Steps for Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities





By

Professor Aunty Kerrie Doyle, Cadigal, Budjeri and Irish Woman

Artist: Rich Murphy, Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi Man

Maridulu Budyari Gumal

Working together for good health and wellbeing

1.Understand and Acknowledge Historical Context

2.Initiate Early and Respectful Contact

3.Establish Genuine and Reciprocal Partnerships

4.Embed Indigenous Governance and Oversight

5.Ensure Cultural Safety at Every Stage





















6.Clarify and Deliver Tangible Benefits

7.Practice Transparent, Ongoing Communication

8.Uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Shared Ownership

9.Embed Co-Design Throughout the Project Lifecycle

10.Continued engagement with the target community post-research work



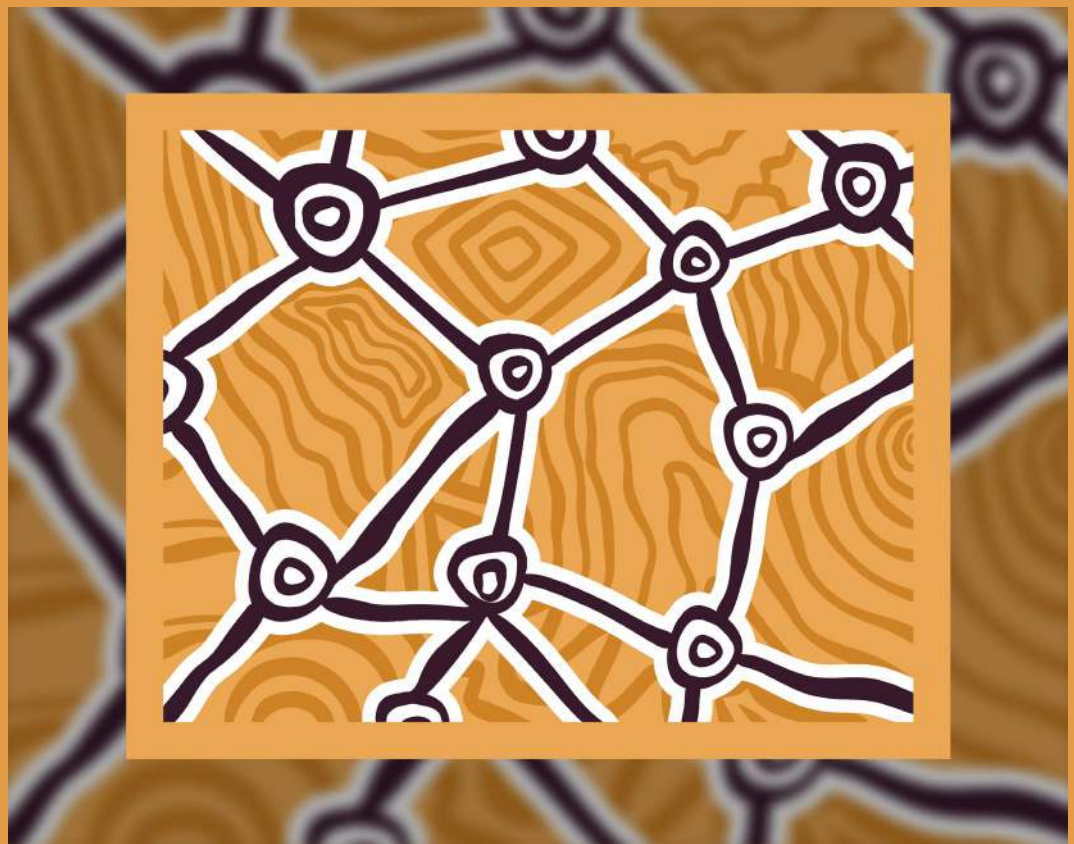
'Gulbarra' – Understand
Reflecting on the transformation from a rich, thriving cultural history to a present shaped by challenges to cultural practice — whilst also speaking to the enduring strength, resilience, and survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Key Actions
- Include cultural competence training for all staff involved in the project.
- Ensure project teams are briefed on the local history and context of the communities being engaged.
- Use the Acknowledgement of Country meaningfully in all meetings and documents.
- Engage with Aboriginal-led literature and historical records relevant to the specific community or region.

