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Epistemological Pluralism: Indian Knowledge Traditions in Australian Higher Education, with Complementary Insights from Persian Philosophical and Poetic Thought

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Abstract

This paper examines the marginalisation of non-Western epistemologies in Australian higher education, drawing on Indian philosophical traditions through the lived experience and Sanskrit-textual knowledge of an Indian-Australian academic, and engaging in complementary ways with Persian philosophical and poetic thought through the cultural inheritance of a Persian-Australian academic. The study employs collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013) across ten structured fortnightly dialogic sessions in late 2024 and early 2025. We identify several epistemological resources that offer substantive alternatives to the individualist, instrumentalist orientations dominant in Australian universities: holistic knowledge integration, ethical-relational frameworks, communal learning, and the rigorous distinction between conception (taṣawwur) and assent (taṣdīq) in the Persian-Islamic tradition of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. Drawing on epistemological pluralism (Harding, 2015; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Smith, 2021), Gramscian hegemony theory (Mayo, 2015), and contemporary cross-cultural epistemology (Beaney & Lai, 2025), we propose five design principles for curriculum transformation grounded in critical epistemological pluralism rather than assimilative integration.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Practitioners incorporating non-Western traditions should engage with internal critiques such as caste-based and gendered exclusions rather than presenting them uncritically.
2. Curriculum designers should distinguish domains where epistemic integration is possible from those where incommensurability requires coexistence rather than synthesis.
3. Assessment practices should be reconsidered in light of traditions that frame knowing as cognitive performance in context rather than static possession.
4. Team-teaching between tradition-holding and disciplinary academics models the epistemic negotiation that plural curricula require.
5. Collaborative autoethnography enables tradition-holding academics to contribute epistemological inheritances as legitimate scholarly resources for curriculum transformation.

Keywords

epistemological pluralism, collaborative autoethnography, decolonising curriculum, cross-cultural epistemology, Australian higher education

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Introduction

Of the executives running Australia's universities, 97% come from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds (Soutphommasane et al., 2016, p. 4). This is the structural setting in which Australian higher education claims to engage seriously with non-Western knowledge traditions, and the setting from which this paper is written. Western epistemological paradigms continue to operate hegemonically in the sector, and recent rollbacks of progressive scholarship globally (Cerullo, 2025) make the question more urgent. Australian universities have begun engaging Indigenous knowledges in curricula (Bullen & Flavell, 2022), with critical scholarship now warning against simplistic Indigenisation that produces impoverished representations (Nakata, 2007; Nakata et al., 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Yet other non-Western traditions (Indian, Persian, Chinese, Arabic) remain under-engaged.

This paper foregrounds Indian traditions, with complementary engagement with Persian philosophical and poetic thought. We draw on critical theory and on the recent flourishing of cross-cultural epistemology in mainstream philosophy of knowledge, where Beaney and Lai (2025, p. 1315), in setting out a case for 'deep epistemology', argue that the standard analytic conception of knowledge as justified true belief is parochially Anglophone and that genuine epistemological insight requires sustained engagement with Indian, Islamic, Chinese, and other traditions on their own terms. The convergence with decolonial scholarship is significant: the case for epistemic pluralism is no longer confined to critical scholarship; it is also a substantive philosophical claim. Two research questions guide the inquiry: (1) What epistemological resources do Indian and complementary Persian traditions offer for reimagining Australian higher education curricula? (2) How does structured cross-tradition dialogue between tradition-holding academics generate insights unavailable through literature review alone?

Literature

Hegemony, Epistemicide, and the Neoliberal University

The marginalisation of non-Western epistemologies represents what de Sousa Santos (2014, p. 92) calls 'epistemicide': the structural elimination of non-Western ways of knowing. Fricker (2007, p. 1) frames this as 'epistemic injustice'; Alatas (2022, p. 16) describes the 'extractivism' by which Western institutions dominate global knowledge production; Connell (2007, p. 4) shows how the social sciences are written 'from the metropole'. Gramsci's (1971) account of hegemony as cultural and intellectual control is now read through five decades of further work: Mayo (2015) on neoliberal hegemony in the university, Hall (1986) on articulation, Apple (2013) on counter-hegemonic possibility in education, Thomas (2009) on hegemony as relational rather than static. Within this setting, Australian higher education increasingly frames knowledge as individualistic skill acquisition. Baron and McCormack's (2024, p. 261) analysis of strategic plans across Australian universities reveals a uniformly performative neoliberal conception of graduate employability, what Hartley (1995, p. 410) describes as the 'McDonaldisation' of education, now increasingly delivered through micro-credentials and nano-degrees.

