

National Survey on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment in Australian Libraries

Research Report

Jumbunna Institute
for Indigenous
Education &
Research



This report was funded by the ALIA Research Award

Contents

Message from ALIA President Vicki Edmunds	1
Message from Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt, OA	1
Executive Summary	2
Acknowledgements	2
About the research	3
1 Data on Indigenous employment rates in Australian libraries	4
Survey distribution	4
Survey responses	4
2 What Indigenous library workers had to say about their employment	9
Participation in the interviews	9
Data collection	9
Key themes and insights from the data	10
3 Research findings and recommended actions	16
Final notes on research	18
About the researcher	18
About Jumbunna	18
Terminology	18

Message from ALIA President Vicki Edmunds

This report is the first research to explore the experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders across the Australian library and information sectors, as directly told by First Nations people through First Nations-led research.

The report achieves the dual outcomes of distilling the shared experiences of Indigenous people in the library sector into shared themes, and also allowing individual voices to be heard. The result is a vibrant and valuable piece of research with strong recommendations for the future.

As the national professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector, ALIA was pleased to fund this research. I want to thank Kirsten Thorpe for leading this important project, the Jumbunna Centre and the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub for their support, and the members Indigenous Expert Working Group, Lesley Acres, Rebecca Bateman, Nathan Sentance, Ryan Stoker and Damien Webb.

Finally I want to thank all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in the research, through surveys and interviews. I appreciated the time that you took to contribute, and acknowledge the emotional labour involved. I personally commit to listening to what you have to say, and to working to address the recommendations in the report.

Message from Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt, OA

Chair of Indigenous Research, Director Research and Academic Programs, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, UTS

Indigenous-led research of Indigenous people and self-determination have always been central and leading principles of Jumbunna Research's work. Jumbunna, as a leading Indigenous research institute prides itself on frank and fearless research and advocacy driven by the Indigenous communities it serves.

As a pilot study, the *National Survey on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment in Australian Libraries* is the first of its kind providing a snapshot of the numbers of Indigenous people employed in Australian libraries and insights into the range of roles and employment contexts of their employment. It also provided an opportunity to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers who are currently employed in libraries to hear about their aspirations and needs.

Libraries provide essential services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia and the success of these services is dependent on Indigenous employment and leadership. This is of particular importance to make libraries more relevant and inviting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including making their resources and collections relevant and appropriate in how they represent Indigenous peoples histories, cultures and experiences.

Libraries have not always been welcoming spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and this research shows that continued effort needs to be focussed to address the needs of Indigenous people in this area.

I thank the team in the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub, led by Kirsten Thorpe, and Industry Professor Nareen Young (Indigenous People and Work Research and Practice Hub) for providing advice and support on the study. I would also like to thank the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) for their leadership in working to address the recommendations of the report.

Executive Summary

This report provides outcomes of the research project *National Survey on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment in Australian Libraries* conducted in the period of 2020 to 2021.

The research aimed to find out more about the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in Australian libraries and identify the current employment types across a range of library settings. It also sought to find out more about the location of libraries with Indigenous staff across states, territories, and public, academic, and school, or other specialist libraries. By conducting the study, we have been able to identify the trends in current employment roles, identify gaps, and understand more about the experiences of Indigenous people working in these libraries.

The report provides an outline of the demographic information provided by participants to the online survey and a summary of the major themes identified from data collected in the semi-structured interviews.

The research has shown there are unique opportunities for the library sector to support the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian libraries and develop new pathways for current staff to access leadership roles and others to enter the profession. It has also identified significant gaps in support in this area and provided recommendations for future action and research.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters, cultures, and communities. I also pay respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to Elders past and present.

Deep thanks and gratitude to the participants of the research including those who completed the online survey and others who participated in a research interview. I appreciate the time, insights and knowledge that you shared. I also acknowledge and thank the members of the Indigenous Expert Working Group that was formed.

- Lesley Acres, State Library of QLD
- Rebecca Bateman, National Library of Australia
- Nathan Sentance, AustralianMuseum
- Ryan Stoker, University of Sydney
- Damien Webb, State Library of NSW

Thank you also to Industry Professor Nareen Young, [Indigenous People and Work Research and Practice Hub](#), at UTS for your guidance and mentorship with this research; and Lauren Booker and Monica Galassi, [Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub](#), for their support and advice.

This project is supported by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Research Grant. This study has been approved in line with the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC] guidelines. UTS REC REF NO. ETH20-4964

About the research

The *National Survey on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Libraries* aimed to find more about Indigenous employment in Australian libraries.

By conducting a national survey of Indigenous employment in Australian libraries, the study has provided a snapshot of the numbers of people employed and found out more about the current types of employment across a range of library contexts and services. The research also provided opportunities to find out more about the location of this employment across states and territories, as well as across public, academic, and school (or other) specialist libraries.

