

University of Melbourne

Aboriginal Cultural Protocols Guidelines

Why have Aboriginal Cultural Protocols Guidelines?

The development of respectful relationships between institutions such as the University of Melbourne and Indigenous Australians is an important step in the broader social movement towards reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Respect can be manifest in a number of ways. In formal occasions respect can be demonstrated through the recognition of Aboriginal cultural protocols.

The context for Aboriginal Cultural Protocols Guidelines.

The University of Melbourne is committed to demonstrating reconciliation with Indigenous Australian communities. The values that underpin the commitment is reflected in the statement by our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Glyn Davis, on 12 February 2008, to coincide with the apology made to the Stolen Generations by the Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, on the behalf of the Australian Parliament. In his statement, Professor Davis said:

The University of Melbourne ... 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 –

We 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.

The University of Melbourne is committed to a developing an Aboriginal Reconciliation Action Plan. The development to of a Reconciliation Action Plan is a process supported by Reconciliation Australia (RA) and reported on their website and to Parliament. The RA framework covers the following themes:

- good relationships;

- respect for the special contribution of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- working together to ensure all Australians have the same life opportunities.

The University of Melbourne Reconciliation Action Plan will have clear measurable targets and progress in achieving these targets is monitored and reported annually.

‘Acknowledgement of Country’ and ‘Welcome to Country’.

There are two distinct cultural protocols.

An ‘acknowledgement of country’ is a statement of recognition that is made by someone (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) who is **not** a traditional custodian or owner of the country or land upon which the statement is made.

A ‘welcome to country’ is a statement of welcome that **can only** be made by an Aboriginal traditional owner or custodian 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.

Acknowledgement of Country

An *Acknowledgement of Country* recognises the valuable and unique status of Aboriginal people as the original owners and custodians of the land and waters of this nation. It is a significant and symbolic reconciliation gesture. The *Acknowledgement of Country* is a ceremony undertaken by Aboriginal or Non-Aboriginal people who are not traditional owners of the land upon which the statement is made that recognises and pays respect to traditional owners.

Where & how is this protocol used?

As a part of cultural protocol and a mark of respect university practices an Acknowledge of Country is appropriately made at formal occasions such as:

1. Public meetings and events;
2. University meetings;
3. Commemorations and major festivals;
4. Major launches of University policies and programs;
5. Conferences, seminars, ceremonies and special events held by the University of Melbourne;
6. International events held in Australia of which the University of Melbourne is an organiser or sponsor; and
7. Graduation ceremonies.

It is most important that the *Acknowledgement of Country* is made to the appropriate custodians on the land in which the statement is made. The University has campuses in a number of different locations with different clan groups.

Although it is not preferable, a generic Acknowledgement of Country to ‘traditional custodians’ can be offered if there is uncertainty about the name of the particular custodial clan. This should not be routine practice.

Acknowledgements of Country can be offered as a formal or informal statement. In the following examples the clan names should be changed to take into account the context of where the statement is made.

Example 1:

“We/I acknowledge the Elders, families and descendants of the Wurundjeri people on who have been and are the custodians of these lands. We acknowledge that the land in which we meet was the place of age old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal and that the local Aboriginal peoples have had and continue to have a unique role in the life of these lands.”

Example 2:

“We/I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land in which this event is taking place, the land of the Wurundjeri and pay respect to their Elders and families”.

Example 3:

“We/I acknowledge that we are standing on the land of the Wurundjeri people who have been custodians of this area for thousands of years.”

Welcome to Country

The *Welcome to Country* is also known as a Traditional Welcome. This allows Traditional Owners/Custodians to give their blessing to the event. Only a representative for the Traditional Clan of the location at which the function is being held can provide a *Welcome to Country*.

A *Welcome to Country* is where the Traditional owners/custodians (usually the Elders) welcome people to their land. It always occurs at the start of an event in the opening ceremony, preferably as the first item. A *Welcome to Country* can vary from speeches of welcome to traditional dance and smoking ceremonies.

A *Welcome to Country* is appropriately made at the same range of formal occasions as an *Acknowledgement of Country* including:

1. Public meetings and events;
2. University meetings;
3. Commemorations and major festivals;
4. Major launches of University policies and programs;

5. Conferences, seminars, ceremonies and special events held by the University of Melbourne;
6. International events held in Australia of which the University of Melbourne is an organiser or sponsor; and
7. Graduation ceremonies.

There are no firm rules that distinguish those occasions when it is preferable for a Welcome to Country as opposed to an Acknowledgment of Country. For occasions of greater cultural significance it is preferable to provide follow the *Welcome to Country* protocol (such as an international conference with a large international Indigenous contingent, significant cultural events). In the event that a traditional custodian is unable to provide a Welcome to Country (such as unexpected illness or bereavement) an Acknowledge of Country is an appropriate substitute.

Other Ceremonies

The University is encouraged to consult with local Aboriginal communities on the best form of recognition for each event. A calendar of events can assist with the planning of appropriate activity.

Smoking ceremonies are also conducted by some Aboriginal people with specialist cultural knowledge. Given the nature of the smoking ceremonies they usually are only performed at major events.

At some internal events with a significant Indigenous contingent, some form of closing cultural protocol 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 cultural protocols. This requires careful consultation with local custodians and representatives of Indigenous contingents. It is important that respect for local custodians and Aboriginal Australians is maintained and given precedence.

Courtesies to Indigenous people

In providing cultural services, Indigenous people are using their intellectual property. These can include Welcome to Country, performances and other ceremonies such smoking and dance. As such these services should be remunerated.

Non-custodial Elders

Sometimes it is appropriate in context at official events to acknowledge non-custodial Elders. These are often people who have considerable status in the Aboriginal community and have been involved in University programs and have important roles as mentors and guides. Aboriginal staff involved in the particular event will advise on these matters.