

# National Cultural Policy Submission

**Jaehyun Yun**

Submitted: As an individual

## Should international students at university learn about First Nations arts and culture in the classroom?

Dear Minister for the Arts

I am honored by the opportunity to contribute to the development of a new National Cultural Policy.

As an international student from a racially and culturally homogenous country, studying in Australia was a great opportunity for me to understand the importance of diversity and inclusivity, as well as the value of the world's oldest continuous cultures, Indigenous Australians represented by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. As a consequence of the Australian government's commitment to indigenous arts and cultural heritages such as annual investments (around \$40 million) in the Indigenous Visual Arts Industry Support (IVAIS) and Indigenous Languages and Arts (ILA) programs, the notion of First Nations arts and cultures is widely shared and promoted between generations and cultural groups.<sup>1</sup> This, as a result, help people gain a deep understanding of the artistic vibrancy and multiculturalism of Australia. From my own experience, however, I would point out that international students in the higher education sector hardly get a chance of learning about indigenous arts and cultures compared to Australian domestic students.

In 2008, after former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's formal apology (also known as National Apology) to Indigenous Australians, particularly to the Stolen Generations whose children were forcibly taken by past government policies to be raised in institutions or adopted by non-indigenous families, the Australian government developed measures to promote and educate indigenous histories, and cultures. For example, the New South Wales Education Standards Authority announced the Aboriginal studies years 7-10 to "to develop knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal identities, communities, autonomy, roles and the range of the relationship between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal people."<sup>2</sup> This educational approach at the government level certainly contributed to raising the overall awareness about Indigenous Australians. Statistics from Reconciliation Australia indicate that more than 85% of the national indigenous and non-indigenous respondents believe that

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. *CLOSING THE GAP: Prime Minister's Report*, 2018. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/reports/closing-the-gap-2018/sites/default/files/ctg-report-20183872.pdf?a=1>

<sup>2</sup> NSW Education Standards Authority. *Aboriginal Studies Stage 6 Syllabus*. Broad of Studies NSW, 2010. <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/stage-6-learning-areas/hsie/aboriginal-studies>

learning about indigenous histories and cultures is highly important for Australian students to allow them to develop respect for cultural diversity.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there is no such equivalent educational approach and policy for international students especially in the higher education sector.

In 2015, Wing Kuang, Mahia Rahman, and Vivi Sun, students from Trinity College Foundation Studies reported that of the 50 international students who responded to the survey on a level of knowledge and understanding of Australian Indigenous culture, more than 80 percent of participants showed low cultural competence for First Nations.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, some interviewees added that they would have taken an active interest in Indigenous Australians if the college had offered a relevant course. “Trinity College could have some fun events involving Aboriginal culture or make it compulsory for students to study about it”, said Linda, a TCFS student.<sup>5</sup> In the same vein, TCFS literature subject leader Michael Heald claimed that learning and engaging with indigenous culture should be compulsory for international students to become aware of what has happened and is happening in Australia because they are now a part of the country.<sup>6</sup>

Despite repeated demands from both teachers and students, education and access to knowledge and understanding of First Nations arts and culture for international students currently depend on individual institutions or even the pedagogical approach of each educator.<sup>7</sup> There are, in fact, many universities that offer a variety of Aboriginal studies in both undergraduate and graduate programmes, but they are mostly electives not compulsory units.

On the other hand, a few universities played a leading role in introducing the diversity of First Nations arts and culture to international students by providing a compulsory module. In 2015, La Trobe University instituted ‘Wominjeka La Trobe’, an introduction to Indigenous Australian history, cultures, and customs.<sup>8</sup> All commencing La Trobe students must complete this one-hour compulsory online subject. Later on, in July 2022, Monash University also announced a new compulsory module called ‘The Indigenous Australian Voices’ approved by the University Education Committee and Academic Board.<sup>9</sup> This module is about 15 minutes to complete and ungraded (thus, zero credit points and zero fees). The decision on delivering the compulsory module that contains information on

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<sup>3</sup> Reconciliation Australia. *The national curriculum – knowing the truth about Australia’s history*. 2014.

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/the-national-curriculum-knowing-the-truth-about-australias-history/>

<sup>4</sup> Trinity College Foundation Studies. *Should international students learn about Aboriginal culture in the classroom?* 2015.

<https://wordpress.meldmagazine.com.au/2015/06/international-students-learn-aboriginal-culture-classroom/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Reconciliation Australia. *The national curriculum – knowing the truth about Australia’s history*. 2014.

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/the-national-curriculum-knowing-the-truth-about-australias-history/>

<sup>8</sup> La Trobe University. Handbook *WOMINJEKA LA TROBE: INDIGENOUS CULTURAL LITERACY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION*. 2022.

<https://handbook.latrobe.edu.au/subjects/2022/abs0wom?year=2022>

<sup>9</sup> Monash University. Indigenous Australian Voices. 2022. <https://www.monash.edu/news/articles/indigenous-australian-voices>

Indigenous Australians not only allows domestic students to enhance their acquired knowledge from the primary school curriculum but also and more importantly, it gives an opportunity for overseas students to learn or at least recognise about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures and beliefs. Furthermore, these two modules are completely free and short, therefore, international students do not need to devote a great amount of time and additional fees.

As can be seen from the abovementioned cases, I would suggest that a new National Cultural Policy may pursue a similar approach to that of La Trobe and Monash University. Providing the compulsory module, especially for international students in the higher education sector will bring various positive impacts in the long term, given that the number of international students is steadily increasing across all Australian universities.<sup>10</sup> The module might be delivered in many different forms such as on-campus or off-campus, and online live class or recorded class. Universities may have a leading role in shaping how this short introductory course will be conducted. However, it must be completely free for all international students in order to lower the entry barriers to the arts and culture of Indigenous Australian.

The Australian government has successfully established and supported various policies to close a cultural gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people within a generation. However, my findings during writing the policy brief are that there is not much information and research about cultural engagement between Indigenous Australians and international students. In addition, there is no such compulsory education for international students that Australian domestic students receive. Therefore, I believe that providing the free compulsory module might be a good starting point to promote overseas students' cultural awareness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage that all Australian are truly proud of.

I welcome the opportunity to further discuss my submission and thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jaehyun Yun.

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<sup>10</sup> Australian Government. Department of Education. *International Education Data and Research*. 2022. <https://www.dese.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-monthly-summary-and-data-tables>

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