



Department of
Education
and Training

Protocols for

Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Traditional Ownership





Introduction

It is important that government school and TAFEWA students are immersed in learning environments that duly recognise and value the significance of Australia's Indigenous cultures and peoples.

It is equally important to embrace the spirit of reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and other Australians and for the Department and TAFEWA colleges to be inclusive of all groups.

Aboriginal custodianship of country needs to be recognised where Department and TAFEWA public events are held. Due recognition of the traditional owners of country assists in developing strong partnerships with Aboriginal communities across Western Australia. It also demonstrates the commitment of the Department and TAFEWA to achieving excellence, learning, care and equity for all students.

Aboriginal education is a priority area for the Department and all public schools are required to develop Aboriginal education and training plans. These plans include the teaching of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum, as well as compulsory Aboriginal cultural awareness training for all school staff.

TAFEWA colleges are expected to present relevant course materials to develop a range of competencies that assist Aboriginal economic development and employment.

Recognition of Aboriginal traditional ownership of country through a formal process called *Welcome to Country* will support this commitment to Aboriginal education and training.

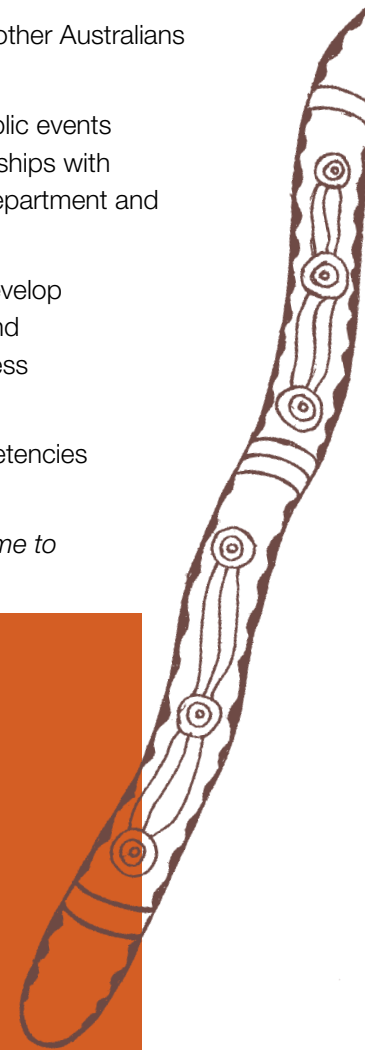
Guidelines for recognising and promoting Aboriginal culture and custodianship of country

Arranging a *Welcome to Country* ceremony that acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land shows respect for Aboriginal people as Australia's First Peoples. Ceremonies and protocols are a fundamental part of Aboriginal culture.

Valuing and respecting appropriate Aboriginal ceremony are pertinent to increasing the understanding and mutual respect for cultural practices by both Aboriginal Australians and the wider community. Appropriate cultural engagement seeks to observe protocols and the sharing of cultural practices.

Improving relationships between the local Aboriginal community and the broader community through ceremony, protocols and the process of collaborative negotiation is essential.

The use of appropriate Aboriginal protocols and ceremonies as a means of promoting greater understanding of Aboriginal culture in the wider community is described in this document.





The Welcome to Country Ceremony

A *Welcome to Country* is where the traditional Aboriginal custodian or Elder welcomes people to their land.

Welcome to Country always occurs at the opening of an event and is usually the first item on the program. The local Aboriginal custodians or traditional owners conduct the ceremony and this may be done through a speech, song, ceremony or a combination of these things.

It is important for the traditional owners to be comfortable with the arrangements. Organisers need to spend time talking with local Aboriginal people to identify the traditional owners and explaining to them the type of public event which is being organised.

In some areas of Western Australia there may be two or more language groups that have traditional ownership of the land where the event is being held. In these circumstances, all groups should be approached and consulted regarding the *Welcome to Country* ceremony.

Who To Ask

Event organisers need to ensure that the traditional owners are involved in the *Welcome to Country* ceremony. The *Welcome to Country* is a right of the local traditional owners and not a privilege; it is not about political correctness or tokenism. Aboriginal people employed at the local level in schools, district offices and TAFEWA colleges may be able to advise organisers about the traditional owners.

It is also advisable to seek advice from more than one source when establishing the local traditional owners. Once this advice is sourced, Aboriginal networks within the Department of Education and Training and TAFEWA colleges will seek advice from a number of additional groups that may include:

- Local community people such as a community chairperson;
- Aboriginal managers in the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA) regional offices; and
- Local Aboriginal organisations.

