

Dr Lewis 'Yarlupurka' O'Brien AO

Honorary Doctorate citation, 2024

Chancellor, it gives me great pleasure to present to you an outstanding candidate for admission to the Honorary Degree of Doctor of the University (honoris causa): **Dr Lewis 'Yarlupurka' O'Brien AO**.

Uncle Lewis is a long serving leader, Elder and champion of Kurna culture and Reconciliation. This award recognises his significant and distinguished service to the indigenous community of South Australia as an elder and educator, and to the promotion and protection of indigenous culture and heritage.

Born at Point Pearce Mission on Yorke Peninsula, Uncle Lewis overcame childhood obstacles including illness, separation from family, and a succession of foster homes and boy's hostels to gain the Intermediate Certificate of education from Le Fevre Boys Technical High School in 1946. He then completed an apprenticeship as a fitter and machinist with the South Australian railways and later joined the merchant navy.

In 1977, Uncle Lewis joined the South Australian education department as an Aboriginal education liaison officer. His passion for promoting the Kurna language and culture was clear from the start, and his presence made a real impact on the numbers of Indigenous children completing high school.

Nearly five-decades of commitment to Indigenous education have followed. In 2002, Uncle Lewis founded Kurna Warra Pintyanthi (meaning "creating Kurna language") with fellow Kurna Elder Dr Alitya Wallara Rigney. With a mission to develop and promote the recovery of the Kurna language, including Kurna language research, media, and resource production, Kurna Warra Pintyanthi has been hosted by the University of Adelaide since 2004.

Uncle Lewis has been a pioneer and leader in education – not just of First Nations people, but also in bringing a deeper awareness and understanding of Aboriginal knowledge to the wider community. He has served a critical role as a bridge between the Kurna Community and Academic institutions. Over the years he has held roles including:

- Adjunct Research Fellow in the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research at the University of South Australia
- Chief Investigator of the ARC-funded UniSA Indigenous Knowledge project
- Senior Elder on campus and contributor to curriculum and teaching within Yunggorendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research at Flinders University
- Lead member of the Yaitya Ngutu Kurna Advisory Group, Cultural Advisor and lecturer, Wirrtu Yarlupurka Aboriginal Education at the University of Adelaide.

Uncle Lewis brings the University community together through his stellar leadership, enabling dialogue and learning with insightful, wise and positive perspectives and outcomes. His cultural knowledge and authority enrich those who engage with him, in particular students who have the privilege to have access to his teachings through the Indigenous Knowledges courses. His charisma encompasses grace and humour, demonstrating his unique ability to support and nurture meaningful educational experiences and engagement through play and wisdom. He has mentored and taught not only the students, but also staff and educators on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching methodologies, through the form of stories which he shares with passion and joy.

His contributions to South Australian society are significant, serving on committees including the Aboriginal Advancement League; Kurna Heritage Committee; the State Council of Aboriginal Elders; various Curriculum Committees.

Over the years, Uncle Lewis has rightly been recognised for the outstanding contribution he has made as a Kurna Elder, leader of reconciliation and custodian of Kurna Culture. He was named Aboriginal Elder of the Year in 1977, awarded the Centenary Medal for service to the Aboriginal people of South Australia in 2001, and South Australian Local Hero in 2003. In 2009 he received the Citizen of Humanity Award from the National Committee of Human Rights, and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders presented him with their Leadership Award in 2018. He holds an Honorary Doctorate from Flinders University and an Honorary Fellowship of the University of South Australia.

Uncle Lewis was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in the 2014 Queen's Birthday Honours.

Today we extend that recognition, in awarding the highest honour the University can bestow.

Chancellor, I am pleased to present to you **Dr Lewis 'Yarlupurka' O'Brien**, Officer of the Order of Australia, for admission to the Honorary Degree of Doctor of the University (honoris causa).