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## Rethinking Assessment in an Indigenous Specific Program

*Nonstandard entry programs into higher education include worthy goals and problematic processes. Although effective practices in teacher education would seem to be well established, complications arise when good intentions intersect with university protocols, issues of power, history, rights, and cultural complexities. This article reports on an Australian study on assessment approaches in an early childhood Indigenous teacher education program. Focus group investigations with current students and teaching staff and interviews with graduates reveal some similarities in perception, but a range of challenges to be addressed. Diversity of perspective characterizes both the student groups' and lecturers' responses.*

*Les programmes d'entrée non standard à l'enseignement supérieur comportent des objectifs valables et des processus problématiques. Bien que les pratiques efficaces en formation des enseignants semblent être bien établies, des complications surgissent quand les bonnes intentions croisent les protocoles universitaires, les enjeux liés au pouvoir, l'histoire, les droits et les complexités culturelles. Cet article fait état d'une étude australienne sur les approches en évaluation au sein d'un programme d'éducation de la petite enfance pour enseignants indigènes. Des sessions avec des groupes de discussion composés d'étudiants et de professeurs actuels, et des entrevues auprès d'étudiants diplômés ont révélé quelques similarités sur le plan de la perception, mais également toute une gamme de défis à relever. Une diversité de perspectives ressort tant des réponses des étudiants que celles des professeurs.*

### *Introduction*

In this article we explore processes in an Australian program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples pursuing university qualification as early childhood teachers. The three-year Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Services), is pursued through "block release," intensive on campus mode (approximately 10 days twice a semester), supported by study materials, federally funded tutors, and on-line discussions. Fourth-year studies are pursued in a

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mainstream BEd (ECE) and are not part of this study. Most students are mature women working in children's services across far-ranging geographical areas.

Nonstandard entry programs targeting equity and access to higher education include worthy goals and problematic processes. In order to draw a clear map of the terrain, this article is organized in sections. First is a review of issues of power and culture that beset higher-education assessment. Second is an exploration of the early childhood teacher education context in Australia. This is followed by an overview of assessment in an Indigenous-specific program, including the voices of participants and points for reflection.

As non-Indigenous women, we write from the perspective of teachers who have walked alongside Indigenous peoples over decades in several countries. We acknowledge the importance of working collaboratively in cross-cultural contexts and usually publish with Indigenous colleagues and co-researchers (Cassady, Fleet, Hughes, & Kitson-Charleston, 2005). In this case, we responded to a university-wide call for investigations into assessment practices contributing to the general knowledge base in higher education and specific program review. We followed recognized protocols (as explained below) and discussed the research with Indigenous colleagues from Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies. We embedded knowledge gained from Indigenous co-researchers in a previous collaboration (Fleet, Kitson, Cassady & Hughes, 2007), but are conscious of the limiting perspectives that each of us brings to any research.

#### *Power, Knowledge, Culture, and Assessment*

Any mature-aged students entering higher education through alternative pathways face many challenges and

often find academic life in general, and its literacy demands in particular, alienating ... mature students engaged in academic assignments ... have not had a smooth, uninterrupted path through the education system like regular undergraduates, so what is demanded of them is unlikely to "come naturally." Returning to study represents a turning point in their lives, when other adult commitments and experiences—other social worlds—are juxtaposed with the academic world. (Ivanic, 1998, p. 5)

These challenges may be intensified when elements of Indigenous knowledge and institutional power intersect.

Research and reflection highlight the "impenetrable whiteness" of educational systems (Reid, 2004), noting that classrooms are permeated by social inequalities deeply ingrained in Australian life (Harrison, 2005). The knowledge esteemed in our education system has its basis in the long tradition of Western thought, which privileges a positivist and reductive reality, emphasizing mechanistic and compartmentalized ways of thinking (Morgan, 2003). Tertiary institutions and teachers, however committed to Indigenous education, are not necessarily conscious of how practices are immersed in *whiteness*. In addition, tacking on Indigenous content without real change in power relations in the institution or its relationship with Indigenous communities perpetuates the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2007; Morgan) and is not a viable solution. Noting that we must recognize the depth of the hold that Western knowledge has over institutions, some

commitments have been made to provide spaces for Indigenous perspectives in universities.

