Marie McInerney reported on the Lowitja Institute Knowledge Translation Forum held in Melbourne on 2 April 2019, for the Croakey Conference News Service.

Croakey is a social journalism project for public health based in Australia. http://croakey.org
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Showcasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge translation that works

A forum in Melbourne hosted by Australia’s National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research, the Lowitja Institute, showcased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research translation in action.

Journalist Marie McInerney live-tweeted from the symposium at @croakeynews with the hashtag #KTthatWorks and reported on the event for the Croakey Conference News Service.

She previewed the event below.

Marie McInerney writes:

How do you do knowledge translation that works? It’s a question for all researchers.

But it’s particularly urgent in the case of, for example, Torres Strait Islander communities who are faced with the impending impacts of climate change, where rising sea levels are a real threat to survival.

People living in these communities need to not only be armed with the latest research, they must lead it, and be involved in translating this work into solutions.
This is a principle at the heart of three innovative knowledge translation projects showcased at a forum by the Lowitja Institute, Australia’s national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.

One of these is *Meriba buay – ngalpan wakaythoemamay* (We come together to share our thinking), which evaluated a community of practice for Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, looking at community capability and the social determinants of health.

The research was led by Torres Strait Islander researchers including Dr Sanchia Shibasaki, who is from Thursday Island. Since the project was completed, she has joined Lowitja Institute as Director of Research and Knowledge Translation.

The Lowitja Institute defines knowledge translation “as a series of interactions that connect research evidence to changes in policy and practice”.

These interactions are fostered from the initial formulation of a project concept through the implementation process to delivery of findings, Shibasaki told Croakey ahead of the symposium.

“We are the only known research organisation in Australia that commissions knowledge translation (work) on top of research funding,” she said.

It’s a process, the Lowitja Institute says, that begins with developing the research questions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, as well as non-Indigenous researchers, and is taken through ways that “minimise power dynamics and privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives”.

Each research project funded by the Lowitja Institute includes additional funding to implement a Knowledge Translation Plan that looks beyond traditional approaches to sharing research with policy makers or affected communities.
Steps that such plans cover are outlined in the diagram, right.

It's an approach that is unique to the Lowitja Institute, as discussed by Dr Megan Williams, a UTS scholar of Wiradjuri descent and a Croakey contributing editor, in coverage of an earlier Lowitja Institute knowledge translation event last year in Canberra.

She wrote:

“The Lowitja Institute’s Knowledge Translation planning process begins before a project is fully funded or implemented. No other mainstream funding body requires, expects or stimulates this.”

Where words meet action

Knowledge translation has been at the heart of the Lowitja Institute’s work since its inception, with the challenge and responsibility put clearly by its namesake Dr Lowitja O’Donoghue AC CBE DSG at its launch in 2010:

“There will be a match between words and action. I want the Institute to achieve real, tangible and immediate outcomes, not rarefied research that will never be applied.

And that meant, among other things, that the point of research must always be questioned, she said:

“Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit? Who is asking the research questions?”

Her words are especially pertinent following last week’s historic announcement of the Closing the Gap Partnership Agreement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and the Federal Government, states and territories.

This agreement represents the first time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak bodies will have an equal say in the design, refresh, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Closing the Gap framework.

The Lowitja Institute is one of 40 members of the Coalition of National Aboriginal Peak Bodies that achieved the “hard fought” partnership, amid grave concerns that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices were being shut out of the Closing the Gap refresh process.

The Joint Council on Closing the Gap met for the first time last week in Brisbane.

Its first communiqué said the partnership commitment “recognises that shared decision making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples...in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Closing the Gap framework is essential to closing the gap in life outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.”

It’s also an implicit recognition of what happens when that shared decision making is not there, and that top-down approaches to funding, policy making and research not only don’t work but potentially cause more harm, as Williams wrote last year.
The Government’s official report card tabled earlier this year found that the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people was, in 2019, widening rather than closing.