Driving this study is the need to understand more about current trends in types of Indigenous employment across various library roles, whether they be as library assistants, paraprofessionals, or professionals. The study also sought to understand more about the experiences of Indigenous people working in Australian libraries, including information on workplace conditions. By gaining insights into the experiences of current workers, we can bring greater attention to the barriers to employment within the library sector for Indigenous people and identify opportunities for increasing numbers and supporting the ongoing workforce development needs of Indigenous people across Australian libraries.

The research involved two separate components:

- The first component, an online survey for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to complete, was widely circulated and opened for completion online for a period of 5 weeks between 1 October 2020 to 6 November 2020.
- The second component involved an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to participate in a semi-structured interview by phone or Zoom after completing the online survey. A total of ten interviews were conducted, five in late 2020 and five in early 2021.

This information that follows in the report is as follows:

Part 1 - summarises the data on employment rates and other demographic information relating to employment.

Part 2 - consolidates the significant themes on workplace conditions identified in the interviews.

Part 3 - outlines the major research findings and recommendations for future research and action.

Further information on the research, including research methodology and methods, data/research limitations, literature review, and major research findings, will also be published in the form of a scholarly journal article at a future date.

1 Data on Indigenous employment rates in Australian libraries

Survey distribution

Information on the *National Survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment in Australian libraries* was distributed widely including through social media facilitated by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and through wide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander networks. Additionally, the Expert Working Group members distributed to their networks to encourage responses. The survey was originally opened for one month, and this was later extended for an additional week with a call out to encourage final responses.

The survey included background information on the project as an *Information Sheet and Consent form for Online Survey* approved by UTS Research Ethics (UTS HREC REF NO. ETH20-4964).

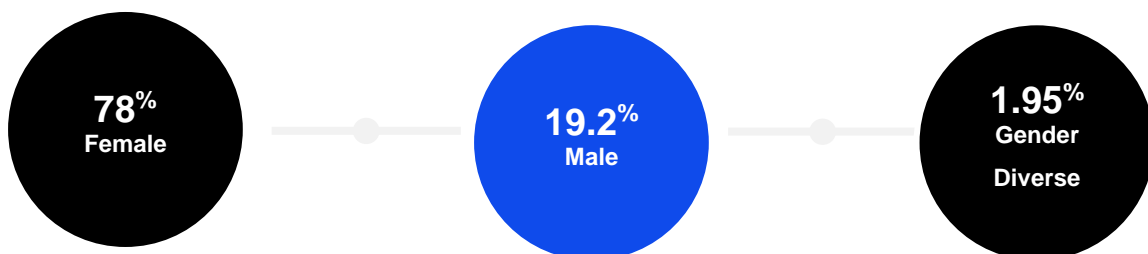
A total of 17 questions were included in the survey.

Survey responses

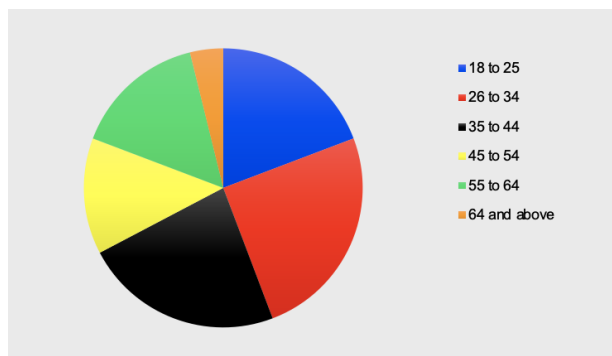
During the period 1 October 2020 to 6 November 2020 a total of **52** responses were received to the survey, which was managed through the UTS research platform *Redcap*.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers

The largest proportion of respondents were female (41, 78%) with 10 male (19.2%) and 1 respondent identifying as being non-binary/gender diverse (1.9%).



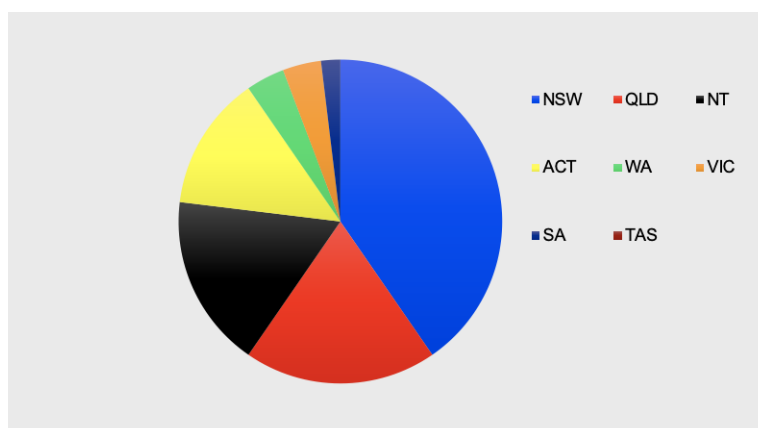
A large majority of the participants identified as being **Aboriginal (45, or 90%)**, and 1 person identified as being **Torres Strait Islander (2.0%)** and **4 people identified as being both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (8.0%)**.



