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Decolonising tertiary psychology programs in Australia: privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' voices

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Program has paved the way for Indigenising and decolonising psychology programs. While Indigenisation and decolonisation of psychology programs are not yet consistent, exemplar initiatives have emerged within recent times. This paper showcases these exemplars, providing details about the “how to” privilege Indigenous knowledges and decolonising practices.

Method: A qualitative research paradigm was used to highlight multiple descriptive case studies. An Aboriginal Participatory Action Research approach honoured Indigenous leadership and governance throughout the process, which supported the use of yarning as the data collection method. The methodological approach illustrated the importance of the psychology discipline supporting epistemological justice via the inclusion of Indigenous research methodologies.

Results: The five case studies provided practical strategies and actions that other psychology education providers, and indeed other higher education providers, can use to decolonise discipline programs. Examples of enablers included Indigenous leadership in curricula design and student support within the psychology discipline challenges. Examples of challenges included a lack of resources and epistemological racism.

Conclusions: This work reaffirms the call for urgent prioritisation to support, embed, and expand Indigenous knowledges and decolonising praxis within psychology and indeed, across broader health disciplines, in Australia and around the world.

KEY POINTS

What is already known about the topic:

- (1) Indigenous psychologists are leading the Indigenous turn in their profession, including decolonising psychology tertiary programs.
- (2) Psychology tertiary programs are actively decolonising in Australia. However, more work is required.
- (3) Academics in psychology tertiary programs are seeking more avenues of support, which can strengthen their decolonising journeys, individually and within context of their program.

What this paper adds to the topic:

- (1) Authentic and detailed case studies showcasing how transformative change occurs during the process of decolonising individual psychology tertiary programs.
- (2) Illustrates tensions that arise within the colonising frameworks of academia when incorporating Indigenous knowledges and actively deconstructing colonial influences.
- (3) Demonstrates the importance of privileging place-based protocols, including honouring relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and fostering traits like being humble, vulnerable and critically reflexive in leadership roles.

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Introduction

Higher education and health disciplines, like psychology, have a long history of privileging Western ways of knowing, being and doing, be that in research, education, or student support. Privileging Western approaches results in, as well as facilitates, the continual transmission of colonial oppression. Transmission of colonial oppression positions Indigenous people and Indigenous knowledges, that is, Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, as being of lesser value, unworthy, and not human (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Gibson, 2020; Smith, 2021). Privileging Indigenous knowledges in higher education, and indeed its praxis, is a priority (Dudgeon et al., 2019; Universities Australia, 2019, 2022). The lack of including Indigenous knowledges is often expressed as political issues, like not employing Indigenous academic staff, not using, or valuing Indigenous pedagogies across curricula, inequity and inequality via the universal processes used, and the absence or low numbers of Indigenous students enrolled in discipline programs (Smith, 2021). Indeed, psychology is not an exception, and these same issues are often reported within psychology programs (Cullen et al., 2020; Dudgeon & Walker, 2015; Dudgeon et al., 2016b). A remedy for the transmission of colonial oppression is decolonisation, of which Indigenous leaders and community are at the helm.

Decolonisation involves understanding and disrupting oppressive laws, policies, and practices, upheld by settler-colonial societies. This includes disciplines, like psychology as well as systems, like education, justice and healthcare (Clarke & Hirvonen, 2022; Selkirk, Gibson, et al., *in press*). While decolonisation promotes the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in laws, policies, and practices, it is more than inclusion. Rather, decolonisation and decoloniality shift the inherent power imbalances resulting from the process of colonisation and ongoing coloniality (Emery-Whittington, 2024). Ultimately, a key aim of decolonisation and decoloniality is to mitigate the pervasive and endemic transmission of colonial oppression (Emery-Whittington, 2024). In psychology, Eurocentric knowledges have been used as a basis for structuring psychology teaching. Examples of Eurocentric knowledges are evident in defining core concepts (e.g., “mental health”) and setting its research methods as the “standard”. A decolonial turn has been instigated and implemented globally, which is illustrated in theories, practices and research. Examples include and are not limited to Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective (Clarke & Hirvonen, 2022), which offers discourse and theories to unpack coloniality in psychology and Ciofalo et al.’s (2022) illustration of how Indigenous Knowledges are now embedded in and reflective of Indigenous psychology wellbeing frameworks across the globe. While the psychology discipline has matured to acknowledge its role in history and its colonial oppression within the discipline, ongoing critical reflexivity is required, as is meaningful structural reforms, both within psychology and beyond (Fish et al., 2024; Australian Psychological Society, 2017).

In Australia, the Aboriginal-led and governed initiative called the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP) (See <https://indigenouslypsyched.org.au/>) is actively working with universities across Australia, with the aim of decolonising Australian psychology programs (Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project, 2021; Selkirk, Alexi, et al., 2025). AIPEP’s focus is on increasing student recruitment, retention, and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in psychology, increasing cultural responsiveness in psychology higher education and building the capacity of the emerging mental health workforce to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project, 2021). To accomplish its aims, AIPEP has developed frameworks, guidelines, and resources to build the cultural capability of psychologists and psychology graduates to work appropriately and effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to improve the recruitment, retention, and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in psychology degrees (Dudgeon et al., 2016, 2016a, 2016b).