Our choice, our voice

Last month the Lowitja Institute published the annual response to the Closing the Gap report on behalf of the Close the Gap campaign.

In the past, the Campaign has provided a ‘Shadow Report’, but this year it took a different approach, highlighting urgent priority themes for addressing the health gap. They are:

- targeted, needs-based primary health care
- a responsive health care system, and
- good housing for good health.

Lowitja Institute Acting CEO Janine Mohamed told the launch that the report includes some key perspectives:

”…an idea of success defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, an idea of health and wellbeing defined by us, a rejection of the negative stereotyping we’re often labelled with, and a call on policy makers to value the creativity, ingenuity and leadership of our people.

As with Tuesday’s forum, the report highlights stories that illustrate success from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, including of community-led research.

It says:

“The stories profiled in this report demonstrate that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved in the design of the services they need, we are far more likely to achieve success. These stories illustrate that ‘our choice and our voice’ are vital if we are to make gains and start to close the gap.

The Lowitja Institute’s Knowledge Translation forum is part of a commitment by the institute to “practice what we preach”, Shibasaki said.

It will be attended by a range of policy and community representatives, to build on the knowledge translation impact of the selected projects, and to make the case for greater investment and accountability in knowledge translation by funders and researchers.

The project presentations will be:

- Ike Fisher (IUIH) & Dr Yvette Roe (Mater Research – University of Queensland) – Tell My Story: Hearing from the Dads in the Indigenous Birthing in an Urban Setting (IBUS) Study
- Dr Sanchia Shibasaki (S4SC), Dr Felecia Watkin Lui & Ms Lynda Ah Mat (James Cook University) – Meriba buay – ngalpan wakaythoemamay (We come together to share our thinking): Evaluating a community of practice for Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing
- Dr Vicki Saunders & Dr Bianca Beetson, (Griffith University) – Listening to Country: Exploring the value of acoustic ecology with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison.
Croakey readers may be interested to read reports from two other major knowledge translation events co-hosted or hosted by the Lowitja Institute in recent years:

- **Community priorities into policy**: a conversation with researchers, policy makers, and stakeholders from across the health sector about research projects driven by the priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.


- **6th Annual NHMRC Symposium on Research Translation**, co-hosted by the Lowitja Institute

“Research is a political act of our sovereignty”: Knowledge translation in action

With the Federal Government pledging $160 million to Indigenous-led research as part of a $1 billion commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health in the 2019-20 Federal Budget handed down on 2 April, a forum that day showcasing success stories in Indigenous knowledge translation could not have been more timely.

The Lowitja Institute — Australia’s National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research — was among bodies singled out for funds in the Budget, winning a much-needed $10 million for scholarships and research.

Though welcome, the commitment essentially restores the Lowitja Institute’s funding to pre-2018 levels, with last year’s package amounting to a funding cut.

Earlier that day, the Institute held a forum in Melbourne highlighting three research programs it has funded demonstrating innovation in knowledge translation.

The event, #KTthatWorks, trended nationally on Twitter — no mean feat on Budget day. Journalist Marie McInerney was there for the Croakey Conference Reporting Service, and reported — the first of a three-part series — on a research program that is informing family wellbeing programs in south east Queensland after hearing the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dads.

Photos featured in the presentation on Tell My Story: Hearing from the Dads in the Indigenous Birthing in an Urban Setting (IBUS) Study (Supplied)
Marie McInerney writes:

For Dr Yvette Roe, a Njikena Jawuru woman from the West Kimberley region of Western Australia, the emerging power of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research is not only “flipping the narrative” on stories of Indigenous health but the act of research itself.

“Research is a political act of our sovereignty”, Roe told a research forum hosted by the Lowitja Institute in Melbourne that showcased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research projects putting knowledge translation into action in innovative ways.

Roe has led the **Tell My Story: Hearing from the Dads in the Indigenous Birthing in an Urban Setting (IBUS) Study**, which is now informing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family wellbeing strategy for the south east Queensland region — an area with a fast-growing Indigenous population.

