

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Looking at the Victorian VET sector

Jo Wallwork

Victorian Skills Authority Fellowship, 2024

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First Published 2024

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Printed by MDM Copy Centre

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ISBN: 978-1-923027-76-3

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01

Acknowledgements

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Fellow's Acknowledgements

I thank all those who supported me in this Fellowship, including those who gave generously of their time and expertise when I travelled to Hawai'i and Thursday Island. For all those who sat patiently while I spoke endlessly about cultural capability and Indigenous pedagogy, I thank you! My family and friends have supported me with kindness and love, and I am very grateful for this and them.

Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge the Jarra people of the Dja Dja Wurrung as the traditional custodians of the land and life where I live and work today.

I acknowledge the Elders past, present and emerging, and the waterways, land, plants, and animals that feed and nurture this country. I walk daily on land that is land of the Djarra people, land that has never been ceded.

I spent many years in Dja Dja Wurrung Country and was born and lived as a young adult on Boon Wurrung and Woi Wurrung Country, part of the Kulin Nation. I was born of Anglo-Irish parents and spent some of my early years in Northeast Arnhem Land, home to the Yolngu people. This time was particularly important to my family and created connections to Country which have continued to

develop and nourish.

I am deeply sorry for the wrongs that have been inflicted on the First Nations peoples. I sit with this discomfort and work to change what I can, starting with my own knowledge and courage. I reflect and consider the things I can do, the connections that I can form, to mitigate my settler background and culture.

02

Executive Summary

What this Fellowship is about

We are coming to understand the complexities of disadvantage in education experienced by our First Nations students, from primary to tertiary level¹. In this report I will look at recent research and data to provide a current outline of these complexities and how student engagement with vocational education, in particular, is impacted by these factors.²

This disadvantage is part of the focus of my Fellowship, but it is not the whole story. Whilst it is important to understand the complexities of disadvantage which First Nations students must navigate, I want to take a strengths-based approach to understanding what these students are bringing to the learning space and how cultural strengths can inform the vocational education learning space.

This Fellowship will consider the way that *cultural engagement* within the learning process can enhance *learning engagement*. This report will focus on how First Nations learners bring their own knowledge, wisdom, and ways of learning into the vocational education learning space and what practices can support and nurture teachers in teaching practices that focus on cultural responsiveness, reflective practice, and peer learning.

It is important to note that I am writing this Fellowship Report as a non-Indigenous teacher. In this capacity I believe it is essential to develop a reflective practice which situates my lack of cultural knowledge and strongly motivates me to learn and attend to cultural matters.

In their work on critical self-reflection, Aunty Denise Proud and Ann Morgan outline this practice and describe how critical self-reflection challenges teachers to deeply explore and understand the underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that shape their worldview and sociocultural standpoint.³ They write that when cultivating a strengths-based understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, teachers need to critically self-reflect in three key ways: 'First, on their own cultural identity; second, on the wider social, cultural and historical context that has shaped their identity; and third, on the strengths, resilience, and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities of Australia.'⁴ They propose three questions to use for reflection: Why does it matter? How do I do it? And what difference will it make?

1 I will be using the term 'First Nations' as a preferred name for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, see <https://www.apsc.gov.au/working-aps/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-inclusion-news/first-nations-vocabulary-using-culturally-appropriate-language-and-terminology> for culturally appropriate language and terminology. I will on occasion use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' when I am making particular points.

2 I will be returning to this point in more detail, and focusing on the current Victorian education strategy, *Promoting participation and engagement for Koorie learners in VET planning for success* (published by State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training) 2019). This report explores the evidence that shows a revised approach is needed to support Koorie learners to engage and participate successfully in vocational education and training. I will be looking in particular at point 11 'How can we ensure Koorie learners and staff experience a culturally safe VET sector?'

3 Aunty Denise Proud & Ann Morgan, 'Critical Self-Reflection: A Foundational Skill', in Shay, M & Oliver, R (eds) *Indigenous Education in Australia: Learning and Teaching for Deadly Futures*, Routledge, 2021, p.39

4 Ibid, p.39

This report will focus also on the importance of developing reflective practices as a non-Indigenous vocational educator in order to be a culturally responsive facilitator.

Why I chose this topic

I was provided with an illuminating experience when working recently with an Aboriginal Community Controlled health organisation as a teacher. The experience of working with First Nations students in a culturally safe organisation put into stark relief the inadequacies of learning and teaching spaces I had been working in for the previous 15 years in mainstream TAFE organisations. I wanted to explore this gap and understand how we can do better in the Victorian VET sector in regard to engaging First Nations students in vocational education. This report outlines strategies which are personal, organisational, and sector-focused.

Gaps in the Victorian VET sector and why my Fellowship report is important

Based on my Fellowship report, I see the gaps in Victoria's VET sector as follows:

- A more consistent and systematic approach needs to be taken regarding Cultural Safety/Cultural Capability training for teachers in the Victorian VET sector
- This Cultural training should comprise of strategies to enable culturally responsive teaching and learning, including reflective practices (critical self-reflection) for non-Indigenous teachers. This report will propose a more strategic approach to Cultural Safety/Cultural Capability training, based on the Fellowship findings

- It is important to understand the potential numbers of First Nations students who could be accessing vocational education in Victoria in the very near future. While the numbers of First Nations peoples engaging with the VET sector in Victoria are above the national average, it can be seen that there is a potential for greater future numbers of First Nations students based on recent data relating to students at secondary school level. This is a good time to be planning for a really sustainable and culturally safe Vocational Education sector in Victoria.

Fellowship travel – where I went and why these countries were chosen for my research

For this Fellowship, I travelled to Hawai'i and the Torres Strait Islands. I also virtually participated in a conference in Alaska and have detailed this further in the Fellowship report.

Why Hawai'i:

The Indigenous peoples of Hawai'i and Australia share a deep sense of place and connection to water and land.⁵ For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, place is intertwined with identity and self-determination. For Native Hawai'ians, this deep connection operates too.⁶

The colonisation of the islands of Hawai'i has continued to disrupt ways of living, including cultural practices that support identity and community. This report will consider this in more detail further on, but suffice to say, the parallels with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia (Victoria) are strong.

5 In outlining why this Fellowship report has focused on these two places, I would first like to make an important clarification regarding Indigenous people. This Report will draw some parallels between relationships and practices of Indigenous people from different places. But I want to start by emphasising the diversity of Indigenous people, in the world (of course), and in Victoria. From AIATSIS we read: 'Many Indigenous peoples are the holders of unique languages, knowledge systems and beliefs, and possess invaluable traditional knowledge for the sustainable management of natural resources and have a special relation to and use of their traditional land, waters or territories. Ancestral lands, waters and territories are of fundamental importance for their physical and cultural survival as peoples. In considering the diversity of Indigenous peoples, an official definition of 'indigenous' has not been adopted by any United Nations (UN) system or body. According to the UN the most fruitful approach is to identify rather than define Indigenous peoples. This is based on the fundamental criterion of self-identification as underlined in a number of human rights documents.' [Indigenous Australians: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people | AIATSIS corporate website](#)

6 The use of the term 'Native Hawaiian' is based on government use but is problematised by historical contestation regarding blood quantum. See <https://www.kaainamomona.org/post/defining-terms-for-indigenous-hawaiians> for a discussion of this. Early use of the term "Hawaiian" referred to the people of Hawai'i and "Native Hawaiian" refers to the indigenous people of Hawai'i, many of whom self-identify as Kānaka 'Ōiwi ("native people" or literally "people of the ancestral bone") or Kānaka Maoli ("real people") or as part of the Lāhui ("Nation"). I've used Native Hawaiian in this report as this is what is in use at the Honolulu Community College.



I travelled to the Honolulu Community College to meet the team developing truly innovative projects and programs. The main project – Kūalahale - involves building the capacity of the faculty, staff, and administration in developing and sustaining culturally appropriate and culturally relevant strategies for current and future Native Hawaiian students. Other parts to Kūalahale include cultural workshops, regular educator symposiums for implementing indigenous education strategies, in-depth mentor program for employees at the College, and a train-the-trainer program.

As this report is focusing on a strengths-based approach for supporting Indigenous students, I was keen to see how the Kūalahale project operated and discuss with the team from Honolulu Community College what their findings were after running the programs. The focus of cultural education, mentor training, and regular meetings focusing on Indigenous pedagogy was of particular interest to me in the context of developing reflective practice to support culturally responsive teaching.

Why the Torres Strait Islands:

When we acknowledge the First Nation people of Australia we always note 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders'. In developing this Fellowship Report, I felt it to be essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural differences were discussed.

I travelled to Thursday Island, to the only TAFE campus in the Torres Strait Islands. This is a campus of TAFE Queensland.



Alaska:

The Culturally Responsive Education Conference is held annually in Juneau, Alaska. This conference, organized by Sealaska Heritage, focuses on education from early childhood to tertiary and is directed at all staff in the education system.

I was particularly interested in participating in this conference to hear speakers discuss how non-Indigenous teachers could understand Indigenous pedagogy and Indigenous knowledge, and how reflective practice and communities of practice could facilitate this understanding.

03

Fellowship background

Context for this Fellowship

This report will consider the context of this Fellowship in two ways: anecdotally, using my own experience as a vocational education teacher; and using current data to determine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement with – and completion of – vocational education programs in Victoria and how this connects to social and emotional wellbeing.

