



**A-Z of First Nations Terms  
CDU Student Guide**



## Introduction

---

CDU campuses are built on the traditional lands of the Larrakia people of the Darwin region, the Yolgnu people of the Nhulunbuy region, the Jawoyn, Dagomon, and Wardaman people of the Katherine region, the Arrernte people of the Alice Springs region, the Turrbul and Jagera people of the Brisbane region and the Gadigal people of the Sydney region.

One of our goals is to be the university of choice for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and staff. Central to this is the incorporation of First Nations perspectives and knowledges into CDU's core business.

The purpose of this Student Guide is to give you some background and context about First Nations history in Australia and particularly the Northern Territory, and to ensure you are being culturally appropriate and respectful. Recognising there are differences across communities, clans and language groups, this guide is a starting point for students and includes suggested terms for commonly used words and relevant references.

## Cultural Identity

---

First Nations Australians in the Northern Territory include individuals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. They proudly identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and are recognised in their communities.

Within these diverse communities, there exists a rich tapestry of cultural heritage. Approximately 145 Aboriginal Australian languages are spoken today, with 60 of them still in regular use as first languages. Among these communities, there are approximately 50,000 Aboriginal Australians whose primary language, learned at home, is one of the Aboriginal Australian languages.

First Nations people in the Northern Territory may describe themselves in connection with their specific language groups and traditional lands, emphasising their geographic origins. Another approach to self-identification among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Northern

Territory context is to use terms like "saltwater people" for those residing along the coast, or "freshwater," "desert," or "spinifex" to indicate their ecological environment.

In the Torres Strait Islander community, individuals commonly identify themselves by the name of their home island when communicating with outsiders. For example, a person from Saibai identifies as a Saibai man or woman.

Being as specific as possible when acknowledging and addressing someone's cultural identity within the Northern Territory is considered a mark of respect. Recognising everyone's diversity, unique heritage, and connection to their traditional lands and language groups is vital to fostering understanding and respect in these regions. Additionally, acknowledging the traditional owners of these areas, such as the Larrakia people in Darwin, is a crucial step in honouring the cultural richness of the Northern Territory.

## Images of a deceased Aboriginal person

---

When discussing or writing about a deceased Aboriginal person, it is crucial to be sensitive to cultural practices and protocols, particularly in Aboriginal communities in Australia. Many areas restrict reproducing names and photographs of deceased individuals during mourning. The duration of this mourning period varies and is determined by the specific community.

As a sign of respect and to honour these cultural norms, it is advisable to refrain from using the name or image of a deceased person unless you have obtained explicit permission from the person's community and/or family before publishing such information.

Additionally, suppose you plan to use imagery, including photographs or videos, that may include the image or voice of individuals who have passed away. In that case, it is essential to include a warning for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, indicating that the material may contain such content. This approach demonstrates cultural sensitivity and respects the traditions and customs of Aboriginal communities in Australia.

## Strengths-based language

---

It is essential to employ empowering and strengths-based language when discussing Aboriginal communities, avoiding any rhetoric that perpetuates a sense of deficit or patronisation. Here are some examples of how to frame conversations and initiatives with a strengths-based approach:

Instead of: "*Helping disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students...*"

- "Providing meaningful opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve their full potential..."

Instead of: "*Addressing the problems in Aboriginal communities...*"

- "Supporting the resilience and growth of Aboriginal communities..."

Instead of: "*Dealing with issues of Aboriginal health...*"

- "Promoting the holistic wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples..."

Instead of: "*Assisting at-risk Aboriginal youth...*"

- "Nurturing the talents and aspirations of Aboriginal youth..."

By adopting this strengths-based language, we can better recognise the resilience, capabilities, and potential of Aboriginal communities and individuals while avoiding any language that may perpetuate negative stereotypes or undermine their strengths and contributions.