1. Understand and Acknowledge Historical Context

Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must begin with a deep understanding of Australia's colonial history and the ongoing impacts of dispossession, systemic racism, and intergenerational trauma. Recognising these lived realities forms the foundation of respectful, ethical, and culturally safe Engagement[1, 2, 3].

Researchers must reflect on their own positionality and acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have historically been over-researched and under-served. Engagement must aim to reverse this dynamic by prioritising Indigenous leadership, knowledge systems, and self-determination.



'Winhangarra' - Hear, Think, Listen
The coming together at different points in time to build understanding and strong communication, highlighting diverse communication styles and cultural contexts that may vary across time, place, and individuals — both for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and those delivering programs.

Key Actions
- Ask for guidance on who should be approached first and how
- Begin conversations with listening, not presenting a pre-formed agenda
- Make time for informal relationship-building (e.g. over shared meals, or Country)[7]

2. Initiate Early and Respectful Contact

Engagement should start at the earliest stage and be guided by the spirit of *Dadirri*[4, 5] – stillness, patience, and genuine listening without imposing agendas. This must happen before projects are finalised or submitted for funding, ensuring communities shape objectives, methodologies, and outcomes.

Initial contact should follow cultural protocols[6], reaching out through Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS), not-for-profits, Land Councils, or Elders. Wherever possible, engagement should prioritise face-to-face meetings.

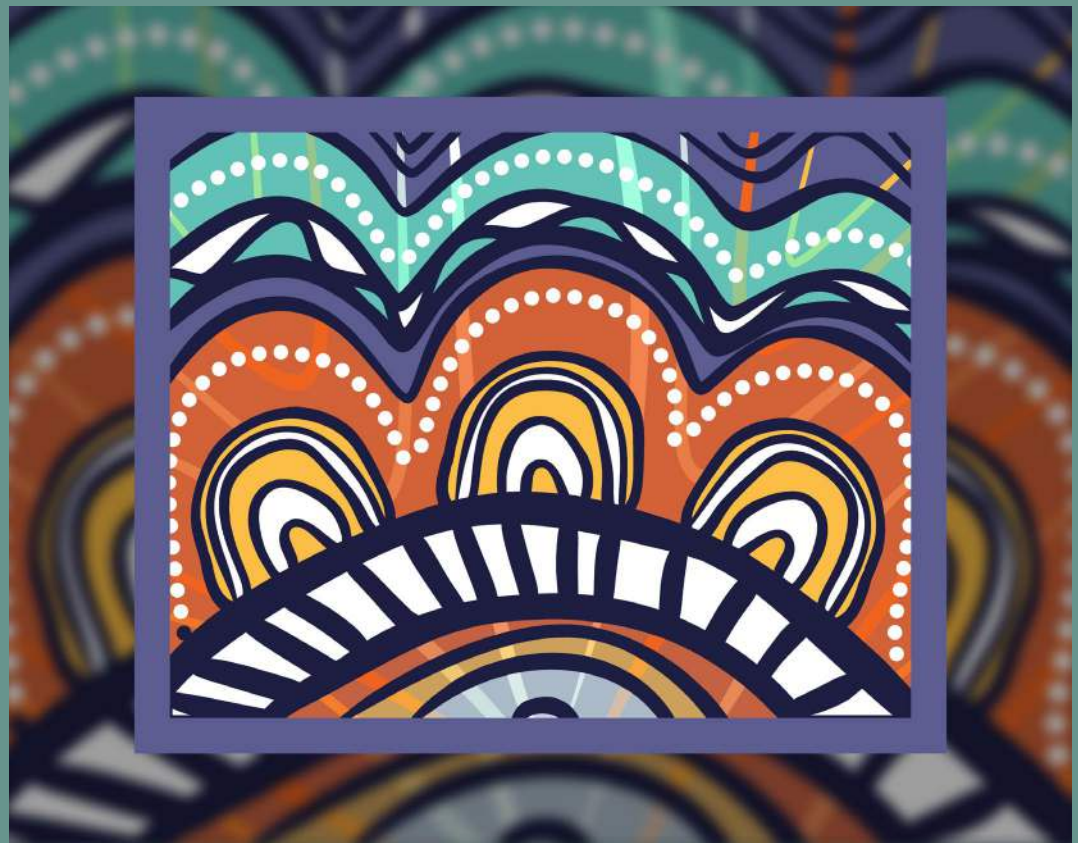


'Gibaynbirra' - Reciprocate
The imagery of hands reaching out symbolises the act of forming partnerships, while the flowing lines between groups represent the ongoing exchange and mutual respect that sustain a continuum of reciprocity.

