



**+1 Podcast**  
*Season 1: Episode 8*  
*Michelle Evans*

Medo Pournader:

Hello and welcome to the +1 Podcast where we discuss diversity and inclusion in our workplaces at the University of Melbourne. I'm your host, Dr Medo Pournader, Senior Lecturer in Management and Marketing at the Faculty of Business of Economics, University of Melbourne.

In this episode we host Michelle Evans, Associate Professorship in Leadership at the Faculty of Business and Economics at the University of Melbourne. I talk to Michelle about her expertise in and experience with Indigenous leadership and entrepreneurship. Michelle takes us with her on her life and career journey from community-based theatre and radio to co-founding the award-winning MURRA Indigenous Business Masterclass Program and directing the Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership. This episode was recorded on the land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Medo Pournader:

Hello, Michelle, how are you?

Michelle Evans:

Yeah, I'm doing well today. It's beautiful and rainy here in beautiful Nam. Acknowledging the Wurundjeri people, the Woi Wurrung clan of the Kulin Nations. They're one of five tribes of this unseated territories, and acknowledging elders past and present.

Medo Pournader:

Thank you so much. I love the pin that you have on your coat. May I ask if it is an aboriginal-related pin and symbol?

Michelle Evans:

Yeah, this is a shield. It's made out of copper, and it's inlaid with emu feathers. It's a very special piece.

Medo Pournader:

Well, it's gorgeous actually. It's very beautiful.

Michelle Evans:

Thank you.

Medo Pournader:

Thank you for your time today to be a guest of the +1 Podcast. I understand we had to reschedule once, but I have been very much looking forward to this talk. As I mentioned prior to the podcast, first we ask the guests what their backgrounds are, and then we move on to the conversation building on that discussions of the background, what the guests are doing now related to D and I initiatives, and then we take the conversation from there. So, I'm all ears.

Michelle Evans:

Well, thanks, Medo. It's lovely to be here with you. Thanks for asking. My name's Michelle Evans. I'm a Kurri woman from the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. I live in Albury on Wiradjuri country in New South Wales. I love regional Australia, it's my happy place. I live there with my family, my wife and two foster children, and also my parents. I moved to Albury, so we're all there having a wonderful time just supporting each other through life.

I started out my career through higher education studying theatre, community-based theatre and radio. That was my background. I always wanted to be a theatre director. I loved the course that I did, it was very cohort-based, very Freirean and Boal-inspired theatre training, very improvised. After my third year, I directed my first show as the major director of the show. It had a really successful run, three seasons. The last season we did was actually as a part of the first Sydney Fringe Festival. We had a beautiful location to do the show at Bondi Pavilion, which was just fantastic back in the early '90s.

During that show and knowing that it was the third run for this story, the actors and the musicians in the show said to me, "We don't need you here every moment. We got this." I was 21, so I felt like that was a kick in the gut, so I wasn't real great at this thing called directing. And so I decided to go off back into more community-based organising and community arts and community cultural development. I worked in Trades Hall Council in Newcastle with the Workers' Cultural Action Committee. I got to work with all sorts of communities, people who were living in caravan parks. I worked with gay and lesbian communities setting up the first big network across Newcastle, worked with Aboriginal communities, and with all sorts of communities.

It really taught me a lot. Out of that I built my first big arts project by myself back in my home community where I grew up, a working-class town called Cessnock in the Hunter Valley. It was about trying to tell women's stories of that. That's a mining town, and really the history of Cessnock is all about men. And so we started this incredible writing project and then storytelling. It was just such a watershed moment for me to be a part of that. As I go on in my career, I went back in my master's to look at what the long-term impact of a small, short 10-week project had on the women and community and the cultural workers who were a part of it.

One of the ladies said to me in the interviews for my master's, "Come on, life happens. This isn't such a big thing for all of us. It might be a big thing for you." It really put me in my place, and I love that. I love that accountability. I love being held to account and being put in my place. It really helps me reorientate.

