



Indigenous-Led Research

**Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous
Education and Research**

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INDIGENOUS-LED RESEARCH AT UTS

“For me it is Yindyamarra, a Wiradjuri concept which means to act with honour and respect, wisdom, to go slowly and act responsibly, be gentle and polite and honest with each other, be careful with the words and actions you put out to the world and understand the impact they have.”

Professor Michael McDaniel, Wiradjuri

“We need to be highlighting the need for strategic planning, ethical engagement, the centring of Indigenous-led, community-based practices that value the unique knowledges and expertise of Indigenous peoples and is underpinned by mutual respect for the cultural values and authority of Indigenous Australians.”

Professor Daryle Rigney, Ngarrindjerri

Background

UTS works hard for its sector-leading status in the Indigenous research space. Our Indigenous-led research is widely acknowledged and used. This document provides guidance for Indigenous people engaging in research and for people of other cultures working with Indigenous leaders, organisations and communities on research.

Indigenous people have been described as among the most researched people on the planet. Texts about decolonising research have existed for decades, as have ethical guidelines for research undertaken by anyone to in turn respect the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determine our futures, use our knowledges and strengthen our cultures.

Indigenous knowledge systems are known to have produced healthy physical environments, healthy people and strong connections between people and the environment, caring for Country for the benefit of future generations.

Calls for decolonisation – a process of removing, minimising and healing from processes and impacts of colonialism – frequently occur.

In decolonising universities there has been a renewed challenge to ensure that ethical guidelines are met, and that we have processes for support and accountability to make sure they are. That is, in accordance with current ethical research guidelines, that research should be 'for' Indigenous People not 'about' us. Research should further the aspirations, and address the identified needs and priorities of First Nations community in Australia. It should embrace the fundamental principle of 'self-determination'. A key way to ensure this is to undertake research that is 'Indigenous-led'.

In this context, 'Indigenous-led' means to have Indigenous people centrally involved at every stage of the research process, privileging Indigenous perspectives, methodologies, self-determination and sovereignty.

This discussion paper has been developed by the UTS Indigenous Research Committee and the Indigenous academics and Higher Research Degree (HDR) students at UTS. This paper seeks to assist in giving guidance about what 'Indigenous-led' means according to existing ethical research practice. There are two questions identified that were raised by the Indigenous Research Committee in relation to what 'Indigenous-led' means at UTS:

- The first issue is what the term means for the staff and students in relation to their engagement in research with Indigenous communities across the country.
- The second issue, relates more specifically to the relationship that UTS has with the local community on which the University sits – the Gadigal of the Eora nation.

This paper sets out to start to better understand the first question while acknowledging that a separate process and conversation needs be had to explore the second.

The UTS Policy Framework

The UTS commitment to Indigenous-led research is articulated in the Indigenous Education and Research Strategy 2019-2023:

- 3.8 Participate in Indigenous-led and community-driven research that embraces Indigenous self-determination.

And further:

- 3.8.2. Pilot, evaluate and share different approaches to community engagement. Make UTS's Indigenous-led and community driven research models exemplars of community-based research engagement.

The concept of 'Indigenous-led research also aligns with the priorities of UTS 2027. Specifically:

Transforming society through connected research

Our research will be exemplified by excellence, impact, engagement with global partners, and innovative collaborations that transcend disciplinary and professional boundaries.

We'll continue our commitment to producing high-quality, globally-respected research that makes significant economic, environmental, cultural and social impact. Our teaching and our partnerships will benefit from our responsible leadership in the creation and deployment of new technologies.

Delivering positive social change

UTS is, and always will be, an inclusive university.

This initiative will focus on ensuring our longstanding commitment to delivering positive social change through our teaching and research is strengthened. This deep and demonstrable commitment is embedded in our 2027 vision, and will result in significantly enhanced outcomes for our local, national, and global communities.

Guiding principles for Indigenous-Led research

A companion principle to 'Indigenous-led' in the Indigenous Education and Research Policy is the concept of 'self-determination.' These ideas require a proactive approach from researchers beyond the simple mantra of 'do no harm.'

The AIATISIS research ethics framework also provides useful principles. It is structured around four principles:

1. Indigenous Self-determination
2. Indigenous leadership
3. Impact and value
4. Sustainability and accountability

It includes Indigenous-led research as part of the responsibilities that accompany Indigenous leadership.

