Response to the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review Discussion Paper

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Why doesn't initial teacher education equip teachers to teach the Australian Curriculum or to meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers?

On review of the *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review 2021 Discussion Paper* (Discussion Paper) (and the papers on which it builds), there appears to be a significant part of the initial teacher education (ITE) conversation that is missing entirely: Why doesn't ITE prepare culturally-competent teachers who are ready and capable of teaching the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority? One of the most significant achievements in relation to the *Australian Curriculum* is ACARA's selection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures as a cross-curriculum priority[1]. As a cross-curriculum priority it is expected that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures are taught across all learning areas and support the learning of all general capabilities (ACARA, 2021). This is a significant change in the expectations being placed on every teacher throughout Australia in their daily practice, yet this change has not been addressed by many teacher educators. In fact, there is an all too common perception of the cross-curriculum priorities that aligns with the sentiment expressed in the 2014 *Review of the Australian Curriculum* (DoE, 2014, p. 134) as "possibly the most complex, controversial, and confusing aspect of the Australian Curriculum" and teacher educators often do not know where to start. How are teachers going to be classroom-ready if their ITE doesn't equip them to teach the cross-curriculum priorities?

As an education stakeholder, I believe the Discussion Paper has failed to address this major oversight in the tertiary education space. There is a need for the Australian education system to make systemic change that includes providing stronger support for teacher educators to be teaching a more holistic curriculum, specifically ensuring teacher educators do not shy away from the 'difficult' topics (detailed below), as well as First Nations content and perspectives. These topics have been silenced for too long, simply because teachers themselves have not been taught how to engage or understand them, or because teachers fear making mistakes.[2]

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[1] This has the potential to fulfill the commitments that Australia has made in international policies (UN, 1948, 1967, 1989, 2007) over the last 80 years to address the long-held concerns of First Nations communities about the lack of truth-telling and active silencing, homogenising and historicising of First Nations cultures and knowledge in Australia's education systems, perpetuated through the ITE systems.

[2] I believe implementing this type of change may help to entice people from diverse backgrounds into teaching. I believe that creating accelerated and incentivised pathways for all ITE providers (for teacher aides, Aboriginal education support officers and other similar positions), which are specifically designed for experienced education professionals to attain full teaching accreditation would enable the development of a more culturally diverse teacher workforce. Retaining that

workforce however, would require a significant shift in the general culture of the education sector and many schools, away from normalised whiteness and towards cultural responsiveness.

In the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*[3] (APST) (AITSL, 2014), Standard 1.4 requires teachers to be able to apply their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages, histories and identities to enhance the education and teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, through collaborative relationships with the families of students and their communities. Even graduate-level teachers are professionally required to have and demonstrate a sound understanding of the "impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background" (AITSL, 2014, p. 11). Despite this, many teachers could not comfortably define the concept of 'culture' or understand what their own cultural lens entails. Furthermore, Standard 2.4 outlines the need for teachers to "Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians" (AITSL, 2014, p. 13). Yet many ITE providers deliver only a single compulsory unit relating to the broad concept of Indigenous education (Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk, & Robinson, 2012).

Addressing 'difficult' topics and invisibility

There are numerous changes that I believe need to be made to ITE throughout Australia. Education providers need to address the 'difficult' topics to counter the traditional invisibility in teacher education; specifically around critically engaging with, reflecting on, and understanding one's relationship with race and racism, colourblindness and whiteness.

'Invisibility', in this context, encompasses the silencing of the diversity of Aboriginal *and* Torres Strait Islander realities and perspectives, as well as failure to address, or educate on, the related issues of race and racism, colourblindness and whiteness. This content must be introduced and strengthened throughout all teacher education programs. The education systems of Australia are failing Torres Strait Islander Peoples by not even recognising that their invisibility is an issue. There needs to be a greater understanding and valuing of the diversity and contributions of Torres Strait Islander people and knowledge, along with those of the other First Nations of Australia. Resources that could support these changes include the work of critical race theorists and the body of critical whiteness scholarship. Although race has been discredited and academically dismissed as a 'biological truth', as a 'social construct', race continues to influence the way people experience the world around them (Paradies, 2017), but "rather than being understood as a collective and active colonial and cultural inheritance, racism has been thoroughly reconstructed as an individual moral aberration" (Daniels-Mayes, 2021, p. 36). Racism can also be understood as the blatant "prejudice of individuals – also referred to as intolerance or bigotry – and discrimination – behaviour that treats … other races unfairly compared to [whites]" (Trepagnier, 2016, p. 1), as well as the more covert forms, such as the soft othering of colourblindness (e.g. "These people are human, too") (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 15). A failure to recognise the influence of one's own normalised whiteness and privilege, or what Dyer (1997) refers to as a non-racialised 'just human-ness' of white people, in contrast to the various racialised others, is often a major contributing factor to colourblind racism. For teachers especially,

