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Leading a culture of success

Whether you're running a startup, multinational or not-for-profit, keeping your thinking fresh and your skills up-to-date is critical in today's accelerating world. Effective leadership has evolved – it now demands the capacity to lead with purpose, align outcomes to values and communicate across intergenerational teams. To enhance these strengths, the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM @ UNSW Business School) has developed a new Leadership Immersion program in collaboration with Aboriginal business and community leaders in central NSW as part of its renowned MBA Executive course. The oldest continual culture on earth has a lot to teach leaders of the future.

Modern executive learning is about asking candidates what kind of leader they want to be and how they want to impact the world. In the increasingly socially aware and climate-conscious business environment, creating meaningful change is a metric of success.

Professor Nick Wailes, director of AGSM and deputy dean at UNSW Business School, says this calls for a broader approach to learning: "MBA education should be about more than ticking off a curriculum – it's also about challenging yourself with new experiences. When you are put in a situation that's different to what you're used to, the experiential learning helps accelerate knowledge transfer."

AGSM's new Leadership Immersion program starts in November and will take participants inside Aboriginal communities, tapping into 60,000 years of continuous culture to help a new generation of leaders build skills in responsible and sustainable management. MBA students will



work closely with an Aboriginal-owned and -run organisation to help the business solve a strategic issue. In the process, they'll be spending time on Country, learning from Aboriginal perspectives and observing different models of leadership.

"There are so many things we can learn from First Nations Australians that are incredibly relevant for global leadership," says Wailes. "This is the oldest living culture in the world and it's survived by managing resources, dealing with the complexity of more than 250 language groups and navigating a network of close personal relationships. It's also a rich oral culture, in which storytelling, narrative and vision are the way information is spread and knowledge is preserved, bringing people to a shared understanding. Modern leaders have similar challenges to overcome."

Unique wisdom for modern leaders

The immersion experience has been developed in close collaboration with Aboriginal elders, faculty members, alumni and community members. It builds upon the insight acquired through the development of other learning modules, such as the award-winning AGSM Emerging Indigenous Executive Leader Program (EIELP). Developed by AGSM and Professor Mark Rose in collaboration with Reconciliation Australia and the Elevate RAP Working Group – which includes National Australia Bank, Richmond Football Club, Crown Resorts, Australian Football League, Broadspectrum, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Services Australia – the EIELP is designed to cultivate the next generation of Aboriginal senior business leaders.

Since it was launched in 2016, more than 125 Aboriginal leaders from private, public and for-purpose sectors have graduated from the EIELP. And in 2020, the course received the European Foundation for Management Development's Excellence in Practice Silver award for talent development.

"Part of the success of small-cohort cultural programs is that you form incredibly strong bonds with your group," says Wailes. "This has given emerging First Nations leaders the space and support to make a significant contribution in shaping not only the future of Aboriginal Australia but Australia as a whole."

Moving forward in two worlds

The first new leadership immersion will take place in Wiradjuri Country, on a property outside

Dubbo in NSW. "We've partnered with Cherie and Phil Thompson, an Aboriginal couple and the owners of local business Native Secrets," says Wailes (read the story, right). In the beginning of the immersion, students will spend a day with the Thompsons and local elder Peter Peckham, learning how they have rehabilitated land while developing cosmetics from local plants.

AGSM aims for the experience to benefit both students and communities. "This is not cultural tourism; it's about forming a long-term relationship between AGSM and the communities," says Wailes. Students gain insights and powerful new perspectives on leadership and, in return, will share skills – some freshly acquired from the MBA – to positively contribute to the local businesses. Each year, the immersion will be open to three cohorts, giving the businesses continuity. "The first group comes out with ideas and starts implementing strategies, then each cohort picks up where the last left off to keep building on it," adds Wailes.

Students will also be tasked with looking into their own organisations and taking real action in a range of ways, including by reviewing Reconciliation Action Plans and procurement systems that improve supplier diversity. "We all know it can be challenging for small businesses to sell into big businesses but when you go beyond just having a policy to actively seeking out Aboriginal businesses to partner with, that's when things start to change," says Wailes. "We believe that AGSM students and our alumni can make a significant contribution to improving economic opportunities for Aboriginal Australians – we all have a role to play."

Learnings for our times

"We have wanted to do this for a long time," says Associate Professor Michele Roberts, AGSM academic director. "Australia is finally about to have a national conversation about the Uluru Statement from the Heart. This is our moment as a nation to embrace our First Nations leadership and all the things they will do to help make Australia a better country."

AGSM believes a personal connection to First Nations culture is key to a leader's commitment to making meaningful change throughout their careers. "We'll be spending time in traditional yarning circles, sharing knowledge," says Wailes. "On the last night, we'll bring everyone together around a fire under the stars so students can talk about their learnings, sharing their ideas with each other and the local businesses. It's an amazing opportunity to reflect on how they're going to take the experience forward and make a positive impact in the world."

Caring for Country is better business

A connection to culture underpins the success of this AGSM student's skincare brand

Cherie Thompson, a Wailwan woman from the Dubbo region of NSW, is passionate about raising up her community. While teaching at the local primary school, she – along with husband Phil, a Bidjara/Kara Kara man from central Queensland – founded locally made and sourced skincare and essential oils business Native Secrets in 2013. Since then, she has worked through an Executive MBA at AGSM, which she will complete next year, and had two daughters – Airley, eight, and Romee, five. And she's still working as a teacher three days a week.

