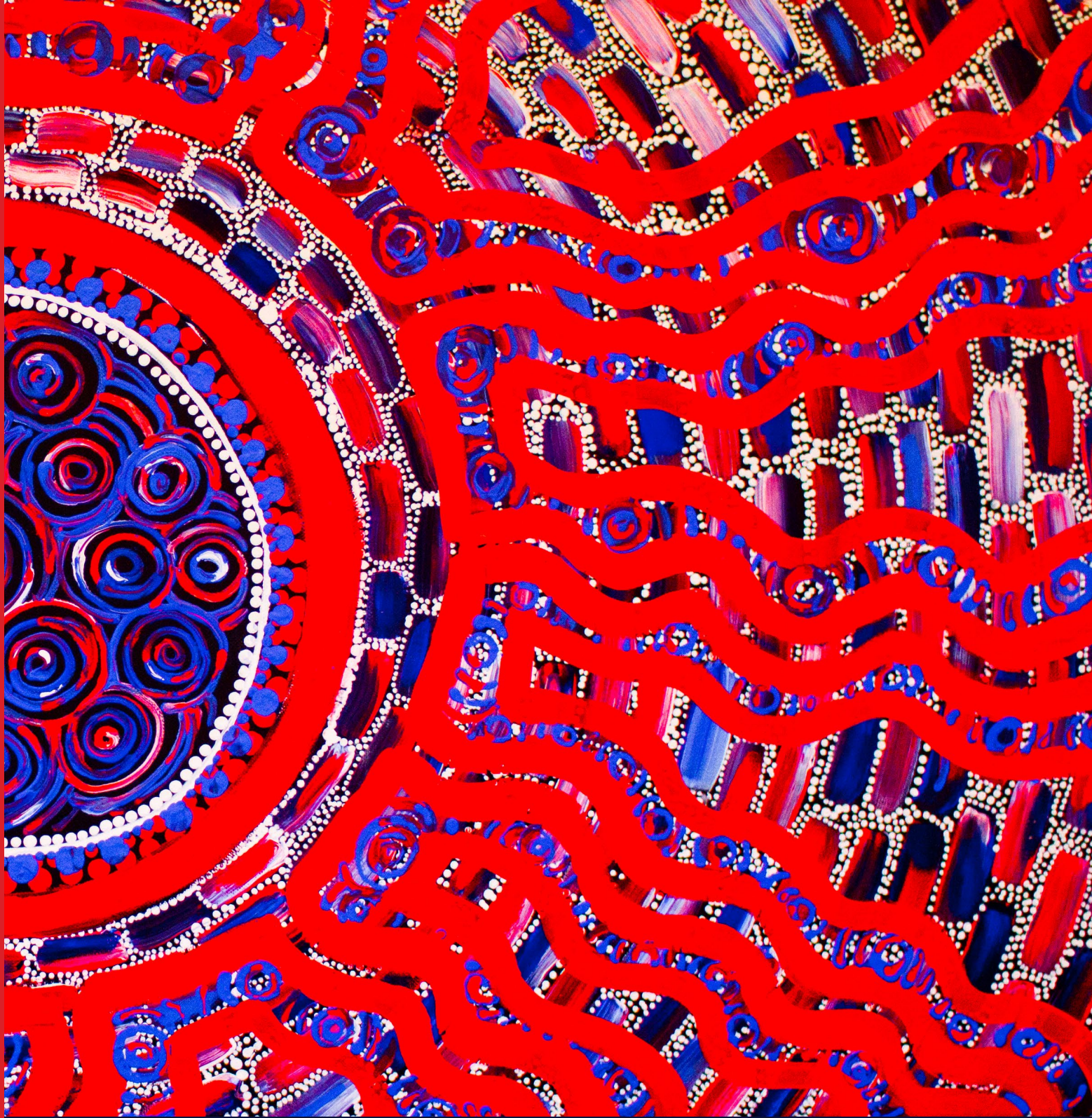




GARI YALA 2

SPEAK THE TRUTH

Full report



Business
School



Centre for
Indigenous People
and Work

proud
partner



nab
foundation

Centring the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/
or Torres Strait Islander Australians in 2025-2026



Report embargoed until 11 March 2026.

An electronic copy of this report can be read on the Centre for Indigenous People and Work (CIPW) website.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kirsten Gray is a Yuwalaraay/Muruwari woman living on Dharawal country and raising three children. Her artworks are a contemporary and vibrant reflection of her passion for her Aboriginal culture.

'Speaking truth' explores the nature and extent of the contributions made by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in this land for millennia. Long before the birth of the Australian nation, our people were already making significant contributions to their families and communities. It was the contributions of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples upon the arrival of the British, which helped transform our country into what it is today. Much of this labour was often unpaid, unrecognised and undertaken in discriminatory and harsh conditions. Nonetheless, it is these ongoing contributions of our people which keep each other, our communities and this country, strong.

ABOUT CIPW

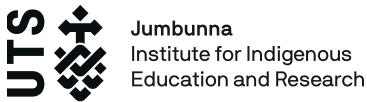
The Centre for Indigenous People and Work (CIPW) is a self-determined, joint initiative of the [UTS Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research](#) and the [UTS Business School](#) that aims to address systemic inequities experienced by Indigenous Australians in the labour and employment markets, including racism, underemployment, and exclusion from leadership positions.

The Centre seeks to reclaim the Indigenous employment narrative through rigorous, industry-based Indigenous-led research, consulting, and partnerships with other stakeholders in the employment community, focusing on policy formulation, law reform and workplace-based solutions.

Materials contained in this document are © Copyright of CIPW 2026.

Suggested citation: Centre for Indigenous People & Work (Young, N., Gilbert, J., Evans, O. and O'Leary, J.) (2026). *Gari Yala 2 (Speak the Truth) Full Report: Centreing the Work Experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians in 2025-2026*, Sydney, CIPW. <https://doi.org/10.71741/4pyxmbnjq.31611544>

Designed by Cause/Affect
causeaffect.com.au



The UTS Jumbunna Institute was proud to support the development and establishment of the Centre for Indigenous People and Work (CIPW) in partnership with the UTS Business School in 2025, addressing the fundamental, glaring gap – the existence of an ‘Indigenous employment’ sector not informed by Indigenous insight, knowledge, perspectives or experiences. How we work matters. This key area for our people is one that deeply deserves an Indigenous narrative, and that’s precisely why the CIPW and its work are so vital.

The CIPW embeds the underlying ethos of the Jumbunna Institute – for research of Indigenous people to be Indigenous-led and proudly self-determined.



Budyeri kameru

The impact of the first Gari Yala 2020 report was profound. Since its release, we have seen remuneration for cultural load introduced in different workplaces and industries, Indigenous-led survey work embedded in numerous organisations, and Indigenous appointments made to roles that work directly with Indigenous people. These shifts meant we approached this second iteration with great anticipation.

Since Gari Yala 2020, we have also launched the Centre for Indigenous People and Work. Our ambition – that Indigenous people should own the “Indigenous employment” narrative – has increasingly been recognised across the employment community as essential, even if it is not yet fully realised.

Gari Yala remains the only Indigenous-led research in the employment space that uses Indigenous methodologies and is conducted by Indigenous people. We are indebted to the Jumbunna Research leadership – Professor Lindon Coombes and Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt – for their continued advocacy for Indigenous-led research. We are equally grateful to the Gari Yala Expert Panel. We simply couldn’t do Gari Yala without them. It remains a baffling anomaly that employment research is still being conducted without Indigenous standpoint at its core. We appreciate the support of all of these mob who enable this work.

While our original intent was to survey Indigenous employees about the human resource industry’s employee lifecycle, our first Expert Panel redirected us to what truly required attention: the pervasive impact of racism in all its forms – individual, systemic, overt, appearance-based, and more. Our second Expert Panel affirmed this focus. We wish this wasn’t necessary. We also recognise the troubling, growing tendency to “victim-blame” in discussions about racism, including the claim that talking about racism creates it.



NAB Foundation is a proud supporter of the second Gari Yala Report, working in partnership with the UTS Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research and, more recently, the Centre for Indigenous People and Work. NAB supported the first landmark report, published in 2020.

This research aligns with NAB and NAB Foundation’s focus on First Nations economic empowerment. We are pleased to back First Nations knowledge and lived experience to build our understanding of how Australian workplaces shape economic participation, opportunity and security.

Gari Yala actualises this leadership, re-narrating, through a First Nations lens, the experiences of Indigenous people and working to create policies, law reform and workplace change. By listening to Indigenous people, governments and employers can tailor employment programs and conditions to address issues that have benefits for employees and organisations alike.

I’d like to thank the CIPW for their vision in conceptualising this project and all the Indigenous Expert Panel members who gave their time to this project.

Professor Lindon Coombes

Director

**UTS Jumbunna Institute for
Indigenous Education and Research**

These are challenging times for decency, yet we remain guided by our Expert Panel – those who are “on the tools” – and by the workplace experiences Indigenous people are living right now.

Addressing these realities is essential if we are to improve Indigenous workplace experiences and progress the big issues – leadership development, quality work, pay equity, the undervaluation of cultural skills in wage fixing and setting and remuneration and benefit processes, and more.

But the challenge is stark. At the current rate of improvement between the two Gari Yala surveys, we estimate it could take 118 years for Indigenous people to experience workplaces free of racial slurs. This is not only unacceptable – it poses a significant problem for the Australian economy.

We hope this work serves as a catalyst for meaningful solutions.

I am so grateful to Joshua Gilbert, Professor Jane O’Leary and Dr Olivia Evans for their work here, and many thanks to Angela Daley. I also thank Professor Lindon Coombes, Professor Sara Denize and Professor Carl Rhodes for their ongoing support. And of course, many thanks to the NAB Foundation, Kate Betts, Sam Webster and Dino White who are a pleasure to work and collaborate with.

Professor Nareen Young

Associate Dean (Indigenous Leadership and Engagement)

UTS Business School

Professor Indigenous Policy (Indigenous Workforce Diversity)

Director, UTS Centre for Indigenous People and Work

UTS Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research

Through truth-telling and evidence, Gari Yala presents a clear case for the importance and opportunity for more culturally intelligent workplaces – with clear, sustainable pathways to leadership, employment and progression. It sets the standard for organisations like NAB.

Sarah White

NAB Group Executive, People and Culture



Acknowledgement of Country

The authors and partners of this report wish to acknowledge the Elders and Traditional Owners of the lands and Nations across Australia and pay our respect to Elders past and present. We recognise that all Elders and mobs in locations across Australia have their own experiences with 'work'. We hope this report ensures mob keep telling our own stories, and that they are heard. *Gari Yala*, speak the truth.

Our thanks

We thank and acknowledge the project's Expert Panel, made up of prominent Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. The project has benefited immensely from panellists generously sharing their expertise and insights.

Name	Title/Organisation
Jack Beeton	Executive Director, Literacy for Life Foundation
Dr Sarah Bourke	Research Fellow, Australian National University
Adrian Cheatham	Senior RAP Program Manager, Reconciliation Australia
Matt Roberts Clifton	Senior Consultant, Customer Service Strategy and Planning, National Australia Bank Limited
Dr Lisa Conway	Chair, Australian Public Service Indigenous SES Network
Kiera Donnelly	Indigenous Consultant, Kiera Donnelly
Trent Donovan-Wallace	Head of First Nations Strategy, Ashurst
Vanessa Edwige	Chair, Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association
Dr Kirsten Gray	Associate Professor, UTS Jumbunna Institute
Kara Keys	Director and Principal Consultant, KTL Collective
Bree Knapp	Head of HR Analytics and Insights at Qantas
Associate Professor Sharlene Leroy-Dyer	Director – Indigenous Business Hub, Business School, University of Queensland
Kristy Masella	Managing Director, Aboriginal Employment Strategy
Karen Mundine	CEO, Reconciliation Australia
Matt Rix	Senior Manager, Reconciliation, Australian Financial Complaints Authority
Lisa Sarago	CEO, Land on Heart Foundation
Edie Shepherd	Federal Campaign Director, Australian Education Union
Jinny-Jane Smith	Program Manager, ACON
Amber Roberts	Director, Yamagigu Consulting
Kate Russell	CEO, Supply Nation
Jayde Ward	Director, Philanthropic Services, JB Were
Lara Watson	Indigenous Officer, Australian Council of Trade Unions
Jen Mar Young	Executive Director, Community Partnerships, Aboriginal Affairs NSW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Our thanks.....</u>	<u>05</u>
<u>Executive summary.....</u>	<u>07</u>
<u>Why this project?.....</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>Some important background.....</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>Sharing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity at work.....</u>	<u>16</u>
<u>How culturally safe are Australian workplaces?</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>What is the state of racism for Indigenous workers?</u>	<u>31</u>
<u>What are organisations doing to prevent and address racism at work?.....</u>	<u>38</u>
<u>Unpaid workplace demands.....</u>	<u>41</u>
<u>What are organisations doing and what makes a difference?.....</u>	<u>51</u>
<u>What's changed since <i>Gari Yala</i> 2020?</u>	<u>59</u>
<u>Appendix A: Research method.....</u>	<u>90</u>
<u>Appendix B: Survey sample characteristics</u>	<u>93</u>
<u>Endnotes</u>	<u>96</u>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gari Yala 2 (Speak the Truth) provides one of the most comprehensive and current examinations of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people's workplace experiences in Australia.

Six years on from the inaugural 2020 report, more than 1,100 Indigenous employees have again spoken truth about what is happening inside Australian workplaces today. Their message is clear: organisations have made some progress, but not enough. Racism and lack of cultural safety remain widespread, and without organisations deeply committing to truth-listening and truth-acting, meaningful change will remain out of reach.

THE PRIDE AND PERIL OF SHARING IDENTITY AT WORK

This second national survey – the only one of its kind **led by mob, for mob** – found that 86% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees stated it was important for them to share their identity at work. The same amount shared their identity at work – 56% actively talking about their identity at work and 30% not trying to keep it private.

While many survey respondents spoke of sharing their identity out of a deep sense of pride, responsibility, and commitment to organisational change, doing so often brought racial harms – for example, having their identity questioned or challenged, exposure to multiple forms of workplace racism, questioning of competence, lost career opportunities, and rapid increases in unpaid, emotionally demanding work.

THE SAFETY GAP

In all, only 40% of Indigenous employees reported that their workplaces were culturally safe – the majority of respondents reported being either in a culturally unsafe (25%) or only moderately safe workplace (35%). Evidently, while cultural identity is deeply important to many employees, most are not working in environments where they can express, practise, and maintain that identity without fear of ridicule, discrimination, or marginalisation.

% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in culturally safe workplaces



This lack of cultural safety has direct, detrimental impacts, as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees in culturally unsafe environments are:

- **7 times less likely** to be very satisfied with their jobs,
- **10 times less likely** to recommend their employer to other Indigenous people, and
- **3 times more likely** to be actively looking for a new employer.

Cultural safety refers to an environment where individuals can express, practice, and maintain their cultural identity without fear of ridicule, discrimination, or marginalisation.

The persistence of racism

We found that for the majority of respondents, racism was not an isolated or occasional experience but a recurring feature of their working lives. In all, 58% experienced some form of racism at an average frequency of very often to sometimes. Racism manifested in different ways, but some of the more common experiences were:

- **appearance racism** (53% received comments about how they look or should look as an Indigenous person very often, often, or sometimes),
- **inappropriate race-based comments and assumptions** (53% reported that non-Indigenous employees made inappropriate comments or assumptions about Indigenous peoples very often, often, or sometimes),
- **not being treated seriously** (41% reported that they felt ignored or not taken seriously by their boss very often, often, or sometimes), and
- **racial slurs and jokes** (40% reported hearing racial or ethnic slurs or jokes about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people at work very often, often, or sometimes).

Racism isn't rare – but anti-racism action is

Most organisations are unprepared to prevent or respond to racism at work.

- Nearly two thirds of Indigenous employees (63%) say their workplace provides no antidiscrimination training that addresses racism towards Indigenous peoples.
- Even more concerning, 69% said their workplace does not have a racism complaint procedure.
- Not surprisingly, only 38% of Indigenous workers who experienced racism felt they had the support they needed when unfair treatment and/or racial slurs or jokes at work occurred.

These gaps matter. Although complaint procedures and compliance training are not a cure-all, workplaces that had **both** in place showed markedly lower levels of reported racism – 40% of Indigenous employees in these workplaces experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes, compared to 66% in organisations with neither.

Unpaid, unseen, and unfair: The 'hidden year' of unpaid work

A major finding of this report is the quantification of unpaid workplace demands – formerly referred to as cultural or colonial load. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are frequently expected to perform additional, uncompensated tasks such as educating colleagues, managing Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), and organising cultural events.

- Nearly two thirds (64%) of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees experience high levels of cultural load arising from this type of unrecognised and unrewarded work.
- High cultural load was even more common (78%) for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees working in mainstream organisations in non-identified roles.

We also asked full-time respondents approximately how many hours per week on average they spent on **unpaid** cultural work that was **not** part of their formal workload.

- One in two (55%) worked at least one or more hours per week unpaid, working out to an additional (48 hour) week of unpaid cultural work per year.
- One in three (34%) worked three or more hours per week unpaid, working out to over an extra three weeks of unpaid cultural work per year, and
- One in five (23%) worked six or more hours per week unpaid, working out to an extra seven weeks of unpaid cultural work per year.

These demands accumulate significantly over a career. We estimate that, over a 50-year career, one in two full-time Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are likely to be working at least an additional year of unpaid workplace demands.¹

Despite this 75% of Indigenous employees reported that their organisation did not formally recognise or remunerate cultural load (48%) or that they did not know if their organisation did (27%).

When organisations act, workplaces change – the data prove it

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives make a difference. Respondents in organisations with a high number of Indigenous-related initiatives were:

- **4 times less likely to be treated unfairly** (6% of those in high-activity organisations were treated unfairly very often or often versus 24% in low-activity organisations),
- **almost 4 times less likely to hear racial slurs or jokes** (7% of those in high-activity organisations heard racial slurs very often or often versus 26% in low-activity organisations),
- **4 times less likely to report their workplace being culturally unsafe** (9% of those in high-activity organisations compared to 39% in low-activity organisations), and
- **half as likely to be very likely to leave their employer** (12% of those in high-activity organisations compared to 23% in low-activity organisations).

The most effective organisational initiatives are the least used

We found that the highest impact initiatives were some of the least commonly implemented in respondents' organisations.

- **Racism complaint procedure.** While having a racism complaint procedure was linked to lower rates of racism, it was the 11th most common initiative implemented – only 31% of respondents stated their organisation had such a procedure.
- **Marking dates of significance.** On the other hand, the most commonly implemented initiative was marking significant dates (68%). While important, this initiative is generally less strongly associated with lower reported rates of racism than other initiatives which focus on internal policies and practices that shape employees' day-to-day experiences. This finding suggests that organisations may be more comfortable investing in actions that signal commitment, than in the harder work of changing internal systems, accountability, and everyday workplace culture.

Without a deeper commitment to truth-listening and truth-acting, the current rate of change suggests it could take another 118 years before Indigenous workers can expect a workplace free from racial slurs.

The Centre for Indigenous People and Work stands ready to support organisations on this journey – through Indigenous-led research, workplace truth telling, and practical strategy and implementation support.

What's changed since Gari Yala 2020?

Six years on, the picture is mixed.

- **There are small gains.** More employees feel safe to share their identity (79% versus 72%) and seven of nine forms of racism have eased slightly (by between 0.4% and 1% per year).
- **But racism remains stubbornly high.** One in two (53%) Indigenous employees still experience inappropriate race-based comments and assumptions. Key markers like unfair treatment (38% in both years), high cultural load (63% versus 64%), and antiracism structures (only 21% of workplaces offering both training and a complaint process in both years) show no progress.
- **A century to silence overt racism.** At the current rate of change, without further policy or legislative change, we estimate it could take another 118 years for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers to never hear racial slurs and jokes at work.²

Our call to action: The 10 Truths

Six years on from the initial *Gari Yala* report, it is clear to us that the path forward does not require new mandates, but rather a reaffirmation of our original 10 Truths for organisational action and a deeper commitment to the practice of truth-telling.

In *Gari Yala 2* we call on Australian employers to move beyond “marking the days” and commit to truthlistening and truthhacting. This means confronting uncomfortable realities, dismantling systems that enable racism, resourcing Indigenous leadership, and building environments where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people can thrive without carrying disproportionate burden.

In the spirit of truth-telling and to address the endemic racism in Australian workplaces, at the Centre for Indigenous People and Work, we re-iterate our calls in partnership with the ACTU and the federal Race Discrimination Commissioner to conduct a Racism@Work Inquiry. Such an inquiry promotes truth-telling for workplaces and, if listened to deeply, would result in meaningful changes to eliminate racism and enable greater safety and inclusion at work.



10 TRUTHS **to centre Indigenous** **Australians'** **voices to create** **workplace inclusion**

1.

Commit to unearthing and acting on workplace truths – however uncomfortable this may be.

2.

Ensure any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-related work is Indigenous led and informed.

3.

Develop organisational principles to make it clear how Indigenous community engagement and employment should work in practice.

10.

Look to high-impact initiatives – those that research shows are linked to better wellbeing and retention for Indigenous staff.

4.

Focus on workplace readiness (cultural safety) rather than worker readiness.

9.

Take action to address workplace racism.

5.

Recognise identity strain and educate non-Indigenous staff about how to interact with their Indigenous colleagues in ways that reduce this.

8.

Focus on sustainable careers and career development, rather than just short-term appointments.

7.

Consult with Indigenous staff on how to minimise cultural load while maintaining organisational activity.

6.