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[3] In response to one of the other questions raised in the Discussion Paper, I believe the APST are a great starting point, but, as Moreton-Robinson and her colleagues highlighted (2012, p. 8), these standards are framed around "a muted pedagogical imperative that through 'knowing' the 'other', either through more effective teaching strategies or better cultural understandings, entrenched educational disadvantage can be ameliorated". As such, I believe there is still more work that could be done around the framing and phrasing of these standards to ensure strength-based practice that embodies reflective and genuine understanding and relationships.

it is essential to understand one's own position in relation to the social reality of racism, and understand the interplay between invisibility, race, racism, colourblindness and whiteness.

> [Teachers] have the opportunity to internally investigate and interrogate the elements from [their] own education that may need to be realigned; and most of all, ensure that [they] neither covertly nor overtly exhibit any of the by-products of the 'silent apartheid', so that [their] praxis breaks the cycle and the continuum of the education acts of the 1800s. (Rose, 2012, p. 78)

As Rose (2012) suggests above, self-reflection is often perceived as critical to enabling teaching practice that addresses racism, whiteness, colourblindness and the invisibility of these important and interrelated issues. Yet, in their study examining the content and structure of ITE courses and programs specifically in relation to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia, Moreton-Robinson and her colleagues[4] (2012, p. 25) found that self-reflection comprises just one per cent of content taught through Indigenous core content units in undergraduate education degrees across Australia. Similarly, in my own research (Williamson-Kefu, 2019), many of the participants emphasised the need to address whiteness and counter the dominant white narratives that have been normalised through education. Further, Daniels-Mayes (2021) calls for courageous conversations that unpack and examine the role and history of racism in Australia's education systems. Yet research suggests that only one per cent of the content taught through Indigenous core content units in undergraduate education degrees across Australia tackles whiteness as an issue (Moreton-Robinson, et al., 2012). 'Anti-racism' is slightly higher with two per cent of content (Moreton-Robinson, et al., 2012). Even combined, these three critical issues only registered four per cent of the content taught in Indigenous core units in undergraduate education degrees. Despite being relatively dated, this research is indicative of a larger and ongoing problem in the ITE sub-sector: the lack of appropriate teacher education course content perpetuates the problematic invisibility of these key issues.

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[4] While the results of the Moreton-Robinson et al. (2012) study were released nearly a decade ago, I believe there is still value in reflecting on the research, as it provides a thought-provoking snapshot of where teacher preparation for Indigenous education was placed, not that long ago.
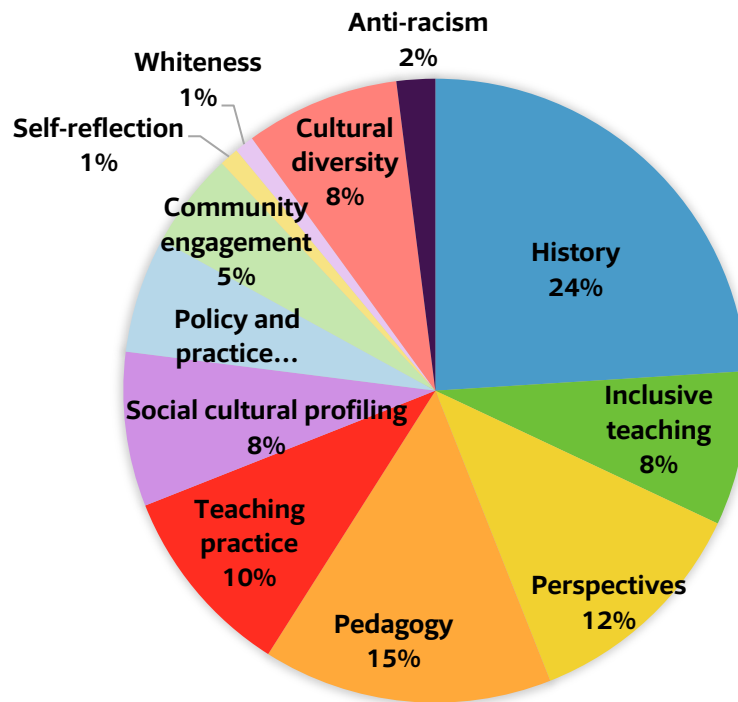
Figure 1: Percentage distribution of the content taught in Indigenous core units across undergraduate education degrees

