

## 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.