

EMBEDDING INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY AND GOVERNANCE IN WELLBEING RESEARCH

The *Where We Belong* Study

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Overview

Where We Belong: Connecting Indigenous identity and wellbeing in the city is a three year (2025–2028) ARC Discovery Indigenous funded project. It is Indigenous community led, designed, and governed qualitative research which focuses on what it means to belong, be well, and live a good life for Indigenous peoples living in cities. As the ACT region is home to Australia's fastest growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (1), the study has been yarning with community in Canberra and Queanbeyan through interviews since August 2025 about lived experiences of belonging and wellbeing in the city. Gathering these local knowledges and stories through yarning in a place where many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural groups live will help to highlight the ways in which Indigenous people living in cities can connect with and build community.

The project's central hypothesis is that those with a greater sense of belonging to the place/s and community/ies where they live and/or are ancestrally connected to, experience better health and wellbeing outcomes and are more empowered to lead 'a good life', however they define it. The key research questions this study aims to answer are:

- What does it mean to belong and be well for Indigenous peoples living in cities?
- How do Indigenous peoples build belonging and connection to Country/land, culture, and community in cities?
- How do particular social groups/community organisations facilitate this?
- What impact does the experience of belonging have on holistic wellbeing for Indigenous peoples in cities?



Figure 1. Photos of Community Governance Group and project team members from meetings held to date

Community Design Process

A collaborative design process was held in 2024 with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in the ACT region. Presentations about the research were delivered by the Study Director, Dr Sarah Bourke, to a wide range of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and groups, and official support for the project was received from the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, the Board of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services, and the ACT Torres Strait Islanders Corporation.

Over 350 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members living in Canberra and Queanbeyan were contacted through various research, social media, and email networks and invited to attend workshops held at Yardhura Walani to help determine the aims, key questions, data collection and analysis methods, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance frameworks, and knowledge translation outputs for *Where We Belong*. Six catered workshops were held from August to November 2024 with 27 community members in attendance, with a \$200 gift card given to each attendee as thanks for contributing their time and expertise. Several of these attendees were then approached to stay on with the project to guide the research as members of an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Governance Group (Figure 1).

What is Indigenous Data?

According to the Maïam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective (2):

- 'Indigenous Data' is information or knowledge about Indigenous people which impacts Indigenous lives from the individual through to the collective.
- 'Indigenous Data Sovereignty' is the right of Indigenous people to exercise ownership over their Indigenous Data.
- 'Indigenous Data Governance' is the right of Indigenous people to autonomously decide, what, how, and why Indigenous Data are collected, accessed, and used.

Where We Belong enacts these principles through its research processes (see worked example in Figure 2.). The Community Governance Group meet every six months to review progress, provide expert advice, and guide research activities. The project team work alongside this group as custodians for the study's Indigenous Data, ensuring that these data are held securely and with care, and that any outputs developed from these data accurately and respectfully represent community voices and interests. After the 5-year minimum data retention period concludes, the research data collection will be donated to AIATSIS for ongoing community access in perpetuity.

INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY IN ACTION

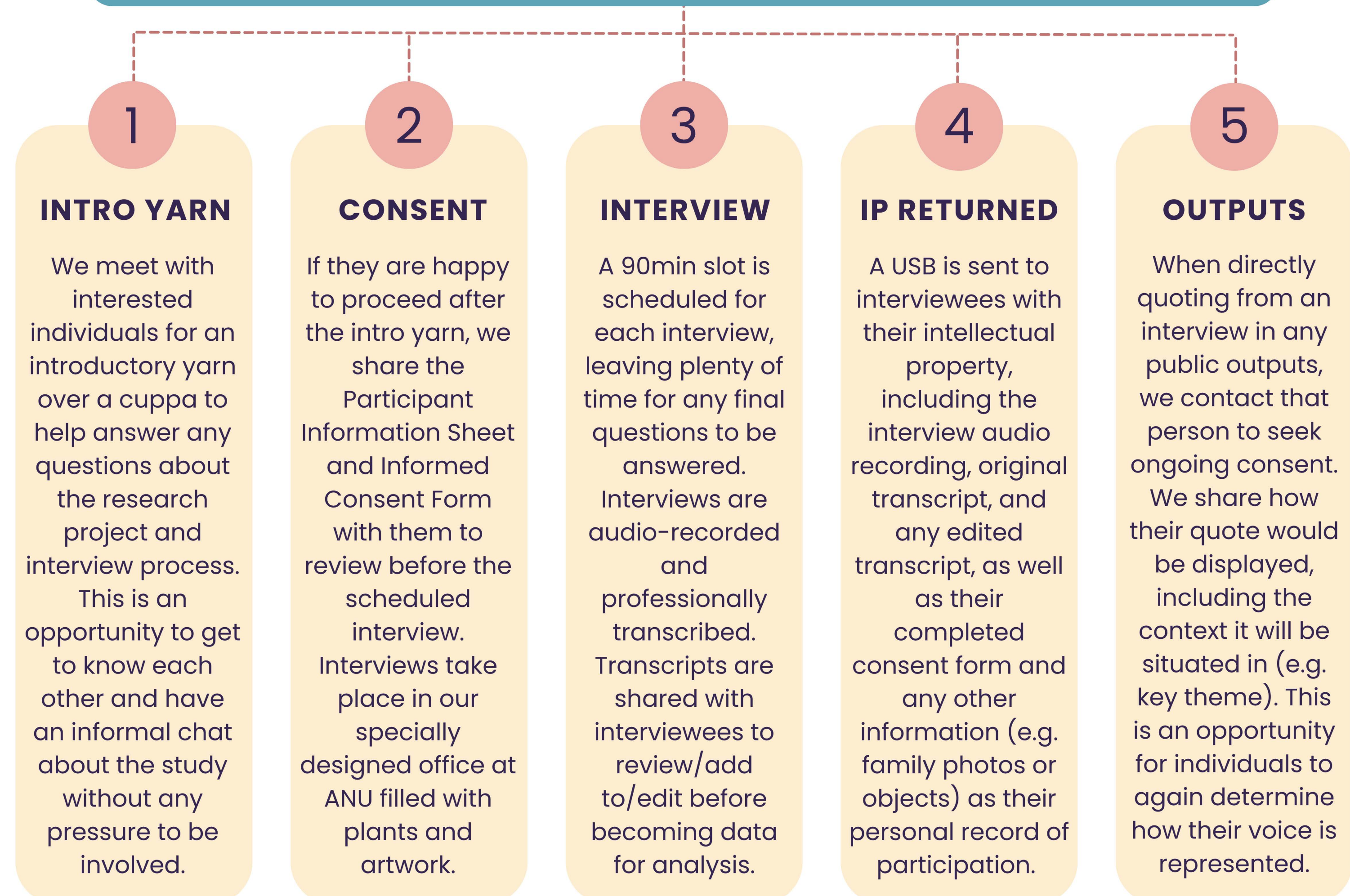


Figure 2. Indigenous Data Sovereignty in action

Acknowledgements & References

First, we would like to thank those community members who contributed to the design of *Where We Belong* and our Community Governance Group who continue to guide this work. We are also grateful for support from the following organisations and groups: The Australian Research Council, The Australian National University, Yardhura Walani, the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, the Board of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services, and the ACT Torres Strait Islanders Corporation. The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the AIATSIS REC (REC-0431) and the ANU HREC (H/2025/0262). The beautiful artwork for *Where We Belong* was commissioned in 2024 from local Wiradjuri artist Kalara Gilbert.

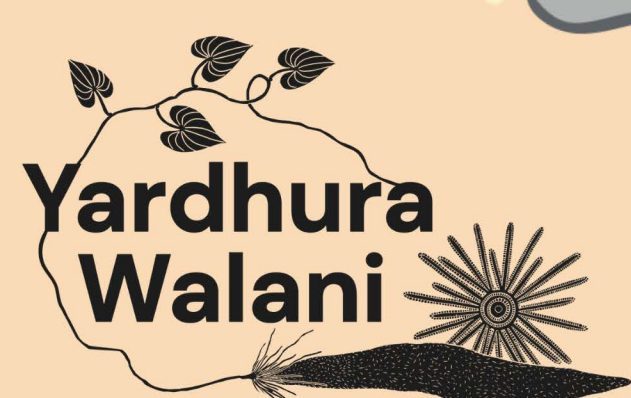
A. Gamilaroi, Jarui, Gidja
B. Palawa

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022). *Census of Population and Housing - Counts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, Canberra, Australia: ABS.
2. Maïam nayri Wingara (2018). *Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit Communiqué*, Canberra, Australia.

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