The AIPEP team recently conducted a scoping survey study of academic representatives from psychology higher education providers (Selkirk, Alexi, et al., 2025). The study revealed that while psychology programs, overall, are broadening efforts to decolonise, much work remains to strengthen and build upon these efforts. The survey showed that some psychology programs are well underway in their decolonising journeys. Further, conversations within the AIPEP Community of Practice (AIPEP CoP) and requests from programs at the beginning of their journey to learn more about “the how” to make transformational changes (Selkirk, Alexi, et al., 2025). As such, a qualitative descriptive multiple case study approach was conceptualised, with the aim to 1) Privilege Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, including non-Indigenous people’s engagement in the Indigenisation and decolonisation processes within psychology higher education

programs; 2) Illustrate examples of good practice that could strengthen the Indigenisation and decolonisation processes within psychology education programs, and the systems in which these programs operate; and 3) Provide critical, deep, and perhaps even uncomfortable dialogue for some, about the strategies and challenges for decolonising psychology programs.

Methods

The following approaches were applied in this research.

Aboriginal Participatory Action Research

Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) aims to privilege Indigenous people's voices and uphold Indigenous rights in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and psychology (Dudgeon et al., 2020). As described and illustrated in (Selkirk, Alexi, et al., 2025), APAR was a suitable approach to use in AIPEP, including in this qualitative descriptive multiple case study. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance arrangements were maintained by the Expert Advisory Committee, consisting of key national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, who informed the design and implementation of the scoping study research (Selkirk, Alexi, et al., 2025). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research team and leadership was expanded, and this aligned with APAR principles. Both, members of an honours research project and authors of the case studies, were invited to participate as co-researchers and co-authors. Table 1 lists the researchers involved, along with each of their positionalities.

At least one, if not multiple Aboriginal researchers, was involved in each step of the research. That approach is decolonising in nature for many reasons, including positioning Indigenous people as knowledge producers, which is in opposition to Western research ideologies and its positioning of Indigenous peoples as just the subjects of research (Emery-Whittington et al., 2024; Smith, 2021).

Descriptive multiple case study approach

A qualitative descriptive multiple case study approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of these initiatives and to share narratives that reflected the roles, responsibilities, and approaches used by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Following the completion of the beforementioned AIPEP scoping study survey (Selkirk, Alexi, et al., 2025), several initiatives were identified as being exemplary as these privileged Indigenous people's ways of knowing, being, and doing, and illustrated how higher education providers transformed their practices to do so.

Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling is a qualitative selection method that invites people who hold experiences and/or knowledge that are essential to the topic being explored (Palinkas et al., 2015). Following a survey in relation to decolonising and Indigenising psychology education programs in Australia, the researchers identified initiatives that were exemplary. Initially, participants were selected for a follow-up yarn if they met the following criteria: Active engagement in relation to i) Decolonising psychology education programs; ii) Supporting recruitment, retention or graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In these criteria, we defined active engagement as demonstrating three or more strategies and/or actions in both criteria. These actions and strategies were independent of those undertaken by the Indigenous Education Centre and/or by the HEP¹ more broadly. Thirteen of the potential 18 survey participants met that criterion. We then ordered the potential 13 case study participants from the most to least strategies and/or actions. Six participants who demonstrated the most strategies and/or actions were selected for follow-up yarns, five of which agreed to participate.

Yarning

Yarning is a culturally respectful communication tool, which is reliant on relationships and cultural protocols (Dean, 2010). Yarning is decolonising in nature, as it centres Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing;

Table 1. List of researchers and their positionality.