Recognise and remunerate cultural load as part of an employee's workload.

WHY THIS PROJECT?

Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) is the only national survey about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' workplace experiences done by mob for mob.

Centring the workplace experiences of Indigenous Australians

Gari Yala (Speak the Truth) remains Australia's only national survey on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' workplace experiences done by mob, for mob. When it was first conducted in 2020 it filled a critical gap.³ It dragged the national conversation forward, ensuring Indigenous voices were finally starting to be centred in these conversations. For decades, conversations about Indigenous employment had been driven by limited research, mostly produced by non-Indigenous people and/or narrated through non-Indigenous perspectives. This work lacked Indigenous voices describing their own experiences of work and was overwhelmingly shaped by inaccurate assumptions and colonialist deficit framing.

Here, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees were framed as lacking skills, qualifications, or motivation to succeed, while entirely ignoring the strengths and cultural knowledge Indigenous employees bring and the entrenched systemic barriers (i.e. racism embedded in educational and employment institutions) they face accessing employment. This deficit framing instills rhetoric of "Indigenous employment" as low level, low skilled work.

For Indigenous people, these conversations were exhausting – deficit concepts of work were inflicted on us, continuing the undervaluation of our work and erasing us from some narratives.

The first *Gari Yala* report changed that. By asking Indigenous workers directly, and by ensuring Indigenous leadership, governance, and interpretation at every stage, the 2020 survey reshaped the national employment narrative. It offered, for the

first time, a large-scale picture of what Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples were actually experiencing in workplaces across the country. Its findings have since informed organisational policies, reconciliation commitments, and sector-wide diversity and inclusion practice. *Gari Yala* provided the truth needed to spark change.

Six years on, a follow-up is essential. 'Indigenous employment' continues to be a growing and vital area of focus, yet the National conversation is still largely informed by non-Indigenous data, deficit statistics, and external judgments about what Indigenous workers "need." Often the narrative remains hidden behind non-Indigenous intermediaries who still attempt to speak on the behalf of Indigenous workers. We emphasise bluntly that this cannot continue.

While there is abundant information about employment rates and gaps, there remains little information about the lived experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples at work, and even less that is told by Indigenous people or is Indigenous-led. *Gari Yala* remains the only project in Australia that centres Indigenous workers' voices as the primary source of truth.

To improve Indigenous people's experiences at work, we must stop asking non-Indigenous people about Indigenous workers and instead listen directly to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers. This *Gari Yala 2* report provides the updated evidence needed to ensure that the employment narrative going forward is informed, shaped, and led by Indigenous people themselves. We remain incredibly grateful for the 1,033 Indigenous people who shared their truth in the 2020 report, and the 1,158 who shared their current truths in 2025.

Speaking the truth: Insights from Indigenous workers

We created *Gari Yala* – which means ‘speak the truth’ in Wiradjuri language – to gain a firsthand understanding of the diversity of Indigenous workers’ experiences. The project is Indigenous led and has again been overseen by an Expert Panel of distinguished Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander academics and employment practitioners. This report aims to be an educational resource for human resources, managers and business leaders, diversity, industrial and other employment practitioners and business leaders, providing Indigenous perspectives and ideas for change.

This *Gari Yala* survey remains an important step in regularly measuring Indigenous people’s real experiences of work from across the country. The survey, currently in its second wave, seeks to:

- be a voice for the diversity of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers, and
- capture the state of play when it comes to workplace cultural safety, inclusion, and exclusion and racism.

To do this, we again drew on the insights and experiences of over 1,100 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait workers. Their insights and recommendations for organisational action are presented in this report, which details their narratives and experiences.

It is our hope that *Gari Yala* enables Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples to share their firsthand experiences of work and thus ensure diversity and inclusion practice is founded on Indigenous voices.

A call to action

We hope *Gari Yala 2* findings act as a powerful call to action for Australian organisations. Now is the time for them to engage in truth-telling and reconciliation in their own workplaces, to advance the employment interests and careers of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. This starts with creating space for truth-telling, then listening deeply and acting meaningfully on insights shared by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.

For governments, *Gari Yala 2* offers a powerful window into how Indigenous people experience society through their working lives – making visible the realities that too often go unheard. While this truth-telling is a vital step, it must be met with further action. From a policy and legislative standpoint, there is a clear need for a dedicated Racism@Work Inquiry and greater harmonisation of laws that recognise and support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’s experiences and viewpoints.

The Centre for Indigenous People and Work can be your partner in action, supporting workplace truth-telling through our deep experience and knowledge of our communities, our Indigenous employment research yarning and other methodologies, and strategy creation and execution.

SOME IMPORTANT BACKGROUND

Who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in contemporary Australia?

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples constitute 3.8% of Australia's total population,⁴ and are a young rapidly growing population. In two decades, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples could represent between 4% to 7% of Australia's population, with the proportion of prime working age people (20-54 years) increasing by 57% over that time.⁵

Today, 57% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (aged 15 to 65) have secured employment,⁶ with a growing Indigenous middle class who are 'largely overlooked.'⁷ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with tertiary qualifications enjoy employment rates of up to 94%,⁸ and our employment rates are higher than non-Indigenous tertiary qualified people.⁹ With growth in the number of Indigenous professionals, it is even more critical that Indigenous perspectives are heard and respected within the context of work.

For over 60,000 years prior to colonisation in 1788, Indigenous Australians had our own governance systems and understanding of 'work' and how this was organised in communities. The British, after proclaiming ownership,¹⁰ used Indigenous labour to help build the colonial structures within Australia. Often, this was done with limited acknowledgement and through indentured processes.¹¹ This background continues to inform relationships and workplace mentality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees. Indigenous people still suffer profound injustices within Australia.¹²

Our standpoint

This report has been influenced by the framework of Indigenous Standpoint Theory,¹³ which recognises that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have essential insights that are often missing in mainstream non-Indigenous organisational thinking. This theory recognises that any knowledge created about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people is incomplete unless that knowledge creation is led by them and incorporates their experience.¹⁴

In this report, we have deliberately prioritised the perspectives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers, because they know and understand the experience of work for Indigenous people in ways that non-Indigenous people cannot. The project was designed and informed by Indigenous academics and practitioners, placing Indigenous understanding and priorities at the forefront of the research and reporting. We also sought to ensure that Indigenous values shaped the work. The project team drew on Williams's approach,¹⁵ applying the below (adapted) principles to this project.

- We used Indigenous people's definitions of racism and cultural safety.
- We were 'trauma-informed' and acknowledge that abuses Indigenous people have experienced from past policies have an effect across generations.
- We recognise that inclusion for Indigenous people requires action by individuals, services, policies and society – 'multi-level empowerment'.
- We acknowledge that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution because Indigenous people, communities and their experiences are diverse.
- We know Indigenous culture is a strength to draw on in employment.
- We know Indigenous people have the right to shape how decisions are made.

About the team

This project was designed and undertaken by the Centre for Indigenous People and Work, a partnership initiative between the University of Technology Sydney's Business School and Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research.

As experts and practitioners in the diversity and Indigenous employment fields, the project team brings a longstanding understanding of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employment experiences and engagement. Three of the team identify as Aboriginal. The report has been supported by the NAB Foundation, who is acknowledged as having a long-term commitment in the Indigenous employment space.

A note on language

Indigenous. In this report, we use the terms 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' and 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people' (where the 'and/or' recognises that some individuals belong to both groups) interchangeably with 'Indigenous' to refer to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. However, we recognise that this approach is not without contention. First, these terms do not reflect the diversity of Indigenous Australians, and it is important to remember that many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people prefer to be known by their specific group or clan names, and some by 'First Nations'. Second, we acknowledge that some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people do not like being referred to as Indigenous, as it is frequently used as a catch-all category, particularly in government and institutional contexts, that risks flattening or erasing the significant diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Nations, and lived experiences. We have therefore, wherever possible, referred to both Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people but, where appropriate and sometimes for brevity, we have used 'Indigenous'. We apologise if this causes any offense – this is not our intention.

Respondents. Where the report refers to 'respondents' it is referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander respondents only.

Community. Where the report refers to 'community' it is referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Racism. This report recognises that for many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, racism at work is endemic. It manifests in structural and interpersonal ways and has a real and dramatic impact on Indigenous employees. For Indigenous people reading this report, the experiences relayed by our respondents may be distressing. However, we felt that this behaviour needed to be named and so we made a conscious choice to call out racism where we heard it from our respondents.

A note on the findings

The views and experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are diverse, with each person experiencing their own history of being Indigenous at work across a variety of workplaces. Throughout this report, we share the views of Indigenous people who responded to the *Gari Yala* survey. However, we note that each person's and community's experience is different, and we have made no attempt to address these experiences or make judgement on the findings. This report does not purport to represent the experiences of all Indigenous people, but rather, the experiences of those who participated in the survey.

A note on context

This is the second time we have conducted the *Gari Yala* survey. The 2020 survey and research report called on organisations to do more and in doing so accelerated the public narrative. We know from feedback that *Gari Yala* has had an enormous positive impact across the employment community including a diverse range of Australian workplaces.

In this latest iteration of *Gari Yala*, we collected survey responses from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers between April and June 2025. Survey responses and comments were influenced not just by the *Gari Yala* 2020 report but also by events occurring in the broader socio-political environment including for example the Voice to Parliament Referendum (October 2023), the United States federal election (November 2024), and the Australian federal election (May 2025). As with all societal discussions, debates, and movements, these reach into the workplace and influence people's experiences – both good and bad.

Diversity of Indigenous respondents

The intent of *Gari Yala* is to provide a national survey to gain perspectives from employed Indigenous people. We surveyed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who were employed at the time of the survey or had been employed in the past two years.

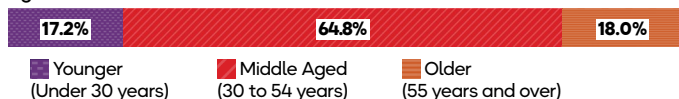
Various sampling methods were used, including accessing Polity Research & Consulting's Indigenous research panel, as well as snowball convenience sampling through our networks, social media channels and community groups. This generated 1,158 completed survey responses, with distribution of respondents as detailed below.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people live and work right across Australia. Our respondent sample sought to reflect this. While many respondents were from urban and regional centres, this is in keeping with Indigenous population distributions, with 41% of living in major cities, 44% in regional areas, and just 15% living in remote (6%) or very remote areas (9%).¹⁶

Our sample also reflected diversity in other demographics as outlined in the image below.



Age



Gender



Sexual Orientation



Disability



Carers



1. SHARING ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER IDENTITY AT WORK

Chapter snapshot

We asked 1,158 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers about their experiences sharing their Indigenous background at work. In all, 86% stated it was important for them to share their identity at work, and the same amount shared their identity at work – 56% actively talked about their identity at work while 30% did not try to keep it private.

Experiences of sharing Indigenous identity at work were usually complicated. While pride and positive reception were present, comments most commonly reflect mixed or negative experiences, shaped by unfair workplace demands, identity scrutiny, and conditional safety.



What is identity?

In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is often described in legal and administrative contexts using a three-part definition: descent, self-identification, and community acceptance.¹⁷ While this definition is widely used in policy, research, and institutional settings, it represents only a starting point for understanding identity and does not capture its full social, cultural, or lived meaning.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity is not singular or static. There is substantial diversity in how identity is understood and expressed across Australia, shaped by differences in Nations, language groups, communities, geography, family histories, and generational experience.¹⁸

Across generations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' approaches to sharing identity at work reflect changing social, political, and workplace conditions. Older generations, who directly experienced policies of protection, assimilation, and forced removal, often learned that concealing identity was necessary for safety. While significant social change in recent decades has led to greater willingness to share identity, many younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people report navigating different constraints, expressing caution about foregrounding identity or entering identified roles where this may limit career progression, invite tokenism, or create expectations of unpaid cultural labour.

Identity is also deeply shaped by personal and family histories, many of which have been profoundly affected by colonial and political interference. Government policies of removal, racial classification, and assimilation disrupted kinship systems, interrupted the transmission of culture and language, and continue to shape how individuals understand, reclaim, or negotiate their identity today.

Understanding identity in this way is essential for appreciating why decisions about sharing identity at work are rarely simple. Such decisions reflect not only personal meaning and pride, but also historical context, structural conditions, and assessments of safety within workplace environments.

Identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander at work matters

Overall, 86% of respondents felt it was important for them to identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person in the workplace.

It is important to me to identify as an Indigenous person in the workplace



But sharing comes with high costs

Experiences of sharing Indigenous identity at work are rarely uncomplicated. While pride and positive reception are present, comments most commonly reflect mixed or negative experiences, shaped by cultural load/unfair workplace demands, identity scrutiny, and conditional safety.

"My experience has been mixed. It can receive a positive response, but it can often lead to being seen as the Aboriginal 'token' and being expected to answer all questions."

UNFAIR WORKPLACE DEMANDS, TOKENISM, AND BURNOUT

Once identity is known, many workers describe a rapid increase in unpaid, emotionally demanding labour.

"The colonial load begins once you identify."

"After sharing I was continuously assigned to Reconciliation Action Plan/Indigenous tasks and projects without any proper training or support."

"I felt dehumanized like they only saw me for my Blakness and nothing more."

"It's heard but NOT appreciated. I feel constantly undervalued and tokenised."

"It is almost expected that I can only comment on 'Aboriginal things'... a 'stay in your lane' attitude."

IDENTITY SCRUTINY AND APPEARANCE-BASED QUESTIONING

Many workers report having their identity questioned or challenged, particularly those who are fair-skinned.

"Every time I share with coworkers I'm met with 'but you're white?' 'How Aboriginal are you like what percentage?'"

"Why am I not Blak enough for non-Aboriginal people?"

"When I tell people they nearly always seem surprised or uncomfortable. Maybe because I have lighter skin."

UNSAFE WORKPLACES AND DISCRIMINATION

For some, sharing identity led to serious personal consequences arising from racism.

"Since I have been open about my Aboriginality... I have been subject to racial discrimination, bullying and harassment."

"I do not feel safe disclosing I'm Aboriginal due to racism and prejudice. It's about survival."

"The mistreatment has led to depression and mental breakdown and suicidal thoughts."

IDENTIFYING BEING A CAREER LIMITING MOVE

Many talked of how they had decided not to share their identity at work as doing so adversely affected career prospects.

"I was passed over for roles... others promoted were Anglo-Saxon."

"[I] did not share identity for fear of prejudice in the workplace affecting career opportunities."

"Until my current employer (10 months) I felt it would work against me in applications and career opportunities."

"Indigenous workers are not valued are not supported for high duties or promotion."

"It will normally negatively affect my career prospects no matter what people say in a positive sense."

Some spoke of non-Indigenous colleagues questioning their competence and merit after learning about their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity.

"Some colleagues expressed surprise when they learned I entered through an alternative employment pathway questioning whether I deserved my role or if I had worked as hard as those who followed a more traditional route."

"It also common to hear that's the only reason you got a job in the first place. It almost makes it impossible to be recognized for your skill set or gain career advancement"

Others spoke of how career ceilings were particularly pronounced in identified and/or cultural roles.

"Being pigeonholed into cultural roles often means that my other leadership strengths –strategic thinking, facilitation, governance, organisational development – are overlooked. As a result, career opportunities can be missed. I've seen First Nations staff passed over or boxed in because organisations fail to see the full breadth of our capability. When you're constantly viewed through a cultural lens alone your professional growth can be limited despite having the same or more expertise than your peers."

CONDITIONAL SAFETY AND IDENTIFIED ROLES

For many, identity disclosure is not a choice, but a requirement of their role. Safety is often tied to context.

"I am in an identified role meaning I NEED to openly share my Aboriginal identity with my colleagues. Sadly, in a previous role I was told I only got my position because I was Aboriginal. My point is identified roles can place us in a position to be subjected to racism."

"I am in an identified role, so my identity is not something I keep private. However, I am very careful about what I share and any advice or suggestions I provide colleagues are always framed as my opinion or perspective. Aboriginal people are not a monolith, and I am not (and cannot be) a cultural authority on all things Indigenous."

"I actively choose employment that I feel safe to share my identity."

Pride, visibility, and advocacy

Despite the costs, many workers continue to share their identity out of a deep sense of pride, responsibility, and commitment to change.

"I'm proud and unapologetic. My identity informs everything I do."

"I continue to share because I believe it's the right thing to do. Representation matters and staying visible helps create space for truth respect and better understanding even when it's uncomfortable."

"I have always identified as having Aboriginal heritage or descent at every place I have ever worked. I do so because I am fiercely proud of my heritage and connection."

Some spoke of how sharing their identity at work enabled them to educate non-Indigenous colleagues and challenge stereotypes and misinformation.

"As a Proud Aboriginal Strong woman, I believe that if we must change the views of others we must teach and learn our history to those who have been given the wrong lessons to begin with."

"I am very open about my heritage because I am proud and passionate about it. I feel that as a society the segregation and suppression isn't going to end unless we are actively talking and educating people."

"I promote my culture at work to educate Non-Mob of why it's important to address the disparity and the neglectful treatment of First Nation Australians."

Others spoke of how sharing identity at work created connections with other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers and so greater cultural safety.

"It's about my connection to country and family belonging - [sharing] helps me connect with other mob from all over."

"We need to identify who we are – having trust and connection is important in the work for the sake of our Mob. The moment we connect as Mob the dynamic usually changes to a more positive one."

For some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers sharing identity cultivated closer connections with non-Indigenous colleagues.

"Being open about my heritage helped create stronger connections with colleagues."

"Many staff who weren't born in Australia are often more open curious and connected to our culture which has led to some really meaningful conversations and learning moments."

"I usually share with people I'm comfortable with and I perceive as culturally safe. When I have shared, it is a connecting experience as I'm able to share my identity and experience with those I trust facilitating closer relationships."

Others talked of sharing their identity at work in order to be role models for younger generations.

"I have been raised as a strong sistergirl by my mum and family and want the next generation to feel safe and proud in their workplaces."

"As the most senior Blakfella in our agency I try to show leadership and be a role model for others (you can't be what you can't see)."

"I lead with my identity. With integrity. With cultural values that doesn't always get recognised on paper but runs deep in my bones. And I'll keep doing that even when it's hard. Because the next generation deserves a workplace where they don't have to choose between visibility and safety."

Overall, sharing Indigenous identity at work is experienced as emotionally demanding and structurally loaded, even when accompanied by pride or moments of support.

"Being First Nations has been an asset to me - it sets me apart from others it brings different skills and perspectives and I've only ever worked for employers who value that"

The dominant story is not one of simple inclusion, but of negotiating visibility, safety, and burden in systems not built for Indigenous people.

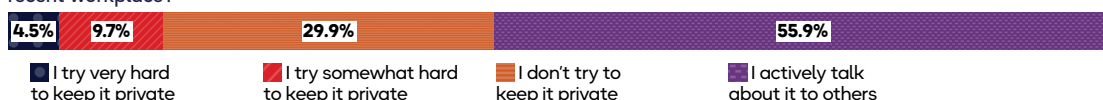
"Identifying is a political choice that I make which comes at personal cost for the sake of all the mob I haven't even met yet that might one day join me in this workplace. We. Are. Here."

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity is deeply important but also complex. For many people, identity is not fixed but shaped by personal, familial, cultural and historical factors—and individuals may be at different points in their journey of identifying or reconnecting. In the workplace, choosing to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander can be a powerful act of pride and visibility, but it also carries risks in environments that are not culturally safe.

Cultural safety is key to sharing identity at work

In all, 86% of respondents felt it was important for them to identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person in the workplace, and a similar amount shared their identity at work – 56% actively talked about their identity at work while 30% did not try to keep it private.

To what extent do you share your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background with other people in your current/most recent workplace?

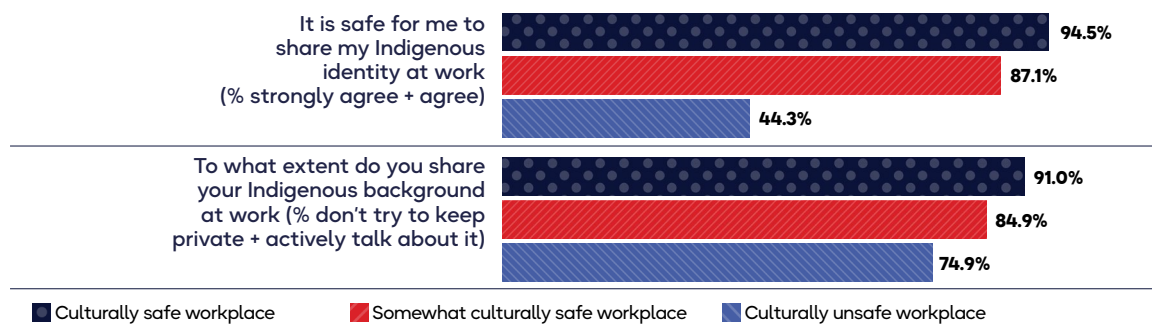


Perceptions of cultural safety in the workplace strongly influence whether Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees feel safe to share their identity.

- In culturally safe organisations, 95% of respondents said they felt safe to share their identity at work, compared to 87% in somewhat culturally safe environments and just 44% in culturally unsafe ones.
- This sense of safety is closely reflected in behaviour. In culturally safe workplaces, 91% of respondents said they share their identity at work. This decreased to 85% in somewhat culturally safe settings and 75% in culturally unsafe organisations.

Together, these findings suggest that while most Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees feel comfortable and supported to identify at work, this is only possible when cultural safety is present. The high value placed on identity, paired with the fact that not all respondents felt safe to be open, highlights the continued importance of fostering culturally safe environments where everyone can share their identity without fear of judgment, exclusion or harm.

