

FOSTERING GENUINE INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT: MOVING BEYOND THE RHETORIC

This document consolidates key messages from a half-day forum that was held at The University of Melbourne on 1 May 2023, and which asked, “How can we advance intercultural engagement through the curriculum and students’ experience at university?” The forum included both a focus on Indigenising the curriculum and a broader discussion on fostering meaningful interactions among diverse students, in the classroom and beyond. For more detailed information about the forum sessions and speakers, see page 2.

One of the forum aims was to discuss what is needed to make greater progress with intercultural engagement and ensure that all students have the kinds of intercultural experiences that would lead to our University’s desired graduate outcomes. Below are the consolidated suggestions that emerged as key themes throughout the forum.

5 Actions for Deeper Intercultural Engagement at University

The following five key actions emerged as priorities for making the university one in which genuine intercultural engagement is fostered and supported for all students.

- 1. Investigate how we define and imagine ‘intercultural engagement’.**
Consider the level of criticality and/or simplicity in the language used in university strategy and policy. Use more concrete language to help define actionable outcomes. Ask what success would look like. Importantly, ask what a successful outcome would look like for various student groups, including Indigenous students.
- 2. Support and initiate the difficult conversations that need to be had among staff and students.**
For example, talk with staff and students about racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and the history of prejudice in Australia. This will also serve as a starting point for creating environments where it is okay to make mistakes and learn from difference.
- 3. Create more opportunities (and make opportunities more comfortable) for engaging in difficult conversations and intercultural communication.**
Ensure that such opportunities take place both inside and outside the classroom. Importantly, create culturally comfortable opportunities for interaction and establish a culture where mistakes are welcomed as learning opportunities, for both students and staff.
- 4. Prioritise intercultural engagement within university structures.**
Recognise intercultural engagement activities and efforts in workload modules and prioritise space for such efforts. Include it as a formal component of progress reviews and promotion processes for staff.
- 5. Improve the communication competences of all staff and students at multiple levels of university practices.**
Create training modules, guidelines, and policies that apply to students and staff. Ensure that learning experiences are designed in ways that all students expect to/need to engage in such a way on a regular basis, allowing students to practice and build communication skills, and to reduce risk.

Summary of Forum Sessions

The program included opening remarks by Professor Michael Wesley (Deputy Vice-Chancellor International, The University of Melbourne) and a keynote from A/Prof Kevin Lowe (Indigenous leader and Scientia Indigenous Research Fellow, The University of New South Wales). The second half of the Forum comprised a panel discussion that responded to the prompt, “What needs to change in order for genuine intercultural engagement to be a characteristic of every student’s university experience?”, followed by roundtable discussions with attendees that focused on consolidating (a) what the university would look like in 40 years if it were to have genuine intercultural engagement and (b) what two or three steps should be prioritised in order to achieve that goal. The following sections provide the consolidated messages from each of the above sessions.

Opening Remarks

In his opening remarks, Prof Michael Wesley emphasised the importance of creating a learning environment in which students are not only comfortable with intercultural engagement but are also eager to seek out such engagement at university. Key suggestions included the following:

- Provide opportunities for students to practice being uncomfortable in a safe, supported learning environment.
- Find more culturally accessible ways for interpersonal interactions to occur.
- Include culturally diverse material and viewpoints through educational resources and class materials.
- Improve all students’ intercultural communication skills.

Keynote

A/Prof Kevin Lowe’s keynote address discussed the concept of Indigenising curricula, including what it means and the challenges that need to be understood before we can have intercultural dialogue—especially when the dialogue is embedded in disciplines that are antagonistic to Indigenous knowledges and experiences.

One overarching theme within the keynote was the need for more critical investigation of our concepts, strategies, and practices. For example, A/Prof Lowe emphasised the importance of investigating the language used in university strategies and whether it reflects outdated concepts of ‘equality’ rather than (in increasing order of complexity) equity, social justice, or genuine inclusive excellence. He suggested that current language highlights that we are still at the beginning stages of this important discussion.

Similarly, he suggested that we investigate what we mean by ‘Indigenising the curriculum’. A/Prof Lowe emphasised that including a few Indigenous examples does not suffice at portraying the truth and history of Indigenous peoples and that it puts too much responsibility on that small bit of Indigenous content to represent all Indigenous knowledge. Relatedly, content and curriculum, he mentioned, cannot be separated from attached pedagogies and teaching practices; it therefore does not work to sprinkle in some Indigenous examples without transforming the pedagogical approach as well. Otherwise, Indigenising the curriculum is not taking place.

