

# Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce

## Progress Report

April 2021



## Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land, sea country, and water ways across Australia. We honour and pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

### About the artwork

Reko Rennie, *Untitled* 2020.

Reko Rennie is an interdisciplinary artist who explores his Aboriginal identity through contemporary media. Through his art, Rennie provokes discussion surrounding Indigenous culture and identity in contemporary urban environments. Largely autobiographical, his commanding works combine the iconography of his Kamilaroi heritage with stylistic elements of graffiti. He merges traditional diamond-shaped designs, hand-drawn symbols, and repetitive patterning to subvert romantic ideologies of Aboriginal identity.

### Disclaimers

For the purposes of this work, the working term Indigenous Cultural Competency is used consistently and is defined as the ability to understand, communicate, and effectively and sensitively interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, communities, and staff. A range of other terms have also been used to refer to this ability and AITSL welcomes an opportunity to determine language that is most useful and appropriate to the teaching profession. There is a glossary at the end of this paper to explain highlighted terms that are used throughout.

AITSL respects and celebrates the unique and diverse cultures, languages, and societies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The terms used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are used only for the purposes of this paper. The term Indigenous is used interchangeably with the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to assist readability.

AITSL was formed to provide national leadership for Commonwealth, state, and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership with funding provided by the Australian Government.

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## Executive Summary



**380+**  
online forum  
participants



**87**  
submissions  
received



**5K+**  
downloads of  
discussion paper

This progress report has been compiled to summarise and examine the key findings from the research and extensive consultations conducted by AITSL to inform the direction of its Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce project.

In February 2019, the then Federal Minister for Education, the Hon. Dan Tehan MP, requested AITSL undertake a four-year project to *build or enhance the cultural competency of the existing teaching workforce including the development of a suite of professional learning resources and increase cultural safety in schools.*

The Australian Government is committed to supporting every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student to reach their full potential and acknowledges the importance of ensuring schools are culturally safe learning and working environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers, school leaders, and staff. This is critical to improving opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and retaining and building the Indigenous teaching workforce.

AITSL also acknowledges and values the importance of creating supportive and safe teaching and learning environments that are conducive to the diverse learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. From a teaching and learning perspective, a culturally competent workforce that meets the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities lies at the heart of this and will ultimately benefit all students and the wider education community.

In 2020, AITSL launched the discussion paper, *Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce* in response to initial consultation and research undertaken to set the foundations of the work and gauge the understanding of cultural competency within the profession. The discussion paper, informed by extensive consultations with educators, Indigenous education experts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, set out areas of discussion on four guiding questions. The responses to the discussion paper were received through national online forums, written submissions and community consultation with 87 responses provided as written submissions, over 380 forum participants and the commencement of national community consultations.

The responses to the discussion paper will be presented as key findings to a national dialogue to be held in Canberra in May 2021. The national dialogue will be a culminating event involving invited members of the profession and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to present ideas, approaches and the delivery of a set of workshops to develop actions and a roadmap to further progress the work.

AITSL acknowledges this project is focusing on a vital but only one part of the Indigenous education agenda, and while this current project does not address every factor relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, AITSL understands and recognises the broader agenda and continues to support and position itself to respond to any further national work commissioned.

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# Introduction



**3.3%**  
**population**

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017)



**5.7%**  
**school children**

(ACARA, 2017)



**2%**  
**teachers**

(Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2018)

## Cultural respect

Recognition, protection, and continued advancement of the inherent rights, cultures, and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Australian education systems were never designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Aboriginal Consultative Group, 1975; Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, 1988; Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1989). The legacy of colonisation has undermined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' access to their cultures, identities, histories, and languages. As a result, they have largely not had access to a complete, relevant, and responsive education. Australia's education system must respectfully embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with safe learning environments (Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019).

The Mparntwe (pronounced M-ban-tua) Declaration respectfully highlights how culture is important for us all, and especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have experienced a systemic erasure of their languages and cultures. Our cultures guide our individual and collective identities and influence all aspects of our lives. The acknowledgement that teachers have an important role to play in the cultural understanding and healing occurring right now across Indigenous Australia is a guiding light in this project.

Until recently, there has been limited recognition of the incredible diversity of languages and cultural practices among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In many ways, the idea of 'cultural competency' respects and embodies the recognition of this diversity, and the celebration of the cultural resurgence that is currently underway. Cultural competency also speaks to the idea of safety, recognising that no student can learn unless they feel safe and welcome at school.

This project, *Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce*, seeks to bring the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities together to re-imagine what our shared future might look like. Addressing our internal biases and assumptions and developing a greater understanding of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges is critical to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It can improve learning outcomes, strengthen engagement, and recognises that a relationship between students and teachers built on **cultural respect** and understanding can change lives.

**‘The cultural awareness, responsiveness, and competency of the current Australian teaching workforce should be advocated by the collective not driven by the individual.’**

Dr Melitta Hogarth, Assistant Dean, Indigenous | Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne

## Quick link

To learn more about the project, please refer to ‘About the work’ from [page 29](#).

Over many decades, national and state policies have pursued different strategies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education predominantly aimed at students. Areas such as student attendance, literacy and numeracy, community engagement, critical transition points, student retention, and school readiness have been the primary focus. Proportionately, little resourcing has been devoted to teaching and school leadership for Indigenous engagement. This project provides an opportunity to centre the profession in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, which will strengthen the understanding and skills of teachers and school leaders, maximising student learning outcomes through a more holistic approach to schooling.

Cultural competency is not about adding to the unremitting demands of teachers; it is about enhancing and enriching teacher practice and broadening the perspective of the profession. Teachers and school leaders have not always been effectively supported to teach Indigenous students, nor have they always been provided with the resources to help them develop either their skills or confidence in this area (OECD, 2017). This lack of training and resources, combined with the historical and contemporary experiences of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, has made the barriers to change seem insurmountable. This project seeks to effect long-lasting change that benefits the profession.

This will only occur by supporting teachers and school leaders and, crucially, listening to the needs and aspirations of students and their families.

At its heart, cultural competency is a celebration of learning together; it is opening new doors to greater respect for, and inclusion of, the incredible diversity of cultures and languages that continue to exist across the nation. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, culturally competent teachers and schools have the power and responsibility to create new and promising futures. It is a challenging task, and one that both includes and goes beyond a focus on student outcomes, but the benefit of this work—for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, families, and teachers—is immense.