Name	Positionality
Chontel Gibson (C.G.)	Chontel is a Gamilaraay woman raised on both Wiradjuri Country and Gamilaraay Country. Chontel was living on Gamilaraay Country for the most part of this project. Chontel is an occupational therapist and has been employed in academic roles for nearly 8 years in total. She has advocated for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in health degrees, including organisations, like accrediting bodies, that support the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges in health education programs. Chontel's research work focusses on sharing the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' social and emotional wellbeing, with a focus on older Aboriginal people.
Joanna Alexi (J.A.)	Joanna has Cypriot heritage, was born and raised in Larrakia Country, and now living and working on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja. Joanna worked as a research fellow at the University of Western Australia, with the Indigenous-led Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing project, focusing on decolonising psychology education and practice. Through her personal and professional experiences, she has had opportunities to reflect on her education in psychology and the importance of decolonising the discipline of psychology to honour and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' wellbeing. She continues to interrogate her own role as a non-Indigenous researcher and how she can work better to value, respect, reciprocate, engage in, and elevate the important work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and allies in decolonising psychology education and practice.
Pat Dudgeon (P.D.)	Professor Pat Dudgeon is a Bardi woman from the Kimberley. Since 2009 she has been a researcher in the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia (UWA). Her research is concerned with community engagement, consultation, and responsiveness, and draws upon multi-disciplinary approaches. Her large, national integrated projects map social phenomena and seek to implement transformative methods and practices focused on Indigenous health and wellbeing.
Cammi Murrup-Stewart (C.M.-S.)	Cammi is an Aboriginal woman, mother and academic, born, raised and living on Wurundjeri Country with a family history impacted by Stolen Generations. She has deep connections to the mountains of the Dandenong Ranges and is guided by Waa the Crow and Bunjil the Eagle. Alongside her Aboriginal ancestry, her family also has Irish ancestry. She is trained in social sciences and international development, now working in the psychology space to break down the silos of Western science. She leads the Murrup Bung'allambee Indigenous Psychology Group at Monash University, and her research focuses on the social and emotional wellbeing of urban Aboriginal populations, through a social science and strengths-based intersectional lens. Cammi lives with multiple disabilities and is deeply committed to centring the voices of oppressed communities in her work, in particular, connecting Indigenous youth with their cultures and communities.
Stacey McMullen (S.M.)	Stacey is an Kooma woman who was born, raised and living on Awabakal Country, with a family history impacted by Stolen Generations. Stacey is an academic and Clinical Psychologist who has worked with First Nations peoples focusing on social and emotional wellbeing and trauma interventions. She has advocated for including and privileging Indigenous knowledges in psychology education programs. Stacey is a proud member of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA).
Darcey Decke (D.D.)	Darcey is a Noongar Banjima student at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and conducted her research project under the wing of the APEP Scoping Study and Research team, with a particular focus on decolonising psychology in higher education. DD was born and raised in Karri Karrak (South West Boorjarah) country and is now living and working on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja.
Jeneva Ohan (J.O.)	Jeneva was raised by a European-descent Canadian mother and Arabic father in Toronto, Canada. She migrated to Australia in 2003 and has lived and worked on Noongar land since 2012. Having been educated in mainstream perspectives in psychology, she has reflected and continues to reflect on how these exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and how to improve psychology education and practice such as through listening, honouring, collaborating, and advocating. She is an endorsed clinical psychologist who currently directs the clinical psychology programs at UWA and is committed to ally-ship and improving cultural responsiveness in education.
Amanda Taylor (A.T.)	Amanda acknowledges her colleague Tod Stokes, Torres Strait Islander man and co-Lead for First Nations Education and Engagement at UoA Psychology, for his leadership and mentorship. Amanda is of European Australian descent and identifies as a cisgender female. Having spent most of her childhood on Peramangk country, she now lives and works on Kurna country. After her education in psychology, she spent time working as a clinical psychologist in Mparntwe and learned first-hand the necessity of culturally responsive psychology practice. Since returning to an academic role in 2019 she has worked to continually reflect on psychology education and lift up First Nations voices and knowledges across the curricula.
Peter Gill (P.G.)	Peter identifies as an Anglo Celtic cisgender male and recognises the privilege of his positioning. PG was born and is currently living on unceded Wurundjeri land. PG is a community psychologist who teaches intercultural psychology, with a focus on whiteness and white identity. Peter is committed to learning about Indigenous cultures, fostering relationships, and working in solidarity towards decolonising academic spaces.
Monica Thielking (M.T.)	Monica is a non-Indigenous researcher born in Australia and raised on Bunurong land. Her parents migrated to Australia from Germany in the late 60's. As a child of immigrants, Monica grew up with a sense of being in 'two-worlds' and had a deep curiosity about her parent's homeland as well as the people who were here 'before us'. As such, Monica was acutely aware of the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' perspectives in her entire schooling and education. Monica is now a registered psychologist and academic leader in higher education who is committed to working with and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders on ways to decolonise psychology education and strengthen pathways and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
Belle Selkirk (B.S.)	Belle is a cisgender Noongar woman living on Wadandi Boodja, connected to her culture through her grandmother (Hume). She grew up on Wadandi Boodja as a child and moved to Boorloo (Perth) as an adult. She spent a number of years as an uninvited visitor/settler in the unceded Coast Salish Territories (British Columbia, Canada) and recognises the privilege that holds. Belle is an experienced Clinical Psychologist who has worked with First Nations peoples in Australia and Canada. She is an early career researcher with the Australian Indigenous Education Project (AIEEP) focusing on Indigenous Psychology, decolonising psychology education, and cultural safety in psychological practice. Belle is a proud and active member of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA).

promotes Indigenous sovereignties and Indigenous theorising; and finally, supports self-determination, shifting the oppressive nature of Western research (Walker et al., 2013). The literature highlights how yarning has become a method and/or methodology of choice, in Indigenous research with Indigenous participants (Gibson et al., 2020; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2022)

Indigenous leadership, guidance, and participation in each yarning session was essential, as without it, yarning amongst non-Indigenous people only would not honour the processes relating to relationality and privileging Indigenous peoples' values and practices (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2022). In this research project, semi-structured yarning sessions were used, and questions were based off information provided in the survey (Selkirk, Alexi, et al., 2025). Research yarning was predominately the type of yarning used in the research (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). However, other types of yarning occurred too, such as social yarning occurred prior to commencing the research yarning and collaborative yarning occurred within the research yarns and in discussions about the project (Walker et al., 2013). Important to note in this instance is that co-researchers/authors have established relationships with each other. Many have been involved in the AIPEP CoP. These long-lasting relationships and/or vouching of the same meant that trust and contextual understandings were established prior to the yarning sessions. That trust and contextual understanding supported the relationality aspects of yarning.