It really taught me a lot, Medo, about understanding somewhat arrogance of trying to evaluate and how we come at it as this egocentric piece of wanting to understand impact. It really set me off on this kind of path of thinking about impact and trying to redefine how do we notice social change, how do we understand it. That's really been a big part of my life.

I've worked in community theatre. I'm a bit of a founder. I was one of the founding station managers of 3 Kool 'N' Deadly, which is Melbourne's indigenous radio station. It's still going 20-odd years later. I was a founder of the Wilin Centre at the Victorian College of the Arts, and it's still going 20 years later. That's the sort of legacy you want to see, that you want to be a part of setting things up and also letting things go and grow in the way that they need to, and that's been a big part of my life. I guess it's taught me a lot about this thing called leadership, and it's something that I have been watching and wondering about and listening for and hearing about from elders and artists as I've gone across my whole career.

When I was training indigenous artists and arts managers in a program down at VCA, it was meant to be about arts management, but in the end, I really wanted to find out about what I was seeing, which was about leadership. I talked to all of the students and teachers involved, and we've started to look around for what was out there about indigenous leadership, and there was hardly anything written at that time. I thought, "Well, that makes sense." And so I wanted to do my doctoral studies in the area specifically around indigenous arts leadership because I was very heavily in the arts obviously. That's been my passion, my area, and my expertise.

But to study leadership, Medo, you have to go to a business school, and oh dear, that was a big thing for me, moving across to a very different way of thinking and operating in the world from what I had been doing for the first 15 years of my career and my training. It was very, very difficult for me to arrive in a place like Melbourne Business School and there not to be any other Aboriginal people at all and also to be studying something that wasn't a mainstream discipline of a business school. But I had really fantastic supervision, and we built it out from there.

One of the guys who was there, Professor Ian Williamson, he just was like, "How do we get more Aboriginal people in here?" He had been a part of a thing in the US called the PhD Project. Have you heard of that one?

Medo Pournader:

No.

Michelle Evans:

Yeah, so it's a pipeline idea that one of the big consulting companies have really backed of, "We need more minority academics in business schools in order to attract, obviously, more minority students clearly, but also to change the curriculum over time." It's that sort of thinking. The PhD project has been going for over 20 years, 25 years. Ian had done his PhD and been a part of that project, which is all about building this critical mass of people from minority backgrounds in the US and coming into very white spaces like business schools, very captured thinking and very specific managerial neoliberal ideas of how to think about and manage businesses in this day and age.

I think that his experience in that and my experience in building indigenous spaces and working really in a community engage, community upway, we were able to build something together at Melbourne Business School, and that was called the MURRA Indigenous Business Masterclass Program. Because I'd been just working for the last decade in Melbourne with indigenous artists and creatives who are also entrepreneurs, they have to be. It was a big change in the '90s, as we all know, where a lot of our creatives were really forced into that tension around managerialism and having to manage this career and find their way to build a business model out of their artistic practise.

I could see the possibilities of having a program that was just about kicking the door open in a business school and saying, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people deserve access to business acumen training at the postgraduate level as anyone does. We need to know about how to run businesses and how to play this game in order to create self-determining vehicles, and a business can be that also." I really learned a lot about this, had no idea about this, as you can understand.

And so we built this program along the same time as the Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce was setting up in Victoria as well, Kinaway. And so Kinaway and I from MBS, we went out on the road across Victoria talking to entrepreneurs and business owners and trying to figure out what was what and what a program could be, what was wanted, what was needed. Out of that, we built the MURRA program.

And so that's been going for 11 years, 12 years. We've got nearly 250 alumni that went national in year two. It just boomed, and all of a sudden I had people I could hang out with in this space. I mean, I worked out that there was a backdoor in MBS between the Centre for Population Health at Melbourne University and MBS. I was letting my fellow indigenous PhDs across the university in for a cup of tea at the staff lounge at MBS, which was incredible. We were all just super poor back then. Now we started to have a trickle of indigenous business leaders. We started to have a critical mass. We started to build this voice, and it was such an incredible time.