Harrison (2007) notes that Indigenous learners face systems in which they are often characterized unfairly as deficient and “behind” non-Indigenous students (who are cast as the norm) even in programs intended to foster success. Coming into a white system, Indigenous students often need to learn how to learn in the dialect expected of students while they learn content. This can lead to disengagement and a cynical approach to learning through “pleasing the teacher” (Harrison, 2008) or the devaluing of Indigenous ways of thinking as students learn that they are being “enlightened” by white learning (Harrison, 2007). In illustrating this inequity, it is claimed that the overrepresentation of Indigenous Hawaiian students in special education is partly through the failures of standardized testing, but more through teachers’ interpretation of “inappropriate” behavior (Ogata, Sheehy, & Noonan, 2006). Indigenous learners face the possibility of negative assessment based on unconsciously held and culturally specific notions about interpretations of student behavior and what constitutes good classroom communication before formal assessment is even undertaken (De Plevicz, 2007).

Research identifies dimensions of assessment culturally specific to Western ways of thinking, valuing, and expressing knowledge that disadvantage Indigenous students by assessing attributes and understandings not related to subject matter. The use of standard English as the language of assessment, and non-acknowledgement that this may be a second or additional language for Indigenous students, has been identified as important (Beaulieu, Figueira, & Viri, 2005; Bourke, Burden, & Moore, 1996). Further, culturally specific expectations about modes of oral and written communication are often not made explicit. Malcolm and Rochecouste (1998), for example, identified a *grapholect*, a specific kind of academic literacy that can form a barrier to participation and success in higher education.

To succeed in assessment, Indigenous students are expected to think in the compartmentalized, noncontextual way in which traditional Western rationality works, which is in many ways alien to Indigenous world views (De Plevicz, 2007; Williamson & Dalal, 2007). Research also identifies an institutional culture based on standardized learning outcomes, which limits flexibility in assessment and creates resistance to reconceptualizing assessment to serve diversity (Bowser, Danaher, & Somasundaram, 2007; Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006). In reflecting on their aims and accountability to Indigenous stakeholders, the North American Tribal Colleges and Universities are exploring how assessment might avoid “insidious legacies of colonizing violence.” Again, careful and conscious reflection on the “imperialist baggage” carried by assessment is seen as central to the success of this process (George & McLaughlin, 2008; Karlberg, 2008; Radell, 2008).

#### *Early Childhood Indigenous Teacher Education*

To contextualize this Australian study, it is necessary to provide information on the need for university-qualified early childhood Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to optimize opportunities for Indigenous children, as well as being role models for their communities.

The importance of quality early childhood programs has been a research focus for decades. It is well established that qualified staff are critical to quality (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2004; Barnett, 2003; Hutchins, Frances, & Sagers, 2009; Lidington, 2002; Phillips & Howes, 1987; Priest, 2005). Hayes, Neilsen-Hewett, and Warton's (1999) research indicates that, "Better care-giver qualifications were associated with more care-giver social interaction between care-givers and children, with more cooperation and task persistence among children, and with increased involvement of children" (p. 100). Such findings underscore the need for formal teacher qualifications for staff in all children's services.

The Australian Government Indigenous education policy mandates strong participation of Indigenous people in education at all levels (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2006). In particular, there is widespread acknowledgment of the importance of Indigenous staff as well as non-Indigenous staff sensitive to Indigenous education in early childhood programs for Indigenous children and families. As Martin (2005) writes, "To know who you are in relatedness is the ultimate premise of Aboriginal worldview because this is the formation of identity" (p. 28). The pressing need to involve more Indigenous children in early childhood educational experiences underlies the focus on increasing opportunities for Indigenous people to gain university teaching qualifications.

"It is well recognized that teacher quality is a critical factor in the performance of Indigenous students in early childhood services and schools and that there is a direct link between teacher quality and Indigenous student learning outcomes" (MCEETYA, 2001, p. 17). Cronin and Yelland's (2004) Australian research notes that "those who are not prepared to engage with the student's social and cultural context will severely disadvantage outcomes for Indigenous students" (p. 108).