Data representation and analysis

An Aboriginal researcher read through each of the transcripts to become familiar with the case studies shared. Using the transcripts, the same Aboriginal researcher developed short narratives, using the words and phrases in each of the transcripts. These short narratives became the case studies. While each transcript could generate multiple case examples, one case study was chosen from each transcript based on various factors. Case examples were sent back to each participant, who made minor changes and confirmed the case studies represented their lived experiences. Furthermore, at that point, participants were asked to become co-authors and to contribute to the discussion relating to the case examples and decolonising psychology. All participants agreed to be co-authors of the paper, and the case studies were then sent to all participants. Co-authors read the case examples and then participated in two collaborative yarns, which formed the foundation of the below discussion.

Asserting epistemological justice via APAR

In this multiple case study approach, asserting epistemological justice, that is, valuing Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing was important. Three examples of asserting epistemological justice in this research process included: 1. *Keeping the case studies in a story format.* While qualitative research approaches represent a shift away from a positivist orientation, they often remain reliant on Western data analysis processes (Breen & Darlaston-Jones, 2010; Dudgeon et al., 2020). To address that issue, each of the case studies retained the voices, narratives, and perspectives of participants. 2. *Inviting contributors to be authors on this paper.* The original ethics approval included a process whereby people who contribute to the research projects can be invited to be a co-author, which aligns with the principles of Indigenous relationality. The addition of the participants as co-authors, although a strength, resulted in another process that we had not initially anticipated. Confidentiality of co-authors' colleagues, who had contributed to the work at the university and now AIPEP, could potentially be compromised. Co-authors contacted colleagues to actively seek full and genuine consent to share the case study. 3. *Sharing and practicing Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.* Aboriginal leadership and role modelling provided opportunities for non-Indigenous co-authors to experience both APAR and yarning, as well as contribute in appropriate ways. Stories shared during collaborative yarns helped build connections between co-authors, which further assisted participants to make meaning of their own experiences. Furthermore, the process of bringing multiple lenses together supported rich collective understandings, which is an advantage of critically reflecting with others.

Ethics

As explained in Selkirk, Alexi, et al. (2025), AIPEP adheres to good practice guidelines for Indigenous research and obtained ethical approval from the AIATSIIS Research Ethics Committee (Reference: EO273–20210720)

and reciprocal ethics from the University of Western Australia (UWA; Reference: 2021/ET001137). For example, self-determination was embodied in the project's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's leadership and governance arrangements and finally, the research valued Indigenous knowledges, which is of value to past, current, and future generations of Indigenous psychologists (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2020). Quality appraisal of case study approach

Trustworthiness

Yin (2018) tests for assessing the quality of case studies were used to critically reflect on the trustworthiness of this study. *Construct Validity*: Representatives for the case studies were chosen based on their achievements relating to decolonising and Indigenising psychology programs. *Internal validity*: The case studies reflected the enablers and challenges identified in Selkirk, Alexi, et al. (2025) study. *External validity*: Relevance of case studies to other settings and people was achieved by ensuring diverse representation of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, multiple health education providers and various levels of studies, like undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The AIPEP governance and CoP confirmed their relevance to other programs in psychology, and indeed more broadly. *Reliability*: To ensure the research is logical, traceable, and clearly documented, the researchers recorded key decisions and processes throughout the study.

Findings

Our findings are illustrated in the following five case studies.

Case study 1: changing curriculum, one step at a time. (S.M.)

I commenced my position as an Indigenous scholar three years ago. My role was created to support the decolonising process of psychology programs. When I first started, there was already some Indigenous content. Initially, we focussed on just tweaking some of that content, and then later, adding a whole lot more. We have now embedded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into more than 20 undergraduate courses.

We use a variety of teaching and learning practices. For example, one of our courses used to be very statistics heavy. We now devote a class to getting yarning mats from the library, then sitting outside to look at yarning methodologies and advanced research methods. We recently employed an industry educator, who is also an Indigenous person, to support the teaching. We are now in the process of developing a governance committee for our Indigenous content – it is not up and running yet, but the logistics are happening now. I appreciate that although we have non-Indigenous academics teaching some of the decolonising psychology, there are some specific information that need to be taught by Indigenous peoples.

When I first started, a few course coordinators came to me and said “look, we’ve been really interested in putting some content in our courses, but we’ve been a bit hesitant or a bit nervous about doing that” or whatever reason they hadn’t kind of gotten there yet, and can we work together on what that might look like and how that might work. Once I wrapped my head around all the courses that were running, I looked at the different courses and I approached other coordinators and said, “Hey, I think I’ve got some content that might fit nicely into your course”. I kept the Indigenous content in a central record, so I can see that it’s both horizontally and vertically embedded. That scaffolding made sure we have that introductory material in first year and all the way through to more experiential and exposure towards the end of the program.

