



Strengthening outcomes through Aboriginal-led co-design: Lessons learnt from co-design in practice

Roundtable Outcomes Report

Prepared by Lowitja Institute | March 2026



Lowitja Institute acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first custodians of the land, seas and waterways of Australia and pay respect to their cultures and knowledges that have sustainably cared for Country. This position paper was developed on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung where the offices of Lowitja Institute are based. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pay our respect to them, their cultures, and their Elders past, present and future. They have paved the way, with strength, resilience and fortitude, for future generations.

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LOWITJA INSTITUTE

PO Box 1524, Collingwood

Victoria 3066 Australia

E: admin@lowitja.org.au

W: www.lowitja.org

Authors: Lowitja Institute

Artwork and graphic design: Mazart Communications




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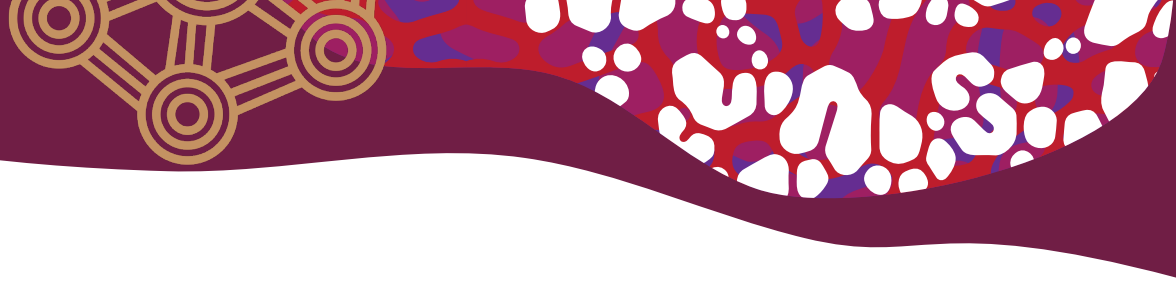
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Introduction

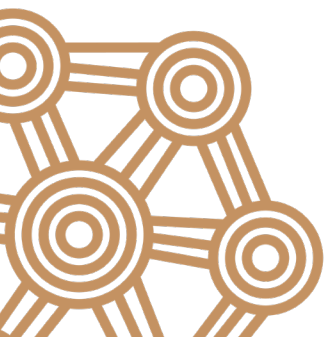
The *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* explicitly commits governments to establish formal partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community controlled organisations, to ensure that decision-making is shared and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are empowered to lead in solutions that affect our communities. These reforms are intended to move policy and program development away from ‘business as usual’ and towards genuine collaboration, power-sharing, and co-design.

To date, governments are not yet implementing shared decision-making in a way that reflects true co-design. Traditional top-down policy approaches have largely failed to address the health inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In contrast, authentic co-design centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, priorities, and values, ensuring people most affected by policies have real decision-making power in shaping them. This approach fosters self-determination, cultural safety, and equity; and leads to policies and programs that are more effective and sustainable because they reflect community-defined solutions rather than externally imposed ones.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

In 2025, Lowitja Institute undertook work, in partnership with Yardhura Walani, the National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing Research at the Australian National University, to develop a position paper aimed at sparking critical debate and discussion on the future of co-design practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. A corresponding roundtable event was held, bringing together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, experts, and practitioners of co-design.

This paper captures key findings and recommendations from this work, providing an update on consultations with key community members and stakeholders on the position paper, as well as additional strong case studies that illustrate key approaches to authentic co-design. It presents key calls to action for governments to ensure dramatic improvements in co-design practices, to further meet governments’ obligations under the priority reforms of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.



LOWITJA INSTITUTE'S POSITION PAPER

In June 2025, Lowitja Institute published a position paper, *Co-Design Versus Faux-Design of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Policy: A Critical Review*. This work began in late 2024, when Lowitja Institute commissioned Yardhura Walani, the National Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing Research at the Australian National University, to undertake a critical review and provide a summary and critical comment on current thinking and practices in co-designing health policy with and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The position paper provided an overview of key concepts, principles, and benefits of the co-design methodology; highlighted concerns with contemporary practices and tokenistic co-design; and outlined critical issues to address and achieve effective co-designed health policies. It included case studies of best practice co-design to demonstrate how co-design can be done by, with, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These case studies demonstrated the benefits of co-design, including how community-led governance, community driven priorities and self-determination can create lasting, meaningful policy change. They also provided examples of how best practice co-design can be meaningfully enacted in research and policy making.

