

Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country Guidelines

Why are Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country important?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced a long history of exclusion from Australian history books, the Australian flag, the Australian anthem, and for many years, Australian democracy. This history of dispossession and colonisation lies at the heart of the disparity between Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians today. Including recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in events, meetings, and national symbols, is one part of ending the exclusion that has been so damaging.

Incorporating welcoming and acknowledgement protocols into official meetings and events recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Australians, and Traditional Custodians of the land. It promotes an ongoing connection to place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and shows respect for Traditional Custodians.

Reconciliation Australia advises that in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the meaning of Country is more than just ownership or connection to land, as Professor Mick Dodson explains:

"When we talk about traditional 'Country'...we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians...we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area, and we might mean more than just a place on the map. For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area... It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. While they may all no longer necessarily be the title-holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land."



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What is a Welcome to Country?

A Welcome to Country is a ceremony given by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elders, or Traditional Custodians who have been given permission, to welcome visitors onto their Traditional land.

Protocols for welcoming visitors to Country have been part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years. Traditionally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups had clear boundaries separating their Country from that of other groups.

Crossing into another group's Country required a request for permission to enter. When permission was granted, the hosting group would welcome the visitors, offering them safe passage and protection of their spiritual being during the journey. While visitors were provided with a safe passage, they also had to respect the protocols and rules of the land owner group while on their Country.

Today, these protocols have been adapted to fit with contemporary life. However, the essential elements of welcoming visitors and offering safe passage remain in place.

When do I include a Welcome to Country?

A Welcome to Country occurs at the beginning of a formal event such as a conference, seminar or festival where people are coming from outside the local area. A Welcome can take many forms, including singing, dancing, smoking ceremonies, or a speech in Traditional language and/or English.

What is an Acknowledgement of Country?

An Acknowledgement of Country is an opportunity for anyone to show respect for Australia's Traditional Custodians, and the continuing connection that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to the land, sea, sky and waterways. An Acknowledgement of Country can be performed by an Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or non-Indigenous person, and is generally offered at the beginning of a meeting, speech or formal occasion.

The University of Queensland recommends a short and longer version for acknowledging Country:

When to use a short version for acknowledging Country

You may use the shorter version if you are not the first person to acknowledge Country or in a more informal setting or thanking a Traditional Owner for welcoming people to Country.

Short

I (too,) acknowledge the (people as) Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which we meet today and pay my respect to their Ancestors and their descendants.*

When to use longer version

If you are the main speaker at the event/gathering or the first person to present, it is appropriate to use the longer version for acknowledging Country.

Long

I acknowledge the (people as) Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which we meet today. On behalf of ** I pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.*

(* people as) If known add the Traditional Owners' language group/ nation/clan. You may need to contact a local organisation to understand who the Traditional Custodians are.

** If you are hosting an event, meeting or seminar, you might say something like "On behalf of the event organisers or your section."

Remember to pause briefly after acknowledging Country as a sign of respect. If you are more familiar with acknowledging Country you may add a statement about the event, meeting or forum's connection with Country. For example; at a higher education event you might acknowledge that the campus has always been a space for teaching, learning, research and collaboration tens of thousands of years before it was established as a UQ campus, and continues today.

Acknowledgement: This guideline is adapted from Reconciliation Australia's Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/welcome_acknowledgement_v4.pdf

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