Key Actions
- Establish a Memorandum of Understanding or Letter of Agreement outlining roles, expectations, and benefit-sharing[1, 8]
- Offer meaningful paid roles for Aboriginal researchers, Elders, and cultural consultants
- Engage in regular joint planning meetings to ensure the project remains aligned with community priorities[9]

3. Establish Genuine and Reciprocal Partnerships

Partnerships should be based on mutual respect, benefit, and trust. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations should be invited to co-lead research activities and share in governance, decision-making, and authorship. Partnerships must be transparent, equitable, and formalised.



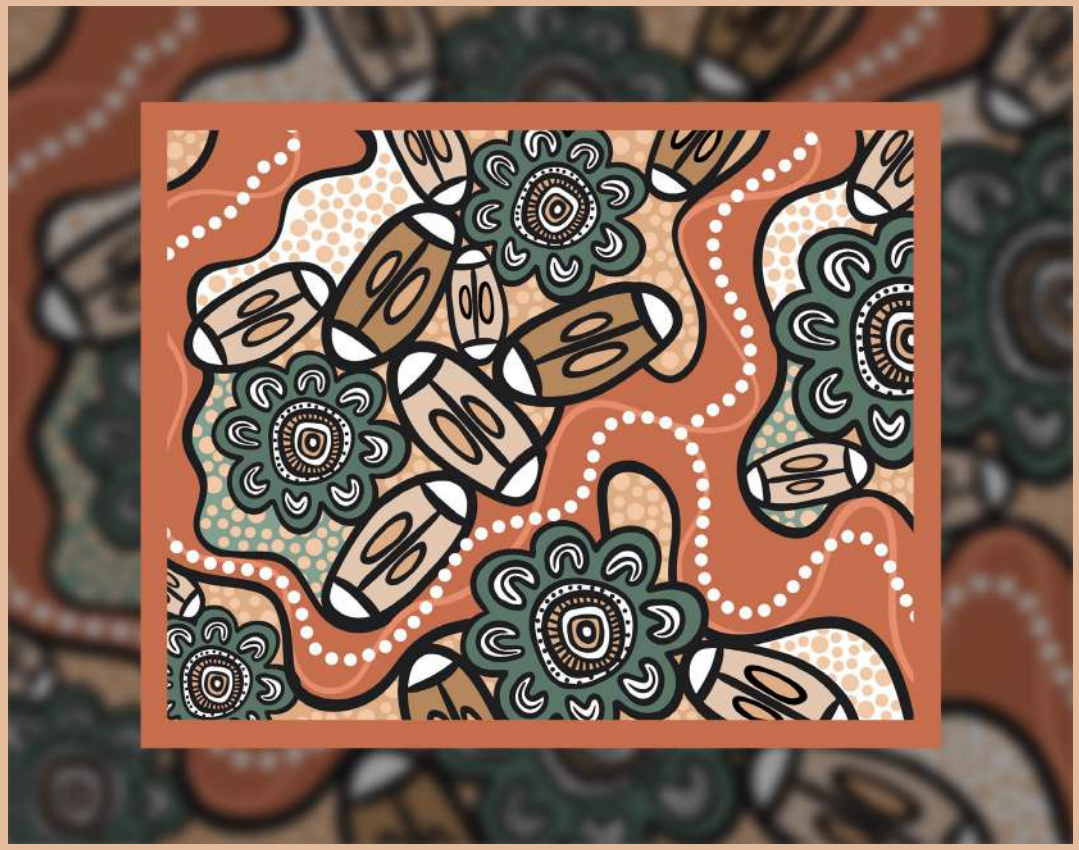
'Ngiyambildhaany' - Oversight
The importance of cultural leadership and governance in shaping programs — placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices at the centre creates culturally safe spaces and meaningful outcomes.

