University of South Australia

Cultural Awareness Training for Students

A DISCUSSION PAPER FOR STUDENTS, STAFF AND COMMUNITY

Table of Contents

You're invited

On behalf of the University of South Australia, we invite you to contribute to the creation of our first online cultural awareness training for students.

The is discussion paper has been developed to create a meaningful opportunity for students, staff, and our broader university community to shape the way our cultural awareness will be developed.

This paper will create a dialogue which will bring together the diversity of understandings towards learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here in Australia.

The University of South Australia believe that together when can move another step forward to reconciliation through allowing all students and staff to have a say and be involved

Summary

The development of an online cultural awareness module for all students is a central deliverable within the University of South Australia's Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan 2023-2025. This discussion paper outlines the research conducted by the Office of Aboriginal Leadership and Strategy (ALS) and the Student Engagement Unit (SEU) regarding the design, delivery, and effectiveness of Cultural Awareness Training (CAT) programs at UniSA. The research aims to foster an inclusive, respectful, and culturally safe learning environment for both First Nations students and the broader university community.

Key findings from this research highlight the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and locally contextualized content, as well as the need for a collaborative approach to designing and delivering CAT that reflects Aboriginal perspectives. The paper also emphasizes the need to use diverse teaching methods and platforms, such as online learning environments, to reach all students. The paper invites feedback from students, academics, and professional staff to refine the training content, learning outcomes, and assessment methods.

Background

Universities are tasked with creating learning environments that are not only inclusive but also reflective of Australia's rich cultural heritage.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (henceforth referred to collectively as First Nations peoples) are the original inhabitants of Australia, with a history that spans over 65,000 years. This rich cultural heritage is marked by a deep connection to land, spirituality, and community. First Nations cultures in Australia are diverse, comprising hundreds of distinct groups, each with its own languages, traditions, and customs.

Therefore it can be understood the significance of understanding First Nations peoples' histories and cultures is paramount in educational settings within Australia. Knowledge of historical experiences, particularly the impacts of colonization, dispossession, and assimilation policies, fosters a more inclusive perspective among students. This understanding is crucial for dismantling stereotypes and promoting respect for First Nations peoples' rights and contributions to Australian society.

Cultural awareness is a form of professional training, where the historical purpose seeks to assist in the prevention of inequality in service delivery and outcomes within institutions, organizations, and communities. You may have heard the term 'cultural competence· or training that is framed towards achieving 'cultural competency'.

Cultural Competency is not considered a realistic outcome of training that attempts to educate on cultures, with competency implying that there is no longer the need for continued growth and learning. Rather the research suggests cultural competency has moved towards cultural responsiveness as being an effective outcome of training that requires regular self-reflection and proactive responses to the person, family or community being interacted with. To become culturally responsive requires knowledge learnt from being culturally aware, where cultural awareness sits within a stage-based continuum that leads to the required outcome of informed discourse and practice.

Key Findings

The research conducted by the project team included a desktop study of existing CAT modules, a benchmarking review of national practices, a literature review, and consultations with academic, community, and student groups. These efforts led to the identification of the following key findings:

- *The systemic problem with CAT packages to have an overemphasis generalising understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders cultures.*

- *The required need to align CAT delivery to recognise the cultural biases and learning gaps within its participants so it is tailored CAT to more effective.*

- *The importance of placing participants in uncomfortable spaces and embracing those spaces to foster critical thinking and develop cultural understanding.*

- *The growing prevalence and proven need to produce effective University specific CAT programs at Australian universities that are contextual to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures those universities have relationships with*

- *A gap within many CAT packages to be able to effectively measure learning outcomes,*

- *The need for CAT to recognise diverse learning modalities within the university to better educate students and meet their learning needs.*

- *Online learning is one the most accessible ways to engage students but teaching effectiveness is dependent upon how the learning takes place within those online spaces.*

- *A CAT package needs to recognise that students are foundational always challenged by the concept of cultural identity and its importance in how they see themselves and others.*

Furthering implications of findings would suggest. Graduate attributes and employability skills could be enhanced through effective CAT teaching practice, as employers increasingly value cultural competence in global and diverse workplaces.

Within the university, Interdisciplinary integration opportunities exist to embed cultural awareness across various academic disciplines rather than treating CAT as a standalone module.

Student leadership development could be strengthened by involving those students in co-creating and facilitating cultural awareness initiatives, creating peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Professional placement preparation would benefit from discipline-specific cultural awareness training, particularly for fields like healthcare, education, law, and social work where graduates will engage with diverse communities. Student retention and success rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students might improve in environments where cultural awareness is genuinely embedded in university culture.

