

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2025-26

A joint proposal prepared by the Wollotuka Institute, the Office of Indigenous Strategy and Leadership and the Teachers and Teaching Research Centre.

The University of Newcastle | December 2024

**TEACHERS
& TEACHING**
RESEARCH CENTRE

THE
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INSTITUTE

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE QUALITY TEACHING

Education outcomes for Indigenous students have improved only marginally despite decades of government and systemic effort and millions of dollars invested in a range of reforms. We must do better. Doing so requires fresh approaches that are backed by robust evidence of improved outcomes and are developed by, with, and alongside Indigenous leaders and communities.

The University of Newcastle's culturally responsive quality teaching program is one such evidence-based, Indigenous-led approach. It draws together key elements from the University's sector-leading Cultural Capability Framework and training package, its research and professional development on leading Aboriginal education, and Quality Teaching Rounds professional development which has been proven to improve outcomes for teachers and students in disadvantaged schools.

This culturally responsive quality teaching program:

1. Builds cultural understanding and enhances the culturally responsive practice of all staff who work with Indigenous students.
2. Enhances the quality of teaching experienced by Indigenous students.
3. Improves educational outcomes and life chances for Indigenous students and their families.



IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS THROUGH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE QUALITY TEACHING

The 2024 Closing the Gap annual report shows that just four of 17 targets are on track to be met. Of the five targets related to education, only Target 3 - pre-school enrolment - is on track. While there is some progress in Target 5 - Year 12 attainment, Target 6 - tertiary qualifications, and Target 7 - engagement in employment, education or training, none of these targets are on track to be met. Alarmingly, Target 4 relating to the percentage of Indigenous children commencing school developmentally on track is going backwards. These trends cannot be allowed to persist.

For too long, Indigenous Australians have been excluded from discussions and decisions about the policies and programs implemented to address inequities in our education systems. We have failed to listen to the desires of Indigenous people for what education should be, and do, for their communities.

In its 2024 Closing the Gap annual report, the Productivity Commission identified the importance of culturally responsive practice and the valuing of cultural knowledge and experience in our education system.



“Throughout its review of the National School Reform Agreement (2022), the Productivity Commission heard from organisations, children and young people about the barriers faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These barriers included that schools are not always culturally safe spaces, that the curriculum does not reflect aspects of learning valued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and that non-Indigenous teachers and school leaders may have a limited understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultures.



A culturally responsive approach to the curriculum and pedagogies enables students to see their identities, cultures and knowledge reflected in what and how they learn. It supports a student’s perception of their potential and supports educational outcomes.”

We need to shift the power dynamics in education and enhance the agency of Indigenous people to shape education practices. We need to consult with Indigenous people on what matters in education for their children and what success looks like. And we need to implement policies and practical strategies that are Indigenous led and owned.

The University of Newcastle’s culturally responsive quality teaching program offers a co-designed, Indigenous-led, evidence-based approach to delivering practical outcomes for Indigenous students. The program is ready to be implemented by the Australian Government nationally.

This program draws together the University's sector-leading Cultural Capability Framework and training package, its research and professional development on leading Aboriginal education, and the award-winning Quality Teaching Rounds program.

Teachers and school leaders in all schools, and particularly those with a high proportion of Indigenous student enrolments, should be supported to undertake professional development that builds their cultural understanding, their capacity to deliver quality teaching in a way that respects and values cultural knowledge, and their capacity to engage in culturally responsive practice.

The program is designed as a whole-school initiative with University of Newcastle academics, Indigenous leaders, and experienced teachers employed by the University collaborating with school executives and local community organisations to co-design the implementation of four modules:

1. Cultural Capability Framework and training
2. Quality Teaching Rounds
3. Leading Aboriginal Education
4. On Country experience

Cultural Capability Framework and training

Foundational cultural knowledge is essential for teachers and school leaders to understand the unique position and historical experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the students they work with. In 2020, the University of Newcastle unveiled its sector-leading Cultural Capability Framework. The Framework is made up of four domains of cultural capability - Knowing, Doing, Being, and Belonging - and outlines indicators on which to base practical strategies to move along a continuum from Cultural Awareness to Cultural Understanding, Cultural Safety, and finally Cultural Responsiveness. The Cultural Capability Framework establishes a roadmap for teachers to become more culturally capable and for schools to become more culturally responsive environments.

