



Indigenous Knowledge Institute

Annual Report 2021



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From the Inaugural Director

The Indigenous Knowledge Institute was established in 2020 to advance and build new interdisciplinary capabilities in Indigenous knowledge research and engagement in collaboration with internal and external partners to address emerging global challenges for Australia and the world. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 made such challenges starkly apparent. The pandemic ushered in sweeping global changes that compelled us to adjust to new ways of living and working, which endured throughout 2021.

Despite these steep challenges, 2021 was a year of considerable growth for the Institute with the Faculty of Science selected as our host Academic Division. We welcomed our first Project Officer, Ms Brittany Carter, who immediately embarked on a brilliant program of work in producing the Institute's events, online media, and communications strategy. Ms Aurora Milroy was seconded to the Coalition of Peaks for a year with Ms Kirsten Clark from the Faculty of Science Research Office stepping into the important role of Institute Manager. Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher and I continued in our respective roles as Director of Research Capability (0.2 FTE) and Inaugural Director.

The first half of 2021 involved intensive work on Institute bids for two National Indigenous Australians Agency tenders and the development of a complex multi-partner Expression of Interest to the Australian Research Council for a Centre of Excellence. These initiatives proved to be a highly beneficial investment in advancing and building the Institute's working relationships with internal and external partners across Australia and the world.

Despite the severe restrictions against travel and gatherings posed by the pandemic, 2021 saw the Institute deliver its first Colloquium NAIDOC Week panel, Faculty of Science Dean's Lecture, International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples Symposium, Knowledge Intersections Symposium, documentary film screening, and regular Community of Practice meetings. These events were all well attended and proved highly beneficial in building the Institute's global reputation as a leading hub for Indigenous knowledge research with contributions by presenters from Australia, East Timor, Indonesia, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Brazil.



The Institute expanded its funding schemes in 2021. We funded our second round of Seed Funding grants and allocated our first round of Indigenous PhD Bursaries, PhD RTP Scholarships, and Research Themes. Important strategic work went into developing the Institute's Doctoral Academy initiative and we ended 2021 by advertising three Level C–E positions (0.2 FTE) in the Institute's Fellowship scheme.

I gratefully thank the Institute's staff, our colleagues across the University, and our many external partners for engaging so enthusiastically to make our important work possible. We look forward to our continuing collaborations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'A. Corn', written in a cursive style.

Professor Aaron Corn, Inaugural Director



About us

The Indigenous Knowledge Institute is a Melbourne Interdisciplinary Research Institute that advances and builds Indigenous knowledge research and engagement in collaboration with internal and external partners. The Faculty of Science became the Institute's chosen host Academic Division at the commencement of 2021. Amid the challenges of the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, the Institute invested heavily in producing high-quality online meetings and events, which have been viewed by audiences all over the world. Recordings from the events also provided outstanding international content for our new online media series and built a robust audience for those meetings and events that we were eventually able to host in person at the year's end. Heavy investment was also made in expanding the Institute's funding schemes in 2021, as our internal colleagues and external partners settled on new ways of working together through the pandemic.

Our purpose

The purpose of the Indigenous Knowledge Institute is to advance and build Indigenous knowledge research and engagement. We support and promote research and collaborative engagements with Indigenous knowledge holders that aim to strengthen research capabilities in this field.

Our aims

1. Document, maintain, disseminate, and progress Indigenous knowledge through research in partnership with Indigenous knowledge holders.
2. Recognise and respect Indigenous knowledge innovations through collaborative engagements that address global challenges for Australia and the world.
3. Create new avenues for enquiry and learning in partnership with Indigenous knowledge holders that aim to generate mutual benefits.

