

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Thursday 14 December 2017

Dr Wayne Atkinson
T.G Tucker Medal Recipient

Thank Arts Faculty, and the University of Melbourne School of Social and Political Science and the Indigenous Studies program and the Yorta Yorta Community special thanks to my family and their contribution to Education.

Today is an opportune time to focus on education as an integral part of the journey of learning that has culminated in those achievements recognised? It is also an historic occasion, as I believe I'm the first Indigenous recipient of this particular award, a significant occasion that I would like to honour for my people the Yorta Yorta Dja Dja Wurrong traditional owners of the Murray and Central Victorian region.

In receiving the Award there are some points along the journey of Education I would like to highlight and I will use the success of Oncountry Learning program as case study in Indigenous education outcomes. OCL is a program that has produced overwhelmingly positive outcomes in teaching and student learning and one that has attempted to bridge the equality gap between Indigenous education and the Academy.

It is against a background of exclusion of Indigenous knowledge for the most part of Australia's education system that we can reflect on the positive achievements and contributions that Indigenous education and the Oncountry Learning program has achieved at the University of Melbourne. Now approaching its 15th year as a field based course it has received overwhelming endorsement and recognition as a teaching and learning course receiving consistent positive outcomes from Student Evaluation Results. When measured against the three main teaching criteria for the evaluation of courses for the 14 years it has been running, it has achieved near perfect scores of nearly 99%. Thank you students, the School of Social Political Science, Arts Faculty, the University and the Yorta Yorta community for the success we can share for such a high achievement in Indigenous Studies education. I would particularly like to thank the Dean of the Arts Faculty for his appraisal of the course which he describes as a 'Jewel in the Crown' Indigenous Studies subject. That is a great honour for the course and one that evokes many positive outcomes for all contributors.

Having set the context and the tone for today's address I would now like to share the journey of learning that has culminated in this award.

The Oncountry Learning course is now in its 15th year as a community based education program. It was initially inspired by the work of some of our great scholars and leaders of the calibre of Thomas Shadrach James (my great grandfather) who studied medicine and education at the University of Melbourne before the turn of the 19th Century. He was an outstanding scholar and worldly thinker who became teacher, mentor and community leader at Maloga and Cummeragunja Aboriginal reserves (1881-1947). It is great honour for me to praise his influence, as I often feel a strong connection with the University, knowing that

I've been virtually walking in his footsteps in my career path in education and learning . Other members of my family and Indigenous students have been inspired to follow the same path to higher education at the University of Melbourne.

Returning to Granpa's story, it was a place called the 'Scholars Hut at the old Maloga Mission that he enters the world of the Yorta Yorta people. He marries one of the matriarchs of the tribal group and dedicates the rest of his life to our peoples struggle for justice and education equality. He then takes under his wing and mentors the first generation of outstanding scholars and political leaders who are respected as legends of the Indigenous struggle for racial equality and fundamental rights. Yorta Yorta leaders of the calibre of William Cooper, Sir Doug Nichols Theresa Clements, Marj Tucker, Bill Onus, Shadrach James Jnr are some of the outstanding students of Granpa James. They are the founding leaders of the Aboriginal political movement, established in Victoria and New South Wales, in the 1930s. William Cooper ' learned to write letters and express himself in a formed and educated hand' which helped him to organise people to form the Australian Aborigines League AAL, the founding organisation of the political movement in Melbourne, 1932 (Mr Maloga, 1976:114-115).

'The power of the voice, the spear of the pen' and 'collective organisation' are the key strategies that Granpa's teachings instilled in these fine leaders. It was in the Scholars Hut away from the vagaries of Mission life and exclusion that Granpa inspired his students and those of our generation to see the value of education as an empowerment tool. Education was the pathway to community empowerment and the means by which the principles of self determination, reconciliation and greater understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians could be achieved. And it must be remembered that he was able to do this against overwhelming odds and disadvantage of the time.

The prescribed level of education allowed to be taught to our forbears living under the yoke of colonial rule was equal to that of an 8 year old non Indigenous child-grade 8. The quality of education Granpa was able to deliver under those oppressive circumstances is still considered a remarkable achievement. The outstanding leadership that emerged from this experience is what motivated my generation to embrace education as a tool of individual and community empowerment. That is the source of the teaching pedagogy, world view and ideology that shaped my peoples thinking and desire for equality of education. It is the key factor that inspired the success of Oncountry Learning over the last 15 years. The results for the teaching outcomes of the Oncountry course are outstanding, reaching nearly perfect scores and consistently high results .

Let's take a closer look a closer look at the dynamics of the Oncountry program.