The Framework is supported by an inclusive training package that aims to build culturally capable individuals within a culturally responsive environment. The training package includes a series of self-paced online modules and an in-person workshop. The workshop is designed to build cultural capability, an understanding of Indigenous culture, history and contemporary issues, and guide teachers on how to lead and collaborate to achieve reconciliation. The training package is complemented by the On Country experience (module four).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has been commissioned by the Australian Government to develop and roll-out a culturally responsiveness tool. In our consultations with AITSL on this program, we identified both alignment and significant differences in our approaches. Namely, AITSL has designed a highly scalable digital tool for individual teachers' self-reflection, where our program is aimed at deep, school-level transformation into culturally responsive environments,

specifically in schools with a high proportion of Indigenous students. Deep engagement with this Framework and training builds teachers' cultural capability and enhances the learning of Indigenous students.

Quality Teaching Rounds

For the past decade, the University of Newcastle has tested and refined the Quality Teaching Rounds approach to teacher professional development. A recent series of randomised controlled trials demonstrated that teacher participation in just four days of Quality Teaching Rounds improved the quality of teaching, teacher morale and teacher efficacy. Most importantly, teacher participation in Quality Teaching Rounds improved student academic achievement in mathematics and reading by 25-30 per cent, with greater effects experienced by students in disadvantaged schools.

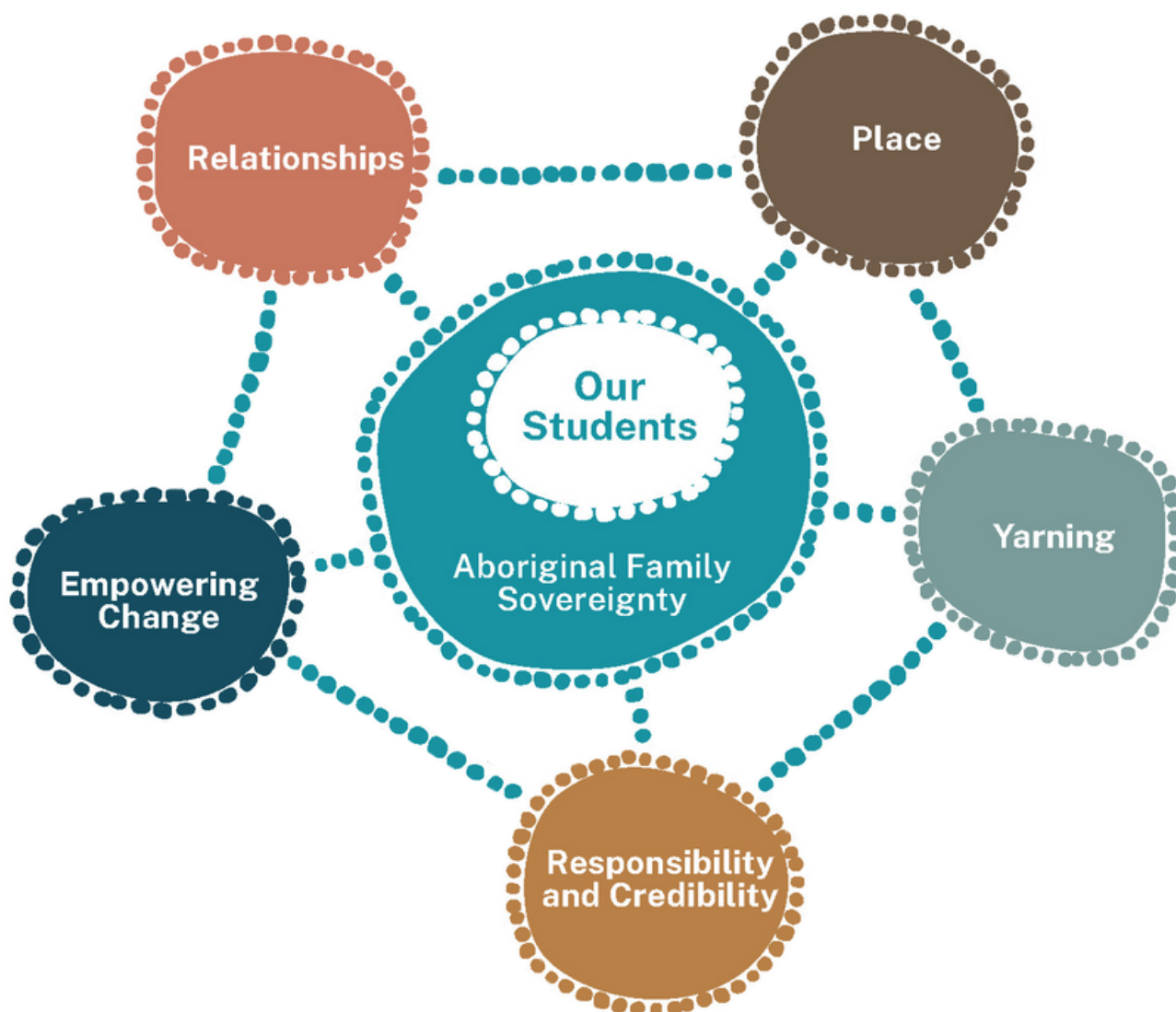
Quality Teaching Rounds is currently the subject of a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan initiative aimed at improving the induction and retention of early career teachers, addressing teacher shortages, and lifting outcomes for students. Results from the first year of the initiative have shown teachers participating in Quality Teaching Rounds have reduced burnout and improved their teaching efficacy and confidence in classroom practice and behaviour management strategies.

