Oncountry Learning: Australian Indigenous Studies: A maximum in Student Learning, 2019

For the attention of the Academic Board, Vice Chancellor, Indigenous Studies Program and the relevant Department Heads and Deans who monitor the quality of teaching and subjects offered by the University.

The paper is a timely assessment of results achieved from 16 years of teaching an Indigenous studies course, at the University of Melbourne (Oncountry Learning Course OCL: POLS30028). The high quality of teaching results consistently achieved over that period sets a high standard for the concept of Oncountry Learning within the University of Melbourne and other Academic Institutions. The results achieved are relevant to other initiatives in Indigenous Studies mentioned in the Vice Chancellors Open Day Approaches letter, 2019. The vision of the proposed ‘Indigenous Knowledge Institute’ becoming a global centre for the documentation, management and dissemination of Indigenous knowledge in partnership with Indigenous communities, is a welcome initiative. An Indigenous Knowledge Centre of such capacity and Indigenous cultural focus supports the concept of OCL and the application of Indigenous based knowledge in its teaching pedagogy and results achieved.

In accordance with University policy commitments to teaching and student learning, the OCL program offers a highly successful framework model. It offers much more, and on the basis of its outstanding achievements, calls for the replication of the concept of OCL across the spectrum of Indigenous Studies. The adoption of this model gives the Academic Board the ‘opportunity to take action for the achievement of high performing subjects’.

OCL achievements are further supported by the glowing appraisals of the Dean of the Arts Faculty, the Chancellor and their colleagues who regard ‘OCL ‘as one of the most imaginative programs in the country’ that ‘has taken the teaching of Indigenous Studies to a new level and provided a role model for the new generation of academics working in the field. It is an ‘inspiring model for teaching that can be applied to other contexts and subject areas’ (Dean, Faculty of Arts, 28 February, 2014). ‘Oncountry Learning has become a jewel in the crown’ of the Melbourne University Education program. (University of Melbourne, Chancellor Presentation of T.G. Tucker Medal for Outstanding Achievement, 2017).

The course achieved prestigious acclaim as an educational model at the University of Melbourne by being awarded the:

Oncountry Learning Course, Yorta Yorta Country, 2003-2019

Oncountry Learning Course Beginnings, 2003

Oncountry Learning Course, 2019
Assessment of Student Evaluation Surveys for OCL, 2003-2019

The following assessment is from the SES results that complete 16 years of OCL Teaching. In broad terms it is an overview of the OCL teaching model and evidence of its outstanding success using 16 years as a measuring scale for consistent quality of teaching results in the key performance indicators.

Teaching Results for OCL subject, 2003-2019:

| POLS30028 Oncountry Learning Year of Course | 03 | 04 | 05 | *06 | 07 | 08 | 09 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 |
|--------------------------------------------|----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Subject was well taught                    | 5.0| 4.9| 4.9| -   | 4.9| 5.0| 4.9| 4.9| 5.0| 4.9| 5.0| 4.9| 4.8| 4.9| 4.8| 4.92| 4.80|
| Subject was intellectually stimulating     | 5.0| 4.9| 5.0| -   | 5.0| 5.0| 4.9| 4.9| 4.8| 5.0| 4.9| 4.8| 5.0| 4.8| 4.8| 5.0| 4.80|
| Overall satisfaction With the quality of learning | 5.0| 5.0| 4.9| -   | 4.8| 5.0| 4.9| 4.9| 4.8| 5.0| 4.8| 5.0| 4.9| 5.0| 4.9| 4.92| 5.0 |

On the basis of the Student Evaluation Surveys, 2003-2019 (*2006: Sabbatical), the teaching results for the ‘standard and core questions’ are summarised.

These are the Academic Board’s key criteria for the evaluation of education courses, and for identifying whether key elements of an effective educational environment are present or not. The ratings the subject gets is also included in the subject guide for students doing the course.

