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# Living with Mental Illness

Nyoongar ways of working  
& the Looking Forward Project



# Working with Nyoongar Elders to decolonise the Social Work curriculum

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(with academic colleagues,  
*Looking Forward* staff & Elders)

*I'm nervous. I don't know who is to say what and when. I would like to talk as I usually do and listen and say, "Tell me who you are?" But somehow we feel like bulbs breaking through harsh ground. Half hidden. There is history dividing us like a landslide. A gaping wound. It reverberates. "Stop!" I think I know something of all those losses. Land and life. Little breaths try to escape and make gestures of support; of care and acceptance and surrender. I am learning to release all that is making this about me. I try to listen to the wind, hear the settling of leaves. Stillness - a tree allowing birds to land. She tells me about death and destruction and pain, her grief laid out like pebbles for me to walk upon. Discomfort, settling about me as cold as winter wind. She describes the scene as if we are there, watching. We sit in the silence of imagining and the voices of the group are a hum behind us. It's time to join the group. She and I are holding something between us. I want to give more than I have. I am not even sure what there is to give. We let go. The group re-joins, the circle a little more formed, no beginning, no end. (SW staff member 4)*

The above quote eloquently presents one group member's reflection of her experiences of joining with Aboriginal Elders in a succession of gatherings towards 'Indigenising' the social work curriculum. This paper uses one Action Research cycle to retell the story of this engagement between an Australian School of Social Work and local Aboriginal Elders. It reflects on the purpose and the process of what is a continuing journey of engagement and understanding. The social work curriculum at Curtin University in Perth is gradually being enriched and changed by this process.

## Introduction

'who am I?' was the question asked of first year social work students in a first year Citizenship unit that arose from a process of engagement with Nyoongar<sup>ii</sup> Elders at Curtin University in Western Australia. The significance of this question came about in the storying process with Elders and reflects the need to know self in practice as well as be willing to share personal stories with others particularly when asking people ('clients') to share theirs. Social work schools across Australia are taking steps to 'Indigenise'

the curriculum by embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, doing and being. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics (2010) emphasises what values and principles are needed to work ethically with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the AASW Practice Standards (2013) stress that practice needs to be culturally responsive, safe and sensitive. These guidelines provide the what and why of increasing knowledge but less of the how this process can be achieved. A National research project which resulted in the *Getting It Right Framework* (2014) offers possibilities for how social workers could work in culturally responsive ways, emphasising the importance of practice development being specific to the local context.

In Perth a locally-led Nyoongar research project has developed an innovative and progressive framework that involves Nyoongar Elders and non-Aboriginal people working together to transform systems. Staff, both lecturers and administrative, at the Curtin School of Occupational Health and Social Work, are working with the researchers and the Elders in identifying and integrating their work and teaching practices so that they reflect Nyoongar ways of knowing, doing and being (worldview). They are together journeying a new story – one of relationships, created in new spaces towards new ways of knowing, doing and being. It is a partnership leading to transformation at individual, organisational and (we believe) societal levels. In this chapter we offer reflections of developments emerging from this collaboration; while it represents one cycle of the Action Research Learning (ARL) model of *look, think* and *act*, other iterations follow and intersect. A more detailed analytical paper is to follow which explores other cycles involved in this process.

## "Look" - context

Increasingly, universities are looking for ways to 'Indigenise'<sup>iii</sup> the curriculum with many devising policies and programs to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, improve enrolments and retention of Aboriginal students and increase cultural capacities of staff and students. Curtin University in Western Australia is one tertiary institution leading the way

in this area, with its award-winning common core unit, Indigenous Cultures and Health and its newly revised Curtin Reconciliation Action Plan ((RAP) 2014-2017) within which it seeks to build “*Indigenous cultural capability in all staff and students*” through “*the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous staff and students in reciprocal relationships*” (p. 2). Such endeavours support National objectives to Close the Gap including recommendations put forward by the Behrendt *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (2012), which includes the proposal for “*universities [to] develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teaching and Learning Frameworks that reflect the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge within curriculums, graduate attributes and teaching practices*” (p. 14). At a school level, the School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work, within the Health Sciences Faculty, is forging ahead with a process of ‘*decolonising*’ the curriculum alongside Nyoongar Elders, where change is evident at an individual and school level. What we offer here are reflections from staff, Elders and project team members about this journey towards change.