I think for me, working alongside that community in the growing indigenous business sector has been such a joy. I've learned a lot about the tensions and the paradox and the issues and also just the absolute creativity and ingenious approaches people will use business for. It's really for their own families and their legacy. They're able to choose who they work with and what they're doing, and that is an incredibly age-agentic space to be in. I'm not being Pollyanna about this. I listen to people talk about how important the change from being, whether it was working in government or working in another corporation or in education even or other places, community organisations, to actually having to turn up and work out how to make a profit to pay people, pay yourself, and to keep this thing as an ongoing concern, it's really a lot of hard work and hard work ethics.

That for the last 10 years, working with that community of indigenous business leaders, has really led to what is now the Dilin Duwa Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership. We were beckoned into this idea by the alumni as we talk every year with people going through the program, but we had convened a big forum in 2018/19 of 50 indigenous business leaders, and it was about we want an academy for the indigenous business space. Not only the sector is growing, but the discipline of knowledge needs to grow. We need to invest in it. We need to train people, all of those things.

And really, at the heart of it, Dilin Duwa does those things. It does research, it does community engagement, because that's really important, paying attention to regional and remote parts of Australia and making sure that access, which goes back to what really motivates me, but also our programs. So obviously the MURRA program, but now building out a grad certificate and creating that pathway into further study, whether that be MBAs. We're seeing more and more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people go through, and I'm hoping a steady flow into PhDs over time as well, because we really do see internationally this discipline of indigenous leadership, indigenous entrepreneurship, indigenous business is really growing. Our centre is about bringing all of those international best practise scholars together and building momentum and a voice into the scholarship and literature as well.

Medo Pournader:

That's fantastic. Firstly, thank you so much for the introduction to your background and also building up on that to telling us, myself and the audience, about what you're doing now and what are the initiatives for indigenous people that you have at University of Melbourne for the Dilin Duwa Centre. Can I ask for some more information about if public is listening to it right now, how can they get involved? Or specifically indigenous communities, how can they enrol? If you offer any programs, are there any scholarships for it? It would be really helpful if you could provide some more information.

Michelle Evans:

Sure. I think just to pick up on that latter point, this is the area where institutions like the University of Melbourne, Melbourne Business School have the opportunity to step up and make a difference. Because I've really learned over my time in higher education and in indigenous academic leadership that some parts are not my work to do. So it is most important that you create the invitation and create the space and you push, most certainly you push, but the institution has to make those scholarships happen.

I have done it before where I've gone out and hunted scholarships and brought in money and done all of that, but again, it's external to the core business of the university. The university needs to make the change. And so if we're thinking about social change in an institution like a university, we have to unfortunately go into that mindset of what is the value proposition, what is the business model? And of course, hey, I've learned a little bit about that over the last decade, and I'm able to use some of that literacy to make arguments and encourage players who can make those decisions to make those decisions. And then I can point to it and really show that these institutions can do that work themselves and they should be highlighted for that.

I really am absolutely delighted that I've been involved with Melbourne Business School for, I don't know, 12, and 13 years, and it's only a couple of years ago, Medo, that they reached into their own pockets and invested in indigenous scholarships for the MBA. Now, I've been asking and pushing and calling and cajoling for a decade, but the change happened when a senior leader, being the internal Dean Caron Beaton-Wells, said, "This is what we're doing." And that's when things change because I don't have the institutional power or authority to make that happen. My role is to make an argument and show how things can be done and create that flow possibility and show that the scholarships there or there's students there or all these things.

But the business school or even FBE, that institution needs to make space. It needs to not only say they value and want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in as students, as staff members, but actually do it. So it's really not that hard. We do know how to do these things, don't we? But people shy away. I think it's probably the same from what you've heard from other people talk in the diversity and

inclusion space like, "We need a person with lived experience to tell us what to do." You need to do your job, and we're going to work alongside you, and we're going to ensure and hold you accountable, and show that this is definitely possible, and don't let you coward out of this.

