



## **Curtin University Reconciliation Action Plan Progress Report 2009**

### **ABOUT THE ARTWORK**

Indigenous artist Peter Farmer was commissioned to produce the artwork for this report. A Nyungar man born in Gnowangerup, Western Australia, Peter has completed an Associate Degree in Contemporary Aboriginal Art and a Bachelor of Arts (Visual/Fine Art) at Curtin University of Technology. He is strongly committed to breaking down cultural barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, working in school and tertiary settings to develop Aboriginal art and promote Indigenous language and cultural heritage. He has won a number of awards including the 2008 NAIDOC Perth 'Visual Artist of the Year' award.

Peter explains the inspiration behind the artwork commissioned for this publication:

'Reconciliation is really about finding common ground, finding purpose and finding a path forward together. In my artwork, this path is visually represented by lines that are significantly Nyoongar in their design. I have also included three Nyoongar Totems that have a natural connectedness that is sometimes difficult to achieve within the differences and diversities of communities. The message here is that learning does not cease when we graduate; it just gives us the tools to continue our learning and to be open to deeper learning—the kind that our communities can give to each other.'

The **Eagle** or '**Waalitj**' represents Relationships: he has always been the Totem given to Mubarn Men and Women. Mubarn means 'healing' and this is important in the kinds of relationships that are formed within a community and between members of a family. If there is any discord or disagreements, the Waalitj's job is to find a solution, to mend what has been broken, to reconcile both parties to one another's satisfaction.

The **Kangaroo** or '**Yonga**' represents Opportunities: he is a significant Totem, because he creates his own opportunities. His resilience has not only enabled his survival but also secured his position as a permanent part of the natural flora and fauna that continues to make a worthy adversary.

The **Turtle** or '**Boyi**' represents Respect: he is a strong Totem, and lives for many hundreds of years. When you live as long as he does, you will learn much and that learning is passed on to future generations, that knowledge is invaluable. He is given respect because he has manoeuvred his way through the natural world and survived.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY**

Our main campus in Bentley enjoys the privilege of being located in Whadjuk/Nyungar country (there are many spellings of the word 'Nyungar') on the site where the Swan and Canning rivers meet. We're proud to honour the Nyungar people and value this place of shared learning.

We also acknowledge that other Curtin campuses are situated in areas of cultural importance in Aboriginal traditions.

## **QUOTE**

'Curtin enriches the local and international communities it serves through its engagement in important community activities.'



## MESSAGE FROM THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

By Jeanette Hackett

It is with pride that I present Curtin's first progress report on our Reconciliation Action Plan that was launched in 2008 from our Bentley Campus, which is situated on Nyungar land.

This report is our scorecard on the tasks we've set ourselves to contribute to improving the gap in health, lifespan, education and employment opportunities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

We're proud to be the first university to formally commit to a mutual learning journey, to shake up our own habits and practices and to create a reconciliation roadmap that will help us promote a more inclusive and knowledgeable Australia.

Our plan, launched with enthusiasm, has positioned us well to respond to the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council's (IHEAC) Strategic Plan 2006–2008, to 'enhance the prominence and status on campus of Indigenous culture, knowledge and studies'.

We've started the process of ensuring our curriculum is culturally appropriate and we've committed to providing each of our students with an opportunity to experience and understand Indigenous Australian history and culture through their studies at Curtin.

We continue our efforts to employ a greater proportion of Indigenous staff, including more Indigenous academic staff, and we are steadily expanding our research into Indigenous issues.

We have learnt much throughout our first year, particularly that attitudinal change requires a thoughtful approach and that we cannot rush nor underestimate this process. Our RAP targets, which require new and different approaches across many areas of the University, are also placing new demands on us. These are real and important challenges and I congratulate my staff for their contributions and their commitment.

We are very encouraged by feedback from staff who feel great pride in being the first university in Australia to embrace the RAP process and who feel that it has given a much more powerful affirmation to their work. As with many new projects, the RAP process has been driven by a relatively small and dedicated group, and we must now expand these responsibilities across the entire University. We also need to more actively engage our students in the process.

Our targets are ambitious but achievable. I hope they will provide inspiration to other universities and education providers and deliver real progress for Indigenous Australians.

## MESSAGE FROM RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA

By Fred Chaney AO  
Reconciliation Australia Board Director

Reconciliation Australia congratulates Curtin University for completing its first Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Report. Curtin is the first university to launch a RAP and this report demonstrates the outcomes from taking a lead in the higher education sector.