Working recently as educator in an Aboriginal RTO in Victoria (part of an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation)⁷, I taught groups of Aboriginal students within a variety of community services programs. All students in my groups were Aboriginal, and this provided a very exciting opportunity for me as facilitator to understand what teaching practices worked best with these learners. Not since a very early experience teaching in TAFE in northwest Western Australia have I had student groups comprising majority Aboriginal learners. This is not a particularly common experience in Victoria.⁸ As will be shown in the data below, numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are fairly small in terms of representative student numbers.

This experience allowed me to shape what I was learning in terms of providing culturally responsive teaching to these First Nations students. The collaborative teaching approach I have when

it comes to facilitating learning, my experience with different learning styles and cohorts, and my reflective practice all came together to begin a journey which this report signals.

The works of two First Nations theorists, Martin Nakata and Tyson Yunkaporta, have been (and continue to be) very influential in developing my understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy. As a non-Indigenous teacher, it is abundantly clear that developing as a reflective practitioner is essential in terms of delivering the excellent vocational education that all students deserve.⁹

Nakata and his work on the ‘Cultural Interface’ provides a framework for exploring the interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems, a space, Nakata asserts, that is highly political and contested:

In this contested space between the two knowledge systems, the cultural interface... things are not clearly black or white, Indigenous or Western. In this space are histories, politics, economics, multiple and interconnected discourses, social practices and knowledge technologies which condition how we all come to look at the world, how we come to know and understand our changing realities in the everyday, and how and what knowledge we

⁷ Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (VACCHO)

⁸ Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026, State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, 2016 https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf See p.22 for a discussion of the dispersal of the Koorie population across Victoria in terms of school numbers.

⁹ The recent publication, Shay, M & Oliver, R (eds) Indigenous Education in Australia: Learning and Teaching for Deadly Futures, Routledge, 2021, focuses on different ways educators can critically reflect. Each chapter of this book offers reflective questions to support critical reflection.

operationalise in our daily lives. Much of what we bring to this is tacit and unspoken knowledge, those assumptions by which we make sense and meaning in our everyday world.¹⁰

Bringing Indigenous knowledges into learning and teaching contexts is problematised by Nakata:

In the academy, then, we come to learn “about” Indigenous knowledge in similar ways to how we came to learn “about” Indigenous cultures and issues via the established disciplines. It is important for those wanting to bring Indigenous knowledge into teaching and learning contexts to understand what happens when Indigenous knowledge is conceptualised simplistically and oppositionally from the standpoint of scientific paradigms as everything that is “not science”. It is also important to understand what happens when Indigenous knowledge is documented in ways that disembodies it from the people who are its agents, when the “knowers” of that knowledge are separated out from what comes to be “the known”, in ways that dislocates it from its locale, and separates it from the social institutions that uphold and reinforce its efficacy, and cleaves it from the practices that constantly renew its meanings in the here and now.

Nakata states that ‘educators need themselves to develop their scholarship in contested knowledge spaces of the cultural interface and achieve for themselves some facility with how to engage and move students through the learning process’¹¹.

In considering the difference between Indigenous Knowledge as an *addition* to the curriculum¹² as opposed to operating as a **framework for learning**,

the work of Tyson Yunkaporta is critical. His focus is on the reconciling potential of Nakata’s ‘contested space’.¹³ In his work ‘Aboriginal pedagogies at the cultural interface’¹⁴ and the development of 8ways, he focuses on Indigenous knowledges in the teaching and learning space. 8ways is a pedagogical framework that allows teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives by using Aboriginal learning techniques. In this way, focus can remain on core curriculum content while embedding Aboriginal perspectives in every lesson. It came from a research project involving DET staff, James Cook University’s School of Indigenous Studies and the Western New South Wales Regional Aboriginal Education Team between 2007 and 2009.¹⁵ In conversation about this work Yunkaporta says:

These are the questions that I came into the research with, and it was basically ..., how can teachers come to Indigenous knowledge, and how can teachers use Indigenous knowledge productively and respectfully in the classroom? The answer came out really clearly that it was about process, Indigenous knowledge processes rather than content. So if you have an Indigenous knowledge process that you’re able to apply to the way you think through a mass equation or a recipe or something like that, then these are things that you can apply across the board. And you can apply them any way. (Yunkaporta in conversation about 8ways).¹⁶

Yunkaporta describes the Cultural Interface in terms of the common ground and innovation that stems from engaging in higher-levels of knowledge and intellectual rigour from both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous cultures. The image below supports his description of this:

10 Nakata, Martin, ‘The Cultural Interface’ in the Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, volume 36, supplement, 2007, p.9 my emphasis

11 Ibid., p.13

12 Many Higher Education educational institutions want to ‘Indigenise’ the curriculum, see for an example CQUniversity’s work on this, claiming that ‘Indigenisation of the curriculum will transform the University’s landscape by recognising and appreciating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing. https://acquire.cqu.edu.au/articles/report/Great_guide_to_Indigenisation_of_the_curriculum/13393868 The article in The Conversation regarding the University of Tasmania’s Indigenising of their curriculum indicates the differences between institutions in terms of what this ‘Indigenisation’ looks like. It is an ongoing discussion <https://theconversation.com/how-a-university-can-embed-indigenous-knowledge-into-the-curriculum-and-why-it-matters-147456>

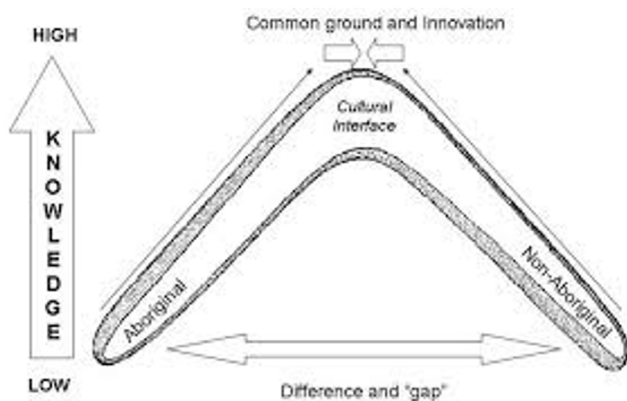
13 ‘Nakata’s work on this subject is much more sophisticated, as the Interface is far more complex than what is shown on this page ... The Interface is a highly contested site, full of contradictions and struggle and unequal power relationships. However, we have attempted to construct a calm, safe ground within that space for the purpose of bringing teachers into dialogue with the Aboriginal community.’ <https://www.8ways.online/interface-theory>

14 Yunkaporta, T Aboriginal Pedagogies at the Cultural Interface, PhD thesis, James Cook University, 2009 <http://eprints.jcu.edu.au/10974>

15 8ways, <https://www.8ways.online/about>

16 Yunkaporta, 8 ways Aboriginal pedagogy framework transcript. Here he describes the questions underpinning the research. <https://teach.deakin.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2019/06/Transcript-Yunkaporta-8Ways1.docx>

‘At the surface level of knowledge, there are only differences across cultures. You have to go higher and deeper to find the vast common ground, the interface between different cultures. This deep digging or high flying for knowledge at the Cultural Interface needs to become part of how we think about education.’¹⁷



Yunkaporta looks at the ‘surface’ level of knowledge and sees that we usually stop there, with a focus on the shallow surface and the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and knowledge. He writes:

...at that level there is no common ground, and all we see are differences and deficits – mismatch and lack. What we see is **gap**. We talk about ‘closing the gap’, but this is a gap in understanding, not ability. We can’t eliminate that gap with solutions informed by shallow understanding.¹⁸

Shifting from a shallow awareness of First Nations culture to a deeper engagement with First Nations culture is how we will move from tokenism towards a more Indigenous pedagogy. ‘Awareness’ is easy, ‘engagement’ requires much more from us, and will lead to understanding. As Yunkaporta states:

We didn’t find this knowledge here in this yarn by taking a straight path. We had to take some risks to get there, and we found the knowledge

along the way, not at the end. We didn’t use linear thinking to get there. We used non-linear thinking.¹⁹

Yunkaporta’s recent work on Indigenous thinking provides an amazing insight into what this looks like, without being didactic and prescriptive. *Sand Talk* and *Right Story, Wrong Story* are beautiful yarns that need to be given a good think. They have certainly tipped the thinking of this Fellow.

Further context for this Fellowship report

As any vocational educator will know, currency for teaching depends not only on industry experience and training but on learning and teaching professional development. All vocational educators need to maintain their currency in learning and teaching principles, which often focus on pedagogical practices to support learners with literacy and numeracy needs or language needs (with CALD students or students with disabilities, for instance). As vocational teachers we develop practices and strategies to engage young learners, older learners, learners who are neuro-diverse, or who have dyslexia and other specific learning needs, such as ADHD.