Key Actions

- Establish a Cultural Governance Group or Aboriginal Advisory Committee
- Ensure community members sit on project steering groups and are actively engaged throughout the life cycle of the research
- Seek approval from both institutional Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) and Aboriginal-specific HRECs (e.g. Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AH&MRC), Human Research Ethics Committee)[10]
- Where the project is part of an educational program, ethics approval may be sought through the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Human Research Ethics Committee[6]

4. Embed Indigenous Governance and Oversight

Cultural governance structures should guide every stage of the project. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must have the authority to shape research questions, methodologies, and outputs. This means establishing advisory or governance groups that have real decision-making power[8].



‘Gurwarra’ – Deliver from Danger
Shields of protection and meeting places, symbolise the commitment to fostering safe spaces for all, where people feel empowered to speak, share, and connect without judgment.

Key Actions
- Provide cultural competency training for all staff[12, 13]
- Involve Aboriginal Health Workers, Liaison Officers, or Navigators in community interactions
- Create space for feedback from community partners about how the research process feels

5. Ensure Cultural Safety at Every Stage

Cultural safety goes beyond awareness, it means creating an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel respected, listened to, and free from racism or cultural disregard. It is defined by the person or community receiving the engagement, not the person delivering it[11,12].



'Yandyibul' - All Around
Strong foundations — like mountains and rocks — symbolise the need for grounded, solid relationships. The tangible outcomes are shown as being built together, growing from that shared base, to endless horizons.

Key Actions
- Co-develop a Benefit-Sharing Plan with community partners
- Offer training, mentoring, or co-authorship to emerging Aboriginal researchers
- Share all results in plain language formats and community forums[7]

6. Clarify and Deliver Tangible Benefits

Engagement must be grounded in clear, mutual benefit. This includes health and social outcomes, capacity-building, and shared ownership of knowledge. Researchers should avoid extractive practices and ensure that the community gains lasting value from participation[8, 14, 15, 16].



'Bawamarra' - Communicate
Two large boomerangs, represent the importance of respectful back-and-forth dialogue, equity and equality, grounded in cultural safety and mutual understanding.

Key Actions
- Schedule regular yarning sessions or community updates[15]
- Avoid jargon or overly technical language
- Provide flexibility in timelines and engagement to respect cultural business, Sorry Business, and significant community events
- Use visual communication tools (e.g., diagrams, videos) to enhance understanding

7. Practice Transparent, Ongoing Communication

Successful engagement depends on two-way, transparent, and culturally respectful Communication[8]. Regular check-ins, updates, and open discussion of challenges should be built into the project timeline.



'Gawimarra' - Gather
Culturally significant collection points and the cultural safety required, with subtle undertones of songlines that reflect how ancestral knowledge continues to shape our data sovereignty practices today.

Key Actions
- Follow the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance[17]
- Clarify ownership and access arrangements in Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)
- Return data to communities in accessible formats
- Discuss and document expectations for data use in future projects, publications, or policies
- Ensure communities are involved in decisions around the long-term storage and future secondary use of data[18]

8. Uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Shared Ownership

Data collected in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be governed by principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Communities should retain control over how their data is used, stored, and shared[14, 16, 17].