Our team

Professor Aaron Corn, Inaugural Director

Professor Aaron Corn holds some three decades of experience working in close collaborations with Indigenous colleagues and communities. He has worked towards broader recognition for the significance of Indigenous knowledge through multiple research, engagement, and education initiatives, including major grants and fellowships. He has been involved in many collaborative initiatives with Indigenous partners, including the Yothu Yindi Foundation and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre. He serves as Director of the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia and on the Board of Directors of the International Council for Traditional Music Study Group on Indigenous Music and Dance. He has previously served on the Australian Research Council College of Experts. His work engages with intellectual traditions that remain fundamental to Indigenous cultural survival and investigates new strategies for strengthening human cultural diversity in the Digital Age.

Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher, Director of Research Capability

Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher is a Wiradjuri man and Director of Research Capability (0.2 FTE) at the Indigenous Knowledge Institute. He is also a physical geographer and Assistant Dean (Indigenous) for the Faculty of Science at the University of Melbourne. His interests are in the long-term interactions between humans, climate, disturbance, and vegetation at local, regional, and global scales. His current work involves developing and integrating high-resolution palaeo-environmental records from across the Southern Hemisphere using multiple proxies, including microfossil, charcoal, geochemical, and isotopic analyses to provide comprehensive reconstructions of environmental change.



Professor Aaron Corn



Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher



Kirsten Clark



Brittany Carter

Ms Kirsten Clark, Institute Manager

Ms Kirsten Clark is a Yidinji woman from Queensland and the current Institute Manager at the Indigenous Knowledge Institute. Kirsten has been at the University of Melbourne since 2016, working in Research administration for the Faculty of Science. Prior to the University of Melbourne, Kirsten worked in the industry sector in Human Resources, Training Development, and Indigenous Employment. Kirsten took on the role of Institute Manager after Ms Aurora Milroy was seconded to the Coalition of Peaks.

Ms Brittany Carter, Project Officer

Ms Brittany Carter is a Wiradjuri woman and coordinates events, communications, and marketing at the Institute. Before joining the University of Melbourne, Brittany worked as the Outreach Coordinator at the Australian National University's Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics. Brittany has a Master of Science (Zoology) from the University of Melbourne and a Master of Science Communication from the Australian National University. She is passionate about science communication and accessibility in STEM and is the Co-Chair of the ACT National Science Week Coordinating Committee.



Co-chairs of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria speaking at the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples Symposium on 9 August 2021.

Our activities

Our focus in 2021 was to deliver on these strategic objectives:

- increase investment in interdisciplinary research activity focused on Indigenous knowledges;
- develop deeper engagements and collaborations with Indigenous knowledge holders and community partners;
- scope the establishment of our Doctoral Academy;
- expand our program of meetings and events to bring together world-leading researchers, industry leaders, policy makers, and Indigenous knowledge holders.

Among our key achievements in 2021 were:

- tending to join the National Indigenous Australians Agency's Panel of suppliers for the provision of Indigenous Evaluation and Research Services;
- building our robust Community of Practice through regular meetings;
- growing our periodical newsletter and its mailing list from 235 to 428 subscribers;
- awarding \$98,484 across five research projects through our annual Seed Funding scheme;
- convening our first International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples Symposium and Knowledge Intersections Symposium;
- committing \$400,000 across three research programs with embedded PhD RTP Scholarships through our biennial Research Themes scheme;
- working with the Faculty of Science and Advancement to secure USD50,000 of support for the Institute's Doctoral Academy from the Agilent Foundation.

Given the overarching challenges of the global pandemic, most of our meetings and events in 2021 were held online. Our public events included a panel for NAIDOC week on 'Healing Country, Healing Futures: Aspirations for Country and Community'. On 9 August, we convened our first Symposium to mark the United Nations International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, which opened with a keynote address by the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. The year ended with our first Knowledge Intersections Symposium, which featured speakers from Australia, East Timor, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Brazil, and a screening of the new documentary film, *DJĀKAMIRR*, which shares Yolŋu knowledge of pregnancy and birthing.

All of our events were recorded to provide unique content for the Institute's new online media series, which can be viewed via the University's *YouTube* channel. Seven editions of our newsletter were also published to keep subscribers abreast of the Institute's events, news, media outputs, and publications.

