Looking back, Kevin Rudd’s apology, 2008 was a watershed moment in Australian History and a time of rejoicement and relief for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It didn’t go to the doctrine of prior occupation and traditional ownership of Australia, but it did go to the principle of reconciliation and it helped to raise the hopes of Indigenous Australians for a better future. That was the benchmark of the apology. The commitment to closing the gap of Indigenous disadvantage was also commendable. Today however and as we commemorate the 6th Anniversary of the Apology, we are in a better position to examine the distance between the rhetoric and the reality of the Apology and the real outcomes that have been achieved in health, education, employment, housing and justice matters.

The extent to which the Gap has closed, got wider, or is still the same, and removing the barriers that continue to deprive Indigenous Australians of the rights and opportunities enjoyed and often taken for granted by the general populous remain the key challenges at hand.

These are the reflective issues that organisations and communities are dealing with today, including those Reconciliation groups who are committed to achieving those objectives.

Looking back at the delivery of the Apology, 2008

It was six years ago in a classroom room at the Yenbena Education Centre, Barmah that I personally witnessed the delivery of the apology and the celebrations that followed. With a group of Oncountry Learning students from Melbourne Uni and in solidarity with local elders and staff we sat in front of the telli waiting patiently to hear the long awaited apology being delivered. Time goes so fast and time waits for no-one as the saying goes. But the memory lingers on from the day we huddled together at Yenbena, riding the ridge on every world spoken to see whether it was honest and genuine or was it to be another form of rhetoric that clouded the integrity of past and present governments. As the narrative unfolded with acknowledgements of past wrongs and the injustices that our people endured there was a sense that the cloud was lifting and moving forward to a new space. Some light was shining through and the mood started to shift from one of doubt and uncertainty to one of cautious optimism. It was something that our ears were not attuned to and it was coming straight from the heart of the man who held the highest office in the land and at least still held the reins at that point. To many it was like a breath of fresh air coming into our space. At the end of the apology we looked at each other a bit dumfounded at the reality of what we heard and then we agreed that it was a time to rejoice- and rejoice we did. There was guitar handy at the time and one of our talented musos picked it up and chose to mark the occasion with a song that united us in harmony and in tears of joy. Lou Bennet sang ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow’ and we all joined together and nearly lifted the roof of the Yenbena Centre. That story line I’m sure is etched deeply into the soul of Yenbena and the story continues through our annual visits with the Oncountry Education program-just finished last week and we sang the song again.
As today is a reflections day for the Apology, we can use this introduction to look back and focus on the extent to which the Apology has impacted on Australian society. It is an opportune time to remind ourselves that whilst the Apology in itself was a momentous occasion that evoked the responses described, it was also coupled with a long awaited commitment to equality and justice for our people. Today I would like to focus on education as an integral part of that equation by looking at what’s been achieved using the Oncountry Learning experience as an example of individual and community empowerment through the process of Indigenous education.

Closing the Gap through Indigenous education

The Oncountry Learning course in now in its 11th year as a community based education program. It was initially inspired by the work of some of our great scholars and leaders of the calibre of Thomas Shadrach James who studied medicine and education 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). It was in the Scholars Hut at old Maloga Mission that Granpa mentored the first generation of Political leaders and scholars like William Cooper, Sir Doug Nichols Theresa Clements, Marj Tucker, Bill Onus, Shadrach James Jnr who were the founding leaders of the Aboriginal political movement, established in Victoria and New South Wales, 1930s. ‘The power of the voice, the spear of the pen’ and ‘collective organisation’ are key strategies that inspired these outstanding leaders and certainly inspired present day scholars and leaders including myself. They are a pathway to empowerment and to achieving greater reconciliation and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Oncountry teaching methods combine academic studies with the more tangible learning that students gain from visiting sites that reflect the past history of Indigenous occupation. This is complimented by local Indigenous community knowledge of more recent events that have shaped Indigenous identity and aspirations. The teaching and mentoring that follows has resulted in University graduates contributing to Indigenous development in the areas of, education, health, politics, law, sport, engineering, media and the arts.

The course is a field based program that embraces the principles of experiential and transformative learning and is taught by Indigenous people. This method of learning is a process designed to give students a broader understanding of the major service delivery organisations in the region in health, Rumbalara Coop, education, ASHE sport, RFNC and justice related issues YYNAC. It also examines the sequential barriers that prevent Indigenous Australians achieving greater self determination and justice in 21st Century Australia. From this experience students gain a deeper insight into the extent to which organisations and communities have achieved greater control of their affairs in accordance with self determination principles.

Some of the outcomes that can be measured in terms of individual and community based empowerment through the Oncountry educational process is:

Students working with NGOs have created a strong partnership with Aboriginal communities along the Murray and contributed their knowledge and skills to the Yorta Yorta Nations campaign for the recently proclaimed National Parks and Joint Management agreements in the region.
A former student wrote an outstanding play about the Aboriginal Day of Mourning, inspired by his course experience. Play: ‘1938: An Opera’ was performed at Melbourne University and brought together a caste of Indigenous, international and local students.

Many students (at least 10 and continuing) were engaged in the University of Melbourne’s Tutorial Assistance program for Indigenous students as Tutors and some also played supportive and educational roles for Indigenous students staying in residential colleges.

I have personally mentored Indigenous students doing Law degrees and students doing PhDs who are now studying at Cambridge, and Oxford Universities on Charles Perkins and Rhodes Scholarships. One is doing a PhD on the repatriation of cultural materials to the Bikini Community in North East Arnhem Land.

Have supervised students doing honours studies on Indigenous issues, one of whom is now working for the Gagudju Association in Kakadu, Northern Territory, and another one in Berlin who produced a video on the Dharnya Cultural Centre in the Barmah National Park which is on You Tube.

Law students have used their learning to promote Indigenous and human rights issues, including one who works in the United Nations Human Rights Council in New York.

Three students completed engineering degrees and went on to work with Engineers without Borders in Indigenous communities in Australia and in South East Asia.

Four students are involved in Indigenous radio and ANTAR (Australians for Native Title & Reconciliation).

Two students are journalists (The Age and Riverine Herald Echuca) contributing articles on Indigenous awareness issues.

Several students have done research projects with Indigenous organisations, applying the consultation principles learned in Indigenous Studies and the practice of applied research which empowers local communities.

Oncountry Learning has influenced other disciplines at the University of Melbourne who are developing Oncountry programs in the fields of health, education, law and cultural studies. For example, a community based education course Oncountry4 Health for medical students auspiced by Uni Melb and the Department of Rural Health, is now being taught as a field based course and has developed partnerships with Rumbalara Aboriginal Coop, RFNC, and the Viney Morgan Aboriginal Medical Service, Cummeragunja.

It is hard to measure these outcomes in terms of closing the Gap in Indigenous education generally but they are positive achievements. There is still much work to be done in providing pathways for Indigenous students in higher education not to mention greater equity for Indigenous voices in the teaching of Indigenous studies within the academy.

I will close there and thank the Shepparton Region Reconciliation Group (SRRG) and the supportive local and regional organisation for the invitation to speak today. Would like to finish on those key political strategies that inspired many of us to achieve higher education by drawing on
the metaphor of the scholars hut to say that; the ‘Power of the Voice, the Spear of the Pen and Collective Organisation (peoples power) are still the key educational strategies for achieving greater reconciliation and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians today.

Thank You in Yorta Yorta Spirit

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