De Gioia, Hayden, and Hadley (2003) and Hutchins et al. (2009), in their research on Aboriginal families' participation in early childhood services, found that lack of Aboriginal staff was an important constraint leading to low or non-use of services. Parents, staff and community members mentioned the benefits of having Aboriginal staff to facilitate communication with families and provide positive role models for children. In a recent report, Kronemann (2008) echoes these sentiments:

Many reports have acknowledged the vital importance of Indigenous teachers and staff to the educational wellbeing and success of Indigenous children and to the involvement and support of Indigenous parents. Early childhood education and care programs must recognize and value Indigenous knowledges, skills, language, culture, and ways of learning ... there are far too few Indigenous teachers and staff currently working in the sector and this is a significant barrier to increasing the participation and educational wellbeing of Indigenous children. (pp. 5-6)

Hutchins et al. (2009) highlight findings from their consultations across Australia with child care workers, community members, and government representatives, indicating that

Indigenous people expressed the importance of Indigenous staff caring for Indigenous children and have cited this preference for two important reasons:

a lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding from non-Indigenous staff; and above all else, the need for those working with Indigenous children to be someone they consider trustworthy. (p. 8)

It is not clear how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are qualified and working in children's settings. Recommendations from the Professional Pathways report (Fleet & Kitson, 2005) included the need to collect more accurate information. This is particularly important as a benchmark process now that the Australian government is increasing the numbers of qualified people in the early childhood workforce. We also proposed that research investigating approaches to early childhood teacher education for Indigenous Australians in university contexts be funded to identify factors such as pedagogical approaches for teaching Indigenous students; relationships between programs for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; support to Indigenous students, both individually to support learning and organizationally to promote a culturally appropriate learning environment; and relationships between these factors, program outcomes and student satisfaction; and effective strategies to assist non-Indigenous student teachers understand contexts and approaches to support young Indigenous children and their families. Since the completion of these recommendations, the need to identify assessment as a separate area for further study and improvement has become apparent.

#### *A Study of Assessment Practices*

This study builds on the strengths of an Indigenous-specific teacher education program, contributing to the knowledge base in this area and assisting course revision. In supporting a process of ongoing program evaluation, the project engaged lecturers and groups of current and past students in explaining the principles underpinning assessment and issues related to effective practice. The findings inform discussion of effective and appropriate assessment, both to strengthen teacher education and to recognize the educational and cultural backgrounds and external pressures on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In a program that runs in a cyclical fashion, changing teaching teams and responsibility for unit development may result in a breakdown of communication about appropriate assessment. The project provided an opportunity for those teaching to share knowledge with each other and listen to students' voices as part of program revision.

The study included separate semistructured focus groups of staff, current BTeach(ECS) students, and telephone interviews with recent graduates, using accepted focus group protocols (Hasse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Krueger, 1998; Litosseliti, 2003) and ethical interview practices. The purpose of data collection was to identify (a) key principles recognized as effective in assessment, and (b) examples of assessment that respondents felt were more or less able to reflect these principles. The intention was to assist in aligning assessment tasks with course intentions and recognizing those that staff and students found to be most effective in reflecting the purposes for which they were set.

#### *Is This Research Approach Appropriate?*

This work is not researching Indigenous peoples; it is investigating pedagogical practices that intersect with the goals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student teachers. This context generates complexity. The methodology

that framed the research acknowledges Indigenist paradigms (Wilson, 2001, 2004) and was undertaken in the belief that it was conducted in a culturally appropriate way to “fit the cultural preferences, practices and aspirations” of Indigenous participants (Rigney, 2006, p. 46).

Rigney (2006) notes, “Until recently, Indigenous Australians did not have equal opportunity and access to a university education” (p. 32) and that research has been imposed on Indigenous Australians by non-Indigenous Western agendas. Indigenous peoples “have been the objects of research, and never the initiator, manager or co-investigator of research” (p. 32). Although he goes on to say that he values “the research contributions of non-Indigenous Australians,” he notes that unfortunately, some of these researchers have used this research to ground their careers while not foregrounding “the rights of Indigenous peoples to speak for themselves and engage in self-reflection in research” (p. 44).

