

## **Exploring a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Workshop**

Friday 4 December

1:30pm – 3:00pm

Arts Hall, 2nd Floor, Old Arts Building

University of Melbourne

## **Backgrounder on RAPs**

### ***What is a RAP?***

Extract from Reconciliation Australia's webpage:

Through the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) program, 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 is a 'living' document and an ongoing commitment, which means the organisation must review it regularly, report on it annually and closely track its implementation.

### ***Why does the AAS want a RAP?***

It will be evident to many of us who have researched, taught or otherwise explored issues located at the intersection of anthropology, history and Australian social identity that the reputation of anthropology in Australia continues to be tainted by its historical implication in the colonisation and dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In public forums, in private conversations and in the written word, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to express feelings of mistrust and anger towards the discipline, critical of its intellectual baggage, fearful of its intentions, and wary about the possible consequences of getting involved.

As a result, Indigenous scholars and students are missing out on the opportunity to deploy the powerful tools of anthropology in pursuit of their own research agendas, and the discipline in turn is missing out on the value and diversity that Indigenous scholars potentially bring to our professional reflections and debates.

Compared to other settler states such as New Zealand or the United States, where it is not uncommon to encounter Indigenous anthropologists, in Australia it seems that very few Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander researchers are choosing to engage with the discipline from within. Very little is known about the numbers of Australian anthropologists or postgraduate students who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or the reasons why their numbers are so few.

And so, despite the postcolonial turn and the increased research focus of many anthropologists on issues of social justice, it seems that the discipline in Australia at least

has not been able to provide meaningful pathways to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars to see themselves as not only the subjects of anthropology, but also as potential practitioners. And we have clearly failed to promote anthropology within the academy more broadly as an intellectually and socially productive place for Indigenous scholars to locate themselves.

The RAP process provides the AAS with an opportunity to explore why this is the case, and to develop and implement strategies to encourage more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and scholars to take up the tools and the ideas of anthropology.

### ***Who else has a RAP?***

As of 2012, 358 organisations had a RAP and more than 1.7 million Australians worked or studied in an organisation that has a RAP. These numbers have increased significantly in the past three years.

A number of organisations for with AAS members work and/or regularly engage with currently have RAPS, including:

- AIATSIS
- Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Attorney Generals' Department
- ABC
- Australian Human Rights Commission
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
- Australian Research Council
- Many universities including ANU, Monash, Uni of Melbourne and James Cook
- Native Title Services Victoria
- Aboriginal Health Council of WA
- Australian Association of Social Workers
- Australian Psychological Society
- National Archives
- Australian Council for Social Services
- Australian Education Union
- Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- Law Society of NSW

Examples of RAPS can be found at: <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/raphub/category/who-has-a-rap/>

### ***What kinds of strategies and actions do RAPs contain?***

The reconciliation strategies contained in RAPs tend to be articulated in terms of three different aspects of engagement with Indigenous peoples: respect, relationships and opportunities.

Examples of strategies and commitments contained in RAPs:

- Establishment of Indigenous consultative groups and forums
- Provision of pro-bono work/assistance

- Indigenous employment and cadetship programs
- Preferred use of Indigenous suppliers and service providers
- Development and use of Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country protocols
- Signage on buildings; acknowledgement on websites and corporate materials
- Provision of cross-cultural training for staff
- Engagement with relevant Indigenous networks
- Acknowledgement, promotion of and attendance at external Indigenous events, both local and national (eg. NAIDOC week, Sorry Day, Garma Festival)

RAPs vary in substance and the key to their effectiveness is organisational leadership and commitment. Reconciliation Australia works closely with participating organisations to ensure that RAPs are in the first instance realistic and meaningful before endorsing them. They also require participants to report annually on their RAP outcomes.

***How will a RAP align with AAS objectives and capacities?***

The AAS represents the profession of anthropology in Australia. The objectives of the Society, as stated in our constitution, are:

- a) to advance anthropology as a professional discipline grounded in the systematic pursuit of knowledge and to promote its responsible use in the service of humankind;
- b) to promote professional training and practice in anthropology.

The AAS currently achieves these objectives in a number of ways, including through:

- our code of ethics
- PhD, Honors thesis and article prizes
- a postdoctoral writing award
- lobbying university sector and on research and education funding and policy issues
- making submissions to relevant government law reform inquiries
- participation in the World Council of Anthropological Associations
- publication of our journal, The Australian Journal of Anthropology (TAJA)
- financial support for the Australian Network of Student Anthropologists (ANSA)

The AAS does not currently have any initiatives in place that specifically target professional training and/or practice for Indigenous students and scholars.

The process of developing a RAP will provide the AAS Executive with an opportunity to identify the need for targeted objectives in relation to the participation of Indigenous peoples in our discipline, and to explore appropriate avenues to address these needs.