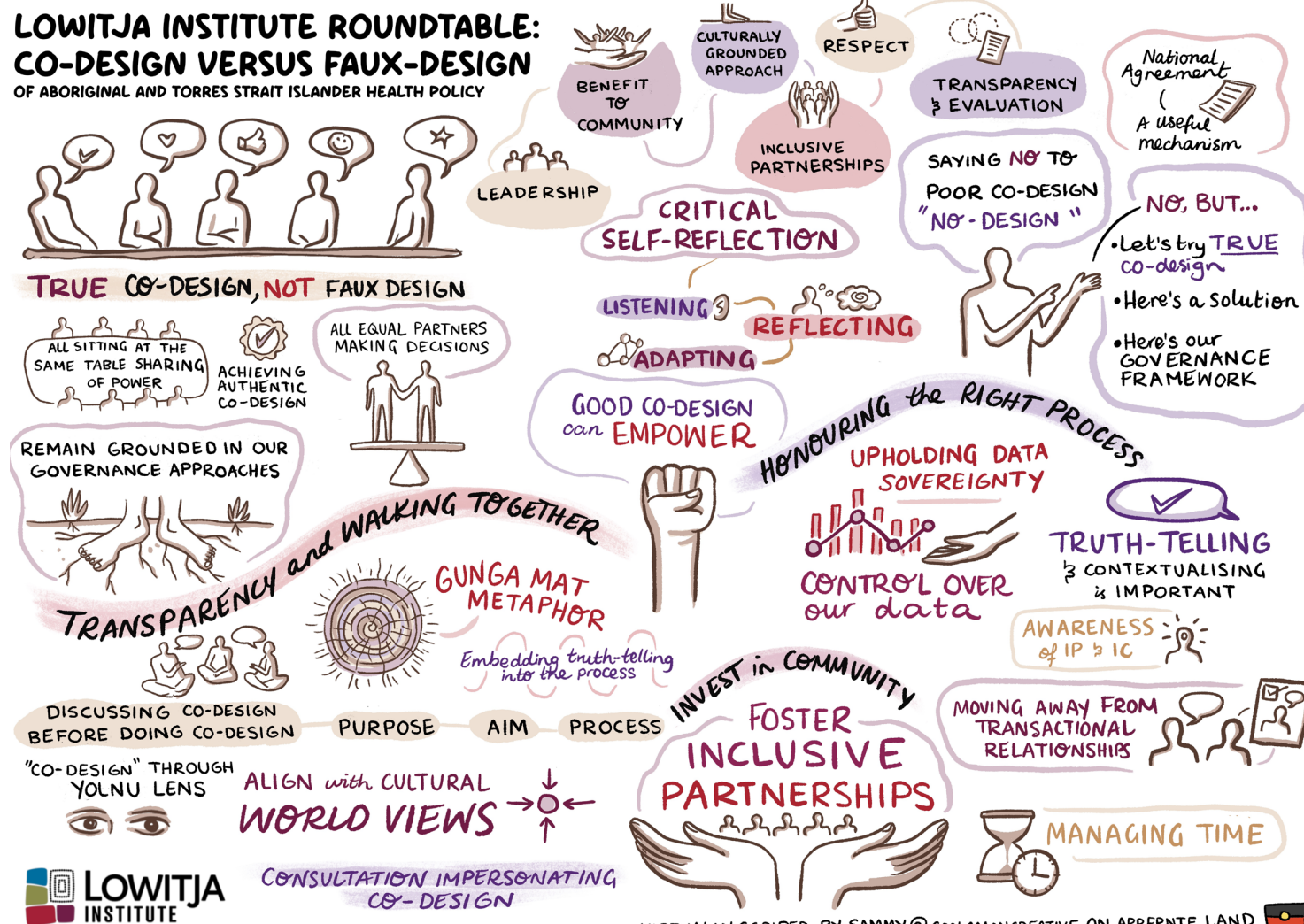
The position paper concluded by posing questions to spark debate and shape the future of co-designing policy with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Acknowledging the widespread use of co-design terminology and limited evidence of best practice co-design in Australian health policymaking, the paper emphasised that it is crucial to provide clear guidance on how collaborative processes can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to lead the design of solutions when engaging with governments on issues that affect their communities.



Knowledge translation roundtable on co-design

Lowitja Institute held a knowledge translation roundtable in 2025, following the launch of the *Co-design Versus Faux-Design of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Policy* position paper. The roundtable brought together a small group of representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations, alongside other experts and leaders, to mark the publication of the paper, and discuss key questions identified. From the event, we hoped to understand next steps and key priorities from attendees to guide potential future work.

The roundtable included two 30-minute sessions for group discussion on experiences, approaches, challenges, and solutions to co-design, and heard from speakers on experiences of best practice co-design.



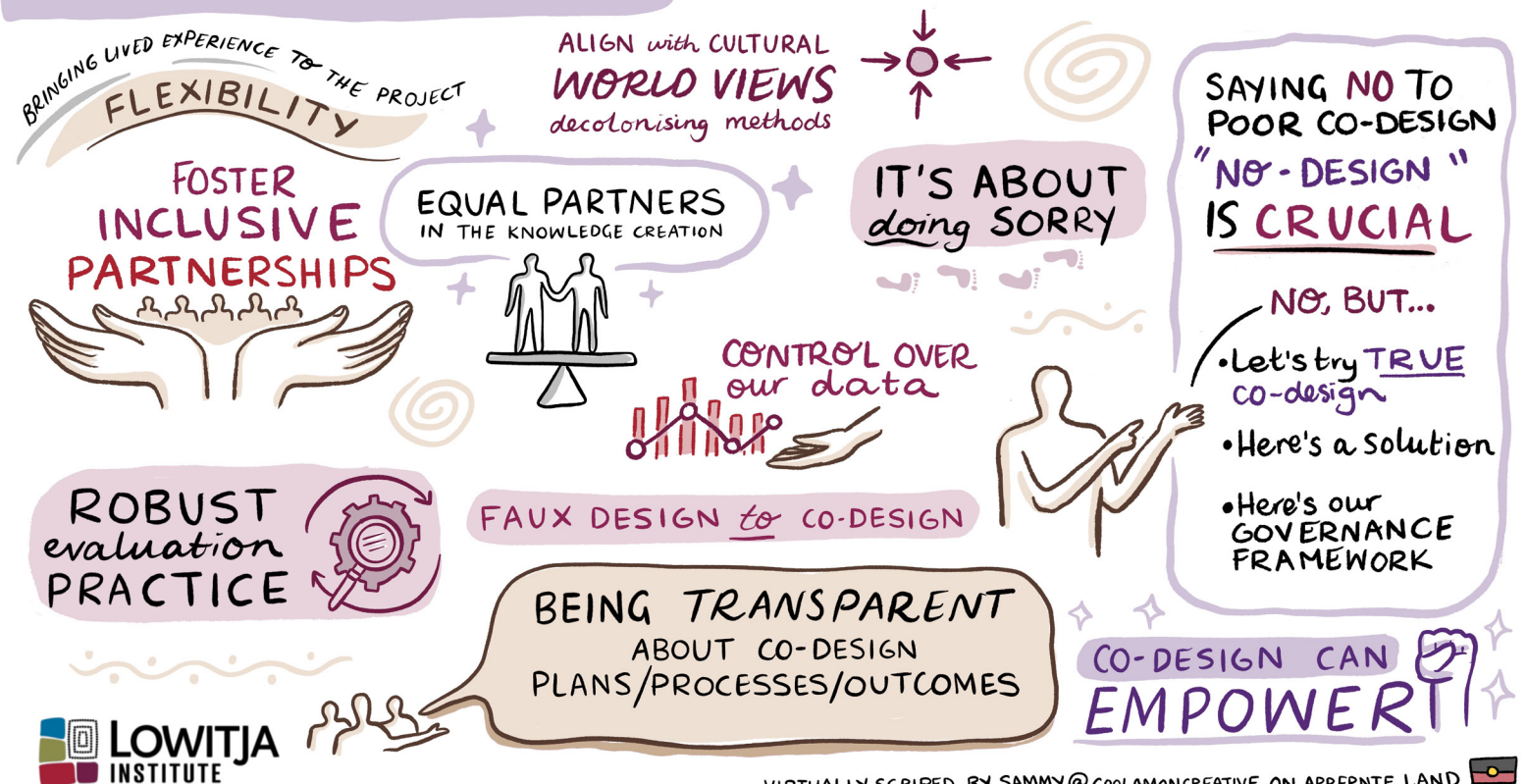
HEARING FROM THE AUTHORS: TAMARA, KATE AND OLIVER

