

# Indigenous Research Strategy : Working Better with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Communities

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**Publication details:**

Report No. SPRC Report Series 14/08  
9780733426735 (ISBN)

**Publication Date:**

2008

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/872>

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
NEW SOUTH WALES

## *INDIGENOUS RESEARCH STRATEGY*

WORKING BETTER WITH ABORIGINAL AND  
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE AND  
COMMUNITIES

**SPRC Report 14/08**

**University of New South Wales**  
Social Policy Research Centre  
August 2008

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ISSN: 1446 4179

ISBN: 978 0 7334 2673 5

August 2008

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## **Suggested citation**

Davidson, B., C. Spooner, K.R. Fisher, B.J. Newton, A. Dadich, C. Smyth, J. Tudball and S. Flaxman, (2008), Indigenous Research Strategy: Working better with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, SPRC Report 14/08, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

## **Note on Terminology:**

The authors acknowledge the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who have different languages, cultures, histories and perspectives. For ease of reference, this report refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people collectively as ‘Indigenous’ people. This is consistent with terminology used by UNSW Nura Gili Indigenous Programs and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies guidelines.

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## **1 Introduction**

The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) undertakes research across a wide range of issues and locations across Australia. It is important that our work fully reflects the diversity of the populations and situations being researched.

In this context, there are complexities and obligations that require a special focus on how we work with Indigenous peoples and communities. These arise from the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples, the diversity of Indigenous peoples and situations, and the social, economic and psychological effects of the history of their interaction with the broader society. Indigenous peoples and communities are over-represented in much of the SPRC's research and their interests are priorities for action in many areas of social policy. As a group, Indigenous people are amongst the most disadvantaged people in Australia against many social indicators, but they also have unique strengths on which social policy affecting them needs to be based.

There is strong commonality between Indigenous peoples across Australia arising from their shared culture and heritage; equally, there is much diversity. Indigenous peoples and communities have a wide range of backgrounds, needs and aspirations, and interact with 'mainstream' society in many different ways. It is important that this complexity and diversity be appropriately reflected in the Centre's work and that the principles and processes in this Strategy are embedded in the overall values, culture, policy, and operations of the Centre.

This Strategy reflects the commitment and work of the SPRC to ensure the relevance and quality of its research involving Indigenous peoples and communities.

## **2 Background**

At its October 2002 meeting the SPRC Co-ordination Committee requested more information on how the Centre can better work with Indigenous peoples and communities. A Discussion Paper was developed in February 2003, following discussions with Sue Green (Director, UNSW Nura Gili Indigenous Programs) and a meeting of SPRC staff. That paper has helped to guide subsequent action on Indigenous research by the SPRC. In particular, the SPRC adopted two key recommendations from the paper, namely that:

1. The SPRC formally adopt the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies; and
2. The responsibility for the SPRC Indigenous Protocol be allocated to at least one SPRC researcher, to develop and implement a draft Action Plan with specific priorities and timeframes.

In February 2006, the SPRC Co-ordination Committee established an internal group to further develop the SPRC's capacity to undertake Indigenous-related research. This paper has been developed by that group, drawing on the 2003 paper, contributions from SPRC researchers, and a range of people experienced in Indigenous research. The group has also worked in concert with another internal SPRC group that is developing a strategy to enhance the Centre's capacity to work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people and communities.

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Nura Gili has been a key partner in developing this paper. We will continue to work collaboratively with Nura Gili in implementing and monitoring the Strategy.

### **3 Lessons from Past Research**

#### **3.1 Indigenous research in general**

The term ‘research’ has a poor reputation among many Indigenous people and communities. There are numerous examples of research conducted in accord with Indigenous wishes and of benefit to Indigenous people, but all too often:

- the relationship of researchers with Indigenous people has involved little or no consultation with the people affected, or respect for Indigenous ethical concerns;
- the research has been a one-sided exploitative relationship with no benefits flowing back to Indigenous communities; and
- the research has been of poor quality, with findings and recommendations not reflecting the reality of Indigenous experience.

This situation is well illustrated by a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) report, which indicated that fifty per cent of funded research projects on Indigenous health issues failed due to lack of:

- collaboration with Indigenous agencies and communities;
- agreement on research ethics; and
- appropriate methods (particularly the underlying methodological assumptions).