When first Melbourne Business School offered the scholarships, there was... I forget how many applications, but at least two or three times more than they expected. Of course. Now again, the stereotype or the limiting thinking is, "There's not people out there." But where's that thinking coming from? I think the role that we have to play as public intellectuals in a space like the academy is to really push people to think about what is closing their mind to this. This is the big change, and it's not about just creating another category or thinking about diversity and inclusion as an add-on or a staple on to these processes. The processes just need to be completely recast and done in a way that is inclusive and has diversity as the absolute DNA of that, because we know that's what creates innovation. We've done all that research, I mean, out of business schools for crying out loud.

So what's stopping us? What's stopping us is these managerial cultures that keep things in the way that they are and the power structures that keep certain ways of thinking going forward. For a person like me who's charged with the role of Associate Dean (Indigenous) and starting to think about ways to bring indigenous content into a space like FBE or MBS, it gives me great cause for alarm in many ways because it's not about bringing people in, it is about us doing housekeeping before that happens. That is an ontological and epistemological discussion that we need to have with our colleagues about how we think about the world and how kind of blinkered we have become in our disciplines of only one way of doing research or only one type of way of collecting data from one particular major US country only to build out knowledge from, and that's the norm.

That is ridiculous in 2023. We need to do better. We know better, we have to do better. I think that we are up for a reckoning around the way in which we understand the world and how we build knowledge. That's our job, and we need to get better at it.

Medo Pournader:

I completely agree with you. Well, with respect to that, the research methods and the fact that in academia most of us are put into this framework and put ourselves into this framework that we are striving to please academics and journals, American academics and journals using positivist research methods whereas there are so many other postmodern and interpretivist ways of doing things that are more true to the sense of the context that you're doing research on, that's a dilemma in my own head.

On one hand, you want to follow the head and then you want to conform to the norms and you want to use that positivist line of thinking and then following that theory and then publish. That, I would say, could be the same line of thinking that gets into what you mentioned about the top managers. Yeah, for example, anywhere else might think about Aboriginal communities and the fact that they want to conform to some other major discourse that goes on, for example in Australia about Aboriginal people, or some kind of preconceptions not necessarily correct that they might have about these communities. To me, it takes courage. You need to be bold enough to stand up against that current that comes at you and wants to take you with it. How should we do that?

Michelle Evans:

Well, I think courage is certainly an important strength to bring to bear on these spaces. I mean I really am calling for colleagues to have critical reflexivity about how they are thinking, how we are building these things, asking if I think about indigenous curriculum and development, it'll be the call, "Okay, I'm the head of finance or accounting, and what's an indigenous finance concept?" I mean, this is ridiculous. We have to think very creatively. We have to go back to first principles. We have to think about indigenous knowledges and how they are holistic. And then we're in a battle between western knowledge and indigenous knowledge, and then we're into this other space all of a sudden, and it really creates an us-and-them paradigm, which is very difficult.

And so you have young academics, whether they be indigenous or not, who are also subject to what the institution deems a success and for promotions and for all sorts of things just to be able to keep going every year in your performance reviews. Those structures are also at the moment starting to open up somewhat, thinking about engaged research, thinking about impact, thinking about different ways of doing it. Now, I'm not saying that we need to throw everything out and start all over again because that is a dystopian idea really, but we need to not just go into this space of building up an us-and-them fight between the culture wars, really, of what has been happening for the last 30, 40, 50 years in this country or 200-plus years in this country, where it is a denial of indigenous ways of knowing and doing and being and the imposition western ways of approaching it.