Rigney (2006) identifies Indigenist research as “research which focuses on the lived historical experiences, ideas, traditions, dreams, interests, aspirations and struggles of Indigenous Australians.” Wilson (2004) extended this concept through his explanation of “relational accountability” and the metaphor of “research as ceremony” (p. 177). He discussed an Indigenous epistemology as the interplay of epistemology and methodology for those who “live in both worlds ... researching from an Indigenous paradigm” (2001, p. 1). Martin (2005, 2008), Rigney (1999, 2006), Steinhauer (2002), Taylor and Steinhauer (2006), and Weber-Pillwax (2001) argue forcefully for Indigenous researchers to reclaim the research landscape with Indigenist paradigms. In this context, Taylor and Steinhauer highlight the importance of empirical knowledge that is gained through watching and listening and that is experienced together with Relational knowledge, Revealed knowledge, and Traditional knowledge. Similarly, Martin (2008) affirms the importance of researchers’ responsibility, defined in terms of rules of respectfulness; accountability, defined in terms of complex evaluation of personal conduct, relatedness to communities, and cultural protocols; and recognition of the authority of responsible organizations/universities.

As non-Indigenous researchers working alongside Indigenous colleagues and student teachers, we agree wholeheartedly with this commitment. We also acknowledge that Indigenous-conceived and managed higher education institutions are developing in ways that foreground Indigenous knowledges and ways of being. This article, however, concerns a time and space shaped by Western colonialism, a university sector brought to the colony of New South Wales by British settlers. As Phillips (2006) states,

The taken-for-granted notions of what it means to be “human” and Australian have been contained and controlled by systems established through historical events, so that for all of us our meaningful participation in the world is governed and patrolled by colonial ideals. (p. 25)

Recognizing the disempowerment brought by this historical circumstance energizes those of us working in the bureaucracy to work respectfully alongside those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have chosen to pursue university qualifications in order to work with children, serve their



communities, support their families, commit to the continuity of culture, and achieve personal goals (Cassady et al., 2005). It is our understanding that this choice does not devalue a belief in relational knowledge embedded in a connected cosmos (Wilson, 2001). Rather, it is a desire to work consciously in the borderlands, listening to voices across the epistemological divide. As Keesing-Styles and Sumsion (2007) write, “every initiative that progresses equity, inclusion and connectedness is a move in a positive direction” (p. 225).

The valuing of Indigenous knowledges and recognition of the centrality of spiritual connectedness creates inevitable tensions in a print-focused tertiary institution shaped by Western concepts of academic standards. Nevertheless, assisting the shaping of assessment policies and practices to enable the hearing of Indigenous voices more clearly may aid in shifting the power dynamic into more equitable relationship with Indigenous world views. Rather than a normative standards focus, there may increasingly be a growth-oriented conversation as assessment strategies acquire less of a checking function and more the characteristics of a reciprocal teaching tool.

As non-Indigenous early childhood teacher educators, we have accepted the responsibility to engage with an assessment discourse shaped by the institution but open to modification. In other circumstances, with other authors, the scene might be painted differently. We acknowledge our positioning and offer this work as part of an ongoing conversation, noting that Indigenous researchers such as Rigney (1999) recognize the potential contribution of non-Indigenous researchers, particularly when that research can “inform the struggles of Indigenous Australians for genuine self-determination” (p. 117). This work embraces that conviction.

### *Participants*

The study sought participants in each of three stakeholder groups, recognizing standard university ethics protocols as well as those specific to working with Indigenous people. For example, no one on the research team was actively engaged in the assessment of students during the research period, and all cultural protocols were respected. Invitations to be part of the study were genuinely invitational, with no pressure to participate. All participants were keen to have their views heard, with the constraint that six people in a focus group was generally considered feasible and effective. Focus groups and telephone interviews were conducted by a research assistant not associated with the program.

All university lecturers who taught the program in 2007 and 2008 were invited to participate. When five people had volunteered, the focus group was formed. Students mid-way through their program (approximately 28) were informed of the project at one on-campus session and followed up for focus group attendance at the subsequent session. Fourteen students (2 groups of 7) volunteered. Students were aware that findings would inform future assessments and be to the advantage of all participants with no potential detrimental outcomes. Convenience sampling was used to contact graduates by telephone and e-mail invitations. Available places for participation were filled by six of the 11 recent graduates from the degree. These were telephone interviews as graduates resided across a wide geographic area.