The RAP program is one of Reconciliation Australia's key strategies in closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. The program was developed to support organisations to contribute to reconciliation through clear actions within their normal business activities.

Curtin's RAP demonstrates good practice and is a valuable model for other institutions and organisations to emulate—particularly those in the education sector.

As the university with the highest levels of Indigenous enrolments and retention in Australia, Curtin has made bold commitments to embedding justice and reconciliation into the fabric of the University's governance structure and academic curricula. Curtin has also pursued ambitious targets of increased student numbers, staff appointments and Indigenous-related research projects and grants.

Curtin University's participation in the RAP program has not been without challenges and the lessons that come from pursuing meaningful targets. This report recognises the importance of a whole-of-university approach to realising employment targets and ensuring the continuation of programs that successfully engage Aboriginal Elders into the fabric of university life.

I congratulate Curtin for its leadership and courage in being the first higher education institution to launch, and now report on, its RAP. Reconciliation Australia looks forward to working with Curtin in the future to help build a better Australia for all.



## WHO WE ARE

Curtin University is the largest university in Western Australia, providing undergraduate and postgraduate courses in business, humanities, health sciences, resources, engineering and related sciences to more than 44 000 students.

These courses are offered through our main Bentley Campus near Perth, regional centres throughout Western Australia, campuses in Sydney, Singapore and Malaysia and, through international partnering arrangements, in more than 10 overseas locations. There are more than 120 000 Curtin graduates worldwide.

We also carry out a wide range of research and identify the following as our priority research areas:

- minerals and energy
- sustainable development
- health
- ICT and emerging technologies.

We are a strongly multicultural university and have also had a long-standing commitment to Indigenous education and culture. We have been running programs for Indigenous people since the mid-1970s, with our Aboriginal-managed Centre for Aboriginal Studies established in 1983. In 1998, we became the first university in the country to sign a Statement of Reconciliation and Commitment and, in 2008, the first to commit to a Reconciliation Action Plan.

## HOW WE RATE

Our Reconciliation Action Plan is built around the three themes proposed by Reconciliation Australia:

**‘Relationships’, ‘Respect’ and ‘Opportunities’.**

Our interpretation of these themes within our higher education context is described under each of these headings.

We made 22 commitments within these three themes in our original plan: in our first year, 5 have been exceeded, 4 have been achieved, 11 are on track and 2 were not achieved. Of those two not achieved, one is progressing and the other is still achievable but will require a more concerted University-wide effort.

## Relationships

Curtin will take pride in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by:

- providing local Elders and other Indigenous representatives with a wider role and appropriate recognition within the University
- fostering long-term good corporate citizenship with key Indigenous corporations and communities.

## Our rating

Rating	Commitment
Exceeded	We exceeded our target of including Indigenous representation on the University's most senior decision-making bodies with the appointment of Mr Daniel Tucker as the first Indigenous member of Council and the appointment of CAS Director Associate Professor Anita Lee Hong to Academic Board. Mr Dennis Eggington, Director of the West Australian Aboriginal Law Service, is Chair of the Aboriginal Advisory Council.
On track	We are on track to appoint at least four Elders in the Western Australian community as Adjunct Professors to our four Faculty Advisory Boards and to appoint an Indigenous representative to the boards of the Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute and the Australian Sustainability Development Institute. While their exact roles as Adjunct Professors are being clarified, the Elders will be there to provide advice to the faculties on Indigenous-related matters and their appointments are a means for the University to acknowledge their standing in the wider community. We have learnt that this process requires a respectful and thoughtful approach that closely observes Nyungar protocols.
Achieved	We achieved our target of having external Indigenous input into our Reconciliation Action Plan through the Aboriginal Advisory Committee of CAS. We have learnt to allow time for this consideration to take place.
On track	We are on track with an audit of our current relationships with Indigenous communities and organisations through education and business associations, University outreach and volunteer projects, and arts programs. These relationships are extensive and the Indigenous community has welcomed our efforts to foster new relationships.

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Commitment</b>
On track	Our target is to establish at least two agreements to foster good relationships with relevant Indigenous corporations. These include a Memorandum of Understanding with the Kimberley Institute to increase research capabilities for Indigenous stakeholders in the Kimberley, and strengthening links with the Mungart Boodja Art Centre in Katanning to learn more about the Carrolup art style of the Nyungar people and to generate learning opportunities for students, staff and the local community.

