



LEARNING PATHWAYS – A Diverse, Equitable and Flexible Indigenous Curriculum

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1. Introduction

During 2002 Victoria's Adult Community & Further Education (ACFE) funded the re-accreditation of the Coorong Tongala Certificate I program, along with the development of Levels II and III. Coorong Tongala Certificate I had consisted of seven modules that provided a culturally appropriate introduction to adult education and training for Indigenous people.

The new curriculum called *Certificates I, II and III in Learning Pathways for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* consists of five core modules. The core modules cover cultural studies, literacy, numeracy, and personal development. The new module '**Where Are You Going?**' includes Managed Individual Pathway Plans (MIPPs) that cover education, training, employment and whole of life support planning.

1. 2 Community Advocates and Learning Partners (CALP)

The CALP supports Learning Pathways program development, participants and their teachers/trainers. The group is a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who can bring their wisdom, encouragement and networks to the program and its participants. They advocate on behalf of participants and providers to ensure the right supports are there when they are needed. The CALP works under the guidance of their Local Aboriginal Education and Consultative Committee (LAECG).

The new curriculum has also been aligned with the Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA), various Industry Training Packages and secondary students will gain credits towards the new Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The curriculum began its Pilot phase in late 2003 by a variety of providers. They include Barrier Reef TAFE with Palm Island Community, Alice Springs General Hospital – Workplace Development, and Swinburne TAFE in Victoria at the Balluk Yilam Indigenous Learning Centre – Lilydale Campus.

2. History of the Curriculum - Rob Storey's Dream

Indigenous educator Rob Storey, who has since passed away, originally conceived Coorong Tongala. Rob was a gifted teacher with a strong empathy for his students in prisons and TAFE settings. He advocated community based; learner centred approaches that were high on culture, relevance and personal development.

The first stage of Coorong Tongala met with great success. Certificate I incorporated core modules associated with cultural studies, personal development, literacy, numeracy and community project work. It exceeded its primary objective of assisting participants to feel better about formal learning and also provided opportunities to develop cultural knowledge and community links.

An example of initiatives in the first stage are Barwon Prisoners' publication of poetry, stories and art as well as Yenbena students' publication of the stories of

local Elders. Both are examples of the ways in which Coorong Tongala encourages literacy development in culturally appropriate and affirming ways.

3. The New Coorong Tongala

The new Coorong Tongala - *Certificates I, II and III in Learning Pathways for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* - rests firmly on Rob's dream of providing learning experiences that affirm culture and identity while building skills to manage learning and work in mainstream environments. It also reflects current policy and initiatives, including the student centred and local community emphasis of Victoria's YALCA document, the objectives of the Wurreker Strategy (TAFE) and ANTA's *Partners in a Learning Culture*. A tribute to Rob Storey is at the front of the new curriculum.

These documents place students' needs and interests at the heart of curriculum design and implementation. They also encourage curriculum delivery that promotes partnerships between education, training and employment stakeholders at the local level.

The designers used these documents along with information from participants and providers of Certificate I, and the current views and needs of communities as expressed through **Local Aboriginal Education and Consultative Committees** (LAECGs) to create the new curriculum. The **Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated** (VAEAI) and the **Office of Training and Tertiary Education** (OTTE) also provided critical advice and support throughout the design phase.

Fifteen young people from all over the State also provided important advice and artwork for learning resources forming the Learning Pathways (Coorong Tongala) Learning Resource and Design Team. They were enthusiastic in their support of a curriculum that prescribes relevance and cultural knowledge as a key component. Their comments included:

"If you can't explain how it's relevant then don't teach it" (Jake – Worawa College). They offered as an example their feelings about algebra. They also

described a hunger for cultural knowledge and history from the Indigenous perspective.

Hooley (2002) asks the question: "How can Indigenous families become involved in the detailed work of educational change when they have been excluded for so long?" He further points out the greater difficulty when only small numbers of Indigenous people may be present at schools (or TAFE Institutes). A genuine attempt to address these issues has been made in the design and development of the Learning Pathways curriculum. Active input from the Indigenous Design Team, participants in the Reference Group and wide consultation with the Indigenous Community has ensured broad acceptance of the curriculum and confidence and excitement about its use.

