



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Indigenous Knowledge Institute
Annual Report 2020



Indigenous Knowledge Institute

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

The University of Melbourne acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our campuses are situated

- Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples (Parkville, Southbank, Werribee and Burnley campuses)
- Yorta Yorta Nation (Shepparton and Dookie campuses)
- Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus)

From the Inaugural Director



The Indigenous Knowledge Institute was established in 2020 to advance and build new interdisciplinary capabilities in Indigenous knowledge research, and collaborative engagement with Indigenous partners, to address emerging and future local and global challenges. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, such challenges were starkly

apparent in 2020. They ushered in a new era of sweeping global change that has compelled us to adjust to new ways of living and working. Moreover, in keeping with the Institute's remit to engage with Indigenous knowledge-holders around the world, they have challenged us to reflect on the fragility of our planet's natural balance and its impacts upon humanity as a species.

Notwithstanding these steep challenges, 2020 was nonetheless a year of considerable growth for the Institute. Our Manager, Ms Aurora Milroy, was appointed as the Institute's first staff member in March. I was appointed Inaugural Director in July, and our Director of Research Capability, Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher, was appointed in October. In April, the Institute worked with Associate Professor Fletcher to coordinate submissions to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. The submissions addressed Indigenous land management and cultural burning practices as means of preventing the kinds of catastrophic bushfires that ravaged Australia over Summer 2019–2020.

I joined Associate Professor Fletcher to discuss Indigenous knowledge in the opening keynote panel of the Professional Staff Conference in September. Associate Professor Fletcher also spoke of his vital research into Indigenous land management and cultural burning in his 'Flames of Opportunity' lecture, which the Institute hosted with the Science Gallery in October, and in his Narrm Oration in November.

Despite the severe restrictions against travel and gatherings posed by the pandemic, 2020 further saw the Institute begin to build a new interdisciplinary community of practice in Indigenous knowledge research across the University of Melbourne and beyond. The Institute sponsored Community Fellowships in partnership with the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, which bring colleagues from valued partner organisations into the University. We also funded the inaugural round of our Seed Funding scheme, which aims to foster new interdisciplinary research among our colleagues and their partners.

The Institute's global reputation as a leading hub for Indigenous knowledge research has also grown through our high-profile contributions to national and international conferences. Professor Marcia Langton AO invited me to present in her Archives and Museums stream of the Royal Anthropological Institute conference in London in September.

In November and December, the Institute was a key contributor to a joint symposium on Indigenous music and dance for the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia. The symposium was co-hosted by National Dong Hwa University in Taiwan for the International Council for Traditional Music and by the University of Melbourne's Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development. I was invited to chair the opening keynote panel of this symposium, which featured leading Indigenous educators and scholars from Taiwan, Australia, Brazil, and Kenya. During this symposium, Mr Tiriki Onus of the Wilin Centre also chaired the official launch of the Institute by the Minister for Indigenous Australians, the Honourable Ken Wyatt AM MP. The launch included responses from Vice-Chancellor Professor Duncan Maskell, Associate Provost Professor Marcia Langton AO, and the noted Australian Indigenous musician, Ms Jesse Lloyd. Attended by some 200 delegates from around the world, this symposium has initiated the International Council for Traditional Music's new Study Group on Indigenous Music and Dance with Professor Langton as its founding Chair. This is the first of many such global networks that the Institute seeks to foster.

I gratefully thank the Institute's staff, who make our important work possible, and our colleagues across the University of Melbourne for enthusiastically engaging in the realisation of a shared vision for new approaches to Indigenous knowledge research — approaches which will better honour and benefit the immense intellectual and applied contributions that Indigenous knowledge-holders around the world have long made. We look forward to further broadening our networks in Australia and internationally, and to collaborating with diverse partners and community stakeholders to identify and realise innovative new ways of meeting the challenges of today and beyond.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'A. Corn'.

Professor Aaron Corn
Inaugural Director

About us



The Indigenous Knowledge Institute is the newest of the five Melbourne Interdisciplinary Research Institutes that promote research collaboration across the University of Melbourne and engagement with external stakeholders.

