Philanthropy, Our Way

Growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities

Co-authored by the University of Newcastle and Noble Ambition

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Citation: University of Newcastle and Noble Ambition (2026), *Philanthropy, Our Way: Growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities*, University of Newcastle and Noble Ambition, https://www.newcastle.edu.au/philanthropy-our-way

Contents

“We’ve been doing philanthropy forever; we just don’t call it that. It was always about how do we give back to community and how do we reinvest back in our people?”

– Michelle Steele, Chief First Nations Officer, Paul Ramsay Foundation

Acknowledgement of Country

Country is the land, water, sky and all the living things that occupy those spaces. It also refers to the spiritual connections that exist between all of those things. For us, Country is our mother. We are Country. It is inseparable from our spirit and the spirit of our ancestors. We acknowledge Country to pay respect – to the wisdom of our Elders past and present.

The University of Newcastle acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which our students and staff live, have come from and are educated on.

Noble Ambition acknowledge and pay respects to the traditional custodians of the lands where we work: the Cammeraygal and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation; the Turrbal and Jagera people of Meanjin, and the Kombumerri people of the Yugambeh region; and acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands of all contributors to and readers of this paper.

Foreword

Professor Kelvin Kong AM
MBBS BSc MD OHNS FRACS
School of Medicine and Public Health, the University of Newcastle
First Aboriginal fellow of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)

As a proud Worimi man, my connection to this land and its stories is the core of who I am. It is from this place of strength, culture, and responsibility that I engage into the spaces of philanthropy and higher education.

For too long, I have witnessed a disconnect. The well-intentioned world of institutional investment and philanthropy often operates through a lens that is foreign to our ways of knowing, being, and decision-making. It can feel transactional, where funding is given with strings attached, often muffling the very voices it seeks to uplift. This is not a path to true equity. True equity requires a fundamental shift – from giving to us, to investing with us. It requires moving beyond symbolic gestures to co-create structures that genuinely amplify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, stewardship, and agency.

This is more than a policy adjustment; it is a critical call to action. We must collectively interrogate and reimagine philanthropy not as a tool of charity, but as a powerful mechanism for self-determination. It is about ensuring that our communities are not merely consultants in someone else's project, but the leaders and architects of initiatives that directly shape our own futures. This means embedding Indigenous governance at the heart of these partnerships, fostering relationships built on genuine reciprocity and deep respect, and prioritising accountability to community above all else.

My vision is one of walking hand in hand. It is about inciting real conversations, forging authentic friendships, and fundamentally changing the narrative around investment so that we are walking together toward a shared horizon. By doing so, we can cultivate a model of philanthropy that is truly culturally sustaining, transformative, and finally aligned with the aspirations of the world's oldest living cultures. This is how we honour the past and build a legacy of empowerment for generations to come.

Professor Kelvin Kong
(Worimi)

Foreword

Loren Collyer
Interim Pro Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Leadership
and Head of The Wollotuka Institute

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have practised forms of philanthropy for over 65,000 years, our cultural principles being grounded in reciprocity, stewardship, and collective care. In Aboriginal cultures, giving isn't a separate 'charitable sector'; caring for others, sharing resources and providing for future generations are beliefs that are embedded in how our societies operate. Wealth is measured in relationships, not possessions.

There is much to be learnt from these cultural understandings, and it is this which we seek to demonstrate in this paper: the opportunity for philanthropic investment to operate – not simply as an act of giving, but as a commitment to equity, justice, and long-term partnership. When funders invest in Indigenous-led higher education initiatives, they are supporting more than access to learning – they are enabling communities to lead their own futures, define success on their own terms, and generate solutions with far-reaching social and economic impact.

As a proud Bandjin woman, and first in family to see the benefits of higher education qualifications, it has been a privilege to sit and yarn with people speaking honestly and frankly about what they have learned over many years working with community, in universities and different parts of philanthropy. Your generosity in helping us shape the reflections in this paper – and suggesting ways we can improve – is deeply appreciated.

In reading this paper, I encourage you to be open. To truly reflect on what it means to pass on benefits to the next generation. To consider new approaches. To see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education as the game-changer it can be for communities when it is grounded in culture.

It is a privilege to share in the oldest living culture on the planet. By elevating the value of our knowledges, and all that is wonderful about our people, cultures and communities, we can work together to achieve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and for all Australians.

Loren Collyer
(Bandjin)

Message from the Vice Chancellor

Professor Alex Zelinsky AO
BMathSc(Hons), PhD, Hon DSc(UOW), GradDip(AICD), FAA, FTSE, FIEEE, Hon FIEAust, FAICD

Higher education has the power to transform lives. At the University of Newcastle, this understanding has guided our mission for 60 years. We are committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and proud to be a sector leader in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, employment, and research. This opportunity is made possible through our deep relationships with community and our unwavering commitment to equity and engagement.

Our University has the highest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students of any university in the country and a strong track record of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership across governance, teaching, and research. This success is grounded in the leadership of the Wollotuka Institute, which since 1983 has built a national reputation for excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, drawing strength from culture, communities and past journeys. Guided by deep listening, we've developed initiatives such as our Cultural Capability Framework, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research Framework, and Reconciliation Action Plan as part of our determination to create culturally safe environments where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems are valued and celebrated.

While our initiatives reflect of our commitment – we know there is more to do.

True equity requires more than access; it depends on structures that elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and leadership at every level. This paper is an important step in that journey. It challenges us to reimagine philanthropy as a tool for self-determination – where communities define priorities, lead decision-making, and share in the benefits of transformational change.

As we look to the future, our vision is clear: to be a university that not only educates but deeply cultivates relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to better shape solutions, drive innovation, and create intergenerational impact. By working together, we can shape a future for the next generation where higher education becomes a force for equity, excellence and opportunity.

Professor Alex Zelinsky

Message to philanthropy

Melissa Smith
CEO & Founder, Noble Ambition

Philanthropy plays a vital role in our communities, meeting both urgent needs and funding ideas, advocacy and systems change that move us forward as a nation. Philanthropy also has a responsibility to navigate power and privilege, to support culturally responsive, positive impact within communities.

In 2023, Australian philanthropy was invited to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities during the Referendum Campaign on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. While the outcome was not what many had hoped for, the Yes campaign demonstrated a scale of philanthropic support not previously seen in Australia.

For many philanthropists, this was an opportunity to demonstrate allyship and to learn how philanthropy can engage more effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to support a more equitable, thriving Australia.

Higher education offers amongst the most significant opportunities for positive change for individuals, communities and the country. At the same time, higher education philanthropy is amongst the most significant areas of Australian philanthropic investment. Indigenous-led higher education philanthropy offers uniquely transformative opportunities, so long as it is culturally responsive and impactful for the communities it serves.

So how can we grow Indigenous-led higher education philanthropy? How can we make sure it is culturally responsive, and impactful for communities?

These are conversations many grapple with, often quietly, separately. This paper seeks to bring them into the open, and in doing so, encourage more reflection, more listening and more learning as a collective.

To our contributors, thank you for generously sharing your knowledge and experiences. To our readers, thank you for taking this important conversation forward.

Melissa Smith

About the authors

The University of Newcastle

The University of Newcastle is proud to be a university of and for our regions, deeply embedded in place and purpose. We lead the sector in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments and staff employment, and are nationally recognised for our role in advancing reconciliation, receiving a Cygnet Award in 2023 for Indigenous Cultural Competency. Our commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, research and engagement is not just a strategic priority – it's part of who we are.

Our approach to this paper reflects the way we undertake all aspects of our work. Whether conducting research, delivering an exceptional student experience, or engaging with our communities, it is always in partnership, in consultation, and with community at the centre. We are guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance, and we believe that the same values must shape how we engage with philanthropy. This paper is our way of starting a conversation with the sector about how we can ensure that philanthropy is grounded in culture, led by community, and designed for lasting impact.

We have a proud history as innovators in enhancing educational and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Our work is underpinned by enduring, respectful partnerships with local communities and an unwavering commitment to building on these foundations.

Through the Wollotuka Institute, meaning "eating and meeting place" in Awabakal language – we've built over a 40-year legacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led education and research. Wollotuka is now internationally recognised as a centre of excellence, shaping culturally responsive practice and empowering Indigenous leadership across higher education.

This paper is the next step in our journey. It's a call to action and an invitation to walk with us – to reimagine philanthropy not as a transaction, but as a relationship. One that honours culture, centres community, and creates space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to define what meaningful impact truly looks like.

NOBLE AMBITION

Noble Ambition

Noble Ambition is an Australian leader in philanthropy and fundraising strategy and capacity building in the for-purpose sector. Our vision is to catalyse philanthropy at scale to achieve transformational positive social impact. We partner with clients in this spirit of shared ambition, impact and accountability.

In the past two decades, Noble Ambition has conceived, partnered on and led some of Australia's most significant campaigns to grow giving and impact. This includes collectively building the capability and confidence of leaders to drive multi-million-dollar philanthropy and fundraising campaigns and achieve philanthropic goals that deliver lasting social impact.

We are deeply honoured and privileged to work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders across Australia to support significant philanthropic investment. We also work to grow the role of women's leadership in philanthropy through the She Gives campaign.

In 2026, we released She Gives: Growing Women's Giving in Australia, the largest mixed-methods study of women's giving in Australia to date, and the second largest Australian study into giving overall after Giving Australia 2016. The research seeks to address the existing knowledge gap and reframe how we understand generosity, influence and social change in Australia.

www.nobleambition.com.au

1. Executive Summary

Australians recognise the transformative power of higher education. Universities are central to advancing our social and economic development. They are places where we educate our future workforce, develop future leaders and make progress towards the most pressing issues facing humanity.

Despite progress, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain underrepresented in higher education; an inequity that comes at a high cost for our nation.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participate in higher education, they share in the opportunities and life benefits it affords, including higher incomes, greater autonomy and associated intergenerational health, security and wealth benefits. Higher education also plays a critical role in building skills, leadership and capacity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead change from within and bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique perspectives, experiences and methods to the fore.

Greater representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in higher education – as students, tutors, lecturers, researchers and leaders – brings significant economic benefits as well. The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research estimates that 'if the educational level of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was increased to that of the non-Indigenous population, the value of this hypothetical change [to the nation] is $1.09 billion per annum'.[1] Access Economics quantifies economy-wide advantages from improvements in the quality of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as more than $10 billion in extra gross domestic product by 2029, increasing government revenue by $4.6 billion and reducing government expenditure by $3.7 billion.[2]

Framing higher education as a powerful tool for good, this paper seeks to understand why there is such a gap between the significant philanthropic funds invested in higher education and the amount directed to university programming and initiatives that are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led. It is our view that there is a significant, unrealised opportunity to build a case for higher education philanthropy's ability to partner with community to drive transformational, culturally responsive change. By better understanding what is holding us back from achieving this, we hope to help navigate the path forward.

This is not simply about growing funding for higher education, nor is it confined to the realm of research alone. It is about how we can champion meaningful work together to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, leadership and community-defined priorities; and centre these knowledge systems as foundational to ethical and impactful philanthropy. This requires a shift that moves beyond token inclusion to genuine power sharing and the integration of Indigenous perspectives in governance and pedagogy at every level. As funders and fund seekers, sector stakeholders and across communities, we each have a role to play.

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1 Taylor et al. 2011, p. viii in Behrendt, Larissa et al. (2012) Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People final report.

2 Access Economics 2008, p. iv in Behrendt, Larissa et al. (2012) Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People final report.

The University of Newcastle has a long and proud history as an innovator in educational outcomes and employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As the sector leader of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, we are ambitious about our role and potential to improve the life outcomes for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Noble Ambition shares this goal to see significant philanthropic investment to contribute to positive social impact.

Together, we have posed the question, ***"How can we grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities?"*** to a select group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders with significant experience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education and Australian funders who have given significantly to Indigenous-led projects in higher education and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy.

Key themes arising from these generous and insightful conversations have allowed us to present an overview of some of the common challenges and opportunities faced by both funders and fund seekers in this space. We have also drawn on the limited data currently available on giving to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities in Australia to contextualise the scale of this opportunity.

Key findings

From these insights, we offer the following four key findings, with associated recommendations, for how the higher education and philanthropy sectors can work together to grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy that is both culturally-responsive and impactful for communities.

1. Strengthening the existing ecosystem to support best practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy will help grow capacity for outcomes and impact.
2. Being truly culturally responsive and impactful for communities requires centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, leadership, experiences and self-determination within philanthropic practice.
3. Growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities requires shifts in philanthropic practice overall.
4. Higher education can provide a model ecosystem for how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy can be culturally responsive and impactful for communities.

We are acutely aware of the importance of strengths-based approaches in celebrating the diversity, capability, strength and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. However, many of the challenges discussed in this paper are systemic and intergenerational. We reference these as important acknowledgements of the socio-economic structures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have historically been, and continue to be, embedded in. More information on our methodology, terminology and list of interviews is included in Appendices.

Walking together toward a shared horizon

This paper honours and recognises the generosity and wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. It also recognises the genuine community partnerships and significant commitments already being made to advance this vision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy. That includes the 80 philanthropic grantmaking organisations who participated in Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey[3] and many others who are keen to listen, learn and take action for our communities.

We hope that by discussing the challenges, opportunities, structures and processes that empower the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we can showcase how higher education philanthropy can be used as a tool for supporting genuine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success – and what we may need to change for that to happen.

In 2027, Australia will host the International Funders for Indigenous Peoples Global Conference. This presents an opportunity for Australia to highlight best practice and demonstrate our commitment to fostering positive partnerships within Indigenous-led philanthropy alongside global peers.

Sincere thanks to everyone involved in this process for their generosity and willingness to engage in these conversations and this vision. We appreciate the significant contributions of time, wisdom and experience that informed this paper.[4]

Ultimately, in working on this paper with leaders in this sector, collaborating to build insights and share best practice with our allies in the philanthropic, higher education and Indigenous sectors, we hope to achieve catalytic investment that drives the big change – meaningful, generational shifts that contribute positively to issues central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lives and to the heart of our nation.

Thank you for being part of the conversation.

Kelvin, Nathan, Loren and Melissa

3 Philanthropy Australia (2025) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey.

4 For full list of interviews and acknowledgements see Appendix A.

Sharing our experiences: the University of Newcastle case studies

The University of Newcastle is deeply committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, research, innovation and engagement. The opportunity to reflect on our own structures, processes and programs through this paper has been invaluable. It has highlighted the success of our efforts to make our University more culturally responsive – and how much work there is still to do.