The result is a highly innovative model and content that is already gaining interest around the country.

3.1 The Model

The new model provides a reduced number of core modules around which other units of competency, or school subjects can sit.

The core modules are aligned with the ***Certificate in General Education for Adults*** (CGEA) and various ***Industry Training Packages***. Secondary students can also gain credits towards the ***Victorian Certificate in Applied Learning*** (VCAL). These alignments were made in response to a growing demand for accredited learning and education and employment pathway planning.

"*Coorong Tongala was great, but where does it lead you?*" was a common statement from previous participants and providers. The new curriculum makes these links strong through links to accredited training and intensive pathway planning. It may also bring intensive literacy and other individual support requirements.

The five core modules are:

What's the Story?	(Cultural Studies)
So What's Happening?	(Community Project)
What's Your Number?	(Numeracy)
Talk Up Listen Up	(Literacy & Personal Development)
Where Are You Going?	(Pathway Support Planning, Employment & Study Skills)

The modules can be integrated through community projects and work experience, or they can stand-alone. This provides an opportunity for communities to design a Learning Pathways approach that best meets their needs and interests.

Specialist programs like Hospitality, Performing Arts, Sport and Recreation or Business can be designed by combining related competency units with and through the core modules. For example, a community project that involves holding a sport and recreation related event could incorporate related training package competencies. It may also meet literacy, numeracy and information technology development needs as identified in those modules.

4. Pathway Planning

On-going individual pathway planning and review is integrated into the curriculum, as well as support from Community Advocates and Learning Partners (CALP). The CALP support the individual's needs and aspirations and those delivering the program. They also provide the frequently mentioned *missing link* in whole of life support. The CALP can bring together supports to meet underlying needs and blocks to pathway progress, such as health professionals, mentors and programs.

The new curriculum also provides a curriculum framework for existing initiatives in relation to partnerships between education, training and employment stakeholders. The Wurreker Strategy and its regionally based Wurreker Brokers promote local partnership approaches within the TAFE and employment sectors to achieve identified and stronger links from education and training to employment. Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) are also

working collaboratively across the State to enhance employment, education and training opportunities.

Learning Pathways provides these groups with a curriculum framework that can be used to inform initiatives focused on job readiness and further study.

5. Students and the CALP

Learning Pathways students experience high levels of caring, support and relevance in their learning. They also understand participation in the Learning Pathways community as a two-way responsibility between them and the CALP. This group includes local Elders and community members.

Aunty Dot Peters, Community Elder from Healesville in Victoria has worked closely with the Learning Pathways design team. She says:

“The CALP gives them another voice and support in their lives. It’s much needed as we’re losing too many, particularly the young ones. We have to listen to them more and pull together to get them feeling better about all sorts of issues in their lives. We also have to give them strong wise people who can give the feedback and direction when it’s needed”

The CALP will work with each participant to engage mentors and other supports to further dreams and plans for employment, education and training, health and well being. These actions are recorded through the MIPP planning and review process.

In *What Works? 2000*, reporting on successful Indigenous projects, the significant level of Indigenous adult involvement was a feature of the projects. “More than two-thirds of the projects engaged Indigenous personnel to work in the projects as teachers, tutors, researchers or other education workers. Student mentoring by Indigenous adults was a feature of about one-third of the projects. In most cases this has been cited directly as a factor in their success.” By placing CALP as the central totem around which the Learning Pathways

curriculum rests, involvement by Indigenous adults has been made integral to the proper use of the curriculum.

6. Learning Resources

Learning resources are being completed to assist delivery. They include a document titled '**Getting It Together**' which advises on implementation planning for delivery. Again consultations stressed the need for planning to ensure programs do represent the community and participants' needs and dreams, as well as providing the practical supports required for quality delivery.

'Getting It Together' is not prescriptive but it does provide strong guidelines to assist each community build its program for a long life and in the best interests of its participants. The document stresses MIPP development, induction for students, mentor training for the CALP and professional development prior to program delivery.