Education has the potential to be a great equaliser. Australians universally value education as the key to the success of future generations, yet they recognise not everyone has the power nor equal or equitable opportunities to shape it. This project is one of those opportunities.

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# A vision for a better future

**‘Future teachers, nurses, doctors, police, lawyers and politicians are in our schools today. Culturally responsive and racially literate pedagogy is essential for a more equitable tomorrow.’**

Sharon Davis | Director Education,  
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Studies

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are incredibly resilient, and much like their peers, come to school with a willingness and desire to learn. Like all children and young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students bring unique gifts and aptitudes to the classroom. With a strong sense of identity, curiosity, and agency, Indigenous students are eager to be guided to success. Throughout their learning journey, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students yearn to explore the lives, stories, and histories of other Indigenous people, which will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see themselves in the ongoing story and identity of our nation’s fabric.

There is a real opportunity to ensure Australian classrooms are places where all students feel safe to develop their identities, interests, and dreams. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this means developing education programs with them and facilitating greater student agency. Teachers, school leaders, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities recognise this and want to work together to ensure classrooms work for every learner.

Cultural competency is a lifelong journey of learning, unlearning, and re-learning. Teachers and school leaders must truly and wholeheartedly embed themselves in the journey of cultural competence and they will find that, just like their students, they are always learning (Krakouer, 2015).

## **Our vision is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:**

- will be excited and motivated to go to school because their teachers encourage them through the school gate and into the classroom, ready for a day of learning. This is demonstrating high expectations.
- feel safe and valued because their teacher acknowledges and centres what they bring to the classroom. This can only happen through applying a cultural competence lens.
- will fully participate and contribute in the classroom and be brave and bold; they will be first to put up their hands to respond to a question or seek clarification. They will not be shame!
- will put their full faith and trust in their teachers, who understand and empathise about what is in their **invisible backpack**. Cultural competency is about teachers and school leaders knowing their students.
- receive a quality education and will not be left behind because of cultural differences. Teachers and school leaders will step out of their comfort zone and do life with different people; it will enrich their lives.

## **Invisible backpack**

Social and emotional factors that students carry that are not visible such as race, gender, religion, language, poverty, [sexuality, disability] and family issues that impact their learning (McIntosh, 1989).



# Language of change

## At a glance

Former school principal and expert on unconscious bias in the American education system, Dr Tracey Benson, explains that as a principal he was unable to connect with the debate about racism in schools, because he did not have the proper language [tools] required. He also explains that without being able to define how unconscious bias occurs in schools, it is impossible to dismantle it. Tools such as the 'good' non-racist vs anti-racist binary, and intent vs impact binary allow us to define and address the problem of racism in schools. Language has the power to shift the conversation and empower teachers and school leaders to engage in new language that can help in dismantling outdated education systems that perpetuate racism.

Dr Tracey A. Benson | Assistant Professor of Education Leadership, University of North Carolina, and co-author of *Unconscious Bias in Schools* (2019)

## Unconscious bias

Attitudes and beliefs of ourselves and others that are beyond our awareness and may be reinforced by environment and experiences.

Language is an integral transmitter of culture. It is a tool that allows communities to discuss and describe ideas, and it shapes how people influence and teach others. The language and words used throughout this project, the paper, and beyond are no different. There is a unique opportunity right now to shape the language used when discussing cultural competency within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to ensure it captures the continual and transformative process of developing and enacting cultural competence.

Language and key terms have meaning beyond their textbook definitions. They can invoke emotional responses that are connected to history, people, and places. As such, a simple word can have vastly different meanings to different people. With regards to the context of this paper, this project strives to move towards language that inspires, connects, empowers, and promotes positive change and transitions away from colonial and deficit-laden language that embodies the mistakes of the past. For example, the use of the term 'achievement gap' refers to the disparity in the achievement levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Morrison et al 2019) and is considered deficit-laden language. Whereas the term 'cultural fluency' refers to the skills and compassion to both appreciate one's own culture and be fluent in at least one additional culture (Miller, 2020), offers a shift in language that is empowering and inspires change.

Language can also be a barrier and reflect our biases. Acknowledging this is crucial when discussing a sensitive issue such as racism in the Australian education system. Such discussions can provoke defensive attitudes or unintentionally cause division. To address this and encourage greater engagement from teachers and school leaders in the conversation, Dr Tracey Benson and Sarah Fiarman (2019) promote the term **unconscious bias**, which describes how we all absorb prejudices about 'race' and about diverse peoples and cultures throughout our lives, which can then influence our thoughts, actions, and relationships.

If it is accepted that language is a tool for change, then it is possible to identify the direction of that change. If used strategically, language can draw people's attention to the inequalities or inequities of the status quo.

Along with the key themes outlined in the 'areas for discussion', this paper invites you to think about the language used moving forward when talking about cultural competency. There is a clear imperative to better define cultural competency in the education context, both to describe more clearly the active principles, processes, and practices that underpin it, as well as to distinguish what cultural competency is not.

As stakeholders embarking on this journey of positive transformation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, it is important the language used embodies and inspires this change. To ensure positive transformation, language needs to empower and encourage teachers and school leaders along this journey.

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## Background

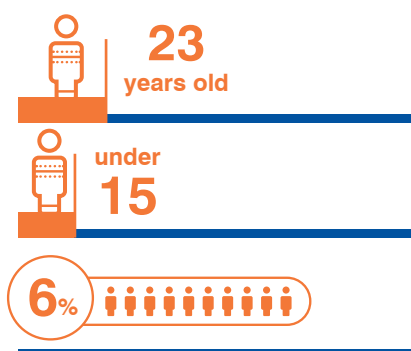
The education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is a major focus in the contemporary political agenda. In recent years, there has been an increasing expectation for teachers be culturally competent; however, many teachers acknowledge this is a persistent challenge. Research regularly highlights that many teachers have limited to no preparation in teaching within culturally diverse contexts, including students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. To understand and respond to cultural diversity in the classroom, teachers and school leaders must recognise the role culture and identity plays when determining strategies to engage effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, students, families, and communities. This collective activity is what makes Indigenous education everybody's business.

