Professor Rhonda Craven  
Launch of the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education  
Australian Catholic University  
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My background

Let me start by telling you a little bit about where I come from. Not to tell you the story of my life, but in emulation of the Aboriginal custom of asking, Where you from? - one of the things all Australians can learn from Aboriginal Australia, because a person’s origins and life experiences tell so much about who they are.

I grew up in Peakhurst, on the banks of the lovely Georges River, where I live now, keeping to my roots and my lifetime circle of friends. I’m an alumna of Peakhurst High School now Georges River College and my elder daughter Violet is a student there now with my other daughter Charlotte joining her next year. Studying education at Alexander Mackie CAE, the Sydney Institute of Education, and then the University of Sydney I developed a strong conviction of the power of education to make a real difference and a lifelong passion for Aboriginal Education.

This led to the most formative experience of my life. As a young teacher education academic at UNSW Oatley Campus, I was asked by Professor Tony Vinson to look after Oodgeroo Noonuccal, formerly Kath Walker, when she was Artist in Residence at the university. Oodgeroo was a great poet, but she saw herself more as an educator. The great lesson she taught me in the years before her untimely death was: ONE PERSON CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE. With her help and inspiration, I and a number of colleagues started ‘Teaching the Teachers’, a model mandatory Aboriginal Studies subject for teacher education. Our research has shown that ‘Teaching the Teachers’ has made a difference in empowering beginning teachers to teach Aboriginal Studies – and, just as importantly, empowering them to teach Aboriginal students effectively. Through ‘Teaching the Teachers’, I met my life partner James Wilson-Miller and am now the mother of two beautiful Koori girls – making my passion for Aboriginal education personal too!

Evolution of IPPE

I have been fortunate to team with the world’s one and only Professor Herb Marsh (an ISI top rated researcher in the world in education and sports psychology) to develop my interests in self-concept theory in education - the critical importance of motivation to learn and how this can be enhanced. We set up the Self-Concept Learning Facilitation Centre – the SELF Centre - and established a worldwide network of scholars – now over 700 – and generated international conferences. After each biennial SELF conference we have published with a leading USA publisher an international research monograph series based on invited presentations. Our 8th biennial SELF conference will be held in Germany in 2015. This shows the strength of our ongoing global networking.
The SELF Centre morphed into the Centre for Positive Psychology and Education – CPPE. Then Professor Wayne McKenna invited us to be the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at Australian Catholic University, and here we are today.
IPPE at ACU

Let me say how delighted my colleagues and I are to be at ACU’s Mount St Mary Campus at Strathfield. We love our new colleagues (we are already working with several colleagues on external research grant applications), the atmosphere, the general happiness of the students and their energy, the harmony of the buildings, the friendliness, and Joseph and Regina’s fabulous catering – fortunately we have access to the gym as well!

A number of our people say that the vibe at Strathfield is just so much nicer than other universities they have been. When our visitors are awed at the beauty and magnificence of the original mansion, we tell them the story of the Christian Brothers head man from Dublin being told there was concern about trainee Brothers being in such a rich environment and saying unequivocally - no setting could ever be too opulent for the vital work of education! As well as the harmony and grace of the buildings – the chapel won an international architecture award in 1923 – there is a vital spiritual element at the Mount St Mary environment. And it is lovely to be across the sports field from St Pat’s and see the boys playing. An environment to flourish and thrive.

A huge reason we at IPPE are so happy to be with ACU is the synergy between the University’s Mission and the vision of our Institute. Grounded in 2000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition, Australian Catholic University brings a distinctive spiritual perspective to the social and ethical dilemmas facing our world and communities, through its fundamental concern for justice, equity, social, and ethical issues; the advancement of the common good; and the dignity of all human beings.

Our vision at IPPE is to lead scientific research that empowers individuals, groups, and Australia to not just succeed - but flourish and thrive.

1. Firstly, by conducting world-class multi-disciplinary research in positive psychology and education that makes a difference in addressing critical educational and psychosocial issues of our time;
2. Secondly, by undertaking research to influence positively the lives of individuals, families, communities and organisations, and translating theory and research into effective policy and practice; and
3. Thirdly, by driving excellence in positive psychology through rigorous research in the international arena that fosters the common good.