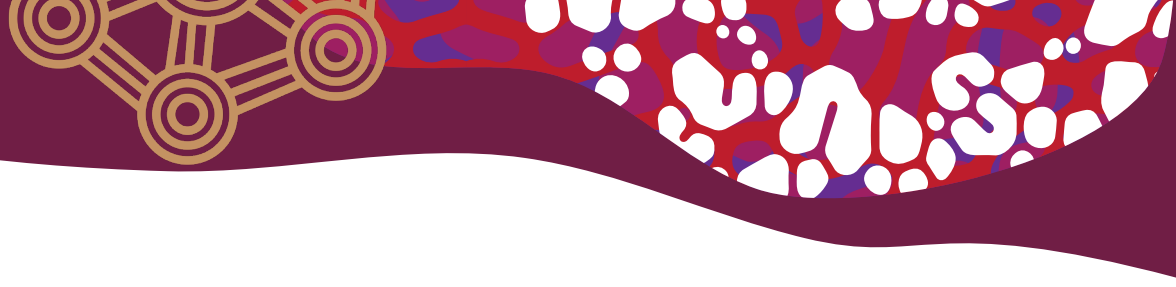
The roundtable opened with a session featuring three authors of the position paper: Dr Tamara Butler (Undumbi), Associate Professor Kate Anderson, and Dr Oliver Black (Anaiwan). They provided an overview of the paper and shared their approach to its development; noting that their work was grounded in guidance from the Yardhura Walani staff and students, to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and perspectives were prioritised and privileged through all aspects of the critical review.

The authors shared their determination to highlight concerns around co-design being used as a branding strategy, rather than being grounded in strong principles, and the need to move away from hierarchical design, to ensure that community are equal partners in the knowledge creation. Critically, as outlined in the position paper, the authors described the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples feeling empowered to say **no** to poor co-design, which they termed 'no-design'.

LOWITJA INSTITUTE ROUNDTABLE: CO-DESIGN VERSUS FAUX-DESIGN OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH POLICY

SESSION 1: TAMARA, KATE, OLIVER





ROUNDTABLE SPEAKERS

The first discussion session focused on the co-design approach. It heard first from Jess Yamaguchi from Kowa Collaboration. Jess is a proud Gangalidda and Waanyi woman from the Gulf of Carpentaria and north-west Queensland who has a wealth of expertise in evaluation, and a deep understanding of the intersection of social determinants, wellbeing, and health equity. She presented on ‘What works and what doesn’t in co-design approaches from a First Nations perspective’, sharing reflections on co-design – the tensions, scope, context, and approach – as well as expectations for co-design processes, and calls upon non-Indigenous partners and allies in these processes.

The second speaker was Hasthi Dissanayake from the Doherty Institute at the University of Melbourne. Hasthi is a research fellow in Indigenous Health and coordinated and established the five-phase Walking Together Program aimed at reducing chronic disease in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Through this program, she has lived and worked in Galiwin’ki. Her presentation was titled ‘Co-design through a Yolŋu Lens: The djalkiri (foundations) of a preventative health program in Galiwin’ku’.

DISCUSSIONS AND KEY THEMES

Discussions centred around participants’ experiences, feelings, and reflections on the co-design approach. Many attendees shared their struggles with ‘faux-design’ or consultation impersonating co-design. They raised that, without truth-telling and sovereignty within these processes, and when not grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance, co-design is inherently flawed.

There were strong discussions around funding and the need to change funding models to support Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) to lead co-design. Commissioning organisations and governments often retain tight control over priorities, funding, and decision-making within co-design processes; and even with careful planning and genuine intentions to implement co-design, significant barriers exist in practice. Compounded by the reality of limited funding, rigid delivery timeframes and significant administration burdens, these controls constrain the flexible, relationship-based approaches that are required for genuine co-design and put ACCOs on the back foot.¹ Participants discussed the necessity of secure, flexible and long-term funding for ACCOs to support them in building their workforces, so they have the resources and capacity to lead, and have autonomy over co-design approaches and partnerships.

Without sustainable, long-term funding, ACCOs often lack the workforce capacity, time, and resources to achieve and maintain sufficient control over these processes. Greater funding to support genuine co-design is necessary for the design and delivery of projects, programs, and services that effectively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s health and wellbeing.

In addition, the roundtable discussion highlighted the need for governments to cede power within these partnerships and models. Participants noted the commonly used purchaser/provider model does not facilitate equal partnerships, or genuine co-design, with ACCOs often finding themselves at a disadvantage in these relationships – hampering efforts towards self-determination.

