Media Release:

‘Yorta Yorta Elder and Senior Fellow wins prestigious award for Teaching Excellence at the University of Melbourne’

Dr Wayne Atkinson has been awarded the substantive ‘Rio Tinto Award for Excellence and Innovation in Indigenous Higher Education’, 2013. The University of Melbourne has also nominated him for the Australian Awards for University Teaching including the Neville Bonner award for Indigenous Education. Head of the School of Social and Political Science, University of Melbourne, Professor Adrian Little appraises the ‘outstanding and overdue recognition for Wayne’s subject, *On Country Learning: Indigenous Studies* that he teaches as a summer intensive course in the ancestral lands of the Yorta Yorta community. The course repeatedly receives ‘exceptionally high Quality of teaching scores’. Teaching and student feedback over the last decade have consistently produced near perfect scores for the key teaching criteria of University accredited courses-see Student Feedback for Course.

“One can only be wrapped with the reward for those results, particularly when you consider the energy investment for the outcomes achieved” Wayne says. ‘Pretty deadly stuff’ as we say in Indigenous circles and it certainly confirms that we are on firm ground with Indigenous education and community based learning at the regional and national level. I must say however that it was only made possible by having such a wonderful and talented teaching team and with the support of the Yorta Yorta community who have generously hosted the program over the last decade”, Wayne acknowledges.

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 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 then visit the key organisations in the region that deliver major services in education, health, sport and community based programs. This experience in learning is a transformative process that students take with them and share with other people including their families. ‘The experience is profound’ Dr Atkinson comments and ‘one that stays with students for the rest of their lives, many of whom pursue other Indigenous studies subjects which they combine with their general academic studies.’ ‘There is now unlimited opportunity for Oncountry Learning: Indigenous Studies to happen more at the regional and local level’ Dr Atkinson urges.

Teaching Indigenous Studies has been a special career path chosen by Dr Atkinson which he says was ‘inspired by his people’. His great grandfather Thomas Shadrach James studied medicine at the University of Melbourne before the turn of the 19th Century and was the teacher, mentor and community leader at Maloga and Cummeragunja Aboriginal reserves (1881-1947). His great uncle William Cooper, and relative Sir Doug Nichols were students of Grandpa James and together with Mari Tucker, were the founding leaders of the Aboriginal political movement, established in Victoria and New South Wales, in the 1930s. The inspiration of these outstanding teachers and leaders has continued through Dr Atkinson’s family, many of whom have chosen education as a means of empowerment and a pathway to achieving greater reconciliation and understanding between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians. ‘The power of the voice and the spear of the pen are two key strategies and educational tools’ that Dr Atkinson says ‘have been passed on to us by these great leaders’.

In his quest for teaching excellence, Dr Atkinson encourages independent learning, rational argument and critical analysis. He often challenges students to take a broader and more lateral approach to learning and to also enjoy the learning process along the way. When introducing students to the Oncountry Learning program, Dr Atkinson encourages 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 these challenges in a positive way”, Dr Atkinson says “which comes back to us in their inspirational reflections of the course”.

Dr Atkinson’s ground breaking work in Oncountry Learning and Indigenous Studies has added drive to other disciplines at the University of Melbourne who are now developing and running Oncountry Learning.
programs in the subjects of health, education, engineering, history, law and cultural studies. A course in ‘Oncountry4 Health’ and medical students has just been completed in Yorta Yorta country with equal success. Dr Atkinson believes that ‘these students will also gain from the experience of learning about Indigenous history and health related issues from Indigenous people and by visiting those Indigenous organisations that deliver health programs in the region’.

Dr Wayne Atkinson, Barmah National Park: Teaching Oncountry students about Yorta Yorta cultural heritage

Oncountry Learning Site: [http://waynera.wordpress.com/](http://waynera.wordpress.com/)

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