Epistemological Pluralism: From Decolonial Scholarship to Cross-Cultural Epistemology

Harding's (1998, 2015, p. 29) standpoint epistemology argues that starting inquiry from marginalised knowers produces more, not less, objective knowledge; her 'strong objectivity'

contends that epistemic diversity strengthens academic knowledge. Mignolo's (2000, p. 11; 2009, p. 160) 'border thinking' and Mignolo and Walsh's (2018, p. 3) 'pluriversality' propose epistemic positions that neither replicate Western universals nor retreat into nativist particulars. Temin (2025, p. 144) usefully critiques Mignolo for risking ethno-essentialism if material analysis is subordinated to epistemic. Smith (2021) reframes Indigenous research methodologies as legitimate scholarly practice; Smith et al. (2018) map the take-up across settler-colonial nations.

A complementary movement within the mainstream history of philosophy has reached similar conclusions by a different route. Beaney and Lai (2025), drawing on Stich and Mizumoto (2018), argue that the standard analytic conception of knowledge as justified true belief reflects what Wierzbicka (2018, p. 215) calls 'cultural opacity': a Eurocentric apparatus that conceals its own provincialism. They document how Indian, Islamic, and Chinese traditions develop different conceptions of knowing (as awareness episode, conception with assent, capacity to act) that resist reduction to the analytic schema. Their deepening of 'know-as' and 'know-to' (p. 1340) is generative for curriculum work: knowing-as captures aspectual knowledge (to know X is always to know X as something), and knowing-to captures the episodic dimension missing from instrumentalist curricula. The convergence is significant. The case for epistemic pluralism is no longer confined to decolonial scholarship; it is also a substantive philosophical claim with implications for how we theorise teaching and assessment.

Settler-Colonial Lessons and the Question of Incommensurability

Curriculum decolonisation efforts across settler-colonial nations offer resources and warnings. Brunette-Debassige et al. (2022) and Gaudry and Lorenz (2018, p. 221) distinguish 'Indigenous inclusion' from 'reconciliation Indigenisation' from 'decolonial Indigenisation' in Canada; Smith (2003) frames Kaupapa Māori work in Aotearoa; Mbembe (2016, p. 32) calls for structural decolonisation of the South African university. Shahjahan et al.'s (2022, p. 85) systematic review identifies a persistent pattern: curriculum decolonisation tends to stall at content addition rather than structural transformation, and outcomes evaluation remains rare. These findings inform our positioning as foundational conceptual work to be followed by implementation and engagement with student experience.

Critically, we engage the question of incommensurability. Verran (2001, p. 37) demonstrates through Yoruba and English numbering systems that genuinely different knowledge practices cannot always be reduced to one another; integration may require what she calls 'ontological choreography' (p. 116). Ludwig (2016, p. 39) distinguishes domains of overlapping ontological referents (where dialogue is possible) from domains of genuine incommensurability (where coexistence is the only honest option). We therefore position the paper not as advocating 'integration', which implies assimilation, but as epistemological pluralism: holding multiple knowledge systems in productive tension, drawing on de Sousa Santos's (2018, p. 137) ecology of knowledges as the appropriate response to genuine incommensurability.

Method

Positionality

Dr Seb Dianati: Seb is a refugee who was granted a humanitarian visa in Australia following the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran in the post-1979 period (Sanasarian, 2000). The journey out of Iran

was made by camel across desert country over five nights, leaving family behind without farewells. In the Iranian context, the families of those who flee are routinely targeted by the state. Stating this matters because the position from which he engages Persian thought is multiply inflected: insider through cultural and linguistic inheritance, outsider through religious-minority displacement, and partial through the ordinary compromises of building an academic career within Australian higher education as a person of colour. One such compromise was the anglicisation of his given name from Saib to Seb at the point of entry into Australian academic life. He notes this with humility rather than complaint: the name change was offered and accepted as the price of legibility within institutional spaces that, in his experience, have remained quietly closed in other ways. The phenomenon is well-documented in the scholarly literature on race and the Australian academy: Ahmed (2012) on the institutional life of diversity work, Moreton-Robinson (2015) on the white possessive in Australian academic space, and Bhopal (2018) on racialised gatekeeping in higher education together describe the conditions under which this paper has been written. His engagement with Persian-Islamic philosophy and Sufi poetics derives from cultural inheritance and lived experience rather than formal training in classical Islamic philosophy; this partiality is acknowledged throughout. Pinar's (2009, p. 192) reminder of the unaddressed 'I' of ideology critique guides this disclosure.