As part of this focus on inclusive teaching practice, vocational educators may participate in cultural competence or cultural safety training specifically designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In my time working in TAFEs (for the past 15 years) I note that cultural training for the support of First Nations students has never been mandatory nor often available to teaching teams. This is my own particular experience, of course, but it is interesting that, even now, cultural safety is provided ad hoc in the learning and teaching professional development of at least two big providers of vocational education.²⁰

17 Yunkaporta, *Aboriginal Pedagogies at the Cultural Interface*, op.cit., p.21

18 Ibid., p.22 my emphasis

19 Ibid., p.23

20 This year working for one of the largest TAFEs in Victoria I found that cultural safety training was not mandatory, not available for a four-month period, and not delivered by a Victorian Indigenous trainer but from a facilitator from another state. Given that the campuses are on Wurundjeri, Dja Dja Warrung, and Yorta Yorta Country, this seems inadequate. Regarding Reconciliation Action Plans, at the time of writing only two major TAFEs in Victoria has lodged a current RAP (Wodonga Institute of TAFE and Bendigo Kangan Institute), with two other institutions having theirs in the pipeline. All other providers are well-overdue, with RAPs as old as from 2021. See <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation-action-plans/who-has-a-rap/> (accessed 19.08.24).

The context for this report is then, to a great extent, based on what I have observed as a missing part of teaching practice and teaching professional development within vocational education in Victoria.

The data, as we see below, indicates some important points regarding the successful engagement and completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in vocational education in Victoria.

Education, health, and social and emotional well-being

The following points derive from the considerations noted in Tier 2 of the *Educational Participation and the Attainment of Adults*, from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework.²¹

Education is well recognised as a key determinant of health and continued learning as an adult is regarded as a powerful tool in achieving better health, education, and economic outcomes.

In terms of employment and ongoing economic flourishing, the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians diminishes as the level of educational attainment increases. Pursuing post-school qualifications increases opportunities for socioeconomic advancement. The transition from education to work is usually smoother for VET and university graduates, and salary outcomes are higher than for those who enter the workforce directly from school. By role modelling the successful completion of tertiary education and pathways into a variety of career pathways, increased numbers of First Nations graduates will support fundamental changes to professions which have been seriously under-represented.

The *Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework* notes that:

Adult learning can indirectly benefit physical and mental health by improving social capital and connectedness, health behaviour, skills and employment outcomes. There is evidence

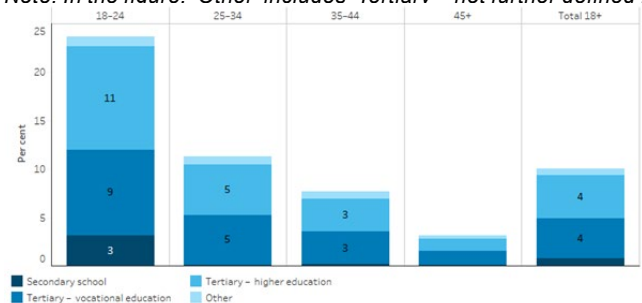
that participation in adult education can have a greater effect on health and social outcomes for people in more disadvantaged groups. Longitudinal studies show that adults who participate in post-school learning engage in healthier behaviours, including increased amounts of physical exercise, reduced alcohol consumption and smoking cessation, and improved social and emotional wellbeing.

Among First Nations Australians we can see (from the following table, based on data from 2021) that age is a factor in engagement with tertiary education:

- aged 18–24, 1 in 4 (24%) were currently studying,
- decreasing to 11% of those aged 25–34,
- 8% of those aged 35–44, and
- 3% of those aged 45 and over

Proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 18 and over currently attending educational institutions, by type of institution and age group, 2021

Note: In the figure, 'Other' includes 'Tertiary – not further defined'.



'Other' and 'Educational Institution not stated'.

Source: Table D2.06.1. AIHW analysis of ABS Census of Population and Housing (ABS 2022).

The proportion of Indigenous adults who were studying was highest among those living in the Australian Capital Territory, where 19% were currently studying, followed by Victoria at 14%

21 AIHW National Indigenous Australians Agency (2023) [Measure 2.06 Educational participation and attainment of adults - Implications, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework website](#), AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 26 August 2024. Note that data and information from this section derive from this website.

Focus on Victoria

There were 65,646 people who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander counted in Victoria in 2021 – up from 47,788 in 2016. This represents an increase of 37.4% (see **Figure 1**).



Figure 1.

Victoria²²

Latest release

2021 Census Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people	65,646
Male	50.1%
Female	49.9%
Median age	24

Education

Type of educational institution attending	Victoria 2021	%Victoria2021	Victoria 2016	%Victoria 2016	Australia 2021	%Australia 2021
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people attending an educational institution						
Preschool	2,597	9.7	1,387	7.1	25,485	8.0
Primary	9,527	35.6	6,934	35.5	120,864	37.9
Secondary	6,546	24.5	4,826	24.7	83,631	26.2
Tertiary - Vocational education (including TAFE and private training providers)	2,099	7.8	1,210	6.2	21,273	6.7
Tertiary - University or higher education	2,559	9.6	1,681	8.6	21,149	6.6
Other	846	3.2	563	2.9	7,310	2.3
Not stated	2,589	9.7	2,940	15.0	38,814	12.2

More information Type of educational institution attending (TYPP)

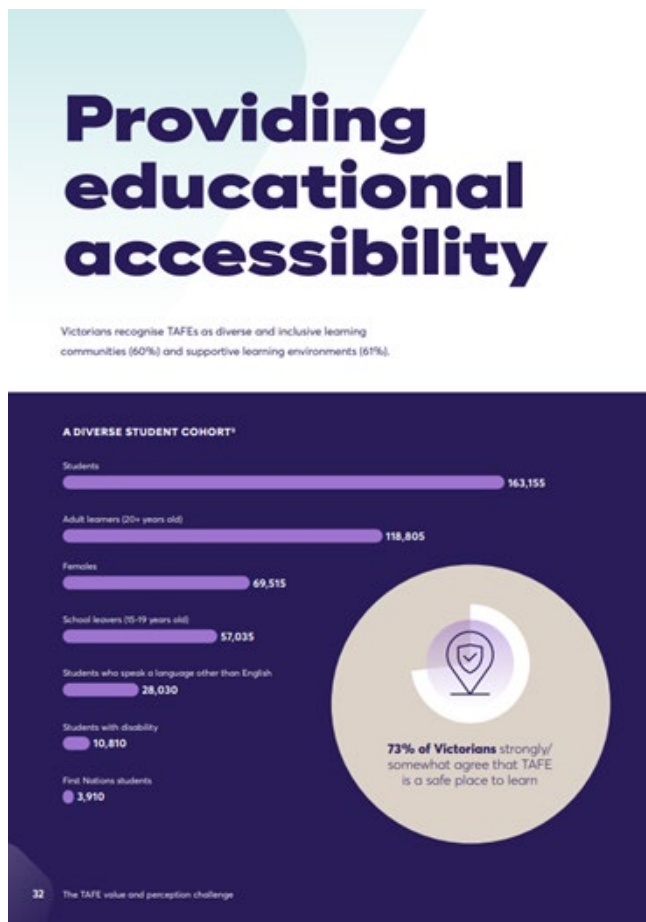
Table based on place of usual residence

22 Data derives from latest figures from Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/IQS2>

The *TAFE Value and Perception Challenge*, authored by Mark McCrindle, provides insight into the perception challenges facing TAFE in Victoria. Written for the Victorian TAFE Association, this publication aims to provide insights “into the perception challenges facing TAFE in Victoria, the present opportunities to build on its rich history and its significant impacts in equipping the Victorian workforce.”²³

For this report, consider this focus on accessibility:

- 73% strongly/somewhat agree that TAFE is a safe place to learn
- 60% Victorians recognise TAFEs as diverse and inclusive learning communities
- 61% Victorians recognise TAFEs as supportive learning environments.²⁴



Marrung -Victoria's Education Strategy

In its introduction, the *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026* states that the plan “will ensure that Koorie families, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people from other parts of Australia who live in Victoria, have the doors held wide open to all learning and development services, from early childhood onwards.”²⁵ There is a focus on ‘celebrating’ Indigenous cultures and on being accountable regarding the delivery of quality education, but Marrung, as a strategy, provides little more than steps to encourage and support Indigenous students in existing educational structures.

In relation to vocational education specifically, one of the action points focuses on:

developing options for a revised approach to supporting Koorie learners to engage and participate successfully in vocational education and training (VET) through the redesign of the existing Koorie VET workforce.²⁶

The other actions focus on developing new support systems for Koorie students or strengthening existing ones.

Points to take away from these figures and tables:

- Since the last census, Victoria shows a significantly increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (37.4% increase from 2016).
- Current figures show there are high numbers of students in Primary and Secondary schools currently who could potentially transition to VE in Victoria. It is a good point, now, to be looking at culturally-based strategies that would work to ensure successful engagement and completion of VET studies for increased student numbers.
- Victoria has a slightly higher number of Aboriginal

23 McCrindle, M, 'The TAFE Value and Perception Challenge', <https://vta.vic.edu.au/tafe-vpcr/>, Introduction.

24 Ibid, p.32

25 Marrung, op.cit., p.4

26 Ibid., p32

and Torres Strait Islander students engaged in VET studies than the national number.

- There is room to improve in the perception of TAFEs in Victoria being safe learning environments and supportive learning spaces for diverse cohorts of students.

While there are some positive points here, the input of data from the next census will be crucial. Post-COVID-19 pandemic statistics will indicate more clearly how vocational education is progressing in Victoria and nationally.

