

UNSW defends Indigenous guidelines amidst claims of 'whitewashing' and 'rewriting' history

By Lindy Kerin
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An Indigenous historian has said the attack on the new set of University of New South Wales (UNSW) Indigenous guidelines is proof Australia has a long way to go in education about the past.

Commercial radio hosts and the Daily Telegraph criticised the new guidelines drawn up by the university, calling them "rubbish" and claiming that UNSW was "rewriting the history books to state Cook 'invaded' Australia."

But UNSW has said its Indigenous terminology guide was designed to help staff and students describe Indigenous Australian people, history and culture.

"The university rejects any notion that a resource for teachers on Indigenous terminology dictates the use of language or that it is designed to be politically correct ... The guide does not mandate what language can be used," a statement released by the university said.

"Rather, it uses a more appropriate/less appropriate format, providing a range of examples. This is an important distinction to make."

It suggests that references to Australia being "settled" should instead be "invaded" and that it is offensive to say Captain Cook discovered Australia. Indigenous historian Jackie Huggins said the guidelines were entirely appropriate.

"We know this country has a colonial history and that certainly has been characterised by a devastating land dispossession, violence and unapologetic racism as well," Ms Huggins said.

"We cannot deny our history. It's a history that's never fully been taught to us in our country.

"I don't find it surprising at all that there is this incredible idea that it's unfair ... for far too long it's been very unfair on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in terms of denying and having our history not even talked about at all, it shows how far we have to go in educating our country and coming to terms with reconciliation and the debate that needs to happen."

'Indigenous voices missing from debate'

Allan Clarke, Indigenous affairs reporter for BuzzFeed Australia, said the level of outrage that had come from the guidelines was "completely over the top".

"The furore that erupted around this is kind of outrageous when you think that most of this debate is missing Indigenous voices," Clarke said.

"I think it's important when discussing something, whatever you call it, settlement or invasion, you actually talk with Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders about how they perceive that time."

Professor David Dixon, the dean of the UNSW's law school, said the guidelines were listed only as part of some students' reading material.

He said the guidelines were commonplace across tertiary institutions and many public sector organisations.

"It's a guide to students about what is regarded as being appropriate and less appropriate ways of speaking, it's not required reading or mandatory reading, it's provided as a resource for students," Professor Dixon said.

"The reason that we do this is to help our students because of a number of incidents in the past where non-Aboriginal students have quite unintentionally have said things in class discussions which have caused offense to their Aboriginal peers.

"So providing something which is just a way [for people to] find out what is the best way to say things, which will not cause offence to people, is a really responsible educational approach."

In a statement, Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham said: "As has always been the case in Australia, universities enjoy autonomy when it comes to academic concepts and what they teach their students.

"Universities should be places where ideas are contested and open to debate, nonetheless, with autonomy comes a responsibility to keep in touch with community expectations and provide an accurate reflection of our history."