## Respect

Curtin will develop a greater understanding of how our different pasts and cultures are part of our shared history and shared future by:

- including Indigenous perspectives in all Curtin undergraduate and postgraduate courses
- increasing the number of Indigenous units co-taught between CAS and schools across the University
- developing a statement of Acknowledgment of Country for course unit outlines
- developing a better understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems among both academic and professional staff.

## Our rating

Rating	Commitment
On track	We are embedding cultural understanding, particularly the perspective of Indigenous Australians, as one of our nine graduate attributes. This is part of our C2010 whole-of-University curriculum review. This review of competencies is still at a basic level, with more detailed analysis required.
On track	We are reviewing courses to establish the existence and relevance of Indigenous material being taught across the University. While Indigenous units do exist or are in planning across most faculties, we have realised that Indigenous-specific units need to be better promoted.
On track	We are developing Indigenous material for inclusion in the University's flagship degrees of engineering, health, and commerce, although consultation and partnership with Indigenous staff to produce this material can't be hurried. We learnt that some professional accreditation requirements offer minimal opportunity to 'Indigenise' units, although efforts continue to change this situation. The 2008 CAS position paper Mooditj Katitjiny: Indigenising the Curriculum Project needs broader promotion across the University.
On track	Our plan to increase the number of Indigenous units co-taught by CAS and schools across the University are on track although we recognise that, with the exception of the Faculty of Health Sciences, the numbers are low. We're mindful that the development of more units will place increased teaching pressures on CAS staff.

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Commitment</b>
On track	Our plan to develop a statement of acknowledgment of Country to include in all course unit outlines is progressing, with a draft statement being prepared by the CAS Nyungar Staff Committee. The roll-out of this statement within the different faculties is under discussion, with one possibility being that the statement be included in the banner of the Blackboard (student web portal) home page for each unit.
Not achieved	We have not achieved our target of having 30 per cent of new Curtin staff undertake some aspect of the Ways of Working cultural awareness program (facilitated by CAS staff) in their first year of employment. More resources are required to deliver this valuable program.

## Opportunities

Curtin is committed to a respectful partnership whereby Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians tackle disadvantage together. To help build this partnership we will:

- increase the number of Indigenous staff and students
- increase the number of Indigenous staff in CAS studying towards a master or doctoral degree
- increase the enrolment and graduation rates for Indigenous doctoral students
- increase Indigenous-related research projects and grants across the University
- include Indigenous targets in the portfolios of senior University managers
- support the employment of Indigenous graduates in the community.

## Our rating

Rating	Commitment
Exceeded	The number of Indigenous staff employed at Curtin increased from 53 in 2008 to 55 in 2009, exceeding our targeted increase.
Not achieved	However, we did not achieve an annual 10 per cent increase in Indigenous staff numbers. We are currently identifying the barriers to the employment of Indigenous people and realise a whole-of-University approach that provides mentoring support for new Indigenous staff is essential.
Exceeded	We've exceeded our target to increase from two the number of Indigenous staff studying towards a master degree or PhD, with seven now undertaking a master degree and two a PhD.
On track	We are on track to increase Indigenous student numbers within Curtin to match the representation of Indigenous people in the general population (3.15 per cent). Indigenous student numbers increased from 487 in 2007 (1.97 per cent of the student population) to 507 (2.3 per cent) in 2008. However, a slight decrease in Indigenous student numbers in 2009 (484) illustrates that these gains can be fragile and efforts must be sustained to recruit and keep our students.



Rating	Commitment
On track	We are on track to increase the pathways by which Indigenous students can enrol at Curtin. The four faculties reviewed a range of options that included strengthened articulation agreements with TAFE and other education providers; visiting schools and other feeder institutions to promote study at Curtin for Indigenous students; and running summer school programs for Indigenous youth. More work on this is required.
Achieved	Our plan to increase Indigenous doctoral enrolments and graduations by establishing a doctoral scholarship within each faculty was achieved. For example, the Faculty of Health Sciences incorporated support for three doctoral students. The Office of Research and Development will work more closely with faculties to develop their strategies.
Achieved	Our plan to include at least 10 questions relevant to Indigenous students in the 'Ask Curtin' section of our website was met. This searchable database of more than 350 frequently asked questions is designed to help prospective and current students find information relevant to their study needs.
Exceeded	We've exceeded our target of increasing Indigenous-related research grants and projects from the 29 projects (worth \$10.5 million) recorded in 2008. By April 2009 Curtin had 44 such projects worth \$17.32 million.
Exceeded	Our plan to provide at least two Indigenous research scholarships each year was also exceeded, with six offered in 2009. We will now review the stipend for these to ensure they are adequate to the needs of mature-age students with families.
Achieved	We achieved our goal of including Indigenous targets in the Performance Agreements of senior staff.
On track	Our plan of supporting Indigenous students to find employment is on track, with new support material being developed by our Careers Centre. Curtin's online job board also identifies positions for Indigenous staff, while internship, cadetship and scholarship arrangements with resource companies are creating employment opportunities for Indigenous students. While there are selected programs within some faculties to support Indigenous graduates, we realise that more effort is required across the University.

