



Department of
Education

GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Guidelines for Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country





Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and respect the Traditional Custodians of the lands, seas, skies and waterways where we are privileged to live and work.

We acknowledge Elders past and present, who generously share their knowledge and wisdom and continue to nurture Country, share culture, and strengthen communities.

We acknowledge the strengths and cultural identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and strive to build a culturally responsive public education system that supports them as they walk in the footsteps of their ancestors.

We acknowledge and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we connect with; we commit to building a brighter future together, enriched by their oral histories, stories, lived experiences and living cultures.

TRIM Ref: D24/0814443

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Department of Education
151 Royal Street
East Perth WA 6004
9264 4111
education.wa.edu.au

Images: Tourism Western Australia

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on request in appropriate
alternative formats.





Incorporating Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country into meetings, gatherings and events shows respect by upholding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols.¹

These guidelines are designed to encourage and assist staff and students to use culturally responsive approaches when doing an Acknowledgement of Country or organising a Welcome to Country in schools, workplaces and at events conducted by the Department of Education.

Incorporating these practices:

- strengthens connection to Country and caring for Country
- encourages recognition and respect of Aboriginal people, their cultures, languages and histories
- helps to build respectful and strong partnerships with Aboriginal people and communities and create the conditions for cultural safety in our schools and workplaces
- demonstrates a commitment to creating a culturally responsive public education system.

¹ Reconciliation Australia. (n.d.). Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country>

Welcome to Country

What is a Welcome to Country?

A Welcome to Country is performed by Aboriginal people to welcome visitors to their traditional lands.

Welcome to Country has been part of Aboriginal cultures for tens of thousands of years.

Traditionally, crossing into another group's Country required a process of seeking permission. Rituals were performed by the owner group as a means of granting permission, which may have taken several hours or days and involve a range of ceremonies. As part of these ceremonies, the hosting group would offer visitors safe passage and spiritual protection during their journey. Visitors were in turn required to follow the protocols set out by the owner group. Today, while these protocols have been adapted to contemporary circumstances, the practice of welcoming visitors to Country and offering safe passage remains in place.²

This cultural protocol:

- is performed by Elders and Traditional Custodians to formally welcome people to Country
- is unique to Aboriginal language groups, communities and the individuals performing them
- may be delivered in Aboriginal languages and/or English.

Who can perform a Welcome to Country?

- A Welcome to Country is performed by a representative of the local Aboriginal community who has traditional links to a place, area or region.³ This will usually be an Elder, or, where agreed, a Traditional Custodian. Protocols that determine whether a Traditional Custodian can deliver a Welcome to Country will vary from community to community
- In some areas, there may be two or more language groups who have a connection to Country on which the event is being held. It is important to engage and consult with all relevant groups
- Thought should also be given to the gender of Elders or Traditional Custodians when delivering a Welcome to Country for gendered events, for example, female engagement programs.

When is a Welcome to Country appropriate?

Seek advice from Aboriginal staff or local Aboriginal Elders, Traditional Custodians, community members and other networks.

Engaging an Elder and/or Traditional Custodian to perform a Welcome to Country is a sign of respect. A Welcome to Country should be incorporated into the opening of major internal and public events. Examples include:

- conferences or large professional development workshops
- highly publicised events
- significant policy, report, or project launches
- cross-agency functions
- opening of new schools or workplaces
- significant events, such as National Sorry Day, NAIDOC Week and ANZAC Day.

2 Reconciliation Australia. (n.d.). Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country.

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country>

3 South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council. (n.d.). Noongar protocols: Welcome to Country.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cf9e6c3b20aca0001f1296f/t/5d64e4d05b2c7d0001bdfb77/1566911825198/Noongar+Protocols.pdf>





Organising a Welcome to Country

There are approximately 90 Aboriginal language groups in Western Australia.^{4,5} Therefore, the first step in arranging a Welcome to Country is to identify the language groups of the area, as well as local Elders or Traditional Custodians who can perform this cultural protocol.