Literature Review

The literature review examined Cultural Awareness Training (CAT) effectiveness in Australia, identifying several critical issues:

Problems with Current Approaches:

- CAT often oversimplifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures

- Programs frequently cater to participants' cultural biases rather than learning needs

- Linear teaching approaches limit genuine understanding and engagement

- White cultural perspectives are incorrectly positioned as the normative standard

- Assessment criteria often reflect white cultural values rather than Indigenous perspectives

Effective Teaching Methods:

- Placing participants in challenging situations that question their cultural assumptions

- Promoting critical thinking and new perspectives

- Helping learners recognize themselves as cultural individuals

Misplaced Priorities:

- Many programs prioritize non-First Nations participants' comfort and workplace relevance

- First Nations peers' needs are frequently overlooked

- Simplistic cultural presentations reinforce existing stereotypes and racialized perceptions

These insights have informed new criteria for analysing and improving CAT programs going forward. Furthermore, based on the review, key implications include the need for universities to redesign programs with measurable outcomes beyond mere enrolment figures and develop locally relevant content through Aboriginal community partnerships. Current external programs (which are educational and valuable) are still likely to fail to create meaningful cultural awareness that aligns with needs of both students and the institution, while the lack of proper assessment metrics prevents organizations from demonstrating impact.

A shift toward First Nations-led approaches would create platforms for Aboriginal voices and priorities while ensuring accurate representation of local cultural knowledge. More challenging learning experiences that disrupt cultural assumptions could accelerate reconciliation efforts by moving beyond dominant cultural frameworks and producing substantive attitude changes among participants. Without these changes, institutions risk continuing ineffective practices that consume resources without advancing cultural safety objectives.

Benchmarking

The benchmarking review found that Australian universities with Cultural Awareness Training (CAT) programs typically use one of two approaches:

External training programs:

- *Often the same program is used for both students and staff*

- *Success was typically measured by enrolment numbers rather than actual cultural awareness gains*

- *No data was collected on teaching effectiveness*

- *Implication: Universities may be investing in programs without evidence of their impact, potentially wasting resources and missing opportunities to develop genuine cultural awareness*

In-house training programs:

- *Developed by universities themselves instead of licensing external content*

- *Created in collaboration with local Aboriginal communities*

- *Provided education specific to the land where students were studying*

- *Enabled ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal communities about essential student knowledge*

- *Allowed students to experience the broader cultural landscape beyond university*

- *Implication: This approach builds meaningful relationships with Aboriginal communities, creates more relevant learning experiences, and establishes foundations for long-term reconciliation efforts*

The review identified additional advantages of in-house programs:

- *Content could be tailored to the institution's specific context and local needs in more innovative ways*

- *Implication: Customized programs may lead to higher engagement, better learning outcomes, and more authentic cultural understanding*

A desktop study of external CAT modules revealed a significant limitation:

- *External programs typically lacked effective methods to measure learning outcomes*

- *This made it difficult to assess whether these programs successfully created culturally safe and inclusive environments*

- *Implication: Without proper assessment methods, universities cannot determine if their cultural safety objectives are being met, potentially leaving systemic issues unaddressed.*

Additionally, research suggested that collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples required an understanding of what success looks like and a clear agreed upon, achievable learning outcomes that can be built upon in the future. Expectations of student's engagement and learning needs to align with expectations of our teaching practice being culturally responsive and proven as such.

Student understandings

From a sample group of a hundred students surveyed and enrolled at the University of South Australia, we found that students struggled to define the differences between culture and race.

Often students believed that race was tied directly with culture or at times the relationship between race and culture was symbiotic. Students agreed that learning about any culture required continuous learning and lived experience. Students' knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was limited to basic and popular understandings that lacked informed detail. Some awareness was demonstrated in knowing the diversity of Aboriginal peoples across Australia. Collectively the feedback on Aboriginal people was that they represented a group who were the first inhabitants of Australia before the invasion of their lands.

The challenge identified for the development of CAT at with our university would be how teach for students how race has a limiting effect on the way culture is and can be understood. The research considered that spectrum of understanding for an online CAT required students to learn about how race and culture (foundationally) affect the identities of themselves and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in negative and positive ways.

The Role of Online Learning in Delivering Cultural Awareness Training (CAT)

Our review of online learning approaches and platforms has highlighted several key findings related to the design and delivery of effective Cultural Awareness Training (CAT) at the university level:

Online Learning Platforms Support Broad Accessibility

Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas are widely used across universities and provide flexible access to learning materials. A major strength of these platforms is their ability to make content accessible to all students—regardless of location, schedule, or personal circumstances. This accessibility is essential for ensuring CAT reaches the entire student body.