The age range of 26 to 34 had the highest proportion of employees (13, 25.0%), followed closely by people who were aged 35 to 44 (12, 23.1%), 18 to 25 year old employees (10, 19.2%), 55 to 64 (8, 15.4%), 45 to 54 (7, 13.5%), and finally 64 and above (2, 3.8%).

Workplace locations

In terms of employment the following numbers of Indigenous people were employed in each state and territory of Australia.



NSW had the highest number of people employed in libraries with 40.4% of responses.

NSW – 21 (40.4%) QLD – 10 (19.2%) NT – 9 (17.3%) ACT – 7 (13.5%) WA – 2 (3.8%)
VIC – 2 (3.8%) SA – 1 (1.9%)

TAS had no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library employees.

Utilising the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure* the following results were shown in terms of geographical spread. The largest proportion of libraries employing Indigenous staff were in the major capital cities (28, 53.8%), followed by Inner regional (10, 19.2%), Outer regional (8, 15.4%), Remote (5, 9.6%), Very remote (1, 1.9%).

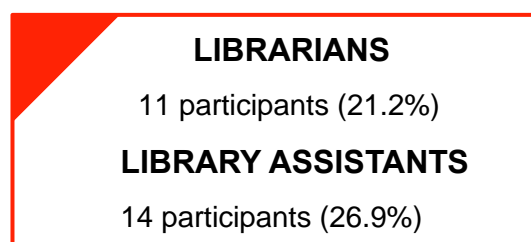
Types of library settings

Public libraries made up the largest of the library employment setting (36, 69.2%) Academic library (9, 17.3%), School library (5, 9.6%), Industry partner (eg. Vendor) (0, 0.0%), LIS Educator (2, 3.8%), Other employee (please describe below) (1, 1.9%).¹



A significant proportion of respondents (33, 63.5%) noted that their employment status was Full-time (ongoing), the next category of Full-time (contract) had 6 respondents (11.5%) which was equally matched by people in Part-time (ongoing) roles with 6 respondents (11.5%). Three people had a Part-time role (contract) (5.8%) and 3 people were in Casual employment roles (5.8%). There was only 1 Cadetship (1.9%) and no internship or student employment roles.

Employment - occupation



11 people identified as being Librarians (21.2%) and 14 as Library Assistants (26.9%) 4 respondents were in Library Technician roles (7.7%) and 2 in Archivist roles (3.8%). There was also 1 Teacher Librarian (1.9%). There were no responses identifying as Curator or Records Managers in library settings².



21.2% OF PARTICIPANTS IDENTIFIED THEIR JOB AS LIBRARIANS

There were an interesting range of responses to library roles with the largest response (20, 38.5%) noting 'other' with several people wanting to describe their unique roles. Some of these examples included, Project Officer, Indigenous Languages Coordinator, Library Team Leader, Marketing and Events, Library Liaison Officer, and Engagement Officer.

¹ A review of the responses that noted 'other employee' where deemed to be public library settings and the data has been updated to reflect these changes. 1 response also noted 'other employee' as library educator, and this data has been added to the category LIS educator and updated accordingly. 1 response remained as 'other employee' as the respondent noted that the library setting was both a joint use library for school & community.

² A review of the responses that noted 'other occupation' saw two people identify themselves as curators.

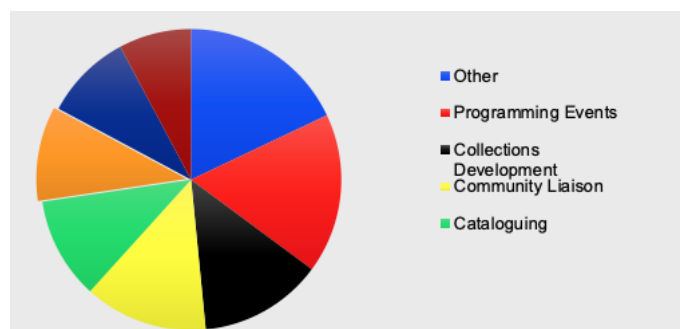
Descriptions of Occupation (other)

Project Officer - Researcher - Indigenous Languages Coordinator - Library Team Leader
 Management role - Branch Officer, Customer Support - Team leader - Home - Library Services -
 Marketing and Events Cadet - Library Assistant Trainee - Library Liaison Officer - Library Trainee -
 Project management (mentoring, literary sector development, strategy & funding) - Indigenous
 Engagement Director, Indigenous Engagement - Visitor Experience Officer- Administration / Liaison
 Officer - Curator of collections - Aboriginal and Islander Education officer - Collections Officer
 (Collections Care) - Curator - Data Archive Coordinator

Employment – library role

There was some cross over with question 10 discussing occupation and 11 discussing library role. It was helpful to see the breakdown of the areas of focus. People could choose more than one area of focus.