We have included case studies where we share examples of our commitments in action. We offer these as an invitation to other organisations to reflect on their own philanthropic practice to explore how they may be strengthened or guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

These examples also serve to illustrate that success is not always measured in the amount of new funds raised. Rather that success needs to be measured in the change made possible when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, universities and philanthropy operate as partners, enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

2. The funding context

Before exploring the key findings arising from investigating our question, *"How to grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities?"*, we offer context to giving trends in Indigenous-led philanthropy globally, in Australia, and within higher education to help contextualise key issues, challenges raised and the scale of opportunity ahead.

2.1 Indigenous-led philanthropy globally

Independent data analysis from International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) identified that, globally, only 0.6% (US$4.5 billion) of giving from 2016 to 2020 was identified as benefiting Indigenous Peoples.[5]

Examining grants across organisation type, regions and years, IFIP found consistent patterns of pervasive and systemic inequities in Indigenous philanthropy, and challenges in accessing global philanthropy. The analysis also highlighted the persistent lack of disaggregated data, transparency and accountability mechanisms to validate the level of funding that actually reaches Indigenous organisations.

IFIP's assessment was that, while relationships between some funders and Indigenous communities is improving, overall, funding for Indigenous Peoples remains inadequate and vastly disproportionate considering the wisdom, knowledge, and solutions Indigenous Peoples hold to many of the issues facing humanity. IFIP also positions that to advance Indigenous-led philanthropy, funders must seek to uphold the principles articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which outlines minimum standards for the recognition, promotion, and protection of the rights of Indigenous Peoples.[6]

> *"Philanthropy needs to ask itself what gives it the right to operate in this space, other than there is wealth and they've got money. Recognising and realising the fundamental and foundational human rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as set by UNDRIP, is the starting point for how philanthropy should be acting and responding in the First Nations space."*
>
> – Adrian Appo OAM, Chair and Executive Director, First Australians Capital, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) Board Member, The Salvation Army Australian Territory Board Member

2.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in Australia

Data on giving is limited in Australia. There is significant need for more evidence on philanthropy across the board – even more so in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space.

5 Archipel Research and Consulting (2024) Global Funding Trend Analysis on Indigenous Philanthropy. International Funders for Indigenous Peoples.

6 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Benchmark data released in 2025 by Philanthropy Australia is working to address this gap, revealing for the first time the share of philanthropic funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs receive.

Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey found that among the 80 philanthropic grantmaking organisations surveyed, funding to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs represented only 1.5% of total philanthropic giving in financial year 2022-23 ($179.9 million of $12.1 billion overall giving). Total funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisationsrepresents only 0.9%.[7]

Despite low overall giving, the survey highlighted the upward trajectory in funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations particularly. Most notably, the survey highlighted the importance and impact of cultural safety and cultural capability training. It found that among the 37 organisations where cultural training was completed, 26 (70%) increased their funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations, compared to only 15 (34%) out of the 44 organisations where cultural awareness training was not completed.[8]

Key findings from Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey published by Philanthropy Australia's First Nations Funders Network and First Nations Governance Committee

- In the 2022-23 financial year, $899.1 million was allocated in funding distributions. $179.9 million (20%) of this funding was received by programs that aim to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and $111.1 million (12%) of this total was directly received by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations.
- Of the 37 organisations where cultural awareness training was completed, 26 (70%) increased funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations, compared to only 15 (34%) out of the 44 organisations where cultural awareness training was not completed.

In the 2022-23 financial year, the 10 largest organisations by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program funding gave $154.8 million; contributing 86% of the total program funding.

- In the 2023-24 financial year, 49 organisations (60%) increased total funding.
- While 39 organisations (48%) increased funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, more organisations (51%) increased their funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations.

Source: Philanthropy Australia (2025) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey.

7 Philanthropy Australia (2025) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey.

8 Ibid.

2.3 Philanthropy in Australia

The overall philanthropy and fundraising landscape in Australia has matured significantly in recent years. Total annual giving from the top 50 philanthropic donations reached a record $1.37 billion in 2023 (up 10% from $1.25 billion in 2022).[9] Legacy models of small-scale, grass-roots fundraising are gradually being overtaken by more sophisticated and ambitious major gifts campaigns.

Against a backdrop of growing need and challenging economic factors, the outlook for philanthropy is optimistic. Australia is experiencing its largest-ever intergenerational wealth transfer with an estimated $5.4 trillion expected to pass between generations over the next 20 years. Philanthropy Australia has set a target to double structured giving by 2030, outlining initiatives to reduce regulatory barriers, enhance research, and promote place-based giving.[10]

This is supported by Australian Government commitments, as outlined in the *Productivity Commission's Future foundations for giving inquiry final report*.[11] Strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and philanthropy is highlighted as a priority. Specifically, the Productivity Commission recommended endowing funds to set up a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led and controlled organisation to improve access to philanthropy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[12]

2.4 The significance of intergenerational wealth

Australia's approaching $5.4 trillion intergenerational wealth transfer presents both challenges and opportunities for sector overall and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in particular.

Philanthropy offers an opportunity for families to share wealth, pass on values and engage generations meaningfully in giving. The increase in the number of structured giving vehicles (more than doubling over a decade) suggests more families are preparing to distribute wealth and create legacies outside their own families according to their interests and values.

However, the impact of colonisation (including the dispossession of land, displacement of people, unfair or stolen wages, and other discriminatory practices) and history of exclusion from wealth means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have not had the same opportunities to accumulate wealth, or leverage from family wealth to generate more wealth, as non-Indigenous Australians.

The significance of this disadvantage was highlighted by the 2024 Australian Government Inquiry into economic self-determination and opportunities for First Nations and across our interview discussions:

9 Australian Financial Review (2024) Philanthropy Top 50 List.

10 Philanthropy Australia (2021) Blueprint to Grow Structured Giving.

11 Productivity Commission, Future foundations for giving inquiry report.

12 Ibid.

> *"Australia's First Peoples have been traders, innovators, entrepreneurs and knowledge holders for more than 65,000 years. We have an unbroken knowledge of invention, innovation and resilience. Our contribution to Australia's economy and local communities is significant and far-reaching—beyond Gross Domestic Product—and it is growing at pace. [...] However, the inquiry has also put a renewed spotlight on the structural barriers and systemic disadvantages First Nations peoples face. As a result of the colonial experience, First Nations Australians are unable to leverage assets and accrue intergenerational wealth to the same extent as other Australians."*[13]
>
> – Senator Jana Stewart, Mutthi Mutthi and Wamba Wamba, Chair, Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into economic self-determination and opportunities for First Nations Australians.

2.5 Philanthropy within higher education

When we look to higher education, philanthropic giving is setting the bar for some of the largest gifts, highest levels of ambition and most transparent data reporting in Australia.[14]

In 2023, philanthropic investment in higher education across Australia reached approximately $915.5 million in new funds committed, with a median value of funds received increasing compared to 2022.[15] This included a total of 130 non-bequest gifts of $1 million or above, highlighting the growth in large-scale donations and a notable rise in high profile 'mega-gifts' (donations exceeding $10 million) in higher education.

This trend reflects both the impact of significant strategy and investment in major gifts fundraising in higher education over the past 15 years and increasing ambition among donors to shape the future through long-term, large-scale investments in higher education.

The rise of the mega gift in higher education

Universities are leveraging philanthropic contributions to enhance research capabilities, provide scholarships, improve infrastructure and enrich social landscape in Australia and across the world.

- The University of Sydney's INSPIRED campaign marked Australia's first university fundraising initiative to surpass $1 billion. Launched publicly in 2013, the campaign concluded in 2018, engaging over 64,000 donors worldwide and setting a new benchmark for philanthropic efforts in the sector. In September 2025 the University launched its latest and most ambitious campaign yet – 'For good: the Campaign for Sydney'.

13 Parliament of Australia (2024) Inquiry into economic self-determinism and opportunities for First Nations Australians.

14 CASE Reporting Rules for Australia and New Zealand.

15 2023 CASE Insights℠ Report Highlights Resilience in Australia and New Zealand Higher Education Philanthropy. 2 September 2024.

- Geoffrey Cumming made a $250 million gift to the University of Melbourne in 2022 to establish the Cumming Global Centre for Pandemic Therapeutics at the Doherty Institute. This stands as the largest philanthropic donation to date to medical research in Australia's history.
- The largest philanthropic donation to women's health in Australia was made in 2025 to the University of New South Wales to establish the Ainsworth Endometriosis Research Institute. The $50 milion gift, led by Anna and Lilly Ainsworth on behalf of the Ainsworth Family, also marks to date the most significant known philanthropic investment in endometriosis research globally.

2.6 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy within higher education

Significant gifts to benefit Indigenous priorities, in terms of gift size and impact at scale, are being made through the higher education sector in Australia. However, in the absence of comprehensive data, it is difficult to report confidently on the levels of investment and to what extent funding is being directed to programs that benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as opposed to being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led.

While there are examples of significant gifts, compared to other areas, funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy within higher education has been limited.

2.7 Realising the opportunity for transformational change

With the compelling case for higher education as one of the most definitive pathways to dramatically improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and the significant experience and track record of university leadership and Advancement teams attracting amongst the largest philanthropic donations in Australia; why are we not seeing comparatively significant investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led programs in higher education?

Furthermore, in a higher education sector that participates in and benefits from detailed and transparent reporting about fundraising to measure the performance of individual institutions and the overall impact of philanthropy, why are we not capturing more detailed information about funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led programs?

While there are examples of significant investment, what mechanisms exist to ensure these these investments as culturally responsive and impactful as they need or claim to be?

In our view, there is a significant, unrealised opportunity to build a case for higher education philanthropy's ability to partner with community to drive transformational, culturally responsive, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led change by connecting with funders who share these values and ambition. By better understanding what is holding us back from achieving this, we hope to help navigate the path forward.

Building the case: reflections on the data gap and the importance of data sovereignty

Professor Kelvin Kong AM
MBBS BSc MD OHNS FRACS

School of Medicine and Public Health, the University of Newcastle

The lack of data in this space identifies a fundamental weakness within the Australian philanthropic sector and underscores an even more acute disparity affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander causes.
The call for more evidence on philanthropic data is not merely an academic exercise; it is a strategic imperative for several reasons:

Illuminating the Gap and Driving Equitable Distribution: Without robust, disaggregated data, the significant funding gap experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and causes remains anecdotal rather than quantitative. Concrete data is essential to measure the current level of investment, benchmark progress, and hold the sector accountable for moving towards a more equitable distribution of philanthropic capital. You cannot effectively address a gap you cannot measure.

Enabling Self-Determination in Funding: Data sovereignty – the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to control the collection, ownership, and application of their data – is crucial. Capturing this data appropriately allows communities to define their own priorities and demonstrate their impact in ways that are culturally meaningful. It shifts the narrative from one of need to one of opportunity and evidence-based investment, empowering communities to attract funding aligned with their own aspirations.

Improving Impact and Effectiveness: For both funders and fund-seekers, data is a tool for learning and improvement. Understanding what works, in what contexts, and why, leads to more effective and impactful philanthropy. In the Indigenous space, this means funding can move beyond short-term projects to supporting long-term, community-led strategies that generate sustainable outcomes. It allows funders to make smarter, more informed decisions.

Building Trust and Catalysing Investment: A lack of data creates perceived risk for potential funders. High-quality, reliable evidence on successful models and their outcomes de-risks investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community causes. It builds confidence and trust in the sector, demonstrating tangible returns on philanthropic investment and catalysing greater giving from mainstream funders who require evidence-based cases for support.
It is important to note the success should be through an Indigenous lens.

When we say, “There is significant need for more evidence on philanthropy across the board – even more so in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space”…the phrase “even more so in the Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander space” is the critical element. It recognises that this data deficit exacerbates existing inequalities. Capturing this data must be done ethically, in partnership with communities, respecting principles of data sovereignty and ensuring it is used for purposes of empowerment rather than oversight.

Ultimately, closing this data gap is not just about counting dollars; it is about valuing Indigenous-led solutions and ensuring philanthropy can be a genuine partner in achieving community-defined goals.

The following sections summarise key themes emerging from our interviews. We acknowledge there will be gaps in our assessment and findings. We also recognise the significant knowledge, wisdom, strengths and experiences that exist within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities whose views may not be represented here.

3. Challenges

While we acknowledge the significant advocacy and outcomes of many funders and fund seekers actively investing in, championing and delivering on commitments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia, our discussions revealed some key challenges reflected in experience. Many of these challenges are systemic and intergenerational. We reference them here to honour the frank reflections of our contributors and consider where there is work to be done.

3.1 Historic and systemic exclusion from wealth

"Wealth has never been a great word for us because we've always been locked out of the story of wealth in this country. The majority of our parents, grandparents and all those before us never had the ability to own their own assets and earn their own incomes in that way.

So the entire process of philanthropy has never really been an option or at the forefront of our mind."

Michelle Steele, Chief First Nations Officer, Paul Ramsay Foundation

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have historically been excluded from wealth-building opportunities, such as fair access to wages, equal wages, property ownership, and access to financial assets.
- As a result, discussions around wealth can be culturally uncomfortable and/or avoided in some community and/or family contexts.
- Interviewees suggested that this may be the first generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples starting to break down cultural stereotypes around wealth.

3.2 Awareness of philanthropy

"There is a lack of awareness from our community's perspective on philanthropy: how philanthropy operates, what the relationships are and how do you actually engage with philanthropy. Because if you do engage with philanthropy, it's usually because you have the relationships."

Leah Armstrong, Strategic Advisor, First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance

- A base level of awareness of private funding and philanthropic structures is the starting point to engage with philanthropy, however, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are not working from the same baseline as non-Indigenous communities.
- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are unfamiliar with what philanthropy is, how it operates, or how to engage with it.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people are often more accustomed to engaging with government than private philanthropic structures.

3.3 Access to philanthropy

"If I've got a great idea, where do I go for funding? Often I am unable to ask my family for money or gain finance from a bank and never thought philanthropy was an option for us so government became the default position when looking at funding opportunities to grow, innovate and evolve."

Michelle Steele, Chief First Nations Officer, Paul Ramsay Foundation

"Philanthropy is all about relationships. The heart stuff. It is literally the language of love. That means you have to invest in relationships with people. Building trust is not always easy but it's really important."