Impact of cultural safety on sharing identity at work



2. HOW CULTURALLY SAFE ARE AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACES?

Chapter snapshot

Cultural safety refers to an environment where individuals can express, practice, and maintain their cultural identity without fear of ridicule, discrimination, or marginalisation.

While more than eight out of ten (86%) respondents told us it was important for them to identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person in the workplace, 60% reported that their workplace was either culturally unsafe (25%) or only moderately safe (35%). Culturally unsafe workplaces significantly decreased Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander worker wellbeing and retention, leaving these workers much less likely to be satisfied with their job or to recommend their employer, and much more likely to intend to leave. Not surprisingly, we found racist behaviour such as unfair treatment and racial slurs played a particularly significant role in creating culturally unsafe workplaces. In fact, 66% of respondents in culturally unsafe workplaces had heard racial or ethnic slurs or jokes in the past year, compared to only 19% of workers in culturally safe workplaces. We found cultural safety can be built through:

- » actively preventing racism,
- » enabling connections between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait staff,
- » investing in the systems and accountability structures needed to uphold equity and inclusion, and
- » supporting staff when racism occurs.

What is 'cultural safety'?

Cultural safety refers to an environment where individuals can express, practice, and maintain their cultural identity without fear of ridicule, discrimination, or marginalisation.¹⁹ Cultural safety goes beyond cultural awareness or sensitivity – it requires active recognition, respect, and accommodation of cultural difference.²⁰ A culturally safe workplace is one where power imbalances are addressed, diversity is valued, and systemic barriers to inclusion are actively dismantled.

In contrast, **culturally unsafe** practices are those that diminish, demean, or disempower the cultural identity and wellbeing of individuals. These may be overt, such as discriminatory behaviour or stereotyping, or more subtle, such as failing to recognise the cultural importance of community obligations, protocols, or ways of working.

Who decides on cultural safety?

Crucially, cultural safety is defined not by the organisation but by those who experience it. It is the perspectives of individuals whose cultural identity is at stake that determine whether an environment is culturally safe.

How did we measure cultural safety?

We measured cultural safety through participants' perceptions of their workplaces. Items reflected key indicators of cultural safety in the workplace, including:

- recognition of cultural knowledge,
- representation in culturally-specific roles,
- respect for cultural practices, and
- the absence of negative judgement for engaging in culturally significant activities.

We asked six survey questions relating to these cultural safety-related indicators. Together, they provide a holistic measure of how culturally safe or unsafe a workplace is experienced to be by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees. Below we report on an overall cultural safety score created from a mean cultural safety score from the six questions responses, as well as responses to each of the six survey questions.

CULTURALLY SAFE WORKPLACES

Culturally safe = Respondents scored their workplace on average 4 or more out of 5 on questions asking how often their workplace was culturally safe (where 5 = all of the time and 1 = never).

Somewhat culturally safe = Respondents scored their workplace on average between 3 and 4 out of 5.

Culturally unsafe = Respondents scored their workplace on average 3 or less out of 5.

How common is cultural safety at work?

"I have often gone to work feeling culturally unsafe and observed service delivery for young people that is not culturally safe appropriate or responsive."

Over a third (39.5%) of respondents reported being in a culturally safe workplace, or that their workplace was only somewhat culturally safe (35.4%). Concerningly one in four (25.1%) reported that their workplace was culturally unsafe.

% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in culturally safe workplaces



Based on the accounts shared by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers, cultural safety in the workplace is not a symbolic concept or a set of policies, but a lived experience shaped by everyday interactions, power structures, and organisational responses to racism. Cultural safety exists when Indigenous workers are respected and valued for who they are, can participate fully without carrying disproportionate cultural burdens, and are protected from racism, tokenism, and identity scrutiny.

Our survey findings indicate that organisations have further work to do when it comes to creating cultural safety in Australian workplaces, as our results indicate that workplaces are either absent or inconsistent with creating culturally safe environments. While Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are often encouraged by employers to share their identity at work, respondents' comments showed that doing so often exposed them to a range of personal and professional risks including:

- racism, bullying, and psychological harm,
- tokenism and excessive unpaid labour,
- identity scrutiny and the policing of authenticity, and
- in identified roles, career ceilings and walls, heightened scrutiny, and assumptions of lesser merit.

THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT TO SAFETY

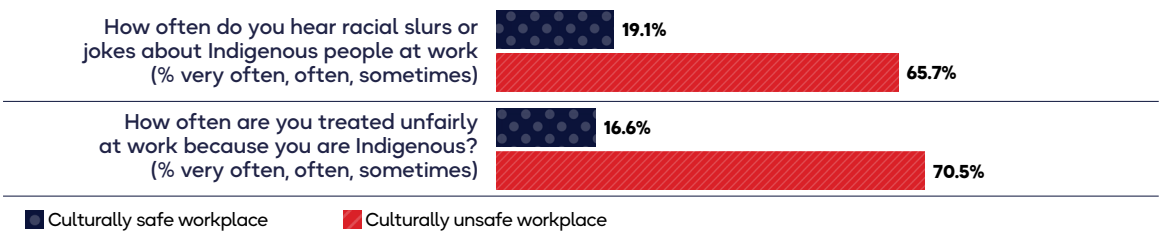
For many Indigenous workers, identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander at work is experienced as a profound personal and professional risk. Numerous comments describe direct racism, bullying, and psychological harm following disclosure of identity. One worker described the toll of unsafe leadership environments, stating:

“Overall mental health from my leadership has made me suicidal...”

We found that racist behaviours such as unfair treatment and harassment based on race were very common in culturally unsafe workplaces. Respondents in culturally unsafe workplaces were:

- **4 times more likely** to have been treated unfairly at work because of their background in the past year (71%) compared to those who work in culturally safe workplaces (17%), and
- **3 times more likely** to have heard racial or ethnic slurs or jokes at work in the past year (66%) compared to those who work in culturally safe workplaces (19%).

Impact of racism on cultural safety



Respondents described organisational responses that compounded harm rather than alleviating it.

“They hire Aboriginal people as black cladding to present to the world that ‘there’s nothing wrong here – look the other way!’”

“The way my Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander section in our directorate is set up is wrong. We have white fellas in positions that should be identified positions... this is unsafe for those staff and totally inappropriate”

These accounts highlight that cultural safety is undermined not only by individual acts of racism, but by institutional failures to respond meaningfully when harm occurs.

Many participants also identified the post–Voice referendum period as a turning point, marking a visible deterioration in workplace safety. Workers observed that the referendum outcome emboldened racist attitudes and behaviours:

“After the Referendum people suddenly had permission to be open and direct in their racism.”

As one worker powerfully summarised:

“The No vote in the referendum ended up giving a Voice to racism not our people.”

This broader social climate was experienced as filtering directly into workplaces, affecting interpersonal interactions, leadership support, and organisational commitment to First Nations inclusion.

VISIBILITY BRINGS TOKENISM AND CULTURAL LOAD

A dominant theme across the comments is the double-edged nature of visibility. While organisations often encourage Indigenous employees to be visible, this frequently results in tokenism and excessive unpaid labour. Workers consistently described being expected to take on additional unfair workplace demands. They spoke of carrying a heavy “cultural” or “colonial” load, encompassing education, emotional labour, representation, and reconciliation work. As one participant explained:

“Acknowledge that cultural load is real. It’s the invisible unpaid labour we carry — from educating others representing culture to doing the emotional work of walking between worlds. It should be recognised not expected.”

Rather than being supported, many Indigenous workers felt overburdened and burned out:

“The burden is not reduced so I have to work overtime to keep on top of things.”

Tokenism was repeatedly described in stark terms. Workers spoke of being positioned as symbolic evidence of diversity rather than valued professionals:

“I feel like I have been used as the ‘token’ First Nations person when it suits the agenda.”

Others described being showcased for organisational image while lacking agency or security:

“They are able to use their Indigenous employees as tokens and grandstand how diverse they are by showing their Indigenous employees at any chance.”

These experiences illustrate how superficial inclusion efforts can actively undermine cultural safety when they are not matched by structural support, resourcing, and respect.

IDENTITY SCRUTINY AND THE POLICING OF AUTHENTICITY

Many Indigenous workers, particularly those who are fair-skinned or disconnected from community due to intergenerational trauma, described having their identity questioned or invalidated. This scrutiny created ongoing stress and eroded their sense of belonging.

One worker described the emotional labour of having to suppress identity to survive professionally:

“I have to put my beliefs and differences at the door before I come in put on my whitest face and voice and work within the system.”

Others highlighted how Indigenous identity was used to undermine professional credibility:

“I am in a non-identified role... I was once told that I am not of the same calibre compared to my non-Indigenous counterparts and being Aboriginal meant the bar was lowered.”

For some, identity disclosure also required revisiting personal and collective trauma:

“Sharing ancestry often necessitates talking about the Stolen Generations.”

These accounts make clear that cultural safety cannot exist where Indigenous identity is policed, questioned, or treated as incompatible with professionalism.

IDENTIFIED ROLES: SAFETY AND CONSTRAINT

Identified roles and Aboriginal-led organisations were among the few spaces consistently described as more culturally safe. Workers in these contexts reported feeling seen, supported, and able to thrive and contribute at work.

“My immediate manager is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander so I feel very seen and supported by them.”

“More Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander employees has made our workplace culturally safer.”

However, even identified roles were described as limited solutions. Many workers felt these roles came with career ceilings, heightened scrutiny, or assumptions of lesser merit:

“It feels as though I should hide my Aboriginality to feel there is a pathway / growth in the business.”

“There is no pathway to help Aboriginal people move into management roles or career progression.”

A CONDITIONAL AND COSTLY REALITY

Across the comments, cultural safety in Australian workplaces emerges as situational and conditional, rather than assured. Many Indigenous workers described constantly assessing whether it was safe to disclose their identity:

“The decision to share is a complex and personal decision with potential benefits and challenges.”

Yet for some, visibility was also an act of resistance and hope:

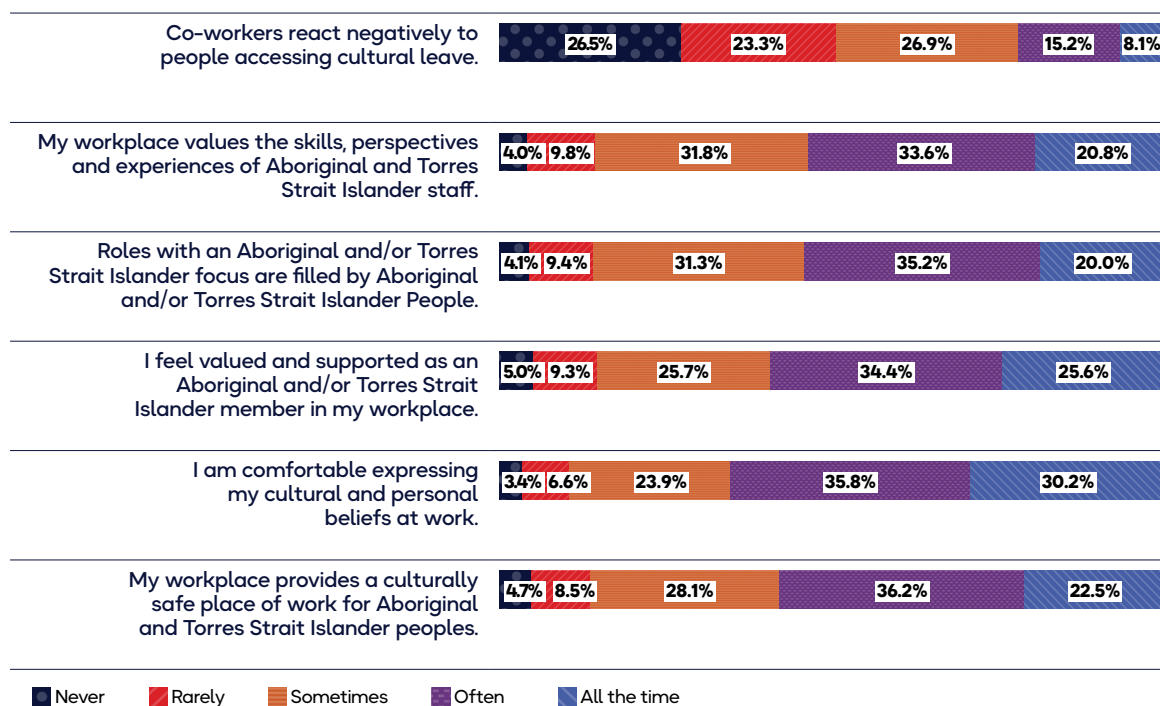
“I am confident in my skills, but I am compelled to be loud and proud to set an example for other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in my workplace and for the sake of all the mob I haven’t even met yet.”

These voices underscore both the resilience of Indigenous workers and the profound cost of working in environments that remain, for many, fundamentally unsafe.

As the bar charts below show, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people reported experiencing:

- **not feeling Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander skills, perspectives and experiences are valued** – 41% felt their workplace never, rarely or only sometimes values the skills, perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people,
- **not feeling personally valued** – 40% felt they were never, rarely or only sometimes valued and supported as an Indigenous member of their workplace,
- **low representation in Indigenous-focused roles** – 45% reported Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were never, rarely or only sometimes appointed in any internal roles with an Indigenous focus in their organisation,
- **not feeling comfortable expressing cultural beliefs** – 34% never, rarely or only sometimes felt comfortable expressing their cultural and personal beliefs at work, and
- **not feeling safe to take cultural leave** – 23% reported their co-workers often or all the time reacted negatively to people accessing leave for cultural reasons.

Cultural safety experiences



What is the impact of cultural safety?

Cultural safety in the workplace significantly shapes Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees' experiences of racism, exclusion, wellbeing and retention. When workplaces are culturally safe, staff are more likely to feel respected, supported and able to thrive and contribute at work. This contributes to better mental health, stronger engagement, and lower turnover.

On the other hand, culturally unsafe environments can reinforce systemic racism, reduce trust, and harm wellbeing. Prioritising cultural safety is essential not only for individual health and inclusion but also for building respectful, accountable, and effective organisations.

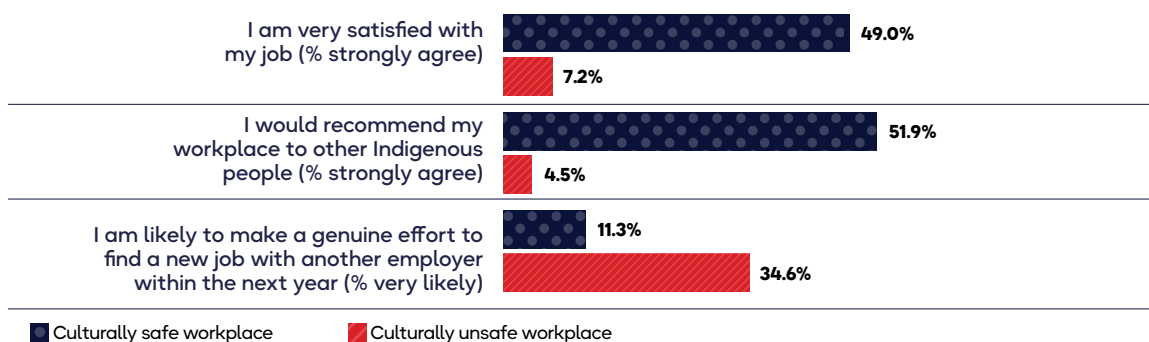
CULTURAL SAFETY IS LINKED TO JOB SATISFACTION AND RETENTION

Overall, we found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in culturally unsafe workplaces were less satisfied, less likely to recommend their workplace to others, and more likely to leave.

Respondents in culturally unsafe workplaces were:

- **7 times less likely to be satisfied with their job** (7% strongly agreed) compared to those in culturally safe workplaces (49%),
- **10 times less likely to recommend their workplace** to other Indigenous people (5% strongly agreed) compared to those in culturally safe workplaces (52%), and
- **3 times more likely to be looking for a new employer** in the next year (35% very likely) compared to those in culturally safe workplaces (11%).

Impact of cultural safety on job satisfaction, workplace recommendations, and turnover intentions



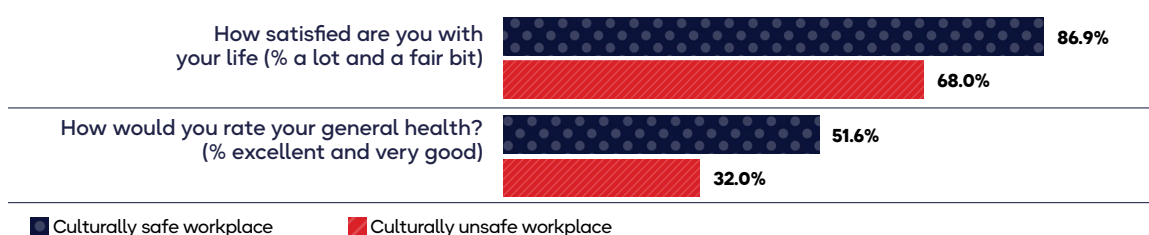
CULTURAL SAFETY IS LINKED TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Culturally unsafe workplaces don't just affect job satisfaction and retention – they also have serious consequences for health and wellbeing. Workers in culturally unsafe environments report lower life satisfaction and poorer health outcomes.

- Employees in culturally safe workplaces were more likely to report being satisfied with life “a lot” or “a fair bit” (87%) compared to those in culturally unsafe workplaces (68%).
- They were also more likely to rate their general health as “excellent” or “very good” (52%) compared to those in culturally unsafe workplaces (32%).

As our data clearly shows, cultural safety matters because it directly shapes both the wellbeing and workplace experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees. When cultural safety is present, people are more likely to feel valued and supported in their roles and have better health and wellbeing. When it is absent, the effects are wide-ranging, contributing to poorer health, reduced job satisfaction, higher turnover, and feelings of exclusion. Ensuring cultural safety isn't just good practice, it is essential for equity, wellbeing, and organisational success.

Impact of cultural safety on health and life satisfaction



How do we build cultural safety at work?

We found that cultural safety is not just about how employees feel - it is deeply connected to how organisations act. Culturally safe workplaces are more likely to actively prevent racism, support staff when it occurs, enable connections between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait staff, and invest in the systems and accountability structures needed to uphold equity and inclusion. Concerningly, the data show that even among culturally safe workplaces the fundamental protections of a racism complaint procedure and anti-discrimination training including reference to Indigenous workers are not common – only 43% of culturally safe workplaces have both in place. This underscores that no organisation can be complacent.

ANTI-RACISM TRAINING

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers were clear about what meaningful cultural safety would require. Central to this was authentic, mandatory cultural safety and anti-racism training, paired with real accountability:

“Compulsory anti-racism and cultural safety training for every single employee and manager.”

“When racism is reported it must be taken seriously acted upon swiftly and met with appropriate outcomes.”

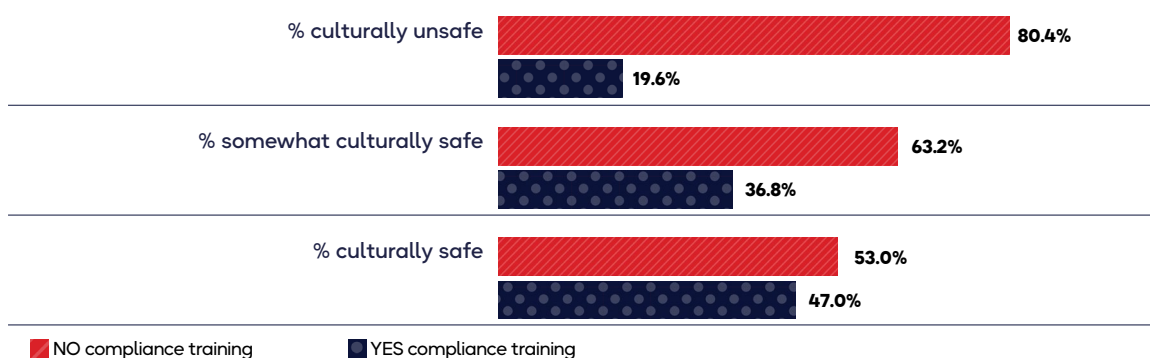
“[Organisations need to] understand what racism is including notions of cultural safety... then commit, the same as they do for workplace sexual harassment, to a zero-tolerance setting.”

Adding further weight to the need for effective training, we found a strong association between anti-discrimination compliance training that includes reference to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and cultural safety.

- Looking at Indigenous workers who reported being culturally unsafe, the vast majority (80%) indicated their workplace did not provide compliance training, with only 20% saying such training was provided.
- In contrast, looking at Indigenous workers who reported being culturally safe, compliance training was much more likely to be provided - with 47% of culturally safe workers saying such training was provided.

Even though anti-discrimination compliance training like this was linked to higher cultural safety, it remains under-implemented across organisations overall. Even among workplaces reported as being culturally safe, fewer than half of Indigenous workers reported that such training was provided. This indicates a substantial gap in organisational practice: initiatives that appear to make a meaningful difference are still not being consistently adopted. Reflecting this, anti-discrimination compliance training was only the 9th most common initiative, with just 37% of respondents working in an organisation that provided it (see What are organisations doing and what makes a difference? chapter).

Impact of compliance training on cultural safety



RACISM COMPLAINT PROCEDURES

We also found a strong association between having a racism complaint procedure and cultural safety.

