Gold Winners | Category: Talent Development

Rio Tinto & AGSM, UNSW

RioInspire: Building a Global Pipeline of First Nations Talent

In May 2020, the destruction of the Juukan Gorge rock shelters became a defining moment for Rio Tinto. It prompted deep reflection across the organisation and a significant programme of change to strengthen cultural heritage management, governance, accountability and relationships with Indigenous Peoples.

One lesson was particularly important for talent development. Indigenous perspectives needed to be more strongly represented in the forums where significant organisational and enterprise decisions were being made.

Rio Tinto recognised that lasting change required more than new policies and processes. It required a stronger pipeline of Indigenous leaders with the capability, confidence and organisational influence to contribute to decisions at the highest levels.

The company committed US$50 million to attract, develop and retain Indigenous professionals and leaders. RioInspire became a central part of that commitment.

Co-designed and delivered by Rio Tinto and AGSM @ UNSW Business School, RioInspire is a culturally grounded talent development programme designed to accelerate Indigenous talent and create clearer pathways into positions of greater leadership and influence.

US$50 million

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From Organisational Challenge to Talent Opportunity

Rio Tinto already employed talented Indigenous people across its operations. The opportunity was to create clearer pathways into senior roles and increase Indigenous representation and influence in decision-making forums.

RioInspire was positioned from the outset as a strategic talent intervention. Participants are nominated by senior leaders through Rio Tinto's succession and talent planning processes, connecting their development with organisational priorities, and creating visibility for emerging talent.

The ambition is not simply to develop better leaders, it is to accelerate the readiness and mobility of Indigenous talent, and to ensure more Indigenous voices can contribute to Rio Tinto's future.

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A Partnership Built for Change

Delivering that ambition required a different kind of partnership.

Rio Tinto selected AGSM for its expertise in executive education, Indigenous leadership development and culturally grounded learning.

Rio Tinto's Indigenous Leadership function, Human Resources, executive sponsors and AGSM faculty worked together to define the participant profile, capability gaps, learning outcomes, governance and connection to succession needs.

Two complementary frameworks are central to the RioInspire design.

The first is Walking in Two Worlds / Two-Eyed Seeing, which brings Indigenous and Western knowledge systems together, enabling participants to draw strength from their cultural identity while developing the capabilities to influence within a complex global organisation.

The second is Indigenous ways of Knowing, Being, Doing and Belonging, grounding the learning in cultural knowledge and understanding, identity and values, practical action, and connection to community and Country.

Together, these frameworks underpin a curriculum that combines cultural identity and community leadership with contemporary leadership theory and enterprise practice, including strategy and systems thinking, business growth and value creation, innovation and change, communication and influence.

An Immersive Development Experience

Face-to-face modules, including learning on Country, create opportunities for cultural connection, reflection and cohort development. These are combined with virtual learning, coaching, mentoring, executive engagement and contemporary business and leadership frameworks.

A defining feature is the Strategic Challenge. Participants work in small groups on real Rio Tinto business priorities, supported by executive sponsors. They apply their learning, work across organisational boundaries and develop practical recommendations, culminating in presentations to senior Rio Tinto leaders.

This gives participants an opportunity to apply and demonstrate their capabilities on the forums where important decisions are made.

Participants who complete RioInspire receive an AGSM Certificate of Executive Management and Development, with credits that can contribute towards postgraduate study.

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From Australia to a Global First Nations Community

RioInspire began in Australia and expanded in 2023 to include Indigenous participants from Aotearoa New Zealand, and subsequently Canada and the United States.

The global cohort brings together different cultures, histories and experiences, while creating space for participants to learn from one another, explore points of connection and build relationships across Rio Tinto's operations.

The result is a growing global network of Indigenous talent that extends beyond individual cohorts, providing relationships and connections that continue beyond graduation.

90%

Across four cohorts, **71** Indigenous leaders have graduated, with a **90%** completion rate.

From Development to Progression

The strongest evidence of RioInspire's impact is what has happened to participants after the programme.

Across four cohorts, 71 Indigenous leaders have graduated, with a 90% completion rate. Twenty-four graduates have achieved significant leadership promotions, six have undertaken lateral stretch moves, and 16 have pursued postgraduate study. Sixteen graduates are now contributing at senior executive levels.

The comparison with Indigenous employees who did not participate is particularly significant.

Among RioInspire graduates, 32% progressed into more senior roles, compared with 16% of non-participants. Graduates were therefore twice as likely to be promoted.

Overall mobility is also considerably stronger. Forty-nine per cent of graduates have either been promoted or moved laterally, compared with 27% of non-participants.

Retention tells a similar story. Indigenous leaders who did not complete RioInspire left Rio Tinto at almost twice the rate of graduates - 51% compared with 26%.

> "One graduate-led innovation in mine design resulted in an estimated A$80 million in avoided costs while reducing disturbance in culturally sensitive areas."

Impact Beyond Individual Careers

Participants also describe significant changes in confidence, identity and their ability to influence. Many report feeling more assured in senior decision-making environments and more confident bringing a cultural perspective into organisational conversations.

That individual growth is translating into organisational impact.

Graduates are applying stronger problem framing, stakeholder engagement, systems thinking and cultural insight to business priorities across safety, governance, operational planning and business performance.

One graduate-led innovation in mine design resulted in an estimated A$80 million in avoided costs while reducing disturbance in culturally sensitive areas. The approach was subsequently embedded as standard practice for future developments.

The broader impact also extends to stronger Indigenous perspectives in decision-making and deeper connections with Indigenous communities.

The Investment in Indigenous Talent

RioInspire has evolved significantly since its creation, but its purpose has remained consistent: to create an environment in which talented Indigenous employees can develop, progress and increase their influence while remaining grounded in who they are.

The EFMD Excellence in Practice Gold Award for Talent Development recognises the collaboration between Rio Tinto and AGSM, and the contribution of the Indigenous leaders, participants, faculty, facilitators and executive sponsors who have shaped RioInspire.

For the RioInspire alumni in particular, it is recognition of a journey that began with the ambition to walk confidently in two worlds and has grown into something larger: a global community of Indigenous leaders shaping the future of Rio Tinto and beyond.