Commencing operations in 2020, this was a challenging year to launch the Institute given the realities of remote work, travel restrictions, and global uncertainty, particularly in the higher education sector. Yet 2020 also provided ample time for reflection. In a year that began with catastrophic bushfires in Australia, followed by a global pandemic, it became clear that the foundations of society, rooted in Western institutions, had been disrupted. Now, more than ever, it is critical to consider the value and role of Indigenous knowledge systems globally in creating a more sustainable future for Australia and the world.

Our purpose

Our purpose is to advance research and collaborations in Indigenous knowledge. Our role is to support and promote interdisciplinary research and collaborative engagements with Indigenous knowledge holders, communities, and systems, and strengthen Indigenous research capabilities.

Our aims

1. Document, maintain, disseminate, and progress Indigenous knowledge in partnership with Indigenous communities
2. Recognise and respect the living dynamism and innovation of Indigenous knowledge through collaborative engagements that address global and local challenges
3. Create avenues for learning in partnership with Indigenous knowledge holders in ways that bring mutual scholarly, community, and practical benefits

Our team

Professor Aaron Corn, Inaugural Director

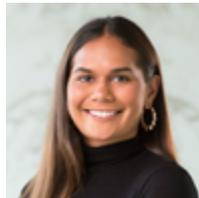
Professor Aaron Corn joined the Institute in July 2020. Aaron has some three decades experience of close collaborations with Indigenous colleagues. He has worked towards broader recognition for the significance of Indigenous knowledge through multiple research and education initiatives, including major grants and fellowships.



Aaron has been involved in many collaborative projects with Indigenous colleagues, as well as partners including the Yothu Yindi Foundation, the Mulka Project, and the College of Indigenous Studies at National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan. He has recently been Director of the National Centre for Aboriginal Language and Music Studies, and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music, at the University of Adelaide. He has served as a Director of the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia since 2010 and has previously served on the Australian Research Council College of Experts.

Sophia Power, Administrative and Communications Officer

Sophia Power is a Juru woman of the Birri-Gubba nation and was seconded to the Institute from August–December 2020 as Administrative and Communications Officer. Sophia was previously a teacher aide in Townsville and most recently Administrative Assistant in the Chancellery Division at the University of Melbourne.



Aurora Milroy, Institute Manager

Aurora Milroy joined the Institute in March 2020. Aurora is a Palyku woman from Western Australia and the Institute Manager at the Indigenous Knowledge Institute.



Before joining the University of Melbourne, Aurora was the Advisor, First Peoples Programs and Strategy at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government. Aurora holds a Master of Public Policy from the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, as well as a Bachelor of Laws (Honours) and Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the University of Western Australia.

Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher, Director of Research Capability

Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher joined the Institute in October 2020. Michael is a Wiradjuri man and Director of Research Capability 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.



Michael's 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 palaeoenvironmental records from across the Southern Hemisphere using multiple proxies, including microfossil, charcoal, geochemical, and isotopic analyses to provide comprehensive reconstructions of environmental change.

Our activities



The Institute's inaugural year of operations was spent building the foundations of our team, profile, and strategic objectives.

Having limited opportunity for face-to-face interactions and public events, we focused on core activities to stimulate research and build recognition of the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems. Our key achievements were:

- Submitting to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and the Inquiry into the 2019–2020 Victorian Bush Fire Season.
- Running a Seed Funding round with commitment of over \$80,000 in funding across five projects commencing in 2021.
- Launching two fellowships for Indigenous researchers working in Indigenous community organisations as part of the Melbourne Social Equity Institute's 2021 Community Fellows program and providing in-kind support for one additional Indigenous Community Fellow.
- Building public engagement with the Institute through our website and Twitter to generate 33,444 website page views and 294 Twitter followers in 2020.
- Launching the Indigenous Knowledge Research Library Guide, the shared Zotero reference library, and the 'Charter for Research with Indigenous Knowledge Holders' to support better and more ethical research practices.
- Developing national and international partnerships through our events programming, including co-hosting Flames of Opportunity with Science Gallery Melbourne, convening the first Indigenous Symposium of the International Council for Traditional Music with the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development at the University of Melbourne and National Dong Hwa University in Taiwan, and signing an agreement to co-host a policy lab with King's College London in 2021.