Tracy Norman, Founder and Chair, Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation

- Many philanthropic decisions rely on long-held relationships and networks which means Australia's $5.4 trillion intergenerational wealth transfer is likely to benefit people who are more familiar with how philanthropy works and have the relationships to access it.
- The 'how' to engage is even less accessible and transparent – for example, many philanthropic structures do not have open calls for submissions.
- Within structured philanthropy, requirements like having DGR status, formal organisational structures or rigid governance models may exclude giving to grassroots collectives and cultural forms of organisation.

3.4 Awareness of and access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

"I think in many cases philanthropy is determining what's good for Indigenous communities based on the biases that philanthropy has, both in terms of its colonial practices and its thinking, and the biases of individuals at decision-making levels within philanthropy."

Adrian Appo OAM, Chair and Executive Director, First Australians Capital, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) Board Member, The Salvation Army Australian Territory Board Member

- Many philanthropic funders are working to develop trust-based, respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Across the sector, however, there are many who are less experienced in partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- There can be a reticence to make assumptions or make decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander funding priorities by funders who are non-Indigenous.
- The fear of making 'wrong moves' can result in not engaging at all.

3.5 Prioritising funders' objectives over community needs

"There is a shift underway in philanthropy towards greater understanding about co-design being led by community as opposed to coming in with donor-driven agendas. Being willing to listen to the individual needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and truly understand what impact means for them, is not a 'nice to have'; it should be core to any relationship-building process."

Amelia Hart, Head of Grant Making and Impact, The Balnaves Foundation

- Even with good intentions, and alignment of values, many funders still have pre-determined ideas about where their funding goes.
- In many cases, this reflects and reinforces non-Indigenous biases, colonising practices and power dynamics.
- The knowledge systems, wisdom and lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are often not valued at the same level.
- Independent 'experts' may be called upon to recommend and/or verify the terms of engagement and measures of success instead of listening to communities about their priorities and what success looks like for them.

3.6 Focusing on short-term impact

"When we're talking about theory of change and measurement frameworks, impact doesn't happen in three to five years. You might get outcomes or inputs in that time frame but, in terms of lasting impact, we talk about 20 years. Those kinds of expectations need to be challenged."

Leah Armstrong, Strategic Advisor, First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance

- Within traditional donor-driven philanthropy, outcome and impact measures, including timelines, are often short-term and metrics-heavy.
- Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy, working collaboratively with community requires funders to take a more flexible approach and long-term view.
- An iterative approach to budgeting, KPIs and timelines allows for a more culturally responsive philanthropic practice that is more likely to have impact within communities.

3.7 Low levels of giving

"One of the biggest calls made through the International Funders for Indigenous Peoples is to push for a minimum of 20% towards not First Nations-benefit but First Nations-led organisations to make up for the historical underspends and under-funding. Because even if we were to do population parity, it's still not going to shift the dial in this country."

Michelle Steele, Chief First Nations Officer, Paul Ramsay Foundation

- Funding to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs represented only 1.5% of total philanthropic giving in financial year 2022-23.[16]
- In the 2022-23 financial year, the 10 largest organisations by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program funding gave $154.8 million; contributing 86% of the total program funding.
- A significant gap exists between funds for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'benefit' and those going to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations (20% vs 12% in the 2022-23 financial year).[17]
- If Australia was to reach its goal to double structured giving by 2030, giving to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs would still be at historically low levels.

3.8 Transparency around reporting

"Part of the challenge is how entities will use 'grey coloured glasses' to make their funding look better than it is. There needs to be better tracking and disclosing of what percentage of funding goes directly to Indigenous organisations and programs across the board."

Adrian Appo OAM, Chair and Executive Director, First Australians Capital, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) Board Member, The Salvation Army Australian Territory Board Member

- There is limited data available on all elements of funding and grant making practices towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs in Australia.
- Even within the higher education sector, with its rigorous philanthropic reporting standards, there is currently no reporting against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priority areas.
- Reporting that claims impact without substance also contributes to the lack of transparency in data and reporting.

16 Philanthropy Australia (2025) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey.

17 Ibid. In the 2022-23 financial year, $899.1m was allocated in funding distributions. $179.9m (20%) of this funding was received by programs that aim to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and $111.1m (12%) of this total was directly received by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations.

3.9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in key roles

"When we talk about something being Indigenous-led, we're really talking about cultural credibility. You need to have that cultural credibility and have built trust and rapport with community. Otherwise you can't be culturally responsive."

Nathan Towney, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Engagement and Equity, the University of Newcastle

"What's very important to us in our Indigenous grants is that strong Indigenous leadership. We want to see whoever is leading the Indigenous work on campus leading the work. We don't want to be continually frustrated by the university reducing their agency."

Hamish Balnaves, CEO, The Balnaves Foundation

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are vastly underrepresented on philanthropic boards and staff.
- Only two out of the ten largest funders for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program funding have Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander board member/s.[18]
- Very few foundations have dedicated Indigenous roles or teams, and many still lack cultural capability.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership within universities are not all equally supported or equipped with cultural credibility to do impactful work.

Sharing our experiences: read more about the *University of Newcastle's Cultural Governance Framework* – see case study on page 36

18 Philanthropy Australia (2025) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey.

3.10 Universities' role and impact undervalued

"There's a narrow view about what universities can do – and the platform that can be used – especially in the First Nations space. The reality is that universities are unique spaces that can provide important engagement and capacity building for both our community and our community-controlled sector. The spaces we work in, like Jumbunna (UTS) and Wollotuka (the University of Newcastle), are totally Indigenous-led. And in fact, why we're attracted to the space is because we've tried to do this work in other areas and there isn't the funding or the resources. Where can I have the most impact? In a university. And at the same time, I can work with the community to make sure their kids are thinking about a university pathway."

Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO, Laureate Fellow, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, UTS

- In some cases, funders have been frustrated by fragmented structures and institutional complexity within universities.
- Awareness of how programs and partnerships between universities and community can be 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led' (e.g. community controlled or set up according to community wishes) is also limited among some stakeholders.
- Advancement professionals may default to promoting more defined areas like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student scholarship programs.
- Funders may be reluctant to fund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs through universities preferring to invest in programs or organisations they perceive to be more directly linked to communities.

Sharing our experiences: read more about the University of Newcastle's *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research Framework*
– see case study on page 44

4. Opportunities

Our discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and Australian funders revealed invaluable insights around opportunities for funders, fund seekers, universities and community to work together in different ways to grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution. But in sharing their ambition and experiences, we hope to inspire further reflection and action among all stakeholders working to drive investment towards change that is meaningful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

4.1 Recognise best practice in Indigenous philanthropy globally

- Recognising and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to self-determination, and the historical injustices and structural inequity that informs their lives – including how they interact with philanthropy – is vital for all stakeholders operating in this space.
- All stakeholders should recognise the UNDRIP principles that guide best practice in Indigenous philanthropy.[19]
- Philanthropy Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey published in 2025 marked a significant step forward towards building an evidence base to inform best practice in Indigenous-led philanthropy in Australia.[20]

4.2 Build cultural capability among philanthropy

> *"Philanthropy needs to trust that we are experts in our own lives and experts in the way things work in our community. Two-way trust and relationships is the grounding of culture. We can't do any business until we have that trust. Then there is the reciprocity piece of passing it on. Again, there's no point doing the work unless you bring your community and the next generation with you. How those deep cultural principles are embedded in philanthropic relationships is really important."*
>
> Loren Collyer, Interim Pro Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Leadership and Head of The Wollotuka Institute, the University of Newcastle

- Cultural capability requires a fundamental shift to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.
- Developing better understanding about the nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (recognising that communities are diverse and individual in how they work), changing the language of philanthropy to better reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and respect will lead to better practice.
- The tangible impact of building cultural capability is reflected in the significant increase in funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and controlled organisations by funders that had completed cultural awareness training.[21]

19 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

20 Philanthropy Australia (2025) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey.

21 Ibid.

4.3 Build philanthropic capability within communities

"Across the country there are so many Aboriginal consultative groups, so many Aboriginal community groups and Aboriginal-owned businesses doing amazing things – if we can reach some of those businesses, engage them to learn how philanthropy works they can deliver culturally safe training to our communities. They are going to spread the word to anyone who would be interested and would benefit from it."

Yeena Thompson (Gamilaraay), Aboriginal Health Research Partner, the University of Newcastle

- While the Western term philanthropy may be unfamiliar within some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the act of giving back is long embedded in Indigenous cultures.
- By positioning philanthropy as relational, founded in trust and two-way relationships, the practice becomes an extension of traditional reciprocity and care as opposed to a foreign or elite concept.
- Building confidence among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to understand, engage with, invest in and lead philanthropic spaces will open doors to more culturally responsive and productive partnerships.

4.4 Prioritise self-determinism

"What a good partner looks like to us is a funder who allows us to get on with the work that we know how to do and we know how to deliver on, especially as an Indigenous led and governed organisation. We understand there are requirements about keeping people engaged and understanding how the money is being spent but flexibility allows us to have greater reach and impact."

Charlene Davison, CEO, GO Foundation

- For philanthropy to be truly impactful within communities, funding needs and impact must be determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Shifting the focus from 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-benefit' to 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led' is an important distinction.
- This requires philanthropy to be responsive to community-defined and driven priorities.
- Replacing traditional philanthropy's donor-driven impact models with trust-based partnerships that evolve with community needs empowers communities to define their own measures of success.

"Funding First Nations projects often requires funders to let go and trust the deep knowledge, experience and expertise of First Nations people. Building trust requires presence, humility and honouring invitations from community. My advice would be to turn up when invited and listen. Be real, be vulnerable and be willing to be educated by the community. I don't see this happen a lot in philanthropy."

Tracy Norman, Founder and Chair, Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation

- It also allows for a level of flexibility in how funds are held and/or allocated, particularly over the long term, when priorities change in line with cultural obligations, community decisions or shifting priorities.

Sharing our experiences: read more about the Muku (Ear) Indigenous Research Program – see case study on page 50

4.5 Build capacity and capability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led wealth

"To help shift the power to communities we need a lot more people with the skillset to engage with philanthropy than we currently have. There are very few foundations with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander board members, and many smaller organisations don't employ staff at all. It's also important that we build capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be more actively engaged in governing and managing trustee funds and how these go out to communities. This is both an education piece for communities and a capacity building piece for the sector."

Leah Armstrong, Strategic Advisor, First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance

- Philanthropy has a role to play in building capital and organisational wealth within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- This may include supporting the creation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led foundations and regranting bodies that direct funding based on cultural values and community relationships; or working with institutions like universities to provide the enabling structures to support community-led initiatives.
- These models support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and build long-term community capabilities, agency and wealth.

4.6 Increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in philanthropic infrastructure

"Something that we do here at GO Foundation is to make sure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in the room, no matter what that room is. 50% of our board members are Aboriginal and more than 50% of staff are Aboriginal. You need Aboriginal people with that strong cultural lens at the leadership table and in those decision-making discussions. You also need Aboriginal people with lived experience actually designing and delivering the programs. It's about putting culture at the heart. That's how we will shift the narrative."

Charlene Davison, CEO, GO Foundation

- Both the higher education and philanthropic sectors have roles to play in increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in leadership roles.
- Greater representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in roles that support philanthropic decision making will have a broader, transformative effect for the sector.
- This includes fostering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent as fund administrators, impact evaluators, and investment trustees.

4.7 Elevate the role of universities as agents for transformative change

"One of the things I love about higher education is that every time we graduate one of our mob, we've got a game changer. We must never dismiss the importance of that individual aspiration but it's more complex than that. In terms of building capacity, it's spaces like Jumbunna (UNSW) and Wollotuka (the University of Newcastle) where we do important community good."

Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO, Laureate Fellow, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, UTS

- Universities are in a unique position to act as agents for transformative change.
- Change occurs at many levels, with universities acting as community partners for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led programs, research enablers and capacity builders at individual and community level.
- Universities with culturally capable governance and empowered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership can help to advance the sector's overall capacity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy through models of best practice.

"The Wukul Yabang Aboriginal Health Research [Community] Panel is a bridge between the research world and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In 2.5 years, we've had 80 research projects come through our doors to get our views on how to better meet the needs of Aboriginal communities. It's turned the whole power dynamic on its head. We also now have researchers seeking out Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to encourage them to be part of research projects earlier in their degrees; and researchers helping small community organisations write grant proposals. All these little connections happening in the background are part of a much bigger story of success."

Yeena Thompson (Gamilaraay), Aboriginal Health Research Partner, the University of Newcastle

4.8 Recognise universities as enablers for community-led priorities

"We know the priorities in the communities we work with. We've got the relationships to be able to help. We have the expertise to ensure it's funded. We've got the knowledge around ethics and making sure things are done properly. We are really good partners for that kind of capacity building work."

Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO, Laureate Fellow, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, UTS

- Universities can act as powerful enablers, not owners, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led priorities by providing infrastructure and convening powers that amplify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.
- This requires university internal structures (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander units, philanthropy teams, faculties) to work together to support best practice and streamline processes, thereby removing barriers for philanthropists to engage.
- Universities can offer shared platforms (e.g. community advisory panels, impact-measurement toolkits) so donors can engage directly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities rather than solely with institutional projects.
- While not all universities are equally equipped with the leadership and cultural credibility to do this work, universities must prioritise building relationships with community to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, cultural nuance, and community-led goals.

Sharing our experiences: read more about the *University of Newcastle's Evaluation of the Expanded Connected Communities Strategy* (2024)
– see case study on page 52

5. Key findings

In summarising our key findings, firstly we would like to honour the genuine partnerships and significant commitments already being made to advance this vision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy. That includes the 80 philanthropic grantmaking organisations who participated in Australia's first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey[22] and many others who are keen to listen, learn and take action for our communities.

These key findings consolidate our discussions and outline some practical actions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the philanthropic and higher education sectors, and government to consider. By highlighting what may need to change, we hope to elevate the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and facilitate growth in higher education philanthropy as a tool for genuinely impactful, community-led success.

5.1 Strengthen the existing ecosystem to support best practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy will help grow capacity for outcomes and impact.

5.1.1 There is ambition and significant commitments already being made to support transformative change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through the philanthropic ecosystem in Australia. With Australia's $5.4 trillion intergenerational wealth transfer fast approaching, we need to ensure the ecosystem is strengthened to support best practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy and harness the opportunity to exponentially grow its capacity for positive outcomes and impact.