Success Depends on Culturally Responsive Design

The effectiveness of online CAT delivery is closely tied to how well the content is designed. Best practice in both online education and cultural awareness teaching emphasizes the need for culturally responsive pedagogy. This approach acknowledges that students' cultural backgrounds shape how they learn and engage. Moreover this finding highlights the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems within education is needed determine effective teaching practices.

Embedding Local Knowledge Adds Depth and Relevance

In-house development of CAT modules allows for the integration of local Aboriginal perspectives. For example, incorporating traditional stories, cultural practices, and video interviews with local Elders can make the content more authentic and meaningful. These elements help to ground learning in real-world contexts and deepen students' cultural understanding.

Diverse Teaching Methods Increase Engagement

Using a mix of multimedia tools—such as podcasts, documentaries, interactive maps, and visual content—was identified as an effective way to engage different learning styles. For instance, interactive elements that allow students to explore significant cultural sites can make learning more experiential and memorable.

Social and Cultural Factors Influence Engagement

While online learning offers many benefits, it also presents challenges—especially when dealing with sensitive topics. Social attitudes, including stereotypes and biases, can affect how willing students are to engage meaningfully with CAT content. Without face-to-face interaction, opportunities to build trust and foster open dialogue may be limited, potentially reducing the depth of learning.

Careful Design is Critical for Meaningful Learning

The importance of designing CAT modules with intention—balancing technical accessibility with cultural integrity. Effective CAT must go beyond content delivery; it should create safe, inclusive spaces for reflection, discussion, and connection.

Feedback and Collaboration are Key to Success

The development of meaningful and respectful online CAT requires input from the UniSA community. Insights from those with expertise in online learning, Indigenous education, and cultural capability are essential to ensure that the training is not only educational but transformative

Proposed Learning Outcomes

The project team considered the purpose of a CAT module for students as primarily to create a safe environment within the university for First Nations students. However, the purpose of CAT also encompasses building the skillset of non-First Nations students to appreciate and value the diverse cultures of Australia's First Peoples and foster respectful relationships with the aim to promote allyship.

While this online CAT module for students may not be able to achieve alone the type of cultural safety and responsiveness that we strive for, the hope is that this may be the first step and eventually part of a larger, overarching framework of cultural responsiveness for both staff and students (by which time we will be operating as *Adelaide University*).

Ethically and professionally speaking the university CAT program could aim to lay the foundation for our students on their journey to becoming culturally responsive members of the workforce and society moving forward. The skills developed from the training should ideally go beyond the stereotypical understandings of cultural awareness, they should be a foundation of building blocks for the continued development of sustainable, culturally responsive practice.

Vital to the purpose of the CAT module, is a set of documented learning outcomes.

These outcomes inform the achievement standards required of students. The research that has been done by the project team and close alignment with work being done in other areas of the university through our consultation, has led to the drafting of a set of learning outcomes and the key areas it is believed they should focus on:

- *Participants will examine one's own culture (understanding their positionality and unconscious bias).*

- *Participants will develop historical understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures (pre-colonial, colonial & contemporary histories).*

- *Participants will gain deeper understanding of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (considering intersectionality).*

- *Participants will engage with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (focusing on strength-based narratives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures).*

- *Participants will learn strategies for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities (promoting cultural safety and allyship).*

- *Participants will be exposed to decolonial approaches (learning the effects of colonisation and recognising & disrupting normalised narratives).*

It is imperative that the developed learning outcomes are measurable.

This is so the learning of the students undertaking the CAT module can be assessed and the achievement of the purpose measured. Currently assessment is a gap found in existing CAT offerings across the landscape, where besides self-assessment and evaluations of the module itself from participants, there is often an inability to measure the achievement of the specified learning outcomes from the standpoint of those whom the training is targeted at.

While self-assessment can be a valuable tool, a key focus of the project team in the development and delivery of this CAT module, is to expand on this and ensure effective assessment that can measure the suitability and effectiveness of the training in contributing to a culturally safe and inclusive environment in the workspace and classroom, progressing reconciliation at UniSA.