The Institute led two tender bids to the National Indigenous Australians Agency and developed a complex multi-partner Expression of Interest to the Australian Research Council for a Centre of Excellence. The research framing and global linkages developed through these processes contributed substantially to shaping the Institute's three funded Research Themes. Indigenous Business Australia, Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia, NBN Co, Health Justice Australia, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, the Boon Wurrung Foundation, Taungurung Land and Waters Council, Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Corporation, Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation, and the Alola Foundation are among the industry partners participating in these Research Themes.

Seed funding

The Institute approved \$98,484 across five research projects through its annual Seed Funding scheme. All five projects involve Indigenous investigators with three led by an Indigenous investigator. Proposals were invited from eligible researchers at the University for innovative interdisciplinary research projects focused on Indigenous knowledge and addressing an identified need or gap in this research field. Successful projects were selected by an invited panel of expert researchers against five criteria: 1. Advances research in Indigenous knowledges, 2. Commitment to external partnerships, 3. Feasibility and impact, 4. Interdisciplinarity, and 5. Early-career researcher development. The five grants funded are as follows:

[Birraring's billabongs: Understanding their past to better manage them today](#)

Dr Joe Greet (School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences) will work with the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Corporation's Narrap (Country) Unit Rangers and Melbourne Water to develop management plans for priority billabongs along the lower Birrarung (Yarra River). The project team will participate in on-Country knowledge sharing, looking at current and past vegetation as well as disturbances like flooding and fire at these ecologically and culturally significant sites. Through skill and knowledge building, the project aims to strengthen the capacity of the Narrap Unit Rangers to manage their billabongs today and into the future.

Investigators: Dr Joe Greet (CI), Mr Rephael Lankri (PI), Mr Sean Hunter (PI), Narrap Unit Rangers (PIs); Partners: Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Corporation, Melbourne Water.

[Social and emotional well-being among custodians of Australian Indigenous knowledge](#)

Led by Dr Candice Boyd (School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences), this project will explore the social and emotional well-being of Elders and older people as the holders and transmitters of cultural knowledge. Dr Boyd will work in partnership with Dr Kari Gibson and Wiradjuri woman Professor Rhonda Wilson, along with First Nations communities in regional New South Wales, to address this neglected issue in the field of Indigenous knowledge research. Scarcely any research exists, nationally or globally, on the social and emotional well-being of First Nations Elders, who are the custodians and keepers of Indigenous knowledge. Project findings will be used to develop culturally appropriate resources in collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Investigators: Dr Candice Boyd (CI), Professor Rhonda Wilson (PI), Dr Kari Gibson (CI); Partners: The University of Newcastle, Darkinjung Aboriginal Land Council, The Eleonor Duncan Yerin Aboriginal Medical Service, Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service.

YOYI (Dance)

Dr David Sequeira (Faculty of Fine Arts and Music) will work with the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development and Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association in the Tiwi Islands to produce the art exhibition 'YOYI'. YOYI will comprise thirty bark paintings by emerging, mid-career, and senior artists, and a collaborative multi-channel video installation. By highlighting the relationship between Tiwi country, painting, and dance, YOYI will explore how Tiwi knowledge around change, continuity, and tradition can be communicated in a contemporary art context. The exhibition will be accompanied by an academic program of workshops, talks, and discussions.

Investigators: Dr David Sequeira, Mr Tiriki Onus; Partners: Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association.

Revitalising and sharing knowledge through creativity: Developing interdisciplinary research practice

Dr Andrea Rawluk will co-lead this project with Darug woman Maddison Miller (both School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences), Professor Rod Keenan (School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences), and Dr Gillian Howell (Faculty of Fine Arts and Music), working with Gunaikurnai Land and Water Aboriginal Corporation and Indigenous actor Leroy Parsons. The project will explore how knowledge and language can be rekindled and shared through song writing and storytelling on Country. The team will bring together Gunaikurnai people from across generations to create and share songs, stories, and practices connected to healthy Country and community.