### A snapshot of the current context in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

The current context illustrates the importance of building a culturally competent teaching workforce. It highlights that one-third of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population are school-aged. It draws on statistical data making explicit the need for action to address the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Further, it amplifies the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers within the Australian teaching workforce. Such data prioritises the need for the teaching workforce to reflect on their role in working towards reconciliation and improving the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The urgency for change is apparent in the statistical data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) reports that:

- The median age of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is 23 years of age.
- 34% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is under the age of 15.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make up almost 6% of the total student population.





year 7 → year 12



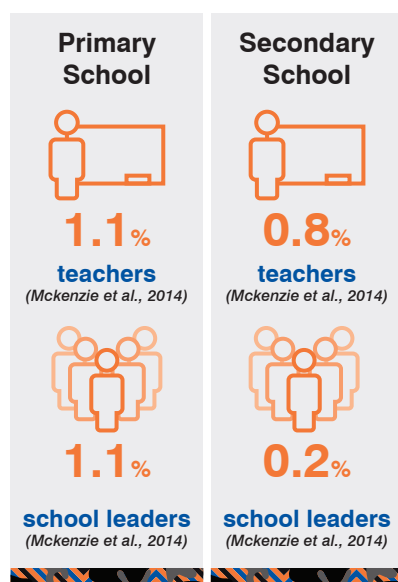
only one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years and over had completed Year 12



students are leaving school more frequently



decreased for all year levels and in reading and numeracy between 2008 and 2018.



The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016, 2017) makes explicit the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' educational attainment, such as:

- Only 58.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reportedly progressed from Year 7 through to Year 12 in 2019.
- In 2014–15, only one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 years and over had completed Year 12 or equivalent.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are leaving school more frequently prior to completing Year 12.
- The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at or above the national minimum standard decreased for all year levels and in reading and numeracy between 2008 and 2018.

*The National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (Council of Australian Governments, 2008) seeks to address these disparities by addressing attendance, literacy and numeracy, and employment. It is understood that the implementation of varying strategies to address these issues ensures the successful progression of Indigenous students through and from school to improve their potential social and economic futures (see also: Education Council, 2015, 2019). Cultural competence is one of these strategies.

Representation in schools is also important. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers within schools legitimises Indigenous knowledges within the school setting (Lowe, 2017). *The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy* states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be engaged in all levels of decision-making in education (Education Council, 2015, 2019); however, data indicates that only 2% of the Australian teaching workforce is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (ACDE, 2019).

Representation at executive levels within schools as principals and deputy principals is even lower. Therefore, the predominant non-Indigenous teaching workforce should develop and model lifelong learning by engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, cultures, languages, and knowledges or otherwise risk being complicit in maintaining harmful societal norms and assumptions.

Teachers need to be culturally aware, culturally responsive, and willing to critically reflect on their biases and expectations on and about Indigenous peoples to adequately ensure that the classroom environment and teacher–student relationship are conducive for all students (Macdonald, Gringart, and Gray, 2016).

# A national gaze on gaps: the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education



1814

First school for Aboriginal students established

1837

Laws passed to assert control over Aboriginal children

1873

Annexation of the Torres Strait Islands by Queensland

The past informs the present and knowing what has happened in the past can evoke the desire for change in the future. To develop a culturally competent teaching workforce it is necessary to examine how education provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, and cultures, has informed and continues to inform dominant practices, assumptions, biases, and stereotypes about Indigenous education. The following is a synopsis of some of the key policies and achievements. Our intent is to provide context and reasoning on how Indigenous education policy has consistently advocated for a culturally competent teaching workforce.

The first school for Aboriginal students was established by Governor Macquarie in 1814 (Price, 2019). The Parramatta Native Institution was the first of many attempts by early settlers to use education to ‘civilise’ and assimilate Aboriginal youth. Aboriginal peoples were perceived as an inferior and dying race. By 1837, the British Empire passed laws to assert control over Aboriginal children who were perceived as being open to change (Armitage, 1995). Such laws enabled the formation of the Aboriginal Protection Acts and policies of assimilation acting as the precipice for the removal of Aboriginal children from Country and family. The power and privilege afforded to the coloniser within education acted to further marginalise and dismiss the value of Indigenous knowledges. Embedded within the Australian psyche was the notion that Aboriginal peoples were uneducable and, therefore, inferior, and uncivilised. Racist ideologies held within Australian society ensured that the ‘station’ of Aboriginal peoples, ‘whether educated or not, was at the lowest rung of society’ (Hogarth, 2018). This is despite evidence that countered such a narrative.

Like Aboriginal peoples, the cultures, languages, storytelling, songs, and dances of Torres Strait Islander peoples were shared through an oral tradition. However, with the annexation of the Torres Strait Islands by Queensland in 1873, the education of Torres Strait Islander children and youth came under the Queensland government jurisdiction (Ketchell et al. 2019). Missionaries with the London Missionary Society had brought western schooling to the Torres Strait Islands with the intent to ‘civilise’ the peoples (Nakata, 2007). Focus was placed on the three Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic. However, most notably, Torres Strait Island dialects and creole were encouraged to maintain language (Jackson-Barrett, 2011). Mission schools replaced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages by delivering all tutorage within school settings in the English language.



The achievement of the successful 1967 Referendum and its constitutional change unintentionally made explicit the disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples. That is, the 1971 Census showed the lack of access to education for Indigenous peoples (Taylor, 2017). A shift in the Australian psyche began to occur. By the mid-1970s, Indigenous children were no longer excluded from the western, euro-centric classroom (Reynolds, 2009). A shift in the approaches to Indigenous peoples became apparent whereby reports and policies specific to the educational provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth began to be introduced.

With the formation of the Australian Schools Commission in 1972, focus was placed on educational disadvantage (see for example: Schools Commission, 1975). The Commission's foresight to insist on the formation of the Aboriginal Consultative Group allowed for Indigenous voices to be heard. The collaborative report provided to government in 1975 saw Indigenous peoples move towards self-determination, informing future policy and action in addressing the disparities evident in education. The report, *Schools Commission Report for the Triennium 1976–1978* (Schools Commission, 1975), highlighted the past alienation and exclusion of Indigenous students from mainstream schools and society and raised concern about the lack of literacy skills evident. The National Aboriginal Education Committee was formalised in 1977 from members of the Aboriginal Consultative Group, and for almost 40 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices through Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies occurred (Reconciliation Australia, 2015).

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) has 21 long-term goals. This policy is still the current overarching policy in Indigenous education. It focuses on increasing Indigenous representation at all levels of decision-making in education and naturally seeks to increase the number of classroom teachers, administrators, and so forth. Notably, it recognises there is the need for community engagement and involvement to enable the appropriate teaching of Indigenous culture and languages.

