

Leah Armstrong
CEO Reconciliation Australia
**Multiculturalism, Reconciliation and Inclusive
Workplaces**

Occasional Address to Business School Graduates

University of Western Sydney

April 18 2013

1650 words

Firstly, as is our custom I wish to acknowledge the Darug people, owners of the land we're meeting on this afternoon and pay my respects to Darug Elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Academic colleagues, special guests, and of course our most important guests today; graduands and your proud families.

This is a momentous day for all of you and so I am extremely honoured to be asked here to share it with you.

As most of you head off into the workforce armed with your new degrees I want to explore with you today the multi-cultural history of Australia's First Peoples; the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the critical importance of ensuring respect for cultural diversity in Australia and particularly in Australian workplaces.

As I scan my eyes across this auditorium I can see a wide variety of the colours and shapes that make up our remarkable human race and waiting to enter the auditorium earlier this morning I was delighted to hear many different languages

being spoken; all different but all sharing that same sense of excitement and pride.

Being here at UWS in this multi-cultural and multi-linguistic community feels like being home because while I identify as a Torres Strait Islander woman, my ancestors came not just from the tiny islands between mainland Australia and Papua New Guinea but like many Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people I also have flowing through my veins the blood of ancestors from Japan, the Malaysian Peninsula and Europe.

I share my cultural diversity with this University and with Western Sydney, the most culturally diverse region- in the world's most culturally diverse country; more than 30 percent of people in western Sydney were born overseas.

This wonderful University reflects the reality of its region's diversity with more than 100 ethnic and cultural groups represented in its student body and nearly 20% of staff coming from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

But the cultural diversity of Western Sydney doesn't come only from across the seas; it is a little known fact that Sydney is also home to what is probably Australia's largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and most of this community live right here in Western Sydney.

The 2006 census estimated the national population of Indigenous people in Australia as just over half a million with 41 thousand of those living in Sydney.

That equates to nearly one in every twelve Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people living in Sydney with the great majority of those living right here in Western Sydney.

Being part of a multi-cultural society is nothing new to Australia's First Peoples.

When the British conquest of Australia began with the arrival of the first fleet in Botany Bay in 1788 there were more than 250 separate languages being spoken on this continent.

These 250 languages were spoken by diverse nations of people who occupied wildly different landscapes and eco-systems; from the tropical rainforests of Far North Queensland to the cold temperate climes of Tasmania; from the vast arid desert country of central Australia to the coral-fringed Islands of the Torres Straits.

They spoke different languages; ate different foods; practiced different ceremonies and led vastly different lives.

In effect the continent that is now known as Australia has always been a multi-cultural place; like Asia and Europe this continent was and is peopled by diverse nations of people who had distinct cultural identities while sharing significant cultural and linguistic similarities.

However, the pre-European diversity which existed in Australia wasn't only between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but was also manifested in relationships between these First Peoples and outsiders.

In my ancestral homeland, the Melanesian Torres Strait Islander people had always traded with their Melanesian neighbours among the Papuan peoples of Papua New Guinea and with the various Aboriginal nations who were their neighbours on the Australian mainland.

In Arnhem Land the Yolngu peoples had centuries old economic and cultural ties with the Islamic Macassans of Sulawesi.

Long before the Scotsman James Cook arrived on the shores of eastern Australia, the Yolngu and the Macassans traded trepang (sea cucumber) for metal knives, cloth and tobacco. These visits are still recorded and celebrated in the music and dance of the Yolngu and Malay words from the Macassans feature prominently in Yolngu language.

Indeed some historians believe that Yolngu people visited and lived on Sulawesi as guests of the Macassans.

The conquest of Australia's First Nations by Britain ultimately ended the trading and social relationship between Yolngu and Macassan, when, as part of the new

Immigration Restriction Act 1900 or White Australia Policy, the Commonwealth Government banned the regular visits by the Macassans.

Similar discriminatory policies practiced by successive Australian State and Federal Governments, restricted movement and employment of non-European residents of Australia thereby further encouraging interaction and relationships between them and Australia's First Peoples.

Often treated with hostility by European Australians, Asian and Middle Eastern residents in Australia tended to naturally gravitate and mix with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples.

In Central Australia Moslem Afghan and Pakistani cameleers interacted with local Aboriginal people and their descendants, people like singer Dan Sultan, now number in their thousands.

In the Torres Straits and other parts of tropical Australia people like me are descendants of Japanese, Malay, Indian and Sri Lankan immigrants who married and interacted with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people.

Down the Queensland coast South Sea Islanders or Kanaks as they were known, worked as little more than slaves in the developing sugar industry and mixed with local Aboriginal people. Thousands of Queensland Aborigines now carry Kanak blood and names.

The Chinese and the Irish, who have been in Australia from the earliest days of British colonisation mixed their DNA into the modern Indigenous community perhaps more than any other peoples.

It is no surprise that so many of our leaders over past decades carry names like Ah Matt, Ah Kitt, Yu, O'Donoghue or Dodson when so many Aboriginal people have Irish or Chinese blood in their veins.

The point I am making here is that Australian multiculturalism didn't start with the First Fleet or with its adoption as formal Government policy in the early 1970s.

Western Sydney, this University and indeed all of you are part of a proud tradition of multiculturalism that long predates the colonisation and dispossession of the First Australians.

The organisation which I head up, Reconciliation Australia is committed to promoting reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader Australian community.

Success in achieving reconciliation will be through increasing the awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history and facilitating the development of relationships and respect between our nation's First Peoples and other Australians and valuing our diversity.

It is about increasing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate fully in Australian social, economic and cultural life.

Reconciliation is also about overturning the disadvantage long suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through opportunities in education and employment; through improved health and through reducing racism.

To achieve this aspiration we work closely with governments and the private sector including some of Australia's biggest corporations such as BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, KPMG, and the National Australia and Commonwealth banks.

The main plank of this work with corporate Australia is the Reconciliation Action Plan program where organisations develop business plans that document what they will do within their sphere of influence to contribute to reconciliation in Australia.

These Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) outline practical actions the organisation will take to build strong relationships and enhanced respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians.

A RAP also sets out the organisation's aspirational plans to drive greater equality by pursuing sustainable opportunities.

Put simply, the RAP program is about working with organisations across Australia to turn their good intentions into real actions.

The benefits to reconciliation of the RAP program are clear; a recent evaluation of the nearly 400 organisations partnering us in the program found that:

- RAP organisations are employing close to 19,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- RAP organisations had purchased more than \$58 million worth of goods and services from Indigenous suppliers; supporting business ownership and employment among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- RAP organisations had provided more than \$14 million towards scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- RAP organisations had provided over 213,000 people with cultural awareness training.

But they do more than provide opportunities. Compared to the general community, employees in RAP organisations:

- have much **higher levels of trust** between each other than the general community (71 per cent compared to 13 per cent);
- are **far less prejudiced** (9 per cent compared to 70 per cent);
- and have **significant higher levels of pride** in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture (77 per cent compared to 51 per cent).

As you leave this place armed with your academic qualifications, many of you will seek and find employment in the private sector and many of you will find leadership roles within that sector.

I hope that my few words today will stay with you and that you will take your place in the movement towards reconciliation and do your bit to encourage reconciliation action in which ever workplace you find yourselves.

Reconciliation between our nation's First Peoples and other Australians is about building inclusion from diversity and creating an Australia where the unique place

of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of this continent is both recognised and respected.

It's a vision that I hope you share with me in both your personal and professional lives.

Thank you.