She described the significant growth in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers over the past decade as driving a seismic shift in research, away from centuries of study on Indigenous people to inquiry by and for them.

“What’s happening is we’re actually using research as a sovereign political act, to voice our opinions, to (ask) questions, to advocate for community” she told Croakey in an **interview** after the event.

“Prior to that, research was often used to oppress us, to exclude us, to describe us in a very deficit model,” Roe said.

Now, she said, her team at the **Mater Research Institute at the University of Queensland** was working with its partners – the **Institute for Urban Indigenous Health** (IUIH), the Brisbane-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service (ATSICHS), and the **Mater Health Service** – on “strengths-based, resilience-focused problem solving”.

“We’re actually flipping that whole narrative, where this research is about advocacy, (and) ensuring community voices are at the forefront,” said Roe.

You can watch our **interview** with Roe and collaborator Ike Fisher below.
**Point of difference**

Earlier at the event Lowitja Institute, interim CEO Janine Mohamad said she was proud to be in the room to showcase “three amazing deadly research projects” and to discuss the way the Institute’s research could be translated into more impactful policies and programs that benefit the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“It’s about improving the health and wellbeing of our mob,” she told the packed room in Melbourne, introducing herself as a proud Narungga Kaurna woman from Point Pearce in South Australia.

Head of the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM) until late last year, Mohamed stepped into the role at the Lowitja Institute following the appointment of former CEO Romlie Mokak as the first full-time Indigenous Policy Evaluation Commissioner of the Productivity Commission.

Mohamed talked about what “sets us apart in research” at the Lowitja Institute – where 68 percent of funded research projects are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and knowledge translation has its own dedicated funding, seeking to move behind the traditional approaches: “publications, conferences and the reports we all love reading”.

The Lowitja Institute got a much-needed funding boost later in the day in the 2019-20 Federal Budget, with $10 million allocated for its research and scholarships program.

Coming on top of a package unveiled last year which essentially amounted to a budget cut, Tuesday’s commitment effectively restored the Institute’s funding to pre-2018 levels.

Mohamed had earlier told Croakey that additional funding was vital for the Lowitja Institute which was “in this amazing space at the moment, throwing off the shackles of being a CRC” under the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, and moving to Department of Health funding via the Indigenous Advancement Strategy from July 1, 2019.
This shift will mean the Lowitja Institute can work with researchers beyond the 22 institutions it has been partnered with under the CRC, a spokeswoman told Croakey.

In a Budget night statement, Mohamed said:

“We look forward to expanding our work in key research areas such as the cultural and social determinants of health, and health system improvements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We also look forward to continuing to build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research workforce, and growing our national and international networks. Our innovations in knowledge translation will ensure the ongoing positive impact of our research.”

**Yarning as method and therapy**

Innovative use of yarning circles was at the core of research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers detailed at the forum by Roe and collaborator, Ike Fisher, a Birri Gubba and Gubbi Gubbi man from Queensland who also has links to Darnley Island in the Torres Strait.

Driven by concern that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dads are often not heard as part of broader research into the health and wellbeing of their babies, the project defines yarning as “a form of culturally respectful conversation that is conversational, narrative-based and prioritises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ stories”.

Yarning was central to the project from the outset, with yarning circles initially held with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander male service providers who are fathers to identify strategies to engage with participants, and ways to stay engaged with them to beyond the birth of their children.

Using his skills as a community researcher, Fisher led yarning sessions with the participants to put the research questions to them, about their fears, hopes and aspirations, and what supports they needed and wanted.

The sessions worked at multiple levels, Fisher said. As a social framework, they served to make a connection with the fathers, identifying their cultural connections and hobbies and interests and “creating that calm environment for them to share their story…an environment where they feel comfortable to open up, (where) it’s not an interrogation, it’s safe for them”.

That often shifted into a therapeutic space, with a number of participants sharing stories they had not previously told others.

Once those yarns were had, the responses were analysed using qualitative methodology that privileged the men’s lived experiences — the range and breadth of which were deeply varied, Roe and Fisher said.