There were a couple of courses where we started out with including content in one week, and we’ve now grown it into a lot more. We might start with a class of theory or construct discussion, then in another class, we might include case studies or some kind of experiential discussion or a yarn to encourage reflexivity.

Staff are supported to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. All our staff that have been through our cultural competency training, and they have all been on an on-Country experience. The training is led by an Indigenous colleague and the Office of Indigenous Strategy and Leadership team within the university. The team and staff from our local Institute of Indigenous Education and Research provide ongoing consultation and mentoring to staff. I also work with the team to support any colleagues who reach out and

want to yarn about different things, including how they might have reflected on any of the classes or respond to any questions.

Case study 2: seeing the world through students' eyes. (C.M.-S.)

We have tried and are still working on pathways for students. One of the things that I built into some of my research is the priority relating to undergraduate students' disengagement. We had been trying to do this for the last few years and we were just not getting any traction. We spoke with the William Cooper Institute, and they said", You know what, we're having the same problem!" Part of the problem, we think was in relation to post COVID and during COVID, where students have all these other competing priorities and challenges, and there is a high level of disengagement. But why were we failing to get the message out? To better understand the issue students were facing, we did an Aboriginal participatory action research project that involved the students. We funded the project from the school's strategic projects grant. It was a little grant of \$20,000, which we used to employ students as research assistants. We did a photo voice project on building a sense of belonging for Indigenous students on campus. We didn't specify this research project for just psychology students, as we wanted to explore broadly what student experiences looked like. Students who filled the research assistant roles came from a range of programs, such as honours, masters, and PhD.

In the project, we are using Indigenous Research Methodologies and are still working on the analysis and findings. Already, a few interesting things are coming out of the project. One outcome from the project is that we created a sense of belonging for the students who were employed as research assistants. We all came together. We did the research slowly. We spent time together. I provided mentorship to the students and an Indigenous Professor provided supervision and leadership on the project. But the students made the decisions. It was spending time doing this project together, along with goal of the project to learn from the students that created a sense of belonging for the students. Another outcome is discovering that the students are not necessarily seeking a place of belonging in their programs, which we had assumed that they are doing. Rather the students are seeking safety.

The project has shown us that there are certain characteristics of these spaces that draw students to them. Things like being able to find a natural space and being able to find identity while walking in two worlds. Students wanted more than specific places for Indigenous students, they wanted to find a place on campus that they can go to be alone and feel safe. This is an interesting consideration; when we think about decolonising academic spaces, it's often actually "Indigenising" work we are doing, forgetting that cultural safety for Indigenous students requires dismantling unsafe spaces as well. A third outcome is that this project (and others) is emphasising that the current support for students and their curricula focuses on remote communities, like learning about the characteristics of rural and remote communities. That focus on remote communities does not reflect many of the Aboriginal communities that graduates from our university will be serving and often fails to address the needs of urban-based communities, so we are changing the focus to better meet the needs of both Indigenous students and other students.

Case study 3: Indigenous leadership: making the invisible visible (A.T.)

Prior to our current curricula work, we had a First Nation academic staff who was delivering the First Nation content. When that staff member left, there was a hole in the teaching space and no system supporting the development of ongoing decolonising processes. Consequently, the first thing we did was map the First Nation knowledges and content across the curricula. To help with the mapping, we hired a First Nation Consultant. We applied for additional budget to pay for the consultancy, which included mapping existing work, planning future decolonising curricula work, and supporting the implementation of First Nations-related content. We then asked for more budget for other aspects of the work, like smoking ceremonies and NAIDOC events. Advocating for more budget does take time and highlights the importance of leadership investment in the decolonising process.

After the mapping activity, some staff did not recognise how First Nation content could be included in their subjects. Some staff felt they were constantly stretched with both their time and capacity. However, in the last two years, many program staff (and members of our psychology profession) are more actively trying to decolonise the psychology curricula and practices. The First Nation Consultant's leadership remains

instrumental in supporting staff, students, and decolonising curriculum. Importantly, our school has now moved away from tokenistic “tick-box” perspectives, like just asking a First Nation person to do an acknowledgement and share First Nation culture in a lecture. Now, staff embed and prioritise First Nation knowledges in many more aspects of the curriculum.

The work of First Nation people to decolonise curricula is often not recorded in standard reporting mechanisms. With that context in mind, the First Nation Consultant and I keep records of the meetings they have with academics, relationships and connections formation, everyday conversations, and leadership in decolonising curricula. In essence, we made unobservable data into observable data that could both record and recognise First Nation leadership and work, although it is important to acknowledge, and for executive leaders to recognise, that translation of this work into entirely observable processes is not possible.