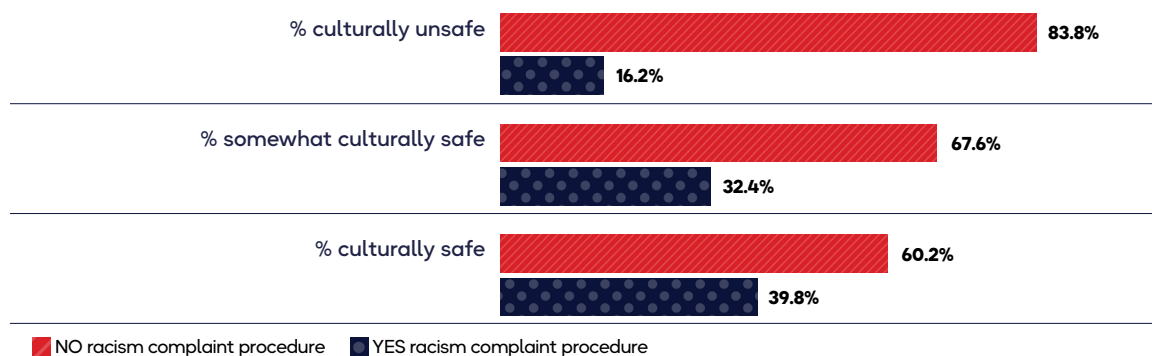
- Looking at Indigenous workers who reported being culturally unsafe, the vast majority (84%) indicated their workplace did not have a racism complaint procedure, with only 16% saying such a procedure did exist.
- In contrast, looking at Indigenous workers who reported being culturally safe, a complaint procedure was much more likely to be provided – with 40% of culturally safe workers saying such a procedure did exist.

Despite their positive impact on cultural safety, racism complaint procedures were one of the least commonly implemented initiatives in respondents' organisations – it was the 11th most common initiative, with only 31% of respondents working in an organisation that provided this.

Concerningly, we found that culturally unsafe organisations were even less likely to have these basic structures needed to prevent and respond to racism:

- 74% of respondents in culturally unsafe workplaces said their organisation had neither anti-discrimination training nor a formal racism complaint procedure,
- compared to 50% in somewhat culturally safe organisations, and
- 43% in culturally safe ones.

Impact of racism complaint procedure on cultural safety



EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE SUPPORT WHEN EXPERIENCING RACISM

Respondents stressed that procedures alone are insufficient without enforcement:

“When racism is reported it must be taken seriously acted upon swiftly and met with appropriate outcomes.”

Crucially, many participants in culturally unsafe organisations also reported a lack of institutional support when facing racism – they were three times less likely than their colleagues in culturally safe workplaces to agree they had the workplace support they needed when racism occurred.

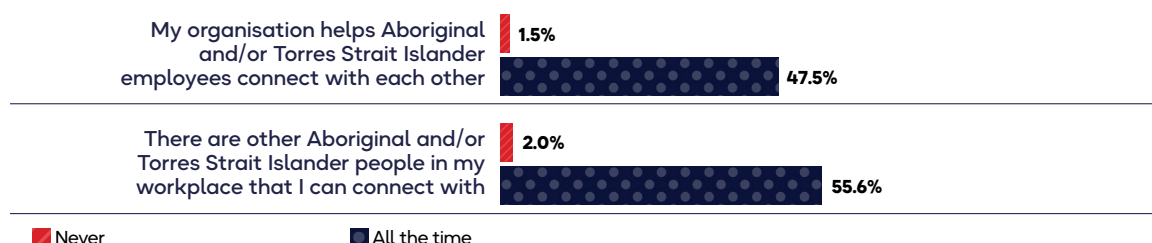
- Only 18% of participants in culturally unsafe workplaces agreed or strongly agreed that they had the workplace support they needed when they encountered racist behaviour,
- compared to 41% in somewhat culturally safe workplaces, and
- 71% in culturally safe ones.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COLLEAGUES

We found that respondents in culturally safe workplaces were far more likely to have their organisations help create connections internally with other Indigenous staff. As the bar chart below shows, when organisations enabled these connections all the time, 47% of respondents said their workplace was culturally safe compared to just 1.5% when these connections were never made.

A similar pattern was observed for access to other people to connect with more broadly: 56% of respondents reported their workplace was culturally safe when these connections were enabled all the time, compared to only 2% when this never occurred.

Impact of connections in culturally safe workplaces



ORGANISATIONAL AUTHENTICITY

Structural supports such as cultural leave, mentorship, and resourced Indigenous networks were described as tangible steps toward safety, but only when embedded within genuine organisational commitment.

“We need a cultural safety framework and a safe way for Aboriginal employees to raise cultural safety concerns... We need organizations to make a commitment (not just words) to what resources they are putting behind what they’re saying they’re going to do.”

Cultural safety is closely tied to how genuine an organisation’s commitment to inclusion is perceived to be. When asked whether their organisation “genuinely supports the inclusive and equitable treatment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees”, participants’ responses varied sharply depending on the cultural safety of their workplace.

- Only 26% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement in culturally unsafe organisations,
- but this almost tripled in somewhat culturally safe workplaces (73%), and
- then rose to 92% in culturally safe organisations.

These findings suggest that cultural safety does not occur in isolation but rather reflects whether organisations are seen as authentic in their values and actions. When inclusion efforts are seen as genuine, cultural safety is significantly more likely to be experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff.

3. WHAT IS THE STATE OF RACISM FOR INDIGENOUS WORKERS?

Chapter snapshot

Our survey revealed that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees face a significant amount of racism, with 58% experiencing some form of racism at an average frequency of very often to sometimes. This indicates that, for the majority of respondents, racism was not an isolated or occasional experience but a recurring feature of their working lives.

Racism manifests in different ways, but two of the most common were appearance racism and inappropriate race-based comments. In all, 53% of respondents reported that they very often, often or sometimes received comments about the way they look or should look as an Indigenous person. Similarly, 53% reported that non-Indigenous employees made inappropriate comments or assumptions about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples very often, often or sometimes.

We also found that racism in the workplace comes from across the organisation including peers, supervisors, clients and leadership alike – though it was often from co-workers in other teams (22%) and co-workers in their own team (19%).

Racism can have a real and dramatic impact on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees. We found Indigenous workers who experienced racism very often, often or sometimes were less satisfied with their job, less likely to recommend their workplace to others, more likely to leave their organisation and had poorer general health and life satisfaction.

What is racism?

Racism refers to the unfair treatment, exclusion, or disadvantage experienced by individuals or groups based on their race, ethnicity, or cultural background. As explained in the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework:

- racism operates at multiple levels, including interpersonal and systemic, and
- racism continues because power and influence are not shared equally across society.

For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, racism is deeply rooted in the legacy of colonisation and continues to affect everyday life, including experiences at work.

This can manifest as anti-Indigenous agendas and sentiment including activities like spreading misinformation and disinformation which intentionally divides and diminishes Indigenous voices.

RACISM OPERATES AT MULTIPLE, INTERCONNECTED LEVELS

Interpersonal racism refers to racism that happens in everyday interactions between people (e.g. discriminatory comments, assumptions, or behaviours). It can come in the form of abuse, harassment, humiliation, or exclusion. It can also come through off-hand jokes or comments.

Systemic racism occurs in organisations, where policies, rules, practices, or cultures disadvantage certain racial groups, often unintentionally. They result in exclusion and/or unequal opportunities. Organisations often believe their policies and practices are racially 'neutral', but the lack of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in leadership in mainstream Australian organisations provides evidence of racially unfair policies and practices (systemic racism).²¹

Interpersonal racism and systemic racism reinforce each other to shape the everyday experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples at work. Here, harmful individual attitudes and behaviours about Indigenous peoples can shape organisational policies, and those policies can also reinforce and maintain those attitudes.

Indigenous workers told us about both interpersonal and systemic racism

In this survey, we measured instances of interpersonal racism, but it is important to acknowledge that these are not isolated incidents – they reflect and are shaped by systemic racism. While we did not specifically measure instances of systemic racism, respondents shared many examples of systemic racism they experienced in the workplace.

How common is racism towards Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers?

Racism remains a regular and harmful part of working life for many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Racism can manifest in many ways, from overt hostility to subtle and everyday interactions that diminish, exclude or stereotype Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this study, we examined nine common forms of interpersonal racism experienced at work as reported on below, as well as exploring overall experiences of racism, by calculating an average score across all survey items related to interpersonal workplace racism.

OVERALL RACISM

Across all nine measures of racism included in this study, experiences were both common and persistent. Respondents with an average score of 2 or below were categorised as having experienced racism "never" or "hardly ever", while those with an average score above 2 were categorised as experiencing racism "sometimes", "often" or "very often".

Prevalence of overall racism at work

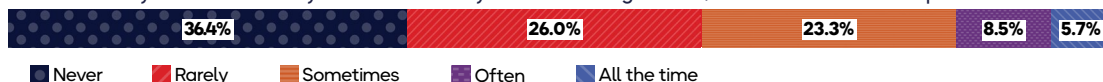


Overall, 58% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander respondents reported experiencing racism at an average frequency of sometimes to very often.²² This indicates that, for the majority of respondents, racism was not an isolated or occasional experience but a recurring feature of their working lives.

UNFAIR TREATMENT

When asked directly whether they were treated unfairly at work because they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 38% of participants said this occurred sometimes, often or very often. These findings show that more than one in three Indigenous workers continue to experience overt racism in their workplace.

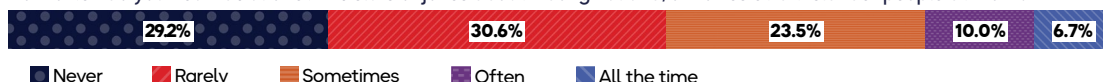
How often are you treated unfairly at work because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?



RACIST SLURS OR JOKES

Racist language and humour remain a disturbingly common experience for many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers. In this study, 40% of participants reported sometimes, often or always hearing racial or ethnic slurs or jokes about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in their workplace.

How often do you hear racial or ethnic slurs or jokes about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people at work?



Racist slurs and so-called jokes reinforce negative stereotypes, create a hostile work environment, and signal to Indigenous staff that their dignity and identity are not respected. Even when not directly targeted, hearing this kind of language can contribute to a broader sense of exclusion, cultural unsafety and emotional distress.

The normalisation of these comments reflects broader societal attitudes that continue to minimise the seriousness of anti-Indigenous racism.

APPEARANCE-BASED RACISM: QUESTIONING AND DISCREDITING IDENTITY

Appearance-based racism refers to comments or actions based on a perpetrator's stereotypical assumptions about what an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person "should" look like. Appearance racism challenges and invalidates Indigenous identity by implying that there is a single, visible way to be Indigenous.

We asked participants about their experiences identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and a concerning 53% reported that they sometimes, often or always received comments about how they look (or how they should look) as an Indigenous person.

How often do you get comments about the way you look or should look as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?



These comments, often seen by non-Indigenous people as harmless or casual, are deeply offensive and harmful. Telling someone they are "too white to be Indigenous" or that they do not look Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander enough not only denies their identity but also echoes the trauma of government policies that aimed to erase Indigeneity through forced assimilation. Appearance is not an accurate or appropriate indicator of Indigenous heritage, and appearance-based racism reflects ongoing colonial attitudes about who gets to be recognised as Indigenous in Australia.

Many Indigenous employees, particularly those who are fair-skinned, reported frequent questioning of their identity and legitimacy. Common experiences included being told "but you're white?" or "you don't look Aboriginal," and being asked, "how Aboriginal are you like what percentage?"

These interactions create ongoing pressure to justify identity and connection to community. One respondent noted, "I feel like I constantly have to prove that I'm Aboriginal, so people don't think I'm just ticking a box."

Another shared that colleagues assumed they were "in danger of becoming a professional Aborigine" after disclosing their identity.

ASSUMPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES

"I have gotten 'you're being really aggressive I suggest you go talk to a trusted friend to calm down.' Even though in those situations I am extremely cautious about how I speak and act because of that stereotype. I have spoken to white friends in the workplace about this and they say that they have never received that but have seen that happen to me."

In all, 53% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees reported that non-Indigenous employees sometimes, often or always made inappropriate assumptions about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. While some of these remarks may be intended as benign or even complimentary, they reflect and reinforce deficit-based thinking and racialised myths. These interactions flatten the diversity and complexity of Indigenous experiences and can leave Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff feeling misrepresented, scrutinised or tokenised.

How often do non-Indigenous employees make inappropriate comments or assumptions about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples?



BEING LOOKED DOWN ON

"The assumptions and presumptions – people talking to me like I'm stupid...I get shunned, I'm not trusted and I am treated like little more than a child."

Over half (53%) of participants reported sometimes, often or always feeling as though people acted as if they were better than them because they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. And 47% reported this in relation to feeling as though people thought they were not smart. This behaviour may not always be overt and reflects an underlying belief in cultural or racial superiority and can be especially damaging in professional settings where respect, recognition and equal treatment are crucial. Being treated as lesser, whether in meetings, decision-making spaces, or casual workplace interactions, sends a message that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people do not belong or are not as capable.

How often do people act as if they are better than you are because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?



How often do people act as if you are not smart because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?

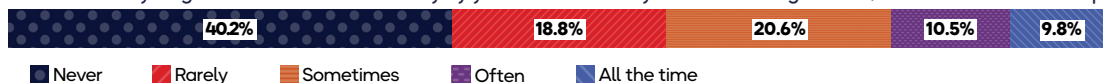


NOT BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY

"We still face a lot of racism in schools...and not taken seriously in our roles when we go out to inform, meet with and visit schools – especially Principals and teachers, they treat us as if we are less than them."

A key aspect of workplace respect is being listened to and treated as a valued contributor. Yet, 41% of participants reported that they sometimes, often or always felt ignored or not taken seriously by their boss. When Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are not taken seriously, it may reflect broader systemic issues around who is seen as credible, capable, or worthy of leadership.

How often are you ignored or not taken seriously by your boss because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?



BEING SEEN AS A THREAT OR DISHONEST

"[I'd like to] just be made to feel that I'm honest and trustworthy."

Racial bias often shapes how Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are perceived by others, leading to harmful assumptions about intent or character. In this study, 35% of participants reported that people sometimes, often or always acted as if they were afraid of them, and 33% said that people acted as if they thought they were dishonest. These experiences are not only deeply hurtful but also reflect long-standing stereotypes that cast Indigenous people as threatening, untrustworthy, or dangerous.

How often do people act as if they are afraid of you because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?



How often do people act as if you are dishonest because you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person?



OVERT RACISM AND EMBOLDENED HOSTILITY

Indigenous workers continue to report direct, overt racism in the workplace, including racial slurs, jokes, and verbal abuse. Respondents described experiences of being subjected to "racial and other discrimination, harassment, and bullying," hearing "rude racist judgement remarks 'jokes'," and being told they "look like I've been hit with the tar brush." Others reported being laughed at when introducing their mob or hearing colleagues claim that First Nations people "get too much leeway and can do what they want."

Workplaces are a microcosm of society, and many respondents identified a clear escalation in overt racism in the face of changing societal events. For example, while for some, the referendum had *“made everyone in my workplace open their eyes up and understand how racist this country is,”* others felt that the outcome legitimised racist expression. One employee stated, *“After the referendum people suddenly had permission to be open and direct in their racism.”* Another explained, *“The No vote in the referendum ended up giving a Voice to racism not our people.”* Several respondents noted colleagues explicitly referencing the vote to justify their views, including, *“I’ve heard statements like ‘we voted no to this’ as if that vote was not about a proposal but about our very existence.”* Some spoke of workplaces having *“got more unsafe with Trump being in”* and of the harm done by media coverage and campaigning during the Australian federal election:

“[It’s] threatening to undermine the work done in the reconciliation space”

“They are throwing fuel on the fire of racism bigotry and discrimination in this country, and it needs to stop.”

COVERT AND SYSTEMIC RACISM

Alongside overt incidents, racism is frequently experienced in more covert and systemic forms. Respondents described racism that is “hidden more” because it is not socially appropriate yet deeply embedded in organisational practices.

Many reported that when racism is raised, systems fail to respond effectively or instead punish the complainant. One respondent stated, *“Every single person I have reported for racial discrimination to my supervisor has been promoted.”*

Another recounted, *“Rather than addressing the conduct the response resulted in my removal from the team and ultimately led to my resignation.”*

This failure to act reinforces perceptions that leadership structures protect themselves rather than Indigenous staff. As one respondent reflected, *“Too often leadership structures remain closed and protective. People in positions of influence protect one another avoid scrutiny and uphold systems that benefit from the exclusion of First Nations leadership.”*

TOKENISM, EXPLOITATION, AND UNFAIR WORKPLACE DEMANDS

A dominant theme across responses was the heavy and often uncompensated unfair workplace demands carried by Indigenous staff. Employees described being expected to educate colleagues, manage RAPs, organise cultural events, and act as cultural representatives regardless of their formal roles.

As one respondent stated, *“Acknowledge that cultural load is real. It’s the invisible unpaid labour we carry — from educating others representing culture to doing the emotional work of walking between worlds. It should be recognised not expected.”*

Another explained, *“Essentially they are getting two people for the price of one.”*

Several respondents described feeling tokenised or symbolically employed to enhance organisational image without real power or support.

“They are able to use their Indigenous employees as tokens and grandstand how diverse they are.”

“I know they get ‘Blak Money’ for having me work there but I don’t see those \$ in my bank account. In the beginning I was eager to share, and I was used as the TOKEN BLAK.”

CAREER STAGNATION AND RETALIATION

Racism was also described as directly constraining career progression. Respondents reported being passed over for roles, confined to identified positions with no advancement pathways, or excluded from leadership opportunities.

One respondent stated, *“In my role there are no opportunities for career advancement into leadership despite being a university qualified employee with a high level of experience.”*

Others noted that Indigenous roles are often underpaid despite heavier workloads, with one respondent stating, *“Our workload is bigger and we are not remunerated fairly for the work we do.”*

Speaking up about racism was widely seen as risky.

“We have to stay quiet in the face of racism or be overlooked for opportunities or seen as a problem to be managed out.”

The frustration expressed by Indigenous employees is not rooted in a lack of willingness to contribute, but in the repeated failure of workplaces to recognise, trust, and value their professionalism. As one respondent stated, *“Given half the chance and TRUST in our professionalism we can be assets to the organisations we work with.”*

A PICTURE OF CONTRADICTIONS

Feedback from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees presents a picture of Australian workplaces characterised by deep contradiction. Since 2020, many organisations have introduced visible inclusion measures such as Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), cultural awareness training, identified roles, and cultural leave. These initiatives have led some employees to note positive change. However, these structural efforts coexist with persistent and, in some cases, intensifying racism. As one respondent observed:

“People know what they are doing & saying. They do courses. They have RAPs. But still we have to stay quiet in the face of racism or be overlooked for opportunities or seen as a problem to be managed out.”

Who does racism come from?

Our data shows that racism in the workplace does not come from a single source. When asked “Which people in your workplace were or are the source of this unfair treatment and/or racial slurs or jokes?”, participants identified a range of sources:

- 22.1% said a co-worker in another team or department,
- 18.7% said a co-worker in their own team or department,
- 15.5% identified a customer, client or patient,
- 14.6% named someone from senior management,
- 13.8% said another supervisor or manager,
- 12.3% identified their immediate supervisor or manager, and
- 5.1% said a supplier.

Clearly no single group is primarily responsible for racism at work. Instead, racism comes from across the organisation including peers, supervisors, clients, and leadership alike. This points to a broader cultural problem rather than the behaviour of a few individuals, highlighting the need for whole-of-organisation approaches to prevent and respond to racism.

What is the impact of racism?

RACISM IS LINKED TO LOWER JOB SATISFACTION AND RETENTION

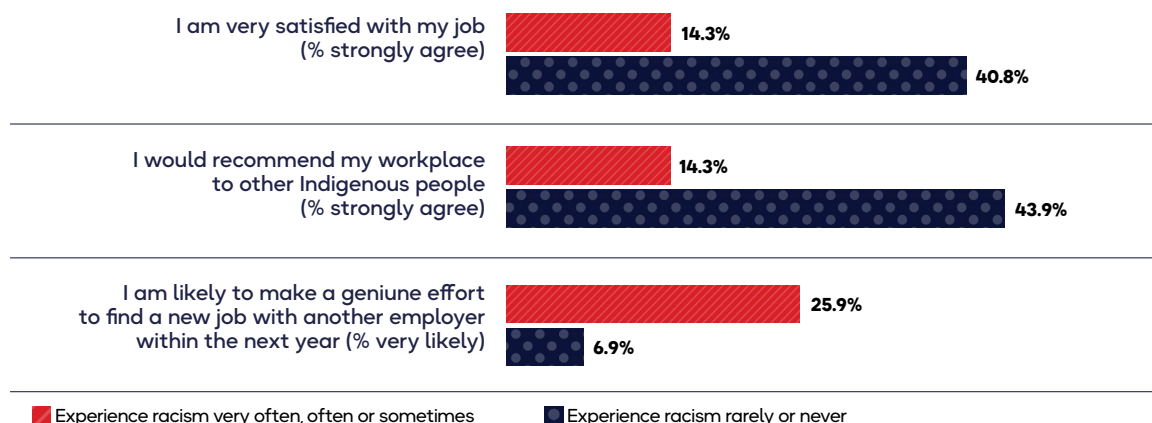
Experiencing racism at work has a clear and damaging effect on how Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees feel about their jobs and their future in the organisation. The data show stark differences between those who regularly experience racism and those who do not.

To explore overall experiences of racism, we calculated an average score across all survey items related to interpersonal racism in the workplace. Respondents with an average score of 2 or below were categorised as having experienced racism ‘never’ or ‘hardly ever’, while those with an average score above 2 were categorised as experiencing racism ‘sometimes’, ‘often’ or very often.