Some had been incarcerated or were going through the legal system, had been homeless and were taking on drug and alcohol addictions; others had career pathways and stable backgrounds.

“No matter what their background or upbringing… they were wanting to be the best fathers they can be, to be the providers and protectors for their families, and they were seeking support to do that,” Fisher said.

The information that was gathered and analysed was then taken back to the participants to “make sure it was true to them”.

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“Research is a political act of our sovereignty”: Knowledge translation in action

#KTthatWorks

Croakey
“Conference News Service”
“We are very much custodians of their story,” Roe said.

So too is the community, with the findings shared at targeted events including a Deadly Choices golf day and a fathers’ barbecue at a Mums & Bubs event.
Roe and Fisher said the project has had tangible outcomes, including the creation of a ‘Dads Wall’ of photos of fathers and their children at the Mums & Bubs centre, plans to run similar Dads & Kids events to sustain connections between fathers, and the integration of men’s health in the IUIH family wellbeing strategy.

“Now it’s evidence, it’s not just hearsay, not just someone’s story,” said Roe of the project’s power.

“Our community is tired of just talking all the time. They want to see outcomes, they want to see ‘what does this mean for me, for my son, for my grandchildren’.

“That’s what’s exciting about knowledge translation because our communities have now got a framework that can do that.”

For Fisher, the key lesson is that community has always got the answers.

“You’ve got to listen and do it in a way that they feel comfortable sharing. But you also have to share it back to them. You can’t hold that information (away from them). That’s what the importance of knowledge translation is.”
From the Twittersphere

The discussion trended Australia-wide on Twitter on Tuesday, garnering 1.75 million impressions. We’ve clipped some of the action below.

Arriving at beautiful @melournemuseum #treetops room for #KTThatWorks @LowitjaInstitut forum

Lowitja Institute @LowitjaInstitut · Apr 2
.LowitjaInstitut Interim CEO Janine Mohamed acknowledging that we’re meeting on Wurundjeri country in the lands of the Kulin nation & setting the scene for the conversation about #KTThatWorks in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander led research.
At #KTthatWorks: presenter @DrRoey01 with Kim O’Donnell from @sahmriAU @Lowitjalinstitut

Lowitja Institute @Lowitjalinstitut · Apr 2
Setting up at @melbournumaum for our forum this morning. Follow the conversation at #KTThatWorks (& also @mariemcinerney for @CroakeyNews). We'll be showcasing Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander led research making an impact.

Lowitja Institute @Lowitjalinstitut · Apr 1
Now onto questions with @TessRyan1. Highlighting the strength of our stories & knowledges. #KTThatWorks
“Research is a political act of our sovereignty”: Knowledge translation in action

Thanks very much to everyone who was part of #KTthatWorks today. We'll be sharing videos & info on the website & through social media soon. Project links are available on the event site eventbrite.com.au/e/lowitja-inst …. Also keep an eye on @CroakeyNews for their coverage!

You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.

#KTthatWorks

Dr Tess Ryan now moderating questions at #KTthatWorks. It’s a really exciting time to be involved in research and my mind is a little bit blown to be here today. Struck by the amazing strength of our own knowledge, that we even sometimes take for granted.

“We are the keepers of so much knowledge: it's given to us through the yarning, the narratives, the stories. That is our theory & our method. We just need to harness it in a way that is translated to government, institutions, given back to the community: @TessRyan1 #KTthatWorks

#KTthatWorks: @DrRoey01 says KT captured in phrase: flipping the narrative. Talks about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers too often have to fit uni criteria. "Instead of using them as default right/wrong, we need to say our knowledge system is everlasting."
You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.

You can watch our preview interview with Janine Mohamed, recorded ahead of the Federal Budget, below.
“Culture clings to a lifebuoy” – Torres Strait Islander researchers flipping the climate risk

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have held the solutions to Australia’s climate extremes for tens of thousands of years, and translating this knowledge into action has never been more urgent for vulnerable communities facing rising seas.