Gaps in the Victorian VET sector and why my Fellowship report is important

Based on my points above, I see the gaps in Victoria's VET sector as follows:

- It is important to understand the potential numbers of First Nations students who could be accessing vocational education in Victoria in the very near future. While the numbers of First Nations peoples engaging with the VET sector in Victoria are above the national average, it can be seen that there is a potential for greater future numbers of First Nations students based on recent data relating to students at secondary school level. This is a good time to be planning for a really sustainable and culturally safe Vocational Education sector in Victoria.
- A more consistent and systematic approach needs to be taken regarding Cultural Safety training for teachers in the Victorian VET sector
- This Cultural Safety training should comprise of strategies to enable culturally responsive teaching and learning, including reflective practices for non-Indigenous teachers.

Fellowship Methodology

My research took me

- to the Honolulu Community College in Hawai'i. HonCC is part of the University of Hawai'i and is the premier vocational education college in wai'i.²⁷
- to the TAFE campus on Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait
- to virtually participate in the Culturally Responsive Education conference held in Alaska.

Hawai'i: I was interested in visiting the *Hulili Ke Kukui Hawaiian Center* at HonCC.²⁸ This centre was established:

as part of the college's efforts to make the University of Hawai'i one of the world's foremost indigenous-serving institutions and fulfills the college's kuleana (responsibility) to the Native Hawaiian Community...

Hulili Ke Kukui Hawaiian Center is committed to actively preserve and perpetuate Hawaiian culture and values. Through an array of comprehensive services, we strengthen the college's educational programs and enable students of Hawaiian ancestry to succeed in their academic, career and individual endeavours.²⁹

In Australia we have Indigenous Education Units in universities and TAFE organisations.³⁰ These



27 In Hawai'i vocational education is referred to as career and technical training. See <https://www.honolulu.hawaii.edu/why/what-sets-us-apart/> accessed 19.09.2024

28 All quotes and titles will use US spelling, otherwise I will use UK language conventions.

29 <https://www.honolulu.hawaii.edu/services/hawaiian-center/> accessed 19.09.2024

30 Indigenous Higher Education Units are located in universities across Australia. These units provide support to First Nations students, create a network of First Nations students and academics and provide a First Nations presence at all Australian university campuses. <https://natsihcec.edu.au/members/indigenous-units/> TAFEs sometimes use this term too, see <https://www.kangan.edu.au/courses/indigenous-education-training> Accessed 19.09.2024

are not often called ‘Indigenous Education Units’: instead, they bear names in language appropriate to the Country where they lie.³¹

The research focus for this report was upon the services offered by the Hulili Ke Kukui Hawaiian Center and the programs initiated by this centre for the entire staff and student body of Honolulu Community College. This includes practices designed for teachers to support cultural understanding and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Torres Strait:

As this report focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally responsive VET education, I felt it important to look at the Torres Strait context particularly and consider the specific cultural needs for Torres Strait Island students.

I visited the Thursday Island campus of TAFE Queensland to meet with the campus manager and staff. The research focus for this report was about the strategies used on this campus to support students in their VET studies, focusing particularly on cultural supports.



Figure 2. Undercover space for outdoor learning, TAFE Queensland, Thursday Island

Alaska:

Every year the Sealaska Heritage Institute facilitates the *Culturally Responsive Education* conference in Juneau, Alaska. I was able to access this conference virtually and learn about culturally responsive education focused on Alaska and Canada, in particular.

The research focus for this report was on reflective practice for non-Indigenous teachers. The keynote speaker, Jo Chrona, focused on the importance of this for culturally responsive pedagogy and proposed strategies for developing this practice.



31 Some examples include the Djimbayang Indigenous Engagement Centre at Bendigo TAFE and Ngarara Willim at RMIT.

Fellow biography

I have worked in vocational education for almost 20 years, and before this, in community education (non-accredited training). I have provided details of my recent work with VACCHO (Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation) as a trainer within the community services programs. This focused teaching with First Nations students, as well as my current work with Bendigo Kangan Institute teaching First Nations students within the prison system, has provided the context and interest for this Fellowship.

I will be forever grateful to the First Nations students at VACCHO. Their insight into their own learning, the generous sharing of cultural knowledge, and their willingness to engage in a learning journey that was not often easy, has taught me a great deal about what I need to do as a teacher to fully engage with First Nations people in a learning space.

04

Fellowship Learnings and Findings

Specific learnings and findings for this Fellowship

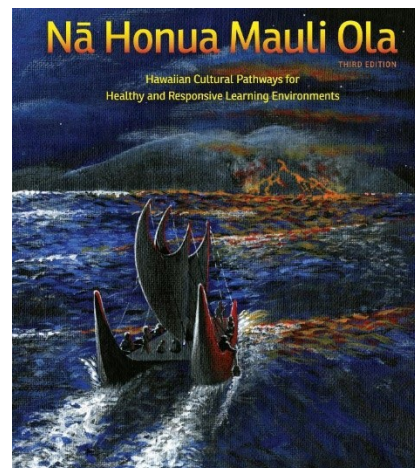
Some context for choosing research location

My journey to Hawai'i began when I read *Nā Hōnua Maui Ola–Hawai'i*.³² This is a document that outlines the guidelines for 'Culturally Healthy and Responsive Learning Environments (NHMO)', providing schools and communities with 'a way to *examine* and *attend* to the educational and cultural well-being of their learners.' (my emphasis).

Written by a volunteer committee representing expertise from within the public, private, and community sectors of education - early childhood to higher education - *Nā Hōnua Maui Ola–Hawai'i* provides a framework for a comprehensive support system for student-centred learning environments:

These learning environments are places where holistic processes for *learning*, *teaching*, *leading*, and *reflecting* occur. They support the practices and learning experiences that foster and shape the development of its learners to become responsible, capable, caring, healthy (spiritual, mental/intellectual, emotional, physical, and social) human beings who have

a strong cultural identity and sense of place.³³



As previously discussed, reflective practice, the *attending* to one's own teaching practice particularly in regard to cultural responsiveness, is core to the proposal of this report. The promulgation of holistic processes that are culturally founded relates to the guidelines' inclusive intentions.

Another section states:

The education cycle is a lifelong learning process, and a personal, family, and community endeavour. A healthy and responsive learning community is the ultimate goal. Therefore, the guidelines provide support for the entire learning community with inclusive and holistic

32 *Nā Hōnua Maui Ola–Hawai'i* - Hawaiian Cultural Pathways for Healthy and Responsive Learning Environments, 3rd Edition, 2024 https://www.olelo.hawaii.edu/documents/olelo/NHMOIIPuke_compressed.pdf

33 *Ibid.*, p.1 my emphasis

considerations. Collective participation and preparation of the total learning community must be an ongoing process that includes educators, parents, students, administrators, community members, and resource and support personnel.³⁴

We understand vocational education to be life-long learning – this is emphasised in our Victorian/Australian vocational education sector’s message and is key to the inclusive nature of this sector (age, cultural background, breadth of program availability, etc). The focus for this report is on how Nā Hönuā Mauli Ola–Hawai‘i outlined inclusivity. The learning process is described in terms of ‘community’ and this community is described multiple times as inclusive of all. The learner is placed within a learning journey that includes family, community, educators, other students, and various support personnel at the educational institution itself, administrators and resource personnel included.

Inclusive practices, within our VET system in Victoria/Australia, speak to the availability and access of vocational education for all. Not only access but focused support is touted as being available for all learners, support provided by the training organisation relating to study support as well as equity support (disability, cultural, age-related, financial, etc). However, the point of difference is the emphasis outlined in Nā Hönuā Mauli Ola–Hawai‘i on the breadth of the inclusive practices, where the learner has multiple points of support within the educational institution, and the cultural focus for learning is the starting point. Native Hawaiians are the focus, but the guidelines provide support for the ‘entire learning community’. Given this support is culturally inflected, this provides a cultural focus for learning which is not provided by the Victorian/Australian VET sector.

I wanted to see how the principles outlined in these guidelines played out in practice. Research led to the Kūkahale project and associated programs currently being developed and offered at Honolulu Community College (leading the project) and Kapi‘olani Community College.

Kūkahale project – creating an Indigenous education framework

The Kūkahale project focuses on one of the core points of the *Nā Hönuā Mauli Ola–Hawai‘i*, that of the ‘collective participation and preparation of the total learning community’ in developing an Indigenous education framework.

The core focus of the Kūkahale project is to build the capacity **of the entire staff** on campus - faculty, administrative staff, and support workers - in culturally appropriate and culturally relevant strategies for all Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) students.

I met with the team on campus at Honolulu Community College. They included

Paul Kalani Ka‘awa Flores-Hatt, *Project Director/ Co-Principal Investigator*

Ululani Kahikina, Kūkahale Program Manager

Rokki Midro, Kūkahale Creative Media

Kaleialoha Lum-Ho, Instructor, Huliili Ke Kukui Hawaiian Centre Coordinator

Mahi La Pierre, Hawaiian Culture Education Specialist – Kīpaipai Aloha & Ho‘omōhalu

³⁴ Ibid., p.1



The team shared experiences and insights and learnings, with each member of the team discussing their role and how this had developed as the project had developed. The results of their work, tangible increases in student retention and the high numbers of students recording a positive experience of education, indicated that the focus and spirit of the team was having the intended effect, and what I saw was a cohesive and energised team.

This capacity-building focus was described to me as a ‘three-tier approach’:

One-touch

Kīpaipai aloha workshops – these are workshops (available to all students) focusing on creating space for culture. “Shaping out will also shape within” is how this was described to me. Mahi LaPierre, who runs these workshops from Honolulu and Kapi’olani Community Colleges, gave me a good example of a short 2-3 hour workshop that he runs, where students work with coconuts to create artwork.

