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Office for
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The Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network

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Lead institution: The University of Queensland

Collaborating institutions: University of New South Wales, University of Technology, Sydney, University of Melbourne, Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Education, University of Wollongong, Macquarie University

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Network summary

The Australian Indigenous Studies Learning and Teaching Network was established in 2011 to develop a focused national network of scholars to engage in key discussions about teaching Indigenous Studies at tertiary level. Funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching (2011–2014), the Network combines leaders and early career academics, and builds relationships between scholars in the discipline to identify key issues and explore effective teaching and learning approaches. The establishment of the Network was particularly timely because, as Phillips notes, Australian Indigenous Studies ‘is in a crucial phase of development at present. It has begun to progress from being ‘about’ Indigenous peoples to being centred on negotiating the complex terrain of anti-colonial enquiry’ (Phillips, 2005, p. 1).

The objectives of the Network are to:

1. Share and build models of good practice within the discipline of Australian Indigenous Studies.
2. Share the outcomes of teaching and learning research within the discipline.
3. Explore and address national higher education priorities in teaching and learning Australian Indigenous Studies.
4. Build relationships between scholars within the broad field of Australian Indigenous Studies.
5. Build relationships with leading international Indigenous Studies scholars, including those in New Zealand and Canada.
6. Support the work of scholars within the discipline, including the development of early career researchers.

The key deliverables of the Network are:

- **A website** <www.indigenousstudies.edu.au> that was launched in 2013. The website includes teaching and learning examples for tertiary educators in Indigenous Australian studies; a facility for joining the Network, a facility for submitting example teaching and learning examples in tertiary Indigenous Australian studies classrooms; information about the Network goals, people, and artwork; news and events in Indigenous Studies; information about useful publications, websites, research projects in Indigenous Studies; and a list of universities offering courses in Australian Indigenous Studies.
- **A Special Issue of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* volume 43.1 (August 2014)** titled ‘Rethinking, revitalising and re-shaping tertiary Australian Indigenous Studies’ and edited by Katelyn Barney, Cindy Shannon and Martin Nakata. The volume brings together the research of a community of tertiary educators working in the field of Indigenous Studies.

A key Network activity was:

- **A National Workshop** that was held on 25 October 2013 at The University of Queensland. Titled ‘Pedagogy, protocols, place, and positioning of Indigenous Studies’, the workshop brought together 40 delegates from 18 universities across Australia and provided a significant opportunity for scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies to meet, network and explore key questions relating to teaching and learning Australian Indigenous Studies. The

outcome of the National Workshop were strengthening of relationships between scholars in discipline and the development of key foundational principles of Australian Indigenous Studies. Workshop participant feedback included: “Continuing to have the opportunity for people in the field to get together and share research and practice is vital. Fostering development of starting our scholars (as well as our current researchers) is key”; “it will be important to keep having dialogue through the Network as this is a challenge for most universities”.

Contribution to learning and teaching

The Network has contributed to learning and teaching in higher education by fostering dialogue and debate among researchers engaging in learning and teaching of Indigenous Australian Studies. There is much ongoing discussion nationally about learning and teaching Indigenous Studies, but few opportunities for scholars in the discipline to have conversations about the discipline. The OLT funding has allowed us to engage in key discussions about Australian Indigenous Studies and bring together leaders and early career academics in Indigenous Studies. The four Network meetings — February 2012 (Brisbane), June 2012 (Sydney), January 2013 (Melbourne) and July 2013 (Sydney) — identified key issues for the discipline (objective 3), built relationships between scholars within Indigenous Studies (objective 4), and allowed participants to share research outcomes, learning and teaching approaches and course content in the field Indigenous Studies (objectives 1 and 2). Alongside the Network meeting in July 2013, a roundtable discussion between Network partners was presented at UTS to explore issues raised in network discussions. National higher education priorities were also discussed (objective 3) including issues surrounding funding for Indigenous Studies courses, student numbers, how to market courses, standards and benchmarking. Other questions discussed at Network meetings included: What and for whom is Indigenous Studies for? What are our assumptions about the learners? Where does Indigenous Studies sit in relation to other disciplines? Where does Indigenous Studies sit within university structures now and in the future? The Network meetings strengthened the collaboration between the universities and allowed for resources, materials, ideas for teaching and learning Indigenous Studies to be shared and discussed which provided support of the work of scholars within the discipline (objective 6).

The resources developed for the website also contribute to strengthening learning and teaching in Indigenous Studies at a national level by sharing examples of good practice in the discipline (objective 1). There are very few resources publically available for educators in Indigenous Studies and many members have commented on the usefulness of the resources for tertiary as well as secondary school educators. The National Workshop also strengthened relationships between scholars in discipline, including links with international scholars (objective 4 and 5), and allowed for the development of key foundational principles of Australian Indigenous Studies. The Special Issue of *AJIE* also contributes to teaching and learning Indigenous Studies at a national level as it explores what it means to learn and teach in the complex field of Australian Indigenous Studies in higher education and allowed for the sharing of outcomes of teaching and learning research (objective 2) and hopes to foster dialogue and debate among researchers engaging in learning and teaching Indigenous Australian Studies (objectives 4 and 5). Overall, the Network has brought to the foreground

the processes, pedagogies and politics at play in Indigenous Studies and allowed for debate and discuss central issues, and explore and share learning and teaching strategies in the discipline at tertiary level.