Investigators: Dr Andrea Rawluk (CI), Ms Maddison Miller (CI), Dr Gillian Howell (CI), Prof Rod Keenan (CI), Mr Daniel Miller (PI), Mr Leroy Parsons (PI); Partners: Gunaikurnai Land and Water Aboriginal Corporation.

Indigenous knowledges in the criminal 'justice' context

Led by Professor Marcia Langton (Melbourne School of Population and Global Health), this project will examine how Indigenous knowledges have been incorporated into the criminal justice system. The project will make a significant contribution to the evidence base of Indigenous Justice Agreements by centring how Indigenous knowledges have driven these agreements, making them sites of self-determination, sovereignty, and nation-building. This work will be done in collaboration with Dr Amanda Porter (Melbourne Law School) and several community justice and Indigenous organisations. The project will raise awareness of the work done by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to advocate in the 'justice' space.

Investigators: Professor Marcia Langton (CI), Dr Amanda Porter (CI), Dr Kristen Smith (CI), Dr Meribah Rose (CI).

Research themes

The Institute committed \$400,000 across three research programs with embedded PhD RTP Scholarships through its biennial Research Themes scheme. All three programs are led by Indigenous investigators. Proposals were invited from eligible researchers at the University for innovative interdisciplinary research programs with a focus on specific Themes in Indigenous knowledge in response to four identified priority areas: Country, Law, Culture, and Futures. Successful Research Themes were selected by an invited panel of expert researchers against five criteria: 1. Indigenous knowledge research advancement, 2. Commitment to external partnerships, 3. Interdisciplinarity and approach, 4. Impact and researcher development, 5. feasibility and budget. The three Themes funded are as follows:

Healthy Country

Led by Michael-Shawn Fletcher (School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences), this theme will provide a qualitative and quantitative understanding of what constitutes 'Healthy Country', develop appropriate benchmarks and metrics to measure the efficacy of management approaches, and facilitate/contribute to the development and implementation of cultural mapping and Healthy Country management plans. This project will empower Aboriginal people to influence and govern decisions that shape their Country. The multi-scalar focus of this project will result in emergence and elucidation of what constitutes 'Healthy Country' at scales ranging from local landscapes to intra-community regional ones.

Investigators: Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher (Theme Leader), Ms Maddison Miller (Deputy Theme Leader), Dr Joe Greet (CI), Dr Andrea Rawluk (CI), Professor Rodney Keenan (CI), Dr Cathy Oke (CI), Dr Jack Pascoe (PI), Mr Matt Shanks (PI), Mr John Clarke (PI), Mr Daniel Miller (PI), Uncle Dave Wandin (PI), Mr David Roberts (PI); Partners: Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Corporation, Conservation Ecology Centre, Taungurung Land and Waters Council, Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation.

Culture and Heritage

Led by Barry Judd (Indigenous Studies Program, Faculty of Arts), this theme will provide mechanisms to support and grow Indigenous knowledge, so it can be applied in contemporary Australia and beyond in the critical areas of culture, land, and heritage. The theme will investigate how this knowledge can be adapted with the guidance of Indigenous knowledge holders to meet social, environmental, and economic challenges of global significance.

Investigators: Professor Barry Judd (Theme Leader), Associate Professor Lisa Palmer (Deputy Theme Leader), Professor Rachel Nordlinger (CI), Professor Rachel Popelka-Filcoff (CI), Ms Jennifer Ganske (PI), Ms Lynette Ross (PI), Mr Joe Morrison (PI), Ms Stephanie Rogers (PI), Dr Kirsty Sword Gusmão (PI); Partners: NBN Co, Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia, Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, Boon Wurrung Foundation, Indigenous Business Australia, Alola Foundation.

