# University of Melbourne Indigenous Cultural Protocols Guidelines

April 2024

## Introduction

**The development of respectful relationships between institutions, such as the University of Melbourne, and the First Peoples of this country is an important step in the broader social movement towards reparations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Respect can be manifested in a number of ways but can be demonstrated more formally through the recognition of Indigenous Cultural Protocols.**

## Context for Indigenous cultural protocols

The University has made considerable progress in advancing positive Indigenous outcomes since the implementation of our first Reconciliation Action Plan in 2011. At that time, we made a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia that we would use our resources to make a sustained contribution to better health, education and living standards for Indigenous Australians, while recognising the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their knowledge in support of this aim.

In 2023, the University launched its ambitious five-year Indigenous Strategy ***Murmuk Djerring*** which included an Action Plan focused around five priorities:

1. Leadership
2. Place, heritage and Culture
3. Partnerships
4. Indigenous Knowledge
5. Truth-telling and Justice

Each of the Signature Projects attached to these priorities will drive institutional change in ways that are both significant and transformational and that deliver on our aspiration and strategic priorities.

Through the implementation of Murmuk Djerring, we are committed to:

* ensuring that our campuses are places in which all Indigenous peoples feel culturally safe and are treated with dignity and respect.
* Truly engaging with and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations.
* embedding Indigenous cultures and knowledge in the University’s research, teaching and learning, and engagement activities.
* demonstrating an understanding of, and deep respect for, the traditions, heritage, knowledge and perspectives of the many nations and language groups that make up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia.

## 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. It 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 and is a significant and symbolic reconciliation gesture.

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.

## 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.

### 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 First Peoples

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 should advise if 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.

## FAQs

### How can I find who the Traditional Owners of my area?

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).

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

* [Welcome to Country and Acknowledgements Map](https://achris.vic.gov.au/weave/wca.html)

Note that the boundaries on the Welcome to Country and Acknowledgements Map may be contested due to the effects of colonisation and its impact on Indigenous culture and knowledge over time.

### Where and how is an Acknowledgment of Country protocol used?

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.

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.*

### What should I say when delivering an Acknowledgement of Country?

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 University of Melbourne has worked closely with the [Traditional Owners Advisory Group](https://about.unimelb.edu.au/reconciliation/governance/consultative-and-advisory-bodies) to craft a formal Acknowledgement of Country that can be used by our students and staff. It reads:

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| --- |
| *The University of Melbourne acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples (Burnley, Fishermans Bend, Parkville, Southbank and Werribee campuses), the Yorta Yorta Nation (Dookie and Shepparton campuses), and the Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).*  *The University also acknowledges and is grateful to the Traditional Owners, Elders and Knowledge Holders of all Indigenous nations and clans who have been instrumental in our reconciliation journey.*  *We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years. We also acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country.*  *We pay respect to Elders past, present and future, and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers, teachers, professional staff and students we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.* |

Although 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.

### When should we include an Acknowledgement of Country in documents?

The inclusion of the University’s formal [Acknowledgement of Country](https://www.unimelb.edu.au/reconciliation/acknowledgement-of-country) is encouraged in any formal UOM report or document. It should be placed towards the front of the document as can be seen in our [various strategies](https://about.unimelb.edu.au/strategy/supporting-strategies).

### Where and how is an ‘Welcome to Country’ protocol used?

**Welcome to Country**, alsoknown as a *Traditional Welcome*, allows Traditional Owners (usually Elders) to give their blessing to the event and welcome people to their land. A Welcome to Country can only be performed bya 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 to ‘Courtesies and Responsibilities to Indigenous People’ in the body of this document.

### How do I request a Welcome to Country?

To arrange for a ‘Welcome to Country’, contact the appropriate Corporation as listed below:

* [The Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation](https://www.wurundjeri.com.au/) (***\****)
* [Djaara (Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation)](http://www.djadjawurrung.com.au/)
* [Bunurong Land Council Aboriginal Corporation](https://www.bunuronglc.org/) (***\****)
* [Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation](http://www.yynac.com.au/)

***\**** If you are based on any of the Narrm/Melbourne campuses, (that is, Parkville, Southbank, Burnley or Werribee) and are requesting a Welcome to Country on Wurundjeri or Bunurong country, please email Narrm Partnerships contact Amy Johannes (**i-partnerships@unimelb.edu.au**) by email in the first instance.

### What should I do if a Traditional Owner is unable to deliver a Welcome to Country?

In the event that a Traditional Owner is unable to provide a Welcome to Country (such as an unexpected illness or bereavement) an Acknowledgement of Country is an appropriate substitute.

### Who can I contact for more information?

Email **cultural-protocols@unimelb.edu.au** if further advice is required.