Seek advice from more than one source when identifying local Elders and Traditional Custodians, including:

- Aboriginal staff
- local Aboriginal advisory groups
- local community members
- Native Title representative bodies
- local Aboriginal land and sea councils
- local Aboriginal organisations.

Elders and Traditional Custodians may ask children and young people to participate in a Welcome to Country. However, is not appropriate for schools or other Department workplaces to request that students perform a Welcome to Country.

One of the significant negative impacts of colonisation is that many Aboriginal people were displaced from Country, and many people have since established historical connections in other areas. It is important to be aware of, and culturally responsive to, these impacts and seek advice and direction from Elders, Traditional Custodians and Aboriginal community members.

Prior to the event

When planning an event, it is important that a Welcome to Country is considered during the initial planning stages. Adequate notice must be provided when engaging an Elder or Traditional Custodian.

Event organisers must ensure time is allocated to develop relationships, as engagement with Elders and Traditional Custodians should be focused on building relationships and not merely a transactional exercise. Conversations prior to the event should include matters such as:

- background about the school or business area requesting the service
- the event details and context, including the audience, purpose, and key themes
- time allocated to the Welcome to Country
- whether they take part in the rest of the event
- permission to video or photograph the Welcome to Country and, if permitted, outline with whom and how images will be shared
- payment and other practical arrangements, such as support with transport to and from the event if required.

Communicate with Elders or Traditional Custodians about services they can provide, as well as any requirements they might have.

4 Gambay First Languages Map. (n.d.). Map of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. <https://gambay.com.au/>

5 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). (n.d.). Map of Indigenous Australia. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>





Payment

Elders and Traditional Custodians must be appropriately remunerated for the services they provide, and payment is to be monetary.

- A person performing a Welcome to Country is sharing their intellectual and cultural property, as well as their time, therefore a fee for service applies
- The fee may vary depending on whether a cultural performance (such as a song, story, dance, or smoking ceremony) is included as part of the ceremony
- Fees should also consider travel to and from the event and the public profile of the event
- Prior to engaging the service, you must obtain a quote which includes the provider's ABN and preferred payment method (credit card or bank transfer).

During the event

A Welcome to Country is usually the first item on an event program. It is important that the Elder or Traditional Custodian that you have engaged is made to feel welcome and that they are briefed about the proceedings. On the day, ensure that:

- a staff member is allocated as chaperone of the Elder or Traditional Custodian, both upon their arrival and throughout the event
- the Elder or Traditional Custodian is made aware of the starting time, location and who will be introducing them
- titles and/or names are noted correctly
- a short message of appreciation is given after the Elder or Traditional Custodian has performed the Welcome to Country.

After the event

- A 'thank you' is respectful and appropriate after engaging someone to perform a Welcome to Country. This may include a gift or a formal letter of appreciation.
- Follow-up to ensure payment has been made.
- Continue to engage with Elders/Traditional Custodians/families to build relationships.



Acknowledgement of Country

What is an Acknowledgement of Country?

An Acknowledgement of Country is given at the beginning of meetings, gatherings, and events to recognise Aboriginal custodianship of Country.

An Acknowledgement of Country is a sign of respect and acknowledges that you are on Aboriginal Country.

It is a way for all people to demonstrate understanding of and respect for Aboriginal cultures and heritage, and the ongoing connection and relationship Elders, Traditional Custodians, and Aboriginal people have with their lands, seas, skies and waterways, and their cultures.

Caring for Country has occurred for more than 65,000 years, it is an opportunity to connect with and respect the land.

When to deliver an Acknowledgement of Country?

An Acknowledgement of Country forms part of your school's or business area's culturally responsive approach to your work.

An Acknowledgement of Country is appropriate for smaller local and less formal events, that may include:

- staff meetings
- school meetings
- school assemblies
- cross-agency meetings
- workshops and forums

Who can deliver an Acknowledgement of Country?

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can deliver an Acknowledgement of Country.

All staff are encouraged to deliver an Acknowledgement of Country.