Percentage Achieved for Core Questions:

- Subject was well taught: 98.6%
- Subject was intellectually: 98.5%
- Overall satisfaction with quality of learning: 98.4%

As can be seen the course achieved 100% for a significant part of its duration. With the replacement of former Quality of Teaching (QoT) by the SES in 2011 with a stronger focus on ‘students learning experiences’, the course has performed consistently high in the key learning criteria for the total period of 16 years.
With such high scores are on the board for OCL, some relevant questions can now be put for further examination and appraisal:

1. How do the results rate with other subjects being taught across the University spectrum?

2. Are they comparative with other subjects or are they producing culturally different epistemologies, oral traditions, and teaching pedagogies?

3. Given that the results achieved are grounded in Indigenous land, community based oral knowledge, and an educational framework, of at least 60-120000 years, are they unprecedented within the University and Australian Educational system?

These are important questions that require careful and considered examination. They will benefit the future consolidation, innovation and development of the concept of Oncountry Learning and Indigenous Studies teaching generally.

In light of the standards of teaching set by the Academic Board, which focus on students experiences, and how teaching practices have influenced their learning, the final results invite feedback. They provide an opportunity for the relevant academic authorities and their policy commitments to respond accordingly to the call for the Aboriginalisation of Indigenous Studies subjects taught at the University.

The results achieved by OCL demonstrate that the subject is getting it right at all levels of the performance indicators, from the ground level to the finished product. The obvious reason for its success is the value of Indigenous Studies as an educational maximum and the profound impact it has on student learning. It is a unique discipline that has its roots in the oldest living surviving culture in the world, and invites nothing less than full equality and inclusion in the education system. The commitment, dedication and hard work of its teaching team and the generous support of the Yorta Yorta as the host community are other important variables.

There are many positive outcomes for all participants. Rewards flow to the Academic School that administers and supports the program, the School of Social and Political Science, the Arts Faculty, and the University of Melbourne as the overarching academic institution committed to equality and parity in their statutory and formal obligations to Indigenous employment and education including teaching.

Oncountry Learning as a Teaching Model

The Oncountry Learning subject is unique and of its own kind and in line with the Dean and Chancellors appraisal of the subject: OCL calls for its entitlement as a fully inclusive model framework for the teaching of Indigenous Studies at the University. Its overall success and cultural integrity can be attributed to the following factors:

- The course is taught by Yorta Yorta people in accordance with their world view and teaching pedagogies, and is taught under their direction, including the planning, management and content of the teaching. Cultural integrity and due respect for the traditional owners of the country on which the course is hosted and
taught, underpins its teaching philosophy.

- In line with self determination principles and calls for the Aboriginalisation of Indigenous studies teaching, the course was Yorta Yortarised at the outset and will continue as such in the future. This is the key factor of its outstanding success that needs to be formally recognised.

- Some non Indigenous persons are engaged in the teaching process and particularly those who have worked with and for the Yorta Yorta community in Indigenous projects and rights based issues.

- The course draws on a number of academic and cultural disciplines in the fields of: Archaeology, History, Political Science, Legal Studies, Environmental Science, Gender Studies, Land and Heritage rights and the Oral Traditions of the Yorta Yorta people.

- A large amount of teaching draws on the rich repository of Yorta Yorta cultural knowledge including oral source materials and the politico-legal data of the land rights struggle.

- The concept of OCL has inspired and successfully built bridges between academic and community based learning. Both complement each other as in two-way learning Indigenous teaching philosophy, compatible with the concept of Knowledge Transfer.

- The course introduces students to a timeline of history and prior occupation of Australia of 60-120000 years BP (before present). The experience of this learning curve and the transformative process it produces has a profound and enduring effect on student learning as confirmed in the broad sample of reflections below. It is a testament of Indigenous Studies as a maximum in student learning.

Student Reflections, 2012

- ‘Spending one week OC has inspired me, empowered me, and changed me irrevocably’

- ‘One of the most profound and illuminating experiences I’ve had not only as an educational experience but on a personal level as well’.

- ‘It was the most eyes opening week of my life’.

- ‘I don’t feel that I’ve been introduced to information. I feel like I’ve been introduced to a person, to a people, to [Yorta Yorta] Country’.

- ‘OCL is an experience that shook me to the core, challenged my worldview, and at one point, left me without words’.