External leadership, specifically Indigenous leadership from the AIPEP team has been instrumental in many ways. For example, AIPEP provides resources for us to use in our curriculum reform and it provides an opportunity to connect with the AIPEP CoP, so that we have ongoing support. For example, when I developed a proposal to employ a First Nation Consultant, I spoke with AIPEP staff and AIPEP CoP representatives who understood what support, resources, and knowledges I needed to advocate for in the proposal. AIPEP has influenced our accrediting body, APAC, in that there seems to be a general shift like APAC introducing the cultural responsiveness criterion 3.8, which has been an important vehicle for change. Our teaching lead now reminds teaching staff to consider the APAC criterion and expectation to support decolonising the curricula.

Case study 4: navigating resistance to decolonising curricula (P.G.)

Nearly 20 years ago, when I first started here, Professor Chris Sonn led a few of us through the first pivotal point for curriculum change. We implemented our first intercultural unit into second year. That unit had regular updates. Five years ago, it underwent a major review, where there was a push to remove content from the unit. We negotiated to put that content into other units. The second pivotal point for curriculum change occurred three years ago, due to new and old forces coming together. It was Professor Chris Sonn's earlier work, APAC's new accreditation standard (3.8), and it was the formation of AIPEP. Those forces elicited our first formal process in psychology. Simultaneously, there was a university-wide process. In this second wave of curricula change, we did a lot.

First, we organised a meeting between psychology staff and the Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Unit, where Professor Chris Sonn now has a role. We discussed what Indigenising courses would look like. That discussion took a while because not everyone works the same and there are cultural differences. We had to change and evolve the way we work, which included accepting being a part of the collective process, which we recorded and mapped out.

The main work included meeting with unit conveners, individually or in groups. We created sub documents from the AIPEP frameworks because staff are time poor. We used these smaller documents to work with conveners, to see what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content could be included in their units.

A small group is involved in the overarching process to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content. Our work has ebbs and flows. We have been proactive with providing carrots to support change, but the stick, like the APAC accreditation, helps push the process along. Processes varied for individual curricula. The Applied Psychology Community had a strong human diversity focus, and the undergraduate had the intercultural unit and other content weaved through it. Whereas both clinical psychology and honours needed a lot more building of content and scaffolding. Our scaffolding is not super sophisticated at this stage. Instead, we normalised the inclusion of Indigenous content, making it visible for students so they can make important connections between content taught in each of the units, and across the years.

Although we have made transformative changes, there is almost an unconscious resistance and a propensity to revert to, reinstate, and/or consolidate the previous power structures that privileged Western ideologies. The resistance can bob up in different ways and it is often camouflaged. We've had a couple of those moments, and we had to make sure we had conversations, which sometimes were difficult. As you learn more about your own positioning, you gain a sense of something new. You start developing yourself and investing your time because it's part of your knowledge. I think fear is the greatest barrier, like the fear of offending someone or fear of doing the wrong thing. As staff begin to build knowledge and

experiences, their fear drops; confidence and motivation increases, and then you will see staff say, “I’ll step in. I’ll do that”.

Case study 5: creating culturally safe student pathways (M.T.)

My last psychology department committed to creating pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, which aligned with AIPEP frameworks. These commitments were reflected in the following activities.

Supporting postgraduate Indigenous student enrolments

In 2018, we had zero postgraduate Indigenous enrolments in the postgraduate psychology programs, and in 2023, we had 15. Initially, we looked at the patterns of enrolment for Indigenous students, and noticed many were online. We then focused our energy primarily on the online space; initiated relationships with Indigenous health and education partners; supported staff to commit to increasing Indigenous enrolments and facilitated programs to include Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, as well as reflecting values of cultural safety and inclusivity. A significant contribution to our success was creating stronger relationships with Indigenous students and boldly voicing, to the students, our desire to do better.

Creating safe enrolment processes

When we conducted our interview and selection for postgraduate psychology, we included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants. Our postgraduate team consciously removed barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the assessment, selection, and entry processes. We worked closely with our university Indigenous student support area. I think “word of mouth” was another key factor that improved enrolments, which, was in part, a flow-on effect from our strengthened relationships with Indigenous psychologists and services.

Proactive leadership that listens to students

Our leadership in the program was present and genuine, and by that, I mean we showed up, listened, and then acted on what we heard from students. We recognised our own privilege as educators, and we used that power to actively open doors and create pathways. Sometimes we modified existing processes, such as amending the application process, or allocating staff with time in their workload to transform curriculum or lead committees. Leadership included building strong relationships between staff and Indigenous students and giving students opportunity to share their learning experiences, so that we could understand how to do better.

Safe supervision for Indigenous students

There are three key things I do when facilitating culturally safe supervision for Indigenous higher degree research students. I learn about students’ motivation for completing a PhD. I link-up with Indigenous researchers, Indigenous support services, and Indigenous education centres, with the aim of including Indigenous researchers as co-supervisors. And finally, I develop an understanding of the students’ competing priorities and opportunities.