Research processes included three focus groups (1 x staff and 2 x current students) and telephone interviews (with graduated students) facilitated by a research assistant; verification through participant feedback on transcribed data; and thematic analysis of transcribed data and the triangulation of data from all sources to identify core points of agreement and outlying perspectives for consideration. These strategies included approximately half the people in each of three stakeholder groups, enabling a valuable range of perspectives. Each is explained briefly, and key findings are summarized below.

The research assistant who conducted the focus groups and telephone interviews was an interested South American postdoctoral student with experience in qualitative methodologies but no involvement in the program. She ensured that transcripts of conversations were returned to all participants individually to enable speakers to have the power of controlling the process through changing their words or clarifying earlier statements. She assisted us in categorizing data through discussion. Timing of the grant precluded involving participants in this part of the process. The draft written summary of (de-identified) results was handed to students in a group discussion to invite feedback, which was incorporated. In contributing to the study, student teachers shared their ideas while retaining control of content. As all participants were encouraged to speak openly, sharing their knowledge and experience, agency was offered and accepted as part of an activist (program improvement) agenda.

#### *Current Students*

The 14 continuing students were mostly mid-way through the degree, with two completing final units of study. Comprising approximately half their cohort, the students were committed to the course: "I'm here because I want to do Indigenous child care; that's why I'm here." Coming from three states and a range of urban, rural, and remote environments, three were aged under 25, one in the 26-35 age bracket, and 10 aged over 36. Academically, half had previously completed a diploma or tertiary certificate course and reflected the full range of assessment results in the current program.

Participants were generally enthusiastic about giving their opinions. Overall, the conversation was a mild critique of assessment organization. Major critiques related to being considered mainstream students. The group agreed that completing this course was only a small part of their lives and that they had other priorities. "We have a life outside campus" and "we are not mainstream students." The group felt that there was no clear understanding of "where we are coming from." They said that their particular ways of learning, their limited time, and cultural knowledge (which cannot be referenced) were not properly considered in assessment. One person said, "They talk about teaching Indigenous children, but most of the lecturers have no idea about teaching Indigenous adults," and another added, "I had original personal knowledge and I was told to take it out or find a reference that would support that. Well, it was actually about Aboriginal identity."

Practical assessments were considered enjoyable and useful ("you could actually physically touch something—it wasn't a picture") like music experiences or toy assessment tasks. Participants also agreed that assignments broken into smaller tasks were more accessible and that open-book exams were appro-



priate to their way of learning (“with the closed book it’s about who has the best memory!”). Frustration with essays often had to do with referencing. Students suggested that referencing could be handled differently (“I just totally object to being marked down because you don’t put a comma in your bloody referencing, or you put a full stop where you should have put a comma. Like, that’s completely irrelevant to the rest of your paper”). Concern was also expressed about some expectations of first-year students: “It was words that were like 20 or 30 letters in a word. It was actually a Masters reading. It was ridiculous. Give us something that is understandable and at a year one university level!”

Most agreed on issues such as many students being busy at home and preferring to do work on campus. There was also a perception that assessments were often irrelevant to real life: “they have nothing to do with teaching children,” or “go and find some videos that’s got Aboriginal kids on it!”

There was general agreement that group work was difficult with geographical diversity and that there could be inequity in marking. There was also agreement on “prac” frustration (two- to three-week practice teaching sessions), when most already had relevant experience and felt like strangers in unfamiliar settings. Useful suggestions included the possibility of more introductory experiences so that children and staff were familiar, instead of just going “out cold turkey,” and “you feel like if you go and say something that you might be treading on somebody’s toes.” The students were happy to continue discussing assessment as their studies progressed.

