

Aboriginal people have been urged to consider accounting and auditing as careers and see these jobs as just as valuable to their communities as becoming a lawyer, teacher or nurse in a joint national initiative being run by Deakin University and CPA Australia.

The initiative being run through the University's Institute of Koorie Education and School of Accounting Economics and Finance, aims to increase the participation and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the accounting profession.

It follows a Round Table which brought together key stakeholders from around Australia to address the issue.

Currently there are approximately 180,000 professional accountants in Australia, yet only 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander accountants have been located.

Director of the Institute of Koorie Education, Professor Wendy Brabham said ensuring Aboriginal people continued into and completed higher education was critical to the success of the initiative.

"Many of our students are the first member from their family and community to enter university," she said.

"When they speak about their journeys to the Institute, their stories differ but they surprise themselves by what they achieve.

"They have an impact on others and often, it is family who follow in their footsteps.

"At times we have had families with graduates who span generations and it is not unusual to have grandmothers, aunts, uncles, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and cousins graduate together.

"This initiative goes beyond increasing the number of accountants; it's about creating people whose work will make a lasting impact on the position of their communities."

Professor Mark Rose from Deakin University's Institute of Koorie Education, said the involvement of Aboriginal people in business schools – particularly the accounting and auditing fields - was the next new frontier for Aboriginal communities seeking self-determination.

"Black fellas have only been able to go to university since the 1970s," he said

"In four decades in higher education, we have really punched above our weight in areas like nursing, teaching and in some ways law, and the Institute with its off campus community based delivery approach has played a critical role in this. However, we are only just warming to areas like commerce and accounting; it's not an area we have made headway into yet.

"As first nations peoples we do not have a good economic base and the wealth of this country is not shared with us."

Professor Rose said auditors and accountants played an important role in community affairs.

“In our communities accounting and auditors are the people that control the money and ask about costs.

“They don’t have a very good image but they have a lot of power.

“We can espouse all the political stuff we want to, but the auditors and accountants can shut us down.”

Luisa Lombardi, one of the organisers of the roundtable and a lecturer in the School of Accounting, Economics and Finance, became aware of the issue while working on her honours thesis in 2006.

“I am from an immigrant family and my brothers would often be harshly bullied at school , so I had a sense of what being marginalised was all about,” she explained.

Ms Lombardi said there were a number of factors as to why accounting, and in particular the accounting profession, was not a popular choice among Indigenous Australians.

“Education is acknowledged as a broader issue in Indigenous communities and this feeds through into those identified as having an aptitude for numbers, continuing onto and staying at University and going into the professions like accounting and auditing,” Ms Lombardi said.

“Accounting is not seen as an attractive profession since most accountants are white and perceived as the gatekeeper and finger pointer of (misused) finances. “They are also seen as elitist.”

Ms Lombardi said the lack of indigenous accountants meant there were few role models to act as mentors. “Understandably people want to work in and benefit their community, but that community has its own demands and value system,” she said.

Adrian Williams, an organiser and attendee at the roundtable, initiated the IndigenousAccountantsRock.com.au website as part of his own efforts to attract more Indigenous people into the profession.

He became interested in the issue when he realised he had worked overseas and had colleagues at a senior level from many nationalities and cultures, except an Indigenous Australian.

His investigations led him to Ms Lombardi’s paper and he spent two years trying to raise awareness within the professional bodies.

“This issue is important, because in every organisation the Chief Financial Officer sits at the table when decisions are made,” he said.

“I don’t think that this is often articulated to Aboriginal people.

“The CEO will consult the CFO around every decision. If you are interested in strengthening your community and your family, you don’t just have to be a lawyer, doctor or teacher.”

Mr Williams said choosing to be an accountant or auditor was about creating options.

“Globally the Western way is changing, we are about to enter the Asian century, and sustainability is key. Indigenous thoughts and concepts globally will be important.

“I don’t think in 10 years time, organisations will be just looking at a Profit and Loss statement; they will be factoring in other things and it would be good if Indigenous people were at the table when these assessments are made.”

Christian Lugnan, who now works as a field officer with the Australian Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations, knows only too well the challenges Indigenous accountants face.

He currently works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander corporations in relation to governance and viability but has previously worked as a Senior Internal Auditor at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and as Senior Finance Officer at Aboriginal Hostels Limited.

Mr Lugnan decided to become an accountant at age 12 after falling in love with a BMW at the tyre business where his mother worked. The car was owned by an accountant.

Mr Lugnan’s aptitude for figures and maths and the encouragement of his family to focus on his schooling – saw him head to the University of Technology, Sydney to complete a business degree.

He explained there were some bumps along the way. His parents were divorced, so he commuted between parents and juggled his schooling along the way. “When I was at school I was a bit unique because I was in the top class which in itself was a contrast to my Aboriginal peers, and I felt isolated because of that,” he said.

“But financially, growing up, we really struggled and I made a commitment to myself that I didn’t want to live in poverty and I realised quickly that education was a way to achieve that.

“My father left school at 15 but went back to do a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies at 40 years of age,” Mr Lugnan said.

“He did it to specifically to say to us boys, never sacrifice your education.”

At University Mr Lugnan enjoyed university politics a little too much and his studies suffered.

However, one of the university’s Aboriginal centre personnel suggested he transfer to the University’s Lismore campus which was closer to his father. He got his studies back on track and in between stints working for Aboriginal Hostels Limited, completed his degree.

Mr Lugnan echoed Professor Rose’s call for more Aboriginals to consider accounting and finance as a career.

“We are business people,” he said.

“I don’t see why we cannot be in these key decision-making roles; they are multi-million dollar organisations and since day one they have been controlled by white decision-makers.

“It is time for us to make decisions for ourselves.”

Carlie Sargent, CSR Manager for CPA Australia, said the issue was of such national importance to the profession that CPA Australia, the Institute of Chartered Accountants and the Institute of Public Accountants had agreed to work with their various stakeholders to address it.

“Adrian Williams put it on our radar,” she said.

“This is something we as a profession can work together on and we are also employing an Indigenous person to work with us and help our organisation understand the issues.”

Ms Sargent said accountants were a long way behind the legal profession but as the momentum built it would be possible to capture that and use CPA Australia’s various networks within corporates and government, to increase the employment of indigenous accountants.

“One of our strengths is our ability to bring together and work with various stakeholders and universities to work on this area,” she said.

“The ability of the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University to recognise the community needs and education needs impressed us.”

The roundtable attracted the attention of the Governor General Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC, who sent a message to the Round Table acknowledging the need to address the serious issue of the lack of Indigenous Australians in the accounting profession.

Ms. Bryce said that action is needed “to ameliorate this grave disadvantage”.