**TESTIMONIAL: Message from Associate Professor Anita Lee Hong**

Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies

‘RAP has given us direction. We are the first university in the country to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan and others are watching and waiting to see how we do.

It’s a matter of trying to break down barriers—but by far the biggest challenge is access to the University and participation by Indigenous students.

‘Other important things are happening though; the University has begun the process of appointing an Aboriginal Elder to each of the Faculty Advisory Boards at the Adjunct Professor level. This recognises the value of life skills in positions of academic leadership.’



## WHAT IS OUR ROLE IN RECONCILIATION?

As education providers, universities have enormous potential to help improve the circumstances of Indigenous people in this country. Education offers opportunities on a range of fronts—better employment, greater financial security, greater social participation and influence, and greater self-fulfillment. These are all factors that directly influence health and wellbeing.

When we established the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS) in the early 1980s, it was built on a philosophy of self-empowerment: the programs run by the Centre are designed and managed by Aboriginal people and aim not only to equip students with the skills and knowledge valued by employers and society at large, but to help build self-esteem, confidence and pride. We strive to provide an understanding and supportive environment whereby students can explore and express their culture, history and identity. Many CAS students talk about their study at Curtin as a life-changing event that has helped them to grow at a personal level and to reassess their place in the world.

CAS graduates are taking their new knowledge and awareness and applying it in Indigenous communities and organisations, in government departments and in a range of organisations across the private sector. These graduates carry enormous potential as agents of change, especially as their numbers start to grow within the community.

Providing an environment where Indigenous students feel comfortable in pursuing higher education has been a fundamental first step in our reconciliation journey. But educating Indigenous students is only one part of the equation; we want all our students to leave the University with a greater understanding of Indigenous perspectives that informs the way they operate both personally and professionally in the world. We also want to use our significant research capacity to expand our understanding of the needs of, and the issues of importance to, Indigenous people, and to provide greater input into policies and practices aimed at 'closing the gap'.

In summary, we must ensure that all our teaching and research activities are underpinned by a genuine appreciation of Indigenous culture and ways of working. This can only be achieved by more directly involving Indigenous people and perspectives in all areas of our operations.

**TESTIMONIAL: Message from Associate Professor Sue Jones**

Dean of Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Health Sciences

Sue Jones says that the RAP initiatives in the Faculty of Health Sciences have focused on leadership and curriculum change in moving towards reconciliation.

As Dean of Teaching and Learning, Sue recognised that the key to achieving curriculum reform lay in changing leadership attitudes towards the importance of Indigenous health as part of the core curriculum.

The Faculty initiated a bush retreat at Wiluna for heads of schools and senior leadership staff.

‘Our new first-year unit on Indigenous health and culture is directly related to training students to be effective health practitioners in working with Indigenous Australians. We are giving them critical capabilities.’



## OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

We began the promotion of educational opportunities for Indigenous people in the mid-1970s and consolidated it with the establishment of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in 1983, now regarded as a national leader in its field. In 1998, we became the first university in Australia to sign a Statement of Reconciliation and Commitment and, in 2006, we developed an Indigenous Governance Policy and Principles for Implementation with the stated aim of promoting active involvement by Indigenous people in teaching and research activities and in University decision-making.

We work in partnership with the Nyungar community through the CAS Aboriginal Advisory Committee where assistance is provided to the Director of CAS to develop appropriate ways of responding effectively and sensitively to the educational needs and aspirations of Indigenous people.

In 2007 a small group of our Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff floated the idea of developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) as a natural next step. Forty people attended the initial working party meeting, crowding the boardroom of CAS. From these initial discussions, two senior project officers were appointed to write up the plan, with direction and feedback from the working party.

