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CSIRO/ANU Indigenous Engagement Research Project

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Abstract

Indigenous Australians are a culturally distinct group within Australian society with a growing land base coming under their ownership and control. Many Indigenous communities suffer severe socio-economic disadvantage and social exclusion, as well as a much greater burden of ill-health than other Australians. In addition to the needs arising from these circumstances, Indigenous Australians also have extraordinary contributions to make to Australia across cultural, economic and scientific domains.

CSIRO is the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, an Australian federal research agency. With over 6500 staff spread over 19 divisions CSIRO conducts applied research in numerous disciplines including the physical sciences and social sciences. In the past five years there has been a growing interest within CSIRO in improving the organisation's ability to engage with Indigenous communities to meet their diverse needs. In a number of areas within CSIRO, steps have been taken to create ethical partnerships based on shared goals, and to directly employ more Aboriginal and Islander researchers. Nevertheless, our level of engagement through research, employment and other point of interface remains very low.

CSIRO recently developed a project in partnership with the ANU's Professor of Indigenous Studies, Mick Dodson, to significantly increase the existing level of engagement and impact. This project is being overseen by an expert Steering Committee drawn from both CSIRO and ANU, and chaired by Prof. Dodson. The interest in Indigenous research and partnerships coincides with greater recognition within CSIRO of the need to integrate social and economic dimensions of human societies and development. The project facilitates dialogue within the organisation, and between the organisation and Indigenous stakeholders on a range of matters including:

- CSIRO's mandate and imperative for meeting Indigenous needs;
- Organisational and individual relationships with the Indigenous sector/communities
- The degree of organisational support for Indigenous engagement.

In this paper, Mick Dodson and Steve Morton reflect on this experience, the impact to date and the insights achieved.

Speech Notes

Firstly, I would like to honour an important tradition in our Australian Indigenous cultures. I wish to acknowledge that we are meeting here to day on the traditional lands of the Yuggera people, and I pay my respects to their ancestors who cared for and nurtured this country over millennium.

My name is Mick Dodson. I am a member of the Yawuru peoples the traditional Aboriginal owners of land and waters in the Broom area of the southern Kimberely region of Western Australia. I am also Professor of Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, and last year I was privileged to be appointed Indigenous member for the Pacific on the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. I have particular interests in good governance for economic growth in Indigenous communities and respectful engagement between governments and first nations peoples.

It was for these reasons, that I considered favourably a request from a major Commonwealth agency charged with responsibilities for scientific and industrial research across Australia, to participate in an organisational learning exercise that explores the history, and potential of the CSIRO's Indigenous engagement, including its Indigenous recruitment and employment record, its research partnerships and its benefit to Indigenous peoples.

CSIRO – brief history

The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation or the CSIRO has over 6500 staff in 19 research divisions located across 57 sites and has been around for about 77 years. It is Australia's premier scientific research agency investigating issues of major national and global importance across such diverse areas as agriculture, the environment, manufacturing and construction, and communications and Information Technology.

Many of CSIRO's operations are in regional and remote Australia, and it is the largest single participant in the Cooperative Research Centre Program being a core participant in 50 of the 71 centres as at June 2004. Its record is impressive to say to the least.

What is not so impressive is that almost none of these operations have involved Indigenous people or research partnerships between Indigenous communities. There are almost no Indigenous staff on its books (peaking in 1997 to 21 Indigenous employees, and progressively dropping to lower than 15 people in 2001), no recognition of Indigenous knowledge and no stated benefit to Indigenous people on who's lands CSIRO scientists have operated for nearly three quarters of a century. In short CSIRO's Indigenous engagement history has been less than impressive.

Organisational learning project

This less than impressive history has not gone unnoticed by some senior executives and scientists within the CSIRO ranks who have demonstrated leadership in relation to forging links with Indigenous Australians. However it has been a lack of strategic support and corporate direction that have not sustained individual efforts.

Steve Morton

On 20 October 2003, Dr Steve Morton, then Group Chair of the Environment and Natural Resources Group wrote to Professor Mick Dodson seeking a partnership between the Australian National University Institute of Indigenous Studies (now called the National Centre for Indigenous Studies) and the CSIRO on an organisational learning project, 'The cultural context of knowledge and research: CSIRO and Indigenous communities'. In this partnership invitation, Dr Morton conceded that

"CSIRO has undertaken only limited research for and with Indigenous people. We believe that this is a consequence within CSIRO of a lack of awareness of opportunities for contribution, the requirements of working with Indigenous people in terms of representative structures, cultural considerations and political and historical realities, and the fact that these issues cut across the formal business structures within our organisation. The proposed project is intended to be one mechanism for addressing these issues."

This project was to sit within a broader organisational learning project under the social and economic integration emerging science area. The organisational learning project is based on the recognition that increasing emphasis on systematic and systemic social and economic research integration requires reflection and change.

The project – the beginnings of the CSIRO/ANU project

A small workshop was held involving staff from the ANUIIA and CSIRO in Canberra in early 2004. At this meeting a research proposal was developed and the parameters of a research relationship between the CSIRO and the ANU were defined. A project steering committee was formed with Prof Mick Dodson as Chair, and with committee members drawn from ANU and CSIRO.