The current devastation being wrought on the island’s coconut trees through the coconut rhinoceros beetle is liable to leave Oahu with no viable coconut trees in as little as a year. By connecting people with this important object in the workshops - handling the coconut, working with it – connection can be made, connection based on the cultural place of the coconut, of it as food, on the long history on these islands, and importantly, on future possibilities, including losing this nut, or saving it.



Figure 3. Mahi La Pierre, Hawaiian Cultural Education Specialist, with students participating in cultural activities on campus

Field trips - The purpose of these is to support employees to gain an ‘entry-level’ understanding of Indigenous concepts and strategies and build partnerships and wahi pana (places of significance) to support a sense of place on each campus.

Two-touch

Ho‘omōhalu - One-week symposium at the beginning of each semester on how to implement Indigenous education strategies – introduces participants to various Indigenous education methodologies and practices that have been successfully implemented in multiple disciplines in higher education.

Mauli Ola Mentorship & Leadership – this is a one-semester program which entails regular workshops and a capstone project identified by the students. Participants in this program can continue to become a peer mentor.

Three-touch

E ho‘i nā wai cohort – This is a mentored one-year program for employees who want to be able to implement Indigenous education frameworks in their work.

The intention is for the Kūkahale project to disseminate the models for these different programs

in a train-the-trainer program for other institutions to include in their Indigenous education strategies. This will include the development of a curriculum for all cultural training and support for best practice through presentations, training, and consultation, including the creation of a community advisory group comprised of practitioners of indigenous education.

As the further dissemination of the Kūkahale project will include showcasing the program at local, national, and international indigenous education conferences, I look forward to seeing this inspiring team from Honolulu Community College at the World Indigenous Education conference in Aotearoa in 2025, to which they have committed to attend.

The learning I took from this discussion and outline of the Kūkahale project and possible applications within the Victorian VET sector:

The strength of this project lies in the **systematic approach to cultural training**. Achieved by different approaches working together, the Kūkahale project offers:

- cultural immersion activities,
- place-based learning,
- focused time spent on professional learning about cultural/Indigenous education strategies (through the one-week symposium, held at the beginning of each semester),
- mentorship and leadership program held over one-semester to develop peer mentors,
- then the final mentored one-year program for all staff to work on implementing the cultural learning into their work.

This is a cultural training program which allows participants to move at a good pace towards being culturally capable and working in a culturally safe way. The flow from ‘one-touch’ to ‘three-touch’ allows for a coherent approach to developing culturally safe practices. The inclusion of a peer mentor program really consolidates the horizontal learning that can be so effective within a workplace. Not only do peer mentors support the learning of others but they themselves are continually integrating learning into their work practice, whether as teaching or support

staff. This is sustainable learning which is more efficacious than a once-a-year webinar on cultural training.

The other point that I want to emphasise is the focus on training *all staff* at an educational organisation. At Honolulu and Kapi'olani Community Colleges, this cultural training is offered to all staff, as the Kūkalahale project is focused on the 'collective participation and preparation of the total learning community' in developing an Indigenous education framework.

In the Victorian context, the Indigenous Education Units (IEU) at TAFEs (and universities) offer support and culturally safe spaces on campuses to First Nations students.³⁵ One of my observations is that these units are often quite separate to all other student services and First Nations students can feel siloed when seeking out and using the IEU on their campus.³⁶

It would be an excellent thing if all staff in educational organisations were to undertake cultural training as comprehensive as that demonstrated at Honolulu and Kapi'olani Community Colleges.

As I have observed, VE teaching staff are offered a fairly standardised cultural training at TAFEs, either online or, if fortunate, with a face-to-face component. This training rarely is for more than half a day and is not usually updated from year-to-year. More worryingly, in my experience, assessment tools that don't align with cultural requirements are continually used, as quality and compliance processes don't allow for adjustments to be easily made. Resources and assessment tools purchased from educational suppliers are often not culturally sound.

One more point: working with other organisations regularly to share findings and showcase practice would be a useful focus for education staff, particularly

teachers, to develop cultural communities of practice to support culturally responsive teaching. With the Kūkalahale project, dissemination of models and practice is a core feature, allowing for the sustainable development of culturally responsive education. This will feature further in this report in my considerations.

An example 'āina -based education: developing a 'sense of place'

Honolulu Community College is sited in the most urbanised environment in Hawai'i. The immediate environs of the campus see much new development, growing homelessness, and a nearby prison, with major roadways bifurcating the landscape.

The first guiding theme from *Nā Hönuu Maui Ola–Hawai'i*:

'ike honua (Value of Place) - Developing a strong understanding of place, and appreciation of the environment and the world at large, and the delicate balance necessary to maintain it for generations to come.

In my time with the team, Kaleialoha Lum-Ho showed maps of the campus where 28 taro fields provided food for the area. Small allotments generously yielded what was needed for the community. Indeed, the whole of the urbanised area of Honolulu is situated on what had been the 'food bowl' of the island of Oahu, paved areas, houses, roads, industrial buildings supplanting the fertile land that fed the island.

How do you find 'place', land, as the source of culture, when there has been such dislocation?

With place-based education, in Hawai'i, 'āina-based education, it is essential to both find and reclaim significant places and to make new places that are culturally significant.

35 The implementation of Indigenous Education Units comes from the Behrendt Report: 'Throughout many of the Behrendt Report's 35 recommendations, support was identified as a key theme in student success. Culturally appropriate and academically comprehensive support at university is vital for First Peoples. The establishment of Indigenous education units (IEU) has improved access, retention and success of students.' See Cook, B, Whatman, S, Sammel, A, 'First Peoples' perspectives on successful engagement at university: What keeps students coming back to Indigenous education units?' in *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* Volume 52, Number 1, 2023, p.2, p.10

36 From the research about IEUs at Griffith University, Queensland, 'Participants voiced that there was a lack of awareness about, or understanding of, what GUMURRII does within the broader university. This was linked back to lack of cultural competency and safety in the broader university and respect of First Peoples' values and practices within the institution...The students' suggestions here related to improving awareness, improving understanding, and embedding cultural support, perspectives and knowledge across the university', *Ibid.*, p.12

At Honolulu Community College, both approaches have been applied and have served to create a campus that celebrates and embeds culture. In terms of 'place making' specifically, there is the Hulili Ke Kukui Hawaiian Centre, a traditional hale at the piko (centre) of campus, and nearby, a huge mural depicting the land and some particular features before urbanisation. The Hulili Ke Kukui Hawaiian Centre is a space dedicated to the support of native Hawaiian students, with artwork and cultural items alongside the computers and student kitchen facilities.



From 2018 to 2020, Honolulu Community College's faculty, staff and students worked with community mentors to erect a hale hālawai (community gathering space).

The hale is named after the college's first Hawaiian Language and Hawaiian Studies Professor, Kumu Edith Kawelohea McKinzie, who taught at Honolulu Community College from the 1980s until her retirement in 1996.

During the building of the hale, a story mural was planned for the newly renovated campus courtyard



next to the hale. The concept of bringing a mural to campus began in 2017. The image of "Ha'aheo Niuhelewai" represents the Olauniu winds blowing through the kumu lā'au niu (coconut trees), the multitude of loko i'a (fishponds) existing in the ahupua'a, Niuhelewai stream, the representation of mo'olelo (stories) Lepeamoā, Kaulu and Haumea in the 'ulu tree, and the 45 lo'i that once existed on the current campus' footprint.

The project was completed between 2017-2019.

The place-making within the Honolulu Community College campus has focused on supporting Indigenous students by creating cultural spaces, such as the piko, the mural, and the Hulili Ke Kukui Hawaiian Centre as a culturally safe student study space.³⁷

³⁷ According to historical land documents, it was revealed that the land that Honolulu Community College occupies was divided into six 'ili or ancient Hawaiian land divisions. In 2016, place name signage representing the six land areas were designed and mounted on identified buildings across campus. HonCC's place based signage supports the work of the college to create a SENSE OF PLACE that is culturally significant and relevant. Additionally the campus signage reinforces and aligns our commitment to Hawai'i Papa O Ke Ao, the University of Hawai'i's "goals and objectives to address the higher education needs of our indigenous people—Native Hawaiians—by creating a model indigenous serving institution." [Creating a Sense of Place - Ho'āla Hou - Ka Papa 'Ōlani - Research Guides at Honolulu Community College \(hawaii.edu\)](https://www.hawaii.edu/researchguides/) accessed 31 May 2024

In Victorian TAFEs we find similar place-making initiatives, even in highly urbanised campuses. Having cultural spaces (gardens, art) open, central, and available to all students, is an excellent way of bringing culture into campuses and teaching spaces. Using these spaces to work with students (all students, including First Nations students) is one way that we could initiate cultural capability on campuses. For those students who are not First Nations, we can be supporting curiosity and learning, an important first step for those who do not have experience or competence with First Nations cultures. Importantly, we are undoing the experience of 'mainstream' vs 'Indigenous' space and allowing 'Indigenous' spaces to be central. Place-making on campus is an important step in developing allies on campus. As the team from Honolulu Community College said during our time together, when you develop allies on campus, "it's not a them but a we".