This was the message from an unprecedented collective of Torres Strait Islander researchers presenting their work to the Lowitja Institute #KTthatWorks forum on innovative knowledge translation projects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Croakey journalist Marie McInerney reported on a Torres Strait Islander community of practice breaking new ground on climate change.

This is the second article in a three-part series arising from the forum. You can read the rest of our coverage here.
Marie McInerney writes:

Early last year children and other residents forced to flee their flooded homes on Yam Island in the Torres Strait took to the streets and social media holding up signs saying ‘Help Our Families’ and ‘Please Help Us’.

Their communities, northeast of mainland Australia, are on the frontline of climate change but far removed from the politics and policies “down south”, says Torres Strait Islander academic and researcher Associate Professor Felecia Watkin Lui.

“They’re flat out living,” she said. “They might not have homes next year. The cemeteries get destroyed, those connections to your ancestors.”

Watkin Lui is one of a group of Torres Strait Islander health researchers who have come together as a community of practice for the first time in a project known as Meriba buay – ngalpan wakaythoemamay (We come together to share our thinking).

Their goal is to translate and harness both Western science and research, and local experiential (personal, traditional and cultural) knowledge, so that Torres Strait Islander people can develop their own solutions to the complex environmental and social problems on their doorsteps.

‘Stories, music, dance and visual art’ helping the Torres Strait Islander Researchers Network connect across the world on a very pressing and urgent issue: rising sea levels from climate change. Very sobering how critical it is for these fullas.
It’s work that their people have done for centuries, but is urgently needed now to respond to a host of climate related crises, including rising sea levels, loss of homes and lands, depletion of fish stocks and pollution of the marine environment which is a key breeding ground for endangered species like the green turtle and dugong.

“Our communities know climate change is very real and is impacting on their communities in a very real and dramatic way,” said Watkin Lui, a research assistant at the Indigenous Education and Research Centre at James Cook University in Cairns.

“It’s flooding our houses, it may mean forced migration of our people, forced disconnection to our home islands for tens of thousands of us who live away…. We’re talking about something that impacts on us immediately and …on generations to come,” she said.

The communities know there is no turning back on climate change for them, added Watkin Lui:

“(The big question is) how do we own that, how do we motivate our communities to have agency, to be able to use both their own knowledge …together with research knowledge and scientific evidence about climate change to make a real difference in terms of strengthening resilience (and) social capital in our communities?”

Lives at stake

Watkin Lui and three fellow Torres Strait Islander researchers Dr Sanchia Schibasaki, Lynda Ah Mat and Margaret Harvey, presented on the work of Meriba buay – ngalpan wakaythoemamay at the forum hosted in Melbourne by the Lowitja Institute to showcase innovative examples of knowledge translation.

The project was conceived in May 2017, when Watkin Lui convened a Torres Strait Islander researcher workshop in Cairns to provide input into research agendas such as the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Roadmap 3 and the review of the values and ethics guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research.

The workshop brought together — for the first time — 12 Torres Strait Islander researchers from the Torres Strait, Cairns, and Brisbane with expertise across multiple disciplines, plus representatives from the NHMRC and the community controlled Wuchopperen Health Service.

This community of practice now has expertise across the domains of health, education, science, environment, engineering, technology, economics, social sciences, community development, knowledge translation, performing arts, visual and creative arts, management and administration, as well as traditional knowledge systems and practice.

At that first meeting, the group identified concerns about the social determinants of health and wellbeing of Islander people in the Torres Strait and mainland, and a dearth of specific evidence that recognised and could support effective decision-making for Torres Strait Islander people as a discrete group among Indigenous Australians.

Two things were evident to those present: a growing pool of early career Torres Strait Islander researchers with the collective expertise to lead research and knowledge translation for their communities, and that the urgent priority identified by these communities was rising seas.

“We didn’t pick a project out of the hat,” said Ah Mat.

