Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training

**Transcript**

Welcome to Cultural Awareness for the Public Sector.

In this module, we will share with you some of the history and culture of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and explore things you can do in your workplace to support Aboriginal cultural awareness and inclusivity.

Today we take you on a journey, giving you an insight into the oldest living culture in the world.

We will look at four key pillars of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity: Family, Education, Country, and Work. In each, we will explore what existed, how it was broken down, and where we are today.

Throughout the module, we will mainly use the term ‘Aboriginal people’, which is preferred in Western Australia, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of our State. No disrespect is intended to our Torres Strait Islander colleagues and community. We also acknowledge that many people prefer to be known by their language group or nation.

We refer to the *1905 Aborigines Act* as the 1905 Act, acknowledging that the word ‘Aborigines’ is considered offensive to many.

We begin by exploring Family and Kinship – the roles of Aboriginal people in their family group, the wider society, complex inter-relations. We will look at the impact of colonisation and the 1905 Act, and how these and other historical events can help us understand some of the issues and complexities of life for Aboriginal people today.

Next, we look at the rich, holistic system of education that Aboriginal people enjoyed for thousands of years, how the dismantling of this system impacted them, and a vision of a hope for the future.

We then describe Aboriginal people’s spiritual connection to the land, including their responsibilities to land management, stock control, and farming.

Finally, we will explore the importance of work for Aboriginal people – the traditional economies that existed prior to colonisation, the impact of the welfare system, and how gaps in employment, education and life expectancy are being addressed.

This module is intended to be the first step on a pathway of learning. We encourage you to have an open mind, as the hardest part can be ‘unlearning’ what we have witnessed, been taught, or had passed on to us about Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. We hope this greater awareness will help guide you towards more positive relationships with Aboriginal people and organisations.

# Family

Family is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In traditional Aboriginal culture the saying ‘It takes a community to raise a child’ wasn’t just a figure of speech. Aunts and uncles shared equal parental responsibility as a child’s biological mother and father, and as such would be called ‘mother’ and ‘father’ by the child. The community understood the serious responsibility of looking after the next generation, and the extended family was integral to this.

Strict kinship protocols, or laws, existed governing how a community member interacted with others - who they could marry, who to avoid contact with and their obligations to certain people in society. This complex system of family and society developed over tens of thousands of years to ensure strong bloodlines, harmonious society, clear ways of engagement between families, tribes and nations across Australia and the Torres Strait Islands.

Upon colonisation, the family unit was swiftly and devastatingly torn apart. Through shameful acts including massacres, poisoning and forced removal, Aboriginal people were dispossessed of key elements of family and community, such as the handing down of knowledge and complex social roles that were essential to their culture and sense of identity.

In WA, the 1905 Act gave significant power to the role of Chief Protector, and removed a range of rights from Aboriginal people. For example, Aboriginal women were not allowed to marry without permission from the Chief Protector.

Terms that are now considered derogatory, such as ‘half caste’ and ‘full blood’, were used to determine a person’s rights and future. People were not permitted to practice traditional language and culture, and people were forced to speak English and go to church.

The Chief Protector was also the legal guardian for all Aboriginal children under the age of 16, which allowed Aboriginal children to be forcibly removed from their parents and placed in missions or reserves. Being raised by an institution, children were not able to develop the experience and knowledge required to be a parent. This began a perpetual cycle of intergenerational trauma, with families still experiencing the grief, loss and dispossession of previous generations.

Children were placed in missions or reserves designed to strip their identity as Aboriginal people, and so that they could be trained for subservient roles such as domestic duties and stockmen from an early age.

These events still cause immense sadness and anger today, with many Aboriginal people unable to find family and connect back to their home country. They often don’t know their native language, their stories or connection to country, and may feel caught between two worlds – but accepted by neither.

In your work with Aboriginal people and families or even when working indirectly through policy design, it is important to recognise that many people are dealing with generations of hurt, pain, loss of identity and trauma in their lives. If people feel understood, it can help to create a positive outcome for individuals and organisations.