Supporting staff cultural responsiveness journeys

The university supported staff to engage in cultural training and after the training we collectively reflected how to embed that new knowledge into our work. Some Indigenous psychology students, from our program, developed a resource, titled “Cultural humility in the classroom”. That resource spoke to the “how” of teaching Indigenous curriculum. It reminded staff that although mistakes will be made when beginning a culturally responsive journey, sometimes mistakes can be harmful. With that in mind, we provided a clear framework containing teaching principles, which included an aim to avoid harm. We also worked with staff to make sure they felt supported to make necessary changes if students provided feedback.

Discussion

The aim of the case study initiative was to illustrate good practice examples of how individual staff and programs are decolonising psychology programs via transformative actions with both curricula work and supporting culturally safe processes for Indigenous student participation. The case studies illustrate good practice examples and align with Selkirk, Alexi, et al. (2025) survey results and did so by providing examples of current actions and policies being undertaken in psychology programs across Australia, along with the enablers and strategies. The case studies differ from the survey, in that they illustrate processes, strategies, and/or steps taken to achieve key outcomes that progress decolonising psychology programs. We now discuss common elements in the case studies.

Relationality

The case studies and collaborative yarns between researchers promoted relationality. Relationality is central to privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' sovereign knowledges in everyday practices (Bullen et al., 2023; Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Researchers shared knowledge through their own relationality with people, place/Country, and identity/positioning. The relationality supported collaborative yarns, which resulted in each researcher benefiting from the collective learning and strengthened abilities to solve problems in the workplace. The constant process of relationality, humility, and reflexivity is central to decolonising practices. These processes are based on local place-based protocols, the cultural responsiveness journey of psychology program staff, and celebrating the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. Furthermore, responsibilities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' kin, family, Country, and the futurities of those relationships are fundamental to the success of decolonising psychology programs.

Implicit in the view that relationality is central throughout the case studies is that, in typical daily psychology teaching practice, relationships are seen as unimportant, with self-sufficiency in delivering psychology in tertiary education seen as an operating baseline. This risks isolation; the move towards relationality pushes against this by forming a collective, though which case study participants were able to see "more" being accomplished. Importantly, our case studies reflect the leadership of Indigenous academics in decolonising and Indigenisation of the psychology programs, supporting non-Indigenous staff to teach content, centring Indigenous pedagogies within the programs, and supporting the development and maintenance of genuine, authentic relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Francis-Cracknell et al. (2022) research illustrated that while Indigenous academics support non-Indigenous academics to teach, caution is provided that Indigenous academics are not merely positioned as a mechanism to augment non-Indigenous academics, but rather they are positioned as leaders. In these case studies, Indigenous academics are seen as leading the ongoing advocacy for authentic and decolonising changes. Although the positioning of non-Indigenous teaching was not explored in case studies, non-Indigenous academics often do not critically engage with the settler-colonial context, including racialised histories of Australia (Francis-Cracknell et al., 2022; Moreton-Robinson, 2020). With this in mind, we encourage non-Indigenous academics to understand their own relationality and positionality.

Individual leadership and decolonisation: being brave and vulnerable

It is important to acknowledge the need for brave leadership and to be prepared to manage feelings of vulnerability in the pursuit of decolonising psychology programs. Case studies describe the feelings of fear and apprehension or even resistance that accompanies the work of decolonising psychology. At times it can be a difficult journey to do things differently or challenge deeply ingrained university systems and structures. On an individual level, there is an element of giving up, modifying, or even becoming aware of conscious or unconscious White attitudes or behaviours that are considered the norm. That resistance and/or transformation speaks to the work of Bargallie et al. (2024), p. 1543), whereby "racial literacy work enacts a refusal, resistance and defiance that act to reveal, comprehend and change existing relations and structures of powers". In these instances, staff need to be open to switching from an expert to a learner. That switching requires, in the words of Moreton-Robinson (2020), p. 243), non-Indigenous people's "ability to interrogate racial power differences

and to give up the power". Implicit in case studies was the willingness to follow the path less travelled but also responding to the risks and discomfort that were encountered or anticipated when racial power imbalances are challenged. Interrogation, we believe, means that one must be able to engage in a deep critical reflexive practice; "listening more and talking less" (Australian Psychological Society, 2017). The deep critical reflexive practice is both an individual and collective process (Ryall et al., 2021). Within the case studies, key mechanisms that build a support system around staff in their pursuit of this critical work are evident.

Decentring & recentring whiteness: decolonisation & resistance to decolonisation

Whiteness, that is the dominant/colonial way of operating, and resistance to decolonisation, is portrayed in non-Indigenous staff or student emotions. These emotions can be strong and negative, and the responses to these emotions can be both unprofessional and culturally inappropriate (Applebaum, 2007; Gibson, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Prince, 2024). In essence, decolonisation works to decentre white racial power, and resistance to decolonisation works to recentre it. The mechanisms of racial power and privilege, including resistance to decolonisation, are very much ingrained and accepted in psychology education, and society more broadly (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). Consequently, although the work presented in the case studies has been transformative and positive, the ongoing transmission of colonial oppression poses a continual threat to the work of decolonising psychology programs – current and future. This implies that much work is needed to address underlying emotional responses that result from these activities, in addition to doing the activities themselves.