### The educational landscape

Two contributory factors stimulated the staff within the Social Work Department to look at ways to ‘embed’ Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being. One prominent point was in 2011 when a group of social work students undertaking the Indigenous Cultures and Health Unit, a common core (CC) unit compulsory to all undergraduate students studying within the Health Sciences Faculty, advocated for greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content across the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW); articulating strongly that one unit of study at the commencement of the BSW did not equip students sufficiently to work in an area evidencing gross overrepresentation on all social and economic indicators for disadvantage. The student group developed an instrument on Survey Monkey to gauge interest amongst peers, across the year levels, about wanting to see more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the course. Overwhelmingly, students wanted more and the student group raised this need with the then Head of the Social Work Department as well as the then Unit Coordinator for the Indigenous Cultures and Health unit. Staff agreed with this need and at the time of the AASW re-accreditation, staff commenced a process of mapping the curriculum to better assess current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content across the course. Aboriginal guest lecturers, case studies, vignettes or activities specific to working with Aboriginal peoples spread throughout particular units were evident, yet staff agreed much more was needed to bring about change at all levels: micro, meso and macro.

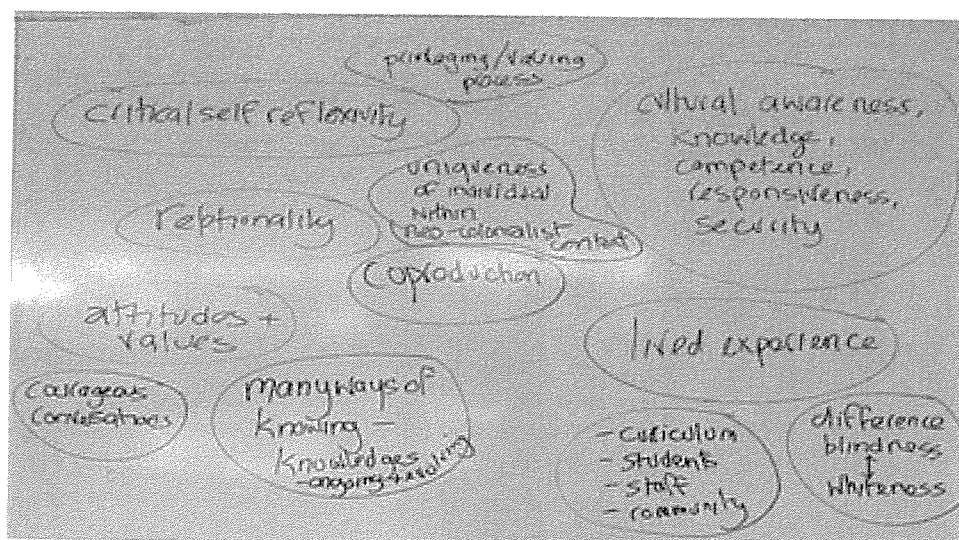
Initial staff meetings about what needed to change and how raised more questions than answers: ‘*who is the knowledge holder and how do we know this is appropriate in this teaching and learning context?*’; ‘*without an Aboriginal staff member how can we be guided in our decision-making about who, what, when, where and why?*’; ‘*how do we know that further oppressive practices, knowledges and values are not being reinforced in our teachings?*’ While other subject areas were identified as needing greater depth of coverage in the course, staff recognised the need to ‘embed’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and practices as a priority given our shared her/history of continued injustices and overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in health, education, justice, child protection, unemployment and other social and economic domains. The intersectionality of these issues and need to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices was considered important in our shared aim.

