Payments for Yolŋu teachers and researchers

- Yolŋu knowledge, like all Australian Aboriginal knowledge, is owned, supervised, and has value.
- Institutions (like universities) often think that they are doing the Aboriginal knowledge authorities a favour in their research and teaching work, and the Yolŋu knowledge authorities think they are doing the institutions a favour.
- Yolŋu knowledge work depends upon a foundation of trust and ongoing accountabilities of both those who share knowledge (they are accountable to those whose knowledge they are sharing) and those who receive knowledge (who must remain accountable to the Yolŋu people for the knowledge with which they are working).
- The failure to engage respectfully with these arrangements sometimes causes resentment and misunderstanding if the Aboriginal knowledge owners feel they are being exploited, or if the institutions feel their good efforts are not being valued. Ongoing respectful exchange of knowledge depends upon loyalties which are built up between individuals more than institutions.

Aboriginal knowledge authorities collaborate with institutions in a range of ways, including:

- elders sitting quietly in the background, listening and supervising. People who speak are answerable to them.
- Aboriginal knowledge owners telling stories to share their knowledge
- Aboriginal government workers liaising between institutions and local knowledge authorities
- clan/community members offering their opinions in focus groups and consultancies
- interpreters paid per hour and translators paid per word
- young research mentorees paid small amounts for their participation as the new generation of co-researchers.

Currently the key problems in the payment process are:

- institutional and Aboriginal knowledge practices will never be wholly commensurable, they depend upon quite different epistemological foundations. There will never be a simple, universally workable pay scale for placing monetary values against Aboriginal work. Ongoing, situated negotiations seem to be the only workable solution.
- preferred institutional and Aboriginal modes of payment differ. Institutional processes prefer payments for consultant services to be made into bank accounts upon invoice entailing some delay after the work is done and complex financial arrangements like ‘Australian Business Numbers’. Aboriginal knowledge workers prefer to have payments in cash, dispersed progressively as contributions are made in good faith.

Michael Christie, John Greatorex, and Marg Ayre, July 2009