

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership and Participation in Research



This information sheet may be useful for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations who are interested in research, thinking about being involved in research or have recently become involved in research.

What is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in research?

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we have the right to lead and actively participate in decisions that involve us. This includes in programs, policies, projects and research¹. Effective and meaningful engagement means that all researchers should demonstrate that involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations have power, trust, and free, prior and informed consent in the research project.

What is effective engagement?

Effective engagement refers to the research leadership and participation rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations to:



Identify
research
priorities.

Author reports
and other
publications.

Understand the
implications of
the research
project.

Participate in all stages of the research, including project design, gathering data, writing up results and presenting research findings in public forums—this includes leadership, participation, and workforce development activities.

Have free, prior, informed consent prior to participation in any aspect of the research project.

Co-design
and develop
research
projects.

Be adequately
resourced and
supported to lead
and participate.

Secret and
sacred
material

Why is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement and leadership important in research?

There has been a long history of exploitation in research. In response, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific peoples have established ethical guidelines that affirm the rights we have to make decisions regarding what is researched, who leads and participates in research teams, and to be appropriately engaged³.

Research about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is more successful when we lead the research¹. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, including Elders, researchers, academics and communities, should be invited and engaged to co-design and lead research projects¹. The involvement of our leaders ensures effective engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and organisations.

How can I ensure effective engagement when participating in or leading research?

We have the right to:

- identify our own research priorities
- determine the questions
- co-design the project and methodologies
- secure community support
- translate the learnings into action^{3,4}.

For effective and meaningful engagement, we have the right to demand that researchers consult with us, our community members, and collaborators “to determine methods and frameworks that prioritise our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing throughout all stages of the project”⁴.

Therefore, it is important that a meaningful engagement protocol is developed as a guide for researchers, our communities and Nations². This protocol will achieve agreed expectations and outcomes².

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“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been subjected to huge amounts of research, but we’ve largely been locked out of the research process. That certainly was my experience as a researcher. I’ve also been on the other end of that where I’ve been involved in research projects and never heard the actual outcomes or how it had an impact from a ground up approach. That’s because non-Indigenous peoples did the research on us and about us - not by us, and with us and for us....This largely meant that when you did hear about...was embedded in deficit discourse where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples where the problem or the problem was placed on us, i.e. the problem with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples....But I’m really proud to say that the Lowitja Institute over it’s 23 years has played a significant role in changing that narrative.”

Dr Janine Mohamed, CEO, Lowitja Institute, Narrunga Kaurna

A meaningful engagement protocol should outline:

How and when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities contribute to the research, and how our leadership, and cultural and professional knowledges are appropriately acknowledged.

How the research will prioritise our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

How it respects, upholds and enhances our rights to control Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property¹. How it respects, upholds and enhances our rights to control Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property¹.

How Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data collection, data governance and Data Sovereignty rights are developed and reflected in the data and information gained in the research project.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, we have the right to be supported to design and conduct research so that we are comfortable, and our knowledges, cultural values, perspectives and leadership are recognised, valued and respected.

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I think research is really important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for a few reasons. The first is to really change our individual and community relationship with research. Historically we have been the subject of research....If we are heavily involved in leading the research and speaking to what research tells us, then we are in control and in charge of that process....The second reason would be that we need to be able to tell our stories our way, and research gives you the skills and the ability to do that....When we are involved in research we conceptualize research questions from a different perspective...Our answers are often different... because we are [often] interpreting... in a strength-based way. The third reason is I am a firm believer in having that same knowledge that a lot of other people have been granted the privilege of having - we must demand and have that same knowledge so we can do or use the same methods that other people have used in research on us. So, we can use those same methods to our truth.

Associate Professor Ray Lovett,
Ngiyampaa/Wongaibon

The [Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property](#) information sheet explains more about what ICIP is and how to respect it. The [Data Governance and Sovereignty](#) information sheet provides a description of these two terms in a research context.

Want to Learn More

Read the Lowitja Institute discussion paper Engaging First Peoples: A Review of Government Engagement Methods for Developing Health Policy. Prepared by A. Thorpe et al. in 2016, available [here](#).

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are effectively and meaningfully engaged, involved and leading research projects, this ensures that research is more likely to be culturally safe and has the best chance of delivering on our needs and aspirations.

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It is really important that if we are talking about culturally safe research that we have systems that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be involved at all levels, in areas that they feel safe and supported to contribute. And why is that important? Well, if we think about the centrality of culture...that's how we function and work as a community. We are all about that horizontal leadership....We all play a different role within our community and our structures. If you are thinking about undertaking research at a community level... what is that best cultural fit in the community? How do you ensure that all people are able to contribute including Elders, young people, the end users of the research topic?....If you are the outside researcher coming into community, think about checking yourself on all of those levels: Who's at the table? Whose voice is being heard? Are there voices missing from this conversation?

Kylie Stothers, Jawoyn

REFERENCES

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4. Dudgeon, P., Bray, A., Darlaston-Jones, D. & Walker, R. 2020, [Aboriginal Participatory Action Research: An Indigenous Research Methodology Strengthening Decolonisation and Social and Emotional Wellbeing](#), Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne. DOI: 10.48455/smch-8z25

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