The recommendations made within the *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families* report (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997) led to the apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008. That year, the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Council of Australian Governments, 2008) was also endorsed, which bound governments to work towards reducing the disparity in life expectancy, health, education, and employment outcomes. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy* (Education Council, 2015) speaks to enabling opportunities for Indigenous students to achieve their full potential, sharing accountability with teachers and systems. It highlights the importance of relationships and partnerships that encourage local approaches.

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The inclusion of cultural recognition and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories, values, languages, and cultures are acknowledged and respected within each of the policies mentioned are the foundational basis on which teachers and systems enter the process of cultural competency. That is, each of the policies mentioned centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, histories, and cultures and seek teachers and systems to engage with them.

# The challenges and opportunities: why we need a culturally competent teaching workforce

**‘In effective classrooms, the pedagogy that prevails is one where power is shared on equal terms, culture counts, learning is interactive, and dialogue far ranging.’**

Professor Russell Bishop | Maori educational expert

While acknowledging the imperative for wider systems change, increasing the cultural understanding, awareness, and competency of classroom teachers is widely recognised as one way in which to address the educational attainment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) highlights that:

*Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] people generally seek education that is more responsive to the diversity of [Indigenous] circumstances and needs, and which recognises and values the cultural backgrounds of students (p. 9).*

Research highlights that such conditions would more likely increase student participation in education, which in turn would address the apparent disparities evident.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers promote reconciliation.** Australian education policy has stressed the importance of culturally responsive teachers and systems. Research asserts that culturally responsive classrooms require teachers and schools to critically reflect on and proactively seek to understand and meet the needs and aspirations of Indigenous students whose cultural backgrounds differ from their own. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) offers the reimagining of a culturally responsive schooling system stating that it would be inclusive of an:

*organisational climate [that] is welcoming to [Indigenous] students and their parents or guardians; [where] sensitive and skilled teachers use interesting strategies which take account of the different cultural backgrounds, socialisation experiences and living conditions of [Indigenous] students (p. 13).*

A schooling experience is dependent on the attitudes of teachers and school leaders and the willingness of these educators to reflect on themselves and their own practices and, in turn, on their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and wider members of their educational communities.

## Quick link

To learn more about the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers visit: [www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards](http://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards)



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**As a teacher working in cross-cultural contexts, I must look inwardly and turn myself inside out and ask myself one question. How can I change my behaviour, my thinking, and my pedagogy to ensure students are culturally safe and have high-quality learning experiences?’**

Lisa Garrett | English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) Teacher

### **Culturally responsive pedagogy**

A framework that emphasises the need to acknowledge student differences within the context of a diverse classroom. By acknowledging these differences, teachers are asked to question what must be changed to cater and respond to student differences. A culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to be culturally competent, have high expectations while valuing students home culture and language, and have critical consciousness (Gay, 2002).

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**Culturally competent systems and teachers actively and respectfully engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, parents, and students.** Current Indigenous education policy requires educational providers to develop and maintain relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that involve active listening and responding, accountability and engagement, collaborative information sharing, and informed decision-making (Education Council, 2015, 2019). Such aspirations are also embedded within the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (the Teacher Standards) where teachers are required to engage with parents and/or carers (see: Teacher Standards Focus Areas 7.3 and 7.4, AITSL, 2014). However, the literature reports teachers are hesitant to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, fearing to be perceived as tokenistic or making mistakes. Be brave.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers know their students and actively value their students’ cultural backgrounds.** As part of teacher practice and as articulated within the Teacher Standards, there is an expectation that classroom teachers know their students and how they learn but also, know the content and how to teach it. Educators should critically reflect on their own cultures and positions. Culturally responsive teachers seek out culturally responsive pedagogies to broaden their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their classrooms, develop their knowledge of Indigenous histories and cultures, and moreover, foster high-expectations relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and what they can achieve together.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers reject racial inequalities.** Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts,

*... white teachers, both pre-service and veteran, indicate that many are uncomfortable acknowledging any student differences and particularly racial differences. Thus, some teachers make such statements as ‘I don’t really see colour’ I just see children (p. 34).*

Teachers who claim ‘colour-blindness’ excuse themselves with such rhetoric of equality, dismissing students’ racial identities and in turn, maintaining racial inequalities and inequities. Culturally responsive teachers counter these perceptions by centring the students in their class using a holistic approach that acknowledges and values each student’s cultural difference (Hogarth, 2020). Culturally responsive teachers ensure a culturally inclusive classroom where all students are more likely to engage and participate but also, feel a sense of belonging and value.

**Culturally competent systems and teachers acknowledge change occurs through cultural understanding.** However, cultural awareness and understanding is not enough. Enacting cultural competency is and can be the only goal—a teaching workforce that acknowledges their own cultures and biases and seeks ways in which to engage students from all cultural backgrounds; that values the knowledges and diverse worldviews these students bring to their classrooms; and actively seeks ways to disrupt and change dominant practices. Teachers need to be risk takers and use their position of power and privilege to be agents of change.



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**The more reflective we are, the more effective we become.'**

Adrian Bell | Chair, New South Wales Secondary Principals Council  
Aboriginal Education Reference Group

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**Culturally competent systems and teachers know critical self-reflection is necessary.**

The notion of cultural competency flips the lens to the predominantly non-Indigenous teaching workforce to reflect on their knowledges and understandings, to put a critical lens on themselves and the biases and assumptions they bring to the classroom, as well as the biases and assumptions perpetuated through the wider education structures/systems that they work within. Nakata (1995) asserts:

*[r]elevance or sensitivity to 'cultural differences' alone does not change dominant practices from alienating the [Indigenous]. Changes to dominant practices, however, change dominant practices (p. 50).*

The detrimental gaps apparent between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples is a social justice issue. It is an economical issue. It is a political issue. Addressing this issue is not possible if change does not occur. Addressing this issue is only possible if teachers and the systems they work within are willing to make the necessary changes and reflect on themselves and their structures.

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# Guiding Questions

AITSL acknowledges that consultation is integral to the development of this work to ensure the views of the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are well represented and presented in the development and outcomes of the project.