Recommendations:

The recommendations from our findings, that then informed the creation of a criteria to further analyze underline best practices are:

1. **CAT needs to be tailored to the environment it's being delivered. If CAT is not contextual to the environment it is being delivered, the participants can't develop greater understanding of the content and its relevance.**

2. **Aboriginal experiences and understandings need to be central to the creation of content and learning. These need to be prioritized rather than being filtered, summarized and homogenized into Western understandings.**

3. **Race and racism need to be required understandings within CAT. Considering the broader historical, cultural and institutional features rather than being taught as individual behavior and poor manners.**

4. **CAT requires contextual information that relates to the roles and relationships of its participants. Reflective of not just the general themes of content but the experiences of those who are participating.**

5. **Effective assessment requires focus on participants as learners. Avoid the idea of success being based on the service delivery rather than individual learning of the participants.**

6. **Effective delivery requires participants to be foundationally aware of colonization. Cultural awareness within Australia is clearly defined by the effects of colonization, and participants need to develop awareness of the historical effects.**

Some underline key limitations were often found to be:

- **Teaching approaches. The literature suggests the approach to effective delivery of CAT requires the positioning of participants as starting from a place of the unknown and unpacking their own interpretations of culture before examining other peoples.**

- **Unconscious bias. The issue of reinforced stereotyping and the simplification of First Nations cultures in Australia.**

  Cultural reflexivity. A tendency of CAT to redefine culture to suit the needs of the non-First Nations learners and Eurocentric Western interpretations of themes and ideas.

Next Steps

Consultation and Community Input: Shaping Cultural Awareness Training at UniSA

To ensure the development of Cultural Awareness Training (CAT) is meaningful, respectful, and relevant to the UniSA community, consultation with key groups is essential. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students, academic and professional staff from a range of disciplines, and students from all backgrounds and levels of study.

To support this, a series of tailored surveys has been developed to gather feedback, insights, and suggestions directly from these groups. Each version of the survey is designed to reflect the unique perspectives and experiences of its target audience.

These surveys include a mix of open-ended questions, multiple-choice options, and scaled responses. They are based on the key themes outlined in the project's discussion paper and are intended to be easy to complete without taking up too much time.

Whether you're:

- *A student who wants to help shape the future of CAT at UniSA,*

- *A staff member with experience in education, equity, culture, or online learning,*

- *Or someone simply passionate about building a more culturally aware university community—*

We want to hear from you.

The insights gathered through this consultation will be combined with research already undertaken by the project team. Together, this feedback will inform:

- *The final recommendations of the project,*

- *The development of a content plan, and*

- *The creation of the online CAT module itself.*

The goal is to begin building the module shortly after consultation is complete, with a planned launch in **2026**. Your voice is an essential part of making this training truly inclusive, impactful, and representative of our community.

Glossary of Terms

A reference guide to key terms used in discussions of cultural awareness, competency, and equity in higher education and institutional settings.

A

Aboriginal Peoples
The First Peoples of mainland Australia and Tasmania. Aboriginal Australians belong to diverse language groups, nations, and cultures that existed long before British colonisation. They are distinct from Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Assessment Criteria
The benchmarks or standards used to evaluate participants' learning, understanding, or skill acquisition during or after a training or educational program.

Awareness-Raising Approaches
Training methods aimed at increasing knowledge of cultural or diversity issues. These approaches often lack deeper engagement with structural issues or behavioural change.

C

Colonialism / Colonisation
The process by which a foreign power establishes control over the land, resources, and peoples of another territory. In Australia, colonisation by the British began in 1788 and resulted in the dispossession, marginalisation, and ongoing disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Cultural Awareness
An initial step in understanding cultural differences, focusing on learning about customs, beliefs, and practices of other cultures. It does not require behavioural change or deep reflection.

Cultural Awareness Training (CAT)
Programs designed to help participants learn about different cultures—often Indigenous cultures—to improve understanding and reduce bias. The effectiveness of such programs depends on the depth of content and delivery methods.

Cultural Binary ("Us/Them" Thinking)
A simplified or oppositional way of viewing cultures that emphasizes difference in a way that can reinforce stereotypes or cultural hierarchies.

Cultural Competence / Competency
The ability to effectively and respectfully engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. It involves applied skills, critical reflection, and an understanding of power and privilege in cross-cultural contexts.

Cultural Identity
A person's sense of belonging to a particular culture, shaped by shared language, traditions, history, and social norms.

Cultural Mores
The accepted customs, habits, and values of a particular cultural group. Mores are often taught through socialisation and shape daily behaviours and expectations.

Cultural Reflexivity
The practice of examining one's own cultural beliefs, assumptions, and biases in relation to others. It is essential to avoid reinforcing dominant narratives or misunderstandings in intercultural settings.