In all, 'other' library role had the largest respondents (23, 44.2%) followed by 22 people identifying Programming/Events as their major role (42.3%), 17 in Collection Development roles (32.7%), equally 17 in Community Liaison roles (32.7%), 14 in Cataloguing / Collection Description (26.9%), 13 in Children's Services (25%), 12 in Reader Services (23.1%) and 10 in Policy roles (19.2%).



In terms of employment position, the largest group of respondents in the level of role were marked at Professional level (17, 33.3%), this was followed by people describing their roles as being at Entry level (14, 27.5%), 13 at Support level, 6 at Management level and 1 at Director level. There were no respondents in the Chief Executive level. One response was missing from this section.

Descriptions of roles (other)

Indigenous Education - Manage and implement Indigenous Languages Policy and associated programming - Library operations and staff management - Management role – Operations team – customer service - Home library service - Mobile library coordinator – Digital communications - Academic liaison - Customer service - Project management (mentoring, literary sector development, strategy & funding) - Library Trainee, undertaking a variety of different work - Processing collections - Trove Partnership Liaison – Engagement - Print and Published materials - Collection Management - Collection engagement via online platforms - Student Support Education Officer - Digitisation and Digital Collections Management



32.7% OF PARTICIPANTS ENTERED LIBRARY WORK VIA

CADETSHIPS

A question in the survey relating to employment pathways asked whether respondent's entry into the library was via a traineeship or cadetship. With 17 people noting **Yes (32.7%)**, and 35 as No (67.3%).

Participants' length of employment varied with the largest group of participants having been in the sector 3 to 5 years (16, 30.8%), 13 people for 1 to 2 years (25.0%), 9 people had been employed for over 20 years (17.3%), 7 people for 5 to 10 years (13.5%), matched by 7 people employed for 10 to 20 years (13.5%).

2 What Indigenous library workers had to say about their employment

Participation in the interviews

The second component of the study involved a call out to invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had expertise and experiences working in the Australian library sector. The library workers who participated in the follow up semi-structured interview would have also completed the online survey. Participation in the interviews was voluntary.

In all, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted using yarning as a method. Five interviews were conducted in 2020 and 5 in 2021. Due to the impacts of Covid-19 all of the yarning interviews were conducted online via Zoom.

The call out for participation attracted a number of people who were new to the profession, and some people who were not engaged in any existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library networks. In other cases, participants had been working in the profession for some time and had previous experiences of being actively involved in library networks.

Data collection

Interviewees were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form approved by the UTS HREC. The PIS also included a list of questions that would be asked to guide the yarning session.

The questions guided the semi-structured interviews in order to investigate the current workforce conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander employment in the library sector in Australia.

The technique utilised to guide the data collection process within the semi-structured interview is the culturally appropriate method of yarning. Yarning allowed for the introduction of the topics and then a broad discussion to take place. Within the yarning, I asked questions relating to participants' professional, community and institutional roles.

Yarning as a method meant that the conversation was open, however I prepared a list of interview questions to guide the conversations. I also let participants know in advance that I would adapt the questions for each specific library context (for example, across public, academic and school libraries) in order to gain insight into people's specific library settings.

Participants' anonymity has been respected in reporting key insights and responses.

Interview questions

1. To begin, can you please provide a brief overview of your library setting?
2. Can you please tell us about role within the library, what are your primary work functions or main areas of work? (for example, community liaison, collections, cataloguing, policy etc)
3. Can you please describe what are the areas of library work that attracted you to the profession?
4. Can you please provide a brief overview your career aspirations in the library sector?
5. Can you please outline if you have had an opportunity to undertake any formal studies in the library and information field, or whether you plan to do so in the future?
6. What support did, or will you, require to be engaged in these studies?

7. Can you please describe any challenges in relation to your library role, or support for career progression in the library sector?
8. Can you please describe any gaps or support that exist in relation to the support for Indigenous Australian employment in libraries?
9. Can you please describe what you would see as strengths of your library in relation to Indigenous employment?
10. Can you please tell me if you have ideas about other professional development that would support you in relation to your work in libraries as an Indigenous Australian person?
11. Do you have any other comments/thoughts you would like to share?

The yarning sessions were approximately 1 hour in length, some participants took longer. Consent was sought to record the sessions for the purposes of transcription, and transcripts were returned to participants for validation of the major themes. People had a lot to say on the research topic.

Key themes and insights from the data

The following summary provides the key themes and insights from the data. It also includes the direct voice of the research participants on the themes.

Key definitions for the term's cultural safety, cultural labour and identity fatigue/strain are provided in the terminology section of this paper.



1 - Indigenous workers enable and support a vibrant Australian library sector

Library workers saw great opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures to be represented vibrantly through various library services.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander library workers breathe life into libraries and enable opportunities to welcome members of their communities in to use their services and collections.

There are so many good things about the library ... the collection is what makes working at the library special ... the cultural materials are amazing, and to work with them is a privilege.

I am still in this profession because I still want to be, which I don't remind myself often enough. There have been situations and times when I have not wanted to be in this job or in this sector. But overwhelmingly, it's been incredible, and it's been a privilege to be able to work with these collections ... I have reverence for our work and our collections.

