

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Ethics Framework

Background

Ethical concepts in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research are broader than the conventional principles that apply to ethics in research¹. Literature relating to ethical concepts in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research have identified the need to place careful thought and consideration into the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, community controlled organisations and community-based service delivery.¹ There is also a need to understand concepts including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, intellectual property, cultural safety, life structure and integrity in research¹.

Foreword

The Western Sydney University Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Ethics Framework is constructed as a guide to assist researchers with embedding ethical principles into planning, developing and conducting culturally appropriate research in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

The framework focuses on key ethical principles that researchers need to consider when developing a research proposal involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People as research participants, or as researchers. The framework provides a brief overview outlining key points for consideration. It does not attempt to provide a holistic representation, covering everything that a researcher needs to be aware of, to conduct ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. It is therefore essential that researchers frequently refer to and engage with the key readings and resource list provided in this document. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research can take considerable time as it is key that researchers develop long term meaningful relationships with communities they want to engage with. Therefore, researchers must be mindful of this requirement and ensure they meet the ethical goal of reciprocity.

Researchers must understand the historical, cultural and social influences that underpin the consent, or lack thereof, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People towards research. It is critical for researchers to familiarise themselves with the supporting Guidelines and Codes that define the ethical principles around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and assist with integrating 'integrity' and 'engagement' into research. The ethical principles outlined in the Guidelines/Codes include: reciprocity, authorship, consent, engagement, governance and self-determination² (*Please see 'resources' page 3*).

Designing ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Researchers must think about how they can establish 'integrity' in their research. Integrity in research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People includes thinking about a

¹ Terry Dunbar, M. S. (2006). "Ethics in Indigenous Research – Connecting with Community." *Journal of Bioethics Inquiry* 3: 179-185.

² Developed from the AIATSIS framework of Responsibilities involved in Indigenous Research.

variety of elements including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, impact and value; sustainability and accountability; and self-determination.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is the development of research that is perceived as a need (by communities) and will have a positive impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.²⁻⁵ Engagement through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is an essential component of research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Researchers can establish leadership by:

- Developing research that is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples;
- Listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives;
- Encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation;
- Consulting, negotiating and seeking agreement to the research proposal with the local community; and
- Respecting and acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and data.

Impact and Value

Researchers should ensure that their research is impactful and brings value to the communities that they work with. When conducting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander related research, it is essential that researchers pay particular attention to:

- The benefits and reciprocity of the research to the community (please refer to the [AIATSIS Guidelines](#) for more information);
- The foreseeable impact that their research will have on the community; and
- The possible risks involved in the research.

Sustainability and accountability

Sustainability involves the consideration of possible pathways whereby the research can foster ongoing local support. Examples of sustainability include recruiting members of the local community as a part of the research team or educating and training people within the community to have the skills needed to continue a service that was provided by the research.

Accountability of the research involves (in consultation with the local community) a network of people or pathways for reporting, monitoring and evaluating the research.

When considering elements of sustainability and accountability researchers should think about:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands and waters;
- Ongoing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Governance;
- Management, archiving and re-use of data; and
- Reporting and compliance (*please refer to attachment 1*).

Self-Determination

Self-determination is defined as the freedom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples “to live well and live according to their values”.³

The act of self-determination involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People:

1. Having a choice in determining the development paths and how their lives are governed;
2. Participating in decisions that affect their lives;
3. Having control over their lives and future including economic, social and cultural development; and
4. Having the means by which every person might achieve their full potential.³

In the planning stages of the research, researchers should identify what features of the project can help foster Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. Some key areas of focus include:

- Recognition and respect for the community, their property, their needs and their availability;
- The logistics behind obtaining culturally appropriate consent; and
- The community's cultural capability and learning.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence involves the researcher developing an understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that are to be involved in the research.⁴

Researchers should ensure that they undergo cultural competence training. This includes gaining an understanding of the history, structure and functioning of the community. Cultural competency also includes an understanding of different research methodologies that are more appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. I.e. Yarning' may be a more acceptable research methodology as it "is less intimidating and intrusive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and is far more appropriate"⁵. It "reflects a formal process of sharing knowledge that is reliant upon relationships, expected outcomes, responsibility and accountability between the participants, country and culture."³

Key readings

Another aspect of Cultural Competence involves reference to and understanding the work of, expert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors across the higher education sector. Their work has established foundational Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research concepts and has significantly influenced our knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. These include:

Western Sydney University academics

- [Prof Michelle Trudgett](#)

External academics

- [Prof Larrisa Behrendt](#)
- [Prof Dawn Bessarab](#)
- [Prof Gawaian Bodkin-Andrews](#)
- [Prof Pat Dudgeon](#)

³ National Health and Medical Research Council (2018). Keeping research on track II: A companion document to Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders.

⁴ The Department of Health (2019). Cultural Respect Framework 2016-2026.

⁵ Elizabeth Jackson-Barrett, A. P., Norman Stomoski and Bruce F. Walker, (2015). "Grounded in Country: Perspectives on working within, alongside and for Aboriginal Communities." *Issues in Educational Research* **25**(1).

- [Prof Bronwyn Fredericks](#)
- [Prof Lester Irabinna Rigney](#)
- [Prof Karen Martin](#)
- [Prof John Maynard](#)
- [Prof Martin Nakata](#)
- [Prof Susan Page](#)
- [Prof Maggie Walter](#)

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Projects

For more information about ethics approval to conduct research with or about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People please contact the Western Sydney University [Human Ethics Officers](#).

There are a number of HRECs which specialise in the review of research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research participants, for example, the [AIATSIS Human Research Ethics Committee](#).

- Researchers intending to work in this field should consult the websites of those committees to determine applicability to their research project.
- For a full list of HRECs see:
- <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/attachments/registered-hreecs.pdf>
- In particular, research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' health issues will usually require ethics approval from a designated Aboriginal Health HREC, for example, the [Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council Ethics Committee of NSW](#). Which HREC(s) is determined by the State or Territory the potential participants live in.
- In addition, some research will also require ethics review by the Western Sydney University HREC and some health research will require ethics review by a Local Health District HREC.
- There are also a number of ethics guidelines concentrating on the ethics considerations of research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples such as [Ethical Guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders 2018](#) and [Keeping research on track II 2018](#).

Resources

[The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2018](#)

[The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007 \[updated 2018\]](#)

[Ethical Guidelines for research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders 2018](#)

[Keeping research on track II 2018](#)

[Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies](#)

[AH&MRC Guidelines for Research into Aboriginal Health Key Principles](#)

Attachment 1: AIATSIS framework for Responsibilities involved in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research