Overall, we found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes were less satisfied, less likely to recommend their workplace to others, and more likely to leave.

- **3 times less likely to be very satisfied with their job** – only 14% of those who experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes strongly agreed they were very satisfied with their job, compared to 41% of those who had never or only hardly ever experienced racism.
- **3 times less likely to recommend their workplace** – among those frequently exposed to racism, only 14% strongly agreed they would recommend their workplace to other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, compared to 44% among those who never or only rarely experienced racism.
- **3 times more likely to leave their organisation** – 26% of those who frequently experienced racism said they were very likely to actively look for a new job in the next year, compared to just 7% of those who had never or hardly ever experienced racism.

Impact of racism on job satisfaction, workplace recommendations, and turnover intentions

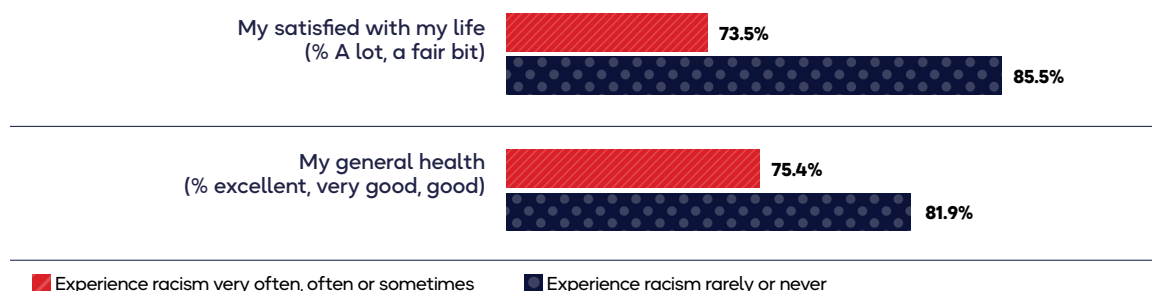


RACISM IS LINKED TO LOWER HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The impact of racism extends beyond job satisfaction and career decisions – it also affects the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.

- **General health:** Among participants who experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes, 75.4% rated their health as excellent, very good, or good, compared to 81.9% of those who never or hardly ever experienced racism.
- **Life satisfaction:** 73.5% of those frequently exposed to racism reported feeling a lot or a fair bit satisfied with their life, compared to 85.5% of those who never or rarely experienced racism.

Impact of racism on general health and life satisfaction



Although these differences are less stark than those seen in workplace outcomes, they are still meaningful. They suggest that racism may have a cumulative effect on health and life satisfaction, gradually eroding overall wellbeing through repeated exposure to stress, exclusion, and dehumanisation.

4. WHAT ARE ORGANISATIONS DOING TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS RACISM AT WORK?

Chapter snapshot

When Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees experience racism at work effective workplace support is not common. Only 38% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had the workplace support they needed when experiencing racism at work. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents indicated that their workplace does not provide anti-discrimination or compliance training that includes reference to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander discrimination and harassment. Even more concerning, 69% said their workplace does not have a racism complaint procedure. Only one in five (21%) respondents worked in organisations that had **both** a racism complaint procedure **and** anti-discrimination compliance training that addressed racism experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. We found these anti-racism measures were linked with lower levels of racism and higher levels of effective workplace support for employees experiencing racism.

Do Indigenous workers have effective workplace support for racism?

Addressing racism effectively in the workplace depends not only on acknowledging its existence but also on ensuring that appropriate structures and supports are in place to respond when it occurs. Unfortunately, many Indigenous workers continue to report that these systems are lacking.

ORGANISATIONAL SYSTEMS ARE LACKING

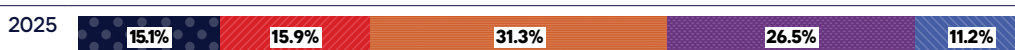
Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents indicated that their workplace does not provide anti-discrimination or compliance training that includes reference to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander discrimination and harassment. Even more concerning, 69% said their workplace does not have a racism complaint procedure. Only one in five (21%) respondents worked in organisations that had **both** a racism complaint procedure **and** anti-discrimination compliance training that addressed racism experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

EFFECTIVE SUPPORT WHEN FACING RACISM REMAINS LOW

“Workplace support isn’t just about policies – it’s about leadership with courage, systems that centre truth and a culture that protects and uplifts those who speak up. Without that racism continues unchecked and cultural safety remains a statement not a practice.”

The above figures highlight significant structural gaps in organisational responses to racism. To understand how this affects employees directly, we asked respondents who indicated that they experience racism in the workplace whether they had the support they needed when it occurred and only 38% agreed or strongly agreed.

I had the workplace support I needed when I experienced unfair treatment and/or racial slurs or jokes at work Indigenous employees



■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Comments shared by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers underscored these findings, showing how far Australian workplaces have to go to effectively respond to and prevent workplace racism.

“I remember a senior external advisor to our leadership team making offensive comments during a lunch. Although it was reported nothing was done – most likely because of that person’s connections in business and political circles. When leadership protects relationships over people it sends a message about whose voices really matter.”

How do we prevent and address workplace racism?

ANTI-RACISM MEASURES – RACISM COMPLAINT PROCEDURE AND COMPLIANCE TRAINING

The presence, or absence, of anti-racism structures within organisations has a significant impact on the frequency of racism experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees.

Among participants who said their organisation had neither anti-discrimination training nor a formal racism complaint procedure, 66% reported experiencing racism sometimes, often, or very often. This dropped to 56% among those whose workplace had at least one of these supports in place, and further to 40% among those who said their workplace had both.

Impact of anti-racism measures on racism prevalence



■ Neither ■ Procedure OR Training ■ Procedure AND Training

These differences also shaped how supported employees felt when racism occurred. Among participants who had experienced racism, 35% in workplaces with neither training nor a complaint procedure disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had the support they needed. This dropped to 26% in workplaces with at least one support in place, and to 17% in those with both.

Impact of anti-racism measures on experience of workplace support



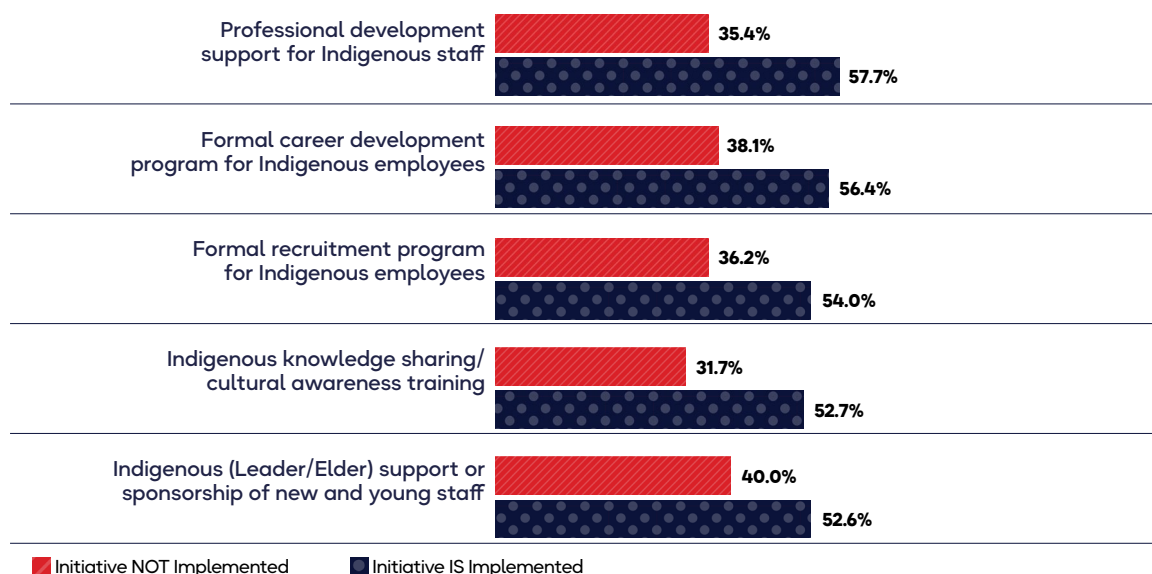
INDIGENOUS-SPECIFIC RECRUITMENT, CAREER DEVELOPMENT, ELDER SUPPORT, AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Looking across all organisational activities included in the survey, several additional key practices were associated with lower reported experiences of racism. The top five activities, excluding anti-racism training and complaints processes, that were most strongly associated with reduced experiences of racism were:

- **Formal recruitment program** for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees – 54% of respondents in these organisations reported never or hardly ever experiencing racism, compared to 36% where no such program existed.
- **Knowledge sharing and cultural awareness training** – in organisations that offered this, 53% of respondents said they never or hardly ever experienced racism, compared to 32% in organisations that did not.
- **Formal career development program** for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees – 56% reported rarely experiencing racism, compared to 38% in workplaces without this initiative.
- **Professional development support** for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff – 58% of respondents in organisations offering this support rarely experienced racism, compared to 35% in workplaces without such support.
- **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Leader/Elder) support** or sponsorship of new and young employees – in organisations with this support, 53% reported never or hardly ever experiencing racism, versus 40% in those without it.

These results show that culturally specific programs that invest in recruitment, development, mentorship and cultural understanding can play a powerful role in reducing racism and fostering cultural safety in the workplace. However, it's important to note that no intervention on its own is sufficient; in every group, a substantial proportion of employees still reported experiencing racism. Even in workplaces with the most supportive practices, racism remains unacceptably high, underscoring the need for ongoing, systemic change across all levels of an organisation.

Impact of organisational initiatives on racism levels (% experience racism never or hardly ever)



5. UNPAID WORKPLACE DEMANDS

Chapter snapshot

Many Indigenous employees report they have extra (usually unrecognised and unrewarded) demands placed on them at work because they are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. This has often been referred to as cultural load or colonial load. Reflecting on the literature and lived experiences of Indigenous people following the 2020 *Gari Yala* report, we have updated this language to unpaid workplace demands.

We asked Indigenous employees how often they undertook unpaid workplace demands. Based on their responses, we estimated that across the career of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, employees will conservatively spend on average an additional year of work on these unpaid workplace demands. This means Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are working an additional year for free on top of their core workplace demands.

We found that only one in four respondents were employed in workplaces with a compensation policy or process for recognising additional unpaid workplace demands. Sometimes this was through financial compensation (usually ad hoc payments for time). Other times it was non-financial compensation (usually providing paid time off, updating position descriptions to include cultural work, or adjusting workload allocation to take into account extra demands).

What are unpaid workplace demands?

"I feel the responsibility is placed on myself as the Aboriginal person [at work] even though [my workplace] has made a commitment to [Indigenous methodologies] and achieving outcomes. It falls to myself to keep this alive and at the forefront."

"I feel obliged to my organisation to educate but also obliged to ensure it is done properly and with care."

Indigenous people often are subjected to additional workloads and demands (usually unrecognised and unrewarded) given their cultural identity. This has commonly been referred to, including in the 2020 Gari Yala Report, as cultural load, colonial load, cultural responsibility and/or identity strain.

Following the release of the 2020 Gari Yala Report, we had many conversations with Indigenous people and workplaces about these terms and the workplace implications. We found that:

- Previous terms used did not clearly articulate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers' concerns that they are doing additional Indigenous-related work on top of their usual job and are not getting paid for it.
- Some Indigenous people feel a cultural or personal responsibility to do this work, preferring to share the strength of culture rather than see it as a load – though there are mixed views, histories, and emotions pertaining to this.
- The language of cultural or colonial load is deficit-based and doesn't reflect the strengths and benefits Indigenous people bring to the workplace.

It was also apparent in Gari Yala 2 survey responses that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers people found existing terms frustrating, sharing:

"'Cultural load' suggests that the rich traditions values and practices of Aboriginal culture add a weight that hinders progress or integration. It frames culture as an obstacle to be overcome rather than a source of strength resilience and identity. This perspective is not only misguided but also harmful as it perpetuates the narrative that Aboriginal culture is inherently problematic. It's time to shift the language and the narrative. Instead of talking about 'cultural load' we need to recognise the true burden: the 'colonial load.'"

"Personally, I prefer the term 'colonial load' because it puts the focus on the colonial institution and colonial ways of doing things that I'm resisting and trying (emphasis on try) to transform. My cultural responsibilities are personal and things I do in a volunteer/unpaid/personal capacity whereas colonial load is all the extra work that weighs down on me due to the processes biases prejudices within the institution"

"I'd rather call it colonial load because cultural load is my privilege and right, but colonial load means to me that non-Indigenous ask and expect me to continue working in a system (that) is not cultural(ly) safe."

Therefore, in consultation with our Expert Panel, we decided to step away from the language of cultural load, colonial load, cultural responsibility and/or identity strain towards unpaid workplace demands.

We prefer the language of 'unpaid workplace demands' as it clearly articulates that this work:

- is additional work done by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees, drawing upon their community, cultural and spiritual connections,
- is work beyond core responsibilities in position descriptions,
- is unpaid, and
- workplaces, who instilling this workload upon staff, should recognise and recompense this effort.

Are organisations compensating additional workplace demands?

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were asked whether their workplace had a policy or formal process to compensate (financially or otherwise) for their additional work. Concerningly, three-quarters (75%) said that their organisation did not formally recognise or remunerate cultural load (48%) or that they did not know if their organisation did (27%). Only one in five (21%) of respondents were employed in workplaces with a financial compensation policy for additional work based on their identity.

Does your workplace have a formal policy to compensate Indigenous workers for additional work?



Financial recognition. Respondent comments suggest that most commonly financial compensation for additional cultural responsibilities and contributions was through ad hoc payments for time (e.g. for speaking engagements):

- “I am compensated for being on panels etc where I am required.”
- “Sometimes a small \$ to be paid to those running the employee network.”
- “Aboriginal staff who are not in identified roles but are doing cultural specific things within the schools are to be paid extra for their time doing so.”

Non-financial recognition. Overall, a further 5% of respondents worked in an organisation that compensated employees in a non-financial way for cultural load. Comments from the 5% of respondents in organisations that compensated employees in a non-financial way suggest that this most commonly takes the form of:

- providing paid time off for attendance including Time Off In Lieu (TOIL), Accrued Time Leave (ATL) or other forms of leave (referred to variously as flex time, cultural leave, floating holidays, an additional holiday),
- updating position descriptions to include cultural work, and
- adjusting workload allocation to take into account cultural load.

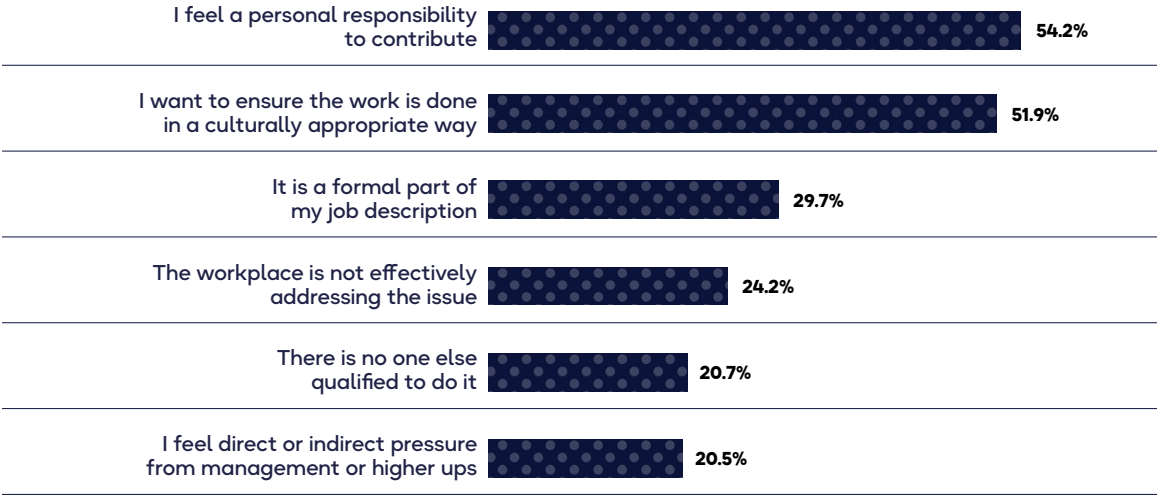
Providing paid time off	“Sometimes things like public holiday swap (e.g. recognising that Invasion Day is an important part of engaging politically and therefore considering participation “work”. This has not been properly tested though as it is only a recent workplace right).”
Updating position descriptions	“For those where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are specifically required to undertake this work – yes, it is built into their job.”
Adjusting workload allocation	“We have been allocated additional workload time allocations for a variety of tasks which go some way to acknowledging the colonial load.”



Why do Indigenous staff do the work?

There are a multitude of reasons why Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people take on unpaid workplace demands. As the chart below shows, respondents shared that the primary reasons for doing so were they felt a personal responsibility (54%) and/or they wanted to ensure the work was done in a culturally appropriate way (52%).

Reasons for undertaking unpaid workplace demands



Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people shared personal reasons for doing this work.

- “I feel I would disrespect my culture if I don’t do it.”
- “I want to ensure that Traditional Custodians are respected I want my children to feel proud of their culture and understand that giving back will lift up future generations.”
- “These are political and cultural matters – if you want to make change step up. And do it in a way that brings whitefellas with you and nourishes and support other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in your family and immediate grouping.”

Other respondents shared that they take on this work to get better outcomes for their workplace and reduce harm to other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

- “Because if I don’t, non-Indigenous colleagues without any formal or trained understanding advise companies on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander matters that are damaging to mob and communities.”
- “I work on a site where there is no cultural awareness training provided to employees. I’ve had numerous colleagues state that I’m the only Aboriginal person that they have ever connected with.”
- “Some of the staff I may work with are not culturally secure, so this can cause harm to contacts partnerships and the outcome of projects.”

How common are unpaid workplace demands?

“Cultural responsibilities are in addition to my workload. I don’t have time dedicated to do these tasks (and) it often affects the effectiveness of my job.”

“While I’m proud to contribute and bring my whole self to work it can become exhausting when the cultural load isn’t acknowledged or shared across the organisation. There’s a big difference between choosing to lead culturally and being expected to carry the weight of representation alone.”

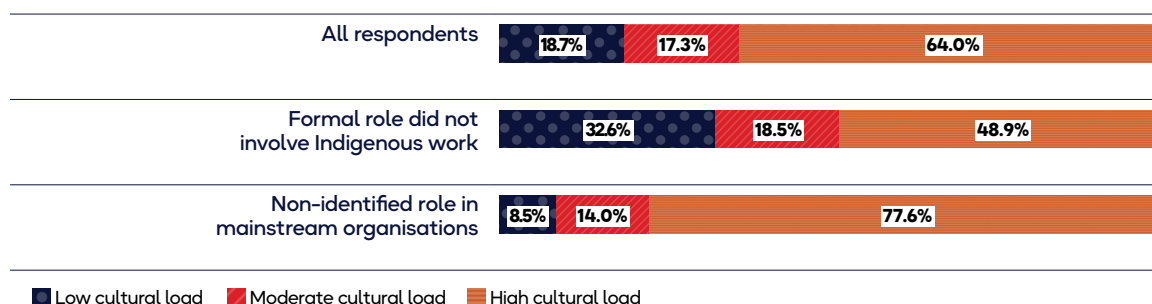
In this *Gari Yala* survey, we asked sixteen questions on unpaid workplace demands, framed around cultural load, cultural responsibility, and time spent on these activities.

CULTURAL LOAD

To track changes over time, we measured cultural load in the same way we did in the 2020 *Gari Yala* survey. We asked four survey questions about extra work demands placed on respondents because of their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity. These questions asked about extra Indigenous work demands generally as well as specifically in relation to being expected to talk on behalf of all Indigenous peoples, to educate non-Indigenous colleagues about Indigenous peoples and racism, and to know everything about Indigenous peoples and cultures. Below we report on an overall cultural load score created from a mean cultural load score from the four questions responses.

In all, 64% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers surveyed for *Gari Yala 2* experienced high cultural load. This had changed little since the 2020 *Gari Yala* survey (63%).¹ Even Indigenous workers whose role did not formally involve working on Indigenous workplace affairs had high levels of cultural load – 49% had high cultural load. We found high cultural load was particularly common for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in mainstream organisations in non-identified roles – 78% experienced high cultural load.

Level of cultural load for different cohorts of Indigenous workers



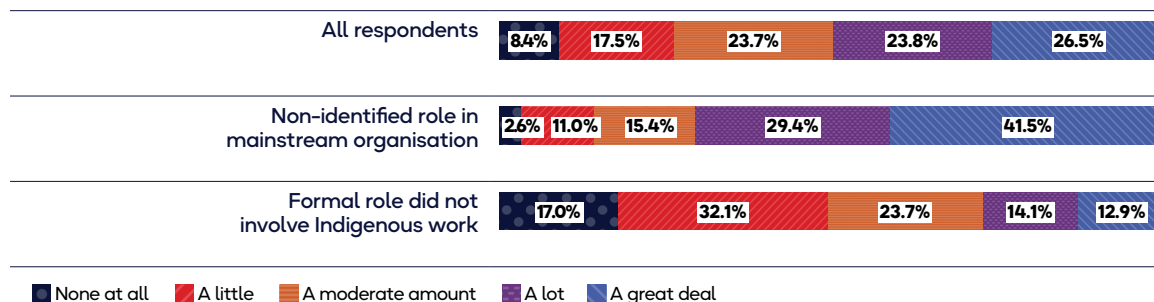
TIME SPENT ON CULTURAL WORK

As a comparative measure to cultural load, we also asked respondents how often they spent time on cultural work in the workplace. We found alignment between the two measures.

