

SUBMISSION FORM

Indigenous cultural competency in the Australian teaching workforce

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1. Submission details

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Organisation	Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA)		
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2. Your response

Please keep your word count to less than 3,000 words.

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to AITSL's important work in developing the Indigenous cultural competency of the Australian teaching workforce.

APTA is a national body which represents the interests of joint councils for professional teaching associations (PTAs) in seven Australian states and territories. Not only is APTA well placed to contribute to discussions relating to teaching professional learning (the primary focus of PTAs) we do so with the ability to represent and reflect the views of teachers across the diversity of education contexts, urban, regional and remote. In addition, we are also able to promote issues of national importance to our members, and through them to PTAs across the nation. In addition to departments of education and curriculum and assessment authorities, PTAs play a very significant role in providing teacher professional learning.

We are not an authority on evidence-based approaches to improving Indigenous cultural competence and note that AITSL has already successfully engaged with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and groups who can contribute to the higher-level concepts associated with this important work. However, many PTAs in Australia have developed their own relationships with Indigenous individuals and groups to support their own members, and these PTAs are already engaged in the work of supporting teachers and educators to feel more confident in selecting resources and strategies to improve the cultural safety of their classrooms and to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their teaching, learning and assessment programming. We note that there is still much to do in this space.

PTAs are therefore a valuable means by which Indigenous Cultural Competence can be achieved, and APTA - as the peak body for PTAs across Australia - can play a key role in facilitating communication between stakeholders and to support our members to provide appropriate, research-based support to PTAs across the country. This submission will comment on some of the ways in which APTA can be involved in this work into the future.

We have prepared our submission in line with the Areas for Discussion in the AITSL discussion paper.

1. What does a culturally competent teaching workforce (including teachers, school leaders, and schools) look like?

Professional learning

The discussion paper makes clear the need for relevant professional development to allow teachers and educators to develop their cultural competence.

PTAs can supplement the important work of education departments and curriculum authorities in providing relevant and specific professional learning. In many ways, PTAs can be more responsive to teacher needs because they are led by teachers for teachers. The members of various boards and planning committees of PTAs around Australia are frequently classroom-based teachers who directly understand the needs of classroom practitioners and are responsive to those needs.

APTA strongly agrees with the discussion paper's focus on exposure to culturally competent pedagogies and the need for experiential learning opportunities for teachers. We know that professional learning provided by PTAs is a key way of achieving this.

Cross-contextual learning

As an overarching network of PTAs, APTA is well-placed to connect high quality professional learning in one jurisdiction with jurisdictions where similar professional learning may not be occurring. For instance, in 2017 the number of students in Northern Territory schools was 40.12% (ABS, 2017) thus NT teachers are very frequently engaged in professional learning regarding the teaching and learning of Indigenous students. The knowledge and expertise of PTAs based in the NT can be used to support educators in parts of Australia where the percentage of Indigenous students is much lower. Almost a third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are learning in NSW schools, but they are only 5.8% of the total cohort. It is clear that national cooperation on professional learning - as can occur through PTAs - will support the development cultural safety across Australian classrooms.

Examples of current professional learning at a national level

This can most easily be achieved by national conferences run by national PTAs, which often include sessions and workshops relevant to cultural competence. There are many examples, but five recent cases include:

- A session on the need to consider the diversity of experiences when teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, as delivered at the History Teachers Association of Australia (HTAA) conference in 2019 by Steve Hawkins from the Geography & History Teachers Association of the NT (GHTANT)
- A workshop on embracing project-based learning and assessment for learning strategies in Geography to celebrate NAIDOC week, as presented at the 2017 Australian Geography Teachers Association (AGTA) conference by Susan Caldis from the Geography Teachers Association NSW (GTANSW)
- A number of sessions on teaching Indigenous languages, using Indigenous languages in schools, and specific sessions on languages in remote and regional Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland, at the 2019 Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations (AFMLTA) conference
- Pre- and post-conference tours to Kakadu and Nitmiluk National Parks to allow visiting teachers to understand Indigenous

- perspectives in science at the 2019 Australian Science Teachers Association (ASTA) conference in Darwin
- Workshops on decolonising the curriculum, Indigenous poetry, teaching culturally sensitive texts, Indigenous perspectives in English texts at the national online 2020 Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) and Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA) conference.

The final example is indicative of the challenge - and opportunity - provided to PTAs due to COVID-19. The 2020 AATE/ALEA conference had to occur online, but this demonstrates how an increase in online professional learning is available to teachers wherever they may be in Australia. Whereas an event may only have been available to teachers in a particular geographic location, far greater opportunities for reach across Australia now exist. This provides an opportunity for teachers and educators from diverse educational contexts to discuss their experiences and share resources and examples of successful classroom activities.

Other relevant issues

The discussion paper notes a number of other matters relevant to a culturally competent workforce where PTAs can play a valuable role:

- As a peak body, APTA can support the use of consistent messaging and definitions regarding cultural competence
- Professional learning opportunities provided by PTAs play a valuable role in helping teachers to challenge their own behaviours and to reflect on their current practice, while simultaneously allowing them to learn strategies for improvement.
- Providing workshops and resources by experts in their fields to ensure that professional learning is evidence and strengths-based
- National professional learning events such as national conferences support consistent messaging across jurisdictions and support for continuous learning
- Many PTAs provide mentoring and support for beginning educators. One example is the Early Career Teacher committee run by APTA member, the Professional Teachers Association of the NT. These can provide support to new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators to better enhance the confidence and competence of Indigenous educators.
- Professional learning events can be run by and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups to better connect these communities with teachers and schools. One example occurred at the 2019 Festival of Teaching run by APTA member, the Professional Teachers Association of the NT (PTANT). Yolngu teachers from Yirrkala, Yalmay Yalmay and Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr Stubbs (pictured below) spoke to non-Indigenous teachers on keeping Indigenous languages and cultures strong.