One social work staff member recounted that for her:

*‘Graduating and practicing in social work in WA in the 1980s, I quickly learned that my most disadvantaged and interesting clients were Indigenous. Unfortunately, despite the best social work preparation at the time, I felt an enormous gap in my knowledge and skills in working with Aboriginals, something seemingly little recognised by my colleagues at the time. This perception was reinforced in the early 2000s, when I was working closely with the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation standards, where, again, there was little mention of indigenous practice. Subsequent to the 1980s, I had the opportunity of living and working in a range of former English-speaking colonial societies and was able to notice some of the similarities and differences between them in terms of Indigenous disadvantage, colonial oppression and recognition of culture as the missing link in understanding, respecting and working with Aboriginal clients and communities. Living in New Zealand in particular demonstrated how it could and should be done better. This again reinforced my view that Australia ranked very poorly in this area, had definitely not ‘got it right’ and that the society and social work in particular had an enormous amount of ground to make up in terms of both recognition of the unique position of our first peoples in Australian society and repairing the damage inflicted by our ignorance and oppression since colonization’. (SW staff member 5)*

At about the same time students expressed wanting more content in the course, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), now known as the Office for Learning and Teaching, funded a two-year project which

supported the 2012 Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards' (ASWEAS) inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing as one of four essential core curriculum areas within accredited Social Work programs across Australia, alongside Mental Health, Child Wellbeing and Protection and Cross-cultural knowledge. What resulted was the *Getting it Right Teaching and Learning Framework* (The Framework) as an "evidence-informed road map for the development and



Core SW staff group white-boarding key concepts relevant in our aim to 'Indigenise the SW curriculum' and 'embed' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing (2, October 2014).

delivery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing in Australian social work curricula" (2014:5). A Round Table discussion in late-2013 presented this work to the Social Work Department at Curtin University. This framework provided a guide to progress our work of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing within the SW curriculum at Curtin: namely by directing a need to form partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and develop a process suited to the local context.

While acknowledging these two events (student survey and the Getting it Right Roundtable) were catalysts for change, we recognised much of the 'good practice' already occurring in units across the course, yet staff unanimously agreed that without Aboriginal and Torres Strait staff members and partners involved in curriculum development, design and governance much of the delivered curriculum would continue to occur within a colonial system reinforcing dominant ways of knowing, doing and being. That is, much of the teachings in social work "is 'very white'" (Walter et al., 2013:230). Our aim of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies and ontologies needed for us to put aside, and challenge, existing ways of working within a tertiary environment. Further, we became aware what was required was also a process for our selves of unlearning and relearning.

One of our earliest discussions was captured on a white board (shown below) when a core group of social work staff met to consider our next steps. Initial questions posed included, 'what do we mean by 'Indigenising the social work curriculum', and what is meant by 'embedding'?' The key concepts, captured here, illustrate our responses to these broad questions. We agreed that for us to continue we needed a process of engagement with local Aboriginal representatives and turned to those known to us. Dr Michael Wright, a local Nyoongar man and well-respected social worker with understanding of the tertiary system, was known to us all and was considered someone with whom to begin dialogue in guiding us in our aims.

One staff member said of our initial meetings:

*I came along to the original meeting of staff members called together to further explore the process of further integrating Aboriginal experiences (history with welfare services?) ways of knowing and doing into the Social Work curriculum. My perception at that time was that it would be pretty straightforward – we would map the gaps and fill them – simple! I felt a bit of consternation during the meeting when I realised that it was a much more complex process than this and that we would do something a lot more involved and inclusive and somewhat removed from my usual linear abstract Western thinking about how things get done (social work staff member 1).*