The more overt examples of exclusion and dehumanisation that we identified in our collaborative yarns included: culturally unsafe teaching practices; inadequate resourcing, not employing Indigenous staff or enough Indigenous staff, Indigenous staff leadership being under-recognised and/or the credit for the same is given to non-Indigenous staff, university leadership and professional staff often lacking nuanced understandings of both decolonisation and Indigenisation, employment assistance programs that are not equipped to respond to the unique experiences of Indigenous staff, and inequitable pathways for students. Covert resistance more likely appears within Western systems and policies and as ideologies, which are viewed by many as being universal and equitable. For example, although universities have strategic goals for prioritising the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, there is often a misalignment with systems and processes that prevent that strategic goal being met.

A lack of understanding of the deep work required and the complexity of decolonisation and/or transformative change in practice across the university are common. Systems and priorities often align with/privilege Western notions of what counts as work and how community engagement is conceptualised. That makes it difficult to conduct work in a culturally safe manner and/or bring in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, like developing long-standing relationships with community to do the required work. These reflections are aligned with the key findings and discussion of Selkirk, Alexi, et al. (2025).

Future work and considerations

In line with the decolonial turn in psychology, it is crucial that our profession collectively supports the full integration of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing within education, research, and practice as we pursue decolonisation of the field. These case studies bring to surface some of the intricate conflicts, like vulnerabilities needed to learn and lead in this space, that arise from the combination of conventional colonising frameworks in academia (and society more generally) with the urgent need to reprioritise and incorporate Indigenous perspectives and deconstruct colonial influences from psychology education and practice. To negotiate these conflicts and other challenges (e.g., like the work of decolonisation being the responsibility of a few select staff and university leadership not being genuinely supportive of the work), future research or educational transformation should not only have an ambitiously broad scope, including students, university leaders, and professional staff, but also thoroughly evaluate the decolonising efforts that have been made thus far, being courageous to forge new paths to tackle the messy systemic barriers. This would include prioritising the existing and broader leadership of Indigenous peoples, respecting Indigenous knowledge and expertise, and working together to transform psychology. Like the Australian Psychology Society's apology and call for action (2017), we recognise that genuine progress requires starting with the fundamentals of historic truth-telling and critical self-reflection which many senior academics and educators

lack within their own education and therefore requires addressing immediately. This work is not easy. It requires humility and vulnerability. It requires adequate allocation of resources. It can result in defensiveness, territorialisation, and apathy. Decolonising psychology is therefore, by its very nature, a political project.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that much of this work is done by those already active in these spaces, Indigenous people and allies alike. It is often not these people who hold the power to create the substantial systemic changes needed to see genuine transformation. We argue, like Smith (2021) that the current features of powerholders are a product of the historical and ongoing colonisation in which academia is situated. The burden to address the transmission of colonial oppression and the load of the decolonising practices, including colonial load, needs to be recognised and tackled with urgency, lest those “doing the work” burn out. We propose that this includes both genuine incentivisation for engagement and valuing this work within academic and professional metrics of success.

Our proposal for future decolonising psychology work involves rigorously analysing student experiences, engagement and perceptions of decolonisation. It also includes examining the tangible needs and impacts of decolonising content, policies, and procedures on professional practices, identifying where disruption is still required, and exploring the dynamics between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in academic settings. Moreover, valuing the principles of relationality, which means embracing genuine collaboration with Indigenous peoples, and critically reflective research methodologies that increase the potential to cultivate a holistic understanding of the decolonisation process, ensuring that it is both culturally responsive and effectively inclusive of the diverse perspectives it seeks to embody. Whilst keeping in mind the necessity of localisation, we can learn lessons from our Indigenous colleagues who have also been doing this work, be that here in Australia or elsewhere. By directly incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems into the psychology curriculum, truth-telling, facing up to and dismantling the racist and oppressive basis on which the field of psychology understands wellbeing, we can work towards a decolonised approach that reflects the complexities and richness of Indigenous knowledge systems, thereby promoting self-determination, equity, and improved wellbeing.

Conclusion

Decolonising psychology is a complex and iterative process, which requires transformative actions that are of benefit to Indigenous peoples, sustained efforts by all key stakeholders, and a willingness to genuinely confront the settler-colonial legacies embedded in psychology programs, academic settings, and broader societal structures. The case studies highlighted the importance of Indigenous leadership and relationality, of which both are essential for integrating Indigenous Knowledges into psychology programs. However, resistance to decolonisation remains entrenched, necessitating critical self-reflection and systemic changes in psychology programs. While these case studies provide examples of decolonial work that is already being conducted, they can also serve to provide insights for other psychology programs (and indeed health disciplines) who are yet to commence their decolonial journeys and/or are willing to expand the work already commenced. Decolonising psychology programs will not only facilitate a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive psychology, but will also positively influence the decolonisation of academia and broader social structures.

Note

1. The terms university and higher education provider are used interchangeably in this paper.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions

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