Dr Kashmira Davé: Kashmira migrated to Australia from India 22 years ago as a skilled migrant. She comes from a highly educated family; her father was a Professor of Sanskrit, providing her with direct access to ancient texts in their original language. Kashmira reads, writes, and understands Sanskrit, thereby substantially reducing her reliance on translations. Her expertise is situated within the Vedic-Upanishadic stream specifically; the paper does not claim to represent the full diversity of Indian philosophical thought, which encompasses Buddhist, Jain, Nyāya, Mīmaṃsā, and other heterodox schools (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). Kashmira's research interests centre on ancient Indian education and how oral knowledge transfer sustained accuracy across centuries. Her journey from new migrant to established academic, and the issues she faced while building a successful career in Australian higher education, have become the subject of an award-winning paper (Dave, 2025).

Approach and Rationale

This study employs Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE), defined by Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013) as a qualitative method in which researchers serve simultaneously as subjects and analysts, using their own autobiographical data to investigate sociocultural phenomena through team-based collection, dialogic analysis, and co-authored writing. CAE's contributions are multivocality, relational knowledge produced through structured dialogue, and suitability for examining socially situated identities (Hernandez et al., 2017). It is appropriate here because the empirical basis is two tradition-holding academics examining their own epistemological inheritances. CAE is complemented by dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999; Wegerif, 2013), in which dialogic space holds difference open rather than collapsing it into consensus, methodologically congruent with our pluralist commitments.

Data, Analysis, Reflexivity, and Ethics

The research involved ten hour-long Zoom sessions, fortnightly from October 2024 to February 2025, audio-recorded with mutual consent and transcribed verbatim (approximately 85,000

words). Reflective journals were maintained independently between sessions. Analysis followed a three-phase process: independent coding by each author for epistemological concepts, pedagogical implications, and points of incommensurability; collaborative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) across three dedicated sessions; and co-authored interpretive summaries refined through further independent and collaborative cycles. Themes were triangulated against transcripts, journals, and tradition-specific literature.

Following Berger (2015), reflexivity was treated as a continual internal dialogue. Each author served as 'critical friend' to the other's tradition, drawing on Pillow's (2003, p. 178) 'uncomfortable reflexivity' to interrogate rather than merely disclose positionality. The Indian-Australian author was challenged on caste-based exclusions in brahminical traditions (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012); the Persian-Australian author on gendered constructions in classical akhlāq (Ayubi, 2019). As CAE involving only the two researcher-authors, formal Human Research Ethics Committee approval was not required under either university's framework (consistent with National Statement 5.1.22); mutual consent was documented; cultural protocols for sacred and philosophical texts were negotiated; we followed Lapadat (2017) on relational ethics in CAE.

Scope and Limitations

Five limitations are acknowledged. The two researchers' CAE design produces rich situated knowledge but does not claim generalisability. Student voices are absent, a significant limitation for a paper concerned with curriculum transformation and the priority for Phase 2 research. We represent partial perspectives within vast traditions: the Indian-Australian author's expertise sits in the Vedic-Upanishadic stream; the Persian-Australian author's engagement derives from cultural inheritance rather than formal training in classical Islamic philosophy. Presenting non-Western epistemologies in Western academic format (English, linear argumentation) is itself a form of translation that may distort. Finally, this study offers no curriculum pilot or evaluation data; the design principles in the Discussion are conceptual and require testing.

