

INAUGURAL SEMINAR
of
University of Canberra's
Collaborative Indigenous Research Initiative (UC CIRI)
22 July 2014

SEMINAR presented by UC Chancellor Dr Tom Calma AO:
Indigenous research at the University of Canberra

Thank you Professor Shannon (Frances) for the welcome and brief introduction to the Collaborative Indigenous Research Initiative (CIRI).

A sincere thank you, Aunty Agnes Shea, for your Welcome to Country.

I pay my respects to the traditional owners of this land, the Ngunnawal people. I acknowledge all Elders present and our youth who will be our future Elders, custodians of our stories, language and culture.

As with other elements of 'the gaps' in Indigenous equality, there is a huge discrepancy between the number of established Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers in the higher education sector.

According to DEEWR Statistics 2010 to close this gap in 2012 would have required Indigenous postgraduate numbers and completions to increase by 600% to attain parity with population proportions. In 2010, for example, only 0.7% of PhD enrolments nationwide were Indigenous and only 0.4% of PhD completions were Indigenous.

Contributing factors to this picture are:

- the low numbers of Indigenous postgraduate enrolments and completions
- the paucity of Indigenous research capacity building programs,
- the relative lack of Indigenous research role models, methodologies, and mentors available to students within their respective disciplines and institutions.

Larissa Behrendt et al's report - the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (2012) - identified an urgent need to build research capability relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in Australian universities.

Thus important factors in retaining and attracting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into higher degrees by research are the provision of sufficient academic support and social and cultural inclusion.¹

UC is responding in a number of ways, including through:

UC CIRI achieving its aspiration to become an Indigenous-led research centre that can inspire and support would-be Indigenous researchers and attract undergraduates to consider a research path.

Partnering with The Aurora Project, which has expanded from its original focus on Native Title to be concerned with Indigenous education and Indigenous affairs generally. UC has partnered with The Aurora Project and the Charlie Perkins Trust to implement The Aspiration Initiative (TAI) that is contributing to broadening the conversation about what is possible for Indigenous Australians in relation to academic achievement – from school attendance and minimum benchmarks to academic excellence in Australia and on the world stage.

I hope that the TAI will reap rewards in the form of more Indigenous university students and graduates and more of them continuing on to research degrees at UC.

TAI aims to:

- better understand why many talented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not going to university directly from school,
- inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school and university students of undergraduate and postgraduate pathways and support at universities in Australia and overseas,
- support and inspire students to excel in their university studies, so that they may be in a position to take advantage of opportunities, such as the many scholarships that are available for undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Linking with NIRAKN, the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network. NIRAKN is funded by the Australian Research Council, with the aim of contributing to addressing the dearth of Indigenous researchers in tertiary institutions and attracting and retaining a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

NIRAKN's motto is 'Indigenous Knowledge Production: Generating Change through Connections'. Notably, its aims reflect or complement the aspirations of UC CIRI founders and my own as Chancellor, and include:

- Establishing a quality program of capacity building initiatives to form a skilled and qualified research community by supporting aspiring, postgraduate, and early - to mid-career Indigenous researchers.

¹ <http://www.nirakn.edu.au/about-us/background-to-nirakn/>

- Initiating the Indigenous research agenda by applying Indigenous knowledges and expertise to multi-disciplinary collaborative projects of pressing research in order to inform community and government policy and program delivery.²

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in a Research Higher Degree are eligible to join the NIRAKN list of Postgrads and are then invited to all NIRAKN activities and events, including NIRAKN's Capacity Building Program, and are eligible to apply to participate.

Indigenous researchers who were not part of the initial ARC funding application can apply to become an Affiliate Member in order to participate in network research and activities.

UC is a NIRAKN supporter and the Deputy Vice Chancellor Research, Professor Frances Shannon, has committed financial resources to support Indigenous UC academics and PhD Candidates to attend NIRAKN events and seed research. Some of the NIRAKN funding also goes towards UC CIRI activities.

Dr Peter Radoll, Assistant Professor in Information Systems – Faculty of Business Government and Law is currently the only UC participant (as a Chief Investigator) on NIKRAN. Nationally there are 40 Chief Investigators, who are all members of NIRAKN.