Cultural Safety
A practice in service delivery (especially in healthcare and education) that respects and protects the cultural identity of service users. The recipient determines whether the environment or service is culturally safe.

Culturally Responsive Practice
An approach that adapts policies, communication, and actions to be respectful of and informed by the cultural backgrounds of individuals or communities being served.

D

Decolonised / Decolonising Pedagogy
Educational methods that challenge dominant Western knowledge systems and centre Indigenous perspectives, lived experiences, and relational ways of knowing. It encourages learners to reflect on their own cultural position and the impacts of colonisation.

Deficit Assumptions
The belief that certain groups are "lacking" in cultural, intellectual, or behavioural traits, often used to justify unequal treatment or outcomes.

Dominant Colonial Framework
A worldview or structure shaped by colonisation, where Western values, norms, and ways of thinking are treated as default or superior.

E

Epistemology
The study of knowledge—its origins, nature, and limits. In cultural education, Western and Indigenous epistemologies often differ significantly in how knowledge is valued and transmitted.

F

First Nations
A respectful, collective term used in Australia to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, highlighting their sovereignty and cultural continuity as the original inhabitants of the land.

I

Indigeneity
The condition or identity of being Indigenous, often marked by connection to ancestral lands, community, traditional knowledge systems, and shared histories of resistance and resilience.

Institutional Racism
The systematic disadvantaging of certain racial or cultural groups through the policies, practices, and norms of institutions, even when there is no overt intent to discriminate.

L

Likert Scale
A survey tool commonly used to assess attitudes, where respondents indicate agreement or disagreement along a scale (e.g., from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree").

N

Non-Aboriginal
A broad term used to describe individuals who are not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It includes all other cultural or racial backgrounds.

Normative Culture
The dominant culture in a society, which sets the standard for acceptable behaviour and beliefs. In Australia, this often refers to white, Western, English-speaking norms.

O

Ontology
A philosophical term referring to the nature of being or reality. In cultural education, it refers to how different cultures understand existence and human relationships to the world.

Othering
A process of marginalising or stereotyping individuals or groups by portraying them as fundamentally different, often inferior, to the dominant group.

P

Power Imbalance
An unequal distribution of power, authority, or influence between individuals or groups. In cultural awareness contexts, this often refers to the historical and institutional privileges held by white or dominant cultural groups.

Problem-Based Learning (PBL)
A student-centred teaching method where participants learn through solving real-world, complex problems, encouraging critical thinking, collaboration, and self-directed learning.

Process Evaluation
An assessment of how a program or training is implemented, focusing on delivery processes, participant experiences, and engagement, rather than just outcomes.

R

Race
A social construct used to categorise people based on physical features (like skin colour) and geographic origin. It has no biological basis but is used to justify systems of inequality.

Racism
Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed at a person or people based on their racial or ethnic group, often reinforced by systemic power structures.

Reflexivity
An ongoing process of self-awareness and self-examination in relation to one's own cultural identity, biases, and assumptions, especially in intercultural or research settings.

Relevance of Content
The degree to which educational material connects with learners' real-life contexts, needs, or professional roles. High relevance leads to deeper engagement and application.

S

Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)
A framework developed by Australian institutions (including universities) to commit to long-term actions that promote reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A "stretch" RAP focuses on embedding change over time.

Systemic Inequality
Structural disparities that disadvantage some groups and privilege others across areas such as education, healthcare, employment, and justice.

T

Teaching Approaches
The methods and strategies educators use to facilitate learning. In cultural awareness training, this may include storytelling, discussion, experiential learning, and critical reflection.

Torres Strait Islander Peoples
The Indigenous peoples of the Torres Strait Islands, located between Queensland and Papua New Guinea. They have distinct cultural identities, languages, and traditions separate from Aboriginal peoples.

U

Unconscious Bias
Implicit, automatic assumptions or stereotypes about people based on race, gender, age, or other characteristics. These biases can influence behaviour and decision-making without conscious intent.

W

Western Epistemologies
Knowledge systems based on European Enlightenment values such as individualism, rationalism, and empirical proof. Often critiqued in cultural training for excluding or invalidating Indigenous ways of knowing.

White
A racial and social category often referring to people of European descent. In critical studies, it also refers to the cultural and institutional norms associated with whiteness that afford social privilege and power in settler-colonial societies like Australia.

Whiteness
A system of social and institutional norms that centres white culture as the standard. Whiteness is not just about skin colour but about structural power and privilege that shapes institutions, education, and identity

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For more information

regarding this discussion paper

please contact the

The Aboriginal Leadership & Strategy team