- ‘OCL has been an amazing experience that I will carry with me for the duration of my studies and beyond’.
• Easily the most engaging, rewarding and enjoyable subject I have ever taken. Amazing speakers, excellently organised and impossible to criticise.

• Best uni subject I have ever done, hands down. Invaluable experiences, learned more than any indigenous studies subject in the space of 5 days. Wayne Atkinson and the other teaching staff were brilliant.

• Learning as a group and getting out of the classroom. Also learning from elders in the community added a powerful component to the content

• It is truly a testament to a brilliant course, fascinating epistemology and Yorta Yorta pedagogies- Liam Niam, PhD student, Monash University.

• ‘Tales of how great the course is even reach me in England’, Daniel Guinness, Australian Rhodes Scholar, Oxford University England, 16 April, 2014.

• ‘The course is stimulating; challenging and is truly multidisciplinary, spanning history, politics, health, and ecology from an Indigenous viewpoint.

2014: Student Reflections

• OCL is a subject like no other available at University. Being OC offers a new level and dimension of learning that cannot be realised from the classroom (Miranda Clark: 2014, 587421).

• The learning experience I had OC was more real than any other study I’ve done (Nadine Rudkine, 2014, 588325).

• The subject (OCL, 2014) offered me a chance to experience ... and doubt whether I ever will again (Jacob Rodrigo, 2014, 585699).

• OCL has been the beginning of a new journey for me in so many ways that I had anticipated and has finally brought me back to the real world (Olivia Aitken, 2014, 583768).

• ‘On Country, has honestly been the highlight of my degree...it has given me such a greater understanding of the story of the Aboriginal people which I feel like I never would have grasped without being on the land where it all happened’(Alison Boast, Medical Student, Uni Melb, 5 March, 2014).

• ‘The subject (POLS30028: Oncountry Learning: Indigenous Studies) is regarded by our colleagues as one of the most imaginative programs in the country. Dr Atkinson has taken the teaching of Indigenous Studies to a new level and provided a role model for the new generation of academics working in the field.’ He also has provided an inspiring model for teaching that can be applied to other contexts and subject areas’ (Dean, Faculty of Arts, 28 February, 2014).

2016 Student Reflections

• Having interesting group discussions at the Yenbena centre and in our cabins. It really allowed us to reflect on our learning and develop ideas
- Alternative learning and teaching practices that facilitated a deeper understanding of indigenous issues and experience.

- It was amazing being on country, and learning in a more grassroots environment as opposed to within the classroom. Wayne, Shane and Andrea were amazingly patient with us, and the stories told were so important in that they were told on their country, through their eyes!

- Bridging the gap between theory and reality.

- Being able to hear the story of the Yorta Yorta people from their own mouths. Shane was a fantastic facilitator."

- The holistic learning

- The truth conveyed and the connectivity of the subject matters to reality. Standing in a place and learning about was a truly immersive style of study that meant full absorption of material as well. Having the chance to reflect throughout the day and particularly hearing such a variety of esteemed people, directors of the centres we were visiting as well and extremely experienced teachers on the course

- The best aspects of the On Country Learning was how it gently and gradually exposes how there are many forms of learning that can leave a massive impact on us as students.

- One way of learning is standing on the country you are talking about, listening to the people from this country, seeing country, hearing country and sleeping on country. I also found myself being captivated by the stories of people and how they were told to us. The beauty of an oral tradition is something that I don't often have the privilege of being exposed to in University.

- On Country Learning really showed me how much more I respond, react and remember From this kind of listening and learning.

- I also found that connecting the dots between the river systems, the land, the people, the culture, the national park and its role, joint management and the continuing struggle for Indigenous rights recognised in the river was an important way to learn about Yorta Yorta waka and wala.

- This visit really spoke volumes in how these aspects are all connected, and how the struggle to keep this community together means keeping the land, water, culture and nature within Indigenous management.

- So there were a lot of great aspects to this subject but I also found it very special to spend time with you Wayne, Shane, Andrea and all the special guests who spoke to us and brought the present day Yorta Yorta land alive with stories!