The juggle has been worth it. "An MBA was a natural next step for growing Native Secrets, and for me personally," says Cherie. "Over the past four years, I've gained an understanding of the complexities of businesses and the strategies and frameworks for success. Phil comes up with ideas all the time and I love the fact that now I can take an idea, research and evaluate it and come up with a strategy for how to implement it and bring it to life."

Phil helps manage the biodiversity offset area for a local mining company and that's where he came up with the concept of turning some of the invasive species he's clearing into products. They began with white cypress, a native tree that becomes a problem when not managed properly. "Traditionally we used white cypress leaves, heated up, to put on our sores," says Phil. "It's a natural anti-inflammatory. The cypress would have been managed by traditional owners by fire but when



Cherie Thompson

it was just left for a couple of hundred years, it became invasive so we're thinning it out to restore the ecosystem. Since 2015, we've been turning the white cypress we're taking out into essential oil."

Buddha wood is another native that's become invasive in the offset area. Used in smoking ceremonies, it also produces an oil that makes an excellent base for cosmetics. "We're trying some new technologies to find the best extraction method," says Phil. "Our aim is to wholesale it to cosmetic manufacturers around the world."

Cherie has flexed her MBA skills to access export markets for Native Secrets products. "I've been able to do several MBA projects on Native Secrets, and when I was

working with my teammates we did an export strategy focused on South Korea, which I'm implementing right now. There's a massive skincare market there – if we crack that, we've made it."

Cherie and Phil have also been working with AGSM faculty to help develop the on-Country cultural immersion program, some of which will take place on their farm. "We've been in several workshops with Nick and his team to make sure we have grassroots involvement from our communities," says Cherie. "There are real co-benefit opportunities. The students will come out and immerse themselves in our culture and learn from our local elders, and the local Indigenous companies

will gain from working with these MBA students, who bring the highest level of knowledge around business strategy."

Students start their learning with a Welcome to Country. "If I was coming into Wiradjuri Country, I would sit on the boundary – generally a river, hill or mountain – and light a fire to let people know I was there," says Phil. "I could wait for days or even weeks but finally the warriors would come across to find out why I'm coming through Wiradjuri Country. People need to understand this process wasn't just about standing up and saying, 'Welcome to my Country'. You had to learn about our lores, our men's business, our women's business,

our sacred sites. There's a whole process of understanding, which we will share with the MBA students who visit us."

The key features of this process – including tolerance, understanding and communication – reflect the skills required for leading teams, networking and achieving shared goals.

Cherie believes the immersion can also promote real change in the way the world recognises Aboriginal culture. "This process is very powerful – it takes people on a deep spiritual journey and it can be life-changing. These MBA students are the next leaders, some working for large multinational companies, so a greater awareness of First Nations culture will be driven from the top."

Do well and do good

AGSM's environmental, social and governance ethos is built to support the bottom line. "We are not saying that companies need to forego their profits and their growth and just start behaving better," says Associate Professor Michele Roberts, AGSM academic director. "When you do things more responsibly, you secure the future of your organisation."

Ethos in action

For the past three years, AGSM has been working to embed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across all its programs. In a structure that Roberts believes is unique within Australia, every core course available through the UNSW Business School now integrates ethics, sustainability and corporate responsibility aligned to the SDGs.

Every AGSM MBA begins with a compulsory Responsible Management Foundations module. "It's an introduction to the science and the evidence – and the strong business case – so that students truly understand how critical sustainable development is," says Roberts. "They see the urgent need to do more to do better."

There's a focus on proven success stories. Throughout the course, students meet, either via video stories or in-person lectures, alumni who are putting the SDGs into action in their own businesses. "It's important that it's not overwhelming – we want to inspire excitement around making a more sustainable world full of opportunity, where all people are thriving."

It's this type of practical inspiration that drives action. "Some students who arrived with limited interest in sustainability have become completely engaged," says Roberts. "We've seen students move into roles that allow them to leverage their new understanding of how they can have an impact."



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Partnerships for the future

AGSM teaches students the importance of true collaboration for success in a rapidly

evolving business landscape. "Partnerships are one of the Sustainable Development Goals, and you can only achieve the SDGs when you work in partnerships," says Roberts. The Ethics Centre is a key partner in the delivery of the AGSM MBA and the organisation's long-standing executive director, Simon Longstaff, has written a substantial portion of the new curriculum. "We also partnered with Giselle Weybrecht, author of *The Sustainable MBA*," says Roberts. "Giselle and Simon have helped us develop a lot of our content, in-class activities and assessments." Weybrecht was a special advisor to the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education and Longstaff is an adjunct professor with AGSM.

The power of short courses

Beyond the MBA, the school offers a full suite of executive education courses, from graduate certificate programs nested into the MBA program (which can also be taken individually) to short courses that can run for a single hour or across one or several days. "We're building the same sustainability curriculum into all our short courses, too," says Roberts.

With hierarchical leadership structures a thing of the past, many organisations are turning to AGSM to create tailored courses for their entire workforce.

Roberts says companies of any size can benefit. "We can upskill the whole workforce to develop a more sustainable mindset. We have moved into an era where you need every leader in every function to understand the implications for sustainability in their daily decisions. We need to give them the knowledge to ensure they're making the best choices."



Invest in your future



AGSM @ UNSW Business School MBA programs, short courses and tailored learning experiences are preparing a new generation of leaders to make an impact in an accelerating world, equipping them to see the world through a holistic lens of opportunity rather than be transfixed by change.

Mark Champley

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