Our work in 2020 focused on four important fields in Indigenous knowledge research:

- 1. Cultural burning**
- 2. Land, sky, and water knowledge**
- 3. Knowledge in song, dance, and artistic practice**
- 4. Community leadership and ethical research**

Cultural burning

Australia's Black Summer bushfires garnered international attention for their devastating impact on individuals, communities, and the environment. As these fires raged, cultural burning practitioners and researchers renewed calls to learn from Indigenous knowledge systems and invest in Indigenous fire and land management regimes to prevent future catastrophic wildfires.

In 2020, the Institute rallied this call for cultural burning. In April, we convened an interdisciplinary team of researchers from across the University, including representatives from biosciences, forest sciences, geography, architecture, and linguistics to produce policy submissions to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and the Inquiry into the 2019–2020 Victorian Bush Fire Season.

These submissions, led by our Director of Research Capability, Associate Professor Michael-Shawn Fletcher, called for greater investment in Indigenous land management programs and were highlighted as a key achievement of 2020 in the Vice-Chancellor's annual address to staff of the University of Melbourne. Institute Manager Aurora Milroy also profiled the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems in bushfire prevention by publishing an opinion piece with the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University and appearing on ABC's *The Drum* for a segment on bushfire recovery.

Later in the year, we co-hosted the 'Flames of Opportunity' public lecture with Science Gallery Melbourne. This conversation between Associate Professor Fletcher and STEM journalist and Wiradjuri woman Rae Johnston was attended virtually by more than 175 people and later viewed another 234 times. It examined the science behind Indigenous fire practices and potential implications for Indigenous futures and climate change.

Associate Professor Fletcher was also invited to give the annual Narrm Oration in November and spoke on the topic of how Indigenous people and knowledge can prevent Australia's environmental and social unravelling. Through our public engagement with the topic of cultural burning, we have highlighted the critical importance of Indigenous knowledge systems to help solve real-world policy challenges.

Land, sky, and water knowledge

Our platforming of cultural burning research was part of a broader focus on how Indigenous ecological knowledge can address global environmental challenges and support cultural revitalisation and community wellbeing. Through our Seed Funding program and partnership with the Melbourne Social Equity Institute's Community Fellows program, we supported the following projects on Indigenous land, sky, and water knowledges commencing in 2021:

- Early Career Researcher Dr Erin O'Donnell (Melbourne Law School) will be working in partnership with the Traditional Owners of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River to map the 'First Law' of the river and explore the relationship between Indigenous and settler laws to develop new, bicultural legal frameworks to sustain the river.
- Dr Justin Wejak (Asia Institute) is an Indigenous researcher from Lembata, Indonesia, and will be leading a project team to explore Indigenous storytelling and knowledge practices relating to food and medicinal plants on Lembata.
- Enterprise Professor Bruce Pascoe will be working with Associate Professor Kate Howell (Faculty of Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences) to develop a food safety roadmap for commercialising native Cumbungi, bringing together traditional knowledge and Western scientific analysis with the aim of delivering economic benefits directly to Indigenous people.
- Associate Professor Duane Hamacher (School of Physics) will be working closely with a team of Aboriginal student researchers and traditional owners to document Aboriginal astronomical knowledge of the Kulin Nation.
- Karen Jones, a sponsored Community Fellow, is a descendant of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung traditional owners of Melbourne. She will be undertaking a research project to document Woi-wurrung land use of Jackson's Creek area and determine Woi-wurrung cultural values to assist with waterways management.
- We are providing in-kind support to another Community Fellow, Ebony Lawson, focusing on Indigenous ecological knowledge. Ebony is a Barkandji woman and will be undertaking research into Indigenous plant knowledge on behalf of the Millewa-Mallee Aboriginal Corporation.

With NAIDOC announcing 'Heal Country, heal our nation' as its theme for 2021, the Institute will continue to prioritise community partnerships and research that centre on Indigenous ecological knowledge and caring for Country.