I’m sure we all agree that Australia is a wonderful country – the envy of the world in so many ways – but no one could argue with any conviction that our society is perfect. As we all know, the function of all education is to enable and empower everyone to be the best they can be. Arguably, this applies most particularly to university education, which prepares young people, and some older people – let’s never forget mature-age students - to better themselves to be of service to the community. I’m sure you will agree that this is where IPPE’s vision and our program of making a difference by addressing educational and psychosocial issues, by research to make a difference in people’s lives – from the individual up to the nation – and by research to foster the common good, build social capital, and grow social responsibility – this is where IPPE can make a positive contribution to our country, both in the immediate
future and in years to come. Our bottom line is we want to conduct high quality research that makes a difference to critical social issues of our time. Let me give you an example.

**Quality significant research: IPPE’s Indigenous Culture, Education, and Well-being Research Program**

Our Prime Minister has emphasised in this year’s Prime Minister’s Closing the Gap report (2014) “no one should be under any illusion about the difficulty of swiftly overcoming two centuries of comparative failure. Nevertheless, it would be complacent, even neglectful, to not redress, from day one, the most intractable difficulty our country has ever faced”. But the national progress report card shows that in far too many areas Indigenous peoples’ lives are not improving.

- Getting children to school is the Australian Government’s number one priority in Indigenous Affairs. Poor attendance means that Indigenous children find it hard to perform at school. In relation to the target to improve school attendance, strategies implemented have resulted in no improvement in Indigenous school attendance over the past five years. An F for Australia.

- Halving the gap for Indigenous children in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018). Only 2 of 8 areas have shown any improvement at all since 2008. Education predicates life’s opportunities. Another F for Australia.

- There has been no progress on the employment target to halve the gap in employment outcomes by 2018. A big F for Australia as having a job enables Indigenous Australians to reap the rewards of the economic prosperity of the Lucky Country.

Whilst these targets and the data representing them are important for Australia it is simply unacceptable as a nation to continue to fail across an array of critical socio-economic indicators resulting in Australian Indigenous people being one of the most disadvantaged Indigenous peoples in the world and the wastage of so much Indigenous talent that could enable Australia *flourish and thrive*. Clearly we need a new approach.

Whilst the Commonwealth means well and acknowledges “We also need to more honestly assess the impact of policies and programmes and, where success is not being achieved, be prepared to change tack and try new things” IPPE believes a key contributing factor to the poor report card in Australia is a lack of quality research that empirically demonstrates what enables people to not just succeed but to *flourish and thrive*. This is where IPPE’s research differs from the norm and represents a new tack. Rather than focus on the problems – we apply international advances in positive psychology theory, research, and practice to focus on finding out what are the drivers that enable Indigenous people to thrive, flourish, and triumph in the face of adversity - and there are plenty of examples of Indigenous success that we as a nation can learn from. For example, we now have over 19000 Indigenous professionals and over 3000 Indigenous PhD graduates, and over 30000 Indigenous university. Who says Indigenous Australians can’t *flourish and thrive*?
One of our new ARC grants is aiming to find out what the drivers of success are that have enabled Indigenous professionals to be where they are today - so that they can be emulated more widely.

Other research I was talking about this afternoon at a conference is our new research collaboration with The Scots College where we are intending on finding out what the drivers are of their successful Indigenous Education Program. This is a highly successful program - The Scots College Indigenous boys are thriving and flourishing and going onto university. They are also doing well at University – Kyol Blakeney is a Scots boy and this year was elected as President of the University of Sydney SRC. The Scots College program also has wide ranging impacts on non-Indigenous students at The Scots College and the broader school community. The Scots College is truly transforming lives and communities and can enable us to see the way. The Scots College success also shows us that problems in Indigenous Education are not intractable – there are new ways that are successful that Australian can learn from and emulate.

The Commonwealth says “There is also a need to engage Indigenous people more in solving their own problems. We have to stop pretending that a government policy or programme on its own can overcome Indigenous disadvantage”. However where is the Commonwealth’s master plan to empower Indigenous Australians with the tools to be self-reliant. IPPE’s focus on empowering Indigenous people with the drivers of success is a new way forward – enabling people to have high self-concepts a, a can do attitude, resilience and the other key drivers that will empower people to flourish and thrive. No more deficit models. We need to move forward with research-derived positive psychology approaches. Hence IPPE is making a novel contribution to addressing the most fundamental social justice issue of our nation which has been consigned to the too hard basket for far too long. We have tried deficit theory for over 200 years – it doesn’t work and never will. Australia’s report card can change with our fresh approach.