- Being on country and seeing the significant sights
Hearing first hand feedback

I really enjoyed the collaborative nature of the subject and the ongoing guests who provided specific insights into the subject. I learnt so much and I was horrified by how little I did know. I am very glad I took this subject as a student but also for my own personal growth.

The multitude of stories and perspectives that were offered, as well as the open and safe learning environment that was created that asked us to challenge ourselves but also made it ok to ask questions.

This was the best subject I've ever done it was practical, challenging and the teaching was of an extremely high standard."

Being Oncountry and learning directly from Yorta Yorta people on their waka - land was invaluable and provided us with tangible, feeling experiences to flesh out and make real what we've read in books. A different type of learning, so valuable.

2017 Student Reflections

A really phenomenal experience. Very special and unique way to learn outside of the University context. Especially being around so many dedicated students and teaching staff.

It was such a personal way of learning, I wish all subjects could be taught similar to this one

Being on Country, outside the walls of the classroom allowed me to learn more and in a deeper, more personal, more honest and more mind shifting way, then I have in any of my other subjects.

The tutors Wayne, Shane and Andrea and others we met along the way are incredible people. People with great depths of knowledge, a real dedication to teaching, generous, patient and welcoming.

I can't stress enough how important this subject is for giving students the opportunity to be open to new paradigms of knowledge, to uncovering and recognising privilege, to learning the truth of Australian history and to hearing the stories of amazing people.

The past week on Country has changed many things in me and taught me things I will carry with me perhaps for the rest of my life.

Having discussions with those I was sharing a villa with at the conclusion of the day"

Learning from people who really cared about the subject and being on country and learning by doing and going rather than trying to comprehend subjects in a classroom which did not relate.
• Also the amazing people involved in the learning and teaching of this subject made it the most enjoyable subject I have ever studied at the university.

• The style of learning. Being On Country definitely made my experience much richer. I felt more connected to what I was learning.

• I loved being able to learn about land rights while being on country, and being able to see and feel and walk through the country. I think it’s difficult to fully understand the issue without this.

• The structure of the subject was really fantastic, going onto country to learn from elders instead of reading from a text book or hearing from a lecturer in a classroom was much more effective.

2018: Student Reflections:

• Learning on country from Yorta Yorta elders was a once in a lifetime experience. Uncle Wayne is passionate, intelligent, kind and experienced. I am so thankful they welcomed us to their home and gave us this experience. I have never experienced a better team of educators, including Uncle Shane. It was the best subject I have ever taken during my degree and was life changing.

• Locating complicated theory related to indigenous studies in a specific region and through the experience of the Yorta Yorta. Critically engaging with the spaces and people that hold the natural and cultural heritage of place, as well as being sites of modern resistance and fluid identity was unique and enjoyable. I particularly preferred sessions within the national park and in community centres surrounding Shepparton.

• Being able to understand the course content better due to being off campus; the knowledge of the teaching staff; every student was eager to learn.

• This subject providing an exceptional experience and facilitated learning perfectly. It was enjoyable and challenging.

• The staff and students are incredibly supportive. The way this subject is taught has also enhanced my understanding and changed how I approach certain problems.

• Fantastic subject, with little to anything to improve on. Stimulating content and delivery that kept you thinking for the 6 days it ran.

• The subject is run as an experience, allowing the student to see, feel, hear, smell and touch the knowledge or history.

• That type of learning is essential to the subject and its purpose. It was moving and engaging.

• True, direct storytelling/teaching on land, and by the people most qualified to do so. Such a privilege to have been part of OnCountry Learning. I’ve been able to bolster my resolve in incorporating this knowledge and these passions into my career.
I felt honoured, trusted, humbled. We were enveloped into this story, this ongoing story of Australia, Indigeneity and land, but Wayne, Shayne, Leon, Damian and Cathy with so much generosity. Their leadership, wisdom and kindness were invaluable.

- Being on country. Relaxed learning environment. Teaching staff were fantastic.

- Everything! I had an amazing week and learnt so much, OCL is the best subject I've done at university.

- Everything about this subject was phenomenal. The teachers, my peers, the elders that helped us along the way, our awesome bus driver Ellen, the spaces we were taken to create an immediate connection between the information and the meaning of it to the Yorta Yorta people.

