



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural capability toolkit**

Supports public sector workplaces to build their capability to attract, recruit, retain, support and develop Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff at all levels.

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# Introduction

The toolkit's aim is to strengthen the cultural capability of managers and staff, as well as the cultural safety of public sector workplaces for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.

The Barring Djinang Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability toolkit supports public sector workplaces to build their capability to attract, recruit, retain, support and develop Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff at all levels. Its aim is to strengthen the cultural capability of managers and staff, as well as the cultural safety of public sector workplaces for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.

Recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees at all levels across the Victorian public sector will lead to improved policies and programs, designed to better reflect the needs and aspirations of communities and delivered through more appropriate models and processes.

The name Barring Djinang is from the Taungurung language and means 'path of the feet' and was chosen as a reminder of the many different career paths that the Victorian public sector can provide to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

## Barring Djinang Five Year Aboriginal Employment Strategy

This toolkit is one of the fifteen initiatives that form the Victorian Government's Barring Djinang Aboriginal Employment Strategy for the Victorian public sector 2017-2022. The toolkit supports Barring Djinang's strategic aim to enhance the career options and experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff across the Victorian public sector. Building the cultural capability of the public sector at individual, managerial, leadership and whole-of-organisation levels will help to ensure that the Victorian public sector can work more effectively with the community it serves, including supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and ensuring that the priorities of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians shape the work of government.<sup>1</sup>

Barring Djinang has adopted a target that by 2022, employment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the Victorian public sector will increase from 0.9 per cent



in 2016 to 2 per cent of total employees.<sup>2</sup> The strategy also aims to support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians to be represented at the highest levels of public sector leadership.

## How to use this toolkit

The toolkit provides information on how to build the cultural capability of public sector workplaces. It discusses key concepts and understandings of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture and cultural capability. Each section contains topic information, questions which workplaces can use to reflect on their cultural capability and useful links for further information.

## How we wrote this toolkit

This toolkit was developed with the valuable support of the Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency (VACCA). We acknowledge the cultural expertise provided by VACCA to this project.

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## Policy frameworks that support this toolkit

### Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) 2018-2023

The VAAF provides an ambitious and forward-looking agenda for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander affairs with the vision that 'All Aboriginal Victorian people, families and communities are healthy, safe, resilient, thriving and living culturally rich lives'.

The VAAF has two key purposes:

1. It is the Victorian Government's overarching framework for working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians, organisations and the wider community to drive action and improve outcomes
2. It sets the whole-of-government self-determination enablers and principles, and



commits government to significant structural and systemic transformation.

Improving the cultural capability of the government is an important step leading to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians. The VAAF's action logic acknowledges that, to do this, government must embed self-determining approaches across government and transform its current structures and systems through action to:

- prioritise culture
- address racism and promote cultural safety
- address trauma and support healing
- transfer power and resources to community.

The application of these enablers of self-determination will help to address structural and systemic barriers experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians.

Government is taking responsibility for this first step, acknowledging that an internal transformation is required to create a context in which Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander public servants, are empowered to own and drive safe, relevant and accessible responses to meet community needs, that in turn will lead to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians.

## **Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy 2013-2020**

The Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy 2013-2020 complements commitments made in the VAAF and identifies building Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander public sector employment and career development opportunities in the public sector as key element to improving Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander economic participation and development and a vital foundation for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander self-determination. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander economic development is also vital to growing Victoria's wealth generally and to increasing overall economic productivity and competitive advantage.



## Victorian Aboriginal Inclusion Framework 2011

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities continue to experience social exclusion. This means being less able to contribute to and benefit from participation in the workforce and other aspects of social, economic community life.<sup>3</sup> Social inclusion on the other hand means having opportunities to participate fully in society through employment, access to education, health and community services and being heard.<sup>4</sup>

### Closing the Gap

In 2011, the Victorian Government recommitted to Closing the Gap in outcomes between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal Australians. As part of this, all Victorian Government departments were required to prepare Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander inclusion action plans. These included strategies to increase employment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>5</sup>

## Useful links and other information



(1) [Barring Djinang website](#) details the full range of Barring Djinang initiatives.

(3, 4) [Social exclusion and inclusion: Resources for child and family services.](#)

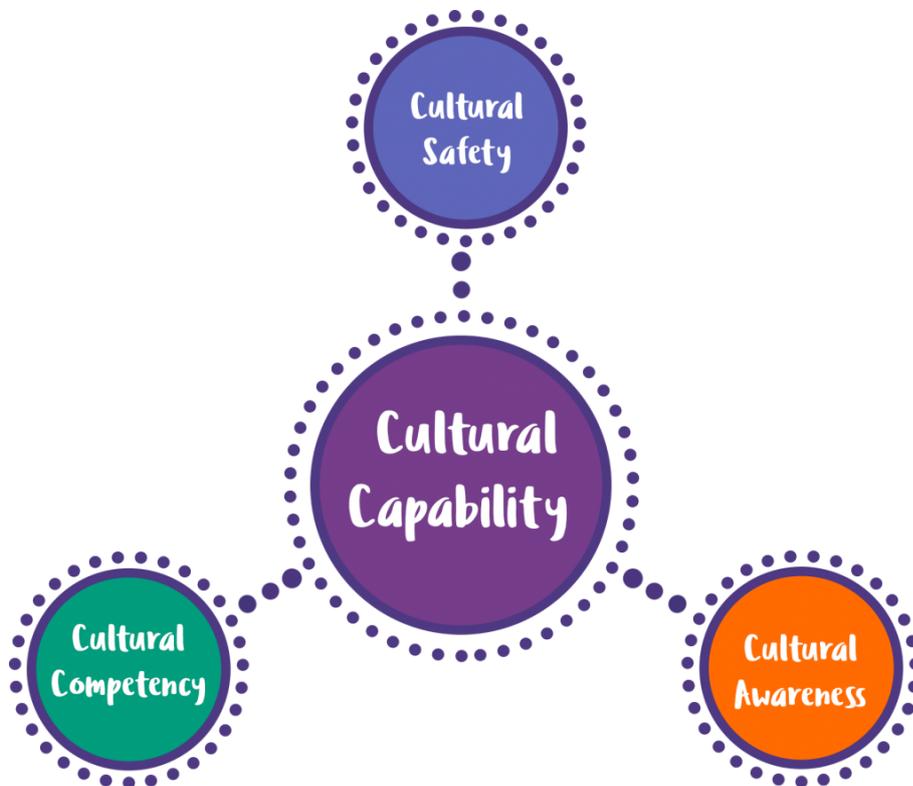
(5) [DPC's Aboriginal Employment Action Plan.](#)

[The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023.](#)

# Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural capability

Cultural capability is a broad term that encompasses cultural awareness, cultural safety and cultural competence.

Cultural capability is not achieved after one training session or at a single end-point but represents continuous learning that builds over time.



## Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness means being aware of, and developing sensitivity to, cultural difference and cultural diversity. It involves knowledge, attitudes and values that

demonstrate an openness and respect for other people and other cultures, languages, religions, dress, communication styles and so on. For example, in some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures it may be considered rude or disrespectful to make eye contact, while in others it is not.<sup>1</sup>

## Cultural Safety

Cultural safety is an environment which is safe for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity and experience. Cultural safety is about individuals, organisations and systems being aware of the impact of their own culture and cultural values on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, while creating and maintaining an environment where all people are treated in a culturally respectful manner.

Tips for achieving a culturally safe workplace:

- Include an Acknowledgment of Country at the beginning of all formal meetings.
- Have an Acknowledgment plaque at the entrance to your building that acknowledges the Traditional Owners of your area.
- Display Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags around the building
- Display Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in workplaces.
- Participate in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community events and celebrations, such as NAIDOC Week, the commemoration of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day.
- Use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork and designs in its promotional and educational material intended for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. However, it is important to ensure that you respect the copyright and intellectual property of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander artists and creative workers who created the artwork. For more information please see [Working and Walking Together \(PDF, 5.7mb\)](#).

## Measures of a culturally safe workplace:

- Cultural safety is an organisational value and is negotiated with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.