I mentioned before my lifelong passion for Aboriginal Education. This is why IPPE has a high quality Indigenous Culture, Education, and Well-Being research program which also permeates across our research programs. It is also why I am so pleased to have my great colleague Professor Janet Mooney, 17 years Director of Sydney University’s Koori Centre, to lead our Indigenous program. We are also honoured to have Associate Professor Cheryl Kickett-Tucker whose research is helping WA Indigenous communities flourish and thrive. Our Indigenous Post-Doctoral Fellows, Dr Anthony Dillon and Dr Fabri Blacklock who both share in ARC grants won this year.

It is also important to emphasise that our Indigenous research team are bringing their insights to inform our mainstream research programs and our leading non-Indigenous researchers are bringing their expertise, skills, and commitment to social responsibility to bear on addressing Aboriginal issues thus generating a cross-cultural synergy unique to IPPE. It is also why ACU is a top ranking university in the country in ARC Indigenous Discovery Grants. IPPE submitted 2 Indigenous ARC grants in the last round. In Australia a total of 10 grants were funded and both of IPPE applications were successful - attracting $848K to ACU.
IPPE’s research programs to make a difference

Our Aboriginal Education research program is just one example of the significant issues of our time that IPPE’s researchers and research programs are tackling head on through the empowering lens of positive psychology.

Let me talk briefly about some of these.

**Mindfulness, Compassion, and Action**

Here we examine interventions designed to promote well-being, supportive communities, and effective behaviours. Our ultimate goal is to find ways to reduce human suffering and promote flourishing and thriving. We are also very interested in having mindfulness taught in teacher education so that the next generation of teachers is empowered with the knowledge and skills to teach Australian children how to be mindful so they can reach their full potential and thrive.

**Physical Activity, Sport, and Health Psychology**

This research program assesses the contribution of physical activity to physical and mental health, and well-being. We also examine social factors in competitive sports and test interventions to enhance performance and provide rewarding experiences for all participants. We want to promote increased physical activity and healthy lifestyles to address the rising rates of obesity in our Australia – one of the most successful sporting nations in the world. For example, funded by an ARC Discovery grant, we are testing the effect of a professional development program targeting physical education teachers that is designed to increase students’ opportunities for physical activity during physical education lessons and to enhance their motivation towards physical activity.

This research is critical because many Australian youth do not get enough physical activity plus there is a large decline in physical activity associated with adolescence. As such, there is an urgent need to develop strategies to engage adolescents in physical activity. If adolescent physical activity levels can be increased, expected benefits include engagement in academic classes, greater self-concept, enhanced academic achievement, and better overall well-being.

**Positive Education**

Capitalising on advances in educational psychology theory, research and practice to empower individuals to thrive our positive education program focuses on how we can improve life satisfaction, self-efficacy, and functioning. We also focus on equity, teachers and teaching that makes a difference. For example working with the NSWPF anti-terrorism unit and the Catholic Education Office we have developed a positive psychology anti-bullying and anti-violence intervention that has been demonstrated to be very effective in reducing violence and bullying and increasing prosocial behaviours.
IPPE inherits ‘Teaching the Teachers Indigenous Australian Studies’. Before ‘Teaching the Teachers’, only one university in Australia programmed a mandatory Aboriginal Studies subject for student teachers – but as a result of ‘Teaching the Teachers’ the majority of universities have introduced mandatory Aboriginal Studies.

We also work with the NSW Department of Education and Communities on an important research project where we have had the privilege to work with schools who have introduced Positive Behaviour for Learning known as PBL. We have found that PBL is helping to enhance school climate and thus enabling students to thrive.

Positive Organisational and Social Context

We also focus on research that enhances our understanding of the social contexts of psychological processes that enable people and organisations to flourish and thrive.

For example, our Police face traumatic incidents as an everyday aspect of their duty to serve and protect us. Our police run towards problems that the public run away from. Currently in NSW very few police (1.6%) officially retire; most exit via medical leave, particularly due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This results in significant human and material costs to: the wellbeing and life potential of police and their families; the capability of NSW Police Force to protect and serve the community; and massive training costs (it costs $1 million to train a new officer).