5.1.2 The level of investment the Australian Government's Productivity Commission report recommends must be sufficient to match size and scale of the opportunity ahead. Piecemeall funding will not drive the big change required to address some of the challenges outlined in this paper. For example, the current endowment structure recommended by the Productivity Commission (in which only interest is dispersed) will take a long time for funding to flow through to communities. We recommend the Australian Government works in partnership with the sector to explore other mechanisms that will have greater, more immediate, impact for communities. For example, the Australian Government could explore setting up a fund where philanthropic commitments would be match funded by government – serving as a powerful, more immediate, call to action for funders to give.

5.1.3 The philanthropic and university sectors could work to improve how they define and measure what goes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led programs in line with established global best practice. Global leaders, for example IFIP, could advise Australian universities and philanthropic leaders on how to track and disclose funding going directly to Indigenous priority areas using methods that align with best practice standards. This change could be implemented by the university sector at speed by adding to its existing reporting of philanthropic data through the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE).

22 Philanthropy Australia (2025). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey.

5.2 Being truly culturally responsive and impactful for communities requires centering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, experiences and self-determinism into philanthropic practice.

5.2.1 To grow giving that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities, we need to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, experiences and self-determinism into philanthropic practice at every level. This includes at a government policy level, philanthropic board and executive leadership level, and at a community level where we build the capabilities within communities to engage with philanthropy.

5.2.2 Many funders and fund seekers are actively investing in, championing and delivering on commitments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia. This level of advocacy was most visible in recent years during the 2023 referendum campaign on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. Organisers of the Yes campaign attracted a record-breaking philanthropic investment of $47 million in nine months.[23] And despite the eventual outcome, the main groups for the Yes campaign combined received more than five times as much in donations than their opponents.[23] Growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy, however, requires more than well-meaning allyship. Being truly culturally responsive and impactful for communities requires centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, experiences and self-determinism into philanthropic practice. This is a responsibility that falls upon funders, fund seekers and Advancement professionals to evaluate and seek ways to improve their current practices.

5.2.3 Increasing sector-wide awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems – and thereby increasing cultural safety – is not a burden that should be constantly carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These commitments are required at an organisational and structural level. Organisations further along their cultural capability journey can offer models of best practice for the sector.

5.2.4 Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultative groups across the country have existing relationships and deep knowledge within their local community. Employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to engage with philanthropic organisations to share their significant cultural knowledge and community experience (while simultaneously building knowledge and engagement around philanthropy) would help bridge the gaps between communities and philanthropy and elevate standards of practice across the sector. It would also provide economic and other opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.[24]

23 Butler, J. (2024, April 2). Yes campaign groups received more than five times as much in donations as no side in voice referendum. The Guardian.

24 We would like to acknowledge Yeena Thompson, Aboriginal Health Research Partner, the University of Newcastle, for this recommendation.

5.3 Growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities requires shifts in philanthropic practice overall.

5.3.1 While we acknowledge the significant advocacy, achievements and investments being made by many funders across Australia, growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education requires shifts in practice and re-thinking how we measure success across the sector more broadly.

5.3.2 Simply increasing the amount of funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led priorities is not the end goal. True success in growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy is measured first and foremost by the self-determined wellbeing and agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as articulated by communities themselves.

5.3.3 Models of best practice globally demonstrate that self-determination drives impact and this may look different in different contexts, within different communities. The International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) advocates that changing funder practices to support Indigenous-led philanthropy requires adopting frameworks designed and led by Indigenous people—such as IFIP's 5Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy (Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Relationships, and Redistribution).[25]

5.3.4 All sector stakeholders are encouraged to examine their current practices and commit to exploring ways to do better. Some examples of best practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy include:

- Honouring cultural knowledge systems to assess whether initiatives are culturally responsive, impactful, and aligned with community-defined priorities.
- Prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led governance, cultural protocols, and intergenerational succession planning.
- Focusing on long-term partnerships and being flexible about how funds are dispersed, and impact and outcomes are measured.
- Investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and knowledge holders and not relying on 'expert' consultants for validation.
- Improving accountability and transparency through better reporting systems and evaluation tools shaped by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.
- Developing best practice examples to share with the sector and help elevate standards of practice.
- Elevating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and leadership in philanthropic decision-making to normalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led funding models across the sector.

25 Archipel Research and Consulting (2024). Global Funding Trend Analysis on Indigenous Philanthropy. International Funders for Indigenous Peoples.

5.4 Higher education can provide a model ecosystem for how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy can be culturally responsive and impactful for communities.

5.4.1 Universities can play a critical leadership role in effecting lasting, transformational change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when their role as enablers for community-led change is better understood and utilised.

5.4.2 Universities already have the reach and connections with funders seeking to invest in causes they care about: education, research and other priorities to improve the wellbeing and resilience of communities across Australia and the world. Universities also have the compelling case – Indigenous leadership, connection to communities and governance structures that align with global best practice – to attract funders seeking to invest in Indigenous-led philanthropy.

5.4.3 Other ways universities can grow the profile of and improve best practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities may include:

- Invest in governance structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, ground culture and embed Indigenous worldviews across the university.
- Develop closer working relationships between university Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, Advancement teams and philanthropy to collectively build best practice.
- Streamline internal processes within university Advancement teams to allow clear, direct relationships between funders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program leaders.
- Facilitate stronger connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and donors; and support better understanding of the philanthropy sector more broadly.
- Invest in the capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and emerging leaders (e.g. researchers) to work with philanthropy on long-term community-led priorities and projects, unbound by short-term, donor-driven metrics.
- Prioritise communities leading project design, governance and evaluation. This may include targets to transition project ownership to community institutions as determined by communities themselves.
- Ensure transparency and clarity around data and reporting. This may include processes to improve internal data capture and advocating for sector-wide improvements to the way data is recorded and reported.
- Across all activity, clearly distinguish between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led (community governance) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-benefit or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-related (non-Indigenous leadership).

6. Conclusion

Our findings highlight the opportunities in growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities. Collectively, these actions can help transform philanthropy into a more equitable, transparent, and impactful tool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

How will we know if we have been successful?

Success manifests across interconnected levels:

- Systemic: Increased, sustained funding flows to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led projects; universities adopt governance models that prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authority over research, curricula, and resource allocation.
- Structural: Growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers leading grants and publications, and non-Indigenous scholars engaging respectfully in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spaces through mentorship from communities.
- Cultural: Philanthropic practices embed protocols like storytelling, deep listening, and reciprocity—rejecting extractive metrics in favour of holistic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evaluation.
- Transformational: Sector-wide shifts toward partnerships that elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge as foundational to innovation, student success, and societal change.

Ultimately, success is not measured by institutional accolades but by intergenerational healing, the resurgence of cultural strength, and the tangible power of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to shape futures on their terms.

Universities, alongside philanthropic allies, are called to reconceptualise traditional relationships, and decision-making. Central to this shift, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are to lead solutions that address systemic inequities, strengthen cultural vitality, and create life-changing pathways in education, research, and beyond. Philanthropy is called to be involved and invested in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge in a more intimate manner and lead change in leadership supporting genuine Indigenous success. This requires commitment to measuring success through an Indigenous lens, ensuring that outcomes are defined in ways that reflect community priorities and values. Moreover, philanthropic investment must extend to a deeper engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and the cultivation of leadership structures that enable and sustain genuine Indigenous success.

This vision demands a transformative shift: philanthropy becomes a tool of reciprocity, not charity. It requires higher education institutions to co-design initiatives with, not for, communities – embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and perspectives at every stage, from funding allocation to impact evaluation. We believe there is both the desire and capability to grow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that serves as a powerful catalyst for self-determined futures. Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities exercise sovereignty over the design, governance, and outcomes of initiatives impacting their lives in partnership with philanthropy.

This work is not merely procedural but deeply relational: it challenges institutions to listen actively, act courageously, and redistribute resources in ways that affirm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty and the intergenerational well-being of communities. In this way, we allow communities to define success – and philanthropy becomes truly impactful for communities.

When philanthropy aligns with Indigenous aspirations and respects the right to self-determination, it unlocks sustainable, intergenerational change. Together, these partnerships can dismantle unproductive legacies, elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices as experts of their own futures, and build a higher education sector that truly serves as a steward of justice, equity and cultural resurgence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

7. Invitation from Nathan Towney

Deputy Vice-Chancellor Engagement and Equity (Interim) The University of Newcastle

Working on this paper has been an opportunity for deep reflection and learning. Through conversations with leaders across the philanthropic and higher education sectors, I have been inspired by the genuine commitment to improve practices and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This experience has strengthened our ambition and resolve to support the growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education that is culturally responsive and impactful for communities.

We must all ask ourselves how our philanthropic endeavours can be more responsive to the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Having created space within our own university to reflect, we invite others – universities, private funders and re-granting organisations – to examine your philanthropic practices and consider how they are truly shaped and guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Our vision is clear: that life-changing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is achieved through genuine partnerships between communities, philanthropy and higher education. This work demands humility and courage. It requires universities and our philanthropic partners to act in partnership as enablers of community-led solutions. It requires an entire philanthropic ecosystem that listens, learns and trusts.

We invite you to join us in advancing this vision. Because when philanthropy, universities and community partners align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations, we open pathways to intergenerational healing, innovation and self-determined futures.

Nathan Towney
(Wiradjuri)

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Engagement and Equity (Interim)
The University of Newcastle

8. Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to everyone involved in this paper for their generosity and willingness to engage in these conversations and this vision. We appreciate the significant contributions of time, wisdom and experience.

Adrian Appo OAM, Chair and Executive Director, First Australians Capital, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) Board Member, The Salvation Army Australian Territory Board Member

Leah Armstrong, Strategic Advisor, First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance

Hamish Balnaves, CEO, The Balnaves Foundation

Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO, Laureate Fellow, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney (UTS)

Charlene Davison, CEO, GO Foundation

Amelia Hart, Head of Grant Making and Impact, The Balnaves Foundation

Tracy Norman, Founder and Chair, Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation

Coralie Nichols, CEO, Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation

Michelle Steele, Chief First Nations Officer, Paul Ramsay Foundation

Yeena Thompson (Gamilaraay), Aboriginal Health Research Partner, the University of Newcastle

Thank you to our contributors

Thank you to our core working group, composed of University of Newcastle and Wollotuka Institute staff, affiliates and partners. These talented minds sparked the conversations that inspired this paper and brought it to life. Many of them are also the creators and caretakers of the programs showcased in the case studies, bringing their passion, knowledge and lived experience to every step of the journey.

Dr Caelli Jo Brooker (Wangaaypuwan and Kawambarai) Design Lead, *Philanthropy, Our Way*

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Dave Newham (Wiradjuri and Ngemba/Wongaibon) – Working Group Member

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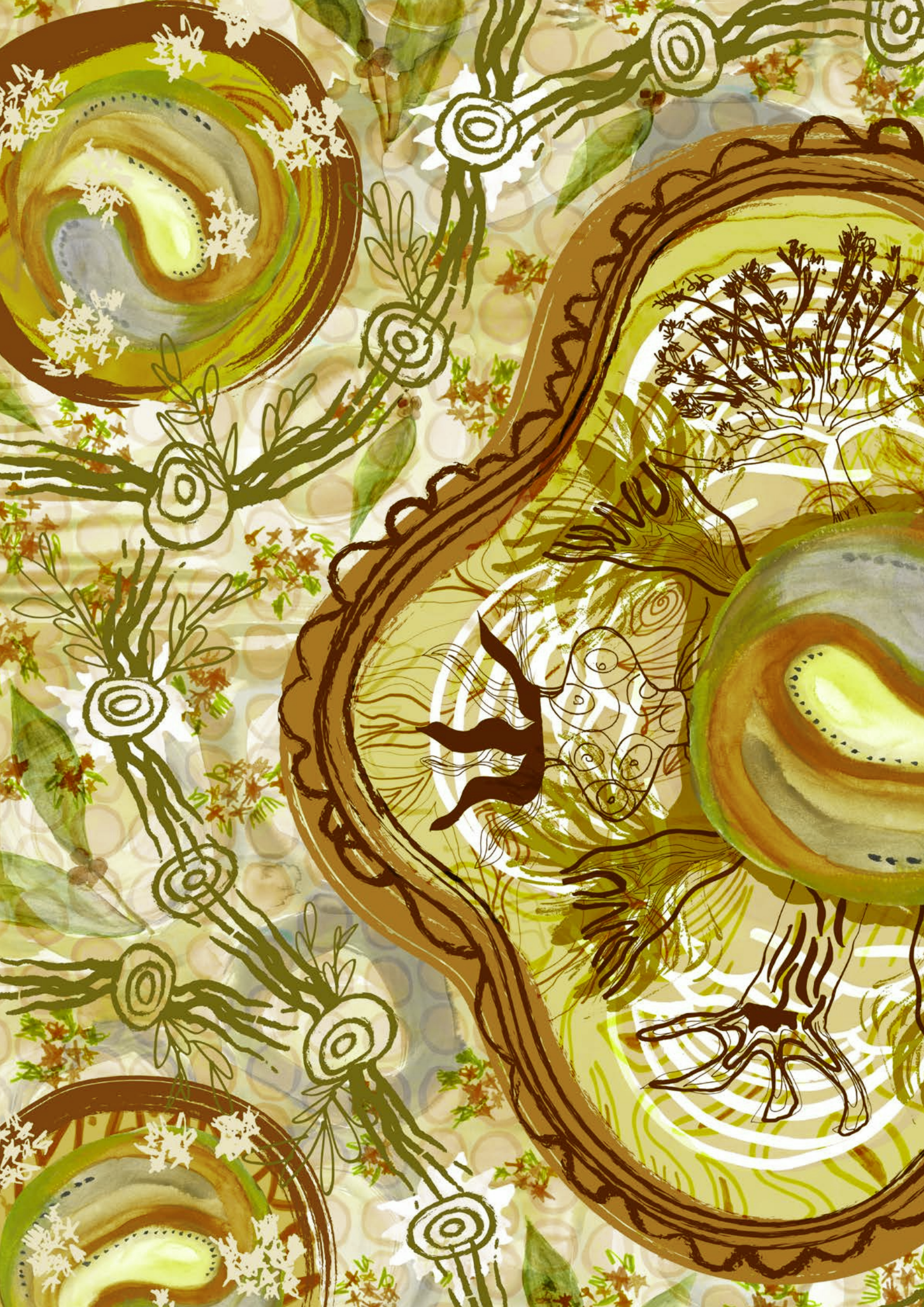
Dr Jake MacDonald (Ngarabal) – Cultural Capability Partner; Case Study Contributor

Professor Bob Morgan AO (Gumilaroi) – Chair of Board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

Shahni Wellington (Wandi Wandian and Jerrinja) – Communications Specialist; Communications & Media Lead, *Philanthropy, Our Way*



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Our commitments in Action: Community-led, From Beginning to End

Our work in this space will never be finished, and we remain committed to the journey ahead. The case studies that follow offer a glimpse into our journey toward becoming a more culturally responsive university and what becomes possible when we learn from and work alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

These seven examples demonstrate our commitments in action and highlight the vital role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge and priorities play in shaping meaningful partnerships. They remind us that impact is not defined by new funding alone, but by the change created when communities, universities and philanthropy work together to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to lead the outcomes that matter most to them.