Results

Insights from Indian Epistemologies

Ancient Indian epistemologies, articulated in the Vedas and Upanishads, integrate spirituality, ethics, and social responsibility in ways that contrast sharply with the empirical positivism, compartmentalised disciplines, and instrumentalist orientation of dominant Australian higher education. Knowledge here is not intellectual acquisition but transformative realisation of interconnectedness; the Chāndogya Upanishad's *Tat Tvam Asi* ('You are that') dissolves the binary distinctions between subject and object that anchor much Western epistemology. Foundational concepts (*Jñāna, Dharma, Karma, Moksha*) are summarised in Table 2 alongside their pedagogical implications; *subhāṣita* (well-spoken aphorism) anchored the *gurukula* system, distilling complex truths about duty and ethics into memorable form (Acharya, 1952). Karma Yoga from the Bhagavad Gītā, selfless action without attachment to outcomes, offers a counterpoint to competitive advantage logics in business and leadership education.

Recent comparative philosophy of knowledge offers conceptual leverage that decolonial framing alone does not provide. Sylvan (2025, p. 1367), surveying the Nyāya tradition, distinguishes *pramā* (a knowledge-episode) from *pramāṇa* (an epistemic source) and from *jñāna* (an awareness

episode). The crucial point is that *pramā* translates not as a mental state but as a successful cognitive performance: 'experiencing things the way they are, hitting the truth, just as success for an archer is a matter of hitting the target' (Ganeri, 2018, in Beaney & Lai, 2025, p. 1320). Nyāya treats knowing as an event that is process-dependent, not as the static possession of a justified true belief. This dislodges a deep assumption embedded in Australian assessment: that knowledge is something a student *has*, rather than something a student successfully *does* in context. Chadha (2025, p. 1393) extends the Nyāya argument by defending direct, non-conceptual perceptual access to universals, disrupting the standard Western dichotomy between perception and conception.

Reflective Vignette. *During Session 4, the Indian-Australian author described the Chāndogya Upanishad's teaching of Tat Tvam Asi ('You are that'), the ontological unity of all existence. The Persian-Australian author recognised an immediate parallel in Saʿdī Shirazi's Bāni Ādam ('The children of Adam are limbs of one another'). What was significant was not the recognition itself, which any literature review would surface, but the difference in epistemological pathway: one tradition arrives at collective ontology through metaphysical realisation, the other through poetic-ethical imagination. The dialogue surfaced a convergence with productive non-equivalence; both traditions reach a similar normative claim, but the warrant differs.*

Critical Engagement with Internal Power Dynamics in Indian Traditions

The ancient Vedic knowledge system categorised people by profession: Brahmins, who imparted knowledge; Vaishyas, who conducted business; Kshatriyas, who protected the wider population; and Shudras, who served the other three. These categories were known as *Varṇas* (Bhagavad Gītā 4.13), and one could move between different *Vannas* over a lifetime according to the work one undertook. The concept was subsequently misused, and the contemporary hereditary understanding of caste consolidated around the early twentieth century under colonial administration (Dirks, 2001). Guru and Sarukkai (2012), in a sustained dialogue between a Dalit and a Brahmin philosopher, demonstrate that experience of caste is epistemically significant; the Brahminical traditions foregrounded here have historically excluded non-Brahmin communities from knowledge production. Ambedkar's (1936/2014) critique of the knowledge monopoly embedded in caste hierarchy must be acknowledged. The authors do not claim Vedic-Upanishadic epistemology represents 'Indian knowledge' writ large; it is one stream within a vast and contested landscape that includes Buddhist, Jain, Cārvāka, and Nyāya schools, each in critical dialogue with Brahminical orthodoxy.

Complementary Insights from Persian Philosophical and Poetic Thought

Persian thought spans multiple traditions (Zoroastrian, classical Islamic philosophical, Sufi poetic, modern secular) with significant tensions between them (Ziai, 2009). A productive meta-level framing comes from Mohammed Abed al-Jabri's (1986/1999) critique of Arab reason, which distinguishes *bayān* (textual-linguistic reason of jurisprudence and exegesis), *burhān* (demonstrative reason inherited from Aristotle and Neoplatonism, developed centrally by Persian-born scholars al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā), and *ʿirfān* (gnostic-intuitive reason of Sufi and Shi'i mystical traditions). Al-Jabri's framework is contested, particularly his historical positioning of the modes as competing rather than constitutive, but it remains a useful scaffold. Table 3 maps the concepts

we draw on across these modes; the *bayānī* mode is largely absent from this paper and named as a further limitation.