Knowledge in song, dance, and artistic practice

Just as the Black Summer bushfires generated a cultural moment that brought Indigenous knowledge to the fore, so too did the destruction of Juukan Gorge, which caused public outpourings of rage and grief at the loss of one of the world's oldest cultural heritage sites.

The need to protect and sustain Indigenous knowledge systems and culture has never been more pertinent. The Institute has therefore also prioritised collaborative research with Indigenous knowledge holders on strengthening and revitalising Indigenous song, dance, and artistic practices that traditionally carry vast bodies of Indigenous ecological knowledge and other kinds of corporate ancestral memory. This is a key research strength of the Institute's Inaugural Director, Professor Aaron Corn.

In November, Professor Corn co-convened the first Indigenous Symposium of the International Council for Traditional Music, which involved more than 223 delegates from around the world. He was the coordinating Chair of this symposium's opening keynote panel which focused on the importance of Indigenous song and dance to Indigenous education and futures. The panel featured presentations by Ms Akawyan Pakawyan from Taiwan, Professor Marcia Langton AO from Australia, Professor José Jorge de Carvalho from Brazil, and Professor Jean Ngoya Kidula from Kenya.

The symposium was held in partnership with the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development at the University of Melbourne and the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia. Professor Corn and Dr Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg of the Open University UK presented there on the importance of recognising the research contributions of Indigenous knowledge holders who maintain and revitalise endangered song and dance traditions. This symposium has since initiated the International Council for Traditional Music's new Study Group on Indigenous Music and Dance, with Professor Langton elected as its founding Chair and Professor Corn to its Board of Directors.

In 2021, the Institute will also support Wiradjuri researcher and dancer Daniel Riley to undertake his Seed Funding project 'Wagambirra', which aims to explore and document traditional Wiradjuri dance in partnership with Wiradjuri elders and communities in Dubbo.

Community leadership and ethical research

The Institute is committed to supporting Indigenous-led research, increasing recognition of Indigenous knowledge holders as experts within the academy, and promoting ethical partnerships in research. Our Community Fellowships are one way we are supporting community-led research and developing opportunities to build research capability within Indigenous community organisations.

In addition to Karen Jones, the Institute will sponsor Wiradjuri woman Bronte Gosper to undertake a project exploring how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in journalism and reporting can impact positively on First Nations communities. The Institute has also developed a number of guides and policies to assist researchers to better understand ethical research practice with Indigenous knowledge holders.

In May, Institute Manager Aurora Milroy inaugurated the University of Melbourne Library's '23 Research Things' blog series with an exploration of how to get started with Indigenous knowledge research. This developed into a larger project in partnership with the Library Services team, culminating in the launch of the Indigenous Knowledge Research Library Guide and a shared Zotero reference library. These resources provide advice to researchers on a range of topics from how to store Indigenous research data to improving citation practices.

In July, we also launched the 'Charter for Research with Indigenous Knowledge Holders' on our website. This resource sets out principles for researchers looking to ethically engage with Indigenous knowledge holders in their work. We closed the year with a presentation from the Institute Manager as part of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education's Spotlight on Engagement series, which explored ethical Indigenous community and collegial engagement.

We aim to build on these foundations in 2021, including through delivery of a global policy lab with King's College London, which will examine how the higher education sector can better engage with Indigenous and other diverse knowledge systems.

Where to next?

The Indigenous Knowledge Institute has built strong foundations in challenging circumstances and will expand its activities and impact in 2021 and beyond. In coming years, the Institute aims to:

- Increase its investment in interdisciplinary research activity focused on Indigenous knowledges.
- Develop deeper engagement and collaboration with Indigenous knowledge holders and community partners.
- Develop the next generation of Indigenous research leaders through the establishment of a Doctoral Academy, training opportunities, and other supports.
- Deliver a program of events and symposia to bring together world-leading researchers, industry leaders, decision makers, and Indigenous knowledge holders.



▶ <https://indigenousknowledge.unimelb.edu.au>

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



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