The Aboriginal Rural Education Program in Teacher Education at the University of Western Sydney

An Innovative Approach to an Important Challenge

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Since 1983, the University of Western Sydney has offered primary teacher education programs targeted specifically for non-metropolitan Aboriginal people. As a result, many Aboriginal people have taken the opportunity to become primary school teachers in NSW schools. As well as strengthening Aboriginal education in schools, these teachers have provided role models for many Aboriginal children.

All of this has been achieved while UWS has undergone a series of radical changes in structure and in its organisation of education for Aboriginal people. This paper describes the history of Aboriginal teacher education programs at UWS in the context of change which has enveloped the university as a whole and its attempts to offer culturally appropriate teacher education for its Aboriginal students.

BACKGROUND

The University of Western Sydney, through its predecessors/members has offered teacher education courses for Aboriginal students since 1982.

In 1982, Milperra CAE established the Aboriginal Education Unit as an enclave support unit providing an on-campus bridging course. The Aboriginal Rural Education
Program (AREP) began in 1983 in the areas of primary teacher education and social welfare. In primary teacher education, a Diploma of Teaching (Primary) was offered using a block release mode. A minimum of five years was required to complete this mode of the three-year full-time equivalent course.

Initially, the institution was constrained by Aboriginal education funding processes (McConnachie 1990:1). The patterns of funding prevented any long-term development of philosophies and goals.

When programs for Aboriginal students at the university were being developed there was a considerable struggle over creating space in the university for alternative modes of delivery in terms of teaching arrangements, curriculum development and resource allocation. The tension between the universal provision of education for previously excluded students and the need for special provision in terms of support mechanisms produced many difficulties for those involved in the program. Given that faculties controlled academic programs while the Aboriginal support unit offered academic skill development and cultural support, there was some degree of tension over ways in which the university could best deliver its AREP teacher education course.

There have been five different Aboriginal centres or units associated with Aboriginal education at the university since 1982. From 1982 until early 1992 the Macarthur Aboriginal Liaison Unit was the support unit and the Faculty of Education was responsible for and carried out the teaching in the Diploma of Teaching (Primary) and, later, the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary). In response to a range of concerns about attrition, late assignments and lack of support off-campus—all of which were highlighted at a review in 1992—a two-phased block release mode was proposed (Centre for Indigenous Australian Cultural Studies 1996, p. 33), with responsibility for the academic administration of and half of the teaching in the first phase being made the province of the newly formed Centre for Indigenous Australian Cultural Studies (CIACS). Until this time students commenced and completed their studies in the faculty through a continuous program. In the two-phase model, the first phase—the Diploma of Indigenous Australian Cultural Studies (DIACS)—was the responsibility of CIACS and constituted the equivalent of the first year of study for the teaching award while the second phase—the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) was the responsibility of the faculty. A ‘hard barrier’ was established between the two awards—that is, students had to complete the Diploma before continuing with the rest of the degree.

In the period 1995-1997, CIACS struggled to establish itself as an academic identity within UWS Macarthur. Partly this was due to the general climate within the University of Western Sydney at the time (one member university had sought secession and this had caused a great deal of internal conflict, tension and mistrust) and partly it was due to the wish of the academics within CIACS to be recognised as more than educators in Aboriginal issues, both within and outside the university. For example, there were many long and heated discussions with members of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group about the use of the term ‘Indigenous’ rather then ‘Aboriginal’ in the title of the centre. For CIACS, to gain independence in this climate, it would have had to
offer very competitive postgraduate courses to survive. It did not manage to do this and was dissolved.

The University of Western Sydney did, at this time, endeavour to establish a university-wide Indigenous support centre—Booloobidja—but this, too, was short-lived. In 1998, UWS Macarthur established the Goolangullia Aboriginal Education Centre. Goolangullia continued to have both academic and support responsibility for DIACS while the faculty continued to have academic responsibility for the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary). The irony, from the point of view of Indigenous struggles in these ‘new’ approaches to cultural studies curricula, is that the Goolangullia Aboriginal Education Centre kept the focus on community cultural issues but preferred to use the word ‘Aboriginal’ over ‘Indigenous’ in both the title of the centre and its awards.