## First Nations Glossary Contents

---

### A - D

Aboriginal  
Aboriginal Customary Law  
Aboriginal English  
Aboriginal Knowledge Systems  
Acknowledgement of Country  
Apology  
Capitalisation  
Closing the Gap  
Colonisation  
Corroboree  
Country  
Culture  
(Traditional) Custodian  
Dreaming/Dreamtime

### E - I

Elder  
First Nations  
Half-Caste  
Indigenous  
Invasion Day / Survival Day

### J - N

Kinship  
Land Rights  
Mabo  
Men's business

Mob  
NAIDOC  
Native Title  
Non-Aboriginal

### O - R

Oral histories  
Payback  
Reconciliation

### S - V

Sacred Site  
Songlines  
Sorry Business  
Sorry Day  
Stolen Generations  
Terra Nullius  
Torres Strait Islanders  
Traditional Owner  
Treaty  
Truth-telling

### W - Z

Welcome to Country  
Women's business  
Yarn

### Sources & Acknowledgement

## A-D

---

### Aboriginal

A person who is a biological descendant of one of the Aboriginal communities in Australia.

The Australian government has an official definition. This is someone who is:

- of Aboriginal heritage, and
- identifies as being Aboriginal, and
- is accepted in the community in which they live or have lived, as Aboriginal.

---

### Aboriginal Customary Law

This refers to traditional Aboriginal rules for living and to traditional legal practices. Aboriginal people must abide by the rules and responsibilities as set out in the Dreamtime.

---

### Aboriginal English

This is the way that Aboriginal people use Standard Australian English. Aboriginal English often uses Standard Australian English terms in a way that differs from the standard way. For example, Aboriginal people will use the term 'Country' to refer to land and use the term 'business' to refer to traditional ceremonies.

Another example of Aboriginal English is the term 'writ' Aboriginal people often say 'writ' instead of 'written' or 'wrote'.

Over time, Aboriginal English has become the first language of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal English is not just used to communicate. Aboriginal people also use it to connect to other Aboriginal people.

---



### Aboriginal knowledge systems

Aboriginal knowledge systems are the ways Aboriginal people collect and transmit traditional knowledge. For example, this knowledge can inform Aboriginal people when and where to find natural resources that are used for different reasons.

---

### Acknowledgment of Country

An Acknowledgement of Country is a way to pay respect to First Nations people. It is an opportunity for either a First Nations person (who is not a Traditional Custodian) or a non-First Nations person to show awareness, respect, and acknowledgement of First Nations people's ownership and custodianship of the lands (and seas where relevant), their ancestors and traditions. An Acknowledgement of Country is usually offered at the beginning of a meeting, speech, or formal occasion. For example – “I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners – the Larrakia people. I pay my respect to Elders past, present, and emerging.”

---

### Apology

The Apology was a key recommendation from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children (Bringing Them Home Report 1997). On 13 February 2008, a formal apology was issued by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for the forced removals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (often referred to as the Stolen Generations) from their families and communities. The National Apology was issued to the Stolen Generations who suffered because of past government policies of forced child removal and assimilation. This apology acknowledged the wrongs of the past while reflecting on the work that still needs to be done to address the impact of unresolved trauma. See Sorry Day below.

---

### Capitalisation

Terms such as 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous Australians', 'Torres Strait Islanders', 'First Nations people', 'Elder', 'Country' and 'Traditional Custodians' must always be capitalised. Important cultural practices are also capitalised. For example, Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country.

---

### Closing the Gap

Closing the Gap in the Australian context refers to the government's commitment to addressing disparities in health, education, employment, and other socio-economic outcomes between Aboriginal and nonAboriginal Australians.

The term originates from the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and subsequent Closing the Gap initiatives launched in 2008. These initiatives aim to improve the life expectancy, educational attainment, economic participation, and overall well-being of Aboriginal Australians, often through targeted policies, programs, and funding allocations.