Last week Peter led a UC delegation of Kerrie Doyle (Assistant Professor in Health), Wendy Summerville and Tess Ryan (both PhD candidates and Tess won the UC University Medal last year as the student with the highest academic GPA) to the NIRAKN annual forum and workshop.

Another of my hats is as Chair of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) and its managing company, Ninti One.

The CRC – REP and Ninti One are focused on delivering solutions to the economic challenges that affect remote Australia. Through its research, it is providing practical responses to the complex issues that restrict full economic participation to people living in remote Australia. Its overarching research themes are Regional Economies, Enterprise Development, and Investing in People.

CRC-REP is a partnership organisation of more than fifty stakeholders, 30% of which are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.³

The CRC-REP runs a Student Scholarship Programme and (For the four years to 2014, CRC-REP has had a target of training at least 24 post-graduate students, and supporting at least five (5) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduates, all from its partner tertiary institutions. These are the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and Charles Darwin, Curtin, Flinders, Griffith, Southern Cross, New England and South Australia Universities.

² <http://www.nirakn.edu.au/about-us/nirakn-objectives/> ; <http://www.nirakn.edu.au/about-us/background-to-nirakn/>

³ <http://crc-rep.com/about-us>

Ninti One has had the target of, and ensuring that, at least 70 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander field researchers are trained and paid.⁴ More about these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander field researchers in a minute.

Ninti One operates as an independent, national not-for-profit company focused on building opportunities for people in remote Australia through applied on-ground research, innovation and community development.

Ninti One's Community - based Research Programme, that reflects its strong commitment to employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is known as the Aboriginal Community Researchers program

The rationale is simple – such researchers open the space for authentic engagement and a deeper understanding of location, Traditional knowledge, languages and other dynamics that often inhibit research conducted by external people.

We now have a network of over 120 trained Aboriginal Community Researchers in over 55 communities, who are skilled in the fields of governance, resource management, anthropology, business development, community-based planning, training, participatory research and social analysis.

UC is not currently a partner of CRC-REP, or Ninti One, but our membership of NIRAKN makes us a defacto partner.

Partnering with an organisation like CRC-REP or Ninti One will potentially provide a range of benefits and opportunities for UC and CIRI.

Last year NATSEM, an entity of UC, celebrated its 20th birthday. It has over its lifetime maintained its position as one of Australia's pre-eminent independent economic and social policy research centres.⁵

It plays a critical role in the policy debate and in promoting social change, including by critically analysing politically expedient claims and ideologically driven policies.

NATSEM contributes in many ways to UC – its standing in the research community, its international profile and by contributed through its Indigenous research.

NATSEM has an Indigenous Disadvantage research stream and is currently working on two projects:

- Deriving small area estimates of Indigenous disadvantage across Australia, and

⁴ <http://crc-rep.com/students-0>

⁵ <http://www.natsem.canberra.edu.au/about-us/>

- Identifying small area differences in relation to suicide and juvenile justice issues in collaboration with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation.

Its research in other areas, such as Social Inclusion and Wellbeing, Poverty and Inequality, Chronic Diseases, Health Inequalities and Housing can also generate valuable data on the status of Indigenous Australians.⁶

NATSEM currently has 4 PhD candidates, but none are Indigenous Australians...As mentioned earlier, UC research that has an Indigenous focus or Indigenous 'cross cut' is found in many disciplines including law, environment, health, public policy, economics and social sciences.

The 41 founding members or instigators of UC CIRI comprise UC's researchers working in this space.

UC has seven Indigenous researchers comprising three Assistant Professors (one with a PhD), three PhD candidates and one Masters Research student.

Research topics, specific and more general include:

- The Road to Eldership - Following the Tjukurpa Way of Visionary and Sacred Leadership
- Strange Estrangement - Indigenous Prisoners, Crime and the Internet
- Computer systems
- Models of Leadership
- The Invisibility of Aboriginal men, writing, novels and communication
- Cultural Representation
- Generational Family Trauma - Recovery from Dependency Addiction and abuse
- Stories of Elders, and
- Biography.