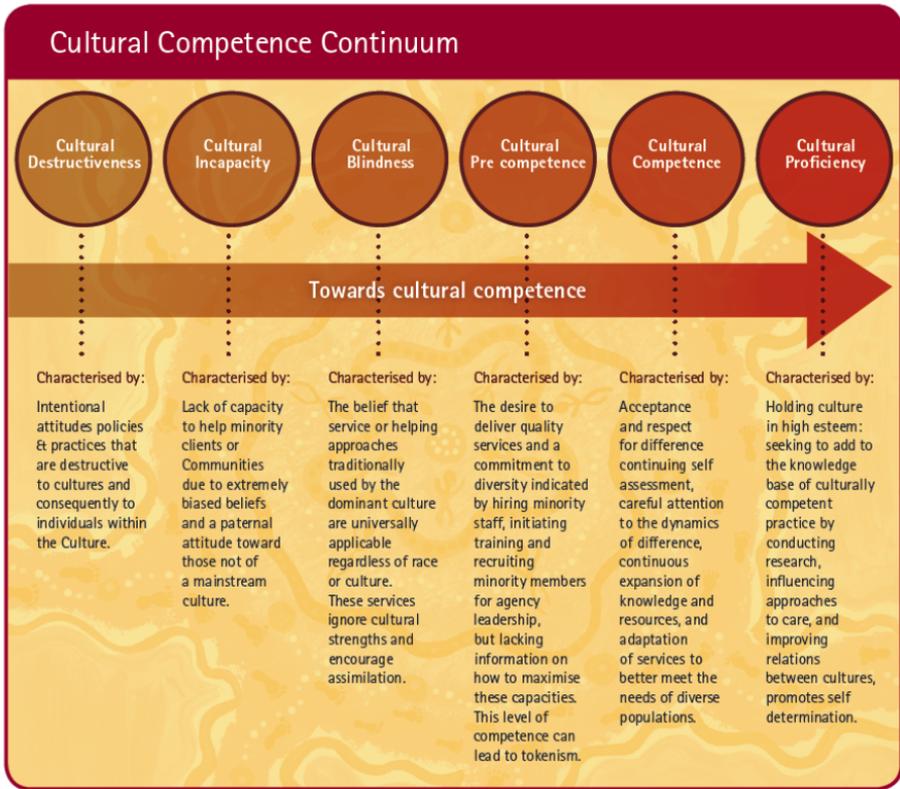
- Policies and procedures are reviewed and refreshed based on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff and community feedback and are aligned with the VAAF and self-determination principles.
- Local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities and the organisation negotiate strategic approaches, goals and outcomes.
- The organisation has systems to determine current proficiency and capability levels and to identify a learning or development plan based on the organisations learning needs.
- The Commonwealth public sector Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability Map are broken cultural capabilities into: knowing; doing; and being. The 'foundation' level that applies to all Commonwealth employees regardless of role, function, or level lists the following capabilities.<sup>2</sup>

## Cultural Competency

Cultural competency is a set of behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together to allow people to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. It is best understood as something people move towards along a continuum rather than a point in time achievement. See [VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010 \(PDF, 1.8mb\)](#).

This diagram draws from work done by VACCA for the Aboriginal Cultural Competency Framework and Muriel Bamblett's Keynote Speech at SNAICC 2007 National Conference in Adelaide, which in turn drew from work by Terry Cross of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (US).





## Cultural Capability Training

Cultural capability training is an integral part of workplace health and safety and is essential for enabling cultural safety in the workplace. Cultural capability training should be ongoing rather than just done once. There are many aspects to cultural capability training, such as: cultural awareness, cultural competency and unconscious bias.

Many Victorian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations provide cultural training. Try to choose a local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander training provider who has knowledge of local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander history and culture. You should contact your local Traditional Owners or Local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) to discuss training options. Some organisations have Traditional Owner Settlement Agreements and therefore must seek training through appropriate Traditional Owners.

Questions for managers and workplaces when building cultural capability:

- What strategies have you put in place to build cultural competency and cultural safety for your staff and the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people working within your area/organisation?
- Has your team completed any cultural awareness/cultural competency training?
- Does your team celebrate significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural events?
- Do you identify and challenge inappropriate behaviours in others and create a safe space for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff to report if required?
- Do you understand what is expected of you in responding to racism, discrimination and cultural abuse?



## Useful links and other information

The [‘Deadly Story’ website](#) has a list of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander service providers across Victoria. You can use the list to find an organisation local to your area.

More information on doing an [Acknowledgement of Country](#)

[Purchasing Acknowledgement plaques](#)

[Information on how to display flags](#)

(1) [Working with Indigenous Australians – Culture](#)

(2) [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural capability: A framework for Commonwealth agencies](#)

# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination

Without self-determination it is not possible for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession.

## What is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination?

Self-determination is an 'ongoing process of choice' to ensure that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs. It is not about creating a separate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander 'state'.

The right to self-determination is based on the simple acknowledgment that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are Australia's first people, as was recognised by law in the historic Mabo judgement.

The loss of this right to live according to a set of common values and beliefs, and to have that right respected by others, is at the heart of the current disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

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Self-determination was prescribed by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987-1991) as being necessary for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to overcome their previous and continuing institutionalised disadvantage and disempowerment. In 1997, the 'Bringing Them Home' report recommended the implementation of self-determination in relation to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and young people through the passage of national framework and standards legislation.<sup>1</sup>

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination in policy

Self-determination is a Victorian Government policy commitment enshrined in legislation. Section 12 of the *Victorian Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, for example, recognises the principle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-management and self-determination as a key principle when determining decisions that concern Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and families.

The *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* recognises that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people hold distinct cultural rights, including the right to:

- enjoy their identity and culture
- maintain and use their language
- maintain their kinship ties
- maintain their distinctive spiritual, material and economic relationship with the land and waters and other resources with which they have a connection under traditional laws and customs. <sup>2</sup>

In June 2018, the Victorian parliament passed the *Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018* which is Australia's first ever treaty law that will create a framework for negotiating a treaty with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

Over 7,000 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians (including Traditional Owners, clans and family groups) have engaged in the treaty process to date.

The Act sets out the process that will lead to treaty negotiations.

## Self-determination in practice

In many contexts including natural resource management, economic development, health care, justice, education and care and protection for children, self-determination mean the transfer of power, control, decision and making and resources from government and the non-Aboriginal service sector to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait

Islander communities and their organisations. The realisation of self-determination in Victoria's child and family services sector, for example, means moving from a position where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have no control and limited influence, to one where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have full control of decision making regarding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employment in the Victorian public sector can support self-determination in practice by:

- Strengthening Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employment in senior positions, which supports the development of future Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander leaders for the public sector and for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
- Ensuring that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to culture are respected and upheld.
- Having a clear commitment to self-determination.
- Adopting a strong commitment to cultural safety which is reflected in the physical environment.
- Involving Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in decision making.
- Ensuring that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have a voice regarding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander business.
- Consulting or partnering with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people when designing services and programs for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

## **Questions to assist you to ask yourself as a manager:**

- Do you understand the intent of Victoria's self-determination in policy?
- Are you and your staff supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination in practice?





## Useful links and other information

A video of Yorta Yorta man and artist Tirirki Onus speaking about the importance of self-determination

[The Victorian Government's commitment to self-determination](#)

[Information about Victorian Treaty legislation](#)

1. Source: Social justice and human rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2003
2. Source: [Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, Section 19](#)



# Recruiting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff

An essential part to building an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is to identify how to attract and recruit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander candidates.

Community relationship building is important for recruitment and often your organisation or Government area needs to be known to the local community and regarded positively before members of the community will consider applying for jobs within your organisation. Community relationship building is important for recruitment because:

- the community can act as an effective conduit of information
- news and information is often shared by word of mouth
- your organisation may become more aware of cultural practices which could help to refine your attraction and recruitment strategies
- it can help identify particular barriers to employment, such as past culturally inappropriate action
- it has the capacity to increase networks

It may help you identify potential staff for current jobs and assist in building a future employment pool for your organisation.

## Recruitment Pathways

When recruiting, you should follow your organisation's usual recruitment processes with some additional steps to successfully recruit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff. Some recruitment methods across the Victorian public sector include:

- The Victorian government graduate program (formerly VPS GRADS) or



organisations' own graduate recruitment program: university graduates with three-year or longer degrees for a 12-month development program to learn about government.