Closing the Gap efforts prioritise Aboriginal self-determination and community-led solutions while seeking to eliminate systemic barriers and address the root causes of inequality and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal communities.

---

### Colonisation

The arrival of Lieutenant James Cook and later Arthur Phillip in 1788 marked the beginning of a momentous change for the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. It signalled the onset of what would become known as 'white settlement', a term that misrepresents the profound disruption and suffering experienced by the Aboriginal population.

From the moment of colonisation, the British authorities treated Australia not as a land inhabited by sovereign peoples with rich cultures and histories, but as a vast, empty expanse. This mindset



was encapsulated in the doctrine of 'terra nullius', which denied the very existence of Aboriginal ownership and stewardship of the land.

The consequences of this colonial mentality were devastating for Aboriginal peoples. Their traditional lands were seized without consent or negotiation, disrupting ancient patterns of life and connection to Country.

---

### Corroboree

A traditional ceremony that is performed for a range of cultural reasons. Typically, it involves singing traditional songs, performing traditional dances, and playing traditional musical instruments.

---

### Country

Country is the word Aboriginal people use to refer to land. It does not refer to a nation-state. It is a local area of land where someone's language group has a historical, physical, and spiritual connection to land.

---

### Culture

In the NT (Northern Territory), when Aboriginal people use the term 'culture', they refer to traditional Aboriginal culture. The term is typically not used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to refer to non-Aboriginal culture or organisational culture.

---

### (Traditional) Custodian

This is someone who has a traditional responsibility to care for a specific area of land/sea. They can also care for songs, dances and ceremonies connected to this geographical area.

## [Dreaming / Dreamtime](#)

The term Dreaming has a very precise spiritual meaning to Aboriginal people.

It is a time when Creator Ancestors gave life to all Aboriginal people in Australia. They were given lore and instructions on how to live peacefully with the world.

The Dreaming is not just historical. It is with us today and will be with us forever. It determines how Aboriginal people live their lives today and why they uphold their beliefs, cultures, and traditions today.

## E-I

---

### [Elder](#)

In a traditional Aboriginal setting, an Elder is an older, respected member of society, from whom people seek advice because they hold considerable wisdom and traditional knowledge.

### [First Nations](#)

People who are indigenous to a country. The term 'First Nations' originated in Canada and gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s and emphasises the historical priority of Indigenous peoples in Canada, acknowledging their unique status as the original inhabitants of the land. More recently, 'First Nations' has been widely adopted in Australia to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for similar reasons as in Canada. The term emphasises the long history and cultural significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first inhabitants of the land, predating European colonisation by tens of thousands of years. CDU acknowledges that settling on one preferred term is complicated and currently uses 'First Nations' in most of our formal documentation.

### Half-Caste

This is not an appropriate term and can be offensive to Aboriginal people. The term was developed by non-Aboriginal Australians and placed on Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people do not refer to themselves as 'half-caste'. They refer to themselves as Aboriginal or identify with their language group.

---

### Indigenous

The term 'Indigenous' in Australia is used to refer to the collective of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. (See also 'First Nations' and 'Aboriginal'). When referring to people, it should be spelled with a capital 'I'.

---

### Invasion Day / Survival Day

These terms are used interchangeably. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people refer to *Australia Day* (celebrated on 26<sup>th</sup> January) as Invasion Day. They do so to ensure that Australia remembers its history of settlement and colonisation and to remind Australians and the world, that Aboriginal people had their lands taken from them against their will.

## J-N

---

### Kinship

Kinship, in its simplest terms, refers to biological relatives. To Aboriginal people however, it can also include people with whom they have had long relationships but are not biologically related.

In Aboriginal kinship systems, people may refer to their mother's sisters as mothers, and their first cousins as their brothers and sisters.



Kinship brings with it a set of roles and responsibilities towards others, in some cases for example this might exclude a person from speaking with another family member or prevent speaking about particular topics in front of another family member.