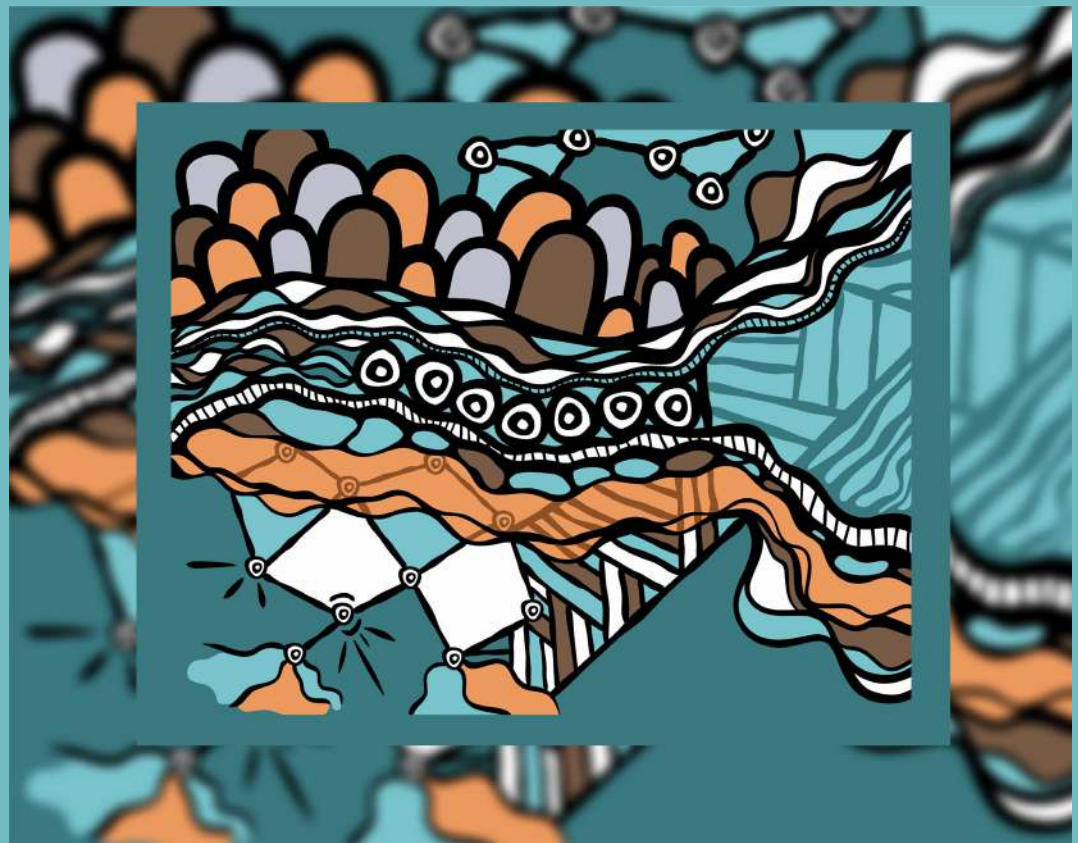


'Wilima' - Midst
Outer elements all face a shared focal point at the centre, symbolise unity in purpose. Their varied shapes and sizes represent the diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, highlighting the need to embrace and respect these differences in all stages of the process.

Key Actions
- Engage community representatives from the outset in identifying research priorities[6]
- Facilitate co-design workshops that are accessible and culturally safe[19]
- Ensure decision-making power is shared throughout the project, not just during consultation phases[19]
- Use strengths-based approaches that build on community assets and aspirations

9. Embed Co-Design Throughout the Project Lifecycle

True co-design is a collaborative process that involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in shaping all aspects of a project throughout the duration of the project, from problem definition to interpretation of findings[19]. It ensures that community voices are not just heard but centred.



'Wibiyanha' - Stay
Commitment and cultural integrity are shown by the overseers, the contributions of all participants, and the foundational work that supports open-ended opportunities and lasting connections beyond all outcomes.

Key Actions

- Return to the community to share findings in ways that are culturally appropriate, such as wisdom gathering circles ("yarn ups"), visual summaries, or community gatherings[7,8]
- Provide community partners with access to reports, publications, and other outputs in clear and accessible formats
- Ask how the findings might be useful and invite input on any future directions, follow-up research, or actions[14]
- Keep the relationship going through regular check-ins, involvement in future projects, or participation in community events
- Work together to reflect on and evaluate what the project achieved and what it meant for the community

10. Continued Engagement with the Target Community Post-Research Work

Ethical engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities does not stop when the research ends. Once data collection is complete, it is important to stay connected, share the outcomes, and continue building the relationship[6].

Too often, research projects conclude without closing the loop with the community. This can leave people feeling that their contributions were not valued or that the research served no clear purpose. Staying engaged after the project finishes shows respect, builds trust, and supports long-term partnerships. It also helps ensure that the research delivers meaningful outcomes for the community.

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