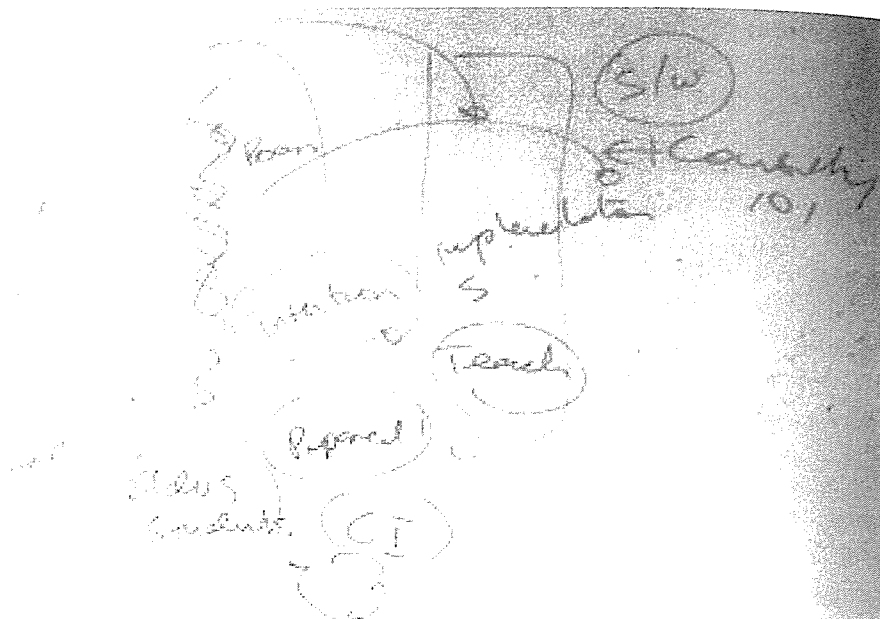
As evident in this reflection, preliminary meetings were challenging not least because our endpoint was unclear but our processes unknown. We knew a different process was required but did not know what that was. With all the questions raised we thought seeking the advice from Michael would assist us to progress in some way towards our aims. This initial meeting with Michael would be the beginning of a highly rewarding yet deeply challenging journey that has each of us reflecting on a range of profound personal and professional learnings. At the first meeting between a SW staff member and Michael, he spoke of a similar process that he and his team from the Looking Forward Aboriginal Mental Health Project (2011-2015) were stepping through with mental health professionals. It was at this juncture that our work together started an engagement process which has grown in strength and continues today.

## "Think" - Connecting with the Looking Forward Project

First a little context of the Looking Forward Project (LFP) is needed. The LFP is an engagement process through which Nyoongar Elders meet with senior service staff to talk about their experiences of supporting family members who navigate the mental health and drug and alcohol service sector in order to find ways to meet their caregiving needs. Secondly, it provides some cultural knowledge (through storytelling) that demonstrates different ways of working necessary for services to respond more effectively in meeting the needs of Aboriginal clients and

their families seeking support. This form of direct engagement leaves little room for misinterpretation, but asks a lot from service staff, in particular, that they be open to the stories of the Elders and respectful of their lived experiences and of their role as Elders in the community. In sharing their stories firsthand, the Elders place great trust in service staff to learn more about Nyoongar culture and the dynamics of the community, so that they can make informed decisions about the ways in which they provide services to Aboriginal clients.

The initial meeting that occurred in October 2014 between Antonia (SW staff member) and Michael was the catalyst for the current project. The purpose of that meeting was to discuss with Michael what could be the most appropriate process for 'Indigenising' the SW curriculum at Curtin. In that meeting Michael expressed both his concerns and doubts about the overall intention and appropriateness of the initiative outlined by Antonia at the meeting. What followed was a robust discussion, discussing both the merits and the limitations in trying to 'Indigenise' the SW curriculum, with even the language of 'Indigenising' open to interrogation. The outcome from the meeting was for Antonia to investigate with the staff at the school if they were willing to try something different. Michael stressed that LFP is primarily an intervention study to change the way agencies engage with Nyoongar people and as a consequence improve the way services are delivered to them. The change factor is both systemic and multidimensional, for it works on a number of levels and its primary focus is about firstly changing belief of senior management, which is then followed by a change in their behaviour. This change occurs primarily through relationships and by intense, consistent and regular contacts between the Elders and senior management. It is through these contacts that beliefs are challenged, debated and then reoriented and what follows is a distinct and measurable change in the behaviour of the organisation in their workings with Nyoongar people. It would be this that would be expected of working with the social work staff at Curtin. The picture below is the whiteboard representation of Michael and Antonia's meeting.



