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Suicide prevention critical issue for Indigenous communities

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Indigenous academic Professor Patricia Dudgeon has told an Indigenous business conference that governments, universities and communities must work together to address high Indigenous suicide rates.

Speaking at the Indigenous Business, Enterprise and Corporations Conference at The University of Western Australia's Business School, Professor Dudgeon, from UWA's School of Indigenous Studies, told conference delegates that Western Australia's Kimberley region had the second highest suicide rate in the world.

"Overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide rates are twice that of non-Indigenous people," Professor Dudgeon said.

"The suicide rate is currently two times higher for Indigenous males and 1.9 times higher for Indigenous females."

In response, the National Empowerment Project, run by UWA's School of Indigenous Studies, is aiming to promote social and emotional wellbeing and reduce community distress and suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The National Empowerment Project will enable communities to identify and voice their issues and solutions. Each site developed a report that can be used to negotiate with Government.

The project's survey of 460 people from 11 communities across Australia found the top issues facing respondents were: drugs, alcohol and gambling; health and mental health; and employment. Other issues included children and youth; family; violence; and personal issues.

In addition, the survey found the top ways of becoming stronger were: education and awareness; connecting with culture; and strengthening and unifying the community.

In a separate meeting in Perth in June this year, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Roundtable argued that in addition to addressing groups immediately at risk, community-wide intervention was also needed.

The results of the National Empowerment Project are expected to feed into community intervention strategies and further suicide prevention research.