- Cadetship programs: cadets are usually Year 12 or first-year university students. The program combines academic life with structured work experience.
- Traineeship programs: traineeships are a pathway for trainees to work and learn simultaneously. Traineeships use competency-based training focusing on performance rather than knowledge.
- Use of employment or recruitment agencies
- Advertising through a range of ways.

## Designing and describing position descriptions

Prior to advertising and recruitment, it is important to think about what a job involves, including the most appropriate skills, attributes, knowledge and experience required. Use plain English and inclusive language and avoid using jargon. To attract a broader range of applicants, you might focus on what the person in the role will be doing and the skills they will need rather than on formal qualifications, particularly where these qualifications are not mandatory requirements of a role. Often qualifications listed as mandatory on position descriptions can be replaced with life experience or professional experience and practical knowledge.

In some cases, Key Selection Criteria (KSC) could assess the potential of applicants to grow into the role. This often results in a broader group of applicants with a range of different skills. You should place value on life experience, practical knowledge and connections to Community as part of the KSC. Offer to clarify the KSC and offer the opportunity to seek assistance with drafting answers.

## Advertising

While you should follow your organisation's usual marketing strategies, it is beneficial to follow some extra steps to attract and recruit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff.

Some good advertising channels for attracting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff that can be employed alongside conventional methods are:



- Word of mouth
- Koori Mail
- Social media
- Career Trackers
- Indigenous Employment Australia
- National Indigenous Radio Service

Make all of your organisation's job advertisements attractive to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander candidates by including the following:

- A clear description of the role
- Leave entitlements including cultural leave
- Hours of work and potential for flexible working arrangements
- Innovative approaches such as using new technology
- The statement "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are encouraged to apply for this job"
- Images of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff members working in your organisations (with their consent).

Make sure time frames for applications are long enough for people to hear about the position through word-of-mouth.

## **Interviewing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff**

Like all potential recruits, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people come from different backgrounds and communities and have different ways of doing things. Communication styles will differ and what works for one Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander recruit may not work for another, especially when you are recruiting employees across a range of levels. The following are helpful suggestions for you to consider when interviewing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff:

- Ensure the interview space is welcoming and culturally safe.
- Provide interview questions prior to the interview to reduce anxiety and ensure interviewees have the opportunity to present their best case.



- Engage existing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees in promoting the benefits of a career in your organisation. For example attending Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job fairs or speaking in a promotional video.
- Provide recruitment information to Aboriginal Community organisations, networks, employment and careers expos and community events.
- Include an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person on the selection panel.
- Include an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander male on the selection panel for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander male candidates and an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander female on the panel for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander female candidates whenever possible.
- Ensure panel members have completed cultural capability training, unconscious bias training and merit-based selection training.
- Provide support to applicants before the interview, e.g. provide clear instructions about access to the building, the selection process and interview format and panel members.
- Be aware that there could be differences in communication styles, e.g. silences might be longer for some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people as they provide an opportunity for deeper thought and it may not be polite for some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to make lots of eye contact.<sup>1</sup>
- Be aware that, for some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, self-advocating or “talking yourself up” may not come naturally due to social and cultural norms. Some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants may be inclined to speak more in terms of team or group outcomes rather than personal achievements.

## Recruitment of non-Aboriginal and/or non-Torres Strait Islander staff

Recruitment of non-Aboriginal and/or non-Torres Strait Islander staff, carers and volunteers should include a focus on cultural capability. Staff selection must, for example, assess whether applicants understand the historical and contemporary issues that affect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.



## Aboriginal Employment Officers and Aboriginal Employment Plans

Aboriginal Employment Officers (AEO) and Aboriginal Employment Plans (AEP) are best practice for recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff and ensuring your organisation is culturally competent and safe.

### What is an Aboriginal Employment Officer?

An AEO is responsible for:

- Providing ongoing support to new and existing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff
- Developing an AEP and coordinating its implementation
- Providing ongoing support to stakeholders, including managers, as well as establishing and maintaining external relationships.

While some of this work can be done by human resources staff, experience shows that this does not deliver results and does not provide the necessary support to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff or the necessary focus for an AEP.

Tips for engaging an AEO:

- If possible, invest in an ongoing, full time, AEO role
- If your organisation cannot appoint its own AEO, try and share an AEO with another organisation
- If the AEO is appointed from outside the organisation, ensure that have full access to consult and collaborate broadly and effectively

### What is an Aboriginal Employment Plan?

An AEP is a comprehensive plan that sets out a series of coordinated and consistent organisational activities to increase the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.



An AEP will:

- Provide the basis for agreement about activities to be undertaken
- Specify what actions are to be undertaken
- Identify who will be responsible for initiatives, as well as designating overall responsibility
- Highlight implementation timelines
- Provide the basis for benchmarking progress and reporting

Tips for developing an AEP:

- Ensure there is a plan with a clear picture of who, what, how, when, and how much is being invested
- Set up management structures that provide clear lines for endorsement and accountability
- Include as many people from as many different areas of the organisation as possible during the planning phase.

View an example of the [Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet's plan](#).

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## **Questions for managers and workplaces when recruiting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff:**

- Do you have an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander inclusion plan to attract, recruit and retain Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff?
- Do your recruitment approaches attract Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants and lead to recruitment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff?
- Does your area/organisation induction for all new staff, carers and volunteers include:
  - the organisation's support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-

- determination and social justice?
- The organisations commitment to cultural capability and cultural awareness or cultural safety content in the training?
  - the organisation's commitment to cultural safety and intolerance of racism and cultural abuse?
  - the organisation's commitment to cultural capability?

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## Useful links and other information



[Aboriginal Employment Plan Example 1 – DEWLP](#)

[Aboriginal Workforce Strategy – Koori employment](#)

(1) Source: National Association of Community Legal Centres Recruiting and Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employees: A guide for community legal centres 2017.

# Inducting and welcoming Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff

To support culturally safe workplaces, hiring managers and teams are encouraged to attend Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability training prior to new staff members coming on board.

Get in touch with your organisation's Aboriginal and/or Diversity and Inclusion team to find out what Aboriginal Cultural Capability training is available. You can also find providers on the [Kinaway](#) or [Supply Nation](#) business directory.

[Cultural awareness](#) means being aware of, and developing sensitivity to, cultural difference and cultural diversity.

[Cultural safety](#) is an environment that is safe for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, where there's no assault, challenge or denial of their identity and experience.

## Read more

[Aboriginal Cultural Capability](#)

## Induction

A good induction process is vital for all new employees. It helps new starters feel welcome and comfortable and gives them the information they need to effectively perform their role.

It's also an opportunity for organisations to build Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural capability by including:



- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and social justice as part of their values and vision
- a commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competence and ongoing training
- a commitment to cultural safety and intolerance of racism and cultural abuse in their employee code of conduct
- information about intergenerational trauma and lateral violence
- a commitment to creating partnerships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations to enhance their service deliver

Every employee is different, and the induction process should be tailored to best suit them.

General induction tips:

- introduce the new staff member to other staff and management, e.g. through a welcome morning tea
- provide an induction kit with organisational policies and other material
- advise new staff of the available support mechanisms
- provide a clear outline of the job expectations and explain organisational systems and policies

If these don't form part of your usual induction process, plan an initial conversation to:

- let them know you have an open-door policy
- discuss their leave entitlements in relation to cultural obligations and needs (see below)
- discuss what supervision approach they'd prefer
- tell them about mentoring, training and other career development options your organisation makes available for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff

## Introductions

Creating opportunities for your new starter to meet their colleagues and connect are important.



Things you can do:

- ask if they'd like to meet other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees and/or be connected to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peer networks
- connect them with a work buddy or an informal mentor. If their buddy/mentor isn't Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, connect the buddy/mentor with resources like the [Aboriginal Cultural Capability Toolkit](#).

Things to avoid:

- Introducing a new starter as 'our new Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employee' (or similar). Many people don't define their employment by their cultural background.

## Identity

When getting to know your new starter, it's important not to make insensitive comments or ask inappropriate questions.

Do not:

- Ask what percentage or 'how much' Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander they are. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people generally view being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander as either something you are or aren't.
- Assume they're across the languages and protocols of other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander groups.
- Share their personal story with anyone else if they've decided to share it with you. It's their story to tell.
- Assign Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-specific work if it doesn't align with their role or interests. It could be inappropriate, especially if you're doing so because they're Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

## Inclusive language

When speaking about or with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people it's best to use phrases like "Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander", "Koori/Koorie", "First Nations",



or Traditional owner names (such as “Yorta Yorta” or “Wurundjeri”).