The Australian Government has recognised the immense and intergenerational impact of past policies and practices, and a range of initiatives has been put in place in consultation with Elders and Elders across Australia and the Torres Strait Islands.

As the journey of grief and hurt has been long, so too is the path of reconciliation. Concerted, sustained effort is required to try and heal the damage done. The apology by Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd in 2008 and subsequent ‘Closing the Gap’ initiatives are examples of this:

“…We apologise, especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country…” (Kevin Rudd, 13 February 2008).

However, for real change to occur it is widely recognised that Aboriginal people need to have involvement, influence and ownership over the healing and reconciliation journey. There is still a great deal of hurt, anger and resentment for many Aboriginal people, but also an enormous amount of goodwill to find ways for families to become strong once again.

When planning consultation meetings with Aboriginal communities, particularly in remote areas, organisers should liaise with local Aboriginal corporations to confirm protocols around Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country and also to identify appropriate representatives from local family groups.

A Welcome to Country is different from an Acknowledgement of Country. Only recognised community Elders from country can perform a Welcome to Country. Others, including non-Aboriginal people can perform an Acknowledgment of Country. An Acknowledgement is a way for a person or an organisation to show respect for the local traditional owners, their culture and connection to their surroundings. This culture endures, and the Aboriginal people continue to observe the strong traditional practices and beliefs.

*The Native Title Act 1993* (cth) recognises the rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in land and waters according to their traditional laws and customs. Native Title was first recognised in Australian law following a claim lodged in 1982 with the High Court of Australia by a group of Meriam people from the Eastern Torres Strait. Ten years later in 1992, the High Court upheld the claim by the Mabo plaintiffs including Eddie Koiki Mabo, who was the first named plaintiff.

The Aboriginal Lands Trust established under the *Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act 1972*, has identified parcels of land in Western Australia that are proclaimed as Part III reserves. People intending to travel through or access these lands must obtain permission.

# Education

The holistic approach to education amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people produced a rich, complex life filled with song, dance, fine dining, and adventure.

A child’s education and journey into adulthood was a product of the teachings of every family and tribe member. Everyone understood that the growth and development of a child contributed to the growth and development of the tribe. While Elders were the most respected and knowledgeable, all adults played key roles in the education of the tribe through a complex curriculum encompassing science, art, philosophy, and spirituality.

A ’master and apprentice’ model of education ensured each member of the tribe developed finely tuned knowledge and expertise about country, society, and spirit, and along with it, a highly secure sense of identity.

Aboriginal culture and learning was mainly shared orally, using the uniquely human capability of storytelling to create a powerful personal connection between the individual, the tribe, and the knowledge being imparted. Stories explained all aspects of life, with lessons about hunting, meteorology, geography, astronomy, lore, men’s business and women’s business.

People spoke multiple languages and used art to ‘signpost’ ceremonies and special or dangerous places. Along with navigational guidance from landmarks and the stars, this allowed Aboriginal people to travel thousands of kilometres for social and ceremonial purposes and trade.

This rich system of education and identity which has been honed over more than 2000 generations was systematically dismantled in less than 2 generations after colonisation of Australia in 1788. Cultural practices were considered by many to be heathen, and Aboriginal people were forced to abandon their education, culture and identity.

Not only were Aboriginal people prevented from engaging in their own education system, they were also barred from attending schools and universities in the mainstream system.

In 1967, a referendum was held to determine whether the Constitution should be amended to remove discriminative wording and include Aboriginal people in the Census. This was the most successful referendum in Australia’s history with more than 90% of people voting yes. It also had the effect of allowing Aboriginal people to fully participate with equal rights in Australia’s education, housing and healthcare systems, as well as protecting against wage discrimination. This marked a huge change, where Aboriginal people were once thrown in jail simply for speaking their own language, today traditional languages are being taught in schools and universities.

