

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.

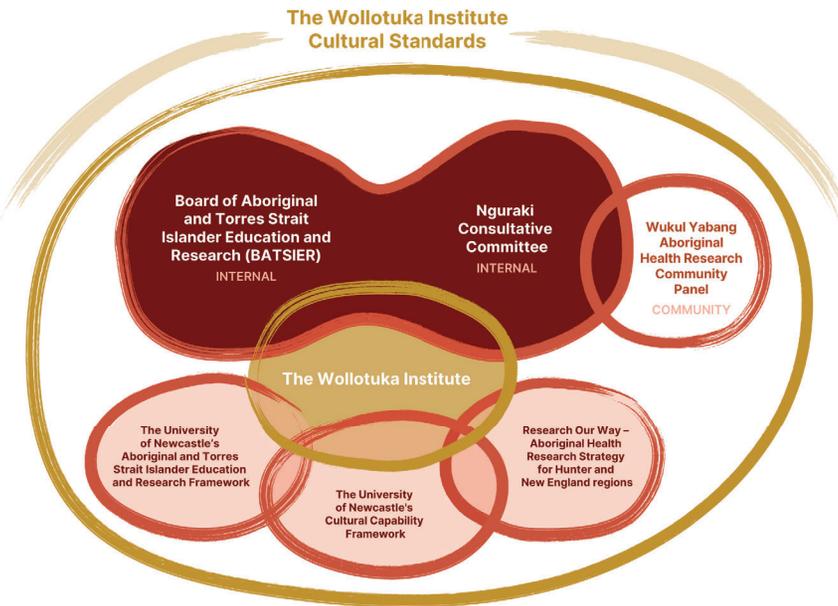


Figure 1. Cultural Governance Structures at the University of Newcastle Diagram, 2026.

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.

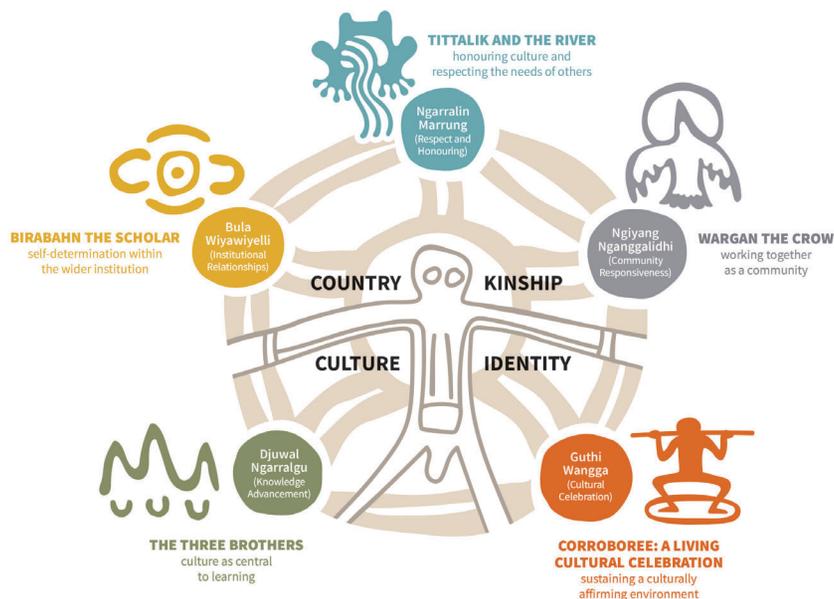


Figure 2. Cultural Standards Diagram, The Wollotuka Institute Cultural Standards, 2026.

Developed and upheld through the authority of Nguraki (Elders and cultural mentors), the Cultural Standards transform 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.