Koori/Koorie is a word broadly used by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people from south-eastern Australia to describe themselves. This is different to more specific Traditional Owner names such as Yorta Yorta or Wurundjeri. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people from other parts of Australia may use different words such as Murri, Nyoongar, Palawah, etc to generally describe themselves.

Don’t use acronyms or other phrases like “ATSI” or “Aborigine/s”. These are outdated and can have negative connotations.

There are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander English words and phrases. If they aren’t part of your regular vocabulary, it’s best to avoid using them. It might come across as inauthentic or awkward.

## Read more

[Aboriginal Culture and History](#)

## Cultural leave

The Victorian Government recognises that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees may have cultural responsibilities requiring their absence from work.

Advise new starters on their leave cultural leave entitlements. They may include but is not limited to:

- attendance at significant community meetings or events
- Sorry Business (bereavement and funerals)

For Victorian public sector employees not employed under the VPS Agreement, we encourage organisations to think flexibly to help employees meet their cultural obligations.

## Read more

[Cultural and Ceremonial Leave](#)



## Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander protocols

Respectful relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities will involve an understanding and respect for protocols. Ceremonies and protocols are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

These include but are not limited to:

- Welcome to Country
- Acknowledgment of Country and Elders

A Welcome to Country can only be performed by a Traditional Owner from the [Formally Recognised Traditional Owner](#) relevant to that location.

An [Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners](#) can be done by anyone.

### Read more

[Aboriginal protocols](#)

[Aboriginal Victoria Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners](#)



# Supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff

Wellbeing is integral to a productive and happy workplace.

Some important things you can do for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander wellbeing include:

- Promote and support the importance of cultural connections in building resilience and wellbeing.
- Consider how you can ensure cultural safety for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people from the moment they enter the workplace.
- Adopt a holistic approach to supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people where the focus is broader than any single issue.
- Checking in informally and providing regular supervision where you are asking questions like “How are you travelling?” allow the conversation about wellbeing to happen.
- Ensure your employees are aware of any existing Employee Assistance Programs.
- Encourage healthy lifestyle and physical activities in the workplace.
- Discuss and if possible negotiate flexible working arrangements so employees are more likely to feel supported and valued.

Good working relationships are also very important for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff. The VACCA publication [Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers \(PDF, 5.7MB\)](#) outlines that good working relationships are more likely to exist when non-Aboriginal workers are aware that:

- Building working relationships takes time and needs to be based on mutual respect for similarities and differences.
- Relationships between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal workers means breaking down barriers and going the extra step in building



respectful, personal and non-judgemental relationships.

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees know that they are part of the same community as their clients and so must keep this in mind when developing working relationships. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees may also have experience of issues such as grief, loss and trauma and will be at various stages in their own journey to healing.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees would agree that they are not experts on all aspects of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture and community life. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are required to respect their cultural boundaries and what authority they have been given to discuss certain things. This is not, however, a license to exclude Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are often utilised to respond to all things Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in the workplace and speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people. This adds to employees cultural load and is a risk to employee wellbeing.

## **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Cultural Loads**

It is also important to remember that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to have caring responsibilities and cultural and/or community obligations outside of the workplace that non-Aboriginal co-workers do not have. This is called 'cultural load' and includes:

- Caring for family members
- Sitting on local advisory councils and boards
- Being held accountable within the community for decisions made by your organisation
- Racism
- Intergenerational trauma
- Lateral violence
- Living and working off Country



## Flexible working arrangements

Some of your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff may need flexible working arrangements for reasons such as:

- Sorry Business
- Child care responsibility
- Cultural responsibilities.

If you notice a change in your employee, such as they are regularly arriving late or seeming unhappy at work, it is best to have a conversation with them. Ask them what is going on and have a discussion about how best you can support them. This could include changed work hours, working from home, sharing responsibilities at work along with a range of other support mechanisms. Adequate arrangements for bereavement leave should be available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to attend funerals and observe Sorry Business.

## Racism at Work

It is also important to understand that unfortunately, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers also frequently encounter racism and prejudice from co-workers and non-Indigenous clients. It is important to be aware that these experiences can range from overt racism, such as derogatory name-calling, to the subtle but equally toxic prejudice and assumptions around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members and their work practices.

This can include remarks or gossip about staff working hours, field visits, or leave for customary practices such as Sorry Business as well as prejudices around work capability. Without transparency, education or cultural awareness, colleagues and supervisors can fail to recognise how much work Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are expected to do outside the office, the importance of outreach work, or the cultural obligations around matters such as bereavement or Sorry Business.<sup>2</sup>

Your role as a manager is to:

- Provide an open door policy for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff to

discuss any issues they are having in the workplace.

- Listen out for or observe unacceptable behaviours in the workplace.
- Call out any unacceptable behaviours and follow policies and procedures to address.
- Ensure the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander worker is supported through the process.

## Shame in the workplace

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff may experience shame when being asked to share personal information or being asked to talk about personal achievements etc.

Shame extends to include embarrassment in certain situations and is often due to attention or circumstances rather than as a result of an action by oneself.

The feeling of shame can totally overwhelm and disempower a person.<sup>3</sup>

## Workplace Cultural Safety

A [culturally safe work place](#) is essential for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff wellbeing.

## Supporting further training and study

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff may want to continue increasing their knowledge and skills. Supporting your staff in these areas results in better performance, higher retention rates and increases the value they bring to the organisation.

## Mentoring

A mentoring relationship involves sharing experiences and expertise through advice, support and encouragement. It helps those being mentored to achieve their full potential, both professionally and personally.

It should be based on honesty, mutual trust, respect, confidentiality and a willingness to share and learn. For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, mentoring from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professional is the ideal. It can provide cultural guidance, pass on cultural knowledge and practices and reduce isolation by providing connection to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community. Mentoring can be formal or informal.

## Formal Mentoring Programs

Formal workplace mentoring involves a structured agreement between two people.

Good formal mentoring:

- Identifies a suitable mentor who is not the employees line manager
- Is career-focused or focused on professional development outside the mentees regular work
- Involves relationships that provide professional and personal support

The relationships run for a specific time in a formal program, though the pair may choose to continue informally.<sup>4</sup>

## Informal Mentor Relationships

Many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees will already have informal mentor relationships or will quickly establish relationships with other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff who will act as both personal and professional mentors.

When you have recruited an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person to a senior position, it is likely that they already have existing relationships in which they are the mentor.

Informal mentoring relationships are extremely beneficial as the matches are natural and not forced and are often maintained over a long period of time. Being part of an informal mentor relationship should not exclude any employees from formal workplace mentoring.



## Sponsoring

Sponsoring gives workers an experience in a different role. Sponsoring is often done with a more senior staff member who actively engages the more junior member to work on a project together. Always discuss a potential sponsoring with your employee first.

Tips for establishing good sponsoring:

- Initiate sponsoring in an area of work that the employee/sponsee has expressed interest in
- Ensure the sponsor is committed to the project and to the sponsee.

## Foundations for Good Supervisory Relationships

Good relationships between a manager and staff member are built on the respect and value accorded to the unique role that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff can have within organisations. Managers should acknowledge the skills and knowledge that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals bring to the organisation.

Supervisors also need to:

- understand the demands on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers, who may be part of the same community as their clients
- realise that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals are unlikely to respect you simply because of your position in the organisation, because the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander way is based on relationships that can only be built over time
- recognise that understanding who you are and taking time to build relationships are important foundations for supervision
- acknowledge the importance of community relationships and events for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander professionals
- acknowledge the added challenges for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff in supporting other staff to build relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities
- supervise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff in the way that is most comfortable for them, and be aware of the impact of language and venue



- support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff to access cultural support and mentoring from an appropriate Aboriginal organisation or Aboriginal professional
- expect that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, like all staff in your organisation, adhere to the organisation's code of conduct and professional standards of behaviour<sup>5</sup>
- address issues as they arise and provide feedback promptly.