- PTAs can organise events with local Indigenous groups and people on behalf of a broad range of teachers and schools, which can prevent those groups and individuals being overwhelmed with requests and can thus streamline communication and engagement.

2. What does a teacher/school leader need to be culturally competent? What will it take?

Leadership

We note that the discussion paper frequently references the need for effective leadership in developing a culturally competent workforce. While leadership is often associated with school or departmental leaders, APTA and the joint councils operating at state and territory levels also provide high-level leadership, particularly regarding professional learning. PTAs can - and already do - play a role in leading change in this space.

Fear and apprehension

When discussing the factors impacting on teacher cultural competence, APTA noted similar issues and concerns of teachers, specifically regarding the impact that fear and apprehension can play for teachers who want to do the right thing but fear being incorrect or causing offence. APTA welcomes the approach of encouraging teachers to “be brave”.

Professional learning

Professional learning is necessary to address teacher concerns, and PTAs can play a role in this. As events are run by teachers for teachers, the environment in which professional learning occurs can be less intimidating for participants, and can provide safer spaces for challenging conversations about race and culture. As we have noted, professional learning run by PTAs provides an



opportunity for teachers working in contexts with high Indigenous student populations to share their knowledge and understanding with those who do not.

We will discuss the challenges associated with supporting teachers to develop their cultural competence later on, but we would like to reiterate that professional learning is already occurring, and some of this already aligns to cultural competence. The mechanisms for supporting teachers already exist and have proven success in improving teacher confidence and competence. We note you have asked for examples, and we have provided some earlier - these are just some of many. We would be happy to share additional examples if it would be helpful.

3. What does cultural safety look like in schools?

Again, APTA acknowledges that there are other individuals and groups who are better placed to say what cultural safety could and should look like. But as cultural safety requires cultural competence, the role that PTAs can play in supporting a culturally competent workforce should be given consideration.

We note that we are one of many tools by which teachers can improve their cultural competence, and one of the many ways by which classroom teachers can connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, as we have previously noted, PTAs can play a very valuable role in connecting teachers in contexts with high Indigenous student populations (such as the Northern Territory) with those with comparatively fewer (such as the ACT). The cross-contextual opportunities of PTAs certainly supplement the professional learning that occurs at a local or jurisdictional level.

4. What might be some of the challenges or barriers we face in developing a culturally competent teaching workforce?

Challenges

APTA agrees with the challenges noted in the discussion paper, particularly the issues of time to plan, fear of offending, lack of knowledge, competing priorities, resistance from other staff. Although the discussion paper notes that resistance or apathy can occur in schools with low Indigenous populations, APTA notes that this resistance also occurs in schools with higher Indigenous populations. While contexts with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population have more ready access to relevant professional learning, it would be wrong to assume that resistance to change is not equally significant in these contexts. Culturally unsafe classrooms exist everywhere.

Appropriateness of resources

Regarding teacher concern on the appropriateness of resources, PTAs already provide a filter through which teachers access relevant and appropriate resources. While these frequently relate to content knowledge and pedagogy, PTAs can also support teachers in identifying appropriate resources on cultural safety and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. We note that not all PTAs can currently do this, but they are in a good position to begin to do so. As stated, a relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with a PTA is easier to manage than between an organisation and dozens of individual schools or educators. Again, PTAs working in contexts like the NT are going to be in a stronger position to manage this, and the networks that exist through national associations and APTA can help to facilitate this more broadly.

Building momentum

As noted, professional learning already occurs and many teachers value the opportunities provided by PTAs and others. While some teachers and school leaders may be resistant to change, interested and motivated teachers are able to learn, engage and network through PTA events, and this initial interest can snowball into broader change at school and systemic levels, as other teachers can see the benefits of cultural safety for their students. Engaging with those teachers who are already passionate about their own practice is a good starting point, and PTAs can facilitate this.

Other considerations - Curriculum and content

Most PTAs are curriculum-focused, thus they can be a useful tool for connecting strategies for promoting cultural safety into teaching and learning programs in particular curriculum areas.

As we all know, the Australian Curriculum is frequently described as “crowded” so the ability for subject teachers to embed cultural safety into their programs is important. Subject-specific PTAs are well-placed to manage this, so that, for example, science teachers feel more confident in selecting and using appropriate resources to build a culturally safe classroom which effectively embeds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the teaching of science.

In conclusion

Professional Teaching Associations are not perfect, but they do frequently provide a service equal to (or greater than) official channels in providing professional learning, networking and mentoring to teachers. APTA and our members are well-placed to support PTAs in developing their own cultural competence and to allow for consistent definitions, messages and approaches to be disseminated across the country. The ability of PTAs to supplement professional learning provided by jurisdictions should be given careful consideration in future strategies to increase teacher cultural competence.

Thank you once again for your willingness to engage with stakeholders around Australia. We hope to work with you in the future on these and other matters of interest to teachers.