The dominant Anglophone framing of Persian thought tends to stop with the Sufi poets, a kind of Orientalism that assumes the Persian intellectual contribution is essentially mystical rather than rigorous. The classical Islamic philosophical tradition, much of it produced by Persian-born scholars writing in Arabic, was philosophically severe. Adamson (2024, p. 651) draws attention to the most fundamental distinction in Islamic epistemology: between *taṣawwur* (conception, understanding what something is) and *taṣdīq* (assent, thinking that something is the case). The distinction refuses the contemporary analytic reduction of knowledge to a species of belief. Klinger (2025, p. 1418) traces the centuries-long debate over its exclusivity and irreducibility, defending Harawī's refinement: knowledge is a cognitive state caused by the presence to mind of a form, with or without an 'acknowledging attitude'. Holding the Sufi-poetic and classical-philosophical strata together refuses the patronising dichotomy by which the West supplies rigour and the East supplies wisdom.

A modern critical strand (Hedayat, Al-e-Ahmad, Fardid, Shayegan) questions the limitations of Western empirical rationality while resisting nativist nostalgia, alert to the ways appeals to 'tradition' can be politically mobilised. This strand is significant for the present author's positioning: as a Bahá'í refugee from post-revolutionary Iran, he engages with Persian thought from within the diaspora and from a position of religious minority displacement.

Pedagogical Relevance: The Integration-Interconnection Paradigm

Al-Jabri's framework finds direct pedagogical application in Amin Abdullah's (2014) *integrasi-interkoneksi* paradigm, developed at UIN Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta and now influential across Indonesia's State Islamic University network. Abdullah holds the *bayānī, burhānī,* and *ʿirfānī* modes in productive interconnection rather than hierarchical subordination, with porous disciplinary boundaries. This is, to our knowledge, the most structurally serious institutional implementation of epistemological pluralism currently operating at scale, and it provides a concrete comparative referent for the design principles below. The Indonesian model operates within an explicitly Islamic institutional framework that Australian secular universities cannot replicate, but the underlying architecture, in which epistemic modes are structurally interconnected rather than appended as electives, is directly relevant to Australian curriculum design.

Critical Engagement with Internal Power Dynamics in Persian-Islamic Traditions

The Persianate *akhlāq* tradition that informs our discussion of ethical wholeness constructed the ethical human as an elite male within a hierarchical cosmology. Ayubi (2019), reading al-Ghazālī, Ṭūsī, and Davānī, demonstrates that the classical ethics literature systematically excluded women and non-elite men from full moral personhood. Spivak's (1988, p. 287) warning that decolonial valorisations of 'indigenous' knowledge can silence the doubly subordinated applies. These internal critiques do not invalidate the epistemological resources we identify; they contextualise them, and they model the critical engagement honest curriculum transformation demands.

Table 1

Comparison of Knowledge Dimensions across Indian, Persian, and Australian Educational Contexts

Dimension	Indian (Vedic-Upanishadic)	Persian (Philosophical-Poetic)	Australian (Dominant)
Purpose of education	Holistic growth: blending material success with spiritual liberation (Moksha)	Ethical wholeness (Akhlāq) and spiritual insight (ʿIrfān); rigorous demonstrative knowledge (‘ilm)	Individual empowerment through skill acquisition; employability-focused
Source of knowledge	Internal insight complementing external learning; *pramāṇa* as event of successful cognition	Reason (ʿaql), revelation (naql), mystical experience (ʿIrfān); conception (taṣawwur) and assent (taṣdīq)	Empirical, scientific, observation-based; knowledge as justified true belief
Individual vs collective	Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (‘the world is one family’); collective good prioritised	Bāni Ādam (‘limbs of one body’); collective welfare and moral duty	Individual achievement; personal gain in competitive contexts
Role of teacher	Guru: guide for life, figure of reverence	Pīr/Ustād: intellectual guide and ethical mentor	Facilitator or expert delivering content
Approach to learning	Relational, experiential, process-oriented; mastery through lived wisdom	Dialogue, metaphor, introspection; structured demonstrative reasoning	Structured, standardised, outcome-driven
Ethical integration	Dharma, Karma integrated throughout; ethics inseparable from knowledge	Akhlāq integrated; morality intertwined with formal learning	Typically secular; ethics often bolted on as separate module

Note. The Australian column captures dominant tendencies rather than the full diversity of Australian pedagogical practice.