The QT Model is at the centre of Quality Teaching Rounds and is based on three dimensions of good teaching: Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance. The dimension of Significance draws teachers' attention to the importance of making learning significant by, for example, hearing local stories, genuinely valuing non-dominant cultural knowledge, and connecting school learning to the world beyond the classroom, including connecting to place. Linking Quality Teaching Rounds with greater cultural understanding and responsiveness of teachers and school leaders amplifies the impact of the program for Indigenous students and helps to narrow achievement gaps.

Leading Aboriginal Education

Since 2020, the University of Newcastle has collaborated with the University of Wollongong and the NSW School Leadership Institute in the development and delivery of a Middle Leadership Development Program. This program provides targeted, evidence-informed professional learning for school middle leaders. The University of Newcastle has specifically developed the theme on Leading Aboriginal Education.

Leading Aboriginal Education is for teachers, assistant principals, deputy principals, and principals. This module delivers practical knowledge to support teachers and school leaders in creating a sense of belonging within their school community and provides tailored support and mentoring for Indigenous school leaders and all leaders who work with Indigenous communities. This component of the program also builds understanding and applies the principles of the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework (depicted below) to help teachers and school leaders to engage meaningfully with Indigenous students and families to ensure the practical application of the QT Model is culturally responsive.



Guiding principles of *Re-imagining Evaluation: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework*,
NSW Department of Education 2023

On Country experience

The On Country experience provides teachers and school leaders an opportunity to engage directly with local Aboriginal people and elders to learn about their Country, culture, geography and experiences. This experience is co-designed with local Indigenous groups, the University and schools leaders or utilises local programs where they already exist (such as the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's [Connecting to Country programme](#)).

CASE STUDY: TRANSFORMING OUTCOMES AT CESSNOCK HIGH SCHOOL

Cessnock High School is one of the most disadvantaged schools in NSW. Almost 25 per cent of its students identify as Indigenous and more than 70 per cent of families are positioned in the bottom quartile for socio-economic advantage. Cessnock High faced numerous challenges, including low engagement, poor academic performance, and behavioural issues.

In 2020, the University of Newcastle's Teachers and Teaching Research Centre began a partnership with the school after Cessnock High principal, Peter Riley, contacted Dr Drew Miller for support in transforming the school's teaching and learning culture.

University of Newcastle academics and Cessnock High leaders co-designed a four-year Quality Teaching Action Plan centred on the QT Model, Quality Teaching Rounds and other teacher capacity building activities.

The results achieved at Cessnock High School have been remarkable. In 2023, Cessnock High ranked first in the Hunter region and 11th among NSW public schools for improvement in Year 7-9 NAPLAN results. Cessnock students' HSC results also improved by more than 50 per cent in 2022 and 2023, including achieving their first ever Band 6 result.