- **For all respondents**, 64% experienced high cultural load, and 74% reported spending a great deal, a lot, or a moderate amount of time on cultural work.
- **For respondents whose formal role did not involve Indigenous workplace matters**, roughly one in two (49%) had high cultural load, and one in two (51%) reported spending a great deal, a lot, or a moderate amount of time on cultural work.
- **For respondents in mainstream organisations in non-identified roles**, 78% experienced high cultural load, and 86% reported spending a great deal, a lot, or a moderate amount of time on cultural work.

¹ In preparing the *Gari Yala 2* report, a transposition error was identified in the reporting of *Gari Yala 2020* cultural load findings. The 2020 report stated that 36.7% of respondents reported a low cultural load, 24.5% reported a moderate cultural load, and 38.8% a high cultural load. The updated correct percentages for 2020 are 19.5% of respondents reported a low cultural load, 17.5% reported a moderate cultural load, and 63.0% a high cultural load.

How often do you spend time on cultural work?



Quantifying paid cultural work

We also asked respondents approximately how many hours per week on average they spent on cultural work/activities as part of their regular paid workload. Almost one in five (19% of) Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander full-time workers reported spending more than a quarter of their work week (i.e. 11 hours or more) on responsibilities based on their identity (see table below).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in identified roles shared that it was common for them to spend a lot of their time on cultural work. In fact, respondents in identified roles were twice as likely as respondents not in identified roles to spend six or more hours per week on paid cultural work (45.4% in any identified roles versus 19.2% in any non-identified role).

"The work I complete advocating for mob is part of my job description."

"My job is one that is particularly centred around the need for cultural expertise."

How many hours per week on average do you spend on cultural work as part of your regular paid workload?

	<1 hour/ week	1-2 hours per week	3-5 hours per week	6-10 hours per week	11 or more hours per week
Full time	21.7%	22.7%	16.6%	20.1%	18.9%
Full-time identified role	12.4%	22.4%	17.4%	29.5%	18.3%
Full-time non-identified role in mainstream organisation	32.8%	23.4%	15.9%	11.3%	16.6%
full-time and formal role does not involve Indigenous workplace matters	39.9%	21.5%	13.5%	7.3%	17.8%

Quantifying unpaid workplace demands

We also asked respondents approximately how many hours per week on average they spent on **unpaid** cultural work that was **not** part of their formal workload. We then calculated the total unpaid workplace demands placed upon Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people because of their identity, using self-reported hours of full-time Indigenous workers employed in mainstream organisations in non-identified roles. We delimited the cohort in this way to ensure our estimate was conservative and recognised that respondents in Indigenous organisations and/or in identified roles can be more likely to have cultural work as part of their formal role.

Full-time Indigenous workers in non-identified roles in mainstream organisations reported that the unpaid workplace demands, based on their identity, were as outlined in the table below.

How many hours per week on average do you spend on cultural work as unpaid work i.e. not part of your workload and/or outside of regular work hours?

(Full-time workers in non-identified roles in mainstream organisations)

<1 hour/week	1-2 hours per week	3-5 hours per week	6-10 hours per week	11 or more hours per week
39.1%	22.5%	18.8%	5.6%	14.1%
19.7% work on average at least 6 hours or more a week unpaid. Extrapolated over a year, this works out to an extra 7 weeks' unpaid cultural work each year (6 hours or more/week x 48 weeks = 288 hours) ²				
38.5% work on average at least 3 hours or more a week unpaid. Extrapolated over a year, this works out to over an extra 3 weeks' unpaid cultural work each year (3 hours or more/week x 48 weeks = 144 hours).				
61.0% work on average at least 1 hour or more a week unpaid. Extrapolated over a year, this works out to well over an extra 40-hour work week each year (1 hour or more/week x 48 weeks = 48 hours).				

As a check and balance, we also calculated an estimate using self-reported hours of full-time workers whose formal role did not involve Indigenous workplace matters. This generated similar findings, as the table below shows.

How many hours per week on average do you spend on cultural work as unpaid work i.e. not part of your workload and/or outside of regular work hours?

(Full-time workers whose formal role does not involve Indigenous workplace matters)

<1 hour/week	1-2 hours per week	3-5 hours per week	6-10 hours per week	11 or more hours per week
44.9%	21.1%	10.9%	6.6%	16.5%
23.1% work on average at least 6 hours or more a week unpaid. Extrapolated over a year, this works out to an extra 7 weeks' unpaid cultural work each year (6 hours or more/week x 48 weeks = 288 hours).				
34.0% work on average at least 3 hours or more a week unpaid. Extrapolated over a year, this works out to over an extra 3 weeks' unpaid cultural work each year (3 hours or more/week x 48 weeks = 144 hours).				
55.1% work on average at least 1 hour or more a week unpaid. Extrapolated over a year, this works out to well over an extra 40-hour work week each year (1 hour or more/week x 48 weeks = 48 hours).				

2 Assuming a 40-hour work week

Whichever calculation approach we used, we found that for full-time Indigenous employees:

- **One in two worked at least one or more hours per week unpaid** – 61.0% of full-timer in non-identified roles in mainstream organisations and 55.1% of full-timers whose formal role did not involve Indigenous workplace matters,
- **One in three worked three or more hours per week unpaid** – 38.5% of full-timer in non-identified roles in mainstream organisations and 34.0% of full-timers whose formal role did not involve Indigenous workplace matters, and
- **One in five worked six or more hours per week unpaid** – 19.7% of full-timer in non-identified roles in mainstream organisations and 23.1% of full-timers whose formal role did not involve Indigenous workplace matters.

ESTIMATING UNPAID WORKPLACE DEMANDS OVER THE WORK YEAR

Using the most conservative estimates in the tables above, we estimate that:

- One in two (55%) of the cohort work on average at least one hour or more a week unpaid, working out to an additional 48+hour work week each year,
- One in three (34%) are expected to work on average at least three hours or more per week for free – working out to over an extra three weeks of unpaid cultural work per year, and
- One in five (20%) are expected to work on average at least six hours or more per week for free – working out to an extra seven weeks of unpaid cultural work per year.

ESTIMATING UNPAID WORKPLACE DEMANDS OVER THE WORKING LIFE

Using the most conservative estimate (i.e. 55% of the cohort work an additional work week each year), we estimate that, over a 50-year career, one in two full-time Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are likely to be working an additional year of unpaid workplace demands.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers shared many comments about the expectations or obligations in this regard that they experienced at work.

“It’s an expectation I’m involved. Not pressured but assumed.”

“I feel obliged to my organisation to educate but also obliged to ensure it is done properly and with care.”

“There is an unwritten expectation that because I am Aboriginal that I will do all and everything related to it and if I don’t, it doesn’t get done.”

“I spend a lot of time working on tasks for my organisations First Nations diversity network but none of that work is specifically reflective of me or my mob. Many people direct questions to be because my role within the network makes me a visible member of the network. Some people do request too much (always very well-meaning and just assume I am higher up the hierarchy because of the work I do) but my manager is always

excellent at helping me to set boundaries.”

Quantifying Indigenous event-related workplace demands

In addition to the above year-round unpaid workplace demands, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people also reflected on the additional work demands during NAIDOC Week, Reconciliation Week or other Indigenous cultural initiatives.

“I feel rolled out each year to organise and represent the organisation at Reconciliation and NAIDOC events but then asked to use my cultural leave to do so, so they don’t have to pay me. On top of that I am expected to fund the morning teas from my own money.”

“I am constantly expected to have all the answers advice and time to support key Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander days in the calendar and yet when opportunities arise to attend events outside my workplace such as conferences or professional development that align to these things barriers are put in place to stop me from participating. It is a very tokenistic approach as though the company only cares for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander rights during the big days of the year i.e. NRW/NAIDOC.”

“There were no events/celebrations within the workplace for NAIDOC week. One of us was approached

and asked what we had organised this week to celebrate NAIDOC. This was upsetting as it should not be an expectation for us to organise.”

We also asked full-time Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers how many hours in total they spend organising and running these initiatives in the past year, recognising that these times may incur an additional load.

We found one in two full-time (48%) Indigenous employees spent six or more hours per year organising and running Indigenous-related workplace events for their organisation, as the table below shows.

	How many hours in total did you spend organising and running workplace events such as NAIDOC Week, Reconciliation Week, or other Indigenous cultural initiatives in the past year?				
	None	<less than 1 hour	1-5 hours	6-10 hours	11+ hours
Full-time	12.5%	11.8%	28.0%	30.6%	17.1%
Full-time non-identified role in mainstream organisation	14.7%	10.3%	26.6%	30.3%	18.1%

Full-time in role with no formal involvement in Indigenous workplace matters	24.1%	10.6%	23.4%	22.8%	19.1%
--	-------	-------	-------	-------	-------

Cultural responsibilities versus unpaid workplace demands

Another way in which the conversation has evolved since the original 2020 *Gari Yala* report is the recognition of cultural responsibility as a distinct and more nuanced concept. While terms such as colonial load capture the burden of inequitable demands imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, it does not fully reflect the fact that not all cultural work in the workplace is experienced as unfair, unwanted, or burdensome. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people describe cultural contributions, such as mentoring, community connection, knowledge sharing, or advocacy, as meaningful, purposeful, and aligned with their values and identities.

Taking a strengths-based approach, *Gari Yala 2* sought to move beyond a sole focus on harm or burden to also capture this complexity. Alongside documenting unfair workplace demands, we aimed to better understand when cultural work is experienced as a source of pride, responsibility.

For the first time, we asked Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers about their experiences and feelings regarding cultural responsibility in the workplace. Findings show that a majority of Indigenous workers:

- feel it is important for them to actively contribute to fostering cultural understanding of inclusion in their workplace (82% strongly agreed or agreed),
- feel their cultural knowledge and perspectives add value to their workplace (76%),
- feel a personal responsibility to share their cultural perspectives or practices with colleagues in the workplace (67%),
- voluntarily engage in activities that promote or preserve their cultural knowledge or practices in their workplace (82% all the time, often or sometimes), and
- work to create or strengthen connections between their community and their workplace (82%).

As the table below shows, these responses were high for all respondents, as well as for respondents whose role did not even formally involve working on Indigenous workplace affairs.

Cultural responsibility values	% Strongly agree/agree	
	All respondents	Formal role does not include Indigenous workplace matters
It is important for me to actively contribute to fostering cultural understanding in my workplace	81.7%	73.7%
I feel a personal responsibility to share our cultural perspectives or practices with colleagues in the workplace	67.0%	53.7%
My cultural knowledge and perspectives add value to my workplace	76.3%	65.8%
Cultural responsibility behaviours	% All the time, often, sometimes	
	All respondents	Formal role does not include Indigenous workplace matters
I work to create or strengthen connections between my community and my workplace	81.8%	68.6%
I voluntarily engage in activities that promote or preserve cultural knowledge or practices in my workplace	81.8%	71.7%

Taken together, these findings highlight the strength, commitment, and generosity that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers bring to the workplace. For many, contributing cultural knowledge, fostering understanding and inclusion, and maintaining connections between community and workplace are meaningful expressions of identity and responsibility. The issue, therefore, is not a lack of willingness to contribute - in fact, the data show the opposite - but the conditions under which this work occurs. When cultural contributions are undervalued, unrecognised, uncompensated, or primarily benefit organisations at the expense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers' wellbeing, career progression, or cultural safety, this responsibility shifts from a source of strength to a site of harm.

6. WHAT ARE ORGANISATIONS DOING AND WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

Chapter snapshot

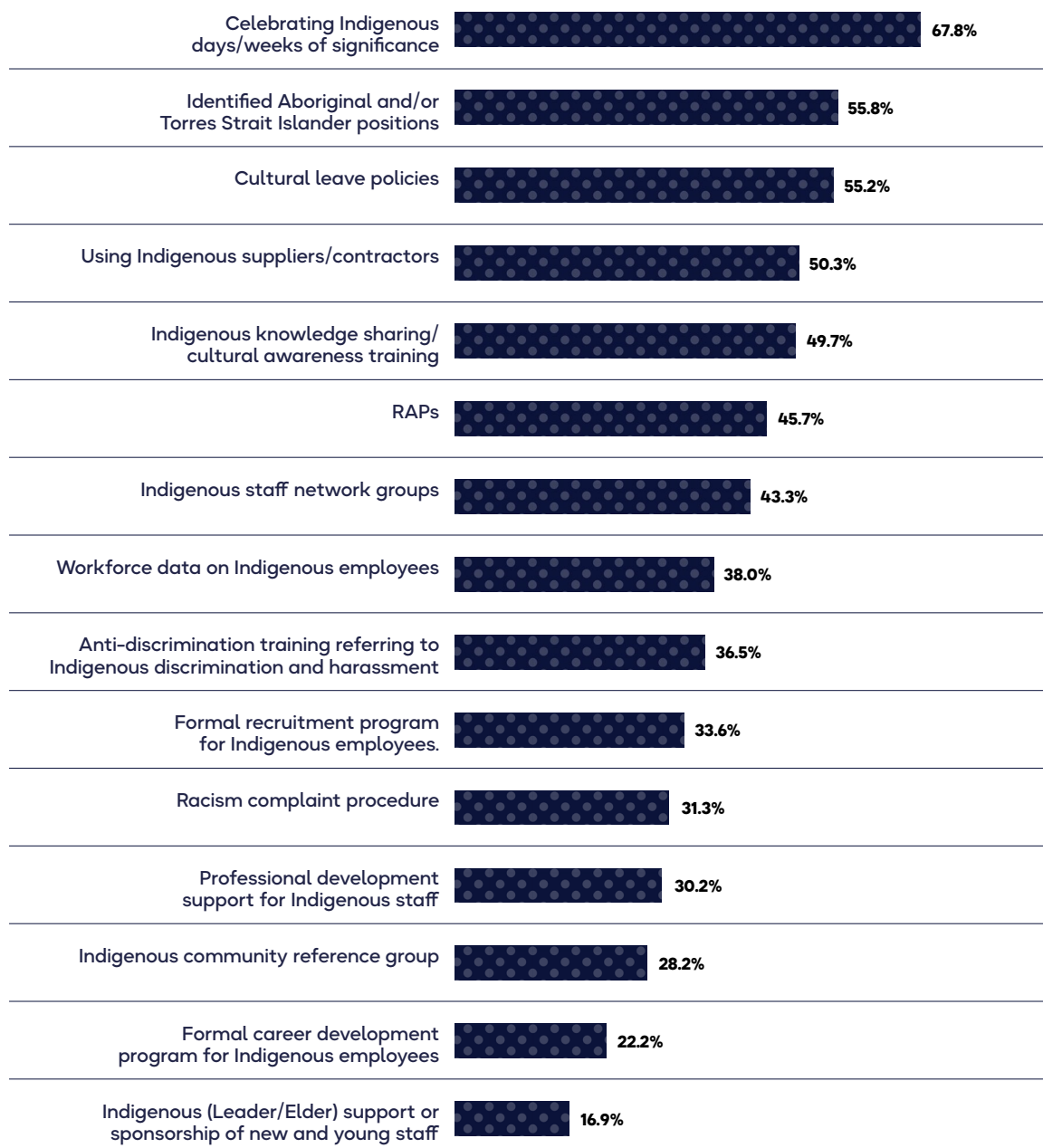
Many organisations across Australia are actively engaging in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives – only 5% of respondents stated their organisation had no initiatives and a third (32%) worked in high-activity organisations (i.e. organisations which have implemented 9 or more initiatives). Our findings show that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives make a difference. Regardless of which initiatives were in place, respondents in high-activity organisations reported less racism, identity strain, and turnover intentions, and greater job satisfaction and intention to recommend their employer. Initiatives most strongly linked to low levels of racism and higher job satisfaction and retention were anti-racism measures (i.e. racism compliance training and complaint procedure), as well as Indigenous-specific recruitment, career development, Elder support, and knowledge sharing. However, these initiatives were also least likely to be implemented.

How common are different organisational initiatives?

A wide range of initiatives were implemented in the workplaces of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers we surveyed. The four most commonly reported organisational initiatives (in order of frequency) were:

1. celebrating Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander days or weeks of significance (68%),
2. identified Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander positions (56%),
3. cultural leave policies (55%), and
4. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suppliers/contractors (50%).

Which if any of the following initiatives does your organisation actively implement?

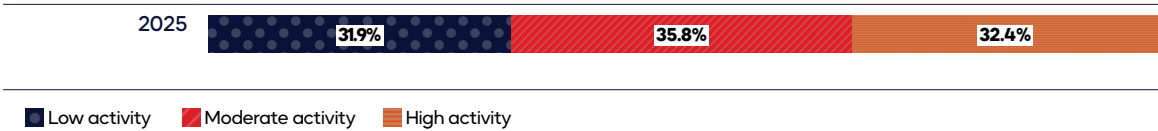


How active are organisations?

Encouragingly, only 5% of respondents reported that their organisation had no Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives.

Roughly a third of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait workers worked in low-activity organisations (32%), in moderate-activity organisations (36%) and in high-activity organisations (32%).

% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in high activity, moderate activity and low activity organisations



ORGANISATIONAL ACTIVITY

- High-activity organisation** = An organisation with 9 or more of 15 possible Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives.
- Moderate-activity organisation** = An organisation with 4 to 8 possible Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives.
- Low-activity organisation** = An organisation with 3 or fewer possible Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives.

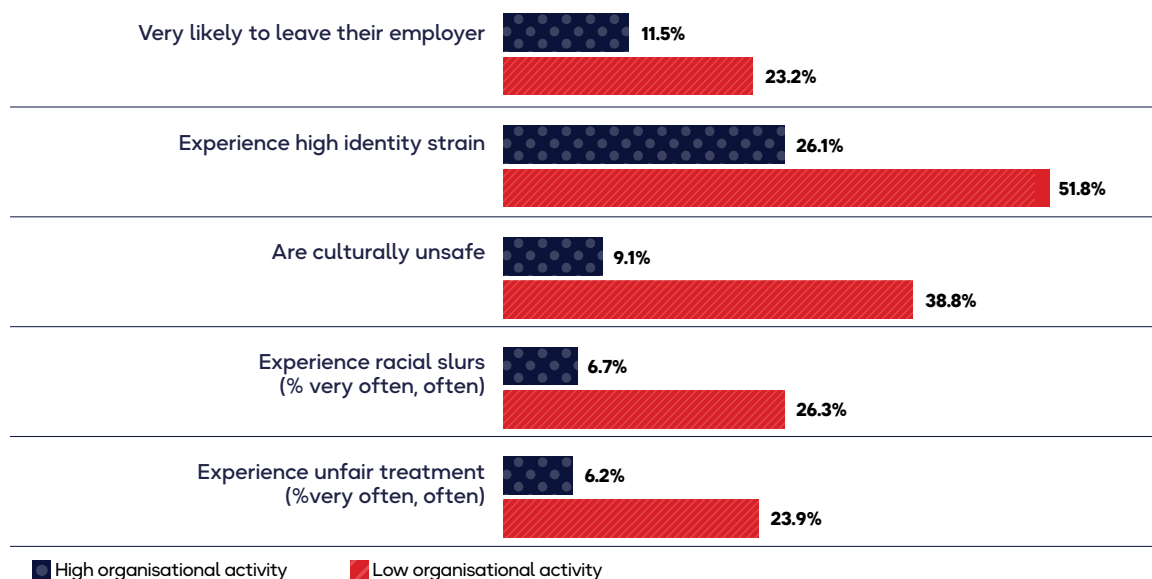
Does high organisational activity make a difference?

We found that higher organisational activity is linked to lower levels of racism, identity strain and turnover intentions, and higher job satisfaction and employer recommendations (see bar charts below).

Respondents in organisations with a high number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused initiatives were:

- **4 times less likely to be treated unfairly** at work very often or often (6% of those in high-activity organisations compared to 24% in low-activity organisations),
- **almost 4 times less likely to hear racial or ethnic slurs** or jokes at work very often or often (7% of those in high-activity organisations compared to 26% in low-activity organisations),
- **4 times less likely to report their workplace being culturally unsafe** (9% of those in high-activity organisations compared to 39% in low-activity organisations),
- **half as likely to experience high identity strain** (26% of those in high-activity organisations compared to 52% in low-activity organisations), and
- **half as likely to be very likely to leave their employer** (12% of those in high-activity organisations compared to 23% in low-activity organisations).

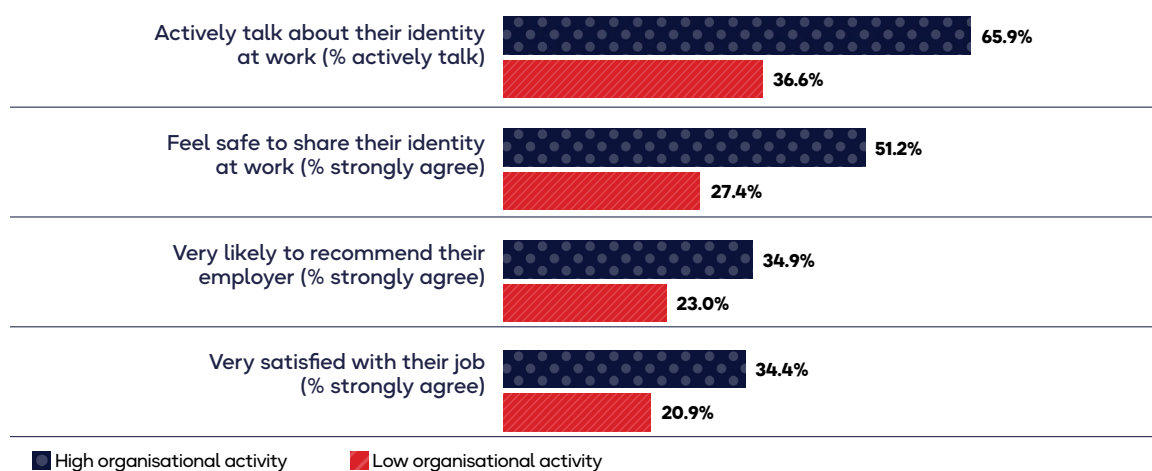
Impact of organisational activity on racism, cultural safety, identity strain, and turnover intentions



Respondents in high-activity organisations were also more likely to be:

- very satisfied with their job (34% in high-activity organisations versus only 21% in low-activity),
- recommend their employer to other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (45% in high-activity organisations versus 33% in low-activity organisations),
- feel safe to share their identity at work (51% in high-activity organisations versus 27% in low-activity organisations), and
- actively talk about their identity at work (66% in high-activity organisations versus 37% in low-activity organisations).