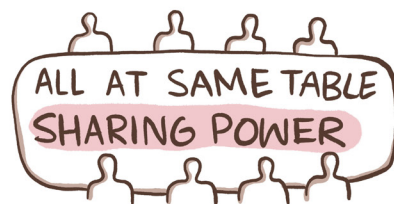
When discussing practical tools and strategies to support co-design, attendees emphasised the need to move away from these transactional relationships and embrace continuous consent and accountability mechanisms to offset known power imbalances.

Roundtable attendees discussed the role and opportunity of Treaty and formal agreement-making, so that governments are not able to step away from their commitments. Treaty processes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples present a significant opportunity to strengthen co-design and self-determination across policy and program development. Treaties allow for the establishment of representative structures, formalising of genuine partnerships, and providing dedicated frameworks and funding, which ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are empowered to lead in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programs.

'It's not that we don't stand in our power already, but we can't let governments step away.'

– roundtable participant

LOWITJA INSTITUTE ROUNDTABLE: CO-DESIGN VERSUS FAUX-DESIGN OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH POLICY



CONSULTATION
IMPERSONATING
CO-DESIGN



HONOURING the RIGHT PROCESS

Having conversations about
co-design isn't a box tick

TRANSPARENCY and WALKING TOGETHER

Embedding truth-telling
into the process



DISCUSSION 1: THE CO-DESIGN APPROACH

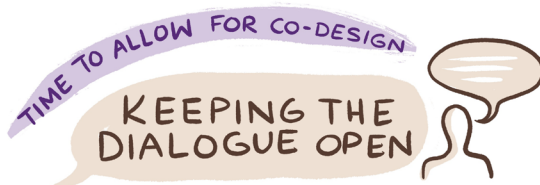


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LOWITJA INSTITUTE ROUNDTABLE: CO-DESIGN VERSUS FAUX-DESIGN

OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH POLICY

DISCUSSION 2: PRACTICAL TOOLS AND STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CO-DESIGN



TIME COERCION
Advocating for timelines that suit community



LEADING THE WAY

LEADERSHIP

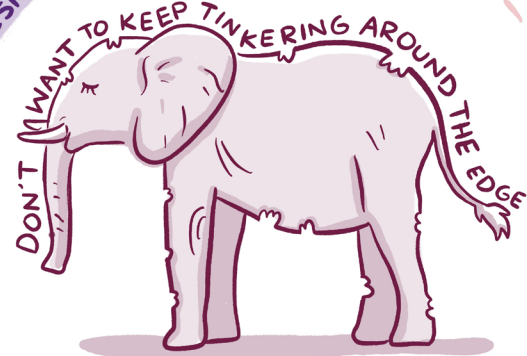


HEALING CO-DESIGN PROCESS



Consent is continually sought along the way

ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM



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Beyond the roundtable

Co-design that works: Case studies on good co-design in action

Best practice co-design aims to empower and actively engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. In policymaking, co-design approaches aim to shift decision-making power from government or institutions to communities, so that community-led decision-making shapes and drives the development of priorities and strategies. Co-design is vital because it shifts policy development from tokenistic consultation to genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Our communities have a long history of ensuring solutions are community-led, reflect our priorities and are locally defined. The case studies featured within this paper are a testament to this and demonstrate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities possess the skills and expertise around best practice co-design.



**SHIFTING THE POWER
BALANCE IN EVALUATION:
ABORIGINAL-LED
EVALUATION OF NGALLA
WIRIN WUNGENING
(OUR SPIRIT HEALING)**



**RIGHT PEOPLE
TELLING THE RIGHT
STORY: JIKA KANGKA
GUNUNAMANDA AND
KOWA COLLABORATION**



SHIFTING THE POWER BALANCE IN EVALUATION: ABORIGINAL-LED EVALUATION OF NGALLA WIRRIN WUNGENING (OUR SPIRIT HEALING)

Wungening Aboriginal Corporation is an Aboriginal community controlled organisation established in 1988, in Boorloo (Perth), Western Australia. It was founded following concerns raised by 40 local Aboriginal people about inadequate service responses to Community needs. Today, Wungening delivers culturally secure services, including alcohol and other drug (AOD) programs, family violence support, homelessness services, justice reintegration programs, and child and family services.

The organisation's vision is *Kootamiara kwab boola moort ngala bidi* (healthy communities our way), with a purpose to strengthen and heal mind, body and spirit through community-led programs.

About the project

Wungening undertook a co-designed developmental evaluation of Ngalla Wirrin Wungening, its own alcohol and other drug (AOD) program).

Ngalla Wirrin Wungening (meaning 'Our Spirit Healing' in Whadjuk Noongar language) is a reimagined and renewed program that transformed Wungening's existing AOD program. Launched in July 2023, NWW embodies Aboriginal ways of working through three core elements:

- **Authentic Connections:** building genuine, trust-based relationships
- **Aboriginal Ways:** centring cultural knowledge, practices and worldviews
- **Flexible Services:** meeting clients where they are with responsive support


An example of an element in the reimagining process is the creation of the 'Healing Worker' role. Healing Workers are Aboriginal staff with lived and/or living experience who bridge the gap between the first contact with the organisation and structured counselling support.

This project evaluation of NWW intentionally focused on embedding Aboriginal leadership, lived experience, and cultural knowledge throughout all stages and processes – from initial conception through to final recommendations. The evaluation focused on creating a way of authentic co-design with integrity and genuine power-sharing.

Why co-designing the evaluations was important

Historically, Aboriginal-led AOD programs have been evaluated using Western methodologies that fail to capture Aboriginal approaches to health and wellbeing, exclude Aboriginal voices from decision-making, and privilege quantitative data over lived experience and cultural knowledge.

This evaluation aimed not only to support real-time learning and improvement during the reimagined NWW program implementation, but also to actively challenge those dominant paradigms. The evaluation centred Aboriginal voices, lived experiences, and culturally responsive methodologies; and findings are therefore both relevant and empowering for Aboriginal communities and organisations leading AOD interventions.