7. Professional Development – the desired model

Ideally, providers will be supported through professional development that includes cultural awareness delivered by the local community. The CALP will determine with the LAECG and teachers/trainers what professional development needs exist and how they will be met. For example, literacy development is an integral part of Learning Pathways and as such all teachers/trainers will be supported in their knowledge and skills in this area. They may also request development in other areas related to their particular program and its participants.

Ideally all providers will be linked on-line and through collaborative professional development events. However, professional development requires funding to initiate and maintain. The new Learning Pathways curriculum received accreditation but no implementation funds. So far, Swinburne University of Technology – TAFE Division has remained the point of contact for the roll out of the new curriculum and has supported the pilot stage. The team continues to work with its existing Indigenous and non-Indigenous team members, including

Aunty Dot Peters and the peak bodies mentioned throughout to ensure quality delivery. Due to the wide interest shown in Learning Pathways delivery, this situation is not sustainable and will need to be addressed (see **9.3 Growing Interest - Early 2004** below).

8. 1 A Community of Practice

Early in 2003 Flexible Learning Leader – Julie Woodlock (2002) from Barrier Reef TAFE met in Melbourne with Sharon Rice (FLL 2003) et al from Swinburne's Regional Learning Networks to discuss the new Learning Pathways curriculum. Julie was excited about the possibilities for the new curriculum in her work with the Palm Island Community. Julie had already spoken with Greg Crowe, another Flexible Learning Leader (2001) from Alice Springs and felt sure he would also be interested in networking as we proceeded with Piloting the new Curriculum. The idea was born to develop a network of providers. We agreed to continue our discussions by arranging a teleconference. Indigenous colleagues took part in the subsequent teleconference, at which the more remote communities felt they needed to talk with Swinburne's CALP group to discuss how they could develop their own community groups to underpin their pilots. The advantage of talking together face-to-face and workshopping to lay some ground-work became very clear. A Community was in place, but we needed funding to make our vision become a reality.

Reframing the Future's: Communities of Practice grants were open for tender. Swinburne applied for funding to enable our Community to meet and to continue to network and share resources. We were successful and plans were quickly put in place to hold our first Workshop. A total of three Flexible Learning Leaders participated in the Community of Practice.

It is the shared belief of the Community of Practice partners that the new Learning Pathways curriculum will provide, as the name implies, real outcomes (pathways) that will move Indigenous education forward within the context of the National Training Framework. Our primary concern is that current access programs are not leading to effective participation of many

Indigenous people and do not appear to provide appropriate preparedness for the National Training Packages as they exist today. ANTA's Partners in a Learning Culture states:

"To increase the relevance of training to Indigenous people, there is a need for Indigenous people to have more control over key areas of the VET sector dealing with the needs of their own people." The Learning Pathways Curriculum has at its heart involvement and decision-making by a group of Community Advocates and Learning Partners (CALP).

In the past, Indigenous people have been involved in VET as advisers rather than as decision-makers. This situation is slowly changing with Indigenous people currently being appointed to positions on various advisory boards and committees. These changes will ensure that decisions take account of the cultural and other issues of importance to Indigenous peoples and will lead to VET policies for Indigenous people based on principles of autonomy, ownership and control and on clear recognition of cultural, social and economic diversity." (p. 22)

Our core community of practice (Indigenous and non Indigenous) consists of RTOs (flexible learning leaders and teachers who have experience and recognition with their Indigenous community) and Indigenous colleagues who will collectively act as facilitators to the Indigenous communities in each of the locations.

8.2 Wider Interest

In the meantime, through word of mouth, interest in the new Learning Pathways curriculum was gaining momentum. We began adding names and organisations to a data-base of those who had expressed interest. A Network of some forty were invited to attend an Information Session to be held on the second day of our conference in Melbourne. The first day would take the form of a Workshop at which the Community of Practice would meet, and the differences in the communities would be discussed. Together we would brainstorm to come up with ways to approach the issues of:

- ☛ identifying suitable members of each CALP group,
- ☛ suitable professional development to prepare the CALP participants

~~What~~ what to teach first?