An essential part of cultural safety is understanding colonial history and the impact of colonisation on First Nations peoples. Each Victorian TAFE celebrates the Country on which the campuses lie and the focus of cultural training should be on the specific Country. Along with sites that are appropriate to visit and know about (for non-Indigenous people), it is important to acknowledge sites where colonisation and complex situations played out. An example would be the structure on the RMIT City Campus, telling the story of the massacre and public execution of First Nations peoples on that site. Taking students to this spot and spending time reading and considering the documents and photographs that are part of the exhibit is always a powerful experience for all. If we can develop understanding and knowledge through our TAFE campuses with explicit activities that investigate connections to Country, and the history of colonisation, then we will ground subsequent cultural training very well.

Point to consider:

This report proposes that extensive cultural safety training for all staff on campus would support culturally responsive education in the Victorian VET sector. Specific support offered by IEUs can sit within a wider culturally supportive staff and campus.

Cultural spaces within VET organisations can ground and connect all staff and all students in cultural attentiveness and support cultural safety and capability.

The Torres Strait Island context

I travelled to Waiben (Thursday Island)³⁸ to visit the campus, which is TAFE Queensland, as the Torres Strait sits under Queensland governance.

The Torres Strait is made up of eighteen islands and two mainland communities. The Islands are scattered over an area of 48,000 square kilometres, starting from the tip of Cape York and stretching north towards the borders of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Torres Strait Islanders are one of the two groups known as First Nations peoples in Australia.³⁹



Figure 4. View from the top of Thursday Island, where I could see the many islands spread over incredibly blue seas

38 I'll use Thursday Island, as this is the name most generally used.

39 https://deadlystory.com/page/culture/articles/World_s_Indigenous_Peoples_Day/Torres_Strait_Islander_people

First Nations peoples in Australia are very diverse, with over 250 different language groups spread across the nation.⁴⁰ Given the particular difference between First Nations peoples in the Torres Strait and those from Victoria, this report will discuss some of the culturally specific points around the delivery of vocational education on Thursday Island.



Figure 5. Here is where the ferry lands on Thursday Island. The little yellow boat is one of the 'school boats'.

I was fortunate to spend time with the campus manager of Thursday Island's TAFE, Jo Savage. She has been working for TAFE Queensland for many years and had returned to the Torres Strait from Cairns (having grown up on the island) to take on the role of campus manager.



One of the main questions I wanted to ask was around culturally responsive education and what this looked like in the Torres Strait, specifically at the TAFE on Thursday Island. One of the notable points was that there is a continuity of culture between staff and students, as they are almost all Torres Strait Islanders. Working within the TAFE system, students are provided with support for enrolment and for completing their LLN tests. Teachers engage with students at this early point to determine LLN support needs. This strategy promoted a good start with learners, so that everyone was clear about LLN and support needs.

This is similar to practices in Victorian TAFEs, as we all work together in the same vocational education system. It is simpler to facilitate cultural connections and support needs with smaller institutes. Sharing cultural background does also contribute to facilitating appropriate cultural supports.

⁴⁰ <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/indigenous-australians-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people> Torres Strait Islander people prefer to use the name of their home Island to identify themselves to outsiders, for example a Saibai man or woman is from Saibai, or a Meriam person is from Mer. Many Torres Strait Islanders born and raised in mainland Australia still identify according to their Island homes.



Figure 6. This shows the large studio space on the Thursday Island campus, which recognises the creative legacy of former TAFE Queensland student and teacher, Ceferino.



An important strategy that Jo Savage discussed focused on choosing the right teacher for each cohort. As students and teaching staff worked in

blocks of teaching (with students and teachers travelling, where necessary, to the TAFE campus on Thursday Island), it was possible to track student engagement and progress from these learning blocks. If student numbers dropped off in the second block or if there was a high level of non-completion, this could be flagged and strategies put in place to support the teaching staff.

Jo Savage discussed the requirements of teaching staff to focus on *care* when working with students. In her previous work with the TAFE in Cairns, she had found that apprenticeship training was not supportive of First Nations students. She observed this as being based on the attitude that students who were adults should be treated as adults and should not need care and support. Through their

apprenticeships, students were travelling to Cairns to complete intensive training blocks of periods of 6-7 weeks. Her work at this time was to train trade teachers in supporting these students. With a focus on cultural needs and the individual needs of each student, students were enabled to engage with and successfully complete their apprenticeship training.

In their article on Torres Strait Islander language and culture in education, Robyn Ober, Noessa Bulsey, Norah Pearson, and Claire Bartlett focus on this aspect of care based on knowing the student group:

To be a good teacher in the Torres Strait (in fact, anywhere) it is important to know the people you are teaching and how they live. Each school is in a different community and language is different everywhere, including in the Torres Strait where every island is different. Also, don't assume that because a person is a Torres Islander that they will know and understand the children on all the different islands – as with Aboriginal students, it is important to understand the diversity within groups and their particular context.⁴¹

When I asked Jo for her considered approach to culturally responsive education, she said:

Sit with them

Be on the same level

Be comfortable



Jo referred to the Island Mat, one big one. It is important to share the mat. If more than one is needed, then others are joined together so that all are able to sit together. As Jo notes: 'we are all one'.

Weaving is one of the most complex and sophisticated examples of First Nations technology and culture. Not only producing objects of beauty, the process of weaving has deep cultural significance. Weaving is a way to share knowledge, connect to people and Country, invite mindfulness, and more.⁴²

This understanding of weaving visually supports the ideas of culturally responsive education outlined by Jo Savage from Thursday Island: the idea of a shared space where everyone is 'equal' and participates equally, with connection to Country, to place, to shared knowledge and being open to learning (comfortable).

The learning from the Island Mat extends to teachers also. As Jo explains, at the Thursday Island campus there is a strong community of teachers, where sharing connections, developing skills, and collaborating are core practices for the teachers here. Accordingly, there are very high retention and completion rates for students (including non-Indigenous students).

One issue that Jo Savage noted was about the need to contextualise certain things to be more culturally specific. This included ensuring the timetable did not interfere with cultural events and important days of significance.⁴³ Educational resources (including assessment tools) were also rejigged to reflect their use in a regional context.

It is important to note that the current school system in the Torres Strait is based on the 'both-ways' approach:

While a both-ways approach underpins the provision of public schooling in the Torres Strait, it hasn't always been that way. Public schooling in the Torres Strait is shaped by a history of

41 Ober, R, Bulsey, N, Pearson, N, Bartlett, C, 'Weaving Torres Strait Islander language and culture into education', in Shay, M & Oliver, R (eds) Indigenous Education in Australia: Learning and Teaching for Deadly Futures, Routledge, 2021, p.83

42 <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/en/podcast-episode/what-is-the-cultural-significance-of-first-nations-weaving/ey5wv6fm3>

43 Given that Victorian TAFE resumes in the first week of July and NAIDOC week begins from the first Sunday in July, it would be good to see a real focus on NAIDOC activities, as well as allowing some flexibility for First Nations students to participate in activities in their own Communities during this week.

colonisation and assimilation that resulted in racist and oppressive policies and practices that privileged Western ways of knowing, doing, and being. These were gradually replaced by policies of self-determination that gave rise to practices that called for Torres Strait Islander languages, cultures, and identities to be harnessed for teaching and learning. Brought about by the leadership of Torres Strait Islander councillors, the local Elders, teachers, and school staff – and their participation in educational decision-making and governance – both-ways learning is now practised in all public schools in Torres Strait Island communities.⁴⁴

Both-ways is an approach formed at the Batchelor Institute in the Northern Territory:⁴⁵

Both-ways is a philosophy of education that brings together Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts, and embraces values of respect, tolerance and diversity



Many of the islands in the Torres Strait have primary schools, with young students travelling to Thursday Island for their secondary school education. Language and culture underpin education in the Torres Strait, and it is no surprise then to know how important these are when providing vocational education at the TAFE on Thursday Island.



‘Our Cultural Landscape’, Culturally Responsive Education Conference, Sealaska Heritage Institute, Alaska⁴⁶

For this report from this conference⁴⁷, my focus will be on the keynote speaker, Jo Chrona, and her address about developing skills individually and collectively to create equitable and just learning environments.

Chrona’s keynote presentation addresses one of the primary research focuses of this report, that of

⁴⁴ Ober et al., op. cit., p.79

⁴⁵ ‘This philosophy had been developed within the school context and continues to be discussed and developed within that sector, most particularly in the continuing dialogue around bilingual education and two-way schooling. It was natural that Batchelor Institute, which began as a training program for Indigenous Assistant Teachers, would be part of those discussions, debate and the development of the philosophy, both within schools and then within the Institution as a place involved in adult education. The implementation of bilingual education in a number of schools in the Northern Territory during the early 1970s gave a new focus to the training of Indigenous teachers that saw a shift from ‘aide’ to ‘teacher’. This then presented a further need for expanded training and gave an opportunity for an expansion of the both-ways practice at Batchelor College’ See Ober, R and Bat, M, ‘Paper 1: Both-ways: the philosophy’ in Ngoonjook: a Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues, no. 31, 2007, p.69. Image from Bat, M., & Shore, S., (2013) Listening differently: an exploration of grey literature about Aboriginal teacher education in the Top End of the Northern Territory. Review of grey literature produced for the MATSITI funded project: “Pathways for Yolŋu Teachers: rethinking initial teacher education (ITE) on country”. Darwin, NT, School of Education, Charles Darwin University.