A major source of concern has been the lack of adequate ethical procedures and the inappropriate processes sometimes employed by academic institutions and staff. At one level, there is a need for researchers to be more stringent and culturally sensitive in the criteria and procedures they follow in giving ethical approval to Indigenous research. Of more concern to Indigenous people, however, is the need to ensure community ethical approval. An honest and open dialogue with Indigenous peoples and communities is essential to ensure the appropriateness of both the content and methodology of research.

Unless clear protocols are in place and clearly communicated to Indigenous people, researchers are likely to be regarded as ‘just another white-fella mob coming to steal our stories’. Whilst we cannot change the past it is incumbent on us to learn the lessons and make every effort not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

#### **3.2 SPRC research**

SPRC researchers have been conscious of limits on the Centre’s ability to undertake appropriate research with Indigenous peoples and communities. Their concerns have included:

- the time and methodological constraints placed on the Centre by contracted research grants;
- the fact that most SPRC research projects are not specific to Indigenous peoples, and thus the focus on Indigenous concerns is limited by the need to address a range of other considerations;
- the appropriateness of methodological approaches often employed by the Centre;

- 
- the need for sensitivity by non-Indigenous institutions undertaking research with Indigenous peoples and communities;
  - the difficulty of including Indigenous peoples and communities in the design and conduct of research when the Centre has limited contacts and networks with Indigenous communities; and
  - the appropriateness of policy recommendations drawn from work undertaken by the Centre that does not adequately reflect the experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Non-Indigenous research institutions undertaking social research have a growing awareness about and commitment to the need to work better with Indigenous peoples and communities. As part of this process, the SPRC has developed this Strategy.

## **4 Objectives of the Strategy**

The SPRC Strategic Plan for 2007-2009 sets out the following vision and mission for the Centre.

*Vision:* To be recognised nationally and internationally as a leader in designing and undertaking rigorous and influential social policy research which contributes to policy development and well-being.

*Mission:* To conduct and disseminate policy-relevant social research that meets and extends the highest standards of excellence, and to promote research training.

Accordingly, the core objective of this Strategy is to ensure that SPRC research concerning Indigenous peoples and communities meets and extends the highest standards of excellence and significantly contributes to the social well-being of Indigenous peoples and their communities.

To achieve this objective, this paper sets out a range of strategies and actions aimed at ensuring that the SPRC:

- conducts research in ways that encompass the range of Indigenous concerns in the subjects being studied, accurately reflect the nature and diversity of Indigenous experience, and use appropriate and sensitive research methods;
- develops its capacity for Indigenous research by enhancing the skills and knowledge of its researchers, its management and organisational support, and the extent and depth of linkages with other bodies; and
- assists in the development of the skill and knowledge base of Indigenous researchers<sup>1</sup>, Indigenous communities, and other external stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> An *Indigenous researcher* is here defined as a researcher who is an Indigenous person. An *Indigenous research specialist* is a researcher with substantial experience in conducting research with Indigenous peoples and communities; this includes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.



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## 5 Principles

The SPRC has formally adopted the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies* (2000) (AIATSIS Guidelines) as the basis on which it will conduct research involving Indigenous peoples and communities.

The AIATSIS Guidelines are based on the following eleven principles:

A. Consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding

1. Consultation, negotiation and free and informed consent are the foundations for research with or about Indigenous peoples.
2. The responsibility for consultation and negotiation is ongoing.
3. Consultation and negotiation should achieve mutual understanding about the proposed research.

B. Respect, recognition and involvement

4. Indigenous knowledge systems and processes must be respected.
5. There must be recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of people as well as individuals.
6. The intellectual and cultural property rights of Indigenous peoples must be respected and preserved.
7. Indigenous researchers, individuals and communities should be involved in research as collaborators.

C. Benefits outcomes and agreement

8. The use of and access to research results should be agreed.
9. A researched community should benefit from, and not be disadvantaged by, the research project.
10. The negotiation of outcomes should include results specific to the needs of the researched community.
11. Negotiation should result in a formal agreement for the conduct of a research project, based on good faith and free and informed consent.

The [AIATSIS Guidelines](#) provide further explanation of the principles, together with advice on their implementation.

In all projects, SPRC researchers will implement the Guidelines in a way that is sensitive to the particular and unique needs of each situation.

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## 6 Strategies and Actions

### 6.1 Overview

Action within the Centre needs to be taken at both a systemic level (ie. organisational and program) and an individual project level. This section sets out a comprehensive program of action at both levels.