10. The University of Newcastle

Case Studies

Case study 1: Cultural Governance at the University of Newcastle

Grounding culture and embedding Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems and leadership across university governance

Australian higher education institutions have historically struggled to embed Cultural Governance meaningfully within their operations, often resulting in culturally unsafe environments and limited community trust. This disconnect has hindered the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and research.

Recognising the need for a robust, culturally grounded governance framework to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and leadership across all facets of university life, the University of Newcastle has embedded a multi-layered cultural governance model. This model ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are not only consulted, but positioned as leaders in decision-making across education, research and institutional strategy.

To achieve this, the University has established a suite of formal governance bodies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led institutes, and foundational frameworks that collectively uphold Indigenous authority, cultural integrity and community accountability.

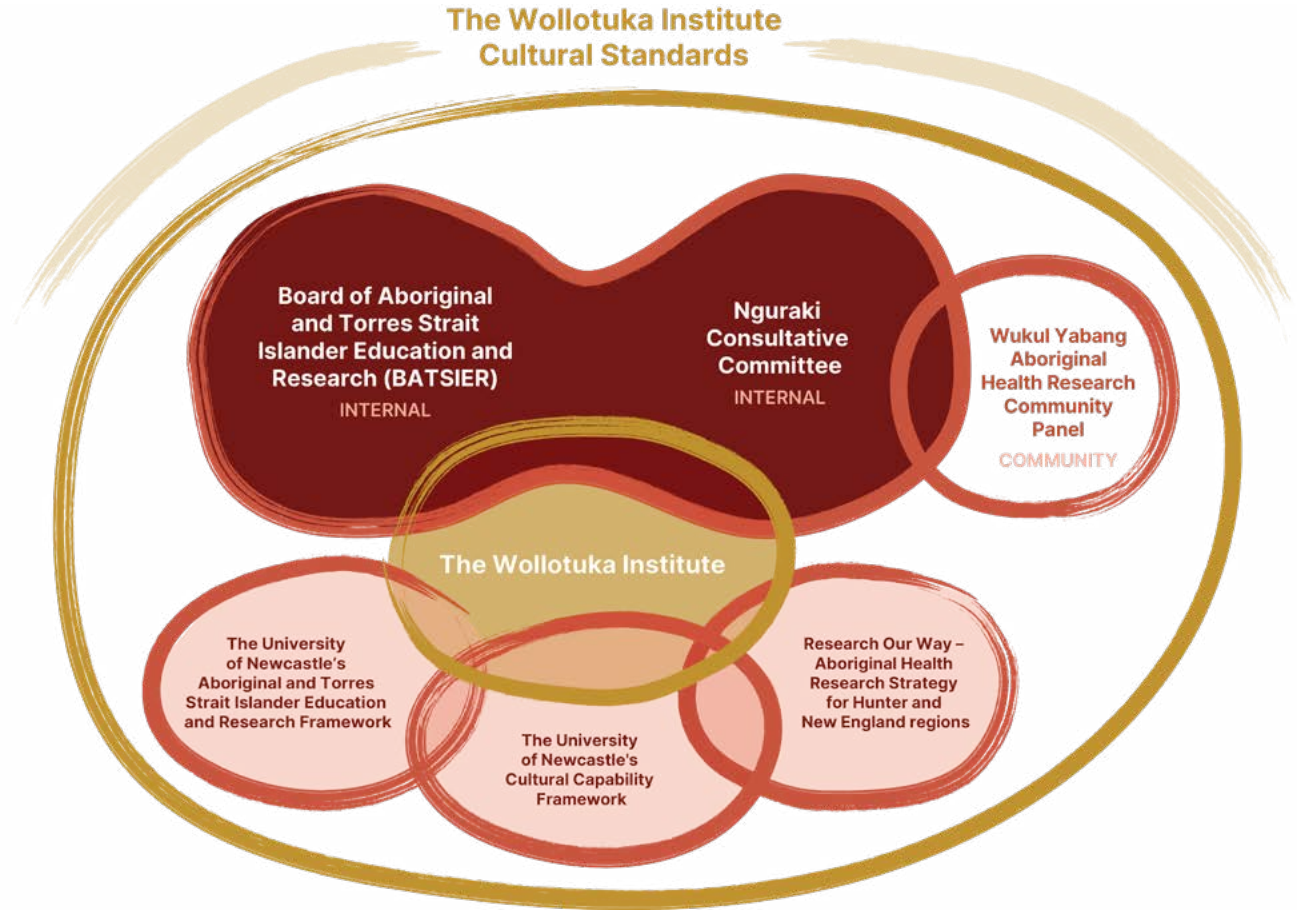


Figure 1. Cultural Governance Structures at the University of Newcastle Diagram, 2026.

CORE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

The University of Newcastle has two major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led internal governance structures:

- **Board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research (BATSIER):** BATSIER provides strategic advice to the Vice-Chancellor on all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander matters across the University. It plays a pivotal role in strategic planning, program funding, and the development of education, research, operations and international engagement that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. BATSIER is comprised of representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, staff, and student populations, and serves as the University's central consultation mechanism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-related initiatives.
- **Nguraki Consultative Committee:** A collective of respected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and cultural mentors, Nguraki guides the Wollotuka Institute's core functions in alignment with the established Cultural Standards. The committee provides culturally grounded perspectives on student and staff engagement, teaching, research, and community advocacy.

To extend governance beyond the University and ensure community-led oversight of health research, a regional Aboriginal governance panel has been created:

- **Wukul Yabang – Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel:** Wukul Yabang ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lead and shape health research conducted by the University, the Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI), and the Hunter New England Local Health District (HNELHD). The panel assesses research proposals for ethical rigour, cultural appropriateness, community benefit, and alignment with local health priorities. Its diverse membership includes Elders, knowledge holders, academics, and health professionals, who actively support researchers, guide ethical practices, and ensure the community's voice is central in all stages of research.

SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER-LED INSTITUTE

- **The Wollotuka Institute:** Fully staffed with academics and professionals, it leads cultural, academic, and community engagement initiatives across the University and has been instrumental in increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments and retention through culturally tailored support programs.

FOUNDATIONAL CULTURAL STANDARDS FRAMEWORK

The Wollotuka Cultural Standards serve as the foundational cultural governance document for the University, articulating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing. The Standards comprise four core values and five interconnected standards, all underpinned by local cultural stories that ground governance, decision-making and institutional practice in Country, culture and community.

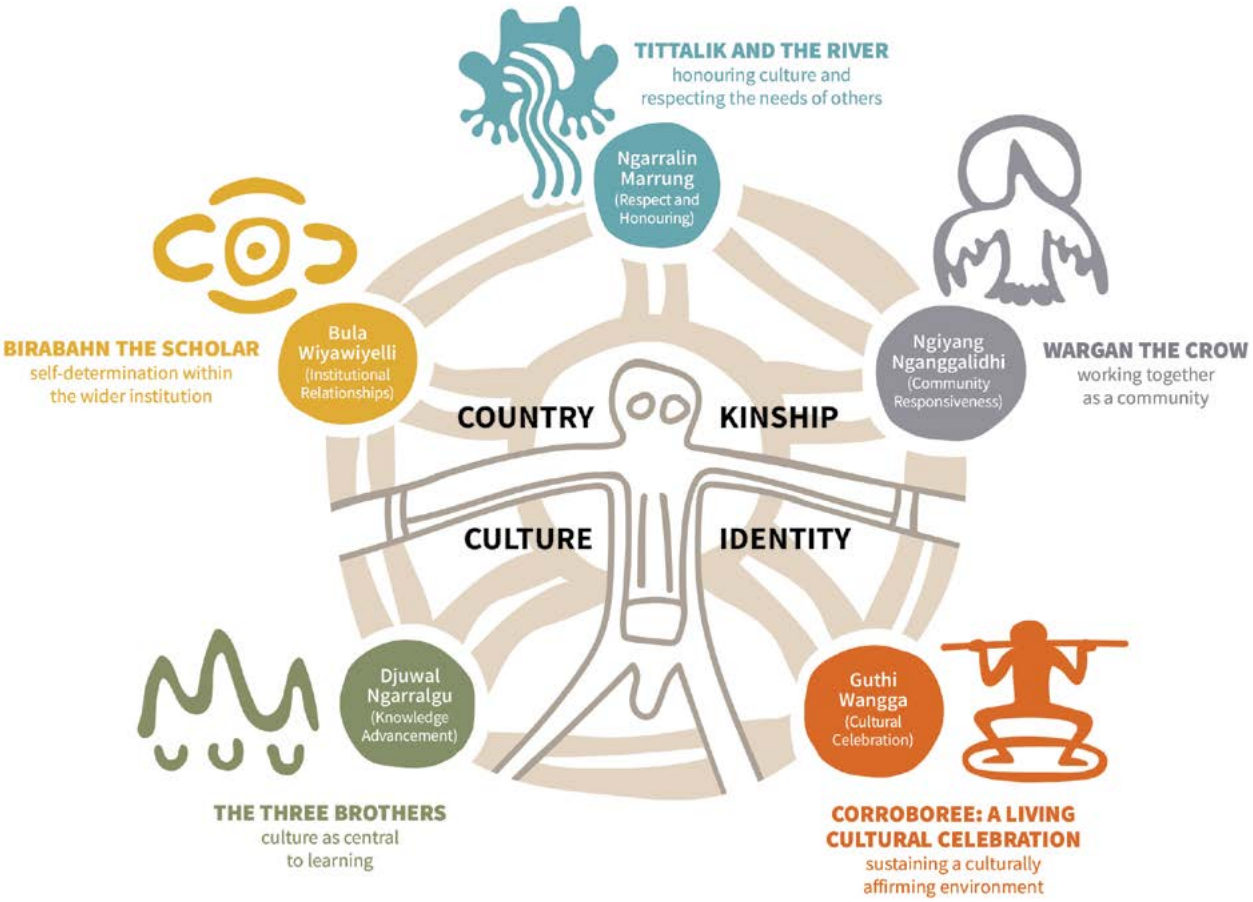


Figure 2. *Cultural Standards Diagram*, The Wollotuka Institute Cultural Standards, 2026.

Developed and upheld through the authority of Nguraki (Elders and cultural mentors), the Cultural Standards tranform Indigenous worldviews into an operational governance framework that embeds cultural integrity, accountability and self-determination across leadership, teaching, research and engagement. Their strength and rigour have been formally recognised through Wollotuka becoming the first Australian institute accredited by the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC), validating the Cultural Standards as an Indigenous-led measure of cultural governance within higher education.

> *"We endorse The Wollotuka Institute Cultural Standards, which speak to Country, Kinship, Culture and Identity. We are committed to working alongside the Wollotuka Institute and the University of Newcastle to ensure the principles within these Standards are understood, respected and embraced by all stakeholders. "*
>
> Nguraki Message, *The Wollotuka Institute Cultural Standards*, University of Newcastle

UNDERPINNING FRAMEWORKS

- **The University of Newcastle's Cultural Capability Framework:** All fixed-term and ongoing staff complete a 3-stage Cultural Capability training program, including online modules, workshops, and On-Country experiences.
- **The University of Newcastle's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research Framework**: The University supports the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student cohort among Australian universities.
- **Research Our Way – Aboriginal Health Research Strategy for Hunter and New England regions:** A region-first Aboriginal Health Research Strategy returning authority to Aboriginal communities to lead the research that impacts their lives.

Together, these governance structures, cultural frameworks and foundational standards ensure that Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems and leadership are embedded across the institution. This creates a model of governance that is culturally grounded, community-led and accountable at a level unique in the Australian higher education sector.

FUTURE DIRECTION

The Cultural Standards will underpin the strategic direction of the University of Newcastle in the future, ensuring that our shared future is culturally responsive and grounded.

Figure 3. Nguraki Committee members and staff from The Wollotuka Institute, 2025.

Case study 2: Cultural Capability Framework & Training

Embedding cultural safety at an institutional level and resourcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led knowledge-sharing at scale

Prior to 2020, cultural safety training at the University of Newcastle was ad hoc and delivered only on request, resulting in low engagement and patchy uptake. Cultural capability was not viewed as an institution-wide priority, contributing to a lack of understanding around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and intersectional concerns – particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, and their families. This led to limited cultural safety and a weaker sense of belonging across the University community.

In 2020, the Office of Indigenous Strategy and Leadership launched the Cultural Capability Framework, led by the Wollotuka Institute, to address cultural safety across the institution. The Framework aims to increase cultural capability among both staff and students by fostering a stronger understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, and contemporary issues.

Since its launch, the Cultural Capability Framework has significantly strengthened cultural safety and awareness across the University and is now embedded in the new staff on-boarding process. Over 1,000 staff have completed post-training surveys, with an average rating of 4.9 out of 5 for both delivery and content. The vast majority agreed that they learned something new (99%) and would recommend the training to others (98%).

Building cultural capability across communities

Building on this success, the University has extended its Cultural Capability Training beyond campus, making it available to **industry, government, and community organisations** across the Hunter region and beyond. This expansion allows external partners to engage directly with Aboriginal-led and locally tailored learning and to strengthen their own capacity for culturally responsive engagement. Now, more than 3,000 staff, students and community members have now participated in the training, with consistently outstanding feedback.

Cultural Capability Framework & Training

Staff Training:	Student Training:	Industry Training:
Cultural Capability Training is compulsory and aims to create a culturally responsive work environment through a better understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, cultures, and contemporary issues.	Cultural capability development is embedded across all programs of study. This approach is being expanded as part of the University's commitment to the Culturally Responsive Graduate Attributes, continuing to remain a priority for student learning.	Cultural Capability training is offered by the University to help workplaces across the Hunter and beyond lead with cultural integrity, strengthen community connections, and contribute to a more inclusive society.