Factors contributing to productive networking

The major achievements of the Network have been:

- Connecting over 100 members of the Network who have joined via the website.
- Establishing online resources to share examples of learning and teaching in the discipline.
- Publishing a Special Issue of *AJIE* to demonstrate the collective commitment of scholars in relation to what it means to learn and teach in the complex field of Australian Indigenous Studies in higher education.
- Holding four Network meetings with partners allowed the partners to develop the website and the Special Issue as well as explore key issues.
- Facilitating presentations by Network members at conferences and organised events. For example, a roundtable discussion was presented Network partners at UTS (July 2013), Barney, O'Sullivan, Page and Willis presented a panel at the AIATSIS conference (March 2014), and O'Sullivan presented a plenary at the OLT conference (June 2014).

The networking activities that worked particularly well were:

- The National Workshop because it provided an excellent opportunity for scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies to meet, network, and explore key questions relating to teaching and learning Indigenous Studies. The format of the day work well overall with short 10 minute presentations, international reflections via Skype, small-group activities, and reflections on artworks linked with themes. Despite some unforeseen technology issues caused by venue, the reflections via Skype from international scholars provided valuable international input into the discussions around teaching Indigenous Studies globally. Connecting with these scholars has also provided opportunities to collaborate further through panels at conferences and the development of future publications.
- Presentations by Network members who discussed the Network, the website and gave out flyers also allowed for wider knowledge about the Network. After all of these presentations numerous extra people joined the Network.

The key networking method we would recommend to others is to create face-to-face opportunities like the National Workshop because this was particularly useful to allow for dialogue about key issues.

Barriers to productive networking

Liaising with the large team of partners and critical friends who are situated at numerous universities has been challenging. It was a logistical challenge to find suitable dates for the Network meetings and the National Workshop that suited an acceptable majority of the Network members. Another challenge was to maintain communication between the network members between meetings. This challenge will continue to be tackled and discussed. A newsletter will be circulated to all members updating them on the progress of the Network will be sent soon.

Another challenge encountered was developing learning and teaching examples for the website. While some resources were prepared in consultation with Network members for the website, further learning and teaching examples in Indigenous Studies classrooms need to be developed and will be added to the site as the Network grows and more colleagues are encouraged to join the Network and submit examples.

An ongoing challenge faced by the Network has been finding agreement among the Network members about defining 'Indigenous Studies' as a discipline. Diverse perspectives were presented and debated at each of the Network meetings. Key features of Indigenous Studies that were shared and discussed at Network meetings included:

- Privileging Indigenous voices and theories along with local perspectives and international Indigenous perspectives.
- Examining historical and contemporary Indigenous histories and perspectives.
- Exploring the traditional, the modern and the post-modern, encompassing history, politics and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.
- Involving multi-disciplinary ideas about understanding identity.
- Exploring Indigenous knowledge, experience and people and exploring how to untangle this and where it begins and ends.
- Contesting Indigenous knowledge and contesting student's assumptions to socially and politically transform student's understandings.
- Bringing Indigenous experts into the classroom.
- Being critical by examining post-colonial theories and Critical Whiteness Studies, being scholarly rather than spiritual.
- Emphasising the local and specific over pan-Aboriginal and concepts of place, time as a process, and diversity.

Certainly, Indigenous Studies can cover all of these areas, but the team had difficulty agreeing on a short defining statement about Indigenous Studies. In connection with definitions of Indigenous Studies, the Network partners also explored *who* Indigenous Studies is for. There can be multiple groups of students undertaking Indigenous Studies,

including non-Indigenous Australian students undertaking a major, minor or elective, Indigenous students 'who are often a minority in lecture rooms', and significant numbers of international students (Nakata et al. 2012, p. 122). These cohorts vary across universities and courses. Further opportunities to network face-to-face would create space for more dialogue about this issue.

What the Network offers

The Network offers potential members and stakeholders key resources that can be used in learning and teaching Indigenous Studies. This is significant because there are few available resources for educators in this area. These resources allow scholars to strengthen their learning and teaching and offer members the opportunity to share their approaches with colleagues. The Network website also offers information both on the site and through newsletters about useful publications, websites, research projects in Indigenous Studies, and other Australian universities offering courses in Australian Indigenous Studies. This allows members to keep up-to-date with key events and news in Indigenous Studies in Australia.

Continuing to provide opportunities for people in the field of Indigenous Studies to meet and share research and practice is vital. The Network provides a space for dialogue that is central to strengthening learning and teaching processes within Australian Indigenous Studies. The Network is also committed to fostering the development of early career academics in Indigenous Studies as well supporting our current researchers. The Network hopes to continue to host future events and workshops that explore key issues in the discipline to give support to new members, build and strengthen relationships between scholars both nationally and internationally, including those in New Zealand and Canada. A framework for sustaining the Network beyond external funding will be developed in 2015 to ensure the future of the Network. The conversation about learning and teaching Indigenous Studies is necessarily on-going and we believe it is important to make the Network a vibrant and supportive space for collaboration, sharing and communication.

References

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- Nakata, M., Nakata, V., Keech, S., & Bolt, R. (2012). Decolonial goals and pedagogies for Indigenous studies. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1(1), 120-140.