

# Guide to working with Indigenous Australian Staff

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## INTRODUCTION

CSU's relationship with Indigenous communities is a central focus of our commitment to our regions. As an inland university with campuses located in areas of relatively high Indigenous population, CSU has a significant role in providing accessible education for Indigenous students. The University is also working towards increasing employment of Indigenous staff to support a culturally safe environment and provide role models for Indigenous students, to give non Indigenous students the opportunity to work with Indigenous professionals, to give credibility to the teaching of Indigenous studies, and to provide culturally appropriate professional input to the development of course curricula and pedagogy.

For many of the Indigenous people who enrol to study at CSU or who come to work at CSU, it may be the first time that someone in their family has engaged in some way with a university. For many non Indigenous staff providing services to Indigenous students or working with an Indigenous colleague, it may be the first time they have interacted on any significant level with an Indigenous person. Tensions or misunderstanding can occur due to different life experiences, communication styles and cultural backgrounds. This guide aims to provide an overview of some of the more common cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians that can impact on the workplace, and advice on how to navigate them. It is important to note, however, that the issues discussed in this guide will not apply in the same way to everyone. You should take your cue from the person with whom you are interacting. Neither is this guide comprehensive. You are encouraged to access a range of resources for further information (see Appendix 1).

## DEFINITION OF TERMS AND ACCEPTED TERMINOLOGY

The terms Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are European constructs that have been used to describe First Nation peoples in Australia since the time of colonisation. Prior to this time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people identified themselves by their Country. For example, the Indigenous people of the areas in which CSU's campuses are located described themselves as Wiradjuri, Gandangara, Ngunawal or Biripai (or Biripi) people. Because of the diversity of Aboriginal languages and cultures before colonisation, there is no Aboriginal word that refers to all Aboriginal people in Australia.

### Indigenous

In Australia, an Indigenous person is a person who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent, who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person and is accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in the community in which he or she lives or comes from.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Aboriginal person means a person who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of Australia but does not include a Torres Strait Islander;

Torres Strait Islander means a person who is a descendant of an Indigenous inhabitant of the Torres Strait Islands.

*(Definition from the Racial Discrimination Act, 1975)*

The terms Aboriginal person and Torres Strait Islander are not interchangeable and refer to specific groups of Indigenous Australian people. It is important when referring to someone that you do so correctly. If uncertain, it may be simplest to ask and ensure you do not offend by using the incorrect terminology.

### Inappropriate Terminology

Historically there has been a range of terms used to describe Indigenous Australians, including: those that attempted to classify according to parentage and skin colour eg: full-blood; half-caste; quarter-caste; quadroon; or part-Aborigine. These are extremely offensive to Indigenous people and should never be used. Likewise the nouns Aborigine or Aborigines or abbreviations such as Abo's should not be used.

Acronyms such as ATSI; TI; TSI should also be avoided. Instead, use the full term, such as *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* or *Indigenous Australians*. Appropriate terminology acknowledges and respects the humanity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Always capitalise the first letter of the descriptors *Aboriginal* and *Torres Strait Islander*. It is disrespectful not to do so. It is similar to spelling someone's name without a capital or another country's inhabitants without a capital.

***For further information on use of appropriate language when discussing Indigenous culture or history, see CSU's Communicating without Bias Guidelines ([www.csu.edu.au/adminman/hum/equity-diversity-support.htm](http://www.csu.edu.au/adminman/hum/equity-diversity-support.htm))***

## WHAT TO BE AWARE OF WHEN WORKING WITH / SUPERVISING INDIGENOUS STAFF

While it is important to be aware of a range of cultural differences that may impact on the workplace, it is just as important to remember that each person is an individual and the differences listed below may not apply to every Indigenous Australian. The observations made below are simply a guide and people should still be treated as individuals.

### Communication

Indigenous people may communicate in ways that differ from non-Indigenous Australians. It is important to be aware of this to aid mutual respect and understanding and foster a positive and supportive work environment.

Keep the following points in mind when engaging in everyday communication in the workplace, when at meetings and when interviewing Indigenous Australians.

