



Department of Education,  
Science and Training

# **Teaching the teachers mandatory Aboriginal Studies:**

**Volume I  
Recent successful strategies**

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**Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme  
Indigenous Education Branch**

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# Executive summary

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## Purpose of the study

The study was commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) under its Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP). The project goals were supported by the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.; New South Wales Teachers' Federation, New South Wales Primary Principals' Association; New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET); the national Aboriginal Studies Association; and the Australian Council of Deans of Education.

The study employed a blend of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews, written open-ended responses, case study) methods to:

- 1 critically evaluate the impact of mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects on preservice primary teachers' perceived abilities to appreciate, understand and effectively teach Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students in Australian schools in order to test the effectiveness of this delivery mode
- 2 identify key content being addressed in mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects in order to provide other institutions with examples of subject matter
- 3 identify successful strategies utilised by teacher education institutions to introduce mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects in order to disseminate successful strategies to other educational institutions
- 4 elucidate barriers to and difficulties encountered in, introducing such subjects to illuminate potential pitfalls
- 5 provide case studies of the development, implementation and evaluation of successful core subjects to provide models to teacher education institutions to enable subsequent application
- 6 identify potential new strategic directions and provide an impetus for teacher education institutions to enable adoption of recent advances in order to strengthen the teaching of Aboriginal Studies in teacher education courses.

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## Impact of mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects (Objective 1)

Results based on the survey instrument offer important findings. The mandatory subjects considered in this study impact more positively on:

- preservice teachers' knowledge of subject matter
- Aboriginal Studies teaching self-concepts in a range of desirable self-concept facets
- values in regard to teaching both Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students
- preservice teachers' perceptions of the extent to which they intend to teach their future students Aboriginal Studies
- their perceived ability to implement departmental requirements.

Mandatory subjects also seem to have a more potent impact on cognitive (knowledge) components of self-concept than affective (enjoyment and appreciation) components. Mandatory subjects also impact more positively on all affective components of self-concept considered in this study by comparison with perspective courses. Preservice teachers who have undertaken mandatory subjects, compared with preservice teachers who undertake perspectives courses, feel they are more capable of teaching Aboriginal students and Aboriginal Studies, and furthermore, are more likely to enjoy doing so. Given the consistency of these results across a diverse number of variables considered in this study, these results suggest that mandatory subjects can have a powerful positive effect on desirable educational goals.

Several broad themes emerged from the interviews with heads of school, directors of education and teacher educators and the three case studies (volume II) supporting the findings above. All were unanimous that Aboriginal Studies was an essential component of preservice primary teacher education, that Aboriginal Studies was highly relevant to teaching and the school curricula, and an important ingredient in fostering Reconciliation within universities, schools and the wider community. As a case study author stated:

*... the introduction of Indigenous Studies as a core unit in our undergraduate teacher education programmes has resulted in a qualitatively better preparation of our students for teaching, not just in teaching Indigenous students and about Indigenous issues—although this is obviously the case—but in considering aspects of culture and race and how these impinge on their curriculum development and pedagogical practices in schools.*

The overall picture to emerge from feedback from students participating in the case studies is that students view mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects as valuable for them as preservice teachers.

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## **Key content addressed in mandatory courses (Objective 2)**

Given the complexity of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal Education and the very nature of teacher education, it would seem highly desirable that a broad range of content be introduced in teacher education courses. Preservice teachers participating in teacher education courses with a mandatory Aboriginal Studies subject are more likely to be taught a diverse range of Aboriginal Studies content. While a number of teacher courses have been designed to incorporate Aboriginal Studies perspectives across the curriculum, these course types largely appear to be unsuccessful in conveying a broad range of content to preservice teachers.

It also needs to be noted that some weak mandatory and elective Aboriginal Studies subjects do exist. Hence, introducing a mandatory Aboriginal Studies subject alone may not ensure that a broad range of content is covered; rigorous evaluation of courses needs to be undertaken to ensure that subjects are also of the highest quality.

Results based on interview data and cross-case analysis demonstrate that, in relation to course content, there was a diversity of focus across institutions offering mandatory subjects. Subjects ranged from sociocultural and historical issues, to practicum teaching experience with Aboriginal classes. A major concern for many teacher educators was the need to ensure that Aboriginal Studies courses linked theory and content, focusing on ‘how to teach’ as well as ‘what to teach’. Course content suggested as important for inclusion was: curriculum methodology; pedagogy; addressing ‘cultural whiteness’; biculturalism and the need to understand aspects of culture and difference; and an understanding of contemporary Aboriginal issues. All of these issues were addressed in varying degrees across institutions.

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## **Successful strategies utilised by teacher education institutions (Objective 3)**

The success/non-success of Aboriginal Studies, based on interview data and cross-case analysis was shown to be dependent on both external and internal processes. The external processes noted were: the political climate; lobbying from organisations such as the Aboriginal Higher Education Network, Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups and the Australian Education Council; institutions’ ability to take up the recommendations from the report of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Johnstone 1991) and state government education boards’ requirements that all preservice teachers undertake a unit in Aboriginal Studies.

