

# NIPAAC'S CREATION...

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) has maintained a special interest in improving access to postgraduate education for groups that experience educational disadvantage. Specifically, CAPA has been particularly active in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate student issues, largely through its support for the development of the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC).

NIPAAC's creation dates back to 1992 when delegates at the CAPA Annual Council Meeting (ACM) supported the funding of a research project on Indigenous postgraduate issues. Funding of the project was part of CAPA's contribution to the 1993 Indigenous Year of the World's Indigenous People (IYWIP).

Additional funding for the project was sought by an Aboriginal postgraduate member, Judy Ah Wong (who later became Judy Mundine) and, towards the end of 1993, CAPA received a \$100,000 grant from the Department of Education, Employment and Training. At around the same time at the CAPA ACM, Council voted unanimously for the creation of an Indigenous People's Officer (IPO) position on the CAPA Executive. The Indigenous project members were also granted the right to vote with their own voting placards at Council meetings, as all other affiliated postgraduate associations have. When the project was completed, Indigenous members of CAPA retained this right and it remains current practice.

The research project was launched in 1994. It culminated some four years later as one of the first comprehensive qualitative reports on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate student experiences, titled *Indigenous Postgraduate Education: A Project into the Barriers which Indigenous Students must Overcome in Undertaking Postgraduate Studies*.

During the course of the project, CAPA elected its first Aboriginal President, Bronwyn Fredericks, who was also the first known Aboriginal President of a National Education Peak Body/Organisation that was not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific. Indigenous members perceived a strong cultural shift in CAPA during her term and Bronwyn later reflected: "*I remember thinking of those constituents who were opposed to my election as Vice-President. Some of their fears would be burning, but I knew that our ancestors had made this all happen for a reason and there were now lessons for all to be learned*".

CAPA responded to the Indigenous Postgraduate Education report upon its conclusion by making 21 recommendations in support of the findings to higher education peak bodies such as the AVCC,

Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs and the Aboriginal Higher Education Network.

NIPAAC members Judy Mundine, Bronwyn Fredericks and Pamela Croft recall the launch of the research report on 26 May in Canberra on the grass near the Aboriginal Tent Embassy: *"The launch event marked five years almost to the day that the Indigenous Project began at Humpty Doo. The 26th May 1998 was additionally National Sorry Day and the Project Team wanted to offer something positive, this was Pamela's idea. As the IPO and as a member of the Stolen Generations she very clearly articulated that this day was chosen specifically to provide Australians with an opportunity to say 'Sorry' with a practical action.... Help - by working with us to implement the Recommendations from the report. This could provide a healing journey towards Reconciliation... Many Postgraduate Associations with their university campuses launched the report on Sorry Day and at other times. The CAPA office and the IPO received many congratulations from around the country praising the report."*

The National Indigenous Postgraduate Association (NIPA) – later to become NIPAAC - was formed to respond to, and extend on, the findings of the *Indigenous Postgraduate Education* report in October 1998. It was incorporated, becoming NIPAAC, in November 1999. The formation of an Indigenous organisation within CAPA acknowledged the importance for Indigenous students to have their specific needs addressed and supported by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students.

Judy Mundine, Pamela Croft and Bronwyn Fredericks: *"In conclusion, It's fair to say that CAPA over the last seven years has maintained its initial commitment to the Indigenous project, and that the Project team members and IPOs have remained strong in ensuring this commitment did not slip. The achievements for CAPA have been the publication of important research document on Indigenous Education; the successful showcasing of an Aboriginal Presidential style of a main stream peak body; the establishment of a national incorporated Aboriginal education association; and enormous future publishing possibilities of Indigenous academic papers on the CAPA and ION [Indigenous On-line Network] Websites."*

The contact with Indigenous students that had been forged by CAPA's former IPO Pamela Croft formed a basis for NIPAAC's initial membership. Membership on NIPAAC's email list has since grown to over 100 Indigenous postgraduate students and NIPAAC has established a basis as an organisation with strong networks in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate community. Those networks have been integral to NIPAAC's emergence as a pastoral, advocacy and research organisation that has developed a respected national profile.

In 2002 the CAPA Council and Executive provided additional seed funding for NIPAAC to employ a part-time Research Officer dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate student issues. All policy-based functions of NIPAAC continue to be directed by its Indigenous membership and coordinated by an elected governing committee, the NIPAAC Executive.

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**Source:** Mundine, Judy, Bronwyn Fredericks and Pamela Croft, 2000, *The CAPA Indigenous Project: "Indigenous Postgraduate Education - A Project into the Barriers which Indigenous students must overcome in Postgraduate Studies", A Short History, 1993-2000*, Published for the Second Indigenous Researchers Forum, University of South Australia, Adelaide.