White-boarding LFP aims and ways of working (9 October 2014)

Michael was describing the philosophical underpinning of the engagement process. Assumptions, both positive and negative, are the main drivers for service delivery. A popular assumption currently held by mainstream service providers, which is by the way correct, offers the proposition that Aboriginal people do not access their services because of the perceived and actual barriers as well as the lack of cultural safety. What tends not to occur is mainstream service providers interrogating why there are perceived and actual barriers and why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients feel culturally unsafe. In these *safe or contested spaces*, beliefs are challenged and debated resulting in a dramatic change in behaviour. These acts of sustained and intense engagement, between the Elders and SW staff as also seen with service providers, have resulted in organisational change, felt at both the personal and professional levels.

The outcome from this meeting was for Antonia to investigate the willingness of staff at the school to embark on this journey. Agreeing to do so, the social work staff and the LFP team, including the Elders, started the process of relationship building with the intent of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing in the social work curriculum at Curtin University.

It was important that our engagement appropriately honoured the knowledge and time given by the Elders and hence the School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work funded this first stage of engagement with The Looking Forward Project team. Payment to community members for sharing their knowledges and practices was earlier identified as an important part of bringing some parity to the process of developing partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Often, this aspect of engagement is overlooked or expected 'in kind' and, therefore, Indigenous knowledges and time continue to be undervalued and underpaid.

Of this initial engagement between TLFP team and the social work staff, one member of the LFP team said:

*As we arranged to meet with SW, my initial question related to the context, that is, how do we (i.e. LFP) prepare for engaging in this space, being quite different to the service context we had worked in previously? And, consequently, how would the engagement process work within the teaching and learning context? From our early conversations, it appeared to me that the SW staff group had already begun to ask questions about the impact of dominant Western ways of knowing and doing and that an Aboriginal worldview was required to further open up the discussions. So, I really felt we were 'on the same page' and was excited by the possibilities that lay ahead of us (LFP team member).*

This statement reflects that often social work academics are considered to "know' more intellectually than some of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people they will be working with because of their tertiary education [but that] this knowing ... is not equal or superior to lived knowledge and cultural being" (Zubrzycki, Green, Jones, Stratton, Young & Bessarab, 2014:40). This point further emphasises the importance of questioning the dominance of particular knowledges and practices and consider who are the rightful 'knowledge holders' and who decides.

The usual or Western models of engagement were set aside and staff, whose expertise in academia is usually unquestioned, found themselves as novices and learners.

*My sense is that the process of engaging in the Looking Forward project has offered a different way of being and 'doing business' for us as a group of academics. I experience the project as inviting us to step into an unknown and untested space and process. The actual process and potential outcomes are unknown and I believe, will emerge as we move forward. This is the opposite of a corporatized university environment driven by key performance indicators, procedures and bureaucratic processes (SW staff member 3).*

*Instead [of the expected lineal process] it has been a more organic process that has evolved and grown as we have progressed through many meetings with the staff, Elders and people from the Looking Forward project, as we explore together what the changes could be and work to build strong and trusting relationships with each other on which to base this work. This process has unexpectedly involved a lot of questioning of myself and the way I go about my teaching (SW staff member 1).*

Foregrounding the lived experience of the Elders is recognised by social work staff as the change needed to the normal order of teachings where content is often one guest lecture or case study rather than an undercurrent that serves to embed Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being in the curriculum. Often such teachings are underscored by anthropological and by default, Western, teachings.

### **"Act" – developing relationships**

In November 2014, the school held its first meeting with the Elders and the LFP team. We worked in small groups to share personal stories. This 'act' component of the ARL cycle presents participant reflections of these engagements. These two accounts present considerations on preparing for this first meeting, occupying this new space of engagement with Elders, from a LFP team member and social work staff perspective.