In the early part of my career, I did very hands-on work in terms of answering inquiries and doing research. Whereas now, I am more in a policy advisory space where I can make more systemic change to hopefully make those hands-on procedures better and more culturally informed.



2 - Indigenous library workers are committed to driving change

Library workers expressed a real commitment to their work. For many participants, the work is about giving back to communities to support their information needs.

The work is also about driving and supporting change about recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignties by acknowledging the land that Australian libraries operate on.

The change also spoke directly to the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories to be told, and as a simultaneous agenda of national truth-telling around Australian national histories.

My drive has always been around connecting our mob up with the information and knowledge that sits quite often locked away in these institutions that people don't know about or are too shamed to find out how to access them and stuff.

Libraries themselves, having a statement, or a plan regarding Indigenous engagement and representation within the library, acknowledging that the First Peoples of the nation and making sure that they are represented within the collection and that local mob has a place in the library. Libraries are a community space, and they are meant to represent the community. I think you need to be doing that you need to have a responsibility of acknowledging how this community came to be, and it's on stolen land that belongs to the First Peoples.

You need to be showing people that and educating people about those peoples on whose land they stand. It is all well and good having an Acknowledgement of Country whenever you do anything, but you need to have that real and identified - progress and, and things in place. Basically, you need to walk the walk, really, because it's easy to say a few words.



#3 - Indigenous library workers are concerned about cultural safety in Australian libraries

Library workers were concerned about cultural safety across a range of library settings and contexts. People were concerned that many people left the profession because it was culturally unsafe, and retention is an issue.

Participants discussed the importance of library strategies being built to address cultural safety issues at a systemic level.

Some of the tensions relating to the support for workplace cultural safety related to the challenges of working in libraries that were based on western knowledge systems and constructs which in turn silenced Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

There were also real concerns expressed about the cultural safety of Indigenous workers who are required to engage with racist, derogatory, and offensive material held in collections in libraries as part of their work role. Many people do this work without appropriate support or recognition.

Making sure the collection is culturally appropriate. That if someone, an Indigenous person wants to come in with their child and browse the collection, or an Indigenous child was that they wouldn't find something and go, and I guess be triggered by the representations, you know, which is super important to me.

If you're lucky, you get an opportunity to occupy one little corner, but we're still overlaying on top of a colonial construct that does not fit what we're trying to do. It is frustrating that we all butt up against around trying to fit almost a square peg into a round hole in terms of trying to fit Indigenous perspective and cultural mandate and whatever into this rigid framework that doesn't lend itself to being flexible. We have to manage responses such as, "Oh, no, we can't do that." "Or we couldn't possibly do that". This is the way we've always done it. When you ask why there's often just a very wishy-washy, you know, answer about what "we've always done it that way".

I sometimes come home, and I'm pretty information-overloaded, and the information we are reading is really tough, heartbreaking, and distressing. Navigating your emotions and detaching yourself from that when you come home can be difficult, especially when it's personal. It's about you, and it's about your culture and your people. You have to know when to walk away, and I've done it. Some days, I've gone now, I've done some read some full-on information, and I've just gone down, gone home, I'm done. So, you know, those other library workers aren't having to do that. They might be dealing with other personal, you know, whatever it might be afflictions or emotional responses to information they're reading in other ways. But for us, honestly, it's a different experience.



4 - Indigenous library workers are experiencing cultural load and identity strain

Cultural load and identity strain and fatigue are real issues, and more support needs to be given to address these issues.

Indigenous workers are experiencing of having to do *all things Indigenous* in their roles and managing issues of being stereotyped and pigeonholed.

Participants expressed concerns that they would be unfairly labelled as troublemakers if they spoke out about cultural load.

I love my job, but you guys are killing me ... This task of being an Aboriginal person in an institution is that you are somehow responsible for everything that is related to Indigenous knowledges collection ... When you start a new job, you kind of have to prove yourself, and I know that I've proven myself, and so within that I have a working relationship and partnership now with leadership and they trust my endorsement, or my recommendations, and the strategies that I'm putting forward. However, I am culturally fatigued.

What stayed the same is that you're still the go to person for Aboriginal topics, even though you might be you know, you might not particularly - Yeah, and I love doing it - Even though you might have lots of other interests and other specialties in the in the library world, you're seen really as just the Indigenous focus person, which is can be a bit frustrating sometimes

I've seen other young Aboriginal trainees and apprentices brought into the various places I've worked, and they literally wanted to do a tech service job, they wanted to fix computers. They were continually forced onto projects to do with Aboriginal culture or history.... we don't really have a lot of roles that are identified by don't require us to engage with our culture and our history. That's something that I've been told many times by other Aboriginal staff as well that some of us just want to do a job nine to five and to turn off and go home.