#### *Lecturers*

The five lecturers who volunteered had several years of experience in this program and were thoughtful and interested. Despite the collegiality of the work environment, lack of communication between lecturers in relation to planning assessments was noted, particularly regarding timing assessments to avoid overloading students. Most participants agreed that many students had difficulties completing assessments once they returned home; however, if they were asked to complete all tasks while on campus, they would not have time and energy to concentrate and make good use of lectures. There was also agreement that assessments related to practical experience worked best, as did those assessments that put theory into practice, particularly when structured in manageable components enabling regular feedback. For example, one person commented on the need to make connections between curriculum and field-based courses, “They feel more comfortable with assessments that allow them to draw on the knowledge that they already have and apply it to the new knowledge that they’re being given.” However, there were also comments about the importance of making sure that the degree maintained university standards by which assessments such as essays are required.

Some commented on the limited cultural knowledge of some lecturers about Indigenous people, and the need to be more culturally aware in order to construct assessments that were relevant for this group of students. It was clear that there were tensions with staff attempts to be culturally relevant. In several courses, staff noted things such as “I took the cultural part out of the assessment, because it didn’t actually seem appropriate to assess that, because the quality related to access to elders and traditions.” These efforts also collided

with the inappropriateness of assessing traditional knowledge, both from ethical and cultural points of view. Although surrounded with good intentions, interactions could be uncomfortable. As one person said, "While still recognizing that many have come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds and not denying that, I just think it's a really delicate ... you never feel confident, I don't ever feel confident; I've got a right, but I just always feel on the edge."

Another area that generated rich—and unresolved—discussion was the use of technologies for teaching, particularly in the context of on-line Web-based instruction and discussion. Staff were aware that, "increasingly, communication technologies have been used to further Indigenous cultural, social, economic and political agendas" (Molnar & Meadows, 2001, p. 196), but that access and equity issues were problematic. One person stated that there was a general shift in the student body toward increased computer competence, which was also reflected in the Indigenous cohorts, but there were still difficulties. As another person commented,

I was just thinking about the internet, because we use online so much in the other courses ... it's got a lot of value in terms of minimising isolation, but then the access is not necessarily good where some of the students live and for economic reasons as well, so that's a hard one. Because the more that you use it, the more you're then marginalising one or two people, and yet the advantages of it, when we see how it works in the mainstream students, is so great. It's an issue.

Another person added,

I know what it's like for me personally, I go and have a training program on how to use something on the computer, and unless I'm doing it all the time, I forget. I would imagine for some of the students it's the same thing. They just get so understandably locked in the world back there that it's very easy for them to forget, and I don't know how you overcome that.

Overall, staff agreed on the importance and significance of recognizing culture and students' life experiences, but there were differences of opinion about the most appropriate assessment strategies to support program goals.

#### *Graduates*

Transcribed data from phone interviews with program graduates were analyzed, with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The all-female group included one person younger than 25, two aged 26-35, and three aged 36-45, a distribution fairly typical of students in this degree, although five of the 14 current students were over 45. Four of the graduates were from New South Wales and two from interstate; four described themselves as living in regional areas, with one urban and one suburban resident. No one was from a remote location. Two had no previous tertiary studies, whereas three had completed TAFE diplomas (equivalent to community college) and one had partial study from a previous university course. They had progressed through this program at varying rates depending on circumstances. They were, however, an above-average group, with only one having mostly Pass results, four having mostly Credits, and one person earning Distinctions and Credits.

Graduates had a more positive view of the course and assessments than did current students. Many explicitly mentioned how much they had enjoyed the

course, how helpful and professional lecturers had been, and how valuable the whole process of obtaining a teaching degree had been.

In line with what both the current students and the lecturers had mentioned, practical hands-on assignments were seen as productive and enjoyable. For example, in discussing valuable assignments, Emily referred to being “the hands-on visual learner, so having the formats and things that you could look at and modify yourself and adapt, yeah it just enabled you to create your own style.”

In addition to comments about themselves as learners, graduates referred to the value of tasks relevant to the workplace. Naomi’s comments reflected those of continuing students. She liked “assessments that were relevant to my community,” mentioning “making our own activities and bringing them home.” Although these comments could be interpreted through the lens of Community, Donna highlighted a lens of Theoretical application, that is,

Doing assignments that put theory and practice together, like with Maths, Science and Technology. We made a resource folder and all the projects that we had to do were culturally appropriate. So it made us think how to apply early childhood knowledge culturally, thinking all the time.