The steering committee set a number of research priorities for the project which included the need to:

- Reflect on CSIRO's relationship with the Indigenous sector
- Document CSIRO research activities/projects and policies and procedures relating to Indigenous engagement and research transfer, including human resource management
- Facilitate dialogue across the entire organisation in order to understand the interest levels and experiences of individual researchers
- Consider the role of culturally specific knowledge systems and cultural protocols

within a national Western scientific research organisation

- Develop strategies to address identified problems and build on achievements
- Establish the parameters for Indigenous Research Strategy or Strategies for CSIRO.

Under the auspices of the project steering committee a consultant was appointed to conduct the internal CSIRO review, produce a report which was discussed at a workshop in May 2005 and to assist in the development of strategic responses.

The May workshop demonstrated that CSIRO has been well intentioned, and that it has, at different times over the past twenty five years, commenced work in a number of areas with the objective of putting in place policies to provide a continuing ethical framework for CSIRO engagement with Indigenous people. However, this process has been undermined by a lack of a strategic cross-organisational planning and a commitment by CSIRO leadership to embed and resource it.¹

For instance in 1996 a workshop was held in Canberra for CSIRO Divisions with a history of, or an interest in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. In 1993 CSIRO implemented an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment strategy in line with Commonwealth guidelines, and in 2003 CSIRO was awarded an Australian Human Resources Institute Award for committee to EEO and was shortlisted for the Victorian Excellence and Leadership Diversity award for its strategy to attract Indigenous students to science and CSIRO.

Similarly, in research, over the years individual scientists have developed their own links with Indigenous people and have designed research programs together with local Indigenous communities.

Sue Jackson from CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems is working with Indigenous communities on the Daly River in the Northern Territory on land and water planning. In Central Australia, a Bush Foods project has been established and includes seed harvesting of indigenous species by local people, and a project in the Murray Darling Basin is investigating the impact of natural resource management, particularly water on Indigenous communities.

This research project has enabled internal dialogue and debate between senior executives, field workers, lab based scientists and Indigenous staff about practical, ethical and infrastructural barriers and opportunities for Indigenous engagement. It has stimulated discussion with external potential partners and has identified sources of support to assist CSIRO to move forward. There have been overwhelming offers of support and advice from regional and national agencies with extensive knowledge and resource bases willing to assist CSIRO embed good Indigenous engagement practice.

And significantly, there are many willing CSIRO staff represented throughout the

organisation who have demonstrated commitment, capacity and desire to bring about change in a corporate culture that has essentially excluded Indigenous Australians.

This project has been relatively small in the grand scheme of CSIRO's operations but I feel it has opened the pathways, provided the tools, demonstrated the goodwill by outside Indigenous agencies to help move this corporate giant towards respectful Indigenous engagement. It is now up to it to demonstrate its will to move.

The project has helped to define good engagement practice and the ethical shifts required for change.

What is Indigenous engagement

The project steering committee considered that pivotal to the success of this partnership would be to communicate to CSIRO what constituted good practice in Indigenous engagement. An effective Indigenous engagement strategy would lead to an increase in employment of Indigenous people and the development and implementation of research that is inclusive of Indigenous interests.

The first broad objective to best practice in Indigenous engagement is to employ Indigenous people. Not only is employment of Indigenous people important but the strategies dedicated to recruiting and retaining Indigenous employees across all levels and all areas of the organisation.

The second broad objective to best practice in Indigenous engagement is to ensure that research undertaken is of a type to be of benefit and interest to Indigenous groups and that it involves significant Indigenous participation in shaping and undertaking the research.

Respecting Indigenous people and their knowledge

Underpinning good engagement practice lies the fundamental importance of respecting and valuing Indigenous people and their knowledge. Important components of CSIRO's business relate to research into ecological processes active in our environments. Seeking out and incorporating Indigenous knowledge about our changing environment is not an act of charity, or good will, or even a demonstration of corporate responsibility, so much as it is necessary for good science.

Valuing the contribution Indigenous people can make to good science is fundamental not only to demonstrating respect to Indigenous knowledge and experience, but in fulfilling CSIRO's objectives for science excellence, business excellences and operational excellence.

It is the business case for Indigenous engagement, not the charity case, that is the most compelling and powerful message to emerge from this research partnership. Indigenous

engagement makes good business sense.

A final research report including recommendations about a strategy to embed change throughout the organisation is currently under consideration by CSIRO executive. A partnership in research has also been proposed to assist with the evaluation of change processes throughout the organisation associated with Indigenous engagement. And ethical research standards for research with Indigenous people are being considered.

The challenge for CSIRO

The challenge ahead for CSIRO as we approach the end of our CSIRO/ANU research partnership is how this message will be embedded throughout every area of CSIRO's operations. How CSIRO responds as a single organisation, committing resources, rewarding leadership and succeeding in its aspirations for science excellence, lies in the balance. Solutions for sustainable futures for us all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians together is CSIRO's core business. It has nowhere else to go but forward.

(Footnotes)

¹ Cooperative Change Pty Ltd 2005 CSIRO – An Indigenous Future p.9