The NHMRC, Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders, sets out the following:

- 1. Responsibility:**
 - A core value in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with all having a role in caring for Country, other people and spiritual connections, including researchers
 - Ensuring researchers are accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities
 - Aiming for harmony between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, the science of research, trust of the community for research and the agreed benefits of research.
- 2. Reciprocity:**
 - Designing research so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities define how the research will benefit them
 - Benefits can be in information, opportunities or outcomes, to advance the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- 3. Respect:**
 - Self-awareness by researchers of how they impact on the research, to then try to see how their behaviour and research might impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities over time
 - Developing trust of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for the researchers, and clear, mutual agreements about the research.
- 4. Equity:**
 - Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's individual and collective knowledge, wisdom and resources
 - Using these to bring about the fair distribution of benefit from Australia's resources to achieve equity in health, legal, economic and social status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- 5. Cultural continuity:**
 - Focussing on the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is about the individual as well family and community, so, doing research that includes those perspectives
 - Doing research to understand the distinctiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture/s.
- 6. Spirit and integrity:**
 - Respecting the ongoing connection between past, present and future generations, and carrying out the other five values listed above.

These frameworks and principles need to be continuously interpreted through Indigenous leadership. There is a danger of non-Indigenous people seeking to interpret what these principles mean without considering Indigenous ways of knowing, doing and learning.

Furthermore, when research practice falls below these standards (i.e., does not align with these principles and frameworks), it not only reflects poorly on UTS but it also has repercussions for Indigenous staff, students and other UTS affiliates. Regardless of whether or not they are involved in that research, Indigenous staff and students are, by implication of their employment at UTS, often linked to and held responsible for these damaging practices by members of the aggrieved Indigenous community. To this extent, Indigenous academics at UTS bear an additional impact if UTS based research causes harm.

There is a firm belief and understanding by Indigenous staff and students from initial consultations that the social and psychological impacts needs to be understood and addressed by the academy.

In the recent paper for the Lowitja Institute, Indigenous Nation Building and the Political Determinants of Health, self-determination is defined as:

Self-determination: *communal decision-making for the future of a people, who define on their own terms the collective identity of 'the self' who is the subject of their self-determination. In international law, political self-determination is collective and grounded in group sovereignty, rather than about individual choice; and its sovereign source is people/culture/place-specific.*

Relationships with Indigenous communities

A threshold question is “what is the relationship between the researcher(s) and the Indigenous community”?

- Is it long-standing and pre-existing?
- Is it developing?
- Has it yet to be established?

Meaningful relationships require time and effort. Understanding this is critically important to framing the researcher's reflection on how much work needs to be done, and the level of engagement required, to ensure that the relationship between the community and the researchers is one of trust and that the right environment has been created to ensure that the research is Indigenous-led.

The point at which the Indigenous community is engaged is critical. It should be before the research question is defined and before a funding application is submitted. The research question should be generated from within the Indigenous community rather than externally to the community. Indigenous researchers and communities know instinctively when something is a 'tick the box' exercise and it is apparent when the research has already been framed before the community is approached.

