

Indigenous Cultural Protocols: Guidelines



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

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

Cultural protocols context

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 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.

Reconciliation Action Plan

The University also committed to developing a 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
- Unity.

We believe these projects will produce outcomes with a transformational impact well beyond the University. Our progress in achieving these aims is monitored and reported on annually.

Two distinct 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/Custodian 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 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. There are 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 and waters 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/Custodians 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 practises 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.

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

- The Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples (Parkville, Southbank, Werribee and Burnley campuses)
- The Yorta Yorta Nation (Shepparton and Dookie campuses)
- The Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

Although it is not preferable, a generic ‘Acknowledgement of Country to Traditional Owners/Custodians’ can be offered if there is uncertainty about the name of a particular custodial Nation/Clan. This should not be routine practice.

In the following examples the Nation/Clan names should be changed to take into account the context of where the statement is made.

Acknowledgement of Country: Example 1

‘We/I acknowledge the Elders, and descendants of the [Wurundjeri] people who have been and are the Custodians of these lands. We acknowledge that the land on 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.’

Acknowledgement of Country: Example 2

‘We/I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which this event is taking place, the land of the [Wurundjeri], and pay respect to their Elders and families.’

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

‘Welcome to Country’ is also known as a Traditional Welcome, which allows Traditional Owners/Custodians (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 Nation/Clan of the location at which the function is being held. 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. It is appropriately made at more formal occasions.

These occasions 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.

If a Traditional Owner/Custodian is unable to provide a ‘Welcome’, an ‘Acknowledgement’ is an appropriate substitute.

To arrange for a ‘Welcome to Country’, an Elder from the Country on which the event is being held can be approached by contacting [Murrup Barak, Melbourne Institute for Indigenous Development](#) (see next page).

Alternatively, contact the relevant Indigenous organisation for your campus directly. These are:

- **Parkville, Southbank, Werribee and Burnley campuses – Wurundjeri**
Marbeangrook Consulting
(E: marbeangrook@gmail.com)
OR
[The Wurundjeri Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Aboriginal Corporation](#)
- **Parkville, Southbank, Werribee and Burnley campuses – Boon Wurrung**
[The Boon Wurrung Foundation](#)
- **Creswick campus –**
[Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation](#)
- **Shepparton and Dookie campuses –**
[Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation.](#)

Other ceremonies

Smoking ceremonies

These ceremonies are 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. the opening of new buildings, Indigenous graduation ceremonies.

Closing ceremonies

At internal events with a significant Indigenous contingent, some form of Closing Ceremony may also be required depending on the context. Murrup Barak can advise as to when this would be appropriate.

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/Custodians as well as representatives of other Indigenous groups.

It is important that respect for local Traditional Owners/Custodians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is maintained and that they are given precedence.

Non-custodial Elders

Sometimes it is appropriate at official events to acknowledge non-custodial Elders. These are people who have considerable status in the Indigenous community, 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 non-custodial Elders present who should be acknowledged.

Courtesies to Indigenous people

Indigenous Australians 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 as leaving it until the last minute will often mean Elders and/or performers are unavailable.

For more information

Contact [Liz Laguerre](#), Cultural Protocol and Administrative Officer at Murrup Barak