (IWGIA, n.d.). Vietnam is a socialist republic with a one-party system led by the Communist Party—land rights do not exist in this ideological context. On the other hand, Australia, as a nation, has a bloody colonial history; one it is yet to fully deal with through truth telling and reconciliation (Birch, 2002; Reynolds, 2021). It also has an uncomfortable history in Vietnam through the actions and legacy of the Vietnam War (Young et. al., 2021). Beckwith (2022) notes that nationalism and the interconnectedness of global issues has 'intensified friction' for citizenship in the 'local and global spheres' (p. 87). She argues that further research into how the 'local is intertwined with global and how shared interests and issues can unite communities' elevates the idea of connectivity and helps develop ideas of global citizenship (p. 93).

The Principles are centered around the understanding that Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems are embodied. They are relational, interconnected, and embodied in and enacted through Country (Burgess et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2016). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Country describes the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected; being in relation with Country defines their sense of identity and belonging (AIATSIS, 2021). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Country is a deeply significant place. In this sense, place is a 'way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world' (Cresswell, 2015. p. 18).

Place is 'a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment' (Cresswell, 2015, p.18). However, as Lippard (1997) notes, it's 'common place in Western societies in the twenty-

first century to bemoan a loss of a sense of place as the forces of globalization have eroded local cultures and produced homogenized global spaces' (p.14). The focus on the capabilities of reflexivity and critical thinking enables the articulate of a shift in thinking from place as 'capital to be possessed', to place as a relational entity requiring considerations of reciprocity. This understanding requires us to respond to place in a way that shifts our perceptions beyond resource and utility to instead engage in a reciprocal manner with the singularity of each location as a relational entity. We see this relation being acted out as Escobar (2015) argues, in the desire for the 'reconstruction of communal spaces and for reconnecting with nature', actions that constitute the reactivation of relationality (p. 23).

6. Conclusion

As shown in *Figure 1*, by making embodied knowledges and place the central and core Principles for the framework, we celebrate the unique reciprocal networks of connection whereby Country embodies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, and we make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' inclusion grounded and central. In RMIT's geographies, place offers learning opportunities open to all our disciplines through collective responsibilities and local communities, the physical environment, culture, history and sustainability. This acknowledgement demands a reconsideration of place, with which we are all entangled in mutual relations. So place becomes an opportunity for inclusivity that can potentially become common ground and establish future directions. Place as a meaningful location can bring us back to considerations of embodied, place and community-based ways of knowing, being and doing in the production of knowledge, no matter where education is being pursued.

Acknowledgements

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