An Acknowledgement of Country should be heartfelt, meaningful, and individualised.

Culturally responsive process for providing an Acknowledgement of Country

A culturally responsive approach to acknowledging Country is a commitment to demonstrating respect for and understanding of the experiences, histories, and cultures of Aboriginal people.

The first step is to identify the Country on which the event is being held and the relevant language group/s.

For an Acknowledgement of Country to be culturally responsive, staff are encouraged to:

- spend time reflecting on the purpose of doing the Acknowledgement of Country
- connect to the acknowledgement by learning about the local area (eg: language groups, history, sites of significance, seasons) and physically immerse yourself in the Country/environment you are on
- speak with Aboriginal students, families, communities, and colleagues
- make it your own, ensuring the language is meaningful and shares your learning with others.

It is respectful for staff to seek permission to incorporate Aboriginal languages into the delivery of an Acknowledgement of Country in the presence of Aboriginal Elders, Traditional Custodians and Aboriginal people.

If using the local Aboriginal language, it is helpful to seek advice from endorsed Aboriginal language speakers on the orthography, words, sounds, pronunciation and to practise prior to the event. Advice and guidance should be sought from Aboriginal language teachers, Aboriginal and Islander education officers and local Aboriginal language centres.



During the event

An Acknowledgement of Country is usually the first item of an event.

Although there is no template for doing an Acknowledgement of Country, it is important to:

- acknowledge the Country on which the event is being held
- pay respect to the Traditional Custodians [name Traditional Custodians/ language group(s)] and Elders past and present [name Elders present at the event if known] and their enduring connection to lands, seas, skies, and waterways
- acknowledge Aboriginal people present at the event
- personally reflect on and connect to the place and space.

Culturally responsive Acknowledgement of Country for written documents

Schools, workplaces, and programs may also consider displaying a written Acknowledgement of Country. This may include a plaque, newsletter, or annual report.

Email signatures

It is appropriate to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which the school or business area is located on email signature blocks. This should form part of broader culturally responsive practice within the school or business area.

A culturally responsive written acknowledgement involves learning about the lands you are working on and connecting with the local place and space. Staff may seek advice and guidance from Aboriginal language teachers, Aboriginal and Islander education officers and local Aboriginal language centres to incorporate local Aboriginal languages into the acknowledgement.

Staff and students are encouraged to write an acknowledgement in their own words.

Online events

A Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country is appropriate for online meetings and professional learning. It is a demonstration of culturally responsive practice and assists in creating a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal participants.

The facilitator of the event would acknowledge the Country they are on and extend the acknowledgement to the lands and waters on which the other participants are located and pay respect to Elders past and present. If Countries and places that participants are engaging from are known, these should be specified in the acknowledgement.

An Elder would perform a Welcome to Country from the Country they are on.





Glossary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups

Australia is made up of many different and distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, each with their own culture, customs, language, and protocols. They are the world's oldest surviving cultures that continue to be expressed in dynamic and contemporary ways.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Map of Indigenous Australia attempts to represent the nations, or language or social groups of Aboriginal Australia.⁶

Community

Community is about interrelatedness and belonging and is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Important elements of community are Country, culture, family connection and shared experience. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may belong to more than one community.⁷

Country

The concept of Country is multi-dimensional and includes land, seas, waterways and skies, people, animals, and plants, and has a past, present, and future.⁸

Country is grounded through intimate and interconnected relationships built on respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. These relationships are understood through the concepts of Country, kinship, culture and connectedness.⁹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodianship of Country in Australia is reflected through deep spiritual and interwoven connection to the lands, seas, skies, and waterways.

Cultural responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness is the ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively and sensitively with people from a cultural background that is different to one's own, and demonstrating this ability with proficiency. It is characterised by respect for culture, ongoing self-reflection, expansion of knowledge and commitment to improving practices and relationships.

It is about building mutually respectful, solid relationships with the local community; valuing the strengths of the local Aboriginal community; and working collaboratively with the local community to set the directions and priorities for Aboriginal students in the school.