Importantly, A RAP provides a very visible vehicle through which we can make **public** commitments to these ambitions and lead the way on reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and scientific researchers. (Although a number of universities have RAPs, as far as I can establish no other representative bodies for social science or other science research professionals have RAPS, except for a couple of medical professions such as psychologists and doctors.)

### ***What action has been taken so far?***

In July 2015 the AAS Executive endorsed a proposal put forward by then President Elect, Pamela McGrath, to explore the possibility of establishing a RAP for the society, and allocated some initial seed funds to support a preliminary workshop.

In August, an email was sent out to AAS members and to AASNet seeking expressions of interest in participating in a RAP working party.

The purpose of the RAP Working Party is to provide input and advice on appropriate strategies and activities. The plan was for meetings of the Working Party to be held via Skype or on the phone every couple of months, and for the Working Party will meet in person at an AAS RAP Workshop to be convened as part of the 2015 AAS conference program.

The Working Party held their first virtual meeting in October, at which they discussed the agenda for the December conference workshop. Those present identified the need for a reflective workshop that will enable participants to share their perceptions of the current state of relations between the discipline of anthropology and Indigenous scholars, identify areas where there are still barriers, and explore ways that an AAS might contribute to the creation of more open and inclusive spaces in the discipline.

We have since refined the agenda to the one before you today, and very gratefully secured the participation of Toni Bauman as workshop facilitator.

### ***Who is on the AAS RAP Working Party?***

The response to the Expression of Interest for the RAP Working Party was overwhelmingly positive and we had many more volunteers than we could accommodate. In the end the following individuals were chosen:

Callum Morich  
Darlene McNaughton  
Frank McKeown  
Gretchen Stolte  
Jilda Andrews  
Marcus Barber  
Lorraine Towers  
Michelle O'Toole  
Natasha Fijn  
Pam McGrath  
Sandy Toussaint  
Ute Eickelkamp

### ***What could the AAS do as part of a RAP?***

The AAS is a relatively small not-for-profit corporation of 600 members. Unlike most other organisations that currently have RAPs, we do not have a large revenue stream and limited cash capital, and we only have one part-time employee. Everyone else involved in the AAS participate as volunteers.

The other thing to bear in mind is that, unlike an organisation that has a large employee base, the AAS primarily exists to represent the interests of its members—in fact, they pay us to do so.

These two facts – our limited resources and the nature of our membership base— has some fairly major implications for how we might engage with a RAP framework. We have limited funding available to support RAP initiatives, and a limited amount of people power to implement them.

Further, we cannot compel our members or the organisations they work for to engage in any particular activities. Instead, we – and by that I mean the Executive and those other committed individuals who have put up their hands to be involved— have to lead, set an example, provide incentives, and argue for best practice.

What we do have at our disposal, however, are buckets of intellectual capital, high-level research skills, an innate capacity for designing evidence-based policy, and well-established extensive networks Indigenous organisations and communities as well as with education and research institutions.

In other words, we are well placed to facilitate relationships that generate knowledge, critique ideas and develop solutions to issues around the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars in tertiary education and research, and in particular participation in the discipline of anthropology. But we have limited capacity to stage large scale events or implement funded programs on an ongoing basis.

Some of the ideas that have been raised so far in discussions with the Working Party about an AAS RAP include:

- Reserving a place on the AAS Executive for an Indigenous representative, or establishing an Indigenous consultative committee to advise the AAS on specific issues
- Establishing links between the AAS and Indigenous Studies centres around the country
- Setting up an AAS Pro-bono research and advice service
- Undertaking a survey of Indigenous students and researchers of anthropology
- Convening a seminar specifically to discuss the relationship between anthropology and Indigenous studies
- Commission a literature review of relevant research with a view to a publication
- Improving/refining AAS website content to better reflect reconciliation ambitions and values
- Convening a series of 3 workshops to further refine the AAS reconciliation strategy
- Supporting the establishment of a representative organisation for Indigenous Australian anthropologists
- Encouraging anthropologists to prioritise the giving back of information to research collaborators



Given the limited resources available to the society, collaboration and partnership with other larger and better resourced organisations is one way that we can seek to increase our impact and ensure meaningful outcomes.

***Next Steps?***

This workshop is an important part of the process of engagement with members and interested others in how the AAS can best address its concerns about the current state of the relationship between the discipline of anthropology and Indigenous scholars and researchers. The AAS Executive and the RAP Working Party will take the ideas and directions suggested at this forum and use them to help chart the way forward.

It could be that it is decided that a RAP is not the right vehicle for AAS to achieve its aims. But if not, then what?

I am looking forward to the opportunity of working through all these issues with workshop participants almost as much as I am looking forward to the possibility of one day seeing some of these initiatives in place.

**Pamela McGrath**

President

Australian Anthropological Society