Adapted from Moreton-Robinson, et al., 2012, p. 25

Thus, the content and resources used in Australian teacher education courses need to be changed, not only in units related to First Nations content and perspectives, but across the whole curriculum, to ensure these invisibility-related issues are framed and discussed in a variety of ways. Figure 2 depicts the number of both core and elective courses with Indigenous content in undergraduate pre-service teaching programs at Australian universities (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012). At the time, Moreton-Robinson and her colleagues found most universities had Indigenous content in just three or fewer courses in their undergraduate teaching programs. Yet, all of those graduates are now expected to be able to integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures into all key learning areas across the school curriculum.
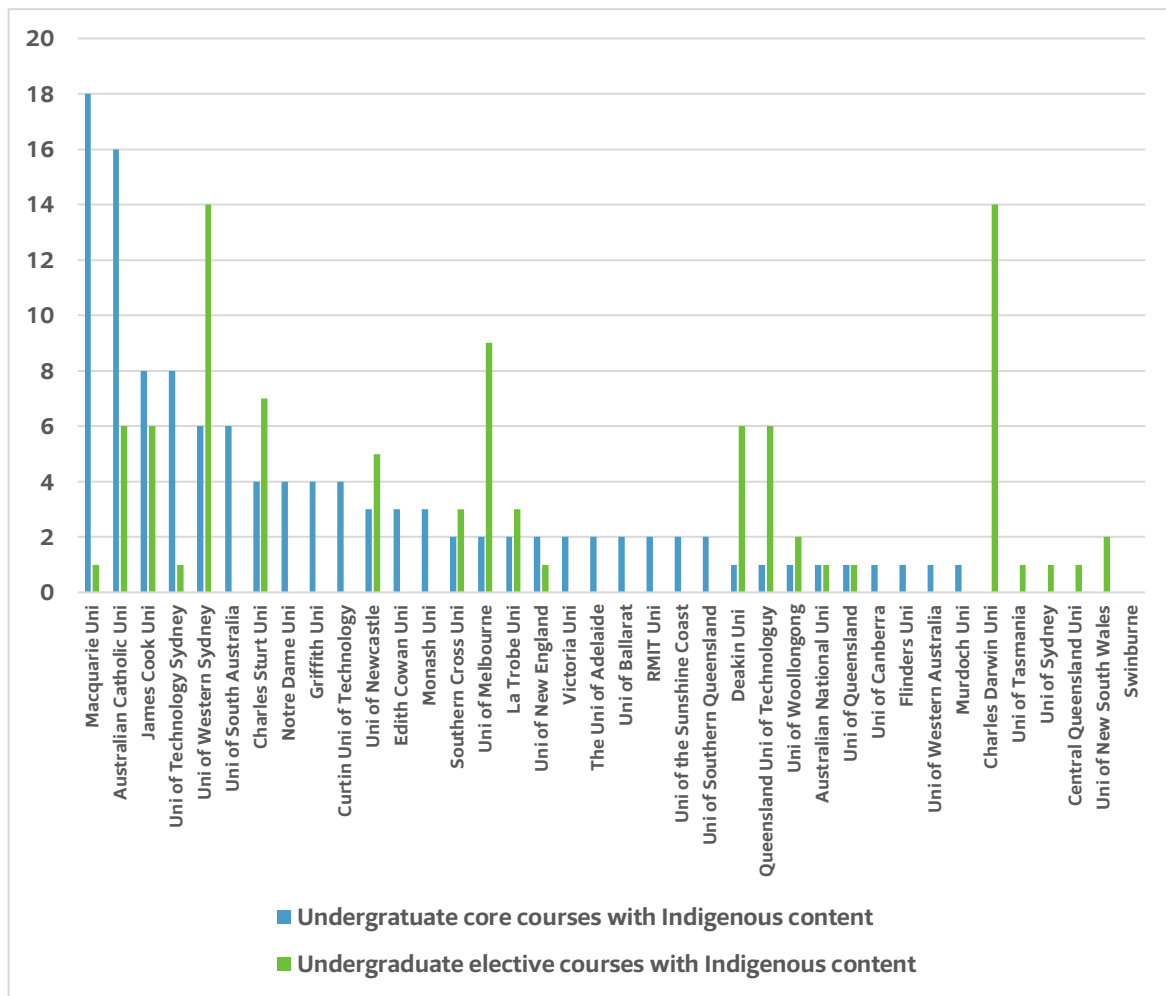
Figure 2: Number of core and elective courses with Indigenous content in undergraduate pre-service teaching programs at Australian universities