*As we prepared to facilitate the sessions with the Elders and SW staff, we asked ourselves how do we best reveal the conditions for engaging and build trust? Based on our previous experiences with service staff and their work together with Elders, I was highly aware that this is a development process, a journey that takes place every time as if for the first time and will potentially make people feel uncomfortable. It is the unknown that can unsettle people, so I felt it important that we keep the space open yet hold people together amidst this uncertainty (LFP team member).*

*Embarking on this process of 'Indigenising the SW curriculum' has been both exciting and frightening, with a range of emotions in-between. I knew the journey ahead would present unforeseen challenges, along with great reward. Not-knowing is a difficult space to occupy. It requires a 'letting go' of (control and power) much of what I know and being open to and experiencing different to what is familiar. Such a process unsettles my own knowing and actuality (SW staff member 2).*

A series of staff and Elders sessions followed the one-day workshop, beginning in early 2015. These have included sharing personal stories as was done in the small groups at the one-day workshop. This meant everyone could

hear everyone else's stories, together, with the objective of building trust within the whole group. What follows are reflections from participants.

*This is exciting, as experience tells me how wonderful are the gifts, strengths, abilities, knowledges that come into play when we step aside from our own worldview to hear and experience others'; exciting because there is often a connection, a forming of relationship which leads to new and interesting eventualities. No matter how different our worldviews, when people share from the heart (rather than head) inexplicable things emerge. As it is exciting, it is equally as frightening (SW staff member 2).*

*Through the yarning sessions, I have learned the importance of sharing my story to make connections with people and build strong relationships. This was something that initially I found difficult to do in my professional space. Sharing personal information brings about a degree of vulnerability that is not always comfortable in the work environment. As a result of this experience, I have grown closer to my work colleagues and also learned the value of sharing my personal stories and experiences with the students. In making myself vulnerable by sharing my personal stories with the students, I feel I have been able to build much stronger relationships with them and give them a sense of where I am coming from as a social worker, tutor and lecturer. I believe this sharing allows them to find their own personal connections with me as a teacher and with the learning materials, which is beneficial, as social work study is very much focused on personal relationships and understanding and use of the self (SW staff member 1).*

*The process of 'letting go' exposes me to vulnerabilities that are easy to mask by control and power; my privileged position as academic enables me to direct, assess, pass, fail, instruct, order and hide behind my professional status. To unmask my many selves and disclose elements of these, to not know, to be and to reflect in a space that is fluid, unpredictable, and undecided, is a threat to much of the order, control, structure that shapes my everyday living (SW staff member 2).*

*SW staff have shown much patience and courage to stay with this work, to begin to understand just what is taking place here. The relationships being formed have really depended on their willingness to stay with this process. So too, given I've had previous experiences in using this process, it was equally (if not more so) important for me to remain patient, confident that the trust-building and connection would occur in its own time and in its own way. This reveals to me just how profound experiential learning is, but also*

*how easily the gap between theory and experience can widen when we do not remain attentive to it. In terms of the engagement process itself, these are the very conditions for engaging! (LFP team member)*

### Again 'looking'

Since our first process of engagement, personal story telling in November, we have had regular sessions with Elders reflecting on personal stories and making connections with units taught by staff. Social work staff also meet between these gatherings to raise any feelings, concerns, learnings, expectations, frustrations and so on. Reflective meetings between staff offer a space to further explore what arises for individuals and how the group is faring overall. Likewise, Michael and Marg (LFP researcher) meet with the Elders prior to and following engagement with staff to reflect on their experiences and anything that arises. Important in this process is the regular communication between the LFP team (Michael and Marg) and social work staff (Antonia). It is necessary for one of the social work staff to facilitate meetings and 'hold gently' the many expectations and aspirations arising from these gatherings. While seemingly straightforward, the process is conflicting with many feelings, expectations and aspirations arising that require respect, patience and careful negotiation. Participants recognise there are many, and often diverse, views and feelings arising that require self and group reflection. As a group, managing these different expectations, perspectives and meanings people bring to this space is important yet who should be the driver of this process or what process to follow is not always clear. While social work staff group reflection occurs, where time permits around competing demands of teaching and research tasks, there is identification of the need for individual supervision that supports personal and professional development in this space. While supervision at this level has not been achievable, it is an identified need.