In 2019, AITSL conducted initial consultations and research to better understand the current context of cultural competency within the Australian education landscape. During initial consultations, AITSL collected responses from a sample of stakeholder groups to develop a deeper understanding of the current context of cultural competency. Four guiding questions were developed to guide and establish discussion and responses to build the foundations of the project. The guiding questions posed were derived from a detailed analysis of responses during the project's initial consultation phase:

1. What does a culturally competent teaching workforce (including teachers, school leaders and schools) look like?
2. What does a teacher/school leader need to be culturally competent? What will it take?
3. What does cultural safety look like in schools?
4. What might be some of the challenges or barriers we face in developing a culturally competent teaching workforce?

In September 2020, AITSL released the discussion paper *Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce* to elicit community and stakeholder feedback as part of its extensive consultation strategy to further understand the complexities and challenges of developing a culturally competent teaching workforce.

The discussion paper was circulated to key stakeholders across the profession including systems and sectors, professional organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. The discussion paper was also made available on the AITSL website and was downloaded over 5000 times.

The guiding questions were presented in the discussion paper to explore both the content and context of responses received during the initial consultation phase, and a further set of complementary questions were developed to expand and unpack the foundational thinking.

A summary of key findings from each of these consultation phases follows.

# Summary of Key Findings

AITSL has consulted widely with the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders through online and face-to-face consultations, focus groups, and workshops to understand and gauge the current thinking of cultural competency in the Australian education system. The aim is to co-design and develop of a suite of resources and tools aimed at improving cultural competency in the education context. This project is a critical component of improving opportunities and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – and ultimately all students – and retaining and building the Indigenous teaching workforce led by the teaching profession.

A wide variety of different sources were examined during consultations, research, literature reviews and written submissions reflecting the range of organisations and stakeholders representative of the Australian teaching workforce. A summary of the key findings from each of these processes follows. A comprehensive narrative and recommendations will be covered in a final report following national dialogue.

National consultation, including guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders, will continue to inform the co-design and development of a suite of resources and tools. Applicable to varying educational contexts, they will be evidenced-based and informed by good practice. They will also be aligned to the Teacher Standards, which stipulate what teachers should know and be able to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories.

## Initial consultations

From August to December 2019, AITSL consulted with a range of stakeholders seeking feedback on AITSL's proposed approach for the project. AITSL posed four guiding questions to gauge the profession's current knowledge and understanding of cultural competency and its practice among the teaching workforce, as well as the barriers faced in undertaking this work.

AITSL conducted initial consultation in all states and territories with systems and sectors, state and federal government agencies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education consultative groups, Indigenous education experts, and professional associations. Consultation aimed to capture the diversity of stakeholders that make up the teaching profession. AITSL also engaged with its Board, internal advisory groups, and expert standing committees. AITSL analysed the feedback and designed a set of focus questions for discussion to unpack the responses and encourage further considerations and responses.

## Summary of key findings – Initial consultations

### Terminology

The initial consultations surfaced the common theme the need to better define 'cultural competency' through an education context specifically, while actively acknowledging that the education context intricately intersects with a range of other (i.e., health, welfare, justice) sectors and systems. Across jurisdictions there is a variety of terminology used to describe work in this space including cultural integrity, cultural humility, cultural responsiveness, cultural capability and cultural inclusiveness, to name a few. In a health context, cultural competence is seen as 'having the capacity to improve the health status by integrating culture into a clinical context to maximise gains from a health intervention'. In that context, it is vital to understand the relevant cultural factors of a patient, both physical and social, and how that may contribute to their health and influence their diagnoses. Translating this understanding to an educational context, it is important to appreciate the contributing factors that impact engagement and achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students such as culture and language, curriculum and pedagogy, rural and remote education and racism in schools.

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## **Strengths-based approach**

A strengths-based approach – teaching to and through students' strengths – was also a key theme that emerged from the initial consultations. Teachers should be responsible for supporting Indigenous students to become leaders of culture in the classroom by valuing the knowledge that children and families bring with them from home. Having high expectations, anti-deficit thinking and acknowledging the journey of each child demonstrates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that they are valued and fosters learning environments where they can thrive.

## **Diversity of teaching workforce**

A common concern that arose from the initial consultations is that the current teaching workforce diversity does not reflect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learner. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly underrepresented in schools, making up only 3% of the Australian teaching workforce. Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, school leaders and ancillary staff is a key factor in fostering student engagement, improving educational outcomes and building the cultural competency of the profession.

## **The importance of building cultural competence in all classrooms**

The initial consultations highlighted that all teachers need to be culturally competent to navigate a globalised world; this is not a skill reserved just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, nor is it just for non-Indigenous teachers who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Teachers and school leaders need to be more than just culturally aware and sensitive — they must also be able to bridge cultural differences in ever shifting demographics. Teachers have a professional responsibility to meet the requirements of the Teacher Standards to demonstrate appropriate levels of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement.

## **Curriculum and content**

The Australian Curriculum plays a critical part in ensuring success for Indigenous students, especially the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. The implementation of Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see themselves, their identities, and cultures reflected in what they are learning and thus increases cultural competence. However, throughout the consultation process, it was identified that the current implementation of the Australian Curriculum and the Indigenous content choices made by teachers were not ideal in addressing the inequity and achievement gaps. While this is out of scope, it is important to recognise the implementation of the Australian Curriculum still requires further exploration and discussion on how to better develop and deliver on all areas of the curriculum in a holistic way, through the lens of a culturally responsive pedagogy.

Also warranting further exploration and discussion is how both the curriculum teachers are expected to deliver, and the initial teacher education (ITE) curricula they are trained within, can best support teachers' relationships with Indigenous knowledges, and their ability to draw relationships between knowledge systems.

## **Initial teacher education**

As outlined in the 'areas of discussion', the importance of developing cultural competency within ITE was a consistent response during the consultations. Teachers acknowledged that, without the establishment of strong foundations in their pedagogical practice, there was a tendency to revert to methodologies and beliefs embedded during their teacher education. It is critical that ITE programs prepare teachers for the wide range of students they may teach, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In several tertiary institutions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is not a mandatory area of study in ITE programs. In institutions that do offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the base requirement is limited across the whole ITE program and does not adequately meet the students' needs. That is, stakeholders voiced serious concerns this undertaking was not enough to model and prepare teachers to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and perspectives across all subject areas, in alignment with ACARA's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority.