We are working in collaboration with the NSW Police Force to apply advances in theory, research, and practice spearheaded by IPPE academics on a $1 million dollar ARC grant that aims to enable NSW police wellbeing. We aim to help prevent our officers from getting sick in the first place by finding out what enhances their retention, resilience, and wellbeing.

Another area we are addressing with The Benevolent Society is how to enhance social capital. We are working with 2 communities and a number of secondary schools to find innovative ways to develop secondary students’ social capital to enable these students and their communities to thrive. We have conducted very successful mentoring, anti-racism anti-bullying, and positive health psychology interventions that have made a real difference to the students’ lives and have built social capital in their communities.

Positive Psychological and Social Development

We also study resilience character traits that help people deal with setbacks and lead healthy and fulfilling lives and test interventions to promote social effectiveness. We are working with Reverend Bill Crews and the Exodus foundation to develop and test innovative interventions to assist young people who have fallen through the cracks and do not attend school to re-engage with education and develop the psychological tools to not just succeed but thrive and triumph.

• In collaboration with the Helmsman Project, we are also coaching disadvantaged secondary students to enhance their psychological wellbeing to enable them to strive for their dreams and prosper. A component of this training is a novel intervention whereby we take students sailing on a yacht to enhance their resilience, character, and leadership skills thus enabling disadvantaged students to flourish and thrive.
Positive SELF and Well-Being

Self-concept and related self-belief constructs are at the heart of the positive psychology revolution that emphasises how individuals can get the most from life. A positive self-concept and its enhancement naturally facilitate positive outcomes such as completing high school, going on to further education and training, being employed and provides an influential platform for leading fulfilling and productive lives. IPPE houses the SELF Research Centre which leads self-concept research with over 700 members from 45 countries. The program draws on advanced quantitative methodology to fuel research to build capacity throughout society.

• In collaboration with the NSW Department of Education and Communities, a key new ARC grant we are working on is addressing the needs and enhancing the self-concepts of Indigenous Gifted and Talented students, who are underrepresented in selective education. We aim to find out about what aspects of selective education work, what are the barriers to Indigenous students engaging in selective education, plus we are going to develop virtual gifted and talented environments for hubs of schools to engage high ability Indigenous students to enable these children to flourish and thrive. Like many Indigenous education initiatives, this will also benefit non-Indigenous students.

Substantive-Methodological Synergy

• Complex issues in applied research require strong methodology; methodological developments are stronger when stimulated by real substantive issues. The two together generate a powerful compound synergy. This research program capitalises on the state-of-the-art methodological developments that are the hallmarks of scientific rigor to address complex practical issues. These are embedded in all IPPE's research themes and our work in this area contributes to driving the international research agenda.

Our team

Thanks largely to the efforts - and the prestige - of my colleague Professor Herb Marsh – the most cited educational researcher on the planet, and my esteemed colleagues – we have been able to gather together a wonderful Institute of internationally renowned researchers and scholars. This is in addition to the renowned researchers and scholars we already had. I promise you that we will make this team of stars, a star team to make a difference for individuals, communities, and our nation. Some of our stars include:

• Professor Richard Ryan (Rochester, Co-founder of Self-Determination Theory);
• Professor Robert Vallerand (Quebec, past president of International Association of Positive Psychology);
• Professor Ralf Schwarzer (Berlin, Founding Director of Society of Test Anxiety Research, and leading Health Psychologist);
• Professor Felicia Huppert (Cambridge, Founding Director of the Cambridge Mindfulness Centre)

My Deputy Director, Professor Alex Yeung, internationally acclaimed expert in educational research who has demonstrated expertise in quantitative and qualitative
methods, and is widely published in the most prestigious journals in education studies and educational psychology.