---

### Land Rights

Land rights refer to the legal recognition and protection of Aboriginal peoples' ownership, use, and management of traditional lands and waters. These rights acknowledge the deep cultural, spiritual, and economic connections Aboriginal communities have to their ancestral territories and aim to rectify historical injustices stemming from colonisation and dispossession.

Land rights encompass various legal mechanisms, including native title, land tenure agreements, and statutory land rights regimes, designed to uphold Aboriginal land rights and support self-determination and cultural preservation.

Aboriginal peoples have been advocating for rights to their lands since colonisation, though the modern land rights movement is widely recognised as starting with the Wave Hill Walk Off in the Northern Territory, led by Aboriginal leader Vincent Lingiari. CDU commemorates this event with an annual Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture in August each year.

---

### Mabo

The Mabo Case recognised the land rights of the Meriam people, traditional owners of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait. It successfully overturned the myth that at the time of colonisation, Australia was 'terra nullius' or land belonging to no one.

The High Court recognised that Aboriginal peoples had lived in Australia for thousands of years and enjoyed rights to their land according to their lore and customs. Twelve months later, the *Native Title Act 1993* was passed.

The five Meriam who mounted the case were Eddie Koiki Mabo, Reverend David Passi, Sam Passi, James Rice, and Celuia Mapo Sale. Eddie Koiki Mabo was the first named plaintiff, and the case became known as the Mabo Case. Mabo Day, on 3 June, commemorates Eddie Mabo and his milestone campaign for Aboriginal land rights.

---

### Men's business

Traditional activities and ceremonies that are restricted to Aboriginal males. These can include ceremonies, songs, dances, stories, and art. It is not appropriate for Women to participate or even to discuss Men's business.

---

### Mob

In the NT, this word refers to a group of people or an unspecified amount.

For example, Aboriginal people may say "Who are those mob over there?"

Or, they may say, "There is big mob people over there".

It is generally not appropriate for non-First Nations Australians to use this term.

---

### NAIDOC

This is an acronym for the National Day of Aboriginal and Islander's Day Observance Committee. NAIDOC is now celebrated over one week every year in July.

It is a time for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and all Australians, celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history, and identity.

---

### Native Title

The recognition of Aboriginal people's rights and interests in land is based on their traditional connection to land.

Native Title is a legal process that allows Aboriginal people to prove that their customs and connections to land have been maintained and continue.

---

### Non-Indigenous

This refers to people who do not have Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait biological connections.

## O-R

---

### Oral histories

In the Aboriginal context, these are ways that people retain and transmit knowledge. Rather than recording information in writing, information is stored and transmitted through songs, dance, ceremonies, art, and stories.

---

### Payback

This is part of Aboriginal customary law. It is a process whereby Elders in a community or family determine how a person guilty of an offence is punished. It typically involves a family member of a victim inflicting physical pain on a person who has injured or mistreated one of their family members or a person who has breached Aboriginal customary law.

Payback continues to be part of Aboriginal society in remote and traditional communities. Historically, payback was used in a measured way to provide justice and *end* conflict, not to continue it.



## Reconciliation

This is about all Australians coming together to accept Australia's history and to work together to improve relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

See: [Home- Reconciliation Australia](#)

## S-V

---

### Sacred Site

These are places or objects in the natural environment that have significant meaning and connections to Aboriginal people. These can be important to Aboriginal people for different reasons and can be specific to men and women. Australia has some laws to protect sacred sites.

---

### Songlines

These are walking routes that cross the country, linking essential sites and locations. Before colonisation, they were maintained by regular use, burning off and clearing.

The term 'songline' describes the features and directions of travel included in a song that a traveller had to memorise and sing to know the route to their destination. Songlines contain information about the land and how the traveller should respectfully make their trip.

This includes types of food safe to eat, places to be avoided and the boundaries of each mob's Country that the traveller could pass through. Examples of 'signposts' or 'markers' include rock formations, bends in rivers or trees with naturally forming spirals, twists, or arches.