It is crucial to invite local Aboriginal representatives into any planned proposal at the onset to discuss and decide the format of the ceremony, who should be invited, who should perform the *Welcome to Country* and how that person will be recognised for their time and commitment.

Making the initial contact with appropriate traditional custodians of country on which the meeting, event or function is to take place may not be a simple process. The initial connection process is often the most challenging. Observing Aboriginal protocol includes allowing time for traditional decision-making and discussion among traditional custodians. This can take some time and should be factored into *Welcome to Country* planning processes.



Not all Aboriginal people can perform a *Welcome to Country* as it must be given by an appropriate person such as a recognised Elder within the local community. In some parts of the State there are disputes about who the traditional custodians are. This should be recognised as an effect of dispossession where people have been dislocated from their land and have returned to an area where they may not be accepted by some as traditional custodians.

When organising a *Welcome to Country* for an event, organisers need to provide the traditional owners (in some places there are more than one group) with information on the theme and purpose of the event. Elder/s representing the traditional owners may choose to include in the welcome a traditional focus to the theme or purpose of the event. Organisers should also respectfully request that the welcome in language be translated into English so that the audience understands the welcoming message. In some *Welcome to Country* ceremonies, Elders use symbols and explain the significance of the symbols in language as well as English.

Response to Welcome to Country

It is necessary for the speaker who follows immediately after the *Welcome to Country* ceremony to provide a response. Part of the response should acknowledge the person who delivered the *Welcome to Country*. If the custodians of the land are not the traditional owners, it may be necessary to acknowledge both groups. If an Aboriginal person from a different region is speaking he or she may wish to acknowledge the traditional owners and deliver a welcome from his/her own country. It is inappropriate for every speaker to provide a response or acknowledge country.

The following text can be used in response to the traditional *Welcome to Country*:

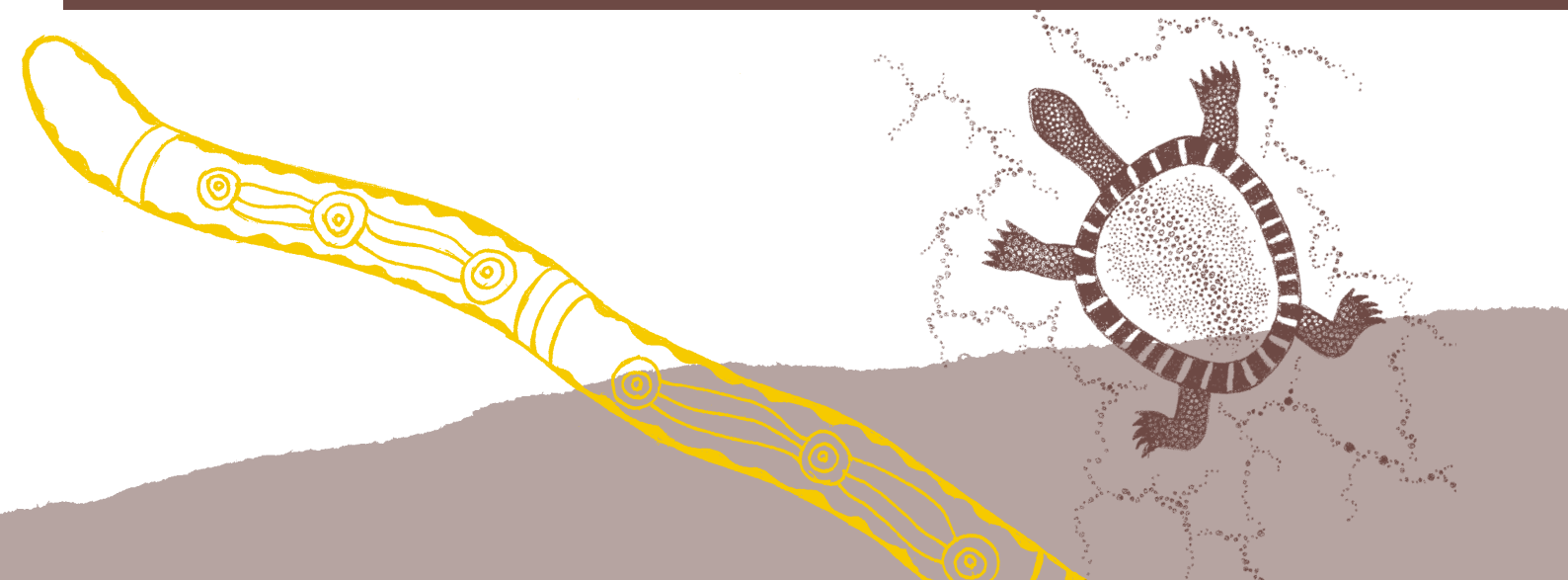
I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of this land on which we are meeting, the <traditional name/s> people. It is a privilege to be standing on <traditional name> country.