The **Community of Practice** consisting of Communities from Palm Island, Bwgcolman Community (Barrier Reef TAFE); Alice Springs General Hospital – Workforce Development and Swinburne TAFE Indigenous Programs, Melbourne met on June 5 and 6 and planned how they will customise the curriculum to suit their Communities and the training needs of their participants. A Network of some thirty-five other individuals and organisations including Mawson TAFE (S.A.) met on day two of the conference and plans are underway for sharing of resources, professional development sessions and ongoing networking. ‘Aunty’ Dot Peters, a local Community Elder was Elder-in-residence for the two days. She read a very wise and moving story of a tree and a rock that reflected on the strength we gain from one another by working together.

Communities in Western Australia have also expressed interest in being included and other names have been added to our list.

9. The Pilot Phase

9.1 Some of the highlights of the initial pilot

Swinburne’s Learning Pathways pilots commenced in Semester II, 2003 at the Lilydale Campus, with Balluk Yillam Indigenous Learning Centre as a ‘home’ focus. Students undertook Cultural Studies and Vocational Units in either Hospitality or Automotive competencies. This was a new experience for many of the teachers involved and the success or otherwise of the classes depended to a high degree on the willingness of vocational teachers to apply flexible strategies and adaptability in their teaching and assessment. We were very fortunate to have a hospitality teacher who made every effort to accommodate students’ special literacy needs, and make the curriculum relevant in every possible way. He subtly brought in bush-tucker plants, adding these as herbs or enhancers to mainstream dishes. There was never a sledge-hammer approach but just a matter-of-fact inclusion of edible Indigenous plants in the lessons which demonstrated that he valued and respected Indigenous culture, without having to say anything. Students

developed a high regard for the trainer that contributed to the excellent attendance and successful completion of the Hospitality Unit by all but one student.

The class contains a mixture of young and old students. One older student who had left school at fourteen and felt, as do many of the students, that she could “never learn anything” surprised herself by really making a connection with the training. She now has a Traineeship at *Bunjil Restaurant* opposite Healesville Sanctuary and there is scope for others from the program to also be employed there.

At the beginning of the course several students said they were ‘dumb’ and didn’t think they’d be able to learn anything. The exciting result was that all the students stuck it out to the end. There was a growing interest by parents too in the study – at first they were sceptical, thinking their young people would drop out as they had at school. Parents are now taking pride in the achievements of their young people.

Perhaps the most significant highlight occurred at the combined Indigenous Graduation, held at the Aborigines Advancement League in December. The Learning Pathways students, attended the event, proudly dressed in their hospitality uniforms. When the supper arrangements did not go according to plan, some of the students took the situation in hand, donned gloves and fried the snacks “the way they should be fried”, organised the rest of the food, rearranged and set up the tables, then set to serving and cleaning up! Their hospitality trainer exclaimed that had he set up an assessment task to cover food handling and service competencies, they all would have passed based on the event! The irony of this situation was that we had originally tried to arrange for the students to cater for the Graduation as an assessment task, but the event was held after the cut off time for results.

9.2 Some of the difficulties encountered in the initial pilot

As we experienced when VCAL was introduced to a primarily Adult learning environment in TAFE, staff, teachers and other students had their comfort zone invaded. There has been a breaking-in period where adjustments

needed to be made. Likewise with the new Learning Pathways cohort of students; the comfort zone of other older Indigenous students and people who had been involved in Indigenous adult education in TAFE over many years was disturbed and adjustments had to be made.

Other difficulties included internal problems with meeting Student Administration data-base requirements; in organising an Enrolment Form flexible enough to meet individual student choices and to be acceptable by our computer system, not to mention Abstudy requirements – ie. that students only be enrolled in one discreet course – were a headache, to say the least. TAFE organisations are faced with the difficult process of getting the curriculum on the Scope of Registration and meeting AQTF requirements. This is an area in which there can, and should be cooperation in sharing of sample units etc. as we experienced through our Community of Practice.

Another difficulty encountered was that the Automotive trainers relied heavily on text-books for their theory, requiring strong literacy skills of the students. This lack of flexibility created a rift between the students and this vocational training. Few completed the competencies and attendance was extremely poor. This was in direct contrast to the flexibility demonstrated in the Hospitality area.