Internal factors relevant to the successful development of a core Aboriginal Studies were a willingness to negotiate, and acceptance of the need to share power. Strong support for the inclusion of Aboriginal Studies by the Vice-Chancellor was also cited as significant by several universities. Another relevant factor noted in all three case studies was that mandatory

subjects built on existing units of Aboriginal Studies. Hence, pre-existing subjects acted as a stimulus for the development of new mandatory Aboriginal units of study.

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## **Potential barriers and difficulties (Objective 4)**

Constraints on the development of Aboriginal Studies varied in all institutions in the study, according to the historical and philosophical circumstances of each university and the place/non-place of Aboriginal Studies in school curricula in different states/territories. The negative impacts were seen to be issues such as timing, funding and an overcrowded preservice teacher education curriculum, the result of the requirement by future employers for a large number and variety of professional experiences. As is illustrated in the Ramsey Report (Ramsey 2000), teacher education programmes are already stretched for time and funding. Hence, funding continues to impact on the quantity and quality of teaching in Aboriginal Studies subjects. Heads of school, directors of education, teacher educators and authors of case studies also noted that staff shortages, or reliance on casual employees meant that Aboriginal Studies subjects were, on occasions, taught by staff who were inadequately experienced or trained, unable to supervise postgraduate Indigenous Studies students, or unsympathetic to Aboriginal Studies. Such competing tensions, however, are indicative of the place of Aboriginal Studies in preservice primary teacher education as fragile and uncertain—subject to the idiosyncrasies of a particular time and place.

The model implied throughout the interviews and case studies echoes the primary themes in the quality teaching literature; that is, that effective teaching and learning is a complex intersection of multiple factors. However, in the case of Aboriginal Studies, it is clear that particular organisational, administrative and procedural issues need to be addressed to strengthen the place of Aboriginal Studies, including government and institutional support, adequate funding and resources, and the appointment of appropriate and qualified staff.

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## **Case study findings (Objective 5)**

In the case study institutions, mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects built on existing Aboriginal Studies courses and stimulated the development of further Aboriginal Studies specialisations. Influential contextual factors in the introduction of mandatory Aboriginal Studies included the decision by departments of education to make Aboriginal Studies a mandatory requirement for employment, along with proactive support from senior staff within the university.

Introducing mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects involved a number of challenges, including decisions about subject content, appropriate teaching staff, managing resistance from staff and students, building a collaborative relationship with the university's Aboriginal education unit, as well as providing sufficient staff and funds to sustain the subject.

Despite these challenges, there was unanimous agreement by case study authors that:

*The introduction of Indigenous Studies as a core unit in our undergraduate teacher education programmes has resulted in a qualitatively better preparation of our students for teaching, not just in teaching Indigenous students and about Indigenous issues—although this is obviously the case—but in considering aspects of culture and race and how these impinge on their curriculum development and pedagogical practices in schools.*

Several factors emerged as crucial to implementing mandatory Aboriginal Studies successfully. Those of particular note include collaboration between schools of education and Aboriginal education units, and direct interaction between students and Indigenous people, cultures and societies through the use of Indigenous guest speakers, practicum, and field experiences with Indigenous community organisations.

Student evaluations of mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects were very positive. Maintaining and building on positive student feedback required staff to constantly re-evaluate, refine and improve subject content, pedagogy and resources.

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## **National mapping of mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects**

A national mapping exercise undertaken as a component of this project demonstrates that the incidence of mandatory subjects in Aboriginal Studies is less than 50%. Employing authorities also do not seem to require qualifications in this area for beginning teachers, a situation which may serve to raise serious doubts about the status of Aboriginal Studies subjects. Even where Aboriginal Studies subjects are compulsory, the weight accorded to them in the context of the total programme is generally so low as to appear tokenistic. Available subject unit descriptions are sketchy and deficient in the details of week-by-week activities and subject matter. As a result, it is impossible to determine the extent to which Indigenous Studies issues and topics are addressed nationally.

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## **Suggestions for future teacher education courses (Objective 6)**

Preservice teachers offered a number of useful suggestions in relation to potential content for incorporation into future teacher education courses. Overall, participants felt that it was important to include content in relation to:

- knowledge of Aboriginal Studies subject matter
- how to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives across the schooling curriculum
- how to teach Aboriginal Studies and perspectives
- how to teach Aboriginal children
- awareness of Aboriginal culture, contemporary issues, and Aboriginal history.

Participants suggested that the adoption of a multifaceted approach to teaching Aboriginal Studies in teacher education courses would be useful. Such an approach would involve incorporating a mandatory subject, an elective subject and perspectives across the teacher education curriculum rather than one sole delivery mode.