Cultural Capability Framework & Training

• Part 1: Three 20-minute self-paced online modules • Part 2: A 3-hour in-person workshop, facilitated by Wollotuka staff • Part 3: A half- or full-day on-country experience, offering immersive learning led by local Aboriginal communities • Training is supported by reflective practice and ongoing feedback surveys	• Online learning modules • Establishment of the Culturally Responsive Graduate Attribute, ensuring all students have the opportunity to increase cultural knowledge and understanding irrespective of their program of study • Integration of cultural knowledge into curricula • Increased inclusion of Wollotuka-taught core courses within programs of study	• Part 1: Three online Modules designed to build foundational knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and contemporary issues • Part 2: 3-hour face-to-face workshop designed to build upon foundational knowledge and provide tailored advice and feedback on the specific organisation's values and experiences • Ongoing advice and support

Figure 4. Cultural Capability Framework & Training at the University of Newcastle.

Scan to learn more about Cultural Capability Training on the University's website

Described by participants as "transformational," the training has deepened understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and reshaped approaches to teaching, leadership, and community engagement, fostering greater cultural confidence, empathy, and accountability across the institution.

The program has been embraced by a diverse range of sectors, with early participants including **Wests Group Australia, Kaplan Australia, EJE Architecture**, and **Terras Landscape Architects**. Industry participants report that the training provides not only cultural insight but also practical tools for embedding respect, inclusion, and understanding into workplace culture, recruitment, and community engagement.

Figure 5. Cultural Capability Training facilitators, Kayla Faulkner and Dr Jake MacDonald.

Growing demand reflects recognition that cultural capability is fundamental to effective leadership and organisational integrity. Highlighted in the Universities Australia 2022-2025 Indigenous Strategy as a best practise example, the Cultural Capability Framework and associated training demonstrate how universities can move beyond awareness-raising to sustained, Aboriginal-led cultural change. Leadership can drive social impact, strengthen connections, create safer workplaces, and foster genuine reconciliation across communities.

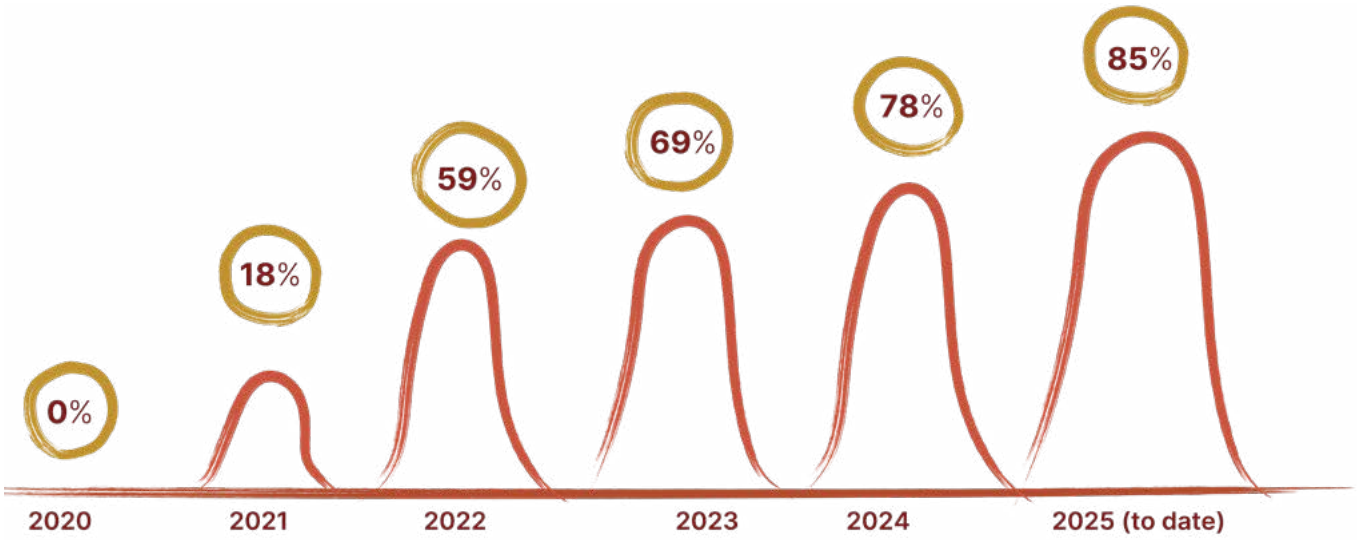


Figure 6. Staff Cultural Capability training uptake over time (2020–2025).

OVER
1,000+
staff surveyed

4.9 OUT OF **5.0**
average satisfaction
with training

99% **learned something new**

98% **would recommend** the training

FUTURE GOAL:
All new staff
complete cultural capability training
as part of their on-boarding process

80.6% of students who responded have been **exposed to knowledge** about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through their program.

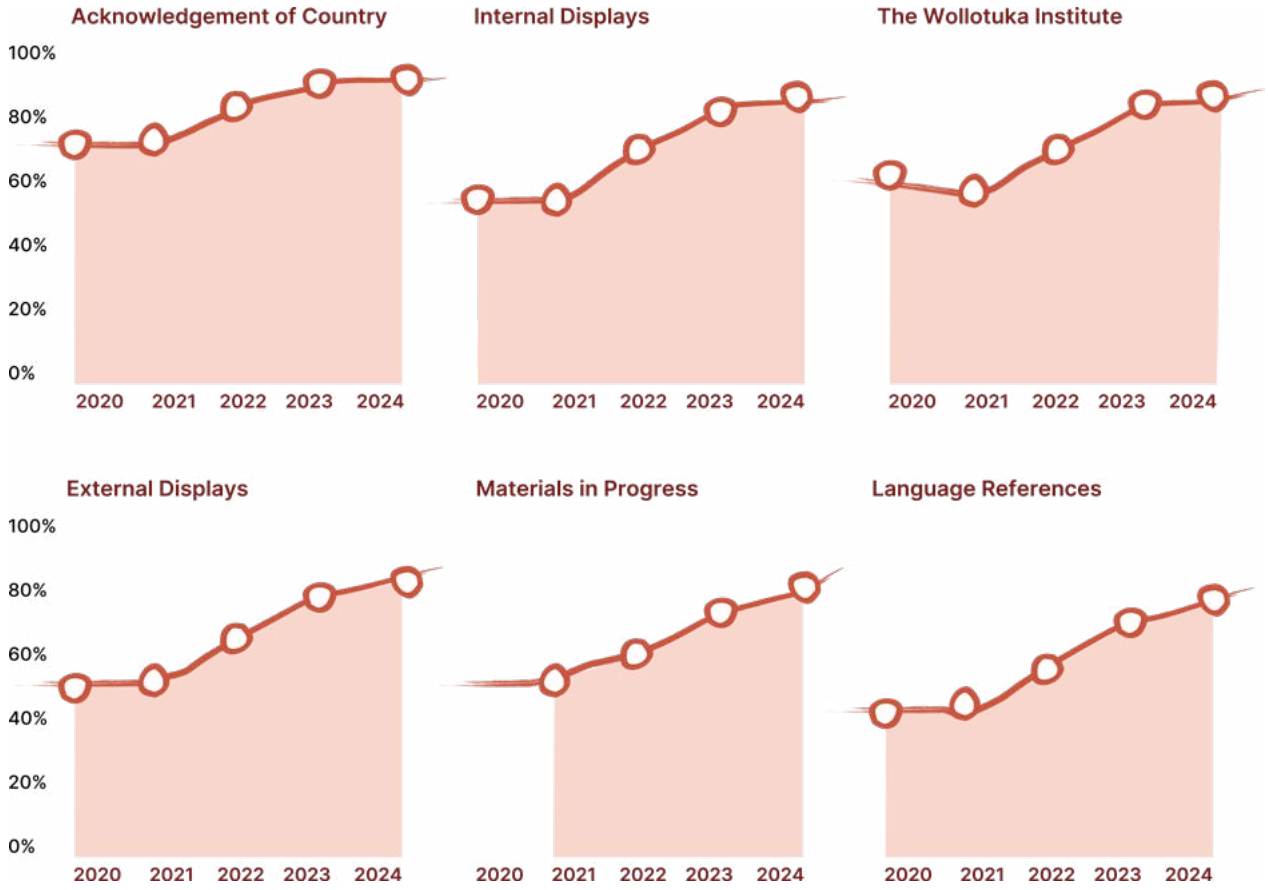


Figure 7. Percentage of responding students who have been exposed to knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures through their program.

Figure 8. Cultural Capability Training in the classroom.
Figure 9. Cultural Capability Training on Country.

Case study 3: University of Newcastle Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research Framework

Weaving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, knowledge and excellence into every aspect of the University of Newcastle

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples bring rich cultural knowledge systems, strong community leadership, and deep resilience to higher education. While systemic barriers—such as underrepresentation, cultural disconnection, and limited access to culturally safe learning environments—continue to shape experiences, there are significant opportunities to build on these strengths. By strengthening representation, creating culturally connected and safe learning environments, and supporting community-led approaches, higher education institutions can foster academic success and broaden social and economic participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Launched in 2021, the University's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research Framework positions Indigenous self-determination, cultural authority and community partnership as central drivers of excellence across the institution. The framework sets out a comprehensive, whole-of-university strategy built around four key pillars:

- **Cultural Knowledge and Understanding**: embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, perspectives, and cultural practices across teaching, learning, and research.
- **Participation and Retention:** adopting a whole-of-life approach that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement and success in higher education.
- **Research to Influence Change:** advancing research led by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, focused on community priorities, impact and outcomes.
- **Engagement and Community Collaboration for Reconciliation:** strengthening partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to foster meaningful collaboration, shared decision-making and respect for cultural authority.

Guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led governance and partnership structures, the Framework embeds self-determination in its design, implementation and evaluation. It also aligns closely with the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022–2025.

Community members have affirmed that the University's commitment to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and embedding cultural knowledge is creating a learning environment that is culturally grounded, inclusive and empowering. They highlight that this strengths-based, self-determined approach not only supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to flourish but also enriches the broader University community by deepening cultural understanding.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Enrolments 2020–2025

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Enrolments: the University has seen a significant increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments, reflecting the success of its inclusive strategies.

Year	Total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments	Total number of domestic student enrolments	% of domestic student enrolments that are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
2020	1353	32724	4.13%
2021	1464	33835	4.33%
2022	1420	31471	4.51%
2023	1416	29744	4.76%
2024	1548	30803	5.03%
2025	1607	31276	5.14%

Figure 10. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Enrolments 2020–2025.
Source: 101 - Program Profile (Annual) Power BI Report.
Note: 2025 is year-to-date – as at 26 August 2025.

Figure 11: Celebrating NAIDOC Week at Ourimbah Campus, 2024.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff Representation 2020–2025

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff Representation: there has been notable growth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff across various roles, enhancing cultural leadership within the institution.

Year	Total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff	Total number of staff	% of staff cohort that are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
2020	95	3353	2.83%
2021	97	3211	3.02%
2022	101	3133	3.22%
2023	103	3231	3.19%
2024	107	3251	3.29%
2025	118	3611	3.27%

Figure 12. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Saff Representation 2020–2025.
Source: Data warehouse (from HR Ascender), 26 August 2025.
Ongoing and Fixed Term employment snapshot as at 31 March.

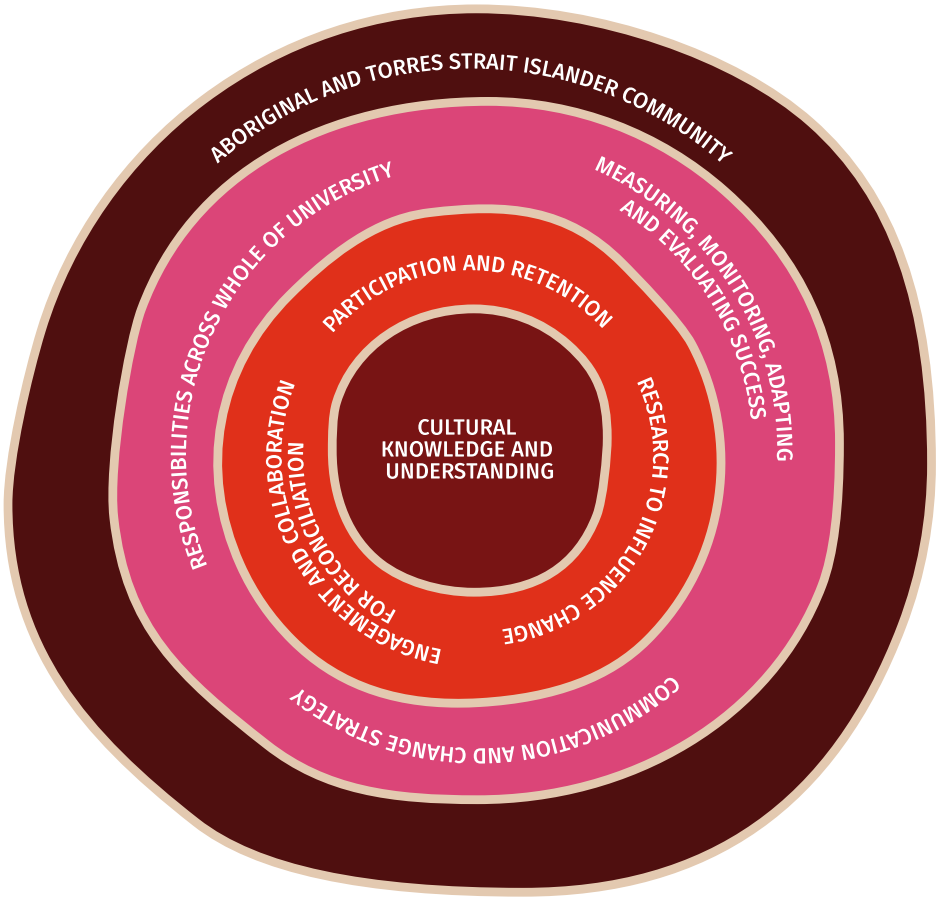
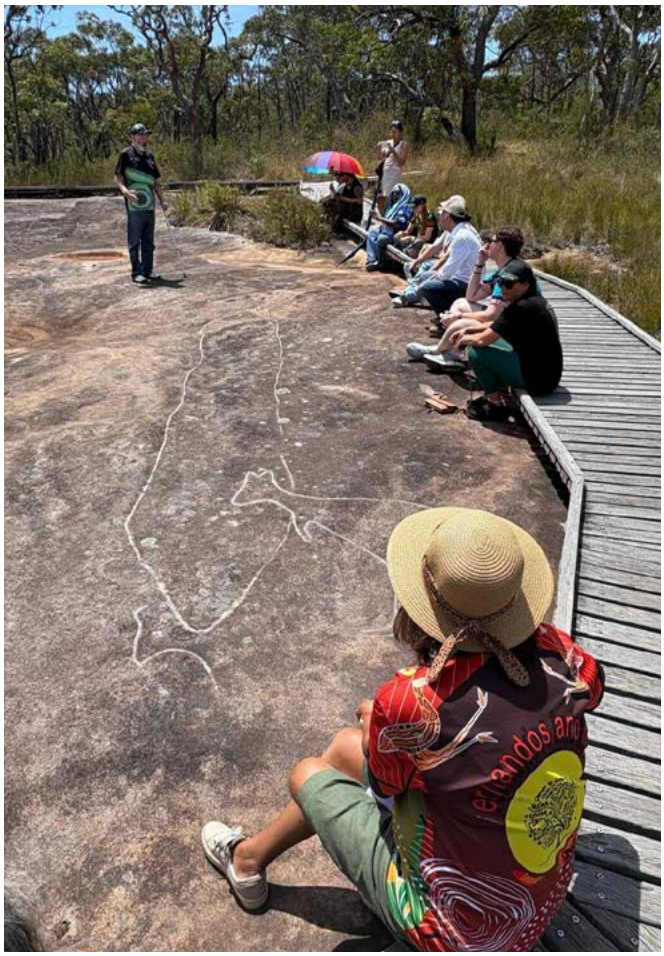


Figure 13. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research Framework 2020–2025 Diagram 2020, illustrating how cultural knowledge lives at the centre of the Framework and is embedded across the University's relationships, teaching, research and reconciliation efforts.