Some of these practical assignments were ground-breaking, challenging students and enriching their practice. Brenda commented,

In the [second] management course, we had to develop a service profile and had to develop a strategic plan for our service. I ended up you know discussing that with staff and the committee, and it made us think about where we wanted to go and what our future plans were.

Although valuable, this assessment was not straightforward: Emily stated,

Some of the workplace assignments were a lot of work to do—going back to another workplace and then gathering all this information ... because I think a lot of students in the course have been in that assisting role and it moves us up into a management perspective.

In concluding her reflection, however, Emily said that the assignment *was* appropriate for her needs: “it was just a little more difficult.”

Many graduates recognized that despite how difficult and time-consuming it was to complete some of these practical assignments, they appreciated being challenged. For example, a literacy assignment seemed powerful as Brenda described:

You had to evaluate your literacy learning areas and then create a change to promote more literacy and language development in children ... that assessment actually made me—it changed not just my attitudes towards literacy and literacy learning in children, but also the team I work with. The workplace changed because of it. And it also, from that point on I decided that my own attitudes about my literacy levels affected the way I then teach children. And from that point I realized that I wanted to study more too. So it was a really life-changing [experience].

Brenda also valued another assessment, despite her original skepticism:

We were asked to make an ABC book ... how insulting is that ... I just thought that was so demeaning, they obviously thought that we didn’t even have the

skills to understand what a good quality children's book looked like for us to make our own. But I ended up making mine with a child and we used sign language in the book to sign the alphabet. When I finished the book, I actually gave it to the child ... And her parents said to me ... "thank you so much for that book," you know her grandfather is deaf and she showed him the book and sat on his lap and they shared the book together ... I sort of thought well, there I go thinking that making an ABC book was very, you know—I didn't really value the book itself. But then ... at the end—I was so glad that I did make it.

There were mixed opinions in relation to presentations. Whereas Donna "got sick of them ... Some of them are just plain boring," Brenda found them enriching:

You still had to do written stuff, but it gave you a chance to be able to verbalise and also share information and that with the group, where other assessments sort of only go to the teacher ... where I think it's important to share the research that you've done with the group so it's a two-way learning.

Personal and professional challenges emerged such as engagement with a reflective anti-bias assessment. Maxine said, "I think being Koori, I think like you can relate to a lot of that and I think it was also that it allowed me to open up my own thinking in terms of other people and other cultures," and Phillipa commented, "I suppose the anti-bias journal was one that I struggled with, but it was still reflective of your learning and all that and it was still valuable."

Brenda's closing comment on this discussion is valuable to consider in the context of assessment review: "And to tell you the truth, a couple of the ones that I didn't actually enjoy doing or questioned why do we have to do them, they were probably the ones that I got the most out of. So it's funny."

In talking about how the program could be improved, work overload was in the forefront, as it was during the current students' focus groups. Some graduates mentioned feeling overwhelmed while trying to complete assignments and noted that if lecturers had discussed the timing of deadlines, this could have been avoided. Other considerations also generated discussion. Reflecting on essays, Donna commented, "To have the time to be able to prepare, to be able to analyze it, to be able to do it, then go back and check it and everything else ... I never had that much time."

Most of the graduates mentioned the benefits of getting things done while on campus. This coincides with current students' views that once back home, the completion of assignments becomes more difficult. Phillipa stated,

You do have to take some home, but I found towards the end of the course we were doing a lot on campus and it was very useful and it also made you feel like you accomplished things before you went home ... You had everything there to support you and help you.

This was reinforced by Maxine, who said,

A lot of people within the group didn't have that support once they left campus, so they fell further behind with the work they had to take away ... I just feel that if more time is given on campus to complete those tasks, then I think the success rate would be higher.

Several students acknowledged the value of being encouraged and challenged by their lecturers and how important it was to feel supported and understood by them. Although current students showed some resentment toward lecturers not setting the same rules for everyone in relation to assignments, graduates appreciated the fact that lecturers were not only very competent, but were considerate of individual circumstances. Naomi said, "Non-Indigenous teachers were very understanding and sympathetic to a lot of Indigenous issues that we faced when we came down sometimes; and with uncompleted assessments and that, they were pretty understanding and flexible."