**Non-Verbal Communication** may require a different understanding when working with Indigenous Australians. For example:

- **Silence** – does not mean that the individual does not understand, but rather that they are listening and thinking and may wait to hear others' ideas before expressing their own views. There are times when Indigenous Australians may remain non-committal or they may be awaiting community support or input. Allow for periods of silence in interviews, meetings and general conversation for these reasons.
- **Eye Contact** – for many non-Indigenous people eye contact is considered a key component of communication. However, for some Indigenous people looking someone straight in the eye may be considered rude or disrespectful. While this is not the case for all Indigenous Australians, it is important to be aware of the cultural context and not apply a negative interpretation when eye contact is avoided.

### Agreement and 'Yes' responses

Indigenous Australians may often agree or respond with 'yes' when asked questions or confronted on issues. This is due to many years of being raised under a government system that was not supportive of Indigenous Australians and that encouraged them to agree with what was being done, regardless of their beliefs. Agreement often kept Indigenous Australians 'out of trouble'. The impact of such conditioning has continued into the next generations - this is often referred to as trans-generational or inter-generational trauma. Be aware of this and allow time for trust and comfort to develop with Indigenous staff, trying not to put them in uncomfortable or confronting situations that will result in a standard 'yes' response.

To understand more about trans-generational or inter-generational trauma in Indigenous communities / individuals, please refer to the following resources:

[www.naho.ca/jah/english/jah05\\_03/V5\\_I3\\_Intergenerational\\_01.pdf](http://www.naho.ca/jah/english/jah05_03/V5_I3_Intergenerational_01.pdf)

[www.shareourpride.org.au/topics/our-shared-history/impacts\\_ofhistory-today](http://www.shareourpride.org.au/topics/our-shared-history/impacts_ofhistory-today)

### Family Relationships

Traditional family relationships are quite complex and differ significantly from non-Indigenous family relationships. Indigenous Australians tend to have extended families and these often go beyond blood and marriage – a kinship system which defines where a person fits into the community and decides what rights and responsibilities each person has within that community. (Kinship systems also vary across Indigenous communities).

Often Indigenous Australians will refer to Elders or leaders within their community as Aunt or Uncle, even if not blood-related, as a sign of respect. You may also hear Indigenous Australians refer to each other as brother or sister even though not blood-related.

Responsibility for, and to, family is particularly significant to Indigenous Australians and the flow on from this may impact on the workplace. Family will usually be the number one priority to an Indigenous Australian.

Be aware that caring for children and elderly family members, including financial care, health care and general care, is often shared within extended family and community. This means your staff member will likely have more responsibility outside their 'nuclear' family.

The potential for cultural differences in family responsibilities is acknowledged by the CSU Enterprise Agreement definition of 'immediate family', which includes the qualification that other kinship and family networks may be considered on a case by case basis when interpreting what is meant by family.

**Family responsibility and absences from work** – due to the breadth and depth of responsibility to family in Indigenous culture, there is the possibility that there may at times be recurrent or unexplained absences from the workplace, or someone may repeatedly turn up late to work without explanation. Support or care for family may take priority over attending work. In circumstances where this happens, it is important to address the issue early on to prevent any potential for deterioration in working relationships. Speak to the staff member in a private space and in a comfortable manner to try to identify the issues and determine how they can be supported while meeting the expectations and needs of the workplace. Be respectful of commitment to family and avoid judgemental language such as the term ‘walkabout’ when referring to the whereabouts or behaviour of the individual (this term has often implied lack of discipline and responsibility and is disrespectful and highly offensive). Make sure that the staff member understands both how they can be supported and the expectations within the workplace around notification of absence and leave options. It may be appropriate to discuss alternate leave options with the staff member, such as unpaid or purchased leave.

For further advice on managing workplace absence, contact the Indigenous Employment Coordinator or other key staff in the Division of Human Resources.

**Sorry Business** – is a term used by Indigenous Australians to refer to the death of a family or community member and the mourning process. Sorry Business includes attending funerals and taking part in mourning activities with community. This can take an extended period of time, a week or more, and may also involve travelling long distances. It is extremely important in Indigenous cultures that people participate in Sorry Business. Be aware that it is common practice not to mention the name of a deceased person or show pictures of them for some time after they have passed away.