The following text could be used if the custodians are different:

I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of the land on which we stand, the _____ people and the _____ people who are the custodians.

We are honoured to be able to use this site with the approval of the traditional owners for the purpose of providing the best education for all children.

Together we acknowledge the contributions of Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians to the education of all children and people in this country we all live in and share together – Australia.



Acknowledgement of Country

Acknowledgement of country is a way that the wider community can demonstrate respect for Aboriginal protocol and can be performed by any individual, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, participating in an occasion of any kind. It is a demonstration of respect dedicated to the traditional custodians of the land or sea where the gathering of participants is being conducted.

Government agencies and community organisations are adopting the practice of acknowledging the traditional custodians of country at events, ceremonies, meetings and functions. The Department and TAFEWA college staff are encouraged to demonstrate appropriate acknowledgement when in forums such as general meetings, formal gatherings, functions, ceremonies and events.

When to acknowledge traditional ownership

There may be events where it is not possible for the traditional owners to provide a traditional welcome due to:

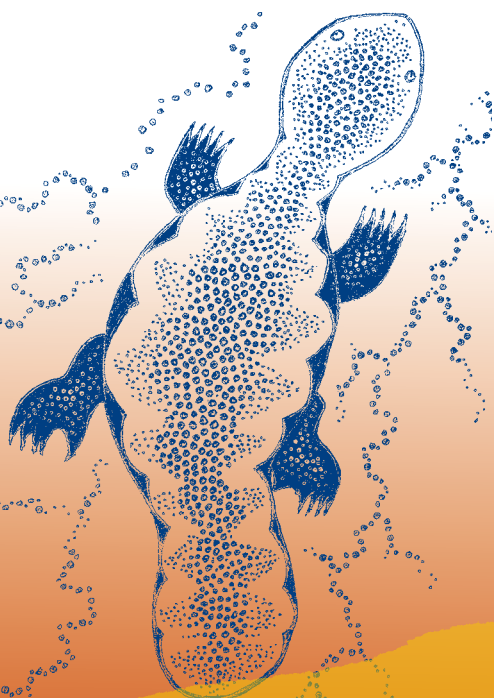
- unforeseen circumstances making it not possible or inappropriate for a traditional welcome ceremony (eg a death, funeral or illness);
- organisers not being able to make suitable arrangements with the traditional owners (eg fees, not allowing sufficient time to discuss requirements);
- prior engagement of the traditional owners (eg personal or cultural business);
- the nature of the event being too small or considered not important enough to warrant a welcome ceremony (eg school assemblies, parent evenings, conferences).

In these circumstances it is important that senior officers acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in the appropriate way even though the event may seem to be insignificant. As a suggested measure, where the event calls for the gathering of the whole school or TAFEWA campus, or all staff in a Directorate or office there should be acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land.

These events, due to their regularity should not require a traditional welcome ceremony but do require acknowledgement of traditional ownership and the following is suggested:

I respectfully acknowledge the past and present traditional owners of this land on which we are meeting, the <traditional name/s> people. It is a privilege to be standing on <traditional name> country.

I also acknowledge the contributions of Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians to the education of all children and people in this country we all live in and share together – Australia.



Other protocols and ceremonies:

The Department and TAFEWA colleges recognise and acknowledge that there are a significant number of Aboriginal ceremonies and/or protocols that necessitate respect. Some are sensitive and not discussed or shared with the broader community.

These can include:

- knowledge that is specific to gender, commonly known as “Women’s Business” or “Men’s Business”
- not mentioning the name of a deceased Aboriginal person or showing photographic images of a deceased person unless agreed to by the relevant family;
- initiation ceremonies; and
- the period of mourning for deceased Aboriginal people referred to as “Sorry Business”

These practices may apply in some areas but not in all parts of Western Australia. If you are unsure whether a group or individual may be sensitive about an issue or issues of protocol or ceremony you can check with your local Aboriginal education team located in the district education office.

In most cases people will acknowledge if you are being intrusive and/or if they are not permitted to talk to you about the protocol or ceremony because of your age, gender status or because you do not belong to their Clan or Tribal Group. If in any doubt about these types of issues always ask.

The Aboriginal representative or representatives should be comfortable with the arrangements that have been mutually negotiated. It is also important to note that the Department and TAFEWA colleges endorse the view that performing a *Welcome to Country* ceremony is a **right** of local Aboriginal custodians and not a privilege.