As many of you will know, in one of my lives I am hired by the Commonwealth Department of Health as consultant National Coordinator of Tackling Indigenous Smoking (TIS). My role is to assist in the promotion and establishment of the TIS initiative, lead and mentor the TIS workforce and provide strategic guidance and policy advice on the Tackling Indigenous Smoking initiative.

In this role I have come to know staff of the Chronic Disease Section in the Indigenous Health Programmes Branch. One member is a UC PhD candidate, Mr Raglan Maddox.

Raglan's research, entitled, 'The Smoke Ring: Smoking among Indigenous Australians' aims to contribute to the evidence-base on tobacco control

⁶ <http://www.natsem.canberra.edu.au/research/research-areas/indigenous-disadvantage/>

interventions targeting the Indigenous Australian population in the Australian Capital Territory.

Raglan's research is one example of Indigenous focused research being conducted at the UC that aims to contribute to public good and influence health policy.

A core component of Raglan's research is investigating networks and their influence in relation to shifting tobacco use, behaviours and attitudes. In other words, Raglan is seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence smoking:

- Is there an association between social and cultural factors and smoking?
- Do social networks influence smoking behaviours?

The project will focus on evaluating tobacco control interventions, including the No More Boondah which has been running in the ACT, and will help inform the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tobacco Control strategy.

It is being conducted in collaboration with Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service and ACT Health, which is providing some funding.

Thus, a central feature of the research is community engagement/ involvement to engender a sense of ownership of the issue and ensure the aims and objectives of the research are relevant and useful for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the community. This is research undertaken by a non Australian Indigenous person, in genuine partnership with Indigenous people on an issue that is most relevant to our people. This is the type of research that UC CIRI members can do for the public good.

As mentioned earlier, UC CIRI has strong links with and is envisaged in UC's Reconciliation Action Plan. It is also, though less clearly, encompassed in our Strategic Plan 2013-17 that states that our research endeavours will be guided by the principles of:

- Focus: Given our size we will focus our efforts in the research domains of environment, governance, communication, health and education.
- Excellence: Our staff will strive for excellence in their research and research training endeavours and this will be evidenced by an increase in the national and international influence of our research.
- Partnerships: We will support the formation of research and research training partnerships with local, national and international research universities and institutions, at both the strategic and individual level.
- Impact: Our research discoveries and applications will lead to early improvements in the changing world around us, and directly benefit industry, business, government and the wider community.

UC CIRI is dedicated to excellence, partnerships and impact. The UC has chosen to focus efforts in research domains that 'reflect our current and emerging strengths, societal need and opportunity' and 'Indigenous' is not one of them.

UC CIRI recognises and is a response to the cross-cutting nature of these five domains with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

UC CIRI responds to the Strategic Plan's commitment to '... ensure that our focus research domains continue to underpin the interdisciplinary approach required to generate impact and contribute to solving some of the big societal problems'.

I have tried to paint a picture of what research we do at UC and highlight some programs that exist in other institutions that we can learn from or partner or collaborate with. I hope I have demonstrated how the efforts of UC CIRI fit with our RAP and Strategic Plan and how the university is supporting UC CIRI.

UC CIRI has the potential to take on a leadership role at UC and with the support of Deans, host an institution wide showcase of all research related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. My experience from other universities has been sobering. The reality is that in most universities there is no central repository or coordination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and all too often no cross-discipline knowledge or limited sharing of research resources, findings, collaborative grant bids and innovation. There is no excuse for this not to happen as it is generally thought to be a good idea but no one has the primary responsibility to make it happen.

UC CIRI should also offer the support and confidence to academics and researchers to express their voice through the conduct of seminars as proposed. But I also see UC CIRI as a vehicle to give voice to its members to express view in mainstream media and through the UC Media Centre. Authorative views by Indigenous academics and HDR students is lacking in most public policy and mainstream media debates.

So this is where UC CIRI comes in. With the support of the DVC Research and Deans, a permanent home and secretariat support, this can happen under the leadership of UC CIRI in the first instance.

So friends, all the best with your studies and, with goodwill and a strong conviction from its membership, UC CIRI will be a leader and champion of informed academic debate.