Although this is not a key focus of the work, stakeholders believe the mandating of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Australian teacher education is fundamental to cultural competency as it ensures all Australian students can be taught about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures by teachers who are themselves adequately educated. It is critical that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies are core areas of course outlines and appropriate Indigenous knowledges and perspectives are incorporated in pre-service, postgraduate, and in-service teacher education programs.



## Conclusion

It became apparent very quickly that jurisdictions have already commenced work in developing cultural competency, however, the terms used to describe this work vary in each state and territory. There was also a great sense of goodwill and intent to develop cultural competency from within the profession, however, teachers and school leaders faced a range of challenges and barriers. Access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the discernment around the quality of resources and accessing quality professional learning were presented as some of those challenges. The term cultural safety was not a familiar term for teachers and school leaders nor was cultural safety a concept that many teachers and school leaders felt confident to facilitate in practice. Further work is required to assist in the development of understanding and awareness around creating culturally safe teaching and learning environments.

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# Research

AITSL commissioned the College of Indigenous Futures Arts and Society within Charles Darwin University (CDU) to develop a research paper to better understand the current context of cultural competency within the Australian education landscape. CDU conducted a thorough literature review of cultural competence, including the review of validated tools used to measure cultural competence within the Australian educational contexts, with a focus on the assessment methods and their findings.

The objective of the research was to extract international and Australian research on cultural competency, with a focus on teachers, educators, and school leaders in Australia, as well as other sectors. The key findings from the research align with the current thinking of the profession around cultural competency.

## Summary of research key findings

- Cultural competency is a complex and multi-faceted construct and varies according to context. Different contexts require differing levels of competency. For example: urban, rural, and remote environments; a teacher's or school leader's career stage; the system level.
- Cultural competency requires contextualisation and definition in an educational context.
- Cultural competence is continually developed, not innate, and is a transformative process requiring individual investment and engagement over time.
- Cultural competence is demonstrated and observable.
- Cultural competence goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge and awareness and is expressed through behaviours and attitudes.
- Cultural competence requires an individual to have the capacity to self-assess/reflect.
- Cultural competency is best understood as a process that exists on a continuum.
- A capability framework supports teachers and school leaders to move through a continuum highlighting core capabilities (knowledge, practice, and engagement) for the effective teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Cultural competence must exist at several levels—systemic (policies and procedures), organisational (skills and resources), professional (education and professional learning), and individual (knowledge, attitudes and behaviours)—enabled through four key inter-related dimensions (Universities Australia, 2011).
- Cultural competence is an opportunity to understand and recognise Indigenous educational leadership and formalise this recognition within the Teacher Standards.
- There is a divergence of views as to whether cultural competency can be achieved as an 'end state', or whether it is a continual process of learning and reflection, thus requiring a different terminology.
- Racism, and racialised attitudes and assumptions, are key concepts that need to be explored in developing cultural competence. This is often missing or unspoken in solutions towards strengthening cultural competence.
- Relational dynamic interaction is key to developing and enacting cultural competency (Gopalkrishna, 2014).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play an active and critical role in the development of cultural competency within education.
- There are limited, validated cultural competency tools freely available (online) for use in Australian educational contexts.
- Relevant existing tools have common characteristics that may make them adaptable and appropriate to Australian educational contexts.

# National Online Forums

From October 2020 – February 2021, AITSL consulted with a range of stakeholders on AITSL's *Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce* discussion paper. The online forums sought to further unpack the four key areas for discussion to understand the current thinking and responses to cultural competency from both the profession and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education experts and stakeholders.

National consultation was undertaken with more than 380 stakeholders (11 consultations) to deepen AITSL's understanding of the profession's and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education stakeholders' current knowledge and understanding of cultural competency and its implementation in the Australian teaching workforce. Due to the restrictions presented by COVID-19, the consultations were held online. Eleven forums were conducted online with education system and sector representatives in each state and territory, an Indigenous Education Experts Forum, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth Forum and an Indigenous Education in Boarding Forum.

## Summary of Key findings

### Terminology

The national forums recognised the term 'cultural competency' as problematic. Many felt that the term assumes that cultural competency can be measured. There is strong consensus that a less static and more action-oriented term is required. In particular, the word 'competent' can be interpreted as an end state, or something that has been achieved and could not be further developed. It was agreed that the term 'cultural competency' should encapsulate the on-going nature of developing cultural competency at an individual level. Stakeholders felt that racial literacy, cultural responsiveness and cultural capability all impact pedagogy and should be a focus when working along a cultural competency journey. Going forward, teachers and school leaders would benefit from the language of cultural competency being standardised and implemented across jurisdictions to provide national consistency and understanding.

While this work cannot and should not proceed without an awareness of its place within diverse cultural contexts, it should be noted that, alongside the interpretational issues associated with use of the word 'competent,' the forums also identified several risks with including the adjective 'cultural' in that:

- teachers sometimes interpret this as an imperative to 'teach culture' (rather than simply teach about culture or facilitate culturally responsive learning experiences in collaboration with community).
- often, 'culture' gets reduced to the visible/performative aspects of culture alone.
- focusing on (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) 'culture' may indirectly deflect from the importance of teachers focusing on their own views, biases, competencies and areas for development.
- there is a need to better clarify the relationship and yet distinctions between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'culture(s)' and 'school culture' more broadly.

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## **Deeper understanding of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, histories, and cultures**

The national forums highlighted the need for teachers and school leaders to have a deeper understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, including an understanding that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or cultures are the same. Teachers and school leaders must proactively develop their personal understanding of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and nations, and that they are not a homogenous group, but an incredibly diverse and distinct peoples with their own personal and cultural protocols, preferences and priorities. The teaching workforce must understand the historical context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and view them as active, diverse, and dynamic cultures rather than referring to this as a past teaching content item. This could be achieved, for example, by providing educators with the opportunity to learn about local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, history and culture either through direct engagement with local communities and Elders or professional learning opportunities.

## **Reflection and growth**

During the national forums, growth mindsets and critical reflection were emphasised as significant areas of focus for schools to move forward on their cultural competency journey. The ability to self-reflect and understand one's own beliefs and knowledge systems was recognised as critical in conversations and actions surrounding cultural competency. It is not merely the process of re-learning history to unlearn biases but teachers and school leaders reflecting on who they are, what preconceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture they have and having the capacity to actively listen. Cultural competency is not about a non-Indigenous teacher needing to “know” or “teach” culture – it is about being able to navigate cross-cultural communications and relationships more broadly, and critically reflecting on their own positionality within these communications and relationships. Stakeholders reinforced that self-reflection should be embedded in school's planning days and should be revisited regularly (not as a one-off compliance exercise).