Student attendance and engagement grew by seven per cent - triple the average across the state. Positive behaviour referrals were up 130 per cent in 2023 while negative behaviours significantly decreased. Despite major teacher shortages at the school and across the country, teacher survey responses showed crucial improvements in their levels of morale and efficacy, school belonging, and perceptions of their leadership team. The school has also built stronger ties with its community and has changed the sentiment about Cessnock High more broadly.

This partnership has been recognised nationally, winning the Australian Financial Review's Higher Education Award for Community Engagement, the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia Award for Research Excellence, and the Teacher Magazine Leadership Award for Driving School Improvement.



L - R: Peter Riley, Kelsey Kisina and Dr Drew Miller

The culturally responsive quality teaching program is based on the best available evidence on improving educational outcomes and has been developed alongside Indigenous leaders and communities. Given the evidence, cultural responsiveness, and our existing track record of professional development delivery, a national roll-out of this program will have a rapid positive impact on Indigenous student outcomes.

The implementation the culturally responsive quality teaching program would lift learning outcomes, boost engagement in schooling, and support Indigenous students to catch up on learning compared to progress achieved by all Australian students. This would reduce the gap that stems from Indigenous students beginning school developmentally behind their non-Indigenous peers. Enhancing educational achievement will have flow-on effects for achieving the Government's goals to improve Year 12 attainment and participation in Tertiary and Higher Education.



ABOUT US

The University of Newcastle has a long and proud history as an innovator in educational outcomes and employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We are the sector leader of Indigenous student enrolments and employment of Indigenous staff. We have graduated more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers than any other university and continue to work on embedding Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies into our curriculums.

This submission has been prepared by the University's Wollotuka Institute, Office of Indigenous, Strategy and Leadership (OISL) and Teachers and Teaching Research Centre (TTRC).

Nathan Towney is Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous, Strategy and Leadership, Head of the Wollotuka Institute, and a former high school principal. [The OISL](#) works closely with [The Wollotuka Institute](#) to provide a culturally responsive environment in which Indigenous staff, students, researchers, and community are welcomed and supported. The OISL developed the University's [Cultural Capability Framework](#) and partnered with the NSW Department of Education in developing the [Re-imagining Evaluation Framework](#) which centres Aboriginal students, their families, and their communities at the heart of education evaluation processes.

[The TTRC](#) is led by Laureate Professor Jenny Gore AM and sits within the University's School of Education. The TTRC is an Australian leader in high-quality, impactful educational research on quality teaching, teacher professional development, school change, leadership, student aspirations, equity, initial teacher education, and STEM education. The TTRC recently completed the five-year [Building Capacity for Quality Teaching in Australian Schools](#) project which tested and scaled the Quality Teaching Rounds program through a series of randomised controlled trials. This research comprehensively demonstrated the impact of Quality Teaching Rounds on teacher and student outcomes. The TTRC is currently receiving Australian Government funding for the expansion of Quality Teaching Rounds as part of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and is partnering with the NSW Department of Education and the Paul Ramsay Foundation to support 25 highly disadvantaged government schools improve educational outcomes.

CULTURAL GOVERNANCE

The University of Newcastle is committed to ensuring that projects involving First Nations communities are ethical and respectful and see First Nations people receive due recognition, respect, and entitlements.

Investment by the Australian Government in this program would be managed and overseen by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and professionals. Importantly it would draw on and be guided by existing cultural governance bodies and frameworks including:

- The University of Newcastle's Board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research (BATSIER) which is an advisory committee of the Vice-Chancellor, responsible for providing advice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training policy and implementation, and ensuring policies meet the needs identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The Board draws on the Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) Protocol which sets out guidelines for the conduct of academic activity and includes a community guide to ensure intellectual and cultural property is protected.
- The Wollotuka Institute's Nguraki council provides guidance and advice on cultural standards and programs to ensure they are inclusive and are within cultural protocols. Nguraki is an Awabakal word meaning Elder, Wise Person, Cultural Mentor. Our Nguraki play a pivotal role in the governance structures and leadership within Wollotuka and the broader Indigenous community with the University as our primary advisors in maintaining the fabrics of our 'ways of doing'. Our Nguraki are our knowledge holders of certain aspects of our culture. It is a responsibility of the Nguraki to share this knowledge with our students, staff and broader community.
- The NSW (or equivalent) Aboriginal Education Consultative Group which provides advice on all matters relevant to education and training with the mandate to help facilitate engagement with local communities and On-Country experiences.