Now, I do think that there are ways that we can do this, and it is about coming together and really critically investigating how do we think about the work. And even for myself, I'm an empirical social scientist, I'm a leadership scholar. You study leadership. This is this phenomenon that emerges between people in groups in moments, how do you study it? We talk to leaders. It's so stupid, why are we talking to people who either we frame as leaders, or they already frame themselves so. Scientifically it doesn't feel right. Our leadership field has been debating about methodology and the big leap between how theoretically exciting the area is and how methodologically backwards really we are.

I mean, those sort of yarns is what inspires us as academics. If we can't work out and challenge ourselves to be thinking about this in our institutions, then how can we really go into communities or work with companies and be able to make that application of the knowledge and show and demonstrate how we have a real understanding of our own positionality in that knowledge development.

So yeah, I get very excited when I see young academics, or any academics really, showing that sort of approach, really thinking about how they are building knowledge and how they are positioned and how they design it and what the limitations are. I get excited also when I see young indigenous academics. I also get very protective, Medo, because I know how hard it is in institutions and how you can get really down because of what you need to achieve. Especially in institutions like the University of Melbourne, when we come here, we are hired here because we are excellent, and that is the expectation, as it well should be. I am all for that. But we need to really be able to think about the breadth of what that can be and from whose perspective that excellence is seen and how even in promotions to have those different communities that we might work with or work from have a voice into those sort of ways of being able to talk about how this has impacted the way we talk about things or the way we think about things. I mean, that's huge, right?

Medo Pournader:

It is. It is a fundamental change. I think the current way the universities function, from my understanding, it is a product of, I don't know, university ranking systems, QS, Times Higher Education, the criteria they use. Exactly, the incentives for them, the incentives for universities, and then how that becomes a top-down approach into what is expected of you to deliver. Really, I understand as academics we should aim for top quality journals and publishing them, but that also comes with its own pressures and its own frameworks that you need to comply with. And then again, getting back to that positivist view. If you want to be more creative, if you want to be... I don't know, I have seen good pieces of work, but most of them, to me at least, probably you would agree, look like following a certain type of not very authentic sometimes frameworks that you need to comply with. And then sometimes you tell yourself, "Yeah, I want to stand up for myself. I want to do my own line of research. I want to have my own legacy in academia," and then you get a rejection.

Michelle Evans:

Absolutely. We've all had that. It's hard, it is really hard, but I just go back again and starting to think about what is the role of a higher education space? And certainly having worked in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space for a long time, it is about the dream of a future for... Education's always been a big part of driving the future for our generations and building up those expertise and having more doctors. We've seen Professor Ian Anderson, who was our first indigenous Provost Vice Chancellor at the University of Melbourne, one of first Aboriginal doctors in Australia, part of building the Indigenous Doctors Association. And now look at where that is, the Indigenous Psychologists Association, the nurses, all the health workers, the educators. It's incredible the amount of effort that First Nations academics and in collaboration with community and Aboriginal education consultative bodies, which connect it to the community and connect it back to those first principles of thinking back to a children's first 100 days, thinking about preschool education, it's all connected.

And so when I think about higher education, I get we can get trapped in that individual academic life and how we're going to get through and what we're doing. But really, I think the opportunity for me is how to be connected with community, especially through research, it's really helpful, but also through the teaching and through our community engagement at Dilin Duwa. That is what gives the inspiration and aspiration, and it really creates such an incredible momentum. Perhaps the thing I'll use as a great example is I teach in the MURRA program, I teach the Leadership Capstone Masterclass. I challenge the group to think of how they can do something collectively that they couldn't do alone. What has come out of these challenges to each cohort has been incredible. There's been junior MURRA programs set up, there's been dialogues set up, there's been indigenous women in business networks, et cetera. But the one that really stands out for me is generation four of MURRA set up Indigenous Business Month. And it's Indigenous Business Month this month in October. Every October, we claimed an entire month, and-

Medo Pournader:

This is awesome.