## **Support from school leadership**

The national forums discussed how cultural competency is supported through strong and committed leadership, and the culture of schools is very much situated within the remit of school leaders. Principals and other school leaders need to ensure that the development of cultural competency is a core component of each staff member's professional learning. School leaders must also articulate the importance of cultural competency to all staff and include their school community in the process. In consultations, stakeholders acknowledged that — where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are achieving well — there is always a committed principal who has ensured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are at school, engaged in learning and making consistent progress.

The forums also discussed the value of providing dedicated and responsive leadership and governance opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of school communities whether as school Board Members, Parent or Student Council representatives, Curriculum or Faculty leaders, Mentors, or in recruitment panellist positions.



### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture embedded into the school system**

The national forums emphasised that all staff should take ownership of developing their cultural competency; this should be ingrained into the operating model of every Australian school and be holistically and sustainably shared by school leadership, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff. School improvement plans should have cultural competency at their core and include practical ways to implement this on a day-to-day basis. To understand where each school is on their cultural competency journey, mechanisms must be in place to support teachers and school leaders to continuously improve and develop at their individual pace. Stakeholders also reinforced the importance of strong staff induction processes whereby staff learn more than just the history of the local community — staff must also learn about the history of the school and how understanding this history – in its interrelationship with the current context - can better shape the school's collaboration with community.

### **Recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the teaching workforce**

The national forums affirmed that cultural safety can be best supported in schools that make intentional efforts to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers into the workforce. Culturally safe employment structures are imperative where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are recruited and retained. Many stakeholders claimed that the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers would be the most effective way to increase cultural safety in schools. It was also discussed that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and school leaders are not open about identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait because they are worried about being the only persuasive voice speaking up for their culture. To counter this, it is important to have many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support officers, teachers and school leaders so that staff members do not feel pressured to be the voice for all Indigenous perspectives.

### **Genuine relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

The forums identified that, historically, schools have not always been a safe place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and that these historical experiences impact on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engage with schools to this day. It is important to develop authentic and meaningful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as these relationships can bring a unique and rich perspective. Relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should always be respectful, and the cultural load should always be acknowledged. As such, it is crucial that teachers and school leaders conduct their own initial research on the land they live, local histories and language and culture so that it is not always the responsibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to educate non-Indigenous teachers and school leaders. School frameworks and resources, as well as local interschool networks should play an important role in establishing genuine relationships and a shared responsibility for developing culturally competent schools and communities.

### **Importance of Indigenous student engagement**

Cultural safety was identified by many stakeholders as places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can have authentic, raw, and real conversations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are empowered when they are encouraged to be involved in making real decisions with respect to the learning process. Stakeholders emphasised that teachers and school leaders need to ensure educational material, teaching styles and resources are inclusive of and respectful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, cultures and histories makes learning meaningful, purposeful and relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experiences, needs and interests.



## Conclusion

There were some very robust discussions that took place during the online forums and there was a sense that teachers and school leaders have been seeking an opportunity such as this to highlight some of the challenges they face in the education system. Participants of these forums were strong advocates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and were able to provide feedback on the barriers faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in accessing equal and equitable education experiences. Many teachers and school leaders believed that the lack of awareness and understanding of the learning needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities was problematic. The prioritisation of system messages also presented challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in many regions and schools.

## Written submissions

The discussion paper was launched on 7 September 2020 to seek feedback on four focus areas for discussion. The discussion paper presented findings from initial consultations undertaken in 2019 and summarises the key issues, including some issues identified that are considered to be outside the scope of this work but have been included as they are deemed necessary to the development of a culturally competent teaching workforce. The submission process closed on 4 January 2021.

A total of 87 submissions were received:

- 70 from stakeholder groups (including 11 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholder groups)
- 17 from individuals

Analysis of these submissions found there were many similarities between their content and the findings from initial consultations and online forums, demonstrating the strength of emerging themes.

### Summary of Key findings – written submissions

#### Terminology

The correct use of terminology was again a dominant theme in the written submissions. The submissions highlighted the issue with referring to the word 'culture'. Submissions discussed that 'culture' is often used as a euphemism for race — using these terms interchangeably poses the risk that issues of individual, interpersonal and institutional racism are overlooked. A critical review of the submissions also indicated that the word 'culture' often caused cultural competency to be seen as defined or demonstrated through 'having' something (cultural knowledge or skills) that is external to oneself, rather than 'being' or 'becoming' something through one's critical-reflexive and high expectations relationship with self, as well as with students, families and school/local communities; with the education (and wider) systems; with diverse knowledge systems; and with place/context.

The word 'competent'/'competency' was similarly critiqued in the submissions, given its tendency to connote an end state or basic benchmark standard, rather than an ongoing – and not always linear – journey of personal and professional development.

'Cultural capability', 'cultural humility' or 'cultural responsiveness' were offered as alternate terms by various submissions.

Submissions also highlighted the interchangeable use of 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in the discussion paper as problematic. Alternatively, 'First Nations' was cited as a potentially more appropriate term to use as it recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the sovereign people of Lands across Australia.

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### **Critical reflective practices**

The written submissions cited reflexive practices as integral aspects of a culturally responsive workforce. Submissions discussed how the profession must go further than simply being aware and respectful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to developing 'anti-racist' practices. This would involve teaching and non-teaching staff developing a critical awareness of their own attitudes and assumptions, and actively countering and dismantling racist systems, policies, practices, and perspectives in their school communities. Submissions also discussed that, whilst calling out racist behaviour and practice is important, there also needs to be adequate support and assistance for educators to learn and develop their cultural competency through critical reflective practices. Educators must be supported and encouraged to develop reflective practices that help them to safely, yet bravely: understand their own identity and positionality; become critically aware of cultural social norms alongside questions of power and privilege; communicate sensitively; and increase their knowledge of the beliefs, values and perspectives of other cultures including the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Related to the imperative for critical reflective practice as it applies to cultural competency development, the submissions also hinted at the value in supporting the Australian teaching workforce with upskilling in critical systems literacy development; critical media literacy development; and resource evaluation and contextualisation ability.