Table 2

Key Concepts in Indian Epistemological Tradition

Concept	Tradition Source	Working translation	Pedagogical implication
Jñāna	Vedas and Upanishads	Knowledge transcending factual accumulation toward self-realisation	Education oriented to wisdom and ethical formation
Dharma	Vedas and Upanishads; Bhagavad Gītā	Duty, righteousness, alignment with cosmic and social order	Integration of ethical reflection across the curriculum

Karma	Bhagavad Gītā; Upanishads	Action and its consequences; cause and effect	Long-horizon accountability in business and sustainability education
Moksha	Vedas and Upanishads	Liberation as the teleological goal of education	Reframes education's purpose beyond employability metrics
Tat Tvam Asi	Chāndogya Upanishad	'You are that': ontological unity of self and universal reality	Foundation for collective ontology in civic curricula
Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam	Mahā Upanishad	'The world is one family'	Counter-narrative to individualist competitive frames
Subhāṣita	Pañcatantra; Mahābhārata	'Well-spoken saying'; aphoristic ethical wisdom	Narrative and contemplative assessment formats
Karma Yoga	Bhagavad Gītā	Selfless action without attachment to outcomes	Counter-narrative to competitive-advantage logics
Pramā	Nyāya (Sylvan, 2025)	Knowledge-episode; successful cognitive performance	Assessment as performance-in-context rather than recall
Pramāṇa	Nyāya	Epistemic source: perception, inference, testimony, analogy	Plural validation of knowledge
Jñāna (Nyāya)	Nyāya	Awareness episode; can be veridical or non-veridical	Distinction between knowing and merely believing

Table 3

Key Concepts in Persian Philosophical and Poetic Thought

Mode	**Concept**	**Tradition / source**	**Working translation**	**Pedagogical implication**
Bayān	*Tafsīr; Fiqh*	Classical Islamic textual sciences	Exegesis of revealed text; jurisprudential reasoning	Named as known limitation
Burhān	*Taṣawwur*	Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Adamson, 2024)	Conception: understanding what something is	Refuses reduction of knowledge to belief
Burhān	*Taṣdīq*	Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Klinger, 2025)	Assent: thinking that something is the case	Distinguishes propositional commitment from conceptual grasp

Burhān	*ʿIlm*	Ibn Sīnā	Complete demonstrative scientific knowledge	Disciplinary rigour as one mode among others
Burhān	*Ma'rifa*	Ibn Sīnā	Knowledge of particulars subsumed under universals	Context-bound knowing alongside abstract knowing
ʿIrfān	*ʿIrfān*	Sufi tradition; Rumi, Hafez	Experiential, intuitive understanding; gnosis	Contemplative pedagogies and reflective assessment
ʿIrfān	*Akhlāq*	Persianate ethics (Ṭūsī, Davānī; cf. Ayubi, 2019)	Ethical wholeness; virtue formation	Ethical-relational framing of teacher role
ʿIrfān	*Kherad-e Jamʿi*	Persian poetic-philosophical tradition	Collective wisdom through respectful dialogue	Dialogic curriculum structures
ʿIrfān	*Bāni Ādam*	Saʿdī Shirazi, Gulistān	'The children of Adam are limbs of one another'	Collective ontology in intercultural curricula
Modern critical	*Gharbzadegi*	Al-e-Ahmad	'Westoxification'; critique of uncritical Western emulation	Critical literacy on knowledge transfer politics
Modern critical	*Cultural schizophrenia*	Shayegan	Bifurcated postcolonial intellectual condition	Resource for reflexivity in cross-cultural teaching

The comparative knowledge dimensions are discussed further in next section.

Discussion

Three findings emerged specifically from the dialogic process. Convergences across traditions, such as the collective-being ontology in *Tat Tvam Asi* and *Bāni Ādam*, were experienced relationally rather than catalogued intellectually; the affective dimension of cross-tradition recognition deepened our understanding of what 'pluralism' means in curricular practice. Divergences proved equally generative: the Indian emphasis on metaphysical realisation and the Persian emphasis on poetic-ethical imagination represent epistemic pathways that resist synthesis, illustrating the productive incommensurability that Wegerif (2013) argues dialogic space must hold open. The sessions also surfaced both authors' tendencies toward uncritical advocacy for their own traditions, which the reflexive 'critical friend' structure helped identify and interrogate.

Design Principles for Curriculum Transformation

Drawing on our findings and the literature cited above, we propose five design principles, summarised in Table 4. The principles are conceptual; they require empirical testing in subsequent phases.