An examination of issues relating to the future direction of preservice Aboriginal Studies showed that interview participants and case study authors generally reiterated themes they had already raised but felt strongly about and wanted to emphasise further. The crucial nature of preservice training in Aboriginal Studies was affirmed, as were aspects of teacher profiles key to successful teaching and implementation. Teaching Aboriginal Studies successfully is dependent upon particular course content, but more importantly, on teacher attitudes, commitment to and understanding of Aboriginal issues. In particular, an understanding of culture, cultural whiteness and how identity is formed were identified as vital ingredients for successful teachers, as well as vital ingredients in course material. It was noted that, in many instances, notions of cultural whiteness and identity formation were overlooked in course content because of the implicit nature of these cultural concepts. Debate continued about the preferred strategy of an integrated cross-curriculum versus the more rigorous learning gained through specialised study. Other recommendations for the future concerned access to technology in outlying communities and within universities, and the possibility of more appropriate timetabling of Aboriginal Studies subjects.

Directors of Aboriginal education units re-affirmed the need for preservice training in Aboriginal Studies and suggested that preservice training in Aboriginal Studies should be a criterion for employment in the profession. However, some directors believed that preservice education was limited, and that the real work of teaching Aboriginal Studies came after years of classroom teaching experience, and by implication, highlighted the need for continuing professional development in Aboriginal Studies for practising teachers.

Students participating in case studies and reflecting on undertaking a core Aboriginal Studies subject showed that the use of Aboriginal and guest lecturers was appreciated by the students.

Many respondents reported that they do not teach any Aboriginal Studies subject matter on practicum, and that they had not had the opportunity to teach Aboriginal students on practicum. Given that the findings in relation to practicum were consistent across the three types of courses considered in this phase of the study, it would seem timely for teacher education institutions to consider reconceptualising their field experience curricula to be inclusive of the need to provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to teach both Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students.

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## **Usefulness of Teaching the Teachers resources**

The resources, *Teaching the teachers: Indigenous Australian studies* (Craven ed. 1996a) have been identified as a useful teaching tool for teaching Aboriginal Studies. These resources were considered to provide a framework that could be adapted according to the

local context and needs of a community. Other comments in relation to the kit were that it presented a clear framework and a structure to help translate Aboriginal issues into a local context, and that the modular design was very useful.

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## Implications of the findings

Based on the findings emerging from the analysis of the data, a number of suggestions designed to assist teacher education were highlighted. These were:

*In the context of teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students, it may be desirable for departments of education to place a greater emphasis on the completion of a mandatory Aboriginal Studies teacher education subject as perhaps an employment prerequisite for beginning teachers, or as a component of appropriate standards-based outcomes in teacher education.*

*The introduction of mandatory Aboriginal Studies teacher education subjects has the potential to strengthen teacher education courses.*

*Primary teacher education institutions without mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects could benefit from giving due consideration to the development and introduction of a mandatory subject into their teacher education course, in consultation with their university's Aboriginal education centre.*

*Ideally, teacher education courses would benefit from a multifaceted approach to Aboriginal Studies in the teacher education curriculum, whereby mandatory subjects, elective subjects and perspectives across the curriculum are integrated into teacher education curriculum.*

*Ongoing and rigorous evaluation of teacher education courses is crucial to ensure that institutional goals in relation to mandatory subjects, elective subjects and Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum are being attained.*

*There is an urgent need for teacher education institutions to ensure that practicum and field experiences include opportunities for preservice teachers to teach both Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students, and to engage directly with Indigenous communities.*

*Mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects can be strengthened by including a focus both on how to teach Aboriginal Studies effectively to all Australian students and on best practice in teaching Aboriginal students.*

*Teacher education courses may benefit from the provision of opportunities for preservice teachers to critique cultural whiteness and to examine Indigenous and non-Indigenous identity.*

*Mandatory subjects could benefit from being designed so that they cover a broad range of Aboriginal Studies content matter.*

*Teacher education institutions should consider designing courses such that teachers' self-concepts and values in relation to teaching and enjoying the teaching of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students are maximised.*

*A professional development programme be developed to assist teacher education institutions to develop mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects in consultation with their university Aboriginal education units, Aboriginal community organisations, and local Aboriginal community members.*

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## **Summary**

The results of this study are important in that this is the first study to attempt to examine the impact of Aboriginal Studies teacher education courses on preservice teachers' ability to understand and teach Aboriginal Studies. The results demonstrate that mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects do make a positive difference to desirable educational goals for preservice teachers in terms of both perceived knowledge gained and, importantly, to attitudes. As such, the study findings support the validity of calls for Australian teacher education institutions to introduce mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects.

The findings also suggest that no single delivery approach alone is desirable; rather, teacher education courses should be designed to incorporate Aboriginal Studies in the teacher education curriculum in a multifaceted manner by the inclusion of mandatory subjects, elective subjects and perspectives across the curriculum. The results also suggest that existing mandatory Aboriginal Studies subjects could benefit from refinement. Moreover, anomalies in design in mandatory courses currently being developed could be avoided by examining potential weaknesses in existing courses identified by this study.