“There were a lot of floods and high tides happening. People’s lives were at risk and (Torres Strait Islander) people on the mainland were worried they couldn’t come home.”
Know the risk, own the risk, flip the risk

The project has a simple but powerful mantra: “Know the risk, own the risk, flip the risk”.

Knowing the risk involved not only an appreciation of the facts, but a framework for action, the researchers explained.

Among the affected communities there was no question that climate change was a risk, but ‘knowing’ required more: agreement that it was an important social determinant of health for Torres Strait Islander communities; specific knowledge or expertise regarding this risk within the group; and action that was realistic in practical and financial terms.

With political and policy conversations around carbon taxes and renewable energy taking place at a great distance both geographically and conceptually from the Torres Strait, owning the risk was an even greater challenge, they said.

“It’s hard for people to own what’s happening on a policy level if they don’t identify with the range of strategies and solutions that seem so far from where they are, culturally and geographically,” explained Watkin Lui.

Recognising the power of the arts in their communities, the researchers targeted their first knowledge translation event at the opening night of the 2018 Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF), a high-profile event attended by politicians, Torres Strait community leaders and members.

They produced a 15 minute multi-media performance piece titled Woer Wayepa—The Water is Rising that took place at the end of the night.
You can track Croakey's coverage of the conference [here](#).

"Culture clings to a lifebuoy" – Torres Strait Islander researchers flipping the climate risk

Visually and rhetorically compelling, it featured an Elder coming back from the future to warn present day communities of what lay ahead:

> “It’s 2050 and a tidal surge has sunk the last of our Torres Strait Island homes beneath the depths of the rising sea. Culture clings to a lifebuoy... Is there anybody out there?”

Schibasaki told the forum the researchers knew they had to ‘walk to talk’ on knowledge translation, to ensure they could answer the question: ‘Did you achieve what you set out to achieve, and most importantly, how do you know?’.
"Culture clings to a lifebuoy" – Torres Strait Islander researchers flipping the climate risk

#KTthatWorks
You can track Croakey’s coverage of the conference here.

“Culture clings to a lifebuoy” – Torres Strait Islander researchers flipping the climate risk

Presenting their work in Melbourne, the team rolled out all the “bells and whistles” used to date in their community consultation and evaluation.

Wearing hi-viz vests (they can’t afford life jackets and Qantas won’t sell them their offcasts) to represent the threat of climate change, the team spruiked social media selfies and got people at the forum to ‘evaluate’ the impact of their presentation by popping popsicle sticks into bottles marked with various ratings.

Similar methods were used at their community events — which included a ‘games night’ on the application of systems theory to complex problems — and the researchers said they had been encouraged by the response, winning an ARC grant to look at the application of their framework and building links to knowledge translation work in Canada.

@weemingboon @nhmrc unpacking how to do KTthatWorks @LowitjaInstitut with the Torres Strait Researchers Network @jcu
The final step — flipping the risk — involves developing tools, solutions and strategies to tap into and support the work being done by many other engaged people in the Torres Strait.

It’s not easy work, and neither is securing the resources and approval for it to continue, with funding bodies and academic institutions making community engagement “very challenging and difficult”, said Watkin Lui.
Doing research through a performance at an Indigenous arts fair and a games night “didn’t look like research, (it didn’t look) legitimate”, she added.

However, she said the Torres Strait Islander researchers aren’t seeking a sense of ‘legitimacy’ from mainstream institutions for knowledge systems and engagement approaches that are already valued in their communities.

Instead, they hope the project will lead to more support “for the type of creative innovative spaces” that are familiar to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but yet to be recognised in mainstream institutional spaces.

“The challenges are outside of these Indigenous led spaces, moving into other research areas, to say this is an important and significant way of doing research that is very beneficial to our communities,” said Watkin Lui.

And the stakes are high for their work, as the researchers explain in the project video below.

“We have met many obstacles head on but how we rise to the ongoing challenges that environmental and social issues bring will determine our survival.”