The organisation was committed to ensuring the evaluation was Aboriginal-led, met the needs of the community it serves, and contributed to a growing body of evaluations that are shifting the power balance away from solely Western methodologies.

Who was involved in the co-design process?

The co-design process was built on a foundation of shared decision-making at every stage, involving:

- *Community leaders and Elders:* over the two-and-a-half-year pre-implementation period, Wungening held discussions and workshops with Elders and community groups across Boorloo to understand local AOD issues and priorities. These conversations identified three key themes: access, family, and trust.
- *Wungening board and leadership:* Wungening's all-Aboriginal board of directors instigated NWW's reimagining, with the board and executive team supporting the depth of the process and vision alongside the NWW program leadership.
- *NWW staff:* all staff were invited to participate through focus groups and/or the Co-Research Group, ensuring diverse perspectives from those delivering services on the ground.
- *Aboriginal Co-Research Group:* comprised entirely of Aboriginal staff from across NWW's different roles and hub locations, this group met regularly throughout the evaluation. Members were selected based on their expression of interest, which outlined their cultural knowledge, lived experience, and reasons for wanting to join the group. All were named as Investigators on the ethics application.
- *Aboriginal Chief Investigator:* Wungening recruited an Aboriginal Chief Investigator with Koori and Kamilaroi heritage to lead the evaluation, supported by Wungening's Research and Evaluation team.

- *Clients:* twenty-eight clients participated in Impact Yarns, sharing their experiences and defining what meaningful change looked like for them.
- *Funding Partner:* Lowitja Institute provided a supportive, trust-based partnership that allowed Wungening the freedom to conduct the evaluation its own way.

What was the co-design process like?

Foundation phase (2.5 years pre-evaluation)

The co-design process began long before the formal evaluation, with extensive community consultation. It featured:


- discussions with Elder groups across Perth about local AOD issues
- workshops with Wungening staff and leadership
- development of *Wungening's Bardip Korangan* (Change Story) and Impact Measurement Framework through collaboration with clients, staff, community Elders, and external partners
- identification of community-defined impact themes (Safety, Relationships, Connection, Growth, Healing, and Empowerment).

Design phase

Through workshops with the Implementation Group, the team explored various evaluation approaches. Developmental Evaluation was identified as aligned with Aboriginal ways of working – flexible, adaptive, and emphasising continuous learning.

Establishing structures:

- An Aboriginal Co-Research Group was established
- The Chief Investigator and evaluation team were embedded within the organisation
- Regular meeting structures were established for ongoing collaboration



The evaluation was deliberately designed around the Australian Evaluation Society's First Nations Cultural Safety Framework principles, including sovereignty, decision-making, respect, and cultural property.

Implementation phase

Ongoing yarning and reflection: Regular team meetings provided opportunities for brainstorming, problem-solving, and collaborative sensemaking. The team functioned less as traditional evaluators and more as custodians of the evaluation.

Data collection methods:

- **Impact Yarns:** a culturally grounded approach developed by the KOWA collaboration, creating safe, informal spaces for clients to share stories on their own terms. The evaluation team met clients where they were – often spending time in hub foyers, waiting respectfully for those ready to engage, always with at least one Aboriginal team member.
- **Staff focus groups:** six sessions held across different program stages and hub locations.
- **Co-Research Group meetings:** regular gatherings throughout the evaluation period.

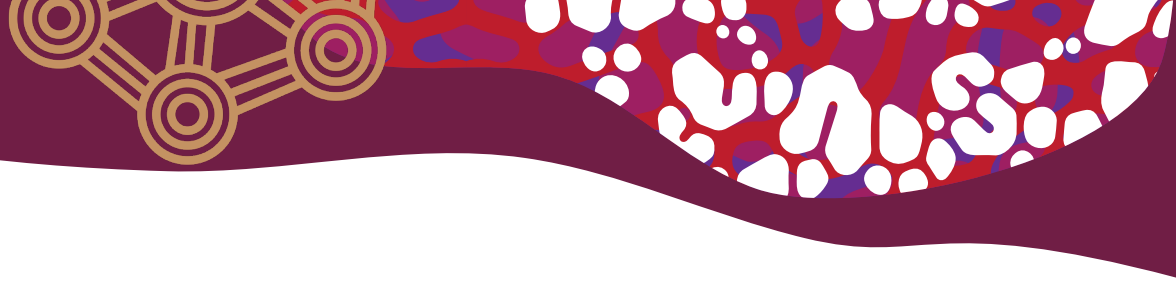
Aboriginal Data Sovereignty*: the Co-Research Group was integral in deciding what data to collect, what stories the data tells, and how findings informed decisions. Wungening, as an Aboriginal community controlled organisation with an Aboriginal board, maintains control over all evaluation data.

Real-time feedback loop: findings were shared regularly with the Leadership Group through learning briefs, enabling immediate program adaptations. For example, when inconsistencies in service delivery across hubs were identified early, leadership responded in real time, leading to improved alignment.

Key features that made the co-design work

1. **Aboriginal leadership throughout:** from the Board to the Chief Investigator to the Co-Research Group, Aboriginal people were always shaping and leading all aspects of this process.
2. **Valuing lived experience as expertise:** Healing Workers are employed for their lived experience and cultural expertise. Co-Research Group members were valued for bringing their cultural knowledge and both personal and professional experiences. The evaluation recognised that lived experience and a commitment to Aboriginal ways of working meant the non-Aboriginal team members had to learn to step back and make space for Aboriginal leadership to truly guide the process.
3. **Time and patience:** the organisation took two-and-a-half years before beginning formal evaluation to get the design right. The evaluation team then dedicated the first six months of the project to develop relationships with the NWW staff and leadership and establish the Co-Research group. When collecting Impact Yarns it was important to meet the clients where they were – on their terms and in their space. Often, this meant spending time in the foyer, waiting respectfully for clients that felt ready to engage.