Due to the extended family make up, Sorry Business can sadly be common for Indigenous Australians and the workplace should be supportive and respectful of such commitments.

The CSU Enterprise Agreement allows up to ten (10) days per calendar year ‘Special Leave’. This leave incorporates leave associated with cultural responsibilities and Sorry Business.

### **Men’s and Women’s Business**

In Indigenous culture, certain customs and practices are performed separately by men and women. These are often referred to as Men’s Business and Women’s Business. Under Aboriginal Law, these traditional practices have very strict regulations and penalties attached if rules are broken. Some of these practices may still be carried out in some communities. Keep in mind in the workplace that there may also be issues that are more appropriate for Indigenous staff to talk about, if they choose to do so, with a person of the same gender. This should not be seen as personal or offensive but a respect for culture which has been passed on through generations.

### **Shame**

You may often hear Indigenous Australians refer to an incident that ‘shamed’ them or they are too ‘shame’ to say or do something. This means they were ashamed or embarrassed.

Indigenous Australians can often be shy and feel ‘shame’ if singled out or laughed at. Even when the singling out is for positive reasons it may still leave them feeling shamed because they do not want to appear better than others, particularly other Indigenous persons.

In circumstances where you may wish to single out an Indigenous Australian person in the workplace to praise them for their work / actions or get them to speak to other staff in a more formal / public setting, it may be a good idea, in the first instance, to approach them individually and see if they are comfortable for this to happen. Give the individual the opportunity to provide input on how they would like this to happen. If they are too ‘shame’ to be praised, encourage them to allow it, but ultimately respect their wishes.

Allow time for rapport between staff to develop in the workplace and they may become more comfortable with such things as time progresses.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO IN YOUR WORKPLACE

### Interviewing

when interviewing Indigenous staff there are a number of basic things you can do to help make the process less intimidating, many of which have already been mentioned. These include:

- Be conscious of differences in communication styles. Allow time for people to think through questions and their answers. Remember silence does not always mean they do not understand.
- Some Indigenous Australians may provide simple answers and it may be necessary for the interviewer to question them further to elicit more information. Do this in a non-threatening, conversational manner and be aware that a brief response may not indicate they do not know any more, but that they are shy or 'shame'.
- Make the interview and environment relaxed with some general welcoming conversation and be genuinely interested in the person.
- Ensure you explain the role clearly and what is expected of the successful appointee, as well as the interview and appointment process.
- Be aware that some people may choose to bring a support person to their interview with them. Some organisations, in fact, encourage this. In this instance, the support person would not have the right of audience or debate.

### Welcoming an Indigenous staff member

Setting the right example and welcoming someone when they first start employment, or even prior to commencing, is crucial to building positive relationships in the workplace. It is a good idea to hold a morning / afternoon tea and ensure that in the first few days the Indigenous staff member meets people in the workplace. Also introduce them to other staff within the organisation with whom they may interact frequently, but not necessarily work alongside. If there are other Indigenous staff members within the workplace, it is often a good idea to create this connection as well, provided those involved are comfortable to do so.

A campus tour is also useful to allow staff time to familiarise themselves with their new workplace and in some cases they may have moved from their own Country.

In these early stages also make it clear whom they can go to if there is an issue in the workplace or if they need advice or have personal issues.

Consider making the workplace culturally friendly by placing Indigenous Australian artworks in the office and CSU's Reconciliation Statement.

### Making expectations clear

This is particularly important to people supervising Indigenous staff. Make it clear where the Indigenous staff member fits – their roles and responsibilities, how they contribute to the goals of the area / organisation and the policies and procedures with which they need to comply. During these early stages, it is best to explain things around whom to notify if absent and when to notify them, as well as flexible hours and how they are to be treated. Basic workplace expectations should be made clear early on. The respect and support for culture and workplace should work both ways.

Meetings and discussions with the Indigenous staff member – if supervising an Indigenous staff member consider the following, particularly in one on one or small group meetings:

- Communication variations as discussed previously – silence, non-verbal cues, time to respond.
- A support person at the meeting – there may be times when an Indigenous staff member would like a support person present, this is usually someone they select and could be for review meetings, general meetings etc.
- Make it as comfortable as possible and as unthreatening as possible. Indigenous people are often scared of being wrong or ridiculed ('shame').

