

# SAFEGUARDING RIGHTS TO CULTURES AND KNOWLEDGES

*Position Paper*

## Imagine...

Imagine showcasing to students the living legacy of Indigenous cultural narratives through the Bunya Nut Festival in South-West Queensland. Picture a gathering that, for millennia, drew diverse language groups and tribes from over 450km in distance, following Songlines and travel maps converging at the Bunya Mountains. Today revived as 'Bunya Dreaming', led by Kabi Kabi Elder Aunty Beverly Hand and a committee of Aboriginal leaders, this festival stands as a powerful testament to cultural resilience, reimagining age-old practices and traditions for today's world and demonstrating the enduring relevance of Indigenous knowledge and connection to Country (Ngarrngga, n.d.).

## Our Position

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and knowledge systems have long been excluded by the Australian education system. This exclusion is at odds with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which demands an unwavering commitment to embedding Indigenous peoples' knowledges, cultures and perspectives across all levels of education. Through authentic collaboration with Indigenous communities, the development of culturally responsive pedagogies and practices, and the creation of truly inclusive educational spaces, Australia can begin to dismantle the cycle of disenfranchisement and fulfill its human rights obligations under the Declaration.

## Upholding a Fundamental Human Right

Safeguarding the rights of Indigenous cultures and knowledges is not only a matter of protecting heritage and traditions, but a fundamental right for Indigenous peoples. It is a living and dynamic process, that represents how the past is brought into the present through each First Nations person's unique interpretation and embodiment of past teachings and knowledge. This process allows Indigenous ways of being to manifest in contemporary forms without losing their essential core and connection to past knowledge systems. Having sustained rich cultures, languages, and knowledge systems for millennia, Indigenous communities hold the right to revitalise, practice, and impart their cultures to future generations. This right to cultural preservation is enshrined in Article 13 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which explicitly states that Indigenous peoples have the right to regenerate and transmit their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, and cultural heritage to their descendants (United Nations, 2007). It is important to note that while Australia endorsed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2013, recognising its importance as a country, the nation has yet to finalise its commitment by fully implementing the declaration. This gap between endorsement and implementation highlights a crucial area where Australia has acknowledged the significance of Indigenous rights but has fallen short in following through with concrete actions.

## Recognising Education Settings as a Critical Site for Change

Educational spaces are pivotal for facilitating the preservation, revitalisation and safeguarding of Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge systems. Schools and learning environments act as critical sites where students can be immersed in and develop connections with this content. The purposeful integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and ways of knowing across curricula holds transformative potential. It can validate and legitimise Indigenous knowledges and lived experiences, carving out spaces where Indigenous worldviews are valued, uplifted, and celebrated.

## How is it Relevant to All Students?

Some critics suggest that the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures into curriculum is of value only to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This misconception can sometimes serve as the rationale behind teachers' or school's decisions to refrain from engaging meaningfully in this work, particularly if they have few or no Indigenous learners in their classrooms. We argue that this represents an unfortunate missed opportunity. The benefits of introducing the rich and diverse Indigenous perspectives and knowledges of Australia are countless and universally valuable for all Australian students and foundational to working towards reconciliation.

## Internationally Recommended Best Practices

The pivotal role of education in safeguarding Indigenous peoples' rights is further reinforced in guidelines focused on preserving cultural heritage and fostering meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities, such as the *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003) and the *UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples* (2018).

## Calls to Action

We challenge **educators, educational leaders, and educational institutions**, from early childhood centres to universities, to critically examine their curricula, teaching practices, and institutional cultures to identify and address any biases, stereotypes, or marginalisation of Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, as well as identify opportunities to strengthen this work.

We urge the **Australian government and education authorities** to provide adequate funding and resources to support initiatives, which aim to amplify Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in education.

We call upon **governments and educational policymakers** to prioritise the meaningful integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledges into the national curriculum across all subject areas and grade levels.

We encourage **all Australians**, regardless of their background, to engage with and learn about the histories, cultures, and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This can be achieved through attending cultural events, reading works by Indigenous authors, and seeking out opportunities for respectful dialogue and knowledge-sharing.

## References

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