Telling about our subjects that we teach across the curriculum has been our most recent sharing. The view is that, together with the Elders, we can plan how best to make curriculum changes based on engagement with the Elders. We hope this will not only enable the Elders to better understand the curriculum, but that as a teaching group we make stronger connections across each of our teaching areas with important input from Elders to improve curriculum design and delivery that reflect Aboriginal knowing, doing and being.

### Looking back and again reflecting

Many reflections of the past ten months provide some insight into the experiences thus far and capture further participant aspirations of what is hoped will be the outcome from our future engagements.

*This process has also opened my eyes further to how Western-centric and colonialist our ways of teaching and the learning materials that we provide often are and has allowed me the added awareness to reflect on this with my students in class. I don't have a sense of what is going to happen next in the process.... Ideally, it would be good to have a chance to discuss the units I teach with them [Elders] in detail and ask for their ideas and input about the topics and teaching materials as well as suggestions for how the Nyoongar community could be further involved in the Social Work course and school as a whole (SW staff member 1).*

*I am confident that our work with the Looking Forward project will take us to the places we need to go and achieve the right 'outcomes'. I also think that the journey is as important as the endpoint (SW staff member 3).*

*Participating in the 'Looking Forward' project for me has, therefore, been a long awaited opportunity to redress the significant deficiencies in my personal and professional knowledge and skills of understanding and working with Nyoongar communities, an opportunity I feel enormously privileged to finally experience. I am looking forward to continuing the journey. (SW staff member 5)*

This completes one cycle of the Action Research Learning spiral. With no neat path easily presenting an approach, as events proceed, succeed, converge and overlap, this offers a snapshot of an overall process that identifies some of the key learnings and reflections within the Department of Social Work in partnership with the LFP team and local Elders. Specific issues of race, white privilege, significance of his/herstorical discourses, Western ideologies and discourses of power are critical to this engagement and, while not interrogated here, this work serves to better critically engage and reflect on theory and practice with a view to decolonise social work curriculum. We offer these reflections on the process following within the Department of Social Work at Curtin insight into what is possible when such partnerships are engaged towards decolonising practices in Australian schools towards better equipping staff and students to work in this space.

## Conclusion

Inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being into social work curriculum presents challenges that are both logistical in design and ideological in practice. While this presents one school's journey towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and practices, what remains is a need for critical engagement of the workings of her/historical legacies, conceptualisations of race, power and organisational resistance to change. It is to these we turn in subsequent papers.

*I don't know where we are going, but I do know that I'm in good hands and that it is the journey itself that is important to honour not the destination (SW staff member 2).*

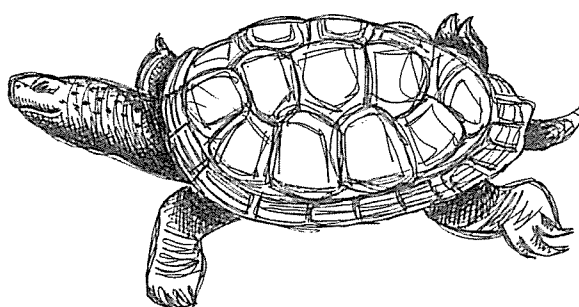
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i Aboriginal refers to local Aboriginal people of Western Australia rather than here meaning inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

ii The traditional owners of the land on which Curtin University is located

iii 'Indigenise' is a term that was useful for framing our work in the first instance as it was common language used by many SW Schools towards the aim of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and practices. Our discussions since have led us to speak of 'embedding Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing' through a process of decolonising.



Cover Artwork:  
Joanna Corbett (Elder)