In February 1999, Goolangullia Aboriginal Education Centre assumed responsibility for the delivery of both the Diploma in Indigenous Australian Community Studies and the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary). Progression within these awards initially continued as before.

The Centre held a staff retreat and vigorous discussion raised issues over the concepts of future modes of delivery of units, the order of delivery, the length of time taken to complete the course, assessment and appropriateness of various staff to deliver culturally sensitive and political content. Current and past students and community stakeholders were consulted for their comments on the outcomes of the retreat and changes were instituted over the next twelve months.

**DIACS:** The mode of delivery changed from two units a semester for four semesters to three units a semester for three semesters. This enabled a larger number of students to engage in study as the restriction to two units per semester precluded students from Abstudy payments and other support. It also enabled a greater continuity of unit delivery. Although the student base remained predominately ‘mature aged’, a greater proportion of younger students began enrolling.

The community-based electives were Indigenised and ‘politicised’, reflecting more current cultural and social continuums. Some units were exclusively taught by Indigenous academics, some co-taught by Indigenous and non-Indigenous and some by non-Indigenous people.

The electives challenged previously accepted approaches to topics such as the land and the law and Aboriginal culture. Presenters in the electives attacked stereotypical approaches and introduced post- modern cultural studies approaches to ensure that Aboriginal voices were heard. Indigenous politics were discussed openly. The electives explored relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in ways which challenged the Aboriginal students and their own personal histories.

**BTeach:** The transition from DIACS to the degree was made smoother through course changes. The overall rigour in the course was increased as was the selection standard for students wishing to enter the course with a stronger interview procedure and a stronger focus on outcomes for self, community and the support they had available to them.
Strong communication between support staff and academics gave students a greater opportunity to gain accurate information and support at their first contact with each unit from their remote locations. Retention rates rose over the next two years to equal those of the internal courses offered, as did outcomes.

The experiment that was Goolangullia was never really given a chance to prosper. During its entire life, the whole of the University of Western Sydney was undergoing yet another restructure. The future for Goolangullia was never clear in this environment. Nonetheless, it continued to offer both the Diploma of Indigenous Australian Cultural Studies and the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) through the AREP mode.

In 2001 it was determined that Goolangullia would be disbanded, a university-wide Aboriginal Education Centre would be established and that the AREP teacher education programs would be transferred from the Bankstown campus—on which they had been taught since 1983—to the Blacktown campus. Many of the community, students and staff felt that they had been inadequately consulted. This was expressed initially as dissatisfaction and the request for further discussion. Significant concern was expressed at the lack of resources available on the Blacktown campus. When further consultation did not eventuate, students began an occupation of the Goolangullia building which lasted for fifty-eight days. A compromise agreement was eventually reached. In what is purported to be an interim accommodation, the support roles and academic teaching/governance for Aboriginal education courses within UWS have been separated. New challenges are now faced to continue the success that had been achieved within Goolangullia.

As change rolls through an institution such as UWS, there are many unintended consequences. Aboriginal teacher education at UWS has never enjoyed a centrally important place in the university – even though the university has not been backward in accepting any laurels which have been bestowed because of the successes of AREP. Hence, as continuous restructuring moves through UWS, Aboriginal teacher education has been alternately used as a political ‘raison d’etre’ for a particular change or has been ignored completely. Teaching and support staff have been left in limbo over employment, role or purpose. While it may be unintended, continuous rolling restructuring can have, and have had, serious unintended consequences.

THE ABORIGINAL RURAL EDUCATION PROGRAM MODE

The AREP mode has varied slightly over the years but is basically a block release mode consisting of residential schools—ranging from ten days to two weeks. Each residential is held on the Bankstown Campus of the university and distance education materials, especially print materials, as well as teleconferencing and videoconferencing have been used as teaching approaches within the mode.