### Acknowledging the positive

There can often be a large amount of pressure placed on Indigenous people to succeed, pressure from themselves and pressure from community, particularly when they are seen as role models. It is important to confirm and reinforce with positive feedback when an Indigenous staff member is doing something well. This can often be as simple as acknowledging their work but, as stated above, until you are familiar with what the person is comfortable with, it may be an idea to keep positive reinforcement simple or low key.

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### **Being aware of leave options**

it may be worthwhile to consider special leave, flex hours, annual leave, carers leave or unpaid leave, depending on circumstances, particularly when considering family responsibility and Sorry Business. The CSU Enterprise Agreement presently allows up to 10 days per calendar year for staff to attend funerals and participate in cultural responsibilities. It has also redefined the term 'family' to include extended families when referring to Indigenous Australians.

### **Being aware of employee burnout**

Due to the small number of Indigenous employees at CSU, Indigenous staff are often in high demand for acting as role models, mentors, members on boards and committees as well as being a point of contact for enquiries around Indigenous matters from other staff. This is added pressure on Indigenous staff in an already hectic work environment. Be aware of these other commitments and monitor workload and how this balances with other commitments. (Special Leave may be considered for some of these options as well, refer to the CSU Enterprise Agreement and Leave Manual).

### **Do not assume knowledge**

Be careful of assuming all Indigenous people have in-depth knowledge of their culture or history. For various reasons, including separation from community and family, many Indigenous people have been isolated from learning about their community and culture. Asking questions about such things can often make Indigenous people feel uncomfortable. Take the time to get to know the individual before making any assumptions about their knowledge or expecting them to share their experiences. They may be able to share knowledge as they become more comfortable.

Interaction with the Indigenous Employment Coordinator – contact the Indigenous Employment Coordinator (IEC) prior to the staff member commencing to find out how you can help the staff member settle in. When the staff member commences, arrange to have them meet with the IEC. Be mindful that contact between the IEC, staff member and workplace may be ongoing and can provide added support. Flexibility for the staff member to meet with the IEC is also useful.

CSU Training offers a module on Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. All staff are encouraged to undertake this training, which is available via flexible delivery.

If you would like to know more, contact CSU Training on 02 6933 2722 or [csutrain@csu.edu.au](mailto:csutrain@csu.edu.au)

To find out more about CSU's Indigenous Australian Employment Strategy, please contact:

**Catherine Maxwell**

Indigenous Employment Coordinator

Phone: 02 6933 2200

Email: [cmaxwell@csu.edu.au](mailto:cmaxwell@csu.edu.au)

## SIGNIFICANT CULTURAL EVENTS / DATES TO BE AWARE OF

There are a number of dates in a calendar year that are important to Indigenous Australians. Be aware of these dates and, where possible, encourage your staff and workplace to acknowledge them and support your Indigenous staff to participate in them.

Keep in mind that Special Leave may be available for people who wish to participate in significant community events on some of these days, as this is considered cultural leave.