Scan to learn more Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025.



Scan to learn more about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research Strategy

Figure 14. Delegates of the International Traditional Indigenous Knowledges Institute, November 2025.
Figure 15. Presenter Simon Munro, and guests at the Umulliko Wollotuka Research Gathering, 2024.
Figure 16. Students viewing the Bulgandry rock art led by Uncle BJ Duncan on Darkinjung Country.
Figure 17. Members of the Wollotuka Men's Group, 2025.

Case study 4: Research Our Way – Aboriginal Health Research Strategy

Shifting the way research is conceptualised, governed and used to create change

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the Hunter and New England regions experience persistent health inequities, driven by systemic barriers, historical trauma, racism and a lack of culturally safe care. For too long, health research has been conducted on communities without their leadership or consent, resulting in limited community benefit, research fatigue, and mistrust. There has been a clear need to shift research power, purpose, and practice.

Research Our Way is a region-first Aboriginal Health Research Strategy grounded in the principle of Strength to Sovereignty, returning authority to Aboriginal communities to lead the research that impacts their lives. The strategy was co-developed by the University of Newcastle in partnership with Awabakal Ltd, Hunter New England Local Health District, and HMRI.

At the Strategy's core is Wukul Yabang – Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel – an independent, community-led group that reviews all research involving Aboriginal peoples in the region. Its role is to ensure research is ethically sound, culturally respectful, and aligned with community priorities and Aboriginal knowledge systems. The Panel is comprised of Elders, knowledge holders, academics, and health professionals, who assess proposals for cultural appropriateness, ethical rigour, and community benefit. They actively support researchers and ensure the community's voice is central in all stages of research.

> "*Over the past year I am excited to see how the research landscape is moving toward research conducted with Aboriginal peoples opposed to research conducted on Aboriginal peoples. Researchers are taking our advice and I can see a shift in research practices that will privilege Aboriginal consumer/patient voices and enrich the findings to support all consumers*."
>
> (Aboriginal Elder and Awabakal Traditional Owner, and Wukul Yabang member)

Through Wukul Yabang's leadership and deep community partnerships, the strategy is fostering trust, strengthening research relevance, and creating outcomes that reflect and respect Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

Importantly, the strategy also upholds Aboriginal data sovereignty, ensuring that Aboriginal people have control over how data about them is collected, accessed, stored and used. This principle is embedded in the governance of the strategy, and guarantees that data practices are culturally appropriate, ethically sound, and aligned with community expectations. By placing decision-making power in the hands of Aboriginal communities, the strategy protects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights to data and knowledge and supports self-determination in research.

Research Our Way Strategy at a glance

Launched: 2021

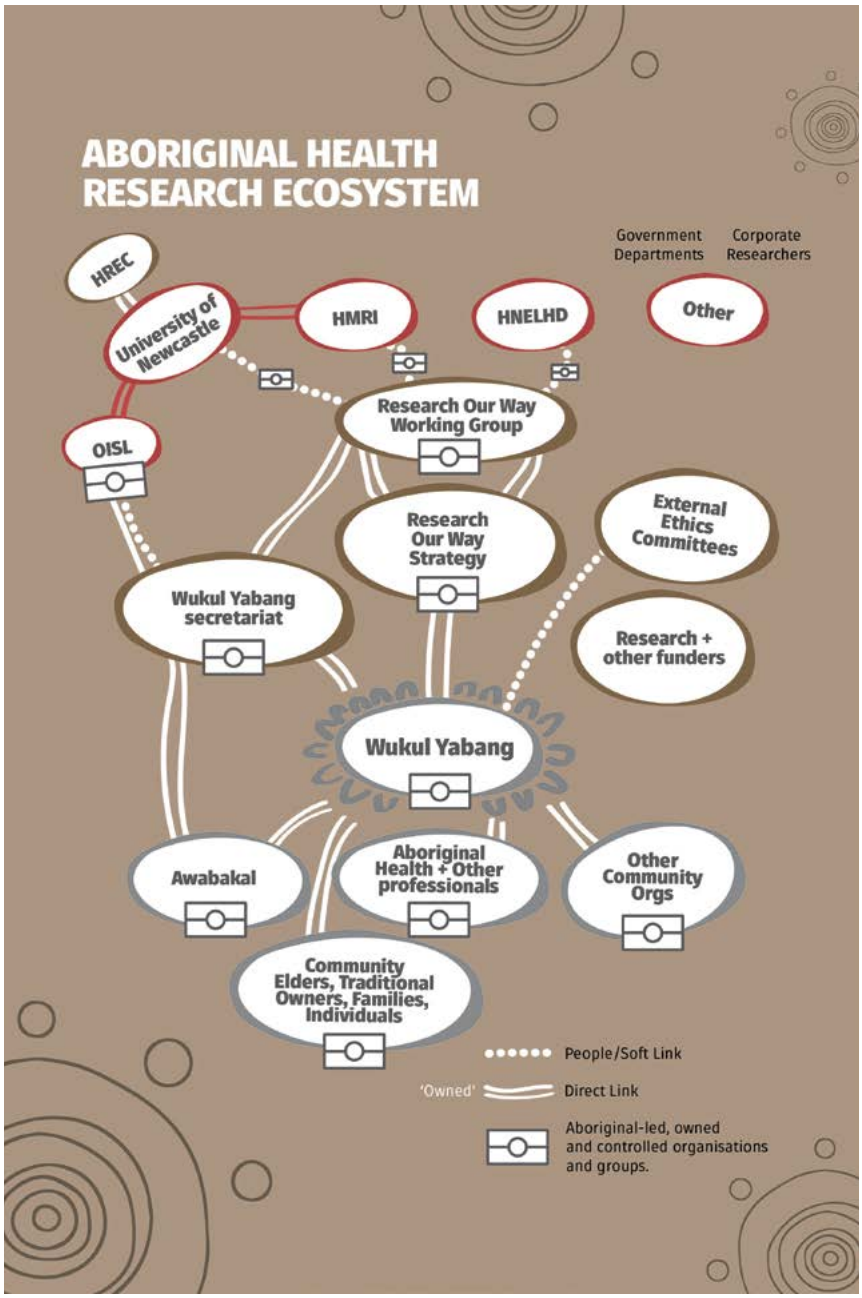
Funding: Approximately $3 million awarded via the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) to support Aboriginal health research projects

Scope: Wukul Yabang – Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel reviews all Aboriginal health research involving Hunter and New England Aboriginal communities

Timeline: Five-year strategy with annual review checkpoints

Scan to learn more

about the Aboriginal Health Research Strategy & Wukul Yabang



Scan to watch

Research Our Way video

Figure 18. *Aboriginal Health Research Ecosystem Diagram*, Wakul Yabang Aboriginal Health Research Panel.
Figures 19. and 20. Images from the 'Research Our Way' Video in Worimi Country, featuring Jamie Tarrant and Yeena Thompson.

Case study 5: Muku (Ear) Indigenous Research Program

"Our kids are seen faster and in ways that respect who we are and how we live."

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience the highest rates of chronic otitis media globally, affecting up to 70% in some remote communities. Often beginning in infancy, the condition can cause persistent hearing loss that undermines language development, learning, school engagement, employment opportunities, and cultural and social inclusion.

Despite decades of research and interventions, ear disease continues to drive health inequity. There has been no sustained national leadership or coordinated approach to prevention and care, leaving communities to bear the ongoing burden.

To address this challenge, Professor Kelvin Kong and fellow collaborators developed Muku (Ear) Indigenous Research – an overarching framework that unites a suite of Aboriginal-led research, clinical initiatives, and community engagement activities under a shared vision for culturally grounded ear health care.

Derived from the Gathang word for "ear," Muku serves as a cultural anchor for this work, connecting research and clinical practice with Country, language, and community. It represents a collective identity for the projects led by Professor Kong and his team at the University of Newcastle and the Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI).

These projects aim to:

- Improve ear health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Embed community co-design and cultural safety in research.
- Develop telehealth ENT clinics, audiology-led models, and workforce pathways for Indigenous clinicians.

These efforts respond to stark realities: 43% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 7+ have measurable hearing loss,[1] and otitis media affects up to 70% of children in remote communities.

Scan to watch the Hear the Difference video and learn more about *Muku (Ear) Indigenous Research Program*

Figure 21. Professor Kelvin Kong, advancing ear-heath care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024). *Ear and hearing health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 2024: Measured hearing loss.*

Central to Muku's success is Wukul Yabang – Aboriginal Health Research Community Panel, which guides research priorities and ensures cultural safety. This co-design approach builds trust and relevance, leading to a number of improved health outcomes including access to ENT specialists through telehealth and creating pathways for Indigenous researchers.

Engagement initiatives such as the Muku Research Kids STEM program inspire the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, fostering long-term capacity building.

Muku aligns with the University's Indigenous Education & Research Framework and Research Our Way – Aboriginal Health Research Strategy, which prioritise Aboriginal governance, cultural safety, and community benefit. By embedding co-design and culturally grounded care into health research, Muku exemplifies these principles and works to address systemic health inequities.

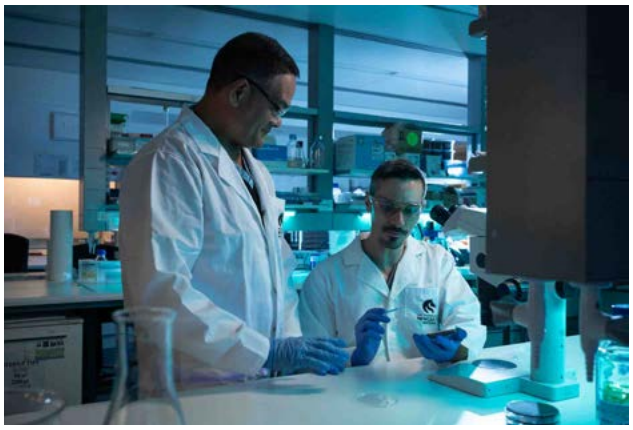


Figure 22. Muku (Ear) Indigenous Research Program collaborators, Professor Kelvin Kong and Dr Guy Cameron.
Figure 23. Classroom image of Marcus, recipient of telehealth ear-health care, from the 'Hear the Difference' video.
Figure 24. Marcus having his ears checked by an Aboriginal Health Practitioner, clinic image from the 'Hear the Difference' video.

Case study 6: Evaluating the Expanded Connected Communities Strategy (2024)

Modeling culturally responsive research – for community, with community

In many regional and remote communities in NSW, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face systemic educational inequity. Challenges include low student engagement, limited cultural visibility in schools, and weak links between schools and community. These structural issues contribute to lower academic achievement, reduced wellbeing, and a lack of trust in education systems. Connected Communities schools in areas with high Aboriginal enrolments were identified as needing a coordinated approach that supports community-led solutions centred on culture and identity in education.

In response, the NSW Department of Education expanded its Connected Communities Strategy to 33 schools. The University of Newcastle, who authored and developed the Department's Re-Imagining Evaluation Framework, were engaged to lead a culturally responsive evaluation of the expanded Connected Community strategy in schools with high Aboriginal enrolments. In conducting the evaluation, the team applied the Re-Imagining Evaluation Framework's guiding principles. Aboriginal researchers who led the work embodied these practices to ensure the process was ethical, relational and centred on community knowledge and experiences, while thoughtfully accounting for cultural nuances and ensuring cultural credibility.

This evaluation represents a unique model within higher education – where a university is not just evaluating for community, but with community, in ways led by community. The collaborative process spanned approximately 18-24 months and culminated in a public-facing report, a thematic framework, and multimedia impact storytelling outputs.

Figure 25. Toomelah Public School Connected Communities school visit, © 2023 Conor Ashleigh.

The evaluation foregrounded community voices, revealing powerful stories of transformation. Participants consistently highlighted improvements in student belonging, cultural responsiveness, and respectful relationships between schools, local Aboriginal communities and inter-agency partners.

> *"Our kids now see culture reflected in every part of school life – on the walls, in the curriculum, in the faces leading our classrooms."*
>
> Connected Communities Strategy evaluation participant

Figure 26. Boggabilla Central School Connected Communities school visit, © 2023 Conor Ashleigh.
Figure 27. Nathan Towney and Monica McKenzie, © 2023 Conor Ashleigh.

The process itself was empowering – face-to-face interactions became opportunities for healing, reflection, and re-assertion of Aboriginal leadership in education. Several communities described the evaluation as the first time they felt heard in a way that respected their knowledge systems and lived realities.

- 33 schools evaluated across rural and remote NSW
- 7 deep dive case studies involving students, families and carers, Elders, school leaders, local Aboriginal community members, AECG representatives, Aboriginal Education Officers and other locally identified stakeholders
- 18–24 month evaluation with multiple face-to-face touchpoints, including school and community visits, sense-making, loop-back discussions and data co-analysis to build credibility and strengthen relationships
- Qualitative data was gathered using various methodologies throughout the evaluation, including semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and collective yarning

This framework positions culture, Country and community voice as fundamental to measuring impact and re-imagining success-measures that are localised and place-based. The evaluation highlights how university partnerships can elevate cultural responsiveness not only in schools, but also in research, philanthropy and systems change. It's a tangible example of how the University is advancing an approach to higher education philanthropy grounded in respect, reciprocity and impact.