It’s important we celebrate these improvements, but there’s still a long way to go. Intergenerational trauma, the separation of families and removal of children, and welfare dependency have built many barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to re-establish their sense of identity and achieve the intentions of the Federal Government’s Closing the Gap initiative.

There is recognition that for equity to be reached, extra assistance is required. This is a hand up, not a handout – giving Aboriginal people the opportunity to fully participate in our society today.

In your work try to be aware of cultural differences. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may communicate with the use of hand signals, facial expressions and words that are unique to the Aboriginal people. Men may prefer to speak with men and women with women. There may be education and communication differences.

Since 2008, governments across Australia have worked together to improve the health, education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to eliminate the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. All government agencies are required under the 2020 Closing the Gap report to contribute to progress against targets set in 2008 with a greater focus on partnership, consultation with indigenous communities.

# Country

Since colonisation, it’s been widely held that Aboriginal people were uncivilised, nomadic, hunter gatherers – taking from the land as they needed, with little foresight or consideration of responsible land management practices. However, we’re now learning that this perception is far from reality. The myth that Australia was an untamed wilderness has now been shattered, revealing the complex, country-wide systems of land management used by Aboriginal people for thousands of years.

Central to this systematic approach was the use of fire and the life cycles of native plants and animals to ensure plentiful wildlife and plant foods throughout months, years and indeed entire generations.

Deep knowledge of the land, seasons, techniques and methods were documented in the form of ‘dreamtime stories’ and retained across generations with every person having a role to play.

Back then, the notion of ‘sustainability’ did not have a name – it was simply a way of life, woven into every aspect of Aboriginal culture. It was a vast and complex knowledge of the landscape and environment that had been developed and shared through generations over 60 thousand years.

That was until 1770, when Captain James Cook sailed into Botany Bay and declared the east coast of Australia “terra nullius”, or “no-one’s land”, ignoring the rights of the First Australians who had lived there for tens of thousands of years.

Here in Western Australia, over 128 tribes occupied the land until the settlement of a colony on Whadjuk country (Perth) in 1829. The settlement brought people who were promised land in a ‘park-like’ environment.

Colonies right across Australia assumed land ownership, causing hostilities with traditional owners and forcing Aboriginal people off their ancestral lands.

There were other changes too, with hoofed animals, exotic crops and other species introduced. Waterholes were fenced off and Aboriginal people were prohibited from accessing their traditional lands or even jailed for trespassing. They were left unable to access traditional food or practice their spiritual and ancient management activities that nurtured the land and held the environment in a finely tuned balance.

The change to the landscape and environment was rapid and has continued through to the current day.

We can learn a lot from the 60 thousand years that Aboriginal people looked after and managed the land. While some knowledge is lost, much needs to be relearned or re-introduced.

With the benefit of hindsight and the use of modern technologies such as satellite imaging, carbon dating and microflora identification, society is realising the extensive damage to the land and waters of Western Australia that these introduced practices have caused. Rising salt, soil degradation, topsoil erosion and uncontrolled bushfires are just a few of the major environmental issues we face today.

Thankfully, many traditional practices, such as fire management are now being recognised for their effectiveness and are being adopted into modern land management policies.

Working with Aboriginal people and communities is the same whether you work in the public or private sectors. Establishing respectful working relationships is important for inclusive program design. Traditional fire management practices are being used to reduce bush fire risks and there is a traditional fire programs coordinator at the Department of Fire and Emergency Services.

The WA Government’s Aboriginal Ranger program helps Aboriginal organisations to manage country and protect the environment in partnership with the public and private sectors. The program is run by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. When we combine the best of traditional practices with the best of modern technology, we have genuine two-way learning and a path forward to a more sustainable future.

# Work

In traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economies, every person had a job and understood how they contributed to their community. There were farmers, hunters, builders, fisherman, academics, doctors, astronomers, chefs, entertainers, soldiers, law men, teachers, and traders. People did not need to accumulate personal wealth, as everything was shared in a society that was rich in food, security, social interaction and lifestyle.