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## Questions for managers and workplaces in supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff:

- Do you support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff through personal, family and cultural commitments and provide support/services for impacts of grief, loss and trauma?
- Do you promote cultural safety and the responsibility of all staff, carers and volunteers to treat Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people respectfully and respond quickly and appropriately to racism, discrimination or cultural abuse?
- Do you clearly display information regarding what staff, carers, volunteers and community members can do if they believe they have been treated in a racist or culturally abusive way by someone within the organisation?
- How do you encourage and support staff, carers and volunteers to make disclosures regarding racism, discrimination or cultural abuse and have a documented policy and procedure for managing it if it occurs?
- Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who make disclosures regarding racism, discrimination or cultural abuse provided with culturally appropriate support throughout the report/investigation process?
- How do you protect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff from being overwhelmed by the demands made of the 'expert'? How does the organisation support Aboriginal staff in this role?
- Does the organisation's employee assistance program (EAP) give Aboriginal and/or

Torres Strait Islander staff choice about accessing an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander counsellor?

- Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff supported and given time to attend significant community events (for example, events during NAIDOC week)?
  - Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff provided with access to other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, either within or outside the organisation, for support and mentoring?
  - Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff encouraged, resourced and supported to become workplace mentors for other staff?
  - Is there a formal partnership in place with your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation to provide cultural support and mentoring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff in your organisation?
- 





## Useful links and other information

[Reconciliation Victoria outline of 'what cultural safety should look like in the work place', created for local councils.](#)

Uncle Richard Franklin discussing cultural load:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9AxZ2QseA0>

(1) Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers. VACCA 2006

(2) [Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations](#)

(3) [The Concept of Shame](#)

(4) [Definition of Mentoring, Benefits of Mentoring, & Other FAQs](#)

(5) Source: VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010.



# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a shared history of colonisation and forced removal of their children.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a shared history of colonisation and forced removal of their children. To be culturally competent, we must acknowledge and tell the truth about Australian history and its ongoing impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and we should understand how the past continues to shape lives today.

Before colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived in small family groups linked into larger language groups with distinct territorial boundaries. These groups had complex kinship systems and rules for social interaction; they had roles relating to law, education, spiritual development and resource management; they had language, ceremonies, customs and traditions and extensive knowledge of their environment. In other words, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures were strong and well developed, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities were self-determining, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were nurtured and protected.

European colonisation had a devastating impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were subjected to a range of injustices, including mass killings or being displaced from their traditional lands and relocated on missions and reserves in the name of protection. Cultural practices were denied, and subsequently many were lost. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, colonisation meant massacre, violence, disease and loss.

Despite the past and present impacts of colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship systems, customs and traditions still thrive, and Aboriginal and/or



Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities remain strong and resilient. <sup>1</sup>

There is a rich body of literature on the violent history of colonisation in Victoria including massacres, missions, segregation, deaths in custody and land rights.

Some sources you can access for information are:

- [Deadly Story – History](#)
- [Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Timeline](#)

## Stolen Generations

The Stolen Generations are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who, when they were children, were taken away from their families and communities as the result of past government policies. Children were removed by governments, churches and welfare bodies to be brought up in institutions, fostered out or adopted by white families.

The removal of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children took place from the early days of British colonisation in Australia. It broke important cultural, spiritual and family ties and has left a lasting and inter-generational impact on the lives and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>2</sup>

## The National Apology to The Stolen Generations

On the 13th of February 2008 the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd delivered an apology to the Stolen Generations. The National Apology to the Stolen Generations came about as a recommendation from The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal Children from their Families. It highlighted the suffering of Indigenous families under the Commonwealth, state and territory Aboriginal protection and welfare laws and policies.

The National Inquiry then led to the Bringing Them Home report which was tabled in Parliament on 26 May 1997. It contained 54 Recommendations on how to redress the wrongs done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by the race-based laws and policies of successive governments throughout Australia.



Recommendations 5a and 5b suggested that all Australian Parliaments and State and Territory police forces acknowledge responsibility for past laws, policies and practices of forcible removal and that on behalf of their predecessors officially apologise to Indigenous individuals, families and communities.<sup>3</sup>

[Watch the National Apology to The Stolen Generations](#)

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## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture

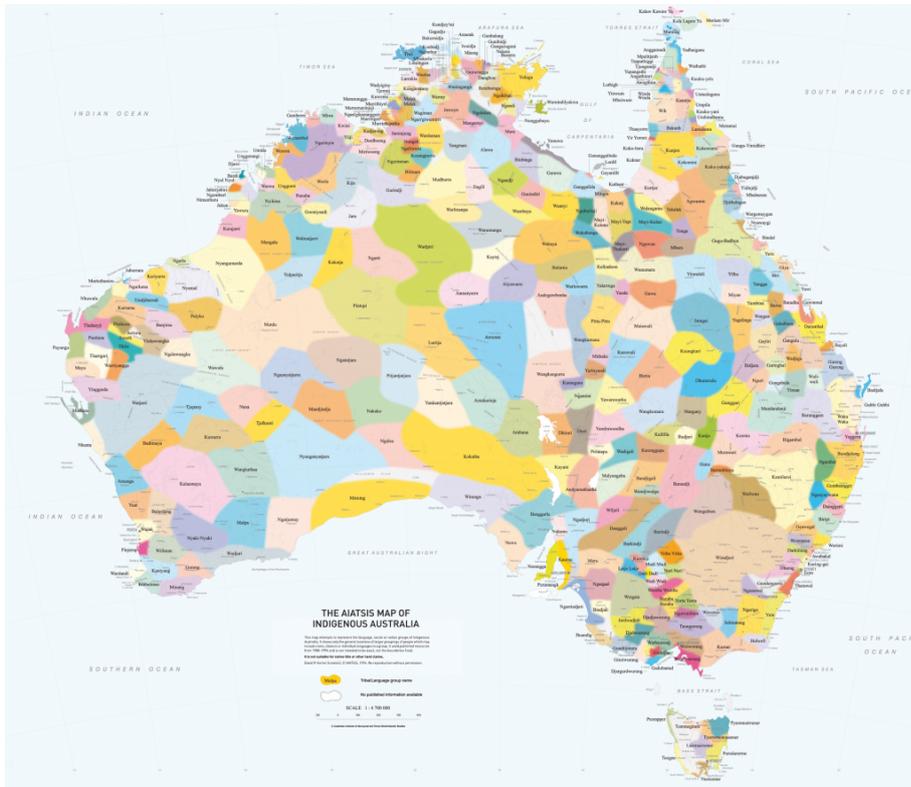
There are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures exist and thrive in a wide range of communities throughout Australia. The Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people you work with are not all the same—their culture, what they value and hold dear, how they live and make decisions and their relationships are diverse. As in Western and Eastern cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have characteristics they share and others that differentiate them, so it is important to avoid assumptions regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

While diversity exists across and within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural characteristics are part of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and unite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through shared history and shared experiences. Understanding these cultural characteristics and appreciating their impact for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people today is a cornerstone of cultural competence.<sup>4</sup>

‘For thousands of years, the original inhabitants of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occupied the lands with very different boundaries than today, centred on intimate cultural relationships with the land and sea.