Figure 28. The Re-imagining Evaluation Principles Diagram, The University of Newcastle, 2022.

Scan to learn more about the culturally responsive evaluation report, the Connected Communities Strategy, and **Watch the video** – Our Voices, Our Stories – our experiences of the Connected Communities Strategy

Figures 29–31. Images from the Toomelah Public School Connected Communities school visit, © 2023 Conor Ashleigh.

Case study 7: Ngarrama – A Night of Reflection and Reconciliation

Creating meaningful, visible acts of reconciliation that foster learning, respect and healing

Australia Day remains a divisive date, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as it marks the beginning of colonisation and ongoing trauma. Opportunities for large-scale community-led truth-telling and cultural recognition are limited, especially in mainstream public spaces.

Ngarrama, meaning "to sit, listen and know", is the University of Newcastle's flagship annual reconciliation event held on the eve of Australia Day. Established in 2022 and inspired by the Barangaroo Vigil, Ngarrama is a culturally rich community gathering that centres truth-telling, storytelling, performance and dialogue.

Co-led with community and held on Awabakal and Worimi Country, Ngarrama creates a unique space in higher education for honest reflection and shared commitment to healing. Attendees consistently express deep appreciation for the event, describing it as *"A new tradition for our family"* and a *"great opportunity to learn about our history and culture."*

> *"It was so amazing to see all those people stand up and show up with an eagerness to learn from one another... on a day that can be really hard for a lot of mob and community."*
>
> Loren Collyer, Bandjin woman Interim Pro Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Leadership and Head of The Wollotuka Institute from the University of Newcastle

Supported by philanthropic partnerships, Ngarrama continues to evolve as a collaborative initiative that exemplifies community-led philanthropy in action – advancing cultural responsiveness, supporting historical acceptance, and facilitating impactful partnerships with community. It reflects key themes of respectful collaboration, embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in program design, and shifting public discourse through cultural leadership and visibility.

Figure 32. Ngarrama documentary photography courtesy Eddie O'Reilly.

Scan to watch the *Nagrrama* video

Impact (what the community is telling us):

- People are showing up: About 4,000 people attended in 2025, with "thousands" returning each year, clear evidence of ongoing community interest and relevance.
- The experience is genuinely positive: Across 2024–2025, 97.87% of surveyed attendees reported a positive experience, showing Ngarrama delivers what it promises.[1]
- It builds social connection: In the same two-year study, more than 97% said Ngarrama brings the community together and projects a positive image of the region, which aligns with the event's reconciliation aims.
- People feel welcome and learn: 94% felt welcome and included, and 90% said they learnt something new across 2024–2025, highlighting Ngarrama's role in inclusive cultural learning.
- Awarded a 'Golden Pineapple' for Event of the Year at the 2022 Hunter Diversity and Inclusion Collective Awards.
- It strengthens place-based pride: 96%+ agreed Ngarrama strengthens local pride and is an important part of the region's cultural life across 2024–2025, showing value that lasts beyond the night itself.

Figure 33. Ngarrama artwork by Belle Leonard.
Figure 34. Ngarrama documentary photography courtesy Eddie O'Reilly.

27. Olivier, L., & Calvin, S. (2026). Attendee research (2024–2025): Findings from the Ngarrama events. University of Newcastle. Unpublished report.

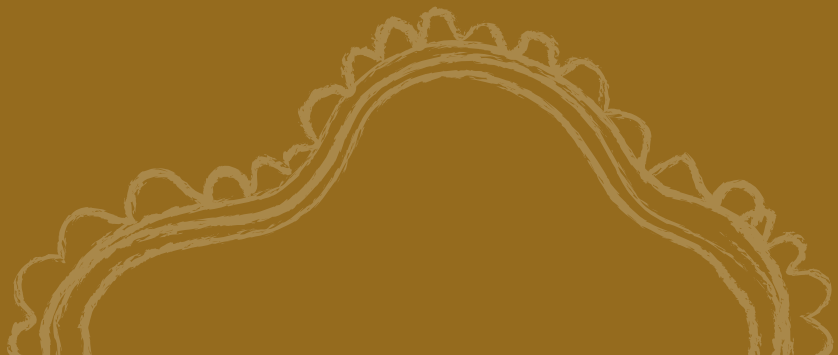
Appendix A: Methodology

The University of Newcastle and Noble Ambition have been working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders from the Wollotuka Institute at the University and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community since 2024. Our discussions around the role of philanthropy in higher education, and how to advance genuine partnerships between community, philanthropy and universities, in line with shared aspirations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, led to this paper.

To explore these questions, and related issues, we spoke to a select group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders with significant experience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy in higher education and Australian funders who have given significantly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led projects in higher education and/or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy:

- **Adrian Appo** OAM, Chair and Executive Director, First Australians Capital, International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) Board Member, The Salvation Army Australian Territory Board Member
- **Leah Armstrong**, Strategic Advisor, First Nations Economic Empowerment Alliance
- **Hamish Balnaves,** CEO, The Balnaves Foundation and **Amelia Hart,** Head of Grant Making and Impact, The Balnaves Foundation
- **Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt** AO, Laureate Fellow, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney (UTS)
- **Charlene Davison**, CEO, GO Foundation
- **Tracy Norman,** Founder and Chair, Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation and **Coralie Nichols**, CEO Ian and Shirley Norman Foundation
- **Michelle Steele,** Chief First Nations Officer, Paul Ramsay Foundation
- **Yeena Thompson** (Gamilaraay), Aboriginal Health Research Partner, the University of Newcastle

Nathan Towney, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Engagement and Equity (Interim) and **Loren Collyer**, Interim Pro Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy and Leadership and Head of The Wollotuka Institute from the University of Newcastle hosted these interviews, providing a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share their knowledge and experiences, alongside **Melissa Smith** of Noble Ambition.



Appendix B: Terminology

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Through consultation with our communities, we recognise the phrase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as the preferred collective description for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We also recognise some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may prefer Indigenous or First Nations as is their self-determined right.[27]

Indigenous

We use the term Indigenous in the context of international Indigenous peoples and Indigenous-led philanthropy more broadly. We also use the term non-Indigenous to refer to Australians who do not identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.[28]

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy

We refer to the definition provided by Philanthropy Australia in its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey to inform what we mean by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy:

> For the purposes of this reporting, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led and controlled organisations is one that:
>
> 1. has been established by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, and
> 2. operates for the primary benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and/or organisations, and
> 3. has a majority (51%) Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body (Directors), and is
> 4. controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, and is
> 5. a charity, not-for-profit organisation, incorporated under Commonwealth, state or territory legislation.[29]

Indigenous-led philanthropy

We use the following definition from International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) to define what we mean by Indigenous-led philanthropy:

> *Giving by Indigenous Led Funds and Indigenous Peoples' Organizations informed and guided by Indigenous worldviews, values, and protocols, and led and managed by, for, and with Indigenous Peoples.*[30]

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17 University of Newcastle Reconciliation Action Plan July 2022 – July 2025.

28 Ibid.

29 Philanthropy Australia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Funders Reporting Survey, Survey Information, 1 August 2024. Information, 1 August 2024.

30 Archipel Research and Consulting (2024). Global Funding Trend Analysis on Indigenous Philanthropy.

Culturally-responsive

In its Cultural Capability Framework (2020-2025)[31] the University of Newcastle defines cultural responsiveness as:

> *The effective engagement and promotion of the socioeconomic, political and cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is having the ability to effectively forge relationships with people from other cultures, actively engage in ongoing learning, re-evaluation and participation in creating positive change within environments.*
>
> *Creating culturally responsive environments is to use a decolonising, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led approach to be responsive to the diverse needs, backgrounds, experiences and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This involves respectful and genuine engagement and relationship building with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Cultural Responsiveness is valuing the knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the experts in leading cultural change within policies and practice to create a culturally capable environment for all.*
>
> *For universities, there is an understanding that strategy and policy development that is responding to the cultural needs within the university must be led by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff.*

Impactful for communities

In framing our discussions with sector representatives, and the context of this paper, Professor Kelvin Kong AM and Mr Nathan Towney offered this definition of impactful for communities:

> *To align with foundational principle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determinism, true success in Indigenous-led philanthropy must be measured, first and foremost, by the self-determined well-being and agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, as articulated by communities themselves. Being impactful for communities requires honouring cultural knowledge systems to assess whether initiatives are culturally responsive and aligned with community-defined priorities.*
>
> *At its core, success is relational. It is reflected in the dignity of Indigenous leadership shaping decisions, the redistribution of resources to sustain Indigenous-driven solutions, and the transformational outcomes that emerge when universities and philanthropy operate as accountable partners rather than gatekeepers to transformational opportunities, wealth and success.*

31 Cultural Capability Framework 2020 – 2025.

Glossary

CASE

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education is an international association of education institutions serving more than 3,200 universities, colleges, schools and related organisations in 45 countries.

www.case.org

Advancement

CASE defines Advancement as 'the systematic, integrated method of managing relationships in order to increase an educational institution's support from its key outside constituents, including alumni and friends, government policy makers, the media, members of the community, and philanthropic entities of all types.'

Artwork Story

Artwork:

Philanthropy, Our Way Collaborative Artwork (2025–2026)
Digital artwork from scanned watercolour and oil pastel on paper

Participants:

University of Newcastle and Noble Ambition staff, with researchers, project partners, and community.

Artwork Story:

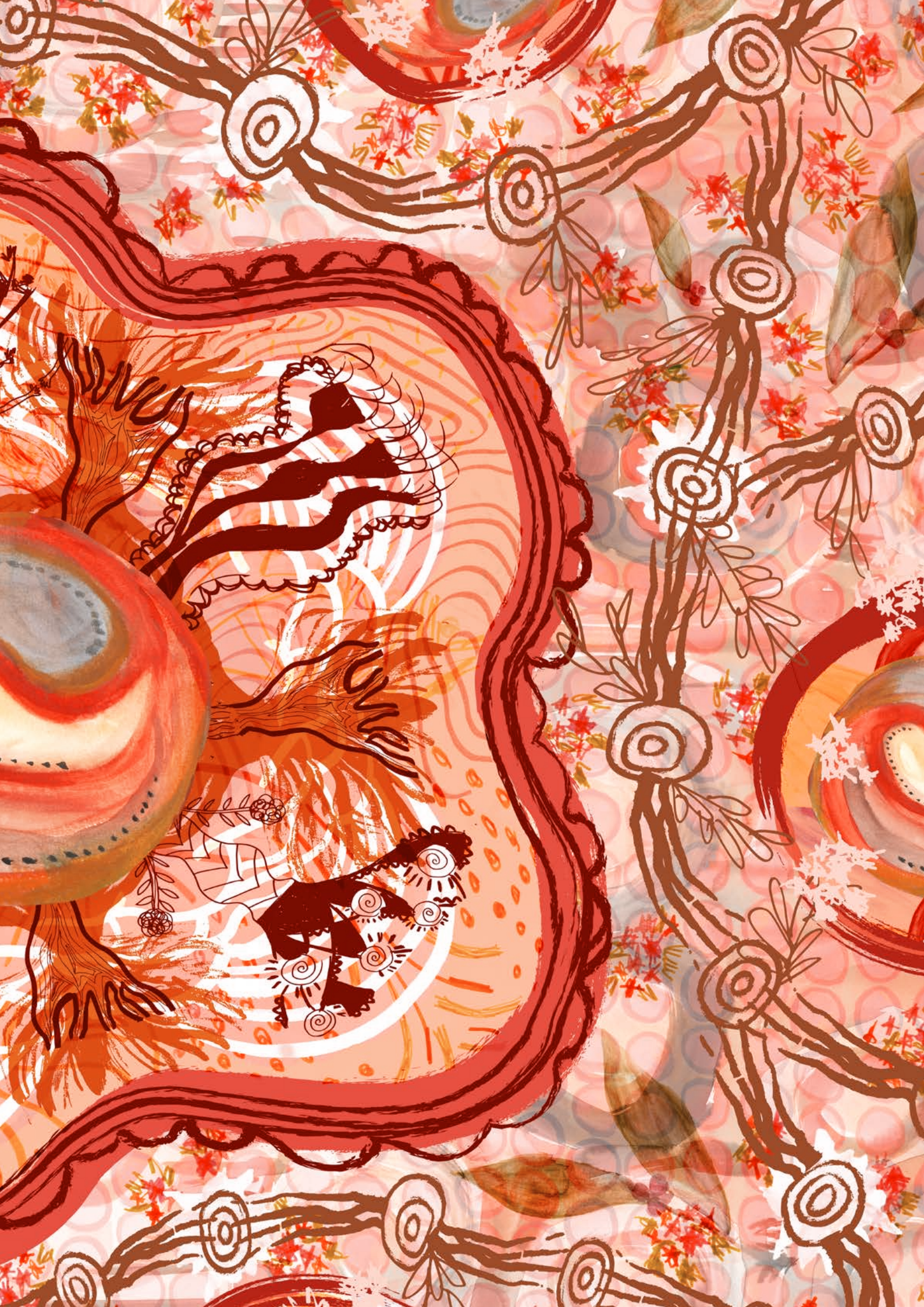
The *Philanthropy, Our Way* artwork was co-created though a collaborative workshop process facilitated by the University Galleries, where contributors generated visual responses to the themes developed in the co-authored paper, which were then interpreted though digital design. This shared creative process invited participants to respond, reflect, and engage with the *Philanthropy, Our Way* research in new and meaningful ways.

With consideration for the University of Newcastle's approach, ambition, and leadership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy, the workshop provided an opportunity to consider and articulate insights from the research through visual storytelling, as well as reflect the diverse perspectives and creativity of the participants. The collective creative outcomes were combined and interpreted digitally to generate a work of authentic visual storytelling as a contribution to the dissemination of the research.

The seed emerged as a powerful visual representation, with roots grounded in Country, and branching into diverse forms connected by symbols of community and relationships. The design tells the story of the seeds of many ideas, and visualises the growth of many projects realised through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led philanthropy.

The artwork also honours collaboration and multiple forms of knowledge; respecting the many cultures, circumstances, skills, and histories which bring us together to envisage culturally responsive philanthropic ecosystems that support positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for the future.

Figure 35. Philanthropy, Our Way Collaborative Artwork (2025–2026).
Figure 36. Collaborative Artmaking Workshop participants, The University Galleries, 2025.



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