You don't want to be the one who's always standing up and banging on about it and making a huge point. Because then you get known as the troublemaker, the person is always on and on about this, and you get a name, and then that'll follow you around. You can be very aware of that. So you just sort of you smile, and you say, "Yeah, Yeah, no problem." If it's something you do not agree with you maybe try it a bit more gently than you might do otherwise. Or you just keep your head down because you don't want to be the troublemaker.



5 - Indigenous library workers shared their views on the importance of allies supporting Indigenous priorities in Australian libraries

There is significant work to do in the sector to support Indigenous people's connections with libraries. It was expressed that this work needs frameworks, allies, and increases in Indigenous employment. It has to be a multifaceted approach.

Building the cultural competence of the library sector was also considered critical in order for allies to contribute to supporting Indigenous priorities and library focussed agendas.

There was a strong sentiment expressed that you don't need to be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person to enact positive change.

Participants spoke of the support provided by library allies to progress work. In cases where there was a maturity of people's cultural competence and engagement, this brought good progress and action.

My colleagues are very supportive, and they're very aware of helping to shoulder the burden. Because of everyone in the team, it's great that we have such an open team, and everyone else helps pick up the slack on different things. We very much work as a team, support each other, and make sure that no one is doing everything themselves and getting burnt out.

I'm really passionate about my culture, and I tend to bring a lot of that into the library because that's me. But it would be nice to, I guess, maybe even have like a plan in place, or you know, where we're going to be, what can we do? How can we help?



#6 - Indigenous library workers are concerned about the low levels of Indigenous employment in Australian libraries

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment rates in Australian libraries are low, and participants expressed their concerns that this must change.

A common sentiment expressed was that Indigenous workers needed to see other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the sector.

Indigenous workers spoke about how libraries were traditionally viewed as white and female dominated institutions and how difficult this was to attract and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian library sector.

What I'm disappointed at is that there are no other Aboriginal male librarians that I know of anyway.

I think having Aboriginal people in the sector and being seen, being reflected, both in the wider community, and especially amongst mob over Australia, can really play a role showing that this is something that they can do. Traditionally libraries have been looked at as a very Anglo institutions.

It's a very, very sort of white institution and as a result, it feels like this sort of entrenched ideas. I think whether it's through fear, or ignorance, there's a bit of a lack of consultation. Yeah, that really hurts the industry in that regard and then, you know, when there is an Indigenous person working there, you sort of lent on. You're either ignored completely, or your lent on to provide, you know, you're the, you're the unofficial, educator, and, and, you know, editor have everything to do with his sort of any sort of Indigenous related thing, which can be tiring and a bit frustrating. So that's, that's, that's definitely a big challenge. I think, also, it doesn't seem to be a big push to get more representation in the sector. It's saying it feels largely ignored.



#7 - Indigenous library workers wanted to connect with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the sector

People felt that it was important to know be more aware of and have access to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who work in Australian libraries. This was about visibility and representation.

Many sole Indigenous workers expressed concerns around isolation and a lack of access to support networks.

Internal to library organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff expressed a real desire to make sure they had access to other Indigenous staff member – either formally or informally – to build support networks.

Being able to connect, being understood, and being culturally situated was a critical element of support. This was also about having opportunities to connect with mentors, through formal or informal opportunities.

Then also just having that general support reaching out to other people as well, because one of the other things was that I felt very isolated when I first started that job at the. Not being able to reach out to a network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, or not knowing anyone in the organisation who I could have a chat with or get that support.

I've seen other people go on and join programs like this, especially places that I have worked at, is that they go for a couple of years and then they really don't have that network there and then they end up leaving. We had one person when I started at the same time, he ended up leaving because obviously there wasn't that support there.

I think ATSILIRN was a network that, like any network, it helps you realise that you're not alone. And a lot of the problems you're having, or experiences or difficulties you're having, are often experienced by others. It's good to be able to tap into that network of support with other blackfullas. Recognition of your work as a profession, something professional. And it is a great way, yeah, just a great way to connect with other people.

It does feel like if you're an Aboriginal librarian, and you can feel invisible, in a sense there and not really know who to connect with ... There's amazing things that librarians do, and there's

amazing things that Aboriginal librarians and Torres Strait Islander librarians can do, as well, if we can we have a platform, I guess, to come together, put our heads together and improve things.

How many other Indigenous librarians are there? I would love to have like a network or something, that would be really cool ..., I'd love to talk to people ... What are you doing? How are you handling this? I've got this problem, what would you do like that sort of stuff, that would be brilliant. If we can somehow connect. I've just never thought about it.



#8 - Indigenous library workers identified a lack of leadership roles in Australian libraries

There is growing recognition of the importance of Indigenous leadership roles in Australian libraries; however, participants spoke about how the opportunities are limited.

More could be done in terms of attracting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait employment, particularly at that leadership level.

It was also expressed that there was a lack of understanding about the needs of senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, or what these roles should be responsible for.

While some of the participants discussed the importance of undertaking formal studies in library and information science, the majority discussed the importance of on-the-job leadership training being made available.