⁴⁶ Sealaska Heritage Institute is a Native nonprofit founded in 1980 to perpetuate and enhance Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures of Southeast Alaska. Its goals are to promote cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding through public services and events. Sealaska Heritage also conducts scientific and public policy research that promotes Alaska Native arts, cultures, history and education statewide.

⁴⁷ This annual event provides educators and administrators with a deep understanding of culturally responsive education and equips them to transform their classrooms, pedagogy, and curriculum to fully support all students’ success—especially those who have been historically underserved, disenfranchised, and marginalized by colonized systems. The focus is on culturally-responsive and sustaining pedagogies for K–12 and university settings, critical theory, place-based education, and possibilities for indigenizing curriculum and building safe social environments for all learners. The conference was for scheduled August 7-9 2024, offered in person at University of Alaska Southeast, in Juneau, Alaska, with featured elements available virtually. The theme of this year’s event was ‘Connecting Culture, Community and Curriculum’. <https://sealaskaheritage.org/conferences/> link to keynote speaker, Jo Chrona: [CRE Conference 2024 Day 1 | Sealaska Heritage \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)



reflective practice for educators, particularly those who are non-Indigenous. Her recent publication, *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies: An Act for Reconciliation and Anti-Racist Education*⁴⁸, based on extensive experience in Indigenous education, opens up the discussion about culturally responsive pedagogy for non-Indigenous teachers who, as she notes in her presentation, ‘hadn’t been part of this conversation previously’.

For this report, the points that I believe are most relevant from Chrona’s presentation are:

- We are impacted by more than the ‘content’ of teaching and learning
- Our learning is shaped by both the ways we interact with one another and how we share what we know
- The importance of situating ourselves (as educators) – who we are, where we are, and where we come from
- There needs to be an emphasis on ‘relationship’. This includes:
 - Relationship to self (understanding identify, personal strengths)
 - To all others
 - To place/land

- Emphasise the holistic nature of learning – learning is relevant and responsive and connected to all other aspects of life and communities, including place and time
- All aspects of being impact learning: mental, physical, social/emotional, spiritual, and learning supports well-being
- Connection of place to identity – our ways of understanding the world influence what we deem as important to teach and to learn and influence our pedagogical choices.
- Reflection and anti-racism. Racism is a barrier to working with Indigenous knowledge. Necessary to have an understanding about racism, as interpersonal, systemic, epistemic. This will inform teaching practice. (And this is an important part of colonial reparations)
- **We need to challenge the assumption that educational institutions are culturally neutral**, as they are not.
- Assumptions that need to be challenged:
 - That our current systems (curriculum, assessment, pedagogical practices) are culturally neutral
 - That we are bias-free
 - That Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives are ‘less-than’
 - That if the system is not working for Indigenous peoples, they need to change to fit into existing systems.

Actions to be taken include:

- Unpack explicit and implicit biases
- Be OK with feeling uncomfortable
- Ask if we hold lowered expectations for different groups of learners
- Challenge narratives of Indigenous deficit
- Pay attention to the “yes, but...”
- Explore how we can engage in ways that support

48 Chrona, J, *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies: An Act for Reconciliation and Anti-Racist Education*, Portage & Main Press, 2023

relationship, well-being, equity, and quality

- Commit to learning from Indigenous peoples and cultures
- Work both individually and collaboratively – be in relationship (foundational for propelling learning and overcoming potential challenges)

Reflective questions proposed by Chrona:

- How well do we know our learners? What are their stories
- How do learners feel valued?
- How do we (as educators) impact their experiences and learning?
- How does focusing on our relationships with colleagues impact our, and their, capacity to learn and grow?
- How do we make our learning (as educators) from students visible to them?

Application

This keynote presentation provided the essential questions and considerations for forming a framework of reflective practice that can be used by teachers in the vocational education space, particularly non-Indigenous teachers, when developing cultural capability.

To bring this to an Australian context, 8ways outlines the importance of engaging with one's own culture very clearly:

But most importantly, it has been found that teachers cannot effectively engage with Aboriginal perspectives and Aboriginal knowledge unless they are first strongly grounded in a critically self-reflective knowledge of their own cultural standpoint. When a teacher is openly bringing their own culture to the table in this way, students and community members are more likely to share their own worldview and cultural orientation to learning. When this kind of deep cultural exchange occurs, there is a synergy created that promotes innovation and

stronger learning. In this situation, people from different cultures can focus on common ground – their similarities rather than differences. This dynamic overlap is called the Cultural Interface, and it is a highly productive space for education. It is also a powerful site for Reconciliation.⁴⁹

The critical self-reflection outlined by Aunty Denise Proud and Ann Morgan reiterate the importance of this practice for significantly improving educational outcomes for First Nations students:

When looking at the big picture surrounding complex social issues, it can be easy to fall into feelings of confusion and a sense of being overwhelmed. A more solution-focused approach is to start making changes in ways where the most influence can be exercised – namely, starting with yourself. The professional responsibility of teachers is to be self-aware, which we suggest can be cultivated through critical reflection...Further, developing greater self-awareness about personal values, beliefs, and assumptions has the potential to impact the status quo of inequity that continues to exist in Australian culture, especially for those not included in the dominant, white culture.⁵⁰

49 <https://www.8ways.online/your-identity-map>

50 Aunty Denise Proud & Ann Morgan, op.cit., p.40

05

Considerations and Next Steps

What this Fellowship research has found

This Fellowship report considered details of projects and strategies that support the provision of culturally responsive education to First Nations learners. These projects range from organisation-wide training to educator reflective practice.

The details of my considerations are as follows:

1. That the Victorian VET sector develops cultural safety training which is grounded in **place** and **practice**. The current provision of cultural training in Victorian TAFE institutions is not sufficient nor rigorous. A strategic approach is required (see below). Currently Victorian TAFEs have some excellent Indigenous Education Units and Indigenous spaces – these can be extended and used to ground specific cultural safety training and cultural events that engage all staff and students.
2. That this cultural training is continual, accessible, mandatory, and available to all staff in TAFE organisations. The model from Honolulu Community College outlines an excellent approach to whole-of-organisation, multiple-approach cultural training. As

noted earlier in this report, the numbers of First Nations students entering vocational education in Victoria will be increasing in the next few years so developing strategies to enhance culturally responsive teaching and organisational practice are crucial.

3. That this cultural training has levels of development, where educators and TAFE staff can interact at different points to develop and maintain culturally safe practices. This can be captured in a **cultural education strategy**. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Other Victorian organisations have taken the step to developing cultural safety education strategies that outline a continual process of cultural training using varied methods and experiences.⁵¹ We need to look at these and consider how we can instate this within all VET organisations.
4. That we include cultural training and reflective practice in the *Certificate IV in Training and Assessment*. It is a serious shortcoming of this important VE teaching qualification that these points are not included. We cannot expect all VE teachers to understand the importance of reflective practice and cultural safety if this is not developed in the teacher-training. There is a serious lack of cohesive values in the VE

⁵¹ As an example, see the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/cultural-responsiveness/building-a-culturally-responsive-australian-teaching-workforce> which outlines a very comprehensive cultural training framework

sector around culturally responsive teaching and reflective practice which needs to be addressed in a systematic way.

5. That a Community of Practice be implemented to support the cultural learning of non-Indigenous educators and provide ongoing reflection and relationship in regard to implementing culturally responsive teaching and learning practices within vocational education. Tying this in with vocational currency could be useful for teachers to engage.
6. That we adapt current vocational education into a pedagogical framework that allows teachers to include Aboriginal perspectives by using Aboriginal learning techniques. In this way, focus can remain on core curriculum content while embedding Aboriginal perspectives in every lesson. This will require close work with Indigenous educators and Communities to enable the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives. This is a consideration that moves beyond the Victorian vocational education sector, of course, and is a point to develop on a national level.

How to mobilise these considerations – some ideas to consider

Points 1-3:

The Victorian VET sector to develop a Cultural Education Strategy that details a multi-faceted approach to cultural safety training for TAFE employees. This Strategy would be rolled out in TAFE organisations across Victoria. Existing cultural safety training may be adapted to accord with the strictures of the new Cultural Education Strategy.

It is essential to understand that the development of competence in cultural safety is a *continual learning journey*, necessitating different forms of learning activities to strengthen skills and support learning. To be culturally capable and safe takes more than participating in a one-off cultural training activity. I would like to see a robust training developed

which takes into account a range of formal and informal learning activities focusing on the specific needs of vocational education workers (educators, support staff, administrators, management). A Cultural Education Strategy can formalise these activities and provide a framework which can sit with Reconciliation Action Plans and other strategies that support diversity and inclusion.

As with industry currency and learning and teaching requirements, VE teachers would be required to complete cultural safety training as per this Cultural Education Strategy.

Suggestions about developing a TAFE Cultural Education Strategy:

- Needs to be developed with First Nations peoples (in collaboration, co-designed **and** co-produced)
- Should include activities recognising the diversity of First Nations communities in Australia
- Needs to support an understanding of colonialism and its ongoing effects
- Outlines the main points about Indigenous knowledge and how this can work with current educational practices
- Must include reflective practice so that staff can fully understand their cultural journey
- Should include *all staff*

Point 5:

The VET Development Centre (VDC) already hosts a Community of Practice for VET teachers. A Community of Practice that focuses on culturally responsive pedagogy could run in a similar fashion from the VDC. Alternately, Communities of Practice can be established within organisations (particularly the large ones) or between organisations.