There were inevitably, a few disappointing episodes of inappropriate behaviour but these were discussed and strategies developed to deal with them. The co-ordinator and staff were very persistent; after the honeymoon period there was the inevitable drop off in attendance but students were persistently telephoned if they were absent. Their phone numbers were programmed into the mobile of the coordinator who immediately followed up any absentees. This has really helped to hold the group and is a highly-recommended strategy for any other groups.

We have been fortunate to secure the services of Shane Charles to work part-time with the Indigenous Learning Pathways students and Part time with First-Stop – a joint initiative of Swinburne and the Outer Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network. Shane comes with a background of wide experience

with Centrelink, working with Indigenous clients and is well accepted and liked by the group.

9.3 Growing Interest - Early 2004

There has been a growing interest in placing young people in the Learning Pathways course. Some students are on “community orders” and at first feel embarrassed about joining the class. However, they soon discover that there is no stigma attached to what people have been or done in the past. There is a strong sense of belonging to a family group. The presence of elders and mentors is a real strength of the program. There is a slowly growing interest for many to explore their own Aboriginality, something they had not done in the past. There is no requirement for this to happen, but the program allows for such exploration, but without any pressure to do so.

Parents too are demonstrating interest in and acceptance of the Learning Pathways course and wanting to be involved.

9.4 Current Wider Interest

The list of individuals and organisations asking, even begging for, Professional Development and resources with which to run Learning Pathways has grown to sixty.

There is urgent need for funding to support implementation of the curriculum. Our list includes Secondary Schools with young Aboriginal students, Community Development Employment Projects, Land Councils, the Justice Department – people training in prisons - ACFE deliverers and TAFE Colleges etc. from regions as widespread as Bairnsdale in Victoria to the Kimberleys in Western Australia, Palm Island Community, Queensland, Ernabella in South Australia and Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

9.5 Challenges for the future

The question arises as to how we can effectively support a large and growing network of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people who are keen to use the

new Learning Pathways curriculum. The diverse range of interested groups endeavouring to engage the Indigenous Community in training includes:

- ☒ Justice System Victoria – Port Philip Prison, Bendigo Prison; Barwon Prison
- ☒ Department of Correctional Services - Sydney
- ☒ Secondary Colleges – Tasmania; Victoria; Catholic Education
- ☒ TAFE Colleges
 - Barrier Reef TAFE – Far North Qld
 - Douglas Mawson TAFE – South Australia
 - Chisholm TAFE – Melbourne
 - Kangan TAFE - Melbourne
 - Goulburne Ovens TAFE - Victoria
 - RMIT - Melbourne
 - Swinburne TAFE - Melbourne
- ☒ Parks Victoria
- ☒ Department of Human Services

Funding will need to be obtained to provide professional development for teachers; to allow for networking in smaller groups to share relevant resources which are customised and contextualised to meet the training and cultural needs of specific groups.

10. Summary

The Learning Pathways curriculum design reflects the input of State-wide consultation and feedback from Indigenous Communities, Industry, service providers and individuals. It is holistic, innovative, flexible, culturally-appropriate and outcomes-driven. The design of the curriculum will increase participation and provide access to the National Training Framework for Indigenous people.

In discussion between the Flexible Learning Leaders, the idea was born to develop a network of providers from diverse locations that would focus on the engagement of Indigenous Community in the implementation phase of the curriculum design. The idea is to strengthen communities so they may determine relevant educational outcomes for their own people.

The pilots will be engaged in case-studying their experiences for their peers to follow them, so they may guide future programs and professional development. To ensure best practice, we would also like to monitor the Pilots using an action research model to track what works and what doesn't; to fine tune the curriculum and make suggestions and give examples as to how it can be further customised and contextualised to provide relevance in different Community settings and for various training needs.

Those interested in discussing further the new *Certificates I, II and III in Learning Pathways for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* can contact Sharon Rice, Manager of Regional Learning Networks, Swinburne University of Technology, TAFE on (03) 9726 1729

References

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