I've really seen drop off is the Indigenous leadership programs that used to exist in the commonwealth and state governments and used to be a lot of programs that used to run, even at middle management level, and over the years have seen that dwindle.

I definitely have made it known that a management role is something that I am aiming for, I would like to help guide and direct, you know, even just that single department in the library service towards better representation of Aboriginal people, and especially local mob and consult with them. Because it seems to be very little representation not only of Indigenous people in the sector, but also local, local mob knowledges in general in libraries.

The big gaps across the sector at the moment are at the sort of at the higher-level decision-making positions and roles.



#9 - Indigenous library workers discussed the lack of pathways, including leadership pathways, for Indigenous people in Australian libraries

Indigenous workers wanted support for career development and leadership training to gain skills to represent and support Indigenous priorities in Australian libraries.

There is a lack of visibility of the variety of dynamic roles in the library sector and career pathways for Indigenous people. We need to showcase the range of careers available.

It is important to be able to communicate career pathways, including at leadership level, and to inspire people to apply for jobs in Australian libraries.

A component of this is being able to share stories of the roles that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have currently in Australian libraries and to showcase this work.

Our industry does really have a have an issue around attracting people and retaining people. People look at libraries and they go, ooh that's not a job for me.

Word of mouth as well, because what a draws lot of our mob into the library, and into a particular organisation is the fact that there's some connection there, whether it be a collection or things like that.

Career progression is not built in enough in our position descriptions. We are pigeonholed in a box, and that's what keeps us in. It keeps us in those positions, and we are only considered for other opportunities that any deal with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander libraries or issues.

There is absolutely no career progression whatsoever from an entry level library system role. I feel very much like the role is tokenistic, just to tick a box to say we have an Aboriginal person working at the library.



#10 - Indigenous library workers called out issues of systemic and structural issues in Australian libraries that impact people's cultural safety

A number of systemic and structural issues were identified by participants and these areas require further research and support.

Lateral violence, racism and issues of having to respond to negative stereotypes were raised by many participants.

There were significant concerns expressed about the role of library human resource teams, and corresponding policies and procedures being developed to respond to discrimination and inequity.

Workers also discussed issues of the lack of recognition of their cultural labour in their roles. This impacted employment grades and commensurate salaries.

Another area of concern was the invisible labour that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff provided to support other Indigenous colleagues with workplace concerns.

Not only were these concerns related to workplace culture, but also arose in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to respond to racist or stereotypical enquiries from the public in some library settings.

Racism is a big issue when we talk about culturally safe libraries.

What I'm currently going through and trying to deal with at the moment is that structural systemic racism. I think that's a real barrier.

Our human resources, areas are not equipped to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

I'm already working at a higher level ... It's just that constant feeling like, you're undervalued completely, like, You're nothing really, and that once you're in, they just don't care. They just need you in and to stay so they can keep ticking that box for how many Indigenous staff they have.

Every role I was acting at least three or four levels above what I was paid, and I was doing at least two full time jobs because they would never hire another one. So being the only Aboriginal person in an institution is something that I have still traumatised by.

At the moment, anything that is available for any staff that want to raise these issues within the organisation is have another Indigenous colleague to support them. That is something that, we know we have to do, but it does come at a cost.

The library hadn't even heard of the term lateral violence, they had no concept or framework, despite that existing despite there being plenty of Aboriginal researchers and work done in that area, if it never, ever come anywhere near them.

It was a racial issue. They didn't even want to go there. And I don't think they had the cultural competency to go there.

I think if you're going to have targeted positions, you need to make sure that those people are safe, and lateral violence in libraries is common, and it's not spoken about, it's not written about, and it should be.

3 Research findings and recommended actions

There are unique opportunities for the library sector to support the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australian libraries however we have major gaps in support in this area. The National Survey has identified key areas for further research & development.

Key focus area	Key Points / Recommended actions
Leadership support for current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library workers	<p>Gaps in supporting career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Issues of people being pigeonholed in 'Indigenous' roles.</p> <p>Clear need to create pathways and options to extend leadership capabilities in line with appropriate cultural frameworks. Leadership at all levels, with a focus on growth and retention.</p> <p>Showcase vibrancy of career pathways for new people to enter the profession utilising these profiles and experiences.</p>
Addressing issues of cultural load and identity strain by reviewing current role descriptions relating to Indigenous employment in libraries	<p>The cultural load and identity strain that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience in is not recognised. There are concerns that people are doing multiple roles and invisible labour in their work. This leads people to burn out and turns people away from library roles.</p> <p>Clear need to make invisible labour visible and address any concerns of level/remuneration relating to these roles, and address the support that library workers require more broadly in their library setting to implement Indigenous priorities.</p>
Continue to invest in nationwide efforts for culturally safe libraries across all Australian libraries	<p>Cultural safety is an issue, and with it comes more complex areas of attention such as the existence of lateral violence. These concerns require further support, but they also be recognised as being complex and multifaceted problems.</p> <p>Further investment should take place in continuing support for cultural competence, and simultaneously developing mechanisms for addressing the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff for their cultural safety.</p>
Articulate and plan Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities in libraries through appropriate strategic frameworks	<p>A lack of strategic frameworks and planning for Indigenous priorities in library settings was evident. This led to ad hoc and informal approaches that were unclear in direction or how they engaged in Indigenous community stakeholders and partners.</p> <p>Investment in an Australian libraries research and engagement project could address these gaps to build a future for Australian libraries' engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including a key focus on employment. The framework aligning with the M & G Roadmap <i>First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries</i> may be a useful model.</p>
Increase opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander networks professionally	<p>Without ATSLIRN there is a gap in how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can network effectively within the profession. There are no formal structures that provide opportunity for information exchange on a national level across different types of libraries.</p> <p>There is a clear need to support ATSLIRN's revitalisation and develop in-person or online forums that support the networking of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally. The network is not for institutions to gain but for people to build connections and participate in dialogue, exchange, and learning.</p>