Communities of Practice can evolve from incorporating cultural training and reflective practice into the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment.

Point 6:

Making changes to the curriculum for nationally accredited training packages is a significant proposal, reaching beyond the State government in Victoria to a Federal level.

Even if changes could be made at State level, it is important to note that current policies and strategies to improve vocational education for First Nations People in Victoria have a limit to their scope. The Department of Education and Training publication, 'Promoting participation and engagement for Koorie learners in VET - Planning for success', notes that:

'The focus of this work is to ensure the outcomes identified in Marrung (below) are embedded in our approach to supporting Koorie learners in the VET sector'.⁵²

It very clearly indicates that 'reform of the structure and nature of accredited training packages' is outside of the scope of the publication. Notwithstanding this limitation, I leave this point as a possible future consideration for when vocational education is further along the culturally responsive track.

⁵² 'Promoting participation and engagement for Koorie learners in VET, op.cit., [Promoting participation and engagement for Koorie learners in VET | Engage Victoria](#) p.5

06

Impacts of Fellowship

Professional impact

Having the opportunity to travel to Hawai'i and the Torres Strait for research for this Fellowship has been a tremendous learning experience. Seeing firsthand other educational institutes and their strategies for developing a culturally responsive learning environment has broadened my understanding of what this can look like here in the vocational education sector in Victoria.

In terms of my professional practice, I am better able to see 'culture' in learning content and delivery. Nothing is 'neutral', and having experienced a new TAFE organisation recently, I noted how I was able to engage with practices of culture in different ways. One particular way is through connection with the local Aboriginal Community in Dja Dja Warrung Country, where I teach. Through colleagues I have the opportunity to work with Nalderun⁵³ Aboriginal Education Community Organisation, based on Djarra Country, Castlemaine.

I know that professionally I will continue to reflect on my teaching practice and develop ways within the learning space, with resource writing, with collaborative practice, and with continual learning to be a culturally responsive educator, working with others to develop this within vocational education.

Personal impact

Completing the Fellowship this year has provided me with great opportunities to make connections and form networks with likeminded educators. Through time spent with staff at the Honolulu Community College and Thursday Island TAFE, I have not only had the benefit of great expertise and experience but have come to realise the network of people working to ensure that Indigenising education practices becomes core to the progress of educational institutions. Seeing how projects have been developed to respond to the need of First Nations students has been very satisfying.

Looking particularly at the Victorian vocational education sector has been illuminating. Whilst I have pointed out the shortcomings and provided some ideas for further consideration, I have also found that Victoria and its educational institutions are working towards improving and developing in terms of engaging First Nations students. This is encouraging, and I hope to be part of the movement forward to being fully culturally responsive in this state when it comes to vocational education, in all its wide offerings.

⁵³ Nalderun is an Aboriginal Education Community Organisation operating since 2009 on Djaara Country, Castlemaine in Liyanganyuk Banyul (Mount Alexander) Shire, Victoria. <https://nalderun.net.au/>

Organisational and broader VET sector impact

During this Fellowship, I have had positive communication with the diversity and inclusion team around the Reconciliation Action Plan and the cultural training on offer at all campuses of my current organisation. I hope to continue with this communication and be part of the development of best practice when it comes to being a culturally responsive institution.

One future action planned is to deliver the report of my Fellowship findings at learning and teaching conferences such as VDC's Learning and Teaching Conference. Before this, I will be developing short workshops with colleagues to facilitate reflective practice around culturally responsive education. It would be an important step in order to develop expertise and a community of practice for non-Indigenous teachers. I plan to extend these workshops and activities to the wider vocational education sector, through conferences and through the Vocational Development Centre in Melbourne. I particularly would like to be part of the 'VET Teaching Series: Practice', which works with teachers focusing on different aspects of learner needs using educational theory, VET policy and focusing on reflective practice, classroom strategies, and learning design. This would be a good program for disseminating ideas around culturally responsive pedagogy and how this works in the classroom.

The World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education (WIPCE) is in Aotearoa in 2025.⁵⁴ I will be submitting a paper based on this Fellowship report and hope to present at this conference. This will be an excellent opportunity to meet with those I worked with for this Fellowship report and a chance to participate in a wider network of educators who work and promote Indigenous-based initiative in education.

⁵⁴ <https://wipce2025.com/> 'The World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education (WIPCE) celebrates the sharing, promoting of, and advocacy for Indigenous-based initiatives through holistic educational efforts to maintain our unique cultures and enhance our world views and life ways.'

07

Conclusion

This report has framed the development of culturally responsive pedagogy in VET by outlining some ideas about developing cultural education strategies, implementing cultural practices on campuses and in classrooms, and developing a more focused and robust reflective practice for non-Indigenous teachers around culture, cultural capability, and Indigenous knowledge. I am aware that the process for culturally responsive education must, as Nakata has argued, be taken very carefully:

‘Things aren’t just white or black, and things cannot be fixed by simply adding in Indigenous components to the mix. This is a very complicated and contested space.’

And further:

Differences at these levels mean that in the academy it is not possible to bring in Indigenous knowledge and plonk it in the curriculum unproblematically as if it is another data set for Western knowledge to discipline and test.⁵⁵

The ‘contested space’ is a complex place and negotiating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives and Western knowledge systems to find a pedagogical practice that can work in this space is a massive challenge for non-Indigenous and Indigenous educators.

This report concludes with arguing for the importance of developing a cultural education strategy for vocational education in Victoria that is based on

Indigenous knowledge and what 8ways describes as

a way of working that goes beyond cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and even cultural responsiveness. It is all about relational responsiveness, a protocol of attending to relational obligations to the field you’re working in, relating and responding holistically to people, land, culture, language, spirit and the relationships between these with integrity and intellectual rigour. 8ways is a point of entry into this way of knowing. It is a way to develop relationally responsive practice in the way you work with your Aboriginal community.⁵⁶

Using these principles to base a new cultural education strategy on will allow for Yunkaporta’s *Indigenous Cultural Interface Protocols for Engaging with Aboriginal Knowledge*⁵⁷:

1. Use Aboriginal processes to engage with Aboriginal knowledge.
2. Approach Aboriginal knowledge in gradual stages, not all at once.
3. Be grounded in your own cultural identity (not “colour”) with integrity.
4. Bring your highest self to the knowledge and settle your fears and issues.
5. Share your own stories of relatedness and deepest knowledge.

⁵⁵ Nakata, op.cit., p.8

⁵⁶ <https://www.8ways.online/interface-theory>

⁵⁷ From 8ways <https://www.8ways.online/our-protocol>

6. See the shape of the knowledge and express it with images and objects.
7. Build your knowledge around real relationships with Aboriginal people.
8. Use this knowledge for the benefit of the Aboriginal community.
9. Bring your familiar understandings but be willing to grow beyond these.
10. Respect the aspects of spirit and place that the knowledge is grounded in.

The findings of this report range from individual actions to large structural reform. Given that we can only make changes incrementally, it would seem wise to begin with changing one's own practice and allowing for new knowledge and understanding to inflect ongoing action.

I believe that many of the considerations of this Fellowship Report find resonance with existing policies and strategies around Indigenous education in Victoria. A shift in perspective is what is needed to align these strategies to the proposals made in this report.

These points are defined within Victoria's 'Promoting participation and engagement for Koorie learners in VET - Planning for success', a publication that outlines the intention of the Department of Education and Training in regard to supporting First Nations learners in Victoria.

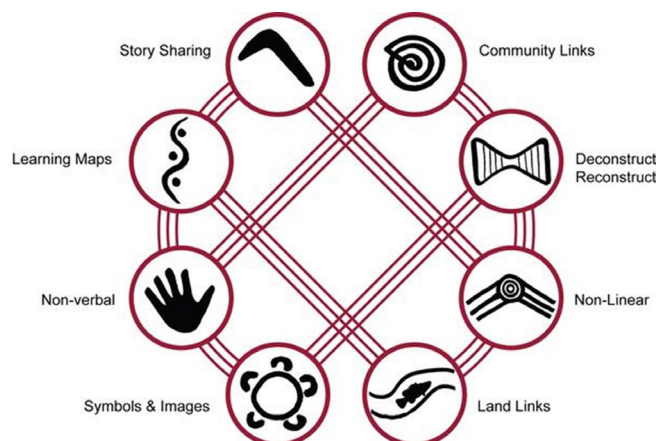
In the section about a 'Positive climate for learning and development', the points outlined are that:

- Koorie learners of all ages are strong in their identity within all services
- All Victorians understand and respect Koorie culture and history

By developing a Cultural Education Strategy that engages all staff in cultural learning (continual and reflective) and which supports First Nations peoples by providing culturally safe spaces for learning, it is possible to shift vocational education into a transformational space for all learners.

I'll finish with some words from Tyson Yunkaporta:

Aboriginal content presented without an Aboriginal framework of values and pedagogy only damages relations and marginalises Aboriginal learners. It also decreases engagement and intellectual quality, while taking up valuable curriculum space. There is no educational benefit to this practice. However, approaching Aboriginal or even mainstream content explicitly through an Aboriginal pedagogy framework improves student engagement, student behaviour, quality of student work, deep knowledge, intellectual quality, relevance/connectedness and high expectations. These in turn raise standards for quality teaching and increase work satisfaction for teachers.⁵⁸



⁵⁸ Yunkaporta, *Aboriginal Pedagogies*, op.cit., p.163

08

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