*Note on language: Wungening Aboriginal Corporation uses the term 'Aboriginal Data Sovereignty' as Aboriginal people in Boorloo prefer 'Aboriginal' to 'Indigenous'. We note that nationally and internationally the accepted term is 'Indigenous Data Sovereignty'



4. **Aboriginal Ways:** the evaluation used Aboriginal-developed frameworks (the Bardip Korangan and Impact Measurement Framework) rather than generic outcome indicators. Every interaction with clients was grounded in cultural safety, with an Aboriginal member of the evaluation team always present to have a yarn and build connection before the Impact Yarn began. Data was analysed through community-defined themes of Safety, Relationships, Connection, Growth, Healing, and Empowerment.
5. **Methodological innovation:** the evaluation embraced yarning, storytelling, and participatory action research as legitimate knowledge-making practices, moving beyond Western statistic driven approaches.
6. **Reflexivity and positioning:** non-Aboriginal evaluation team members explicitly reflected on learning to step back and make space for Aboriginal leadership to truly guide the process, acknowledging when familiar approaches needed to be set aside to trust more culturally aligned processes.
7. **Reciprocity and benefit:** Co-Research Group members reported growing awareness of evaluation as a tool for change, feeling validated and proud seeing their work's impact on clients. The process built evaluative thinking capacity across the program. It showed that the approach taken could help strengthen programs and also add to the evidence base. It made space for Aboriginal knowledge systems to shape what counts as evidence and what constitutes success.
8. **Trust-based funding partnership:** the respectful, supportive relationship with Lowitja Institute gave Wungening a large amount of freedom to do the evaluation its way.

What was different about this co-design process?

Depth of Aboriginal control: unlike consultative approaches often flagged as co-design, in this process, Aboriginal people led all aspects, from conceptualisation to interpretation and use.

Centring cultural safety: the evaluation did not just 'accommodate' culture – it was intentionally built within Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing from the ground up. This approach was embedded throughout the two-and-a-half-year foundation phase.

Developmental rather than evaluative stance: the approach was about learning and improving alongside the community, not judging against external standards.

Integration with service delivery: the evaluation was embedded within the organisation rather than externally imposed, allowing for real-time adaptation. It also built the NWW team's confidence in evaluative thinking.

Challenging deficit narratives: the evaluation explicitly worked to avoid 'BADDR data: Blaming, Aggregate, Decontextualised, Deficit and Restricted', ensuring the stories collected were based on people's strength, resilience, and change that was meaningful to them.²

'Aboriginal-led evaluation means a lot to the Aboriginal community because it's about connection, and it's also about being heard. People have had enough of not being heard.'

- Co-Research Group member feedback

Outcomes of the co-design process

Program outcomes: the evaluation documented significant impacts across all six community-defined themes, with clients reporting feeling safer, more connected, more confident, and experiencing meaningful healing.

Methodological contribution: the project contributed to an evidence base demonstrating the value and validity of Aboriginal-led evaluation methodologies.

Organisational capacity: Staff developed stronger evaluative thinking skills, becoming more curious, critical, and evidence-informed in their day-to-day work and leading changes based on findings.

Real-time improvements: Issues identified during evaluation were addressed in real time, such as improving consistency across hub locations.

Visibility of Aboriginal ways: The evaluation made visible the often invisible work of ACCOs: walking alongside clients, yarning, just being present without judgement. This evaluation made those practices visible and showed that they are essential.

Evidence of innovation: The Healing Worker role was validated as an effective, culturally safe approach to AOD service delivery, creating meaningful career pathways. Healing Workers are employed for their lived experience and cultural expertise, and the evaluation shows the program provides clear opportunities for professional growth and progression within NWW.

Challenges and what might be changed

Many opportunities for improving the NWW program were identified throughout the evaluation, and in many cases, these were addressed in real time as they arose, with ongoing feedback provided to the leadership group. However, as NWW continues to grow, there are opportunities to strengthen and scale what is working well. The evaluation found strong evidence that the core elements of the program: healing through relationships, cultural safety, and flexibility, are central to its impact. This strength is underpinned by Aboriginal leadership, community control, and staff cultural knowledge. Sustainability will also rely on continued collaboration across teams and with partner services, as well as long-term funding to support ongoing innovation.

Key challenges included:

Balancing roles: the evaluation team had to establish and maintain clear boundaries about its role, particularly distinguishing between evaluation and implementation responsibilities at the beginning of the evaluation project.

Time intensity: the depth of relationship building and cultural safety protocols required significant time investment, which can be challenging within typical funding timeframes.

Flexible approach: the approach didn't follow traditional linear evaluation paths, requiring trust in emergent processes that might feel uncomfortable for those used to conventional project management. This needs significant investment in communication, management of expectations, and understanding of the time commitment.





RIGHT PEOPLE TELLING THE RIGHT STORY: JIKA KANGKA GUNUNAMANDA AND KOWA COLLABORATION

Kowa Collaboration (Kowa³) is a thriving team of passionate change-makers working as partners, collaborators, and advocates alongside individuals and communities on their journey towards embedding Understanding, Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (UMEL) and Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS). Kowa works alongside First Nations communities, centring self-determination in their approaches to have the power to shape their own narratives and drive meaningful change.

Jika Kangka Gununamanda (JKG) is the backbone organisation for justice reinvestment, working to the overall guiding vision of the Mornington Island community, to coordinate and manage the operations and implementation of the Thaldii Karrwa justice reinvestment initiative. JKG plays a central role in supporting the involvement of all the Mornington Island community by coordinating inclusive engagement, fostering stakeholder relationships, facilitating two-way communication, and building Community data and resources.

About the project

Through the Thaldii Karrwa initiative, JKG is bringing together Community, services, and stakeholders to build a new way of working that shifts power and decision-making to Community to self-determine responses to the drivers of contact with the justice system and other harmful systems.