Traditional society was governed by complex laws and interactions, with well-established business and trade routes – not just in a family or a tribe, but right across Australia, her outlying islands, and even internationally. These prosperous, peaceful relationships shared trade, culture and language for thousands of years.

This all changed dramatically when colonisation occurred. As highlighted earlier, the declaration of the land as ‘Terra Nullius’ took away Aboriginal people’s access to their land and the entire Aboriginal economy collapsed.

From Federation in 1901 until the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal people were not considered to be citizens of this country and were prevented from participating in the economy – they were not eligible to own farms, houses or businesses and Aboriginal people across Australia did not receive equal wages.

Even Aboriginal soldiers who fought for Australia during the first and second World Wars were not eligible for the returned soldiers land grants (Soldiers Settlement Scheme) or assistance when they returned.

When Aboriginal people were allowed to earn wages, such as working on stations, the wages were placed into a government trust fund –and were used for other purposes. Prohibition from both traditional and colonial economies destroyed the independence of Aboriginal people and over many years has led to a reliance on welfare.

People learn most of their values around work and career from their parents and extended family. Generations of welfare dependency and removal of children have created immense barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. With strong commitment from government, industry and the Australian people, this is slowly changing.

The Western Australian government has committed to helping reduce the gaps in employment and business through a range of initiatives such as the development of Reconciliation Action Plans. However, the gap between Aboriginal people and the rest of Australia in employment and business is large, and it takes every one of us to support positive change.

In modern workplaces and communities that operate very differently, we need to make changes to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to freely participate. A challenge for some Aboriginal people, particularly those from remote communities, may be to meet requirements of 100 points for identification, employment or police clearances. The Department of Justice supports Aboriginal people to obtain identity documents such as birth certificates and drivers licenses. Recognising the significance of Aboriginal culture and tradition, cultural leave has been introduced in many of today’s public sector workplaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to participate in cultural and ceremonial obligations and community cultural events.

The Stolen Wages Reparation Scheme WA was established in 2012 as the Western Australian Government’s response to investigations by the Stolen Wages Taskforce into the wages earned by Aboriginal people but held by their guardians. The taskforce found that people who were under guardianship at Carrolup, Moore River and Sister Kate’s Children’s Home, experienced the most extensive controls over their wages. Under recommended conditions, an ex rata reparation payment of up to 2000 was to be made to living Aboriginal people.

Developing an agency Reconciliation Action Plan shows a commitment to establishing practical and meaningful social change and establishes the economy to develop for Aboriginal people built on relationships, respect and opportunity. Find out more from Reconciliation WA.

# Where to next?

Today, we gave you an insight into the oldest living culture in the world, with a complex system of land ownership, environmental and agricultural management, health and education systems, legal structures, an economy, and complex diplomatic and trade relations across nations, languages and people.

We each have the ability to look back and consider what existed before, what events and even atrocities occurred, their impact on the people affected, and think about where we are as a society today.

In order to move forward and truly reconcile, it is critical we have empathy and understand the hurt caused in the past. Open mindedness, empathy and understanding are the building blocks of a constructive, respectful and united society for all people of Australia.

This is just the beginning of your journey of understanding. Face to face learning with Aboriginal facilitators is a powerful way to create deeper understanding, connection and respect. We hope you will take this next step.

To further develop your understanding, stay curious, actively learn about Aboriginal culture and traditions by talking with colleagues and community and consider the perspective of Aboriginal people in all your work.

Click the links below to access content mentioned in the videos:

[Entry Permits to Access Aboriginal Lands](https://www.wa.gov.au/government/document-collections/apply-permit-access-or-travel-through-aboriginal-land#alps)

[Closing the Gap](https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/)

[Aboriginal Ranger Program](https://www.dbca.wa.gov.au/parks-and-wildlife-service/aboriginal-ranger-program)

[Reconciliation WA](https://www.recwa.org.au/)

[Reconciliation Australia](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/)

Please follow [this link](https://wapsc.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0plqjftWNMlacXX) to provide your details to record your completion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Awareness resource.