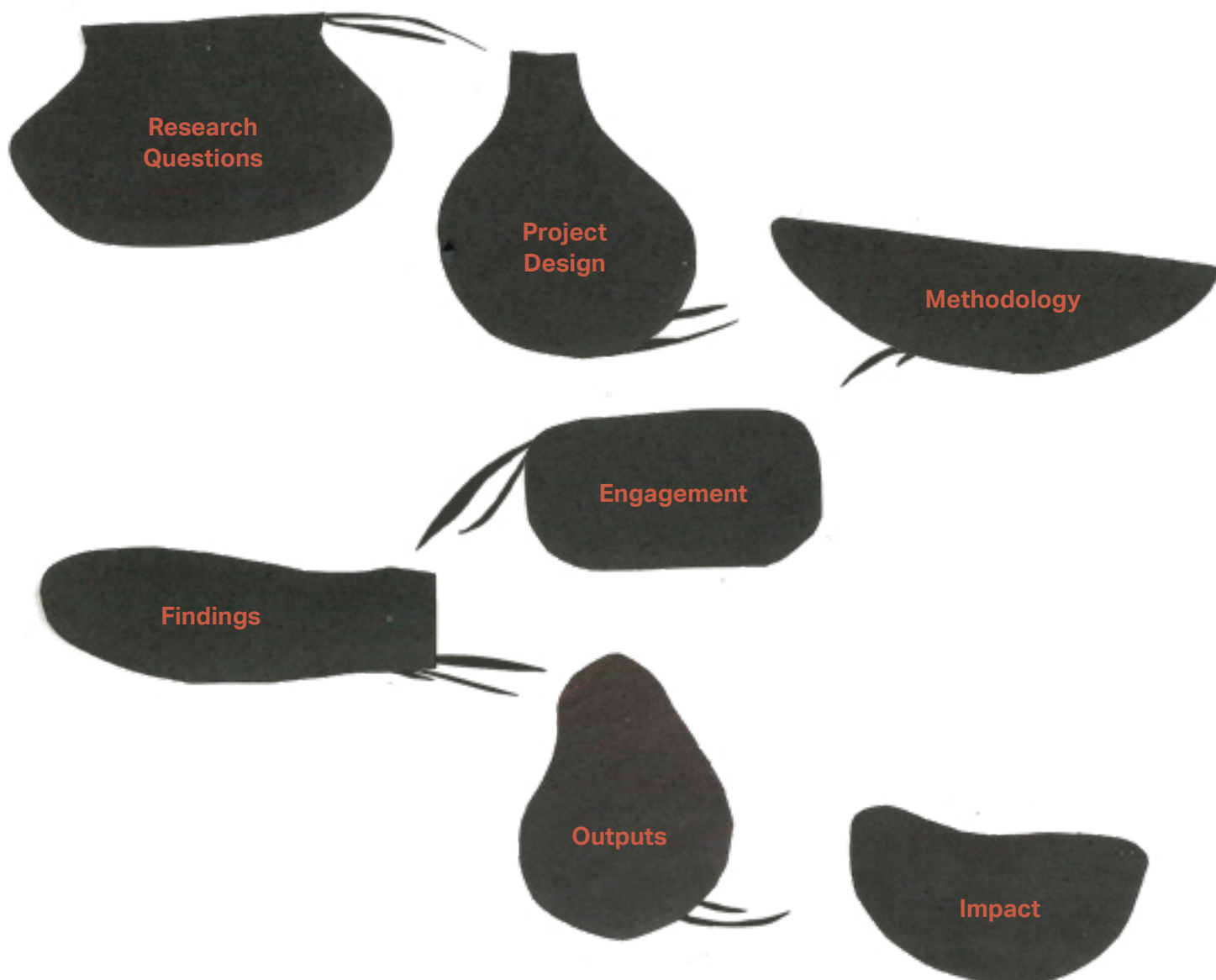


Diagram design by Sancia Ridgeway. This diagram shows woven baskets as vessels of knowledge. This paper pays homage to the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have passed on knowledge through storytelling and craft for tens of thousands of years. Weaving is often practiced in groups and creates community. Weaving circles are a place for collective knowledge to be shared from ancestors, to elders and then on to young people.

A holistic approach

The concept of 'Indigenous-led' research should inform the research process from the very beginning to the very end.

Standpoint

Professor Jason De Santolo, Garrwa and Barunggam, reminds us that the key questions we need to ask ourselves as we undertake research projects are:

- What do we stand for?
and
- Who do we stand with?

These questions help us to understand our standpoint in holistic relation to our work and research.

As Professor Daryle Rigney reminds us, a key question for the University is:

- How can UTS integrate the principle of Indigenous-led research vertically and horizontally through everything it does?

It is important that the day-to-day research processes not render the principles merely aspirational and thematic, but rather that it offers procedures and outcomes that fit and support their implementation.

Research Questions

Ideally, research questions come from Indigenous communities or are driven by building on existing work with and in Indigenous communities.

Key reflections in the process of identifying and designing research questions are:

- Have the research questions come from the researchers or from the community?
- What was the involvement of the Indigenous community or Indigenous researchers in framing the research questions?
- What is the broader context in which the research questions exist?
- Do the research questions come from a strengths-based approach?
- Does the research question reflect Indigenous standpoints and set the foundation for respectful relationships?
- Does the research question enable Indigenous people, collectives and nations to thrive and achieve their self-determined goals?
- Is the research question consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) as endorsed by Australian governments?
- Is the language of the research question reflective of Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous standpoints, and positive relational transformation?
- Is there potential for problematic unintended consequences through the research question being asked?

Project Design

- What are the processes for consultation? Are the timeframes realistic in terms of ensuring meaningful Indigenous community engagement?
- How can the research be done on country?
- How is the Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property identified and protected? Is the protection to the highest standard?
- Has the diversity of Indigenous nations been taken into account?
- Have the appropriate ethical issues been considered and the proper community and UTS ethics process complied with?
- What are the processes for early engagement and consultation emphasising the need for a relationship between sovereign entities and a clear acknowledgement of differing states of readiness
- Are the timeframes realistic in terms of ensuring meaningful Indigenous community engagement?
- How can the research be done on country?
- Is the unique Indigenous relationship with the lands, waters and all living things recognised in the project design?
- Does the project design recognise that engaging with Indigenous peoples as separate from country is often in itself a damaging act?