Health and Justice

Led by Eddie Cubillo (Melbourne Law School) and Shawana Andrews (Melbourne Poche Centre for Indigenous Health), this theme aims to examine the intersection of the health and justice systems to articulate how Indigenous knowledges are recasting deficit-based, siloed health and justice practice models and championing innovative approaches and outcomes. This research will build an evidence-based foundation for the work occurring in and through Indigenous organisations. Drawing from initiatives in the Aboriginal community-controlled health sector and the Yoo-rook Commission, it will show how Indigenous knowledges inform the development of strengths-based and future-oriented health justice practice models for the benefit of Indigenous people and the broader Australian community.

Investigators: Dr Eddie Cubillo (Theme Co-leader), Associate Professor Shawana Andrews (Theme Co-leader), Ms Odette Mazel (CI), Mr Warwick Padgham (CI), Dr Tessa Boyd-Caine (PI); Partners: Health Justice Australia.

Fellowships

In 2021, the Institute advertised three Level C–E positions (0.2 FTE) in its Fellowship scheme for allocation in 2022. These positions will offer a unique opportunity for three mid-career or senior Australian Indigenous knowledge holders to work as Fellows of the Institute and be supported to undertake a two-year research project in response to four identified priority areas: Country, Law, Culture, and Futures. Applicants were asked to address their cultural backgrounds and leadership responsibilities, research interests, proposed research projects, and anticipated benefits and outcomes.

PhD support

The Institute awarded its first annual rounds of Indigenous PhD Bursaries and PhD RTP Scholarships in 2021. Two students were awarded Indigenous PhD Bursaries in addition to their guaranteed Indigenous PhD scholarships. They were:

Mr Josh Cubillo

Topic: ‘Learning on Country pedagogy in Narrm’ (Melbourne Graduate School of Education).

Ms Caroline Williams

Topic: ‘Who is responsible for my health? A study of complementary medicine, traditional Aboriginal remedies, and other holistic natural therapy use in modern-day healing’ (Melbourne School of Population and Global Health).

PhD students who received RTP Scholarships from the Institute were:

Ms Claire Dixon

Topic: ‘Embedding Indigenous knowledge in engineering education to drive sustainable engineering practices’ (School of Electrical, Mechanical and Infrastructure Engineering).

Ms Sarah Stoller

Topic: ‘Perceiving Indigenous values in collaborative policy design’ (School of Social and Political Sciences).

Doctoral academy

Intensive work was undertaken in 2021 to develop a model for the Institute’s Doctoral Academy. Through extensive discussions, it was agreed that the Institute would propose a new Doctor of Philosophy - Indigenous Knowledge course for approval in 2022 with its first student intake in Semester 1, 2023. In keeping with overarching University strategies, the main aim of this course would be to enhance the visibility, appeal and accessibility of PhD studies to a broader and more diverse cohort of eligible Australian Indigenous candidates. The Institute worked with the Faculty of Science and Advancement to secure USD50,000 of support for the Institute’s Doctoral Academy from the Agilent Foundation.



Where to next?

The Institute delivered significant outcomes in 2021 despite the challenging circumstances of the global pandemic and is well-placed to advance its activities and impacts in 2022 and beyond. The Institute's immediate aims for 2022 are to:

- operationalise the three new programs of research funded through the first round of the Institute's Research Theme scheme;
- appoint the Institute's first cohort of Institute Fellows;
- expand the public reach of the Institute's events into major festivals, including Melbourne Design Week and Melbourne Knowledge Week;
- develop the Institute's working relationship with the National Indigenous Australians Agency;
- propose and deliver the Institute's new Doctor of Philosophy - Indigenous Knowledge course.



Website | indigenousknowledge.unimelb.edu.au

Email | Indigenous-knowledge@unimelb.edu.au

Twitter | @IKI_Unimelb

Cover image: Installation photography of Ancestral Memory exhibition, Old Quad, 2019. Photograph: Christian Capurro. Image © the artists.