The Centre is committed to fully implementing the program set out below. Given the wide-ranging and thorough nature of the planned measures, however, the program will need to be implemented over time in line with priorities set by the Centre's management.

### 6.2 Systemic strategies and actions

At a systemic level, action is centred on four main aspects:

1. *SPRC Capacity Building*, through the development of (i) SPRC Management (ii) SPRC researchers, and (iii) Indigenous researchers
2. *Indigenous Research Protocol*
3. *External Linkages*, through developing (i) partnerships with other organisations (ii) informal connections and networking (iii) processes to identify potential projects and project partners, and (iv) an Indigenous focus in SPRC external activities.
4. *Development of Indigenous Communities and Indigenous Research Capacity beyond the SPRC*, through action focused on (i) training of Indigenous researchers (ii) training of all researchers, and (iii) supporting the development of Indigenous communities.

Specific actions under each of these four aspects are set out below. The actions have been placed under the heading of the greatest significance, but clearly most of them can also make a contribution to other areas. An Action Plan has been established to develop and implement each of the specific actions set out below.

#### SPRC Capacity Building

##### *SPRC management*

- Appoint at least one Indigenous person to the SPRC Advisory Committee:
  - The person(s) should have academic qualifications, substantial experience in research, strong community links, and a record of achievement in their field(s).
- Allocate responsibility for the Indigenous strategy to one member of the Management Committee; and
- Allocate responsibility for the Indigenous strategy to one member of the Coordination Group:
  - This involves responsibility for implementing, managing, and further developing the Strategy, including overseeing an ongoing working group.

##### *SPRC researchers*

- Train SPRC researchers in Indigenous research methods, through:
  - SPRC convened workshops
  - Linking researchers to external workshops and programs; and

- 
- Negotiate internships for SPRC researchers within Indigenous research organisations.

#### *Indigenous researchers*

- Appoint Indigenous researchers to conduct research at SPRC. This involves:
  - Identifying funding, either from the SPRC budget or other sources (eg ARC); and
  - Identifying Indigenous people who are suitable and interested;
- Ensure appropriate support and mentoring is available for Indigenous researchers working with SPRC; and
- Proactively seek and employ suitable Indigenous students as casual research assistants to work with SPRC.

#### **Indigenous Research Protocol**

- Review research methodology protocols :
  - Of particular importance are protocols for ethics approval, consultation, data collection, and dissemination of research findings.
  - The use of quantitative data relating to Indigenous peoples and communities requires special consideration. This includes cases where the SPRC has a responsibility for the ethical use of data, even where it has not been responsible for collection of the data.
  - The review would most appropriately be conducted by Nura Gili and the UNSW Ethics Committee as part of a general review of Indigenous research protocols in UNSW. The role of the SPRC would be to support this general review as appropriate; and
- Establish processes to ensure adherence to the Protocol in all research.

#### **External linkages**

SPRC can work collaboratively on a number of levels with Indigenous research and community organisations and with researchers working on Indigenous-related issues. Creating reciprocity in these relationships is important; as in all partnerships, both parties must have something to offer. This involves both building on existing networks and establishing new connections

Four possible levels of collaboration are through:

#### *Developing partnerships with other organisations*

- Establish ongoing partnerships with Indigenous organisations and other bodies as appropriate to identify and conduct collaborative research;
- Partner with organisations for specific purposes on as-needs basis;
- SPRC staff to become members of the boards of relevant Indigenous organisations and of working groups on Indigenous social issues; and
- This would also have value in the context of the career development of SPRC staff.

#### *Informal connections and networking*

- Identify existing relationships with SPRC researchers and foster sustainable relationships;
- Maintain a listing of possible partners;

- 
- Distribute SPRC Newsletter to Indigenous organisations;
  - Provide Indigenous organisations with material about SPRC activities for inclusion in their newsletters and other publications;
  - Increase our links and visibility with people within UNSW who have an interest in collaborating with SPRC:
    - This could include more structured activities such as jointly organising seminars open to external people;
  - Identify and establish links with Indigenous units in other tertiary institutions;
  - Increase links with researchers in working on Indigenous issues; and
  - Develop and utilise other opportunities to establish and grow informal networks
    - e.g., visiting Indigenous organisations when on field work visits for other projects.