JKG engaged Kowa to support the co-creation of a framework for UMEL to support the Thaldii Karrwa justice reinvestment initiative.

This collaboration project followed earlier processes, where the Thaldii Karrwa governance groups identified the need for a concerted effort to ensure the right story is told by the right people (the data story being driven by Community) and to ensure the story is told in the right way for the Mornington Island community. This collaboration integrated co-design and co-creation to establish a UMEL framework and a protocol for IDS and Indigenous Data Governance for the Thaldii Karrwa justice reinvestment initiative.

The importance of co-design

For JKG and the Mornington Island community, co-designing this project was essential to ensure the measures of success and approaches to data, measurement, and evaluation were all shaped by the community's definitions of success, quality and standards. It was also essential to help ensure accountability is upheld back to Community.

'Too many times our community has been asked for input and made promises that are broken, we don't see the progress or understand how our information is used in a way to make progress here.'

- JKG Executive Officer

Kowa has deep respect for First Nations cultures, knowledge systems, and the wisdom of Elders. Collaborating to co-design through this project builds on Kowa's commitment to weaving together Traditional knowledge with innovative and decolonised approaches to ensure First Nations' voices lead the way in impact measurement, evaluation, and learning.

Who was involved?

The collaboration in co-design and co-creation under this project is underpinned by the structure that JKG and the Mornington Island community have developed. Kowa is working as a partner with JKG alongside the Thaldii Karrwa governance groups.

The Thaldii Karrwa governance structure is as follows:

- Three advisory groups – Men's, Women's and Youth. Each group has a minimum of eight members, and its own Terms of Reference developed through individual input and finalised through group discussion and agreement. The advisory groups work on initiatives and input relevant information to their group, with each group shaping and defining what initiatives they prioritise working on.
- Within each of the three advisory groups, there are two representatives for each 'portfolio' across Health, Culture, Justice, and Education. The portfolio groups may come together to meet with key services and stakeholders according to their respective portfolios. They are responsible for sharing information with their advisory group to keep the groups updated through the continuation of inclusive and culturally responsive practices.
- Those 24 people with portfolios collectively then form the Thaldii Karrwa Leadership Group, which sits together to oversee the Thaldii Karrwa initiative and provide overarching decision-making and governance.

In addition to the above Thaldii Karrwa advisory groups, there is also the JKG Board, which is formed from the membership of the local Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) in the Mornington Island community.

What made this co-design process work?

The co-design process with Kowa brought together the Community through local established cultural governance groups and JKG, a backbone organisation, to build a new way of working that strengthens UMEL approaches and shifts power and decision-making to the community. At the heart of that process were Community-driven approaches and governance structures that honoured both local cultural protocols and the diversity of cultural and family groups. The process contributed to genuine Community leadership from the grassroots, providing information flow back to the community about where things are up to and how this builds on previous work. The opposite of top-down leadership, this approach helps to build the movement and genuine involvement of the community in the work.

Kowa continue to share and promote their expectations and callings for any non-Aboriginal entity seeking to operate ethically, respectfully, and in genuine solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the realm of evaluation. Kowa upholds six overarching principles in practice through all work it undertakes with communities and strongly advocates that non-Aboriginal entities also uphold the ethical and respectful practice ingrained within them to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to self-determination.

Six overarching principles:⁴

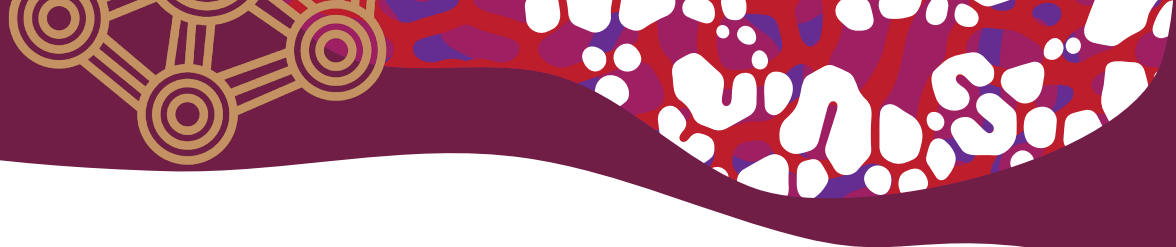
1. **Truth-telling through strengths:** conducting honest evaluation, which requires acknowledging power structures and naming those responsible for harm. Avoid passive language that blames ‘Community’ for systemic issues. Frame messages by emphasising shared values, identifying harmful institutions, proposing community-based solutions, and presenting a positive vision for the future. By working in this way, we can foster hope and appeal to those who value First Nations peoples.
2. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination:** recognising and upholding the inherent right of First Nations peoples to control our affairs, including evaluation processes and data.
3. **Decolonisation:** actively working to dismantle colonial structures and power imbalances that have historically disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
4. **Data sovereignty:** respecting and supporting the rights of First Nations peoples to own, control, access, and make decisions about their data.
5. **Ethical economic empowerment:** ensuring participation in the evaluation sector ethically benefits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and businesses, supporting self-determination and building on the principle of reciprocity.
6. **Cultural respect and understanding:** recognising the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledges, and ways of working.

What was different about this co-design process?

A key strength of this co-design and collaboration project is the strong foundations that have been laid, through ground-up and community-driven approaches to establish the Thaldii Karrwa governance structures with processes that honour and respect both local cultural protocols and the diversity of cultural and family groups in the Mornington Island community.

‘We have structured it around how these conversations need to be had here locally... family-to-family conversations, youth-to-youth, women-to-women, men-to-men, as needed. In doing this, we reinforce cultural protocols and respect our local ways of working. These cultural ways make us stronger, and we know that our community feels safe and respected, engaging in this way. The work is done by us, for us. This contributes to self-determination in that community members see our own people leading this work at each stage. It makes us feel stronger seeing that we are leading this work, not outside people. It is our community leading, from deciding what needs to be done, to how the yarning is done and concepts explained, to interpreting and using the information, and how it is shared back. It means the story comes from the heart. It is part of truth-telling. Our lived experience is centred in all steps.’