- Professor Lazar Stankov The focus of his research has been on intelligence, personality, and issues related to the assessment of cognitive and non-cognitive traits as well as cross-cultural differences and anti-terrorism research.
- Professor Alexandre Morin defines himself as a lifespan developmental psychologist, with broad research interests anchored in the exploration of the social determinants of psychological well-being and psychopathologies at various life stages and in various settings, such as schools and organisations.
- Professor Joseph Ciarrochi His books and papers on emotional intelligence (EI) are among the most highly cited works in the EI area. Professor Ciarrochi’s work has been on television, and in magazines, newspaper articles, and radio. He has been honoured with over two million dollars in competitive research funding.
- Associate Professor Chris Lonsdale research utilises Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework for understanding and enhancing physical activity motivation. He is making a real difference for Australian youth to be able to participate in the greatest sporting nation on earth and flourish and thrive.
- Dr Philip Parker focuses on career pathways, personality, and well-being issues related to youths’ transition from school to work or further education. He is identifying new drivers of successful transition for critical life periods.
- Dr Marjorie Seaton In addition to gifted and talented education, including Indigenous students, Marjorie's research interests include self-concept, social comparison, anti-bullying interventions, reading interventions, and teacher feedback.
- Dr Baljinder Sahdra’s research investigates factors that promote personal and interpersonal flourishing in new and innovative ways.
- Our adjuncts Kurt Marder, Dr Suzy Green, Dr Toni Noble, Associate Professor Philip Riley, Dr Anne Forbes all of whom are undertaking significant research programs that are enabling and empowering Australians to flourish and thrive.
- Our Indigenous team of stars whom I mentioned earlier.

In addition, we have a professional staff of rare talent and effectiveness in administering the Institute and our large research grants, liaising with our research partners and making it all happen.

I deem it an honour and a privilege to lead this wonderful team – and as I always say – It’s great working with you all.

**Our Track Record**

Before we joined ACU, the CPPE research centre led UWS to be the 4th-ranked Australian University in ARC grants in Education, 1st in Indigenous Education, and the 7th-ranked educational psychology program in the world. IPPE leads the international SELF Research Centre. IPPE staff successfully collaborate with a wide range of important partners (e.g., NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, NSW Aboriginal Education Council, NSW Department of Education & Communities, NSW Catholic Education Commission, NSW Police Force, Peer Support Foundation, Learning Links, Black Dog Institute), as well as international partners (e.g., Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research, German Max
Planck Institute, German Institute for International Education Research, UK Higher Education Academy, UK Centre for Multilevel Modelling, OECD PISA, Pearson Research & Assessment, National Institute of Education Singapore). Our researchers are internationally known for state-of-the-art research that addresses complex issues of national and international significance.

**Conclusion**

IPPE is about values as well as results. We are about finding the best – and best tested – ways to promote health and well-being, to increase compassion and connectedness, to enhance social responsibility, to improve all performance, from the individual up, and, perhaps above all, to increase justice in society – to make Australia truly the land of the fair go where all Australians – and our nation - can *flourish and thrive*. We believe passionately in the power of education in enhancing wellbeing to make a difference in society and in the need for research derived from rigorous research that makes a difference.

We are excited about the potential for creative synergies with other ACU Institutes, with Brother Jude Butcher’s community engagement work, and with all ACU faculties across the country - not only in generating new research but also collaborating on the important IPPE research partnerships and projects already underway.

Thank you all for coming today. IPPE looks forward to working with you to collaborate on making a difference for all Australians and contributing to ACU positioning itself as a leading research university. Together we can and will make a difference.

**A special thank you**

It would not be possible for IPPE to be here today without the support of colleagues who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to establish IPPE. For these special people I have a little gift I purchased for you to show the appreciation of myself and my colleagues for your generous professional assistance in establishing IPPE. Professor Rich Ryan was recently telling us about his research that shows that having nature around you enhances wellbeing. Hence I have brought you a living gift that I hope will enhance your wellbeing and help you to *flourish and thrive* even more luxuriantly.

**VC Professor Greg Craven**: Thank you for inviting us to ACU. I hope this will find a special place in your gorgeous garden.

**DVCR Professor Wayne McKenna**: Thank you for your outstanding leadership and your unfailing support in creating IPPE. You made this happen.

**Members of IPPE’s Executive Management Committee** Thank you for the ongoing work you did and still do behind the scenes to make IPPE flourish and thrive at ACU:

- Professor Herb Marsh
- Professor Alex Yeung
Members of our professional staff thank you too - for your commitment to establishing IPPE

- Peter Loneragan – Research Manager
- Ferina Khayum – Senior Administration Officer
- Deirdre Rogers – Research Assistant.

Thank you for all being people who have put in the hard yards to establish IPPE as a research institute that can make a real difference in addressing the critical social issues of our time.