Michelle Evans:

It's incredible. I mean, you just do it. You don't ask permission for these things, you just get on, get on, do it. What is it about? All we did is so light touch, put up a website, and invite people to log on their events celebrating indigenous business, whether it's a coffee and Toowoomba at a local cafe or a panel discussion about legislative change in the indigenous business sector, it doesn't matter. Anyone can do anything they want. It's been great, we are on the ninth year this year. Because we are going to the national referendum, we have decided that this year we really wanted to encourage people to just



gather together to support each other and not really have our big awards ceremonies or big launches and stuff, because the negative campaigning has just been really attacking a lot of indigenous individuals, of course, but lots of movements and organisations. No one deserves any of that.

And so, this year in 2023, it's really about just encouraging grassroots gathering to support each other. Even that just feels like such a generous. I just get a big sigh when I think about it, I think, "Oh, thank goodness I don't have to perform. I don't have to be out there trying to be a voice on this or that. I can just have a cup of coffee with some local people that I know who are trying their hardest to build their business or their organisation to make a difference." All of those businesses really are making a difference, whether it's employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There's a fantastic MURRA business that I love that's set up a foundation funding workers on the mission. The lady, she's one of our indigenous advisory group members, her name is Carol Vale. Her firm, Murawin, does service engagement evaluations, reviews, all sorts of things, but she also funds major international conferences out of her own pocket or funds the employment of her sisters and family on the mission that she's from, and really funds community to get involved, employs her family. I just think, "What an incredible leader Carol is." She's not the only one, there are so many. There's hundreds and hundreds and thousands of indigenous business leaders around this country, and we are all so much strengthened by them, I think.

Medo Pournader:

I'm pretty sure, and I would love to meet them. For this October event, can non-indigenous people attend? And if they can, where can they find some more information about it?

Michelle Evans:

Yeah, so just look on [indigenousbusinessmonth.com.au](http://indigenousbusinessmonth.com.au) and you'll see all of the events listed. They're all around the country and anyone... well, indigenous businesses can list events. It's just great to see what comes up. You just never know. But next year, Medo, once we're beyond October 14th, we are really looking towards our 10th anniversary of Indigenous Business Month. We're going to have a bit of a shindig, I think. I think it's time for a party and real celebration of all that is in the indigenous business sector. I'm not just talking about the most profitable business or the biggest business, and those are really important, but I'm talking about ingenious businesses that figure out a business model that gives directly back to community through their work. Or I'm talking about incredible creatives who create business models out of their creative and cultural work. Or I'm talking about indigenous businesses who do business with other indigenous businesses and build that supply chain interaction eye to eye, we've called it, not B2B, and just those different ways of saying, "This is what we think is really special." I'm sure there's 100 more great ideas that will become awards in the future, and we look forward to that.

Medo Pournader:

Yeah, me too. I would love to see more of indigenous businesses, specifically more indigenous people in Faculty of Business and also Melbourne Business School. Michelle, I'm conscious of the time, I know that you have to be somewhere. There is one question I ask all our guests by the end of the podcast, and here it is: how do you think the future looks like?

Michelle Evans:

I'm always hopeful. Some people think hope is something that we've been sold to believe in, but I really do think hope is an important gift to ourselves for the future. And so, I still have great hope for a positive outcome from the referendum, and I think that that will spur on great change in the DNA of our country

and our identity as Australians. I really am excited by that. I think for the indigenous business sector, I think there's real hope for coming together and having a strong voice to call and leverage policy change in and of themselves. I think for Dilin Duwa, as we're going through our first... We're still building as a little centre, we've just turned two this year. I have great hope for just seeing more and more indigenous academics and professional staff building out this really important space and finding ways to bridge into really authentic and exciting curriculum and a decolonised way to be in our Faculty of Business and Economics and in Melbourne Business School.

Medo Pournader:

Thank you very much, Michelle, for your time. I hope we get to have you again in the podcast.

Michelle Evans:

Thank you.

Medo Pournader:

Thank you for listening, and please don't forget to subscribe to the podcast series. Please also reach out, let us know what you think, and whether you'd like to contribute to +1 Podcast series.