

Indigenous Cultural Protocols Guidelines



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Wednesday, 4 August 2022

The development of respectful relationships between institutions, such as the University of Melbourne, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is an important step in the broader social movement towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Respect can be manifested in a number of ways. On formal occasions respect can be demonstrated through the recognition of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols.

Context for Indigenous Cultural Protocols

The University of Melbourne is committed to a just, equitable and reconciled nation for all Australians. The values that underpin this commitment are reflected in the Statement made by Vice-Chancellor Professor Glyn Davis, on 12 February 2008, to coincide with the Apology to the Stolen Generations by then Prime Minister, the Hon. Kevin Rudd, on behalf of the Australian Parliament. In his Statement, Professor Davis said:

The University of Melbourne, established on the traditional land of the Kulin nation, is a community that aspires to participate in the creation of a diverse and harmonious nation. Our aim is to bring greater benefits to the Indigenous people of Australia through education and research, and to do so by involving Indigenous people in those endeavours. On behalf of the University of Melbourne, I acknowledge,

- *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original inhabitants of the continent;*
- *Recognise their loss of land, children, health and kin, and the erosion of their languages, culture and lore and the manifold impacts of colonisation; and*
- *Australia will only become a mature nation when the past is acknowledged, so that the present can be*

understood and the future confidently based on the mutual recognition of aspirations and rights.

The University records its deep regrets for the injustices suffered by the Indigenous people of Australia as a result of European settlement...The University also acknowledges and sincerely regrets any past wrongs carried out in the name of the University which have caused distress to Indigenous Australians.

In 2021, the University apologised to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples through the publication of the following in the Indigenous Strategic Plan 2021 – 2022:

The University acknowledges that, since its foundation in 1853, our shared history with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been tainted by colonisation and institutional racism. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were excluded from our University community for more than 100 years. We recognise these and other failures of the society of which we are part and which we serve, and we acknowledge and apologise for the historic and current injustices which have been and are to the detriment of the health and well-being and educational and living standards of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this country. Our purpose is to benefit society through the transformative impact of education and research. The University of Melbourne commits itself, in carrying out its mission of education and research, to actions to right historical wrongs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of our country. Page layout is two-column.

Reconciliation Action Plan

In 2010, the University committed to developing its first Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), a process supported by Reconciliation Australia through a framework covering the following themes:

- **Relationships** – Building strong, two-way relationships
- **Respect** – Building cultural competency and respect
- **Opportunities** – Driving meaningful opportunities.

The University of Melbourne's third Elevate RAP, [Reconciliation Action Plan April 2018 – December 2022](#), has 14 Signature Projects that address one or more of the critical dimensions of reconciliation identified by Reconciliation Australia – Race Relations, Equality and Equity, Institutional Integrity, Historical Acceptance, and Unity. The University believes these projects will produce outcomes with a transformational impact well beyond the University. Its progress in achieving these aims is monitored and reported on annually. The work undertaken through our Elevate RAP reinforces the University's commitment to developing respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Two distinct cultural protocols

An **'Acknowledgement of Country'** is a statement of recognition and respect that is made by someone (Indigenous or non-Indigenous) who is not a Traditional Owner of the Country or land upon which the acknowledgement is made.

A **'Welcome to Country'** is a statement of welcome that can only be made by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owner of the Country or land upon which the welcome is made. The distinction between these protocols is important and it can cause offence if they are confused. There are currently no firm rules to distinguish those occasions when it is preferable to have a 'Welcome' as opposed to an 'Acknowledgement'. However, for occasions of greater significance it is preferable to follow the 'Welcome to Country' protocols.

'Acknowledgement of Country': Where and how is this protocol used?

An 'Acknowledgement of Country' recognises the valuable and unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the land, waters and skies of this nation. It is a significant and symbolic reconciliation gesture, which is undertaken by Indigenous or non-Indigenous people who are not Traditional Owners of the land upon which the statement is made.