Methodology

- Are Indigenous methodologies understood, privileged and utilised?
- Does the methodology ensure a decolonial and sovereign approach?
- Does the methodology ensure conscious decisions are made regarding the nature and scope of Indigenous jurisdiction thereby linking political identity to self-determination and self-governance?
- Does the methodology position Indigenous communities at the heart of their affairs?

Engagement

- At what stage is the community involved in the project, noting the lifecycle of a research project?
- How is engagement facilitated?
- What are the protocols that support agreement-making and the development of formal relationships with existing and emerging local Indigenous polities?
- Is Indigenous agency and capability centred in the process of developing the research project to support self-determination and wellbeing?
- Do agreements with First Nations communities recognise Indigenous rights and responsibilities, reinforce self-determined governance structures, set the terms for a just relationship and provide the basis for commitment to long-term partnerships.
- Has the design and process for engagement been developed in collaboration with the Indigenous community?
- Have the appropriate cultural protocols been taken into account?
- How are interview questions developed and phrased?

Findings

- What processes are being used to test the research finding with the Indigenous community? What is the lens that research results are being analysed through?
- Is there an understanding of bias and preconceived assumptions by researchers?
- How is Indigenous perspective being used to lead the interpretation of the research findings?
- Is an understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal self-determination and authority incorporated in the findings?

Outputs

- How were the outputs of the project determined?
- How has co-authorship been considered and acknowledged? Does authorship attribution incorporate an understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal self-determination and authority?
- Are the outputs in forms accessible to the Indigenous community?
- How has data sovereignty² been ensured by the project?

2 Lovett, R., Lee, V., Kukutai, T., Cormack, D., Rainie, S.C. and Walker, J. 2019, 'Good data practices for Indigenous data sovereignty and governance', in A. Daly, S.K. Devitt and M. Mann (eds), *Good Data*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, pp. 26-36, viewed August <https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/tod-29-good-data/>

Outcomes and Impact

- How have the intended outcomes of the research been defined? What are meaningful outcomes from the Indigenous community's perspective?
- How is the impact measured?
- How are the Indigenous community and Indigenous participants empowered through the impact of the research?
- What steps have been taken to ensure that Indigenous people and their communities are not used to disempower First Nations people?
- Who has custodianship and stewardship of the research and its outputs beyond the life of the program?

An Example of Best Practice

Indigenous Nation Building – the Indigenous Nations and Collaborative Futures Hub at Jumbunna led by Professor Daryle Rigney undertakes sector-leading research on nation building that is led by Indigenous communities looking to build their own self-governance models. The research responds to community needs, with researchers working to a community-led agenda. The researcher's relationships with community partners have been decades long. The research has built capacity within the community and has been at the forefront of developing the best practice Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) protections in the sector².

An Example of Worst Practice

- Designing a project with no consultation and then seeking to find Indigenous people to 'tick the box'
- Employing an early career Indigenous researcher on a project as the sole Indigenous voice
- Not understanding Indigenous methodologies
- Treating Indigenous researchers and knowledge-holders as consultants or associates rather than co-researchers and co-authors.
- Putting the burden of consultation and relationship maintenance on Indigenous researchers, especially Early Career Researchers – and not acknowledging that burden.

2 <https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/our-research/jumbunna-institute-indigenous-education-and-research/our-research/indigenous-nations-and-collaborative-futures>

Next Steps

- Facilitate conversations across UTS about the concepts of 'Indigenous-led research' to increase understanding of the issues with a particular role for the Associate Deans (Indigenous) across the faculties
- Identify ways to ensure the concepts of 'Indigenous-led research' are integrated into the training of UTS researchers and supervisors. Identify mechanisms through which to ensure this training is compulsory where researchers are working with Indigenous communities
- Explore ways these concepts could be incorporated into UTS policies
- Identify processes that can be developed to ensure compliance with best practice in relation to Indigenous-led research
- A review of the UTS ethics process as a matter of good practice to ensure it is keeping fit for purpose.
- Planning for a second phase specifically tailored to the relationship that UTS has with the local community on which the University sits – beginning with the Gadigal peoples.

Final Note

Indigenous-led research will require ongoing education and training to support its implementation and longevity. Champions, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, across the University could be identified and work together to support Indigenous leadership

An Indigenous-led approach to research places an additional burden and responsibility on Indigenous scholars, community and Elders. This needs to be acknowledged and supported. For this reason, an Indigenous-led approach needs to be properly resourced and undertaken in appropriate timeframes. It also requires a strategy of training and capacity building, especially for Indigenous Early Career Researchers.

As Professor Gawaian Bodkin Andrews reminds us, our stories connect us to each other, our ancestors and our country and they also represent our responsibilities.

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