Adapted from Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012, p. 27

A more meaningful engagement with First Nations knowledge is essential for all ITE providers, teacher educators and pre-service teaching students, which should include content around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander philosophies, cultures, technologies and practices; as well as perspectives from the depths of First Nations embodied experiences of colonialism, segregation and assimilation, racism, privilege and disadvantage and trauma.

First Nations knowledge cannot be taught to pre-service teachers without first making changes to the teacher education sub-sector. Course structures and content must change, but so too must teacher educators. Many teacher educators are products of classrooms that taught "the notion of a single [and universal] norm of thought and experience" (hooks, 1994, p. 15) and while they may have engaged with revolutionary educational thinkers, such as Freire (1993), concepts like 'conscientisation' are only effective when combined with meaningful praxis. Teacher educators who have undertaken their schooling in Australia need to be conscious of the effects of misrepresented or distorted 'knowledge' around romanticised and simplified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bold, 2012), which is still advocated for through government resources such as, *Curriculum into the Classroom* (C2C) (DET, 2018). This change therefore requires teacher educators to reflect and understand their own personal relationships with race, racism, colourblindness and whiteness and how these issues relate to their knowledge and learning. Teacher educators must then be able to teach these challenging topics to pre-service teachers, who may resist such confrontational learning or "deflect their shame through emotional expressions of guilt, anger, defensiveness, and denial" (Matias, ViescaGarrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014, p. 292). As most teachers in Australia are white and middle class, the necessity of understanding the implications of their own positioning and privilege cannot be overstated (Dyer, 1997; Shay, 2015, p. 95). Understanding *privilege* is integral to the study of race, yet it is a frequently ignored topic (Maxwell, 2014, p. 21). This type of content needs to be taught by teacher educators and support should be given to enable teacher educators to undertake professional development. The area of teacher educator professional development, however, has been highlighted as under-researched and in need of further resourcing and attention (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012, p. 13).

Critical race theory and critical whiteness studies together provide a strong theoretical base for teacher educators to engage with this type of content (Matias et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2014). However, the focus of much of the scholarship in these fields is on the American experience of slavery and immigration, as opposed to dispossession and colonisation as experienced by Indigenous Peoples, which has been stressed as a limitation of its applicability in the Australian context (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). While this may require a recognition of the limitations of critical race theory and its local scholarship, it does not preclude the use of this research area as a valuable starting point for reflection and discussion. Critical whiteness studies are similarly useful as it critiques the normalised notion of whiteness as "a benchmark of humanity (not simply the ideal of human attainment, but of *humanness* itself)" (Maxwell, 2014, p. 32) and recognises the power in the invisibility of whiteness to those who possess it (Moreton-Robinson, 2006).

In summary, if classroom-readiness is the goal of ITE, there is no doubt that greater support and stronger action is needed to ensure teacher educators equip graduate-teachers to meet the APST to teach the Australian Curriculum, specifically the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority. In order to do this, it is essential that ITE providers do not shy away from the 'difficult' topics; including race, racism, whiteness and colourblindness, but address these and give time and voice to the various issues that have traditionally been made invisible through the Australian education systems.

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