Our Croakey Conference Reporting Service archive of stories from #KTthatWorks can be found here.
Listening to Country: reclaiming culture from the clamour of prison

In a sterile, depersonalising remand environment designed to strip inmates of all individuality and ties to the familiar, the simple act of listening can be a profound connection to self.

That was the message of a captivating presentation at the recent Lowitja Institute knowledge translation forum #KTthatWorks on a research project connecting incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to country through sound.

Journalist Marie McInerney reports on how Listening to Country is helping Indigenous prisoners to heal, and reconnect with home.

Marie McInerney writes:

The sounds of a prison are oppressive even for visitors, with duress alarms going off constantly, steel doors clanging shut, even the whoosh of a vacuum-powered toilet.

What must they be like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who are locked up, often far away from family, community and country, and what do they mean for health and wellbeing?
These questions are at the centre of an innovative research program by Aboriginal researchers Dr Vicki Saunders and Dr Bianca Beetson, presented at the recent Lowitja Institute #KTthatWorks knowledge translation forum in Melbourne.

“The soundscape of a prison has to be felt to be understood,” Saunders told Croakey after presenting the work, which was undertaken earlier this year at the Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (BWCC).

“I had no idea how intrusive the sounds all around you can be. That particular prison, it’s like they designed (it) to overwhelm you with ugly sounds: of toilets flushing, of crashing doors, duress alarms. It jars in the body while you’re there.”

Saunders and Beetson are members of a multidisciplinary team conducting the research project Listening to Country: Exploring the value of acoustic ecology with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison.

It was developed in response to a direct request from a group of Aboriginal women at BWCC, in south-western Brisbane, for an immersive audio work based on field recordings to reduce stress and connect them to natural environments and to country.

The project’s aim is to explore the value of acoustic ecology – the study of the relationship, mediated through sound, between human beings and their environment – in promoting cultural connection, maintenance and wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in prison.

“I think in this project we use sound as a form of asserting our cultural sovereignty,” Beetson told Croakey later in an interview.

“It’s about reclaiming our space, our place as Aboriginal people, asserting what is important to us back in that place (the prison).”

For these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women — the “mothers, daughters, sisters, aunties and grandmothers” who are much over-represented in justice settings across Australia — “it’s one way to be able to access their culture and their agency in a place where they’ve had all rights removed,” Beetson said.
The impacts of sound

Saunders, a Gunggari woman from south west Queensland, is an emerging researcher and academic who describes her work as using arts-led and poetic enquiry in the field of child protection and family wellbeing.

Beetson, a Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi woman from the Sunshine Coast, is a visual artist and curator, and Director of the Contemporary Indigenous Art Program at Griffith University.

Collaborating with them on the Listening to Country project are two non-Aboriginal researchers: Dr Sarah Woodland, who has worked on arts-based approaches to wellbeing — including soundscape initiatives — at the BWCC for seven years, and Dr Leah Barclay, a sound artist whose work investigates the social and environmental value of acoustic ecology.

Barclay was unable to attend the forum but said in a video that many disciplines, including environmental science and medicine, were increasingly interested in “how sound truly affects our body and how listening to environmental sound can have a positive impact not just on our bodies but our minds”.

Also critical to the project are Aunty Melita Orcher and Aunty Estelle Sandow from the Brisbane Council of Elders, two respected community leaders with deep connections to women in the prison who helped the team to “navigate some very complicated spaces in that environment”.

Together, the group conducted 10 workshops at the BWCC, working with 14 inmates who participated on an ad hoc basis – “one of the challenges of working in a remand centre, with people being released and transferred regularly”.

Listening to Country project: to allow women to build trust and capacity to enable the transfer of knowledge through sound meditation, post it note poetry, and recording each others voices, footsteps, breaths and heartbeats. #KTthatWorks

Dr Vicki Saunders: "No it's not about listening to country music: it's about listening to the sounds of Country as a way of translating ways of knowing. Listening to the Country that's central to our wellbeing". #KTthatWorks
River of belonging

The first workshop was a “profound” experience, they said.