An existing challenge is the extent to which Indigenous students feel included in their university experience. A/Prof Lowe mentioned that students’ experiences often do not reflect their own aspirations and motivations for attending university, which, for many remote Aboriginal students, relate to language, culture, and land—elements of identity rather than opportunity.

The keynote prompted us to reconsider what we are trying to achieve, to critically investigate the efficacy of our practices, and to aim for more sustainable, comprehensive approaches that include ‘reciprocity, relevance, responsibility, and respect’. Main suggestions included the following:

- Think more critically and concretely about what we mean by ‘inclusion’.
- Consider curriculum as the centre of the learning experience and as the aspect that determines pedagogy and practice.

- Aim for genuine inclusive excellence rather than equality, equity, or social justice.
- Reconsider what we mean by ‘Indigenising the curriculum’ and approach it as something more comprehensive than the inclusion of some Indigenous examples or perspectives.
- Engage with families and communities.

Panel

The panel comprised five panellists (two of whom are students) from across different disciplines of the university, including Arts, Business and Economics, Engineering and IT, and Science. It was chaired by Dr Samantha Marangell, who asked the panellists “What needs to change in order for genuine intercultural engagement to be a characteristic of every student’s university experience?”

The key messages that arose from the panel:

- Create environments where students feel safe making mistakes and having difficult conversations.
- Genuine intercultural engagement needs to take place at multiple levels and in multiple contexts, including in classroom conversations, between classes, online, and in extracurricular opportunities.
- Teach students how to have (and provide opportunities to practice having) difficult intercultural conversations and interactions.
- Model inclusive interaction, e.g., through representation of diverse staff and diverse leadership, by staff engaging with each other, by staff modelling difficult conversations.
- Both ground-up and top-down strategies matter, including the importance of the University’s messaging, guidelines, and training for staff.
- Seek out valuable information about students’ experiences, e.g., through student surveys.
- Have the difficult conversations, e.g., about racism and micro-aggressions—with each other, with colleagues, and with students.
- Prioritise intercultural engagement by making space for it (e.g., in workload models) and by incorporating it into performance reviews and promotion processes.

Roundtable

During the roundtable, attendees were asked to answer the following two questions: (a) What is the aspiration for the university in 40 years regarding intercultural engagement and genuine inclusion? and (b) What are the top two or three suggestions for getting there?

Key suggestions that emerged across both questions:

- Make the university inherently ‘intercultural’ at all levels, rather than ‘inclusive’.
- The links between strategy and practice need to be strengthened, including through a coordinated accountability approach, representation of staff and leadership, workload allocation, and by intercultural engagement being embedded within all teaching practices.
- There should be multiple shared, open spaces where interaction can occur freely and where it is safe to share one’s own practices, values, and beliefs.
- Hire and include diverse staff and leadership that better reflect the community.
- Create University-wide cultural awareness programs, training programs, guidelines, and mandated supportive policies, including those related to respect, language, and anti-racism.
- Include subject review processes that consider intercultural curriculum and pedagogy.
- Incorporate required activities for every student, including positionality statements.
- Revise language used in the University’s strategy so that it guides practices toward genuine inclusive excellence.
- Allocate resources to support students directly.
- Create a Centre for the Study of Intercultural Engagement.
- Address racism and discrimination, e.g., by valuing linguistic diversity, renaming buildings, and supporting inclusive practices.

Closing Remarks

To close the Forum, A/Prof Lowe invited us to dream the future. He suggested that we think about what we would like to achieve and then work backwards about how to achieve it. As a final provocation, he asked if we could allow for difference and 'do' social inclusion at the same time.

Acknowledgements

Speakers (in chronological order):

- Prof Chi Baik, forum organiser
- Prof Michael Wesley, opening remarks
- A/Prof Kevin Lowe, keynote speaker and closing remarks
- Dr Samantha Marangell, panel chair
- Dr Elizabeth Lakey, panellist
- A/Prof Georgina Such, panellist
- A/Prof Peter Cebon, panellist
- Marina Gabra, panellist
- Kayra Karrysia, panellist

We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of the forum attendees who also comprised the roundtable participants. Thanks, also, to Claudia Rivera for documenting the points made during each session.

We acknowledge that the forum took place on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. We pay our respect to Elders past, present, and emerging.