This map is an attempt to represent all the language, tribal or nation groups of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people of Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups were included on the map based on published resources available between 1988 and 1994 which determine the cultural, language and trade boundaries and relationships between groups’.<sup>5</sup>





[Explore the map in further detail.](#)

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Connections

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

Culture underpins all aspects of life including connections to family and community, connection to Country, the expression of values, symbols, cultural practices and traditional and contemporary forms of cultural expression such as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander language, ceremonies, cultural events, storytelling, dance, music and art. The following diagram highlights these important cultural connections:



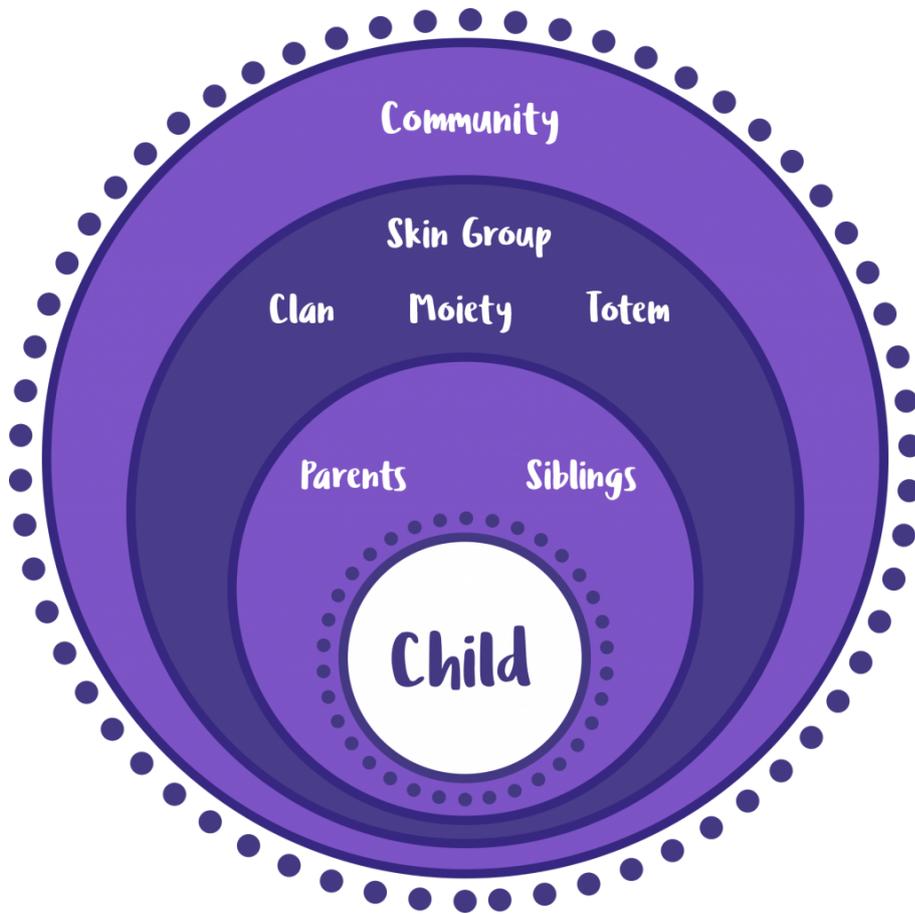
## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Kinship Ties

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people view individuals within a community holistically. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understanding of the individual is in relation to the family, the community, the tribe, the land and the spiritual beings of the lore and dreaming. A person’s physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural needs and well-being are intrinsically linked—they cannot be isolated. The person is not seen as separate, but in relationship to and with others. An Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspective views:

- the person’s relationship to their whole family—not just to their parents and siblings
- the person’s relationship to their community—not just their family
- the person’s relationship to the land and the spirit beings which determine lore and meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, kinship networks are based on relationships of blood, marriage, association and spiritual significance. An Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person has brothers, sisters, mother, fathers, uncles and aunts, who are additional to relationships by blood or marriage. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children understand that these people are important in their life—they are people who will support them and on whom they can rely—they are family. These relationships are maintained through involvement in community. Even if they see each other infrequently, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people describe a closeness that exists—'like I saw her yesterday'. Each individual is important, has a role to play in the community and is accepted for both their strengths and limitations. Sharing is a strongly promoted value. There is a strong obligation to share if others are in need. The family, and one's obligations to the family and community, are more important than material gain.<sup>7</sup> The diagram below shows the key features of a traditional Aboriginal family structure.<sup>8</sup>





## Respect for Elders

From a very young age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are told about their relationships and links to others and are taught to show respect to their Elders. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Elders play a vital leadership role.<sup>9</sup>

An Elder is an identified and respected man or woman within the community who has the trust, knowledge and understanding of their culture and permission to speak about it. They are often recognised as being able to provide advice, offer support and share wisdom in a confidential way with other members of the community, particularly younger members.

Some Elders are referred to as Aunty or Uncle, but you should only use these titles when

given permission to do so – simply asking is the best way to find out if you can do so or not.<sup>10</sup>

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Spiritual Relationship with the Land**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a deep connection with the land or Country, which is central to their spiritual identity. This connection remains despite the many Aboriginal people who no longer live on their land. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people describe the land as sustaining and comforting, fundamental to their health, their relationships and their culture and identity.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their traditional Country and what it represents in terms of their history, survival, resilience and cultural and spiritual identity gives them much to take pride in. In the dominant Australian culture, land is thought of as a commodity to be used, enjoyed and owned — as a place to build a home or grow food or develop a park. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people consider the land differently.

Aboriginal spiritual identity and connection to the land is expressed in the Dreamtime. In Aboriginal cultures, the Dreamtime tells of the beginning of life. Different Aboriginal groups have different dreamtime stories, but all teach about aspects that affect daily life. Dreamtime stories teach Aboriginal people about the importance of sharing with and caring for people of their community, of nurturing the land and of the significance of the land and its creatures.

Dreamtime stories pass on the history of Aboriginal people, their relationship with the land and their spiritual connection. For Aboriginal people, their connection to the Dreamtime is still alive and vital today and will remain so into the future. The complex set of spiritual values developed by Aboriginal people and that are part of the Dreamtime include 'self-control, self-reliance, courage, kinship and friendship, empathy, a holistic sense of oneness and interdependence, reverence for land and Country and a responsibility for others.'<sup>11</sup>

The following diagram shows how, for Aboriginal people, all aspects of life are interconnected through the centrality of land and spirituality.<sup>12</sup>



## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags are particularly important for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. The flags can indicate pride, show great respect and leadership and can enhance healing. The power of messages conveyed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags should not be underestimated. Mainstream organisations that display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags demonstrate their support for Aboriginal people and those from the Torres Strait Islands. Understanding the history and meaning of the flags, and displaying the flags appropriately is a step towards creating a culturally safe workplace for Aboriginal staff.

### The Aboriginal Flag

Harold Thomas, an acclaimed artist, member of the Stolen Generations and a Luritja man from Central Australia, designed the Aboriginal flag. The flag was originally designed as a protest flag for the land rights movement of Aboriginal Australians. It is a symbol of identity, unity and Aboriginal rights.

The Aboriginal flag is divided horizontally into equal halves of black (top) and red (bottom) with a yellow circle in the centre. The black represents Aboriginal people. The red represents the earth, and spiritual relationships to the land. The yellow represents the sun, the giver of life and protector. Care should be taken to fly the Aboriginal flag properly, because grave offence has been caused when flags have been displayed upside down.

The Aboriginal flag was first raised in Adelaide on National Aboriginal Day on 12 July 1971 and was adopted nationally in 1972 when it was flown above the Aboriginal 'Tent

Embassy' in Canberra. In 1995, the flag was proclaimed a 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953, to reflect its increasing importance in Australian society.



## The Torres Strait Islander Flag

The Torres Strait Islander flag was created as a symbol of unity and identity for Torres Strait Islander people. It was designed by the late Bernard Namok from Thursday Island. It was recognised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1992. In 1995, the flag was proclaimed a 'Flag of Australia' under the Flags Act 1953, to reflect its increasing importance in Australian society.

The Torres Strait Islander flag features three horizontal coloured stripes, with green at the top and bottom and blue in the centre, divided by thin black lines. The colour green represents the land, the blue the sea and the black represents Indigenous people. A white dhari (headdress) sits in the centre with a five-pointed white star beneath it. The dhari represents the people of the Torres Strait Islands. The star represents the five major island groups, and the white colour represents peace. Used in navigation, the star is also an important symbol for the seafaring people of the Torres Strait.<sup>13</sup>



## Useful links and other information

(1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13) Source: VACCA Building Respect Partnerships 2010.

(2) [AIATSIS Stolen Generations](#)

(3) [AIATSIS Apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples](#)

(5) [AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia](#)

(8, 12) Source: Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, September 2006, Working with Aboriginal Children and Families: A Guide for Child Protection and Child and Family Welfare Workers, Melbourne. Based on material from the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian

(10) [Supporting Carers \(SNAICC\) – Connection to Elders](#)

# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victoria today

As of the 2016 Census, there were 47,788 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, making up 0.8 per cent of the population.

## Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Demographics

As of the 2016 Census, there were 47,788 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, making up 0.8 per cent of the population. The median age for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians is 23, compared to 37 for other Victorians.<sup>1</sup>

Approximately 54 per cent of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians live in regional areas while 46 per cent live in metropolitan areas. Over 51% of the Victorian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population live in one of fifteen local government areas. The Local Government Areas with the highest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are: Shepparton; Mildura; Geelong; Bendigo; Casey; East Gippsland; Darebin; Wyndham; Ballarat; Whittlesea; Latrobe; and Hume.<sup>2</sup>

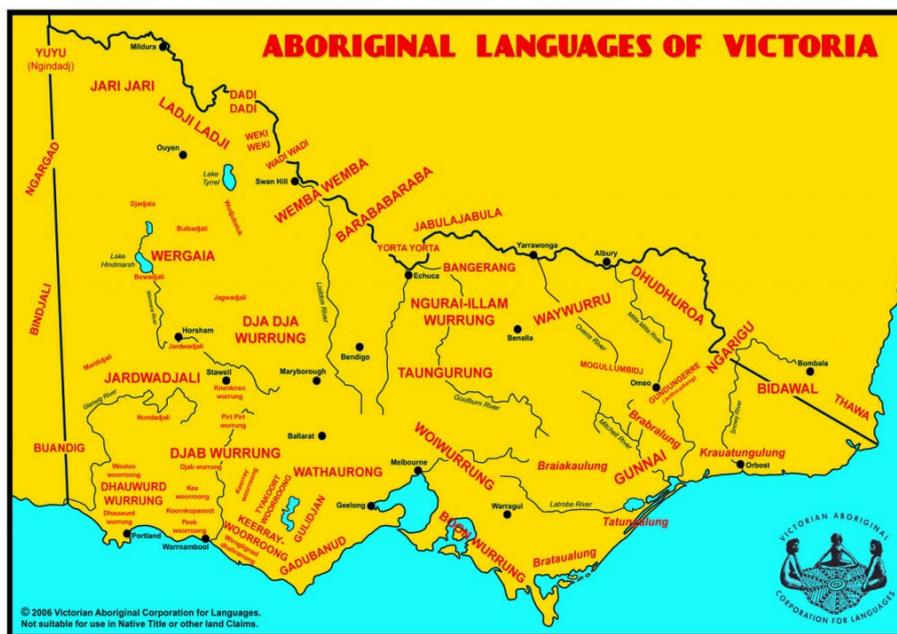
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## Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages

Before colonisation there were approximately 39 languages spoken across the area that is now Victoria. Language is a large part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and strengthens ties between Elders and young people and improves connection to

culture and Country. The boundaries between Victorian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander language areas are not distinct and mixtures of vocabulary and grammar exist in some regions, therefore linguistic maps may show some variation about where one language ends and another begins. <sup>3</sup>

## Map of Victorian Aboriginal Languages



See more at [Aboriginal language map of Victoria](#).

The use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander English is an aspect of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Users of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander English are making a statement about identity. Valuing and respecting someone's use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander English indicates to them that you value them, their Aboriginality and their history. <sup>4</sup> Here are some examples of common words used in Victoria:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander English	Standard Australian English
mob	group
sorry business	ceremony associated with death
gammon	kidding, joking, pretending
deadly	really good

## Sorry Business – Bereavement and Funerals

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people refer to the period of mourning when an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person dies as 'Sorry Business'. It is an important period for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and involves responsibilities and obligations to attend funerals and participate in other cultural events, activities or ceremonies.

In some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the extent of obligations to participate in Sorry Business related to bereavement is dictated by the status of the deceased person and a person's kinship to them. It is very important to recognise that in many communities, there is an expectation that funerals involve the whole community and not just the immediate family and friends. Assumptions should not be made about the presumed 'closeness' or relationship of a person to the deceased in appreciating the necessity of their participation in Sorry Business.<sup>4</sup>

In a workplace, managers need to be aware that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander worker will need to take time out to attend funerals, often to pay respects on

behalf of their family or take extended periods of time off for Sorry Business when a family member has passed away.

## **‘Men’s business’ and ‘women’s business’**

‘Men’s business’ and ‘women’s business’ remain very important and sensitive issues within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. Some information should only be talked about or negotiated and consulted on by people of the relevant gender. Information relating to ‘women’s business’ should be stored in such a way that only women have access to it, and information that is ‘men’s business’ stored in such a way that only men have access to it.

As such, when conducting research or consultation, it is important to plan ahead as to whether you will need both male and female researchers, consultants or project workers, in the event that matters concerning men’s or women’s business may be raised. <sup>4</sup>

In a workplace a manager needs to be aware that, for example, a female Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employee may be less inclined to open up to a male manager than if it was a female manager and vice versa.

## **Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture is Thriving**

Despite the enormous odds presented by colonisation, forced removal, discrimination and injustice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures are thriving: strong kinship ties and social obligations continue; cultural centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, film, dance and theatre and activities celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and significant events demonstrate the resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and cultures. <sup>5</sup>

## **Questions for managers and workplaces:**

- Have you and your staff attended cultural awareness training?
- Do you know where you can access information regarding who the Traditional



Owners are and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history?

- Do you understand the ongoing impact of past government policies and practices on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- Do you understand that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employee working for you may have family obligations that may have an impact on work?
- Does your workplace display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flags?
- Are you and your staff aware of and able to talk about the history of the flags?
- Do you understand 'Sorry Business' and how it impacts an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander worker?
- Do you understand how men's and women's business may have an impact on the relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees working for you?



## Useful links and other information

Further information on [Aboriginal cultural heritage of Victoria](#)

Further information on [Aboriginal culture](#)

For further information on [Aboriginal languages](#)

1. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016
2. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011
3. Source: [VACL Language Map of Victoria](#)
4. Source: Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations
5. Source: VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010



# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols

Respectful relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will involve an understanding and respect for protocols.

Ceremonies and protocols are an important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

By incorporating them into official events we can recognise and pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture and heritage and demonstrate recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's unique position in Australian society.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols differ between communities and regions, and you should not rely on your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees to be responsible for ensuring protocols are met. For example, do not expect that your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees will perform an Acknowledgment of Country at every meeting or that they will have the authority to perform a Welcome to Country. If unsure whether you are following protocols it is recommended to check in with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person or organisation for advice.

## Acknowledgment of Country and Elders

An Acknowledgement of Country, also known as Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners, can be done by anyone and is a way of showing awareness of, and respect for, the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Traditional Owners of the land on which a meeting or event is being held. For a non-Aboriginal person, non-Torres Strait Islander person or an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person who is not a descendant of that tribal land, acknowledging the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Owners is a mark of respect. It is also respectful to acknowledge Elders past and present.

Your Acknowledgment of the Traditional Owners of the land implies:

- your appreciation of the importance of the land to local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- your commitment to work in partnership with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to protect the land and the physical traces of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture and history, such as sacred burial sites, art and ceremonial grounds
- your recognition of the unique position the land holds for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- your understanding of the struggle and pain that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have endured over centuries in being removed from their land.

Example of an Acknowledgement of Country:

"I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Land we are meeting on today; the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people here today."

## Welcome to Country

A Welcome to Country is not the same as an Acknowledgement of Country. It provides an opportunity for the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to welcome you to their country. At the opening of a new building or new program, you may want to welcome those attending. However, it is the right of local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to first welcome you to their land. The Welcome to Country values Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and recognises the ancestral spirits who created the boundaries and lands, which allow safe passage to visitors.

The Welcome to Country has been part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways for thousands of years. It can only be performed by an Elder or respected person who is from the local clan and been given permission to do so.

There are many ways that an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person may



perform a 'Welcome to Country'. It may consist of a single speech, or include a performance (a song, dance, didgeridoo solo etc.), a smoking or cleansing ceremony—or a combination of these. Ceremonies and practices reflect the vibrant nature of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture. By supporting their inclusion, you will be introducing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture to a group of people who otherwise may not have enjoyed such experiences.

## Smoking Ceremonies

A smoking ceremony is an ancient custom among some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander tribes that involves smouldering various native plants to produce smoke which has cleansing properties and the ability to ward off bad spirits, and are still performed today. They are also used in the context of healing, spiritual renewal and strengthening by some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander healing practitioners. This ceremony is a ritual of purification and unity and is undertaken by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person with specialised cultural knowledge. Given the significant nature of the ceremony, it is usually only performed at events regarded as appropriate by the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community.