The researchers asked the women to create a visual musical score, recorded on post-it notes, which was based on yarning and thinking about the sounds of country connected to places of belonging for them.

It was understood that not all the women would know what country they were from, with many having been separated often from family and community.

Some of the words that emerged:

“I like the sounds of

The sounds at night
Bunya tree
Trees
Dreamtime stories
Running water
Earth smell
Timeless connection
Peace
Country music (old)
Breath
Fishing and swimming on/in the river bank
Rain
Family
Old Fullas”

The women were then asked to lay the post-it notes on the ground in whatever order they liked.

Magnificently, the researchers said, the notes assumed the shape of the meandering Maiwar, the Brisbane River that flows through the city and near the Corrections Centre.

“What happened was this amazing river of words, this beautiful poetic river,” Beetson said. “I used it as an icebreaker, but it became very much the backbone and the structure of how we actually created the soundscape.”
The river of words - words about the belonging place - a key part of the workshop with the women in the Listening to Country project. Dr Bianca Beetson. #KTThatWorks

The connection to home, spirit and culture...so important for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Women in prison. Their social & emotional well-being must be considered. #KTThatWorks @LowitjaInstitut

"Growing interest in sound across so many disciplines, how sound really affects our body and how listening to environmental sound can have positive impact on our body and mind. The value of listening is at the core of this Listening to Country project." #KTThatWorks #ktthatworks
The researchers took recordings of sounds particular to places, culture, and fauna, and filtered through them noises made by the women themselves in prison, with participants listening to and recording each other’s voices, footsteps, breaths, heartbeats and poetry.

“Hearing the final soundscape on the final day, some of the women said they forgot about being in prison for the moment,” Beetson said.

Here’s an excerpt, with thanks to the research team for sharing.

A spiritual dimension

Drawing on principles and processes from acoustic ecology and Indigenous storywork, the project emphasises *dadirri*, a term and concept popularised by Nauiyu Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr “to draw attention to the different ways Aboriginal people listen”, Saunders and Beetson told the forum.

“*Dadirri* means deep active listening that is comfortable with silence,” said Saunders, adding that in her local Gunggari language, the word for listening, *Yimbaya*, also means respect and “when you’re listening, respect is automatically there”.

“It’s about listening with more than our ears, it’s a whole body listening.”

She told the Lowitja Institute forum that “our talk today is about listening to the country that’s central to our wellbeing, that’s always speaking to us”.

Like others showcasing their research at the forum, Saunders said there were many barriers to a project that did not conform to traditional research methods.

The approval process for the work, still at a very early stage of knowledge translation, had taken two years “because it’s an ongoing challenge in communicating with people who are wanting us to do randomised controlled trials in a space where that’s an inappropriate method for the type of research question we’re asking.”

“What we’re trying to do has a spiritual dimension to it, has a whole other dimension to it,” she said.
“How do we navigate these spaces in between the arts and the more traditional understandings of what science is?”

The team hope their project could also serve as a model for other wellbeing contexts, including at-risk young people, Elders and other seniors in care or off-country, women transitioning from prison to the community, and hospitals or schools.

The completed work will be showcased in an immersive audio installation at the Lowitja Institute conference in Darwin in June, and there are plans to share the concept with Indigenous researchers in New Zealand and Canada.

Saunders concluded their presentation with the following:

“When we listen to country you can feel it in your body, and only when you feel it in your body can you begin to understand the true benefits of listening to country.”

Watch our interview with Dr Vicki Saunders and Dr Bianca Beetson below:

This is the final article in our #KTthatWorks series.

You can read the rest of our Croakey Conference Reporting Service reporting from the Lowitja Institute’s knowledge translation forum here.
All our interviews from the forum have been compiled into one playlist. They had been viewed a total of 625 times across Periscope and YouTube as of April 15.

Symplur analytics for the period of Croakey’s coverage show there were 121 participants on Twitter using the hashtag, sending 691 tweets, and creating just over 5.062 million Twitter impressions. Read the entire Twitter transcript.

Croakey Conference News Service

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