Finally, Donna mentioned how much she had appreciated and enjoyed the course, but pointed out that in order for assessments to become more relevant and fair, some inconsistencies should be dealt with: "they need to stipulate objectives clearly ... so that people know and they're all on the same path. They need to make the assignments engaging and make assignments just like learning outcomes."

Overall, the graduate students' reactions had a different tone from that of current students. Having experienced the positive effect of the degree for their working lives and for furthering their studies, these students sounded appreciative rather than critical. All six valued the lecturers' support: "They do a fantastic job; I loved it and I'd love to go back!" There was also appreciation of the standard set in the degree. Naomi said that if she had not started her studies at IEC, "I wouldn't be able to complete my further studies right now."

In conclusion, the graduates wanted academic staff to recognize their characteristics as visual and concrete learners with commitments to workplaces and community. They liked purposeful work-related assignments that were engaging and challenging. They appreciated the linking of theory to practice, noting the effect on workplace practice, personal perceptions, and understanding. Differences of opinion about presentation, exam, or essay formats highlighted the need to provide variety for varied learning styles. Issues about workload and timing of submissions need to be addressed by lecturers.

### *Discussion*

This consideration of assessment in an Indigenous-specific teacher education program highlights complexities beyond the inevitable power imbalance in tertiary institutions. The research was structured to recognize these institutional frameworks and to address factors related to Indigenous epistemologies and the nature of students' experiences. Although acknowledging the power of dominant discourses and the potentially alienating whiteness of the university sector, the research demonstrates that staff and students were highly motivated in their goals and in their intentions to engage in processes respectfully.

Lecturers and students were committed to exploring appropriate assessment in the BTeach (ECS). Tensions between the need to recognize experiential backgrounds and philosophical frames of Indigenous students while pursuing a bureaucratically defined educational system remain fundamental. When continuing students were told about the tension in the data between students wanting to be treated "like mainstream" students on the one hand, and to have the difficulties and uniqueness of cultural contexts recognized on the other,

several students asked to follow up the discussion at a subsequent session. This conversation is ongoing.

Lecturers are open to support in extending their cultural knowledge to assist teaching as well as appropriate and effective assessment. Being mindful of student perspectives, one staff member commented that she was revising assessment processes for greater individual relevance with flexibility in applying theoretical perspectives:

For example, there was an assignment I gave where they had to spend money on professional development and so many of them “went to the club for dinner,” which for me was, “Hello! We’re doing professional development,” but for them ... that’s what you *do* for professional development ... have a social engagement. That was when a real spark went off for me about where I’m coming from and what I impose in my expectations.

Overall, it seems that students at later stages of the program and recent graduates engaged more effectively with traditional assessments than those in earlier stages of the program, perhaps due to the perception of lack of relevance. Graduates often had a broader perception as evidenced in Brenda’s closing remarks:

I think the course is great ... and what I really, really valued was that our lecturers weren’t lecturers that just come out of university. We had doctors and professors and associate professors teaching us. We had people that were actively researching, like currently researching stuff that they were teaching ... I mean I felt really well respected that the university had given them to us ... with assessments ... they would all say to us ring me any time, ring me any time and they really meant that.

### *In Conclusion*

This research empowered Indigenous students through invitation to help shape assessment processes in a teacher education program developed in consultation with Indigenous communities. In contrast to deficit models, the knowledge shared with lecturers is being incorporated as lecturers restructure courses so as to value students’ perspectives. Shifting the traditional power imbalance has given students voice in a context that might otherwise be disempowering.

Students value assessments with practical components relevant to their own workplaces, segmented assignments, open-book examinations, and equitable marking practices. Throughout the program, scaffolding is essential to assist students to engage with academic language and forms of knowledge with which they may be unfamiliar. Students are often unaware of the efforts that staff make to teach and assess in interesting and culturally relevant ways and of the interface between assessment and university qualification. A focus on open communication that foregrounds a range of world views will continue to promote respectful relationships.

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2008), states: “Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information” (Article 15.1). This research is a



step forward in enabling these rights to be respected in this university context. The work is ongoing.

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