One of the great tragedies of colonisation was the eradication and whitewashing of the carefully curated use of the country by Aboriginal people. Songlines were dismissed as mere animal tracks or natural clearings when they are so much more.

---

### Sorry Business

This happens when someone dies. This is a time when communities are in mourning. Ceremonies take place at this time. Entire communities can close and people from outside of these communities, are unable to enter these communities. This is a time when people mourn and participate in mourning ceremonies and cultural obligations. The length of time of the Sorry Business can depend on the individual community or the status of the person who died.

---

### Sorry Day

National Sorry Day is a day to acknowledge the strength of Stolen Generations survivors. While this date is significant for the Stolen Generations and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is also commemorated by Australians around the country.

The first National Sorry Day was held on 26 May 1998, one year after the *Bringing Them Home* report was tabled in Parliament. The *Bringing Them Home* report results from a Government Inquiry into the past policies that caused children to be removed from their families and communities in the 20th century. See: [Bringing Them Home | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

---

### Stolen Generations

Aboriginal children, who were forcibly removed from their Aboriginal parents due to government policies and practices that targeted Aboriginal people, are referred to as the Stolen Generations. They are referred to in plural form because these children and their own children were forcibly removed from their families, their lands, their languages, and their cultures. See the Apology and Sorry Day above.

---

### Terra Nullius

This is a term used to describe land that is not owned or occupied, with no previous sovereignty.

---

### Torres Strait Islanders

Torres Strait Islanders are Indigenous Australians whose traditional lands are the Torres Strait Islands which lie between Queensland and Papua New Guinea. Torres Strait Islanders today, live all over Australia. Indigenous Australians may have both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal heritage. The Torres Straits Islands are part of the state of Queensland.

---

### Traditional Owner

This is a person who is recognised through a Native Title court process as being the rightful owner of land through their family heritage and through Aboriginal law.

---

### Treaty

This is an agreement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the Australian Government. The content of this agreement is negotiated between both parties. In the absence of a national treaty, certain State Governments in Australia are progressing with state-based agreements.

---

### Truth-telling

A process of 'truth-telling' would allow the full extent of past injustices towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to be uncovered. This would let all Australians understand Aboriginal history and help to move towards genuine reconciliation.

---



## W-Z

---

### [Welcome to Country](#)

Welcome to Country ceremonies are a long-standing practice between different First Nations groups. Traditionally, when First Nations people travelled, people from one language group would not enter another's land until the Traditional Custodians granted those people permission and welcomed them. Today, these practices have been adapted to fit contemporary times. Welcomes to Country can take many forms depending on the particular culture of the Traditional Custodians. It can include music, dance, traditional smoking ceremonies, and/or a speech and is conducted by a recognised Traditional Custodian – usually an Elder or an adult who belongs to that Country.

### **Women's business**

Traditional ceremonies, events and gatherings that are specifically for Aboriginal females. It is not appropriate for men to participate or even discuss Women's business.

---

### [Yarn](#)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use the term to describe talking to each other, or to have a discussion with each other.

Over time, yarning has become acknowledged as a legitimate method for researching with First Nations Australians.

---

## Sources

---

[Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies](#)

[Bringing Them Home | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

[Central Land Council](#)

[Deakin University Indigenous Glossary](#)

[First Nations Leadership Charles Darwin University](#)

[NAIDOC](#)

[Northern Land Council](#)

[Reconciliation Australia](#)

[The Uluru Statement](#)

We want to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Dr Curtis Roman, Larrakia, former Associate Director First Nations Leadership, and, Trudy Avlonitis, Kungarakan, Acting Manager First Nations Student Services, without whose expertise and collaboration, this guide could not have been produced.

This guide was designed and produced by Language and Learning Support, in collaboration with First Nations Leadership and Engagement.