The OCL course is a field based program that embraces the principles of experiential and transformative learning and is taught by Yorta Yorta people. This method of learning is a process designed to give students a broader understanding of the nature and extent of Indigenous occupation of the ancestral lands. Students doing the course are deeply affected with what they see and learn and with what they are taught by Yorta Yorta people. The course introduces students to the enormous timeline (60-120000 years) of Yorta Yorta occupation, use and enjoyment of the ancestral lands. It examines the tangible evidence of past occupation and then looks at the more recent history of Maloga and Cummeragunja, from the 1860s to the present. Students visit the key organisations in the region that deliver major services in education, health, sport and community based programs. It also examines

the sequential barriers that prevent Indigenous Australians achieving greater self determination and justice in 21st Century Australia. From this experience students gain a deeper insight into the extent to which organisations and communities have achieved greater control of their affairs in accordance with self determination principles. This experience in learning is a transformative process that students take with them to share with other people including their families. It is an experience of learning that *students take with them on their journey of learning and one that inspires them to pursue other Indigenous subjects which they combine with their general academic studies.*

Before students go Oncountry, I encourage them to approach their learning with an open mind, free of those misconceptions and stereotypical notions of Aboriginality they may have learned, and to come with a willingness to learn from the Indigenous viewpoint. *“Students certainly respond to this challenge in a positive way”, “which comes back to us in their reflections of their learning and the course”.*

Outcomes of Course

Some of the outcomes that can be measured in terms of individual and community based empowerment are:

Students have created a strong partnership with Aboriginal communities along the Murray and contributed their knowledge and skills to the Yorta Yorta Nations campaign for the recently proclaimed National Parks and Joint Management agreements in the region. Several students have done research projects with Indigenous organisations, applying the consultation principles learned in Indigenous Studies and the practice of applied research which empowers local communities.

A former student wrote an outstanding play about the Aboriginal Day of Mourning, inspired by his course experience. Play: ‘1938: An Opera’ was performed at Melbourne University and brought together a caste of Indigenous, International and local students.

Many students are engaged in the University of Melbourne’s Tutorial Assistance program for Indigenous students as Tutors and some also played supportive and educational roles for Indigenous students staying in residential colleges.

I have personally mentored Indigenous students doing Law degrees and students doing PhDs who are now studying at Cambridge, and Oxford Universities on Charles Perkins and Rhodes Scholarships. One is doing a PhD on the repatriation of cultural materials to the Bikini Community in North East Arnhem Land.

Have supervised students doing honours studies on Indigenous issues, one of whom is now working for the Gagudju Association in Kakadu, Northern Territory, and another one in Berlin who produced a video on the Dharnya Cultural Centre in the Barmah National Park which is on You Tube.

Law students have used their learning to promote Indigenous and human rights issues, including one who works in the United Nations Human Rights Council in New York.

Three students completed engineering degrees and went on to work with Engineers without Borders in Indigenous communities in Australia and in South East Asia. Four students are involved in Indigenous radio and ANTAR (Australians for Native Title & Reconciliation).

Some students are journalists contributing articles on Indigenous awareness issues.

Oncountry Learning has influenced other disciplines at the University of Melbourne who are developing Oncountry programs in the fields of health, education, law and cultural studies. For example, a community based education course Oncountry4 Health for medical students auspiced by Uni Melb and the Department of Rural Health, is now being taught as a field based course and has developed partnerships with Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop, RFNC, and the Viney Morgan Aboriginal Medical Service, Cummeragunja.

It is hard to measure these outcomes in terms of closing the Gap in Indigenous education generally but they are positive achievements. There is still much work to be done in providing pathways for Indigenous students in higher education not to mention greater equity for Indigenous voices in the teaching of Indigenous studies within the academy.

I will close there and thank the Arts Faculty, University of Melbourne for the opportunity to deliver this Occasional Address at this Conferring of Degrees Ceremony. Would like to finish on those key political strategies that inspired many of us to achieve higher education by drawing on the metaphor of the scholars hut to say that; the 'Power of the Voice, the Spear of the Pen and Collective Organisation are still the key educational strategies for achieving greater reconciliation, and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians today.

In Yorta Yorta Spirit thank you and good luck with your future dreams and aspirations.

T.G. Tucker Medal Citation

Chancellor,

Dr Atkinson is a Yorta Yorta elder who has made an outstanding contribution to Indigenous education.

Dr Atkinson has held academic teaching posts at the University of Melbourne since 1997, as a consultant and lecturer, Senior Lecturer and subsequently Coordinator and Senior Lecturer in Indigenous Studies (2000-2007) and as an Honorary Senior Fellow since 2013. He has also taught at Deakin, Monash, La Trobe and Australian Catholic Universities. His work covers Indigenous land and heritage rights, Indigenous land management practices, cultural resource management and protection, and the use of oral knowledge in Indigenous local history.

Over a period of fifteen years, including since his retirement, he has taught a subject entitled 'On Country Learning' on Yorta Yorta territory in Northern Victoria. His leadership position in the community has enabled this subject, which involves an immersive experience for a group of students for an intensive period, to be developed and sustained. The positive feedback on this course is such that it has been nominated for numerous awards. It is a unique subject, bringing together analysis of Indigenous nations and culture with the politics of land and in particular, the Yorta Yorta native title case.

Dr Atkinson's work on a major native title claim has placed him in the forefront of Aboriginal experience of bringing native title claims through the courts (in the post-Mabo case era). This work has informed his research output, which has been published in various books and journals. He is also frequently invited to address international audiences seeking to put Indigenous debates in a comparative light.

Dr Atkinson won a University of Melbourne Award for Excellence and Innovation in Indigenous Higher Education in 2013. He has also been a Visiting Indigenous Scholar at Limerick University.

Thanks to Dr Atkinson's leadership and inspiration, 'On Country Learning' has become a jewel in the crown of the Melbourne Bachelor of Arts.

Chancellor I present to you Dr Wayne Atkinson