## Fees for Cultural Services

In providing cultural services such as 'Welcome to Country,' artistic performances and ceremonies, it is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are using their own time and intellectual property. For this reason, it is appropriate that people are offered payment and appropriate remuneration for their services. Appropriate payment and remuneration should be negotiated, considering speaker fees, travel to and from the event as well as the public profile nature of the event.

## Community Engagement and Partnerships

A partnership with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community is much more than simply writing a memorandum of understanding or a protocol, calling something a partnership, or including self-determination as an organisational value. Engagement policies and protocols should respect the role of different Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community groups and outline the basis of the relationship. They may outline



consultative processes or establish mechanisms for engagement such as an advisory committee to your organisation and should be developed in consultation with the relevant Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community and where possible seek the guidance and advice of the Local Aboriginal Network (LAN).

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) is underpinned by self-determination and is driven by the following 11 self-determination guiding principles, which set the minimum standard for all work with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians:

1. **Human rights:** Self-determination initiatives honour the norms set out in UNDRIP and Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.
2. **Cultural integrity:** As First Nations peoples, the rich, thriving cultures, knowledge and diverse experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, including where they fit with family, community and society, will be recognised, valued, heard and celebrated.
3. **Commitment:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination will be advanced and embedded through planned action that is endorsed by, and accountable to, all parties.
4. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise:** Government and agencies will seek out, value and embed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture, knowledge, expertise and diverse perspectives in policies and practice.
5. **Partnerships:** Partnerships will advance Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander autonomy through equitable participation, shared authority and decision-making, and will be underpinned by cultural integrity.
6. **Investment:** Investment to support self-determination will be sustainable, flexible and appropriate to strengthen Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations and participation, including around economic participation, economic independence and building wealth.
7. **Decision-making:** Decision-makers will respect the right to free, prior and informed consent and individual choice and will prioritise the transfer of decision-making power to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in areas that impact their communities.
8. **Empowerment:** Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people will have autonomy and participation in the development, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of legislation, policies and programs that impact their communities.
9. **Cultural safety:** Programs and services accessed by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait



Islander people will be inclusive, respectful, responsive and relevant, and informed by culturally safe practice frameworks.

10. **Equity:** Systemic and structural racism, discrimination and unconscious bias and other barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination will be actively identified and eliminated.
  11. **Accountability:** All parties responsible for delivering outcomes involving Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people will be held accountable and subject to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-led, independent and transparent oversight.<sup>2</sup>
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## Questions for managers and workplaces in following cultural protocols:

- Do you begin organisational meetings and community forums with an Acknowledgment of the Traditional Owners?
  - Do you ask Elders from the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community to conduct a Welcome to Country to begin any ceremony to mark the opening of premises, new programs or major events and do you provide payment for the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community to perform this ceremony for your organisation?
  - If unsure about whether you are following the correct protocols do you ask for advice from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?
  - Are you aware when working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities/organisations that creating relationships and partnerships takes time?
  - Do you provide a fee-for-service when seeking cultural advice/support from Elders and Aboriginal community controlled organisations?
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## Useful links and other information

Further information on [Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Traditional Owners](#); steps to determine which is required; tips on what to say during an Acknowledgement; and tips on organising a Welcome to Country

[Map of Victorian Traditional Owners](#)

(1) [SNAICC – Cultural Protocols](#)

(2) [Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023](#).



# Career development for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff

Everyone within your organisation requires career development and performance monitoring for success.

This includes supervision, feedback and opportunities to explore new roles as well as ongoing training and study options.

Many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have not had the same opportunities as non-Aboriginal people or non-Torres Strait Islander people to study and gain formal qualifications because of the disadvantage they experienced in terms of health, education and housing, discrimination in the education system and ongoing experiences of cultural abuse and racism. Opportunities to build skills through professional development, study and secondments are important in terms of:

- Individual professional development for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff
- Ensuring effective services are delivered by these staff
- Building cultural and practice skills in your organisation.

Organisations should ensure Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff are supported throughout their study or secondments in a culturally appropriate way.

Professional development of individual Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff makes an important contribution to capacity building in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Supporting and facilitating Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff to gain qualifications and expertise across a range of areas contributes to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community capacity building and to restoring to those communities the ability to make their own decisions and deliver their own programs to their communities.<sup>1</sup>



Tips for best practice in career managing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff like all staff like to hear feedback about their performance and ongoing encouragement and acknowledgement is important in building confidence and supporting career development.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff may need support and encouragement to go to training, enter a qualification or to apply for the next level up position.
- Create an open and trusting relationship and ensure staff feel comfortable and safe to express themselves and eliminate feelings of shame.
- Do not pigeonhole Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff into identified or designated positions, even if they were recruited to one, and make it clear that there is room to move and explore different areas.
- Provide opportunities for ongoing training and study in areas that your employee has expressed interest in.

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## **Questions for managers and workplaces in supporting career development of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff:**

- Do you create professional development plans for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff?
- How are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff encouraged, supported and resourced by the organisation to access further training and gain qualifications?
- Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff provided with opportunities for experiences and skill development through secondments within the organisation?
- Does the organisation actively support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students through student placements across the organisation?
- When you ask questions of staff who leave the organisation: Are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people given the opportunity to discuss their experiences in



the organisation with a person of their choice, including an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?



## Useful links and other information

(1) Source: VACCA Building Respectful Partnerships 2010.



# Glossary of terms

A glossary of terms used throughout the toolkit

The term 'Indigenous' is not used in this toolkit as historically it was a word used to describe animals and plants and then used to include Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. When referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, you should refer to them by their language group – e.g. Yorta Yorta or Dja Dja Wurrung – or their broader geographical identity – e.g. Koori or Koorie in Victoria and NSW and Murri in Queensland.<sup>1</sup>

## Community

Community refers to and acknowledges all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria. Community can be used to describe the entire Victorian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Community or smaller specific Communities.

## Country/Land

Country and Land encompasses everything within the landscape including: landforms, water, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, medicines, minerals, stories and special places. Country also includes cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories, art and people past, present and future. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have custodial responsibility to care for their Country.

## Cultural abuse

Cultural abuse happens when abusers use aspects of a victim's cultural identity to inflict suffering, or as a means of control.<sup>2</sup> Cultural abuse can include: using racial slurs, mocking someone's accent or appearance, or not letting someone observe cultural days.

## Cultural safety

Cultural safety means “an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening”.<sup>3</sup>

## Designated position

A designated position requires a demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the Victorian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Community, society and culture. You can only fill a designated position with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicant.

## Elders

An Elder is a respected member of the Community who has gained recognition as a custodian of knowledge and lore, and who has permission to disclose knowledge and beliefs.

## Identified position

An identified position requires a demonstrated knowledge and understanding of Victorian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Community, society and culture, as well as the issues impacting on it. Identified positions require a demonstrated ability to communicate sensitively and effectively with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Communities. You can fill an identified with any applicant, though you must preference Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants.

## Lateral violence

Lateral violence is a product of historical, cultural and social dynamics that results in a spectrum of behaviours that include: gossiping, jealousy, bullying, shaming, social exclusion, family feuding, organisational conflict and physical violence. Lateral violence



can impact Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees when their Community holds them accountable for the actions of their workplace or employer. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees may work and live in the same Community and so the lateral violence extends from their work life to their personal life.

## Racism

Racism is a belief that a particular race or ethnicity is inferior or superior to others. Racism may take the form of stereotyping, name calling or insults, negative commentary in the media, speeches at public assemblies, property damage or abuse on the internet. Racism can also take the form of excluding people from accessing services (directly or indirectly), employment, education or sporting activities. Racism can occur systematically, as the result of policies, conditions and practices that affect a broad group of people.<sup>4</sup>

## Self-determination

Self-determination means Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people being able to make their own choices and live according to their own values and beliefs.

## Traditional Owners

Traditional Owners are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who hold traditional rights and interests over particular Country.

## Treaty

A treaty is an agreement between states, nations or governments. The Victorian Government is in the process of negotiating a treaty or treaties with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians. See more at [Victorian Treaty](#), which describes 'What is a Treaty':



## Useful links and other information

(1) [Creative Spirits: How to name Aboriginal people?](#)

(2) [6 Different Types of Abuse – REACH](#)

(3) Williams, R. (2008), Cultural safety; what does it mean for our work practice? Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 23(2):213-214.

(4) Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Racism: definition, research and laws.