### **Sourcing quality resources**

The written submissions reiterated that educators feel they lack access to quality, authentic and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources and/or, where resources are available, feel they often struggle to discern which are culturally appropriate, legitimate and sensitive. This has been identified as a significant barrier to incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander narratives, languages, histories and perspectives into classrooms. Teachers and school leaders require high quality and authentic resources that align to the curriculum to develop their own cultural competency and ensure they are delivering culturally diverse and responsive content to their students. A solution identified by multiple submissions was having access to a list of endorsed curriculum resources that are designed to support teachers and school leaders in respectfully incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, histories and cultures into lesson plans. Accompanying guidelines for how to appropriately adopt and adapt these resources – and their incorporation into teaching/learning experiences – in diverse classroom and community contexts is of simultaneous value.

### **Evidence-based and prioritised professional learning**

To develop Indigenous cultural competency, the written submissions highlighted that schools must invest in appropriate funding to support evidence-based professional learning for all teaching staff. Anti-racism, cultural awareness and racial tolerance were identified as essential topics for professional learning for the Australian teaching workforce. Submissions highlighted the need for professional learning that promotes whole-school approaches to developing anti-racist practices and classroom teaching and learning strategies. They also emphasised the need for a change management framework to help schools foster positive perceptions of Indigenous attainment within the school community. Furthermore, it was emphasised that professional learning relating to the development cultural competency needed to be part of an ongoing (rather than once-off) component of a school/regions professional learning plan/schedule. A balance also needs to be struck between providing access to shared, consistent learning across the sector, as well as providing more contextualised, localised and individualised learning for specific school communities and individual teachers.

## Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching workforce

The written submissions also articulated the need for an increase to the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools. Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in schools is considered integral to the development of student engagement and improving educational outcomes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Diversity in classrooms was highlighted as enhancing critical thinking, problem solving and creates a richer learning environment. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, giving visibility to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers encourages positive role modelling and a sense of belonging in a predominantly non-Indigenous space.

## Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs)

A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) is a formal statement of commitment to reconciliation, and schools and early learning services can develop a RAP using Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali platform to register and extend on existing initiatives or to begin a new journey. Many submissions identified that a Narragunnawali RAP increased cultural competency in their schools.

Arguably, even where RAPs were not explicitly referenced, many of the proposed solutions put forward in the submissions can also clearly be mapped to one or more RAP Actions. 'Cultural Competency for Staff' is one of 40 suggested (14 minimally required) Narragunnawali RAP Actions comprising a sustainable, whole-scale approach to driving reconciliation in education by building relationships, respect and opportunities in the classroom, around the school, and with the community alike.

Submissions claimed that developing a RAP provided a whole-school approach to building strong community relationships and an increased awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, histories and cultures. It was identified that, as a framework for action and accountability, a RAP was not the standalone solution to cultural competency but a useful starting point and continuing reference, reflection and guidance point, if embedded alongside other culturally safe processes, frameworks and policies.



## Conclusion

The written submissions received showed great insight into the professions current thinking and understanding of cultural competency. They also highlighted some of the existing work that schools are doing to increase inter-cultural understanding and respectful and embedment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their wider school frameworks and environments, not just into the classroom/ curriculum.

The issue of racism in education was highly referenced in a number of submissions and additional work will be required to further unpack and seek opportunities to address this more thoroughly. There were some specific strategies presented by a range of academics, who have spent many years in research of improving educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – ultimately for the benefit of *all* students - through the curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogies and professional learning.

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# Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
<b>Anti-racism</b>	Opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance.
<b>Cultural awareness</b>	Recognising the differences and similarities between cultural groups.
<b>Cultural competency</b>	When organisations and individuals accept and respect cultural differences, continue self-assessment of cultural awareness, pay careful attention to the dynamics of cultural differences, and continually expand their cultural knowledge and resources in order to better meet the needs of minority populations (Cross et al. 1989).
<b>Cultural fluency</b>	Refers to the skills and compassion to both appreciate one's own culture and be fluent in at least one additional culture (Miller, 2020).
<b>Cultural humility</b>	A process requiring a humble and respectful attitude towards individuals of other cultures. It requires self-reflection and introspection to work towards realising our cultural bias and acknowledgement that one cannot know everything about a specific culture. Cultural humility also acknowledges learning about cultures is a life-long process (Tervalon and Murray Garcia, 1998).
<b>Cultural integrity</b>	When schools demonstrate both respect and high regard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, knowledge systems, and languages; welcome and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and local community members; and meet the learning needs and aspirations of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
<b>Cultural respect</b>	Recognition, protection, and continued advancement of the inherent rights, cultures, and traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
<b>Culturally responsive pedagogy</b>	A framework that emphasises the need to acknowledge student differences within the context of a diverse classroom. By acknowledging these differences, teachers are asked to question what must be changed to cater and respond to student differences. A culturally responsive pedagogy requires teachers to be culturally competent, have high expectations while valuing students' home culture and language, and have critical consciousness (Gay, 2002).
<b>Cultural responsiveness</b>	Cultural responsiveness requires individuals to be culturally competent. This competency is having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families. Culturally responsive teachers continuously support minoritised students through examination of their own assumptions about race and culture (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis, 2016).

Term	Definition
<b>Cultural safety</b>	An environment that is spiritually, socially, and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for students; where there is no assault challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are, and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge, and experience of learning together (Williams, 1999).
<b>Cultural sensitivity</b>	Being aware that cultural differences and similarities between students exist without assigning them a value. When you practise cultural sensitivity, you need to be willing to adapt your communication and behaviours to other cultural norms. The result is empathy instead of judgement.
<b>Invisible backpack</b>	Social and emotional factors students carry that are not visible such as race, gender, religion, language, poverty, [sexuality, disability] and family issues that impact their learning (McIntosh, 1989).
<b>Race</b>	A socio-political construct that is associated with physical attributes.
<b>Racial literacy</b>	Racial literacy, also known as racial consciousness, refers to an individual's deeper awareness and understanding of race.
<b>Racism</b>	When policies, practices, prejudices, and discrimination result in the unqualified mistreatment of individuals or groups of individuals from a racial or ethnic group.
<b>Reflective practices</b>	The ability to reflect on one's actions to engage in a process of continuous learning and pay critical attention to the practical values and theories that inform everyday actions by examining practice reflectively and reflexively.
<b>Unconscious bias</b>	Attitudes and beliefs of ourselves and others beyond our awareness that may be reinforced by environment and experiences.

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