Data collection improvements and need for ongoing collection

As a pilot study the research also tested the methodology for data collection. The study highlighted a need for further improvements in collecting more granular data on employment conditions. There were limitations in the pilot survey design and survey tool utilised to reveal these connections in the data.

A clear area of need is looking at data relating to employment pathways and career development, for example in looking at types of roles and time in employment as well as an analysis of type of role versus conditions employment status.

Final notes on research

About the researcher

[Kirsten Thorpe](#) (Worimi, Port Stephens NSW), Senior Researcher, Jumbunna Researcher, Jumbunna Research, has led the development of protocols, policies, and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in libraries and archives in Australia. Kirsten's research interests relate to Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives. She has contributed to numerous projects that have involved the return of historical collections to Indigenous peoples and communities and advocates for a transformation of practice to centre Indigenous priorities and voices concerning the management of data, records, and collections. Kirsten was previously the Manager, Indigenous Services at the State Library of NSW where she led the development of strategies supporting state-wide information services for Indigenous people. This included support for Indigenous priorities and cultural competency across NSW Public Libraries, the launch of the Library's first Indigenous Collecting Strategy, and projects that supported the documentation, return and revitalisation of Indigenous Australian languages through archival sources.

About Jumbunna

The [Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research](#) aims to produce the highest quality research on Indigenous legal and policy issues and to develop highly skilled Indigenous researchers. The Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research is unique in Australia. Our Indigenous led [Research team](#) operates throughout Australia, with staff working in communities in Victoria, South Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales, and collaborators in all States and Territories. Operating in the domestic and international spheres, the team prides itself on frank and fearless research and advocacy driven by the Indigenous communities it serves.

Our vision is to promote, support and embody the exercise and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sovereignty and Self-Determination. To this end, we seek to:

- Promote innovation and undertake best practice research and disseminate the outcomes of that Research widely
- Respond to and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, Indigenous Research and the reputation of the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research and through it, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

We do this through taking integrated and innovative approaches to Indigenous community empowerment. The Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research also supports the academic, social, cultural and emotional well being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at UTS. Our vision is to create a place where all Indigenous Australians can access education and be supported to succeed. For more information see: <https://www.uts.edu.au/future-students/indigenous-australians>

Terminology

Cultural safety	The author draws on the definition by Williams (2008) where Cultural Safety is “an environment which is safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening.” (p.213)
Identity strain	‘Identity strain’ is a term used by the authors of the Gari Yala: Speak the Truth report which refers to “the strain employees feel when they themselves, or others, view their identity as not meeting the norms or expectations of the dominant culture in the workplace. The concept draws on literature ¹³ demonstrating members of minority groups expend effort and energy managing their identity in the workplace to avoid the negative consequences of discrimination, harassment, bias and marginalisation.” (p.12)

Indigenous	The report uses the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, First Nations and First Peoples interchangeably. The author notes the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's and communities nationally.
Lateral violence	The author draws on the definition of lateral violence by Clark, Augoustinos & Malin, 2016, cited in Bargallie (2020) which is a term "used to describe the ways that oppressed and powerless people direct their dissatisfaction inwards, and towards each other and those less powerful than themselves. (p.207)
Library workers	The term library workers have been used throughout this report to capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who occupy various roles in Australian libraries. In some cases, the term library sector is used to refer to Australian libraries broadly across Australia.

References

Bargallie, D. (2020). *Unmasking the racial contract: Indigenous voices on racism in the Australian Public Service*. Aboriginal Studies Press.

Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute (Brown, C., D'Almada-Remedios, R., Gilbert, J. O'Leary, J. and Young, N.) *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centreing the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia/Jumbunna Institute, 2020.

Williams, R. (1999). Cultural safety—what does it mean for our work practice. *Australian and New Zealand journal of public health*, 23(2), 213-214.

Suggested Citation

Thorpe, K. (2021) *National survey on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment in Australian libraries: Research Report*, Jumbunna Institute, University of Technology Sydney.