As a part of our Indigenous Cultural Protocols, and as a mark of respect, the University practices an 'Acknowledgement of Country' at many occasions. These may include, but are not limited to:

- University meetings
- Launches of University programs/book launches
- Public lectures
- Graduation ceremonies
- Email signatures

It is most important that the 'Acknowledgement of Country' is made to the appropriate Traditional Owners of the land on which the statement is made. The University has campuses in a number of locations with different clan groups, as follows:

- The Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people (Parkville, Southbank and Burnley campuses)
- The Bunurong people (Werribee and Fishermans Bend campuses)
- The Yorta Yorta Nation (Shepparton and Dookie campuses)
- The Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

It is also advisable to acknowledge Traditional Owners from other clans who have worked closely with the University as follows:

The University also acknowledges and is grateful to the Traditional Owners and Elders from all clans who have been instrumental in our reconciliation journey.

It is important to note that the University does not prescribe a template for an Acknowledgement of Country and encourages colleagues to reflect upon the meaning of an Acknowledgement and then craft their own. The Acknowledgement of Country example text below can be used as a starting point on which to build a personal Acknowledgement of Country. Although it is not preferable, a generic 'Acknowledgement of Country to Traditional Owners' can be offered if there is uncertainty about the name of a particular custodial clan. However, this should not be routine practice.

Acknowledgement of Country Example

'We/I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which this event is taking place and pay respect to their Elders (past and present) and families.'

'Welcome to Country': Where and how is this protocol used?

'Welcome to Country' is also known as a Traditional Welcome, which allows Traditional Owners (usually the Elders) to give their blessing to the event and welcome people to their land. A 'Welcome to Country' can only be performed by a representative from the traditional clan of the location at which the function is being held. It always occurs at the start of an event in the opening ceremony as the first item.

A 'Welcome to Country' can vary – from speeches of welcome to traditional dance and smoking ceremonies.

The design of the Welcome ceremony is set by the Traditional Owners. It is appropriately made at more significant or formal occasions. These may include, but are not limited to:

- Important public events, festivals and exhibitions, e.g. Wominjeka, Orations, the opening of new buildings
- Significant University conferences, particularly those with an international audience.

Importantly, those delivering a 'Welcome' should be appropriately remunerated. Please refer below to 'Courtesies and Responsibilities to Indigenous People'. In the event that a Traditional Owner is unable to provide a 'Welcome' (such as unexpected illness or bereavement) an 'Acknowledgement' is an appropriate substitute. To arrange for a 'Welcome to Country', contact the appropriate Land Council via the University liaison person (where appropriate):

- [The Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation](#)
- [Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation](#)
- [Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation](#)
- [Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation](#)

The University works closely with many Traditional Owner Groups. First Peoples – State Relations has provided an electronic map to assist people in Victoria find out who the formally recognised Traditional Owners are for an area:

- [Welcome to Country and Acknowledgements Map](#)

Other ceremonies

Smoking ceremonies

Smoking ceremonies are also conducted by some Aboriginal people with specialist cultural knowledge. Given the nature of the smoking ceremonies they are usually performed only at major events e.g. opening of new buildings, Indigenous Graduation ceremonies.

Closing ceremonies

At some internal events with a significant Indigenous contingent, some form of Closing Ceremony may also be required, depending on the context. Email cultural-protocols@unimelb.edu.au if further advice is required.

International events with significant Indigenous contingents

At international events in which there are significant Indigenous contingents, it is wise to plan and negotiate the appropriate Indigenous Cultural Protocols in advance. This

requires careful consultation with local Traditional Owners as well as representatives of other Indigenous groups. It is important that respect for local Traditional Owners and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is maintained and given precedence.

Courtesies and responsibilities to Indigenous people

Sometimes it is appropriate at official events to acknowledge Elders from other parts of the country; who are not traditional owners of the land where the event is taking place. These are people who have considerable status in the Indigenous community, have a long standing relationship with the University and/or are involved in the University's programs and have important roles as mentors and guides. Staff involved in the particular event will advise as to whether there will be other Elders present who should be acknowledged.

Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people are using their intellectual property when they provide cultural services such as a 'Welcome to Country', dance and music performances, and ceremonies (e.g. a smoking ceremony). As such, they should be remunerated for these services.

Please ensure you have a long lead-time when booking these cultural services because leaving it until the last minute is disrespectful and will often mean Elders and/or performers are not available.

For more information

Email cultural-protocols@unimelb.edu.au for further information.