It is about being responsive to the diverse needs, backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge of Aboriginal students; and being able to use these as a basis to facilitate learning opportunities.¹⁰

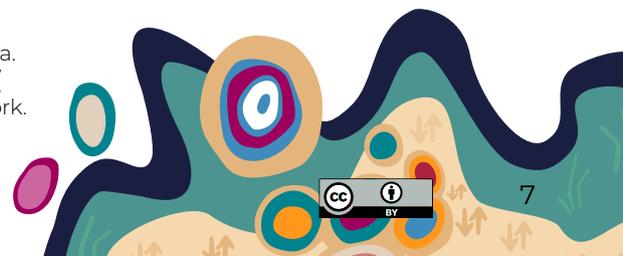
6 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). (n.d.). Map of Indigenous Australia. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>

7 Board of Studies NSW. (2008). Working with Aboriginal communities: A guide to community consultation and protocols (Revised ed.).

8 Dudgeon, P., Bray, A., Smallwood, G., Walker, R., & Dalton, T. (2020). Wellbeing and healing through connection and culture. Lifeline Australia.

9 Kennedy, J. (2018). Welcome to Country [TED Talk]. <https://www.ted.com/>

10 Department of Education. (2015). Aboriginal cultural standards framework. <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/dl/jjgzned>



Cultural safety

Cultural safety is an experience determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when they are in situations where their presence is welcomed and respected, their experiences are believed and validated, their cultures are centred and valued, their knowledges and skills are recognised and supported, their advice is listened to and acted upon, and they do not experience racism in any form.¹¹

A culturally safe environment is culturally, psychologically, spiritually, physically, and emotionally safe for Aboriginal people with shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening.¹²

Elders

Recognised and respected members of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities. Elders are custodians of knowledge and cultural practices and can pass on this knowledge. Elders can provide advice and guidance to community members. Age alone does not necessarily define who is an Elder.

Recognising Elders can be a complex process and is unique to each community. Elders are chosen and accepted by their own communities.¹³

Traditional Custodians

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are descendants of the original occupants of an area. They have continuing connections to lands, seas, skies, waterways, and communities through these ancestral connections.

11 Gollan, S. & Stacey, K. (2021). Australian Evaluation Society First Nations Cultural Safety Framework. Australian Evaluation Society, Melbourne

12 Dudgeon, P., Bray, A., Smallwood, G., Walker, R., & Dalton, T. (2020). Wellbeing and healing through connection and culture. Lifeline Australia.

13 Board of Studies NSW. (2008). Working with Aboriginal communities: A guide to community consultation and protocols (Revised ed.).





Artist: Buffie Punch

Noongar Yorga - Aboriginal Women of the Noongar Nation. My family connections are from Gnowangerup. A small town in Western Australia. I was raised in Perth and consider Perth my home. I love spending time with those that I love and have a strong bond with my family. Much of my work is greatly influenced by family, cultural connections, my spirituality and relationships. I can express myself whole heartedly through my artwork. I believe art is one of the greatest tools to help with any mental and emotional issues. I have always loved painting, drawing and experimenting in a variety of art mediums. I am especially drawn to the challenge of conveying to others, through art, how I am influenced by my spirituality, my culture and my life experiences. I use art as a platform for storytelling. We all have a story to tell and art is one of the most creative forms to share our stories

Artwork story

This artwork showcases the importance of education, learning and cultural safety. The Yarning circles represent the Cultural responsiveness Hub and resources, different departments, schools and community. People coming together to share cultural knowledge and wisdom. The lines found throughout the artwork represent the pathways for further education, lifelong learning, understanding and leadership. The lines also represent the interconnectedness of the work developed by the Cultural responsiveness Hub and the wider community and is shown to connect and join the different yarning circles. Sharing of information and knowledge to incorporate cultural safety for all. The colours of the artwork represent connection to Country, hopefulness and optimism.