Many students have extolled the virtues of DIACS in terms of the ‘start’ it gave the students—most of whom have had no experience in tertiary education. Some students graduated from the Diploma and decided to postpone further study, but most continued
on to the degree. Those who did leave with the Diploma have used it to help gain employment by showing it as evidence of their ability to undertake higher-level study.

In 1999, in order to meet requests from students for their overall course length to be reduced, the Diploma phase was reduced in length to three semesters and the 'hard barrier' removed. While the decrease in time has increased the pressure on students, the removal of the barrier before continuing has meant that students are not disadvantaged if they do opt to slow down a little.

In the current AREP mode of the Diploma in Indigenous Australian Cultural Studies / Bachelor of Teaching (Primary), students are undertaking the equivalent of three years of full-time study over a period of four years in a block release mode. This is a major effort on the part of the students, their families and communities as well as on the academic and support staff of the university. In spite of this, current students are continuing to work towards their qualifications with great determination.

**THE FUTURE**

Following the events of 2001, the academic administration and teaching responsibilities for the AREP modes of both DIACS and the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) were transferred to the School of Education and Early Childhood Studies. There was no intake to the AREP mode teacher education course in 2002. One academic from Goolangullia was transferred to the School and is the course convenor for the AREP mode courses.

This 'breathing space' has provided the opportunity for a review of the AREP mode and for plans to be established for a 're-launching' of the mode in 2003. Firstly, the review addressed the fact that the AREP mode students were among very few teacher education students in Australia who would graduate with a three-year status degree. This means that they would be ineligible for employment in government schools in almost all states of Australia except NSW. Hence, the AREP mode has been adapted to the four-year full-time equivalent Bachelor of Education (Primary) offered at the UWS from 2001.

**Bachelor of Education (Primary)—AREP mode**

This program is a four year degree (320 credit points) with an optional exit point after a specified 80 credit points of study (contained in the dark bordered boxes below). Students utilising this optional exit point would graduate with a Diploma in Indigenous Australian Cultural Studies.

Secondly, the review allowed staff to investigate the value of the Diploma as an entry point into the degree. At a recent External Advisory Committee, the retention of the Diploma received resounding endorsement.

Thirdly, the change in governance of the AREP mode of the courses has meant that it can be given the same levels of scrutiny and quality control as all other courses within the university, thus reducing the validity of any discussion about the AREP course being inferior because it is specifically targeted towards Aboriginal students. However, the School is aware of the need to increase the number of Indigenous staff teaching in this—
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<th>Semester</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>University Study Skills</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Introduction to Learning and Teaching**</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Cultural Diversity, Society and Learning 1</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Curriculum Studies 1: Language and Literacy 1**</td>
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<td>Curriculum Studies 4: PD, Health, PE**</td>
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<td>Curriculum Studies 7: Creative Arts and PD, Health, PE**</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Curriculum Studies 9: Language and Literacy 2**</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Teaching English as a Second Language in K-6 Mainstream Schools**</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Understanding and Teaching in Context**</td>
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** Indicates that the unit contributes to the professional experiences component of the course
and other—teacher education programs. To this end, the appointment of a second Indigenous staff academic has been given a high priority in current staff recruitment discussions.

CONCLUSION

The University of Western Sydney has offered the AREP mode of its teacher education courses since 1983. During this time hundreds of Aboriginal people who might otherwise have been denied the opportunity to become primary school teachers have graduated. Many of these people now hold very responsible positions in education and other human service roles. The mode, through its innovative and consistent approaches to meeting the needs of Aboriginal people living in rural and remote situations, has helped improve the lot of not only its graduates but also many children in our schools and communities. These children can see another possibility for themselves as they grow up and can build a better understanding of Aboriginal people and cultures as a direct result of the AREP graduate teachers. UWS is proud to be associated with such an endeavour.

REFERENCES