Critically, implementation of the culturally responsive quality teaching program will also be guided by the principles of the Re-imagining Evaluation: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework to ensure it connects with and addresses the needs of local Indigenous communities. Our team will engage members of the local Indigenous community (Relationships, Yarning) to understand the culturally significant places and stories of each Country (Place) on which we deliver the program. Doing so will both enhance the credibility of the program and empower the community by working with and alongside Indigenous families and leaders.

CAPACITY TO DELIVER

This package of training and professional development will be delivered by the OISL and the TTRC. Since 2021, the OISL has delivered Cultural Capability training to more than 3,000 University of Newcastle staff, students, and wider community members. In October 2020, the TTRC launched its non-profit social enterprise, the QT Academy, which has since delivered Quality Teaching Rounds to more than 3,000 teachers. The QT Academy employs experienced teachers and school leaders to ensure the relevance and applicability of its offerings. With the institutional backing of the University, we have the capacity to deliver at scale the improved outcomes for Indigenous students sought by the Australian Government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend a four-year staged roll-out of the program.

Year 1

Collaborate with schools and community leaders to co-design the implementation and evaluation of the culturally responsive quality teaching program at 10 schools that have Indigenous enrolments greater than 10% in the Greater Hunter region.

This phase provides the opportunity for developing learnings and ensuring Indigenous voices and perspectives are intrinsic to the program and that the activities are fit-for-purpose with teachers and school leaders.

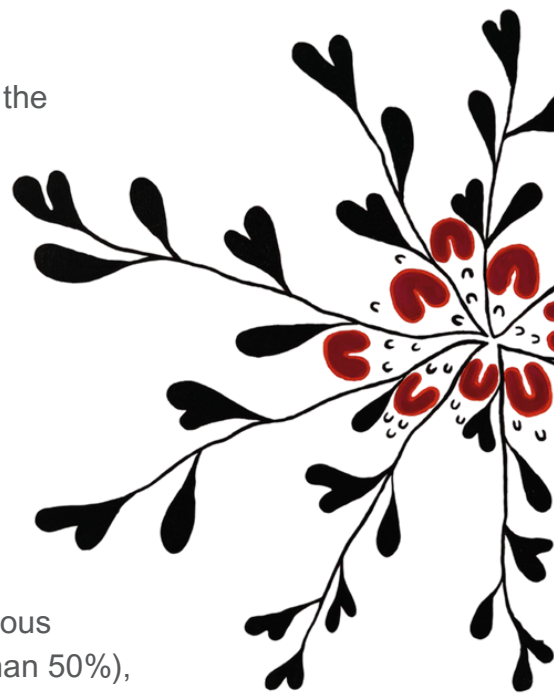
Years 2 - 4

Scale the program nationally to 100 schools that have Indigenous enrolments greater than 10% (with a focus on those greater than 50%), with ongoing community consultation, evaluation, and refinement.

Recognising that the local context needs to be considered, the program would continue to be co-developed, ensuring the inclusion of the local Indigenous community in the program.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

\$2.4M per year over four years. When fully scaled this equates to an investment of only \$24,000 per school per year.



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ARTWORK

Indigenous Education Strategy (2020) Artist: Jasmine Craciun (Bachelor of Visual Communication 2018) Alumna Jasmine Miikika Craciun is a proud Barkindji, Malyangapa designer and artist with a passion for telling the stories of, and communicating to, diverse groups of people.

Artwork story: The symbol for people can be seen gathered within the growing vines. The brightly coloured people represent the older Aboriginal students at the University expanding their knowledge in their current fields while the smaller people symbols next to them are the new students just beginning their journey but with the older students as exciting role models. The leaves/ vines represent the growing of cultural knowledge breaking through barriers (the black and white lines) to better educate our local community. The colours within the black and white lines represent the success of the growing vines - it reflects a change in education, where Indigenous people, knowledge and culture is recognised and valued. The connected circles between the two vines represent the growing of Aboriginal-led research - connecting students across fields and educating our community.