– JKG Executive Officer



What were the outcomes of the co-design process?

The co-design journey and process itself have surfaced outcomes for all involved. Outcomes extend from the members of the Community, who co-create and participate in the process through their involvement with the Thaldii Karrwa Advisory Groups, to JKG as the backbone organisation and Kowa as a co-creation partner.

Purposefully integrating into the co-creation processes, alongside alignment and respect for the established Thaldii Karrwa governance structures has supported comprehensive and inclusive engagement across and within the governance groups. JKG shared reflections on the processes they have led through establishing the Thaldii Karrwa initiative and how it has supported deeper engagement:

'It enables the quieter voices to be heard equally in settings where they feel comfortable - usually their home.'

- JKG Executive Officer

Outcomes from the process have included shared learning and the development of capabilities and understanding regarding data sovereignty rights, principles (including how these translate into meaningful action in the local context), and approaches for measuring change in ways that are meaningful to the Community.

As this project continues through co-creating a UMEL framework and Indigenous Data Sovereignty & Governance protocol, these project outputs will support the work of Thaldii Karrwa in measuring and showcasing success to influence and advocate for improved services and responses to better meet the Community needs and align with the Community's self-determined aspirations.

Challenges

The approaches for co-design and co-creation through this project emphasised focus on relational approaches that stay with and respect 'the pace of Community'. At times, this meant remaining flexible and open to changes, particularly regarding the timing of key engagement activities and workshops, to align with what works best for the Community and to ensure respect for local Community protocols was always upheld.



Calls to action

A number of calls to action emerged from the knowledge translation roundtable, which are outlined below:

FUNDING AND RESOURCING

1. ACCOs must be appropriately funded and resourced, so they have the capacity to hold full oversight over co-design approaches, to ensure they are fulfilling the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This should include:
 - 1.1. Providing ACCOs with long-term, flexible funding to plan and implement co-design initiatives.
 - 1.2. Avoiding project-specific funding that limits the ability to oversee the design and delivery of programs.
 - 1.3. Investing in workforce capacity, including fund training for community members, Aboriginal researchers, and community controlled organisation staff to participate in co-design.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

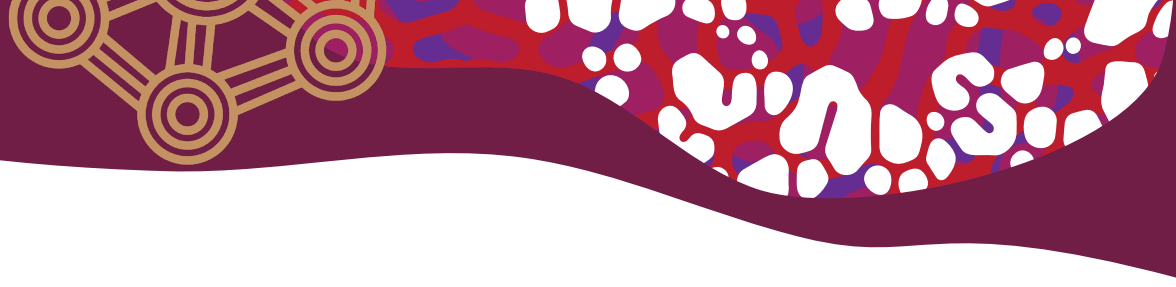
2. Governments must implement strategies and actions that embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, governance, and self-determination at all levels, including ensuring communities have the authority and capacity to reject co-design processes that do not meet their standards. This includes formalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance mechanisms throughout the whole process of co-design, ensuring that communities can actively shape, approve, or withhold participation in any stage of policy and program co-design.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights over data must be strengthened and fortified, through the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance. This includes ensuring that all data collection, access, use, and sharing is co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, giving them decision-making authority over what data is collected, how it is interpreted, and how it is applied.

TREATY AND FORMAL AGREEMENT MAKING

4. Governments must utilise treaty processes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to embed co-design and self-determination, by establishing representative structures, formalising genuine partnerships, and providing dedicated frameworks that enable communities to lead the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programs.

ACCOUNTABILITY

5. To support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and community controlled organisations to engage in and lead genuine co-design, there must be accountability for inequity in funding distribution. Governments must engage in practices that enable effective best-practice co-design, including strengthening transparency and establishing accountability mechanisms.
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Endnotes

- 1 Butler, T; Anderson, K; Black, et. al, 2025, *Co-design versus Faux-design of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Policy: A Critical Review*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne'
- 2 Walter, M. (2018). The voice of Indigenous Data. Griffith Review no.60 <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/voice-indigenous-data-beyond-disadvantage/>
- 3 Kowa, meaning 'purpose' in Awabakal language, was born from a vision: to see First Nations communities leading the way in shaping our futures.
- 4 Kowa Collaboration – Expectations and Callings to Non-Aboriginal Partners and Allies in the Evaluation Sector (April 2025)



Australia's National
Institute for Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander
Health Research

CONTACT

PO Box 1524, Collingwood Victoria 3066 Australia

T: +61 3 8341 5555 | F: +61 3 8341 5599 | E: admin@lowitja.org.au | www.lowitja.org.au



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ABOUT LOWITJA INSTITUTE

Lowitja Institute is Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health research institute named in honour of its co-patron, the late Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG. It is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high-impact quality research, knowledge exchange and by supporting a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers. Established in January 2010, Lowitja Institute operates on key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact.

The history of Lowitja Institute dates back to 1997 when the first Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health was established. Since then, Lowitja Institute and the CRC organisations have led a substantial reform agenda in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research by working with communities, researchers and policymakers, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people setting the agenda and driving the outcomes.