

art of the country



A Petre Foundation Scholarship fosters cross-cultural relations through the prism of Indigenous art.

Laura Fisher with mentor Dr Paul Jones
Photo: Adam Taylor

Despite being the oldest inhabitants of the Australian continent by some 30,000 years, Indigenous Australians have very few protected rights within the Australian political system, with significantly lower levels of life expectancy, employment and educational standards.

It's a problem Laura is now addressing as part of her PhD, which is based on the notion that the popularity of Aboriginal art – a market worth \$100 million globally – could have a positive impact on bridging the gap.

"My approach is to find out, from non-Indigenous people such as collectors and art professionals, how they feel about Indigenous issues in light of their engagement and experiences with the art.

"I believe that gaining a better understanding of the regard non-Indigenous Australians have for Indigenous Australians is crucial to developing a clearer picture of how positive change can be brought about," says Laura.

"This might generate new understandings about Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in general. It's really an exploration of national consciousness."

"Indigenous Australians are a minority and have so few legally entrenched rights, so a lot depends on non-Indigenous Australians and their demands for change."

This insight caught the attention of Daniel and Caroline Petre, founders of the Petre Foundation Scholarship at UNSW, which supports students who hope to contribute to the betterment of mankind without regard for their own personal or commercial gain.

"Laura's academic record is simply outstanding and her area of research is of tremendous significance for Indigenous artists and their communities," says Daniel Petre, executive chairman of Netus, explaining the decision to award Laura the scholarship last year.

"There seems to be a myriad of organisations willing to fund research that has a definitive commercial or scientific outcome. Unfortunately there seems to be very few funding opportunities for people who are interested in studies that have a purely humanitarian outcome."

As a recipient of the Petre Foundation Scholarship, Laura receives \$30,000 per year for the next three years. She is working closely with her supervisor Dr Paul Jones, who is an expert on the sociology of culture within the School of English, Media and Performing Arts.

"Dr Jones also supervised my Honours thesis at UNSW. He is very pragmatic, has a sense of irony about academic life that can be very calming, and is just a little bit eccentric!" says Laura.

Dr Jones believes Laura's PhD will make a significant splash internationally. "I think there'll be much international interest in Laura's project and I'm keen to see her present a paper to an international conference as soon as possible," he says, adding: "I do worry though about Laura's incredible sense of calm – she may not be neurotic enough for academic life!"

Laura hopes to complete her PhD by 2010. "The brief for the Petre Scholarship is very admirable, and I think it's wonderful that UNSW now offers a scholarship with a specifically humanitarian focus - it's a real honour to receive it, and it will be interesting to see what other kinds of research projects gain its support in the future," she says.

Nature of research:

Cross-cultural relations through appreciation of Indigenous art.

Funding:

Petre Foundation Scholarship.