Date	Title	Meaning
January 26	<b>Survival Day</b>	Many people know this as Australia Day. This is not a day of celebration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The date marks the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove, the beginning of invasion and dispossession.
February 13	<b>Anniversary of the National Apology</b>	On this day in 2008, then Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, moved a motion of apology to Indigenous Australians with specific reference to the stolen generations. The Apology passed with bipartisan support from the Parliament and received a standing ovation from the floor of the House of Representatives as well as from the public gallery. The anniversary of this significant event in history is remembered each year with a range of activities across the country and communities.
March 21	<b>Harmony Day</b>	Harmony Day is a day when all Australians celebrate our cultural diversity. The day is also the United Nation's International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This day is often celebrated by Indigenous Australians and people from a range of cultures within communities. This celebration commenced in 1999.
May 26	<b>National Day of Healing (National Sorry Day)</b>	The Bringing them Home report recommended (Recommendation 7.a) that a National Sorry Day be held each year on the 26 May to remember the forcible removal of children from families and its long term devastating effect. In 2005 the National Sorry Day Committee renamed the day National Day of Healing for all Australians.
May 27 – June 3	<b>Reconciliation Week</b>	This week of celebration commemorates and acknowledges the rich culture and history of the first Australians. This is the time we can all think about reconciliation and how we can help turn around the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians.
June 3	<b>Mabo Day (Named Mabo Judgement because it was Eddie's name that appeared first on the legal documents).</b>	On this day in 1992, the High Court of Australia rejected the notion of 'Terra Nullius', that this land was not occupied before European colonisation. Eddie Mabo, a Torres Strait Island man living in Queensland and four other plaintiffs, Father Dave Passi, Sam Passi, James Rice and Celuia Sale, conducted a ten year battle through the courts that led to this historic ruling. The Mabo Judgement stated in law that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have by prior occupation, ownership of land where native title has not been extinguished.
First full week in July	<b>NAIDOC Week (National Aboriginal and Islanders Day Observance Committee)</b>	NAIDOC is celebrated in an increasing number of government agencies, schools, councils and workplaces and is not just for Indigenous Australians to celebrate. This week is about celebrating Indigenous Australian culture, acknowledging the nation's first Australians and building bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
4 August	<b>National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day</b>	NAIDOC was established in 1988 by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). Each year is themed to highlight a significant issue, concern or hope for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.
9 August	<b>International Day of the World's Indigenous People</b>	The International Day of the World's Indigenous People was first proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1994, to be celebrated every year during the first International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995 – 2004). In 2004, the Assembly proclaimed a Second International Decade, from 2005 – 2015, with the theme of "A Decade for Action and Dignity."
September (no set date)	<b>Deadly Awards</b>	Vibe Australia has been hosting the Deadly Awards since 1995. The awards encompass Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music, Sport, Entertainment and Community awards. They promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander achievement as a marketable and growing force within Australia. These awards are growing ever more popular and attracting more and more attention for the achievement of Indigenous Australians.

Derived from NSW Department of Community Services: Working with Aboriginal People and Communities: A Practical Resource (1999)

## REFERENCES

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## RESOURCE LIST – GUIDE FOR WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS STAFF

If you have not already used it, please use CSU's collection of Indigenous resources, stored in DOMS, for further information. This is accessible to all staff and students.

### The Indigenous Education Strategy Collection

[www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/indigenous-curriculum/resources](http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/indigenous-curriculum/resources)

### Australian Human Rights Commission Website

*(This has a large range of information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and issues and below are two specific links to valuable resources from this website)*

[www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/index.html)

### Community Guide to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People

[www.hreoc.gov.au/declaration\\_indigenous/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/declaration_indigenous/index.html)

### Bringing them Home: The 'Stolen Children' Report (1997)

[www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/bth\\_report/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html)

### The Stolen Generations Testimonies

<http://stolengenerationstestimonies.com/index.php>

### NAIDOC website

[www.naidoc.org.au/](http://www.naidoc.org.au/)

### Mabo: The Native Title Decision

*(Short documentary on the Mabo decision and written online resources)*

[www.mabonativetitle.com/](http://www.mabonativetitle.com/)

### Australian Government Website – specific to Indigenous Australia

*(This website has links to 'Closing the Gap' page and the National Apology)*

[australia.gov.au/topics/culture-history-and-sport/indigenous-culture-and-history](http://australia.gov.au/topics/culture-history-and-sport/indigenous-culture-and-history)

### Working and Walking Together: Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations

*(has chapters on culture, kinship, history, social context, cultural protocols, effective communication, working with communities and more)*

[www.snaicc.asn.au/\\_uploads/rsfil/02497.pdf](http://www.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/rsfil/02497.pdf)

### Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice

*(this link takes you to a downloadable copy of a document or you can order it online)*

<http://aboriginal.childhealthresearch.org.au/kulunga-research-network/working-together.aspx>

### First Australians (TV Series from SBS)

*(This DVD Series can also be purchased from ABC Book Shops and the book from most book shops. This link takes you to the first episode in the series.)*

<http://www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians/>