- Never in my life have I learnt and experienced as much as I did in this subject and I will be forever grateful at being able to be involved in something as life changing as this.

- I sincerely hope more subjects like this will become available in more disciplines as this Uni and others because I really think every student should become involved in an experience like this.

- This was the best subject that I have ever done! Getting out of the classroom was refreshing, Wayne and his co teachers were engaging, and the social aspect of the course was a really nice way to begin the semester and make a few new friends. Learning about Yorta Yorta people from Yorta Yorta people is the best way to go about gaining a stronger understanding of Victoria's Aboriginal people.

- Wayne did an excellent job of looking after us, teaching us and making us feel welcome. I hope this subject continues to be available to students into the future, and must be taught by Yorta Yorta people if Wayne ever retires.

- This subject was the best subject I’ve ever done at Unimelb. The best aspects were being out on Yorta Yorta Country, being taught by a wide variety of Yorta Yorta community members. But everything else about the subject (the group barbecues, watching The Sapphire, getting to know Uncle Wayne and Uncle Shane, Cathy and Ellen) were also incredible and add so much to the experience.

- How can the course be improved? Question 12. Subject Report, 2018

- None. There should be more subjects like this.

- The scope from which students are selected provides interesting and varying opinions and discussion. However the differential in fundamental cultural competencies and related practice became frustrating for some students, myself included.

- N/A
- None
- Nothing
• Maybe 2 further sessions spread throughout the semester. One as a debrief and one as a check in for assignments, although it seems we can call on Wayne for this anyway.

• I have no complaints.

• Nothing! (This is very minor but my only suggestion would be to sort out keys before we go to the supermarket so people can shop together if they know they’ll be staying in the same apartment)

• I honestly couldn't fault, an amazing experience

• None.

• In a word - nothing. It was an amazingly generous and hugely intellectually stimulating subject.

• 2019: Reflections:

• I loved the fact that we were out On Country. I have never learnt more from a subject that from this one. Wayne and Shane have a way with words that helped me understand the history and cultural connections to the land. They also gave each of us all the time in the world to ask questions and helped us on our learning journey.

• It's the best subject I have taken at Melbourne University.

• Being welcomed to hear about the struggles and triumphs within the Yorta Yorta community on their land was an invaluable experience.

• This was one of the best and most authentic learning experiences I have ever had. The variation in places we visited each day was terrific.

• I wish that this subject was a capstone for every uni student - we would like in a much better society if it was. I can’t thank Shane and Wayne enough for giving me this opportunity.

• This subject changed my whole outlook and trajectory.

• Being on country - the experiential element of the subject

• Learning from Indigenous people, rather than simply about them

• Accommodation was better than I expected it to be and the location was great.

• Teaching staff were lovely and very approachable, as was our bus driver Ellen

• Got to hear from lots of Yorta Yorta elders at various different community organizations

• Our classroom varied in location regularly - from the bush to a boat to the conference rooms at community organizations
• Got to know fellow students well thanks to spending six days with them

• Being on Country and learning directly from Yorta Yorta people about their land and experiences

• Hearing from community members about diverse projects, down time to process and chat with other students, emphasis on reflection.

• Different type of environment for learning, many different voices to learn from, beautiful sense of community.

• This subject has changed the way I look at my indigenous studies course and reignited inspiration to pursue these issues after uni.

• Shane and Wayne's teaching was incredibly engaging and real, the ability to be on Yorta Yorta land as well.

• The deep knowledge and personal teaching style of the coordinators, the Indigenous autonomy over the way the subject is run, the field trip aspect, the student autonomy around assessment.

Summary:

The SES evaluations provide further support and encouragement for the continuity of the concept of OCL as a model framework for Indigenous Studies teaching.

In conclusion, one needs to personally thank everyone for their support, contributions and to acknowledge the students for sharing their personal experiences. On behalf of our great teaching team, and the Yorta Yorta community, we wish students who have participated in the course, best wishes in their future endeavours. May the experience they have enjoyed and shared together and with their friends and families stay with them forever, knowing that they are always welcome to come back to Yorta Yorta Woka.

For further discussion on the submission presented please direct to the following contact details.

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