Responsibility for the RAP resided in the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic, who ensured the executive officers of the University, including the Pro Vice-Chancellors of the faculties, were aware of their responsibilities and reported on progress. The DVC Academic chairs the Curtin Indigenous Policy Committee where the RAP is a standing agenda item; and also chairs a smaller version of the original working party made up of volunteer University staff and students where ideas flow to 'refresh' the RAP.

In 2008 we became the first university in Australia to launch a RAP. We are still the only university to have a whole-of-University plan.

The first year of our RAP has highlighted those areas of endeavour in which we can take pride and those in which we have to work much harder. The governance of the plan requires fine-tuning and the voices of our Indigenous staff, students and community need to be front and centre.



## **TESTIMONIAL: Message from Associate Professor Dawn Bessarab**

Centre for International Health, Faculty of Health Sciences

'Initial meetings of managers, academic staff and researchers brought to light the clear need in the faculty to introduce Indigenous content into the curriculum. They also put an expectation on schools to do this, which was probably not a bad thing.'

The Faculty of Health Sciences has responded to the reconciliation process by setting up its own Advisory Group on Indigenous Health Outcomes (AGIHO). Established in 2009, AGIHO provides a forum for managers, academic staff and researchers to discuss strategies and advocate for the allocation of resources for achieving outcomes related to RAP. Dawn, a member of the AGIHO group, says that the group has been successful in supporting and facilitating cultural change on Indigenous issues across the Faculty.

AGIHO provided a forum for that conversation to occur. Initially, all heads of schools were asked to report on what their area was doing in relation to Indigenous issues. Members of AGIHO were able to explore future opportunities together.

'Early in 2008, I had discussions with heads of school across the Faculty about Indigenous issues and research and found that many heads were unsure how to proceed,' Dawn says. 'Different schools across campus who did not have much contact with Indigenous people were asking: "What does Indigenous research have to do with my field?"'



## LESSONS LEARNT

In its first year of implementation, our Reconciliation Action Plan has naturally not been without its difficulties and steep learning curves, but the process has generated much energy and creative thinking and is also a source of great pride for many within the organisation.

Many of our challenges have related to the size and scope of our operations. As we have a university population the size of a regional city, it is understandable that a variety of attitudes towards reconciliation have been exposed by the RAP process. We can see the importance and value of critiquing our RAP for its capacity not only to define and achieve measurable targets, but also to change attitudes and values. We also need to ensure that students are more engaged in the RAP planning and review process, as their voice is not very loud in this document.

Curtin offers a large number and range of courses, so assessing the extent and nature of our Indigenous course content—a very important aspect of our plan—has been a huge task. Staff have felt the pressure that comes with finding room for units with Indigenous content in an already crowded curriculum. To help smooth the way, we need to make it clear what an 'Indigenised' curriculum looks like, and how staff will know when it has been achieved.

Getting the RAP message out to all our different locations is a challenge that we have not yet been able to meet; the plan has been centred on our activities at our Bentley Campus and we will have to make efforts now to promote our reconciliation initiatives more broadly. We also need to spread the word that the RAP is a University-wide responsibility and not just that of our CAS.

Indeed, while this process has been very positive in terms of raising the profile of CAS across the University, we are also mindful that these reconciliation initiatives are likely to place extra demands on the Centre's resources, and that this must be factored into future planning.

Our closer dealings with our local Nyungar community throughout this process have also taught us much. We have learnt the importance of observing Nyungar protocols when seeking critical community input and advice and that this process must be handled thoughtfully and respectfully. We also acknowledge that the process cannot be rushed—that time must be allowed for considered discussions to take place within the appropriate Indigenous circles and be reported back. This has been a critical lesson.



## **TESTIMONIAL: Message from Sean Simpson**

Student and member of Curtin Volunteers!

Sean has seen first-hand how students' attitudes to Indigenous Australia literally change overnight through the Curtin Volunteers! experience. Initially reconciliation meant little to many students personally. 'At the moment, even if they've heard about it, they still see it as this big, shadowy thing,' he says. 'Through Curtin Volunteers! the students gain insights into Indigenous landscapes, lifestyles and cultures that many of them have not experienced before.'

Reconciliation is a very difficult concept to grapple with because you don't know what it's going to look like in the end. I think you just have to approach it with an open heart and an open mind.

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