Impact of organisational activity on job satisfaction, workplace recommendations, feeling safe to share identity, and sharing identity



Which initiatives are linked with lower levels of racism?

As reported earlier, anti-racism initiatives measures (i.e. racism compliance training and complaint procedure) and Indigenous-specific recruitment, career development, Elder support, and knowledge sharing were all strongly linked to low levels of racism. They were also linked with higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intention, as the 'impact' bar charts over the page show.

RACISM COMPLIANCE TRAINING

In organisations providing racism compliance training:

- 48% of respondents experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes compared to 64% of respondents in organisations that did not offer training,
- 24% of respondents were very likely or likely to leave in the next year compared to 39% of respondents in organisations without this training, and
- 34% of respondents strongly agreed they are very satisfied with their job, compared to only 21% in organisations without this training.

RACISM COMPLAINT PROCEDURE

In organisations with a racism complaint procedure:

- 44% of respondents experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes compared to 64% of respondents in organisations that did not have a procedure,
- 24% of respondents were very likely or likely to leave in the next year compared to 38% of respondents in organisations without a procedure, and
- 33% of respondents strongly agreed they are very satisfied with their job, compared to only 22% in organisations without a procedure.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT FOR ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STAFF

In organisations with targeted professional development support:

- 42% of respondents experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes compared to 65% of respondents in organisations that did not offer this support,
- 24% of respondents were very likely or likely to leave in the next year compared to 37% of respondents in organisations without this support, and
- 38% of respondents strongly agreed they are very satisfied with their job, compared to only 20% in organisations without this support.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND CULTURAL AWARENESS TRAINING

In organisations offering Indigenous knowledge sharing and cultural awareness training:

- 47% of respondents experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes compared to 68% of respondents in organisations that did not provide training,
- 25% of respondents were very likely or likely to leave in the next year compared to 42% of respondents in organisations without training, and
- 29% of respondents strongly agreed they are very satisfied with their job, compared to only 22% in organisations without this training.

FORMAL RECRUITMENT PROGRAM FOR ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EMPLOYEES –

In organisations with a formal recruitment program for Indigenous peoples:

- 46% of respondents experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes compared to 64% of respondents in organisations that did not have a recruitment program,
- 23% of respondents were very likely or likely to leave in the next year compared to 38% of respondents in organisations without a program, and
- 34% of respondents strongly agreed they are very satisfied with their job, compared to only 21% in organisations without a program.

FORMAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

In organisations with a formal career development program for Indigenous peoples:

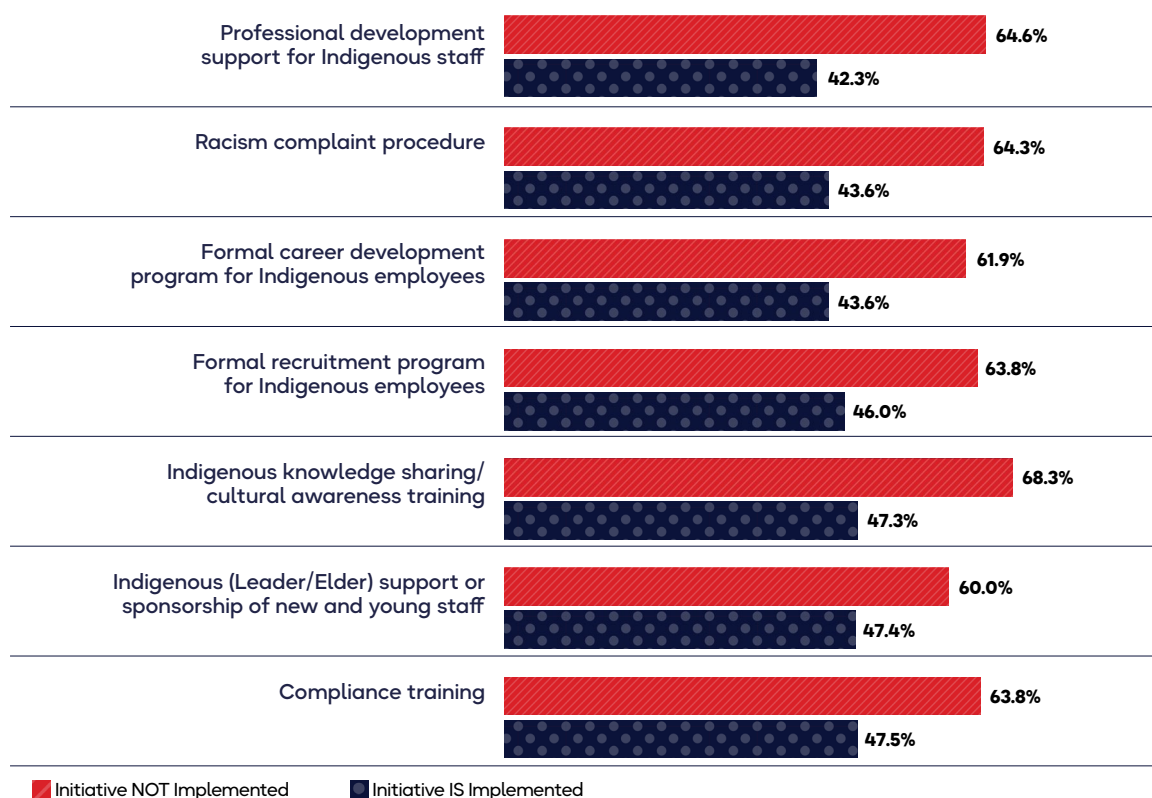
- 44% of respondents experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes compared to 62% of respondents in organisations that did not have a program,
- 25% of respondents were very likely or likely to leave in the next year compared to 36% of respondents in organisations without a program, and
- 37% of respondents strongly agreed they are very satisfied with their job, compared to only 22% in organisations without a program.

ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER (LEADER/ELDER) SUPPORT

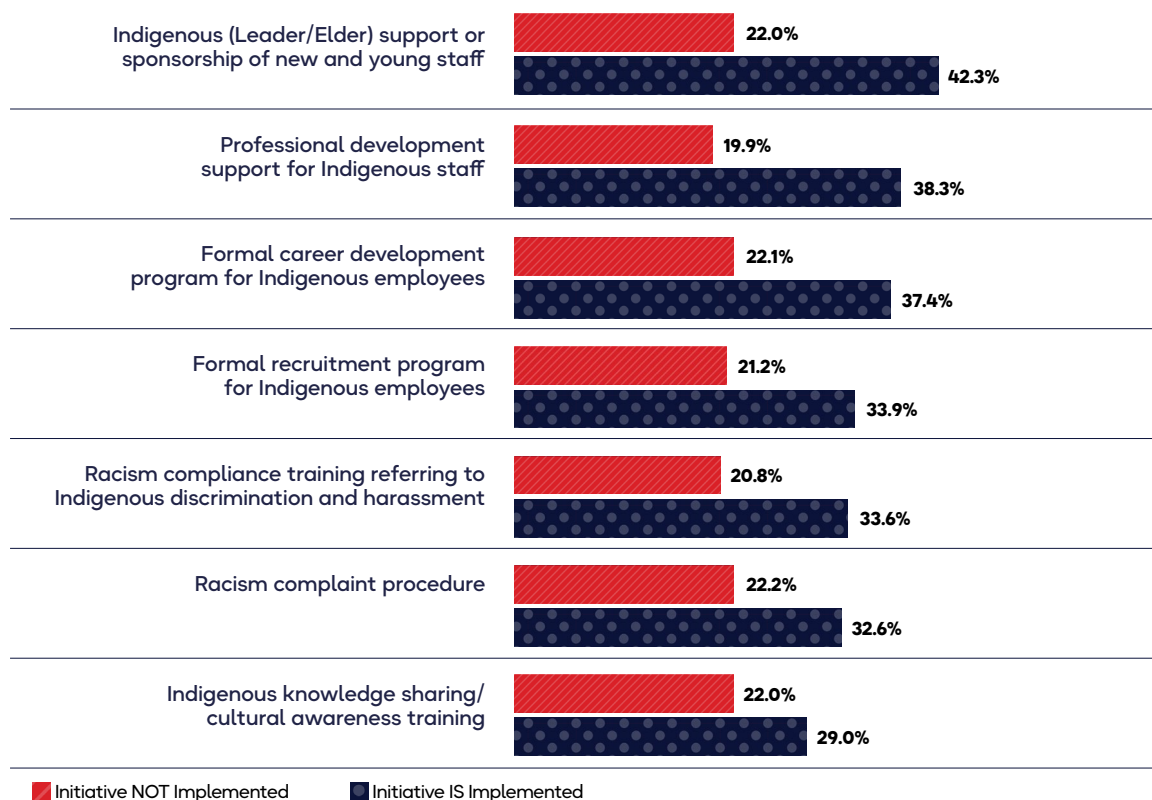
In organisations with Elder support for Indigenous peoples:

- 47% of respondents experienced racism very often, often, or sometimes compared to 60% of respondents in organisations that did not offer this support,
- 27% of respondents were very likely or likely to leave in the next year compared to 35% of respondents in organisations without this support, and
- 42% of respondents strongly agreed they are very satisfied with their job, compared to only 22% in organisations without this support.

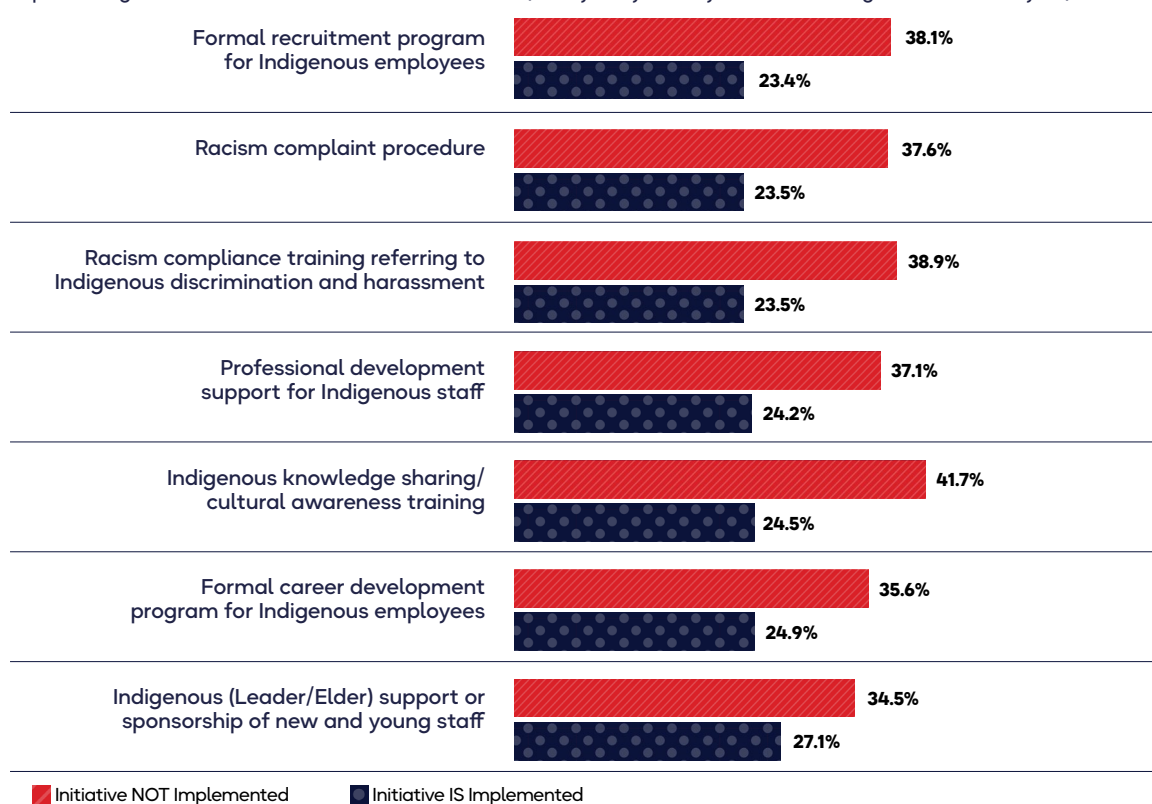
Impact of organisational initiatives on racism (% experience racism very often, often, sometimes)



Impact of organisational initiatives on job satisfaction (% strongly agree they are very satisfied with their job)



Impact of organisational initiatives on turnover intentions (% very likely or likely to leave their organisation in next year)



High impact initiatives are not commonly implemented

The highest impact initiatives were some of the least commonly implemented in respondents' organisations (see table below). For example:

- formal Indigenous career development program was the 14th most common initiative (22% of respondents said their organisation had implemented this initiative),
- professional development support was the 12th most common initiative (30%),
- racism complaint procedure was the 11th most common initiative (31%), and
- racism compliance training addressing discrimination faced by Indigenous people was the 9th most common initiative (37%).

On the other hand, the most commonly implemented initiative was marking significant dates (68%). While important, this initiative is generally less strongly associated with lower reported rates of racism than other initiatives which focus on internal policies and practices that shape employees' day-to-day experiences.

This finding suggests that organisations may be more comfortable investing in actions that signal commitment, than in the harder work of changing internal systems, accountability, and everyday workplace culture

Highest Impact Initiatives	Most Common Initiatives
(% respondents working in organisation that provided this initiative)	
Elder support of new and young staff (17%)	Celebrating Indigenous days/weeks of significance (68%)
Formal recruitment program for Indigenous employees (22%)	Identified Indigenous positions (56%)
Formal career development program for Indigenous employees (22%)	Cultural leave policies (55%)
Professional development support for Indigenous workers (30%)	Using Indigenous suppliers/contractors (50%)
Racism complaint procedure (31%)	Indigenous knowledge sharing/cultural awareness training (50%)
Racism compliance training (37%)	RAPs (46%)

7. WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE GARI YALA 2020?

Chapter snapshot

Six years on from the inaugural 2020 *Gari Yala* survey, we wanted to understand what had changed for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers between then and now.

Gari Yala findings from 2025 suggest it's a mixed bag when it comes Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers' workplace experiences, with 42% saying workplaces had improved and 58% saying they didn't know (28%), there had been no change (21%), or it had worsened (9%).

- » On the one hand, workers felt safer to share their identity, were more likely to actively talk about their identity at work, and the prevalence of seven out of nine forms of racism had decreased by a small amount.
- » On the other hand, for many questions, we found no improvement, including in relation to prevalence of other forms of racism, high unfair workplace demands (cultural/colonial load), and organisational activity including anti-racism related activity. Racism levels experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers remain stubbornly high, with one in two (53%) experiencing some forms of racism very often, often or sometimes.
- » At the current rate of change, without further policy or legislative change, we estimate it could take another 118 years for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers to never hear racial slurs and jokes at work.²³

We close the chapter by reflecting on the extent to which the 10 Truths for organisational action we recommended in our 2020 report have been enacted in organisations. In short, we found one Truth showed improvement, three Truths showed a slight improvement, and six Truths showed no overall change.

It was clear to us that the path forward does not require new mandates, but rather a reaffirmation of these 10 Truths and a deeper commitment to the practice of truth-telling.

Six years on from the initial Gari Yala report, racism at work remains stubbornly high and truth still needs to be told. And we strongly encourage organisations to engage in truth-listening and truth-acting.

In the spirit of truth-telling and to address the endemic racism in Australian workplaces, the Centre for Indigenous People and Work re-iterates calls in partnership with the ACTU and the federal Race Discrimination Commissioner to conduct a Racism@Work Inquiry. Such an inquiry promotes truth-telling for workplaces and, if listened to deeply, would result in meaningful changes to eliminate racism and enable greater safety and inclusion at work.

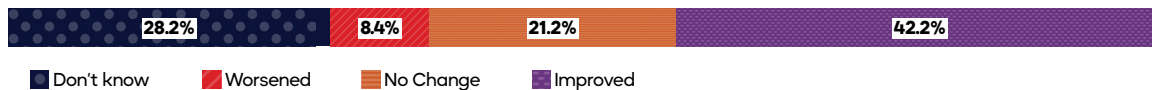
Overall: Are workplaces better or worse?

IT'S A MIXED BAG

We asked Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers whether workplace culture overall for Indigenous people had improved or worsened since the last *Gari Yala* survey in early 2020 and we got a 'mixed bag' response:

- while 42% said it had improved,
- 58% said they didn't know (28%), there had been no change (21%), or it had worsened (9%).

Has workplace culture for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers improved or worsened since 2020?



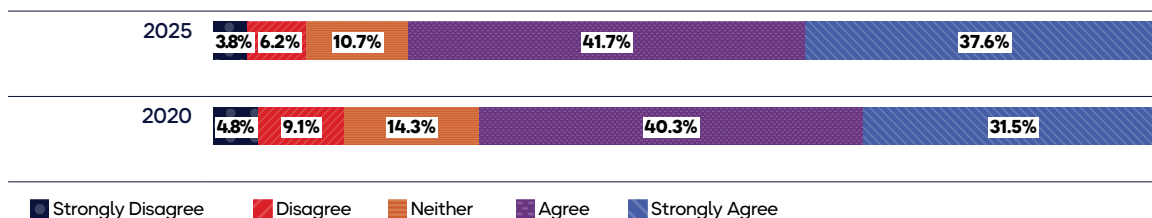
This mixed response is reflected in our more detailed 2025 *Gari Yala* findings.

SOME ENCOURAGING SMALL IMPROVEMENTS

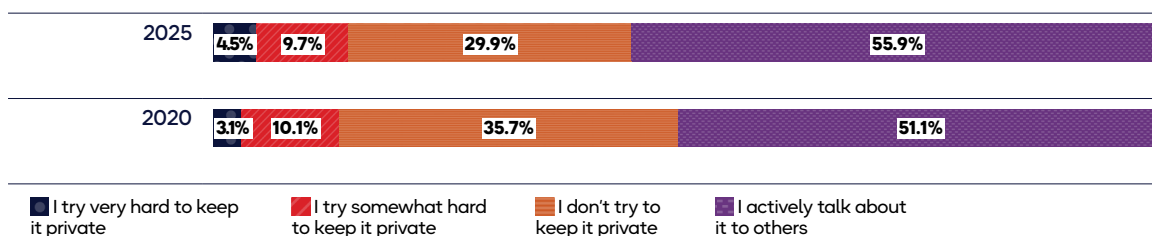
We found some small improvements in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people's experiences at work in relation to:

- **feeling safe to share their identity** (72% of Indigenous workers in 2020 versus 79% in 2025),
- **actively talking about their identity** at work (51% of Indigenous workers in 2020 actively talk about their identity at work versus 56% in 2025),
- **prevalence of seven out of nine forms of racism** (e.g. 44% experienced racial slurs very often, often or sometimes in 2020 versus 40% in 2025), and
- **access to cultural leave** (47% worked in an organisation that offered unpaid or paid cultural leave in 2020 versus 55% in 2025).