#### *Identifying projects and project partners*

- Establish a process to ensure that whenever SPRC plans to prepare a tender or grant application, we identify and approach relevant organisations or Indigenous research specialists to discuss their possible involvement in SPRC tenders/grant applications:
  - The SPRC procedures for writing tenders include a step for inviting Indigenous research organisations or specialists to be involved in any project that might include Indigenous peoples
  - The involvement could be in a variety of ways, including as a joint applicant or contracting their services; and
- Use our formal partnerships and informal networking to ensure that Indigenous research specialists preparing a tender/grant application are aware of the SPRC's capacity and interest in Indigenous research.

#### *Indigenous focus in SPRC activities*

- Prioritise an Indigenous stream in a forum or plenary session in the Australian Social Policy Conference;
- Seek contributions on Indigenous research and methodology for the SPRC seminar series; and
- Include Indigenous issues in the SPRC Newsletter.

### **Development of Indigenous communities and Indigenous research capacity beyond the SPRC**

#### *Training of Indigenous researchers*

- Proactively develop an Indigenous student component of SPRC, particularly support for Honours, course work Masters and PhD students, particularly using industry sponsors; and
- Support programs of placements for Indigenous students (eg. Macquarie University).

#### *Training of all researchers*

- Stock take of Indigenous research capacity in UNSW
  - In conjunction with Nura Gili; and

- 
- Provide skill development opportunities to Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers at the SPRC and/or in SPRC projects.

#### *Supporting community development*

- Ensure feedback of research findings to communities;
- SPRC staff to be available as a mentor for follow-up activities linked to the research; and
- SPRC staff to become members of the boards of Indigenous organisations.

### **6.3 Development and conduct of individual projects**

In the development and conduct of all research projects, it is important that there is:

- An appropriate recognition of Indigenous issues and concerns;
- A methodology and process for ethics approvals that meet both academic and Indigenous community requirements; and
- Genuine engagement with the people and communities.

The significance of Indigenous issues and the involvement of Indigenous people will vary substantially between projects.

In the development of *all projects*, it is expected that, as relevant, SPRC researchers will:

- Consider the possible implications for Indigenous peoples and communities;
- Discuss proposals with existing networks, including ethical issues;
- Identify key Indigenous stakeholders (individuals and/or organisations);
- Identify appropriate potential collaborators;
- Negotiate with any affected communities the form of any payments for participation in the research. (This may be individual payments or resources for general community use); and
- Draw on methodologies that maximise the benefits of Indigenous involvement for both the research and Indigenous peoples and communities (eg. participatory action research).

#### *Short-term projects*

Short-term projects (lasting up to 12 months) place constraints on our capacity to develop partnerships through the project and to fully draw on Indigenous perspectives. In addition to the above measures, it will be desirable to consider the potential for:

- Including representative agencies or advocate organisations as research informants; and
- Follow-up opportunities and funding to enable a more extensive methodology and involvement of Indigenous people.

#### *Longer-term projects*

Longer projects (lasting over 12 months) allow greater opportunities to:

- Work alongside partner organisation to maximise the skills and knowledge exchange;
- Train, support and pay Indigenous people to assist in the research;

- 
- Discuss and negotiate with each community how they would like to participate in the research (which could include training or employment opportunities, participation in an advisory committee, reports in accessible language, etcetera);
  - Negotiate longer-term contributions to the community; and
  - Factor into all budgets repeat visits, feedback sessions, accessible language reports, training and employment of bi-cultural research assistants.

#### *Constraints on research*

All research projects have initial resource constraints, in terms of funds, time, availability of expertise, etcetera. The research plan for each project needs to identify means of mitigating the impact of these constraints in ways that do not adversely affect the relationship with Indigenous partners or the quality of the research findings.

Nevertheless, ‘shortcomings’ of research in relation to Indigenous peoples and communities may become evident both during and at the completion of projects. In such cases, the SPRC will develop a ‘follow-up’ strategy to rectify the ‘shortcomings’. This may require additional funds, either from the project’s original funding source or other sources.

Two initial steps to implement the above strategies for individual projects are to:

- Consider the implications of this Strategy for *existing* projects, and make any adjustments that are necessary and feasible at this stage; and
- Identify a new or future project to trial the strategy.

## **6.4 Resources**

A range of external resources can assist us in developing our Indigenous research capacity. The SPRC has a database (to be continuously updated) that contains the names, contact details, and additional information about individuals and organisations from:

- Within UNSW;
- Indigenous-specific research organisations and units;
- Research bodies with a wider focus but with substantial Indigenous research experience;
- Indigenous community bodies; and
- Other sources.