Table 4

Five Design Principles for Curriculum Transformation

Principle	What it changes	Theoretical anchor	Implementation note
1. Dialogic curriculum structures	Replaces transmission pedagogy with structured cross-epistemological dialogue	Wells (1999); Wegerif (2013); Indian gurukula; Persian communal discourse	Team-teaching pairs tradition-holders with disciplinary academics
2. Narrative and contemplative assessment	Expands assessment to include reflective narratives, contemplative practice, and oral forms	Sylvan (2025) on pramā as successful cognitive performance	Subhāṣita-based ethical reasoning, poetic response, dialogic assessment formats
3. Ethical-relational framing of teacher role	Reconceptualises the academic from content facilitator to ethical mentor	Beaney and Lai (2025) on 'knowing-as'; guru and pīr/ustād traditions	Sustained professional development for multiple epistemological frameworks
4. Critical pluralism, not assimilative integration	Distinguishes domains where epistemic integration is possible from domains requiring coexistence	Verran (2001); Ludwig (2016); de Sousa Santos (2018); Adamson (2024) and Klinger (2025)	Curriculum maps these distinctions explicitly
5. Internal critique as design requirement	Builds critique of internal exclusions (caste, gender) into any module engaging non-Western traditions	Spivak (1988); Guru and Sarukkai (2012); Ambedkar (1936/2014); Ayubi (2019)	Rubrics evaluate critical engagement, not appreciation

Practical Implications

Curriculum transformation of this kind faces substantial barriers, consistent with the comparative literature (Shahjahan et al., 2022; Kuokkanen, 2007). Accreditation frameworks privilege disciplinary content over epistemological pluralism; workforce planning narrows graduate attributes toward employability; institutional expertise in non-Western knowledge systems is limited; resistance from academics trained exclusively in Western traditions is predictable. None of this argues against the project; it argues for realistic implementation planning. The TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework, in its provisions for course design and learning outcomes, allows considerably more epistemic latitude than current sector practice exploits.

Theoretical Implications

The convergence between decolonial scholarship (Smith, 2021; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and the contemporary cross-cultural epistemology project (Beaney & Lai, 2025) is itself a theoretical

contribution. This literature has largely developed independently: decolonial work centres justice and power; cross-cultural epistemology centres philosophical rigour and conceptual analysis. Our study suggests they communicate productively with one another. The Nyāya, conceptualisation of knowledge as successful cognitive performance (Sylvan, 2025) and the Islamic distinction between conception and assent (Adamson, 2024; Klinger, 2025) are not merely 'alternative perspectives' to be appreciated; they are substantive philosophical resources that challenge how Australian higher education theorises assessment, curriculum, and the teacher role.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations acknowledged in the Method section carry implications for future work. The absence of student voices is the most significant: subsequent phases will engage students from Indian and Persian backgrounds to test whether the design principles produce meaningful curricular experiences. The two-researcher scope, while appropriate for foundational conceptual work, requires extension to other tradition-holding academics. The design principles are untested; piloting in specific curriculum contexts is the priority for Phase 2 research.

Conclusion

Through structured cross-tradition dialogue, this collaborative autoethnographic study identified convergent commitments to collective ontology, ethical-relational knowledge, and holistic education in Indian and Persian traditions, commitments that stand in productive tension with the individualist, instrumentalist orientations dominant in Australian higher education. We engaged critically with the internal power dynamics of these traditions (caste exclusions in Indian knowledge, gendered hierarchies in Persian-Islamic ethics) and with the theoretical challenge of incommensurability, drawing on Verran (2001) and Ludwig (2016) to position the contribution as critical pluralism rather than assimilative integration.

The paper situates curriculum transformation within both decolonial scholarship (Smith, 2021; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and the contemporary cross-cultural epistemology project (Beaney & Lai, 2025), arguing that these literatures speak to one another even as they retain distinct projects. It proposes five design principles for transformation grounded in critical epistemological pluralism. Subsequent phases will engage students from Indian and Persian backgrounds and pilot the design principles in specific curriculum contexts. The work needs to continue, done by tradition-holding academics in critical dialogue with their own inheritances, rather than by external observers reasoning about traditions from the outside.

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The authors list the following CRediT contributions: Dianati: conceptualisation, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. Davé: conceptualisation, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

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