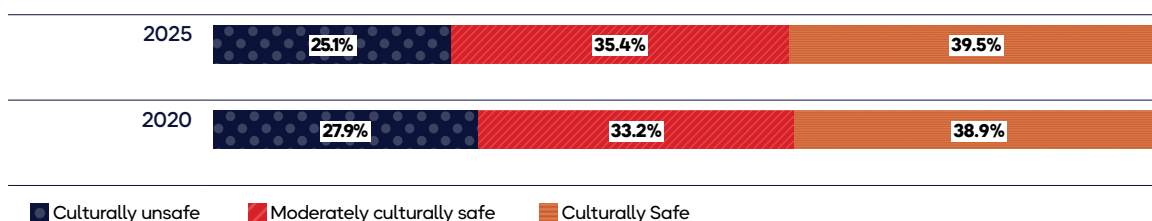
It is safe for me to share my Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity with people at work



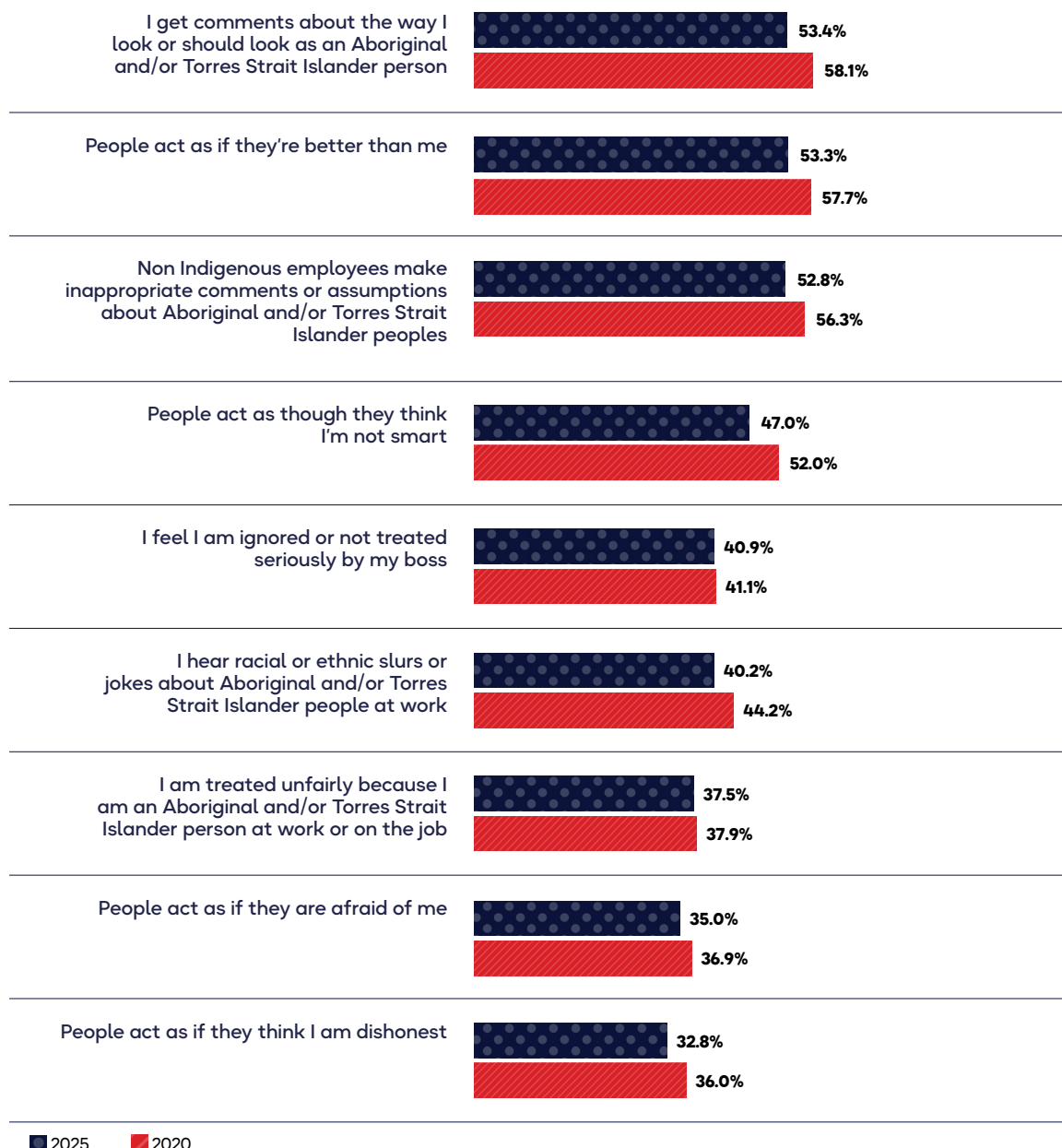
To what extent do you share your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background with other people in your current/most recent workplace?



% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in culturally safe workplaces



Racism Prevalence 2020 Versus 2025 (% very often, often, or sometimes)



BUT MOST IMPROVEMENTS WERE ONLY SMALL IN SIZE

While there were some encouraging improvements, importantly these were relatively small in magnitude. For example, any improvements in prevalence of different forms of racism were between a 2% and 5% reduction across the five years – averaging out to at most a 1% drop per year. In 2020, for instance, 56% of respondents experienced non-Indigenous employees make inappropriate comments or assumptions about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples very often, often or sometimes and this dropped by just 3% to 53% in 2025.

ELSEWHERE LITTLE CHANGED

For many questions, we found no improvement, including in relation to:

- **prevalence of other forms of racism** (e.g. 38% experienced unfair treatment very often, often or sometimes in 2020 and in 2025, and 41% felt ignored or not treated seriously by their manager in 2020 and in 2025),
- **high cultural load/unfair workplace demands** (63% of Indigenous workers had high cultural load in 2020 and 64% in 2025),
- **overall organisational activity** (29% of Indigenous workers were in low activity organisations in 2020 and this increased to 32% in 2025), and
- **anti-racism organisational activity** (in both years only 21% of Indigenous people worked in organisations that provided both anti-discrimination training addressing racism experienced by Indigenous people and a racism complaint procedure)

RACISM LEVELS REMAIN STUBBORNLY HIGH

Importantly, racism levels experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers remain stubbornly high, with one in two (53%) experiencing the following forms of racism very often, often or sometimes:

- appearance racism (i.e. comments about the way I look or should look as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person),
- people acting as if they're better than me because I am an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person, and
- Non-Indigenous employees making inappropriate comments about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

THE PACE OF CHANGE MEANS RACISM-FREE WORKPLACES MAY BE 100 YEARS AWAY

At the current rate of change, without further policy or legislative change, we estimate it could take another 118 years for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers to never hear racial slurs and jokes at work.²⁴ And this is only for racial slurs – there was no reduction in unfair treatment at work, so without positive action, unfair workplace treatment for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people is unlikely to improve.

EXPLAINING THIS 'MIXED BAG' RESPONSE: ARE LAGGARDS CANCELLING OUT LEADERS?

Comments shared by respondents suggest organisations seem to be either leading or lagging, creating an overall 'little or no change' result in *Gari Yala* 2025 findings. Post-Referendum, a marked divide in organisational activity and workplace experiences was apparent. Some organisations appear to be doubling down on genuine, values-driven Indigenous employment and community engagement. Others have disengaged or adopted tokenistic superficial actions.

THE POSITIVE. Some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers talked of workplaces improving in the following areas.

- **Active allyship.** Some non-Indigenous colleagues were more actively seeking out opportunities to learn about Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives, and showing greater empathy, understanding, and solidarity with Indigenous staff.
- **Cultural competence.** Some organisations were offering more cultural awareness/competence training (in some instances mandatory for leaders) and trauma-informed training on handling racism complaints.
- **Authentic systemic change.** In some organisations, Indigenous strategies and policies were being embedded into operations – for example, by increasing investment in and prioritisation of initiatives like Indigenous Strategies, RAPs, Anti-Racism Action Plans, Cultural Safety Frameworks, and/or cultural leave policies.
- **Leadership and voice.** In some organisations, Indigenous voices were being sought out and elevated, by creating new Indigenous-focused roles (in some instances in leadership) and resetting Indigenous Yarning Circles/Employee Resource Groups/Networks.

THE NEGATIVE. However, other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers talked of workplace cultures not changing or deteriorating, as summarised below.

- **Racism.** For some non-Indigenous colleagues, the ‘No’ vote has been used as a justification for overt racism, and so racist comments and behaviours were now more openly expressed in workplaces, resulting in a loss of culturally safety.

- **Tokenism and “Blak Cladding.”** Some organisations were engaging in Indigenous matters only superficially and tokenistically.

- **Pullback.** Some organisations were retreating from previous commitments, seen in a decline in visible celebrations such as NAIDOC and National Reconciliation Week, reduced prioritisation of Indigenous projects, and fewer identified roles.

- **Lack of influence.** Some organisations continued to lack representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in positions of real influence, which discouraged truth-telling and perpetuated systemic inequities.

- **Accountability failures.** In some organisations, rhetoric around respect often collapsed when racism concerns were raised, with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’s concerns being denied, deflected, or trivialised, and non-Indigenous people not being held to account when breaching ordinary behavioural standards.

- **Increased cultural load/unfair workplace demands.** In some organisations Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were being asked to drive systemic change without adequate resourcing and often on top of their formal roles.

Racism

“The failed referendum was like a dog whistle for some people to feel emboldened in expressing their racist views thoughts and opinions.”

“The referendum made everyone in my workplace open their eyes up and understand how racist this country is. Some people are working hard to change that.”

Addressing racism

“I’ve observed some positive shifts in language and intent... [but] underlying systems and responses to racism have not kept pace.”

“[There have been] recent improvements in leadership taking concerns raised by Aboriginal people more seriously.”

Organisational actions

“After the failed Referendum... there was less involvement in celebrations (i.e. NRW, NAIDOC) and projects stopped prioritising working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander stakeholders. This is ongoing... threatening to undermine the work done in Reconciliation.”

“The RAP Working Group has provided a space for cultural learning for non-Indigenous staff which allowed a major shift in appreciation and understanding of how we can better treat and serve our First Nations customers. I feel a genuine interest from my colleagues now rather than the old condescending ‘we have to do this.’”

Cultural load

“With the rise of RAPs /Indigenous related work/ D&I...the pressure and workload have increased. And no-one cares...[about] sustainable change, and they don’t care about the people doing the work. I’ve not just observed this for myself but for other mob too!”

“There is a shift in our Executive and Senior Management Team to distribute the load/ responsibility regarding Reconciliation rather than it sitting with First Nations staff to do the heavy lifting...It is everyone’s responsibility.”

Indigenous leadership and voice

“I’ve noticed a continued lack of genuine representation at every level of leadership. While there may be increased visibility of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in entry-level or advisory roles, decision-making power still sits elsewhere.”

“Since 2020 my workplace has increased hiring of Indigenous staff – I went from being the only Indigenous staff person... [and] I now work on the Indigenous Engagement team with two other Indigenous staff with our own space, projects and opportunities to connect with other Mob across the wider organisation, engage with Culture and decide our own priorities.”

Organisational authenticity

“They hire Aboriginal people as Black cladding to present to the world that ‘there’s nothing wrong here – look the other way!’”

“[There’s] a changing attitude towards Reconciliation. We’re looking to make sure we walk the walk rather than just talk, and we realised that our past efforts in reconciliation have reached a plateau in terms of their results – we had to try something new.”

Our 10 Truths: Is it time for change?

In our inaugural 2020 *Gari Yala* report, we offered 10 Truths outlining how organisations can centre the workplace experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and so create more equitable and inclusive Australian workplaces. These recommendations were drawn from the survey findings and respondents' recommendations and so were provided in the spirit of *Gari Yala* – to speak the truth.

Since the first *Gari Yala* report, employment practitioners and policy makers have consistently shared with us that these 10 Truths have been a powerful call to action. Our one page visual (over page) gave workplaces something to reflect on, helped them understand the experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, and provided practical items for implementation.

Six years on, in this chapter we reflect on the extent to which the 10 Truths we recommended in that report have been enacted in organisations. In short, we find little progress:

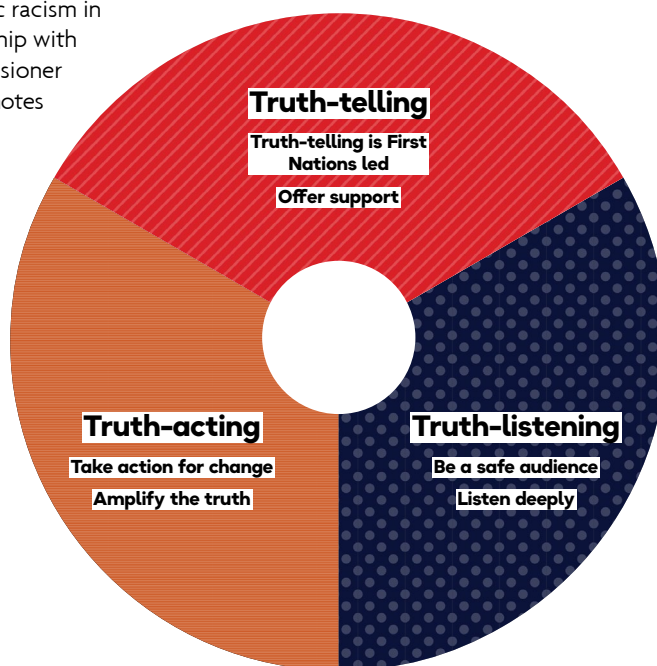
- only one Truth showed improvement,
- three Truths showed only slight improvement, and
- six Truths – the majority – have seen no overall change.

It was clear to us that the path forward does not require new mandates, but rather a reaffirmation of these 10 Truths and a deeper commitment to the practice of truth-telling.

Reconciliation Australia's truth-telling framework shows us that truth-telling requires not just Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers sharing their truth about their workplace experiences – which they have always done. Importantly, truth-telling requires organisations to deeply listen to and learn from that truth, before acting on that new understanding.

It has now been six years since the initial *Gari Yala* report was released. Racism at work remains stubbornly high. Truth still needs to be told. And we strongly encourage organisations to engage in truth-listening and truth-acting.

In the spirit of truth-telling and to address the endemic racism in Australian workplaces, CIPW re-iterates calls in partnership with the ACTU and the federal Race Discrimination Commissioner to conduct a Racism@Work Inquiry. Such an inquiry promotes truth-telling for workplaces and, if listened to deeply, would result in meaningful changes to eliminate racism and enable greater safety and inclusion at work.



Source: Reconciliation Australia Truth-Telling Framework



10 TRUTHS to centre Indigenous Australians' voices to create workplace inclusion

1.

Commit to unearthing and acting on workplace truths – however uncomfortable this may be.

2.

Ensure any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-related work is Indigenous led and informed.

3.

Develop organisational principles to make it clear how Indigenous community engagement and employment should work in practice.

10.

Look to high-impact initiatives – those that research shows are linked to better wellbeing and retention for Indigenous staff.

4.

Focus on workplace readiness (cultural safety) rather than worker readiness.

9.

Take action to address workplace racism.

5.

Recognise identity strain and educate non-Indigenous staff about how to interact with their Indigenous colleagues in ways that reduce this.

8.

Focus on sustainable careers and career development, rather than just short-term appointments.

7.

Consult with Indigenous staff on how to minimise cultural load while maintaining organisational activity.

6.

Recognise and remunerate cultural load as part of an employee's workload.

Reflecting on our 10 Truths: What progress has been made?

Below we reflect on the extent to which the 10 Truths we recommended in that report have been enacted in organisations. Our reflections draw on relevant *Gari Yala 2* data (both quantitative and qualitative), supplemented with other data sources. While not an exhaustive investigation into progress made, it does provide an indicator of the current state-of-play compared to that of 2020 when *Gari Yala* was first undertaken.

The figure below summarises our reflections, followed by more detailed information provided for each of the 10 Truths. In short, we found one Truth showed improvement, three Truths showed a slight improvement, and six Truths showed no overall change.

Truth	Status
1. Commit to unearthing and acting on workplace truths – however uncomfortable this may be (IND).	No overall change
2. Ensure any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-related work is Indigenous led and informed	Slight improvement, though tokenism remains very common
3. Develop organisational principles to make it clear how Indigenous community engagement and employment should work in practice.	Improvement
4. Focus on workplace readiness (cultural safety) rather than worker readiness	No overall change
5. Recognise identity strain and educate non-Indigenous staff about how to interact with their Indigenous colleagues in ways that reduce this	No overall change
6. Recognise and remunerate cultural load as part of an employee's workload.	Slight improvement, though recognition and remuneration are not common and cultural load remains high
7. Consult with Indigenous staff on how to minimise cultural load while maintaining organisational activity	Slight improvement, though recognition and remuneration are not common and cultural load remains high
8. Focus on sustainable careers and career development, rather than just short-term appointments	No overall change
9. Take action to address workplace racism.	No overall change
10. Look to high-impact initiatives – those that research shows are linked to better wellbeing and retention for Indigenous staff	No overall change

TRUTH 1: Commit to unearthing and acting on workplace truths – however uncomfortable this may be

“It’s important to allow Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people help shape our future and current policies to include Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’s lived experiences and for all Australians to know the truth”

STATUS: No overall change

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

Understand current truths in your workplace. Before anything else, organisations must be prepared to interrogate and understand their own current truths when it comes to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees’ experiences at work. This involves working with trusted Indigenous-led partner organisations to talk with, listen to and believe Indigenous employees when they tell you about their workplace experiences. Hearing home truths can be an uncomfortable experience, but meaningful organisational change can only begin when this happens.

Listen openly and act on truths shared. If organisations seek to engage in this process, not only must they be prepared to hear the truths, but they must be willing to listen with an open heart, not get defensive and act on what they hear. As this research has shown, it is not uncommon for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers to share experiences of workplace racism – and even ask for assistance in addressing this – and for these experiences to be dismissed, minimised or just ignored and ‘swept under the carpet’.

SEVERAL POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Several survey participants shared positive experiences of truth-telling in their workplace. They reported feeling culturally safe to truth-tell about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people’s experiences of their organisation, and their organisation responded by listening and acting in good faith on what was shared.

“In the forums that I’ve been in I’ve seen First Nations staff speak their truths and the organisation has not shied away from this or punished them for what they’ve said. They are genuinely interested in being a better employer for our mob.”

“Given the position and level I am in at work, my age, experience and portfolio of responsibility, and my position within the organisation, I am confident in sharing, providing insights and a cultural lens including truth-telling where required. Yes, I have come up against negativity and comments in the past however over time and with persistence and patience (on my behalf too) I believe people are generally moving in a better direction in terms of their cultural understanding and appreciation.”

BUT DEFENSIVENESS AND RETALIATION WERE COMMON

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers also spoke of defensiveness and retaliation being a very common (non-Indigenous) organisational and leadership response.

“Unfortunately, in my workplace I feel I was a valuable token to tick boxes but a thorn in their side when I started to call out racism.”

“People say they want to know and hear about our experiences and history, but when you share the truth, they don’t actually want to hear or know. I have then experienced bullying in the way of not being able to progress in my government job.”

TRUTH-TELLING REQUIRES COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP – AND THIS WAS OFTEN LACKING

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers spoke of how (non-Indigenous) leaders may be open to hiring Indigenous people but often lacked the courage to listen to and act on uncomfortable truths about the racism they experienced at work.

“When racism occurs in the workplace whether overt or subtle the response of leadership is critical. Unfortunately, I’ve experienced environments where senior leaders were either unwilling or unable to take meaningful action. Rather than addressing the issue they often became defensive sought to protect the system or distanced themselves from the person speaking up. This kind of leadership fragility sends a clear message: that truth-telling is unsafe and that maintaining the status quo matters more than cultural safety... [We need] leadership with courage, systems that centre truth, and a culture that protects and uplifts those who speak up. Without that racism continues unchecked and cultural safety remains a statement not a practice.”

Importantly, non-Indigenous leaders were often ignorant about the cultural responsibilities and accountability Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff had to their communities.

"I'm sick of... the looks on people's faces when they hear uncomfortable truths. What they don't seem to realise is that...I have a role which is answerable to the local First Nations Community. I WILL speak up internally when I hear/see something questionable: I do not want to be in the situation where something happens, and I get asked 'Did you know about this?' I say 'Yes' and then I get asked 'Why didn't you say/do something about it?! So, I do... [and] I am made to feel like I have said/done something wrong when I know I haven't. I get shunned, I'm not trusted and I am treated like little more than a child."

Reconciliation Australia statistics show that between 2020 and 2024, the percentage of non-Indigenous people who believe truth-telling is important for reconciliation has decreased – in 2020, 89% of the general community believed truth-telling was important,²⁵ while in 2024, 71% of non-Indigenous people believe truth-telling is important for reconciliation.²⁶

TRUTH 2: Ensure any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-related work is Indigenous led and informed.

“Engage actively with us – involving us early and in non-tokenistic ways giving us a true voice at the table where our opinions are heard.”

Status: Slight improvement, though tokenism remains very common

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

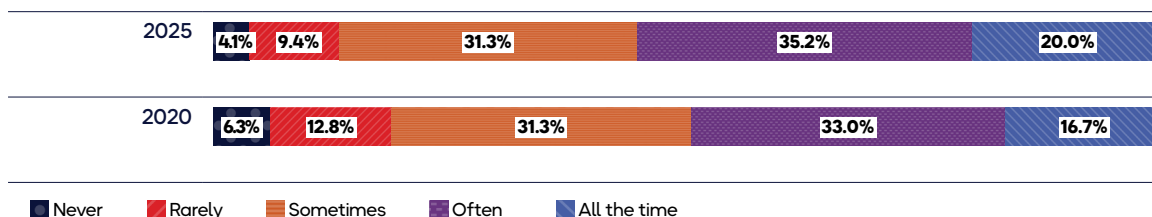
Centre Indigenous voices. It is critical that any and all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-related activities, strategies and work is led and/or informed by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. This means putting Indigenous voices and perspectives at the centre of any work you do. Importantly, this ensures Indigenous people are not having things done ‘to’ them rather than ‘with’ them. It also avoids employers making inaccurate assumptions about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people based on outmoded stereotypes.

Avoid the Tokenism Trap. Often organisations can, in their rush to make a difference, fall into the trap of finding one Indigenous staff member and requiring them to sign off on an organisational initiative. Unfortunately, this is a tokenistic approach and not one which could, in good faith, be seen as centreing Indigenous voices or being Indigenous led or informed. Instead, any approach needs to be genuinely participatory and involve engaging and working with multiple Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander stakeholders (inside and/or outside the organisation).

A SMALL IMPROVEMENT

Gari Yala findings show a small increase in the percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers who report that roles with an Indigenous focus are filled by Indigenous people all the time or often – from 50% in 2020 to 55% in 2025. Respondents were also less likely to report this never or only rarely happens – 19% in 2021 versus 14% in 2025.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are appointed in any internal roles with an Indigenous focus



Some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers' comments supported this, indicating that since 2020, their organisation seems to be prioritising Indigenous recruitment to ensure work is Indigenous led and informed. We also found that there was an increase in respondents saying that their organisation had identified roles – from 52% in 2020 to 56% in 2025.

“Since 2020 my industry has stepped up to address Indigenous worker’s concerns and hopes for the future. This encouraged my workplace to make similar changes which is how my role became available aside other identified roles. This power-in-numbers approach has really helped...[and] makes me feel like things are changing.”

“In past workplaces... I was brought in pretty much as a token