

Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology

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Description	These Guidelines outline the appropriate terminology to be used in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students.

Related documents

[Griffith University Statement on Reconciliation](#)

[Griffith University Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country](#)

[\[Introduction\]](#) [\[Purpose\]](#) [\[Scope\]](#) [\[Rationale\]](#) [\[Definition of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Person\]](#) [\[Collective Names Used to Describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People\]](#) [\[Terms Associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities\]](#)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Griffith University identifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Peoples and Traditional Custodians of the land.
- 1.2 The University endeavours to be a place where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians work together in positive partnership to develop a community that acknowledges the wisdom and cultural heritage of the descendants of the First Peoples of Australia. These values are outlined in the *Griffith University Reconciliation Action Plan*.
- 1.3 In embracing the notion of reconciliation between Australia's First Peoples and other Australians, the University acknowledges that proper use of terminology can assist in healing the dishonourable relations of the past and build the resilient, trusting society that all Australians deserve.

2. PURPOSE

- 2.1 The purpose of these guidelines is to provide staff and students of Griffith University with guidance on appropriate terminology when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities both internal and external to the University, and for use in all relevant policy, planning, programs, and resource documentation.

3. SCOPE

- 3.1 These guidelines apply to all staff and students of Griffith University. The responsibility of ensuring the use of appropriate language rests with all members of the University community in the following ways:

- When meeting face-to-face with Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander staff, students or community members;
 - When making formal presentations on activities in a learning and teaching, research, or community engagement capacity relating to Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander issues;
 - When writing about Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander issues;
 - When developing literature about or targeting Aboriginal and /or Torres Strait Islander issues or communities.
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4. RATIONALE/PROTOCOLS

- 4.1 These guidelines provide an outline of appropriate terminology to be used with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures. They are intended to enable staff and students of Griffith University to work in a culturally-appropriate manner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and students, and the wider community. The guidelines highlight the important role that language plays in building and maintaining respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.
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5. DEFINITION OF ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PERSON

- 5.1 According to s51 (25) of the High Court of Australia (1983): *An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which they live.*
- 5.2 The lowercase word 'aboriginal' refers to an Indigenous person from any part of the world and does not necessarily refer to an Aboriginal Australian. The University's preference is that 'Aboriginal' should always be capitalised.
- 5.3 The use of the abbreviation 'ATSI' to describe people is considered to be offensive and should not be used in internal or external documents.
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6. COLLECTIVE NAMES USED TO DESCRIBE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

- 6.1 'First people' is a collective name for the original people of Australia and their descendants. This is an acceptable term to be used.
- 6.2 The term 'Aboriginal' is generally not inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people; conversely the term 'Torres Strait Islander' is not inclusive of Aboriginal people. Because Queensland's population includes people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, the University's preference is for 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' to be used when referring collectively to Australia's original inhabitants.
- 6.3 The term 'Aborigine' has negative connotations and should be avoided. 'Aboriginal' should be used as an adjective, not as a noun. For example, 'Aboriginal student/students'. The term 'Aboriginal' should never be abbreviated, as this is considered to be offensive.
- 6.4 *A Torres Strait Islander person is a person or descendant from the Torres Strait Islands located to the north of mainland Queensland.* 'Torres Strait Islander' should be used as an adjective not as a noun. For example, The University has many Torres Strait Islander students in its first-year courses. 'Torres Strait Islander' must always be capitalised. The term 'Torres Strait Islander' should never be abbreviated, as this is considered to be offensive.
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- 6.5 As 'Indigenous' is not specific, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe the term to be offensive, as it diminishes their identity. The University recommends that the term be avoided. The University's preference is for the use of 'First peoples' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'. However, where the word 'Indigenous' forms part of an acronym to describe entities within the University, the use is acceptable. For example, Indigenous Research Unit (IRU); Indigenous Community Engagement, Policy, and Partnerships (ICEPP), Indigenous Education Statement (IES).

7. TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES

7.1 Self-identifying terms

Aboriginal people have, nationally, terms of reference by which they may identify themselves. These terms are directly derived from the languages and names used by Aboriginal people in specific areas when referring to themselves:

- *Murri* – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from Queensland and north-west New South Wales;
- *Goori* – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from northern New South Wales coastal regions;
- *Koori* – is usually used by Aboriginal people in and from parts of New South Wales and Victoria.

7.2 Community

There are many different perspectives on what a 'community' is. In defining a particular 'community', consideration should be given to stolen generations, where a community may comprise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from many areas of Australia, whereas Traditional Owners of the land are a particular group of people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may belong to more than one community – including where they come from, where their family is located, and what organisations they belong to. However, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, community is primarily about country, (extended) family ties, and shared experience. Community is about inter-relatedness and belonging and is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

It is generally acceptable to use the term 'community' to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living within a particular geographical region. However, the diversity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within that community should be considered where applicable, including for example mixed unions or families.

7.3 Country

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people have diverse relationships with, connections to, and understandings of the Australian environment. Some of these relationships are based on the traditional knowledge and practice that have been passed down from generation to generation, while others have resulted from the various impacts of colonisation.

Relationships to country are complex and interrelated. The term 'Country' is often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia and most importantly the connections of blood-line back to Country.

7.4 Elder

The traditional meaning of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elder is someone who has gained recognition within their community as a custodian of knowledge and lore, and who has permission to disclose cultural knowledge and beliefs. Recognised Elders are highly respected people within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In some instances, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people above a certain age will be referred to as 'Elders'. However, it is important to understand that in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, age alone does not necessarily mean that one is a recognised Elder.

The use of 'Elder' (always uppercase) is generally acceptable, but it is important to be aware of the differences in meaning, as outlined above.

When negotiating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, ensure that recognised Elders are involved. This may occur directly, or through other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people negotiating on the Elders' behalf.

7.5 **Mob**

'Mob' is a term identifying a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people associated with a particular place or country.

'Mob' is an important term for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as it is used to describe who they are and where they are from. 'Mob' is generally used between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Consequently, it is not appropriate for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to use this term, unless it is known to be acceptable.

7.6 **Nation**

'Nation' refers to a culturally distinct group of people associated with a particular culturally-defined area of land or country. Each nation has boundaries that cannot be changed, and language is tied to that nation' and its country.

'Nation' may be used to refer to a culturally-distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group and its associated country.

Be aware that the boundaries of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations cross over state boundaries.

7.7 **Traditional Owner**

'Traditional Owners(s)' is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people directly descended from the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of a culturally-defined area of land or country, and has a cultural association with this country that derives from their blood-line back to Country, traditions, observances, customs, beliefs or history of the original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inhabitants of the area.

Use 'Traditional Owner(s)' to refer to an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or group, as defined above. Griffith University recommends that all formal meetings, presentations and other gatherings should be opened with an Acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the land on which the gathering is taking place.

7.8 **Sorry Business**

The period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is commonly known as Sorry Business.

In many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities there is a prohibition on naming someone who is deceased, which may last for months or even years. When this occurs, a different name is used to refer to the person who has passed away or one can simply speak of "that person" rather than mention their name.

Generally, the face of the person who has died should not be shown without warning, particularly to their own communities. You should always check with the local Aboriginal community before displaying or broadcasting names or images of deceased people.

It is recommended that the following wording be used by staff and students as a disclaimer when publishing such content.

"We respectfully advise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document/website may contain images or names of people who have passed away."

7.9 Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country

A 'Welcome to Country' is where the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are the traditional custodians welcome people to their Land. A Welcome to Country should occur in the opening ceremony of an event, preferably as the first item. The University has protocols in relation to performing a Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country: [Griffith University Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country](#)

The definitions used in sections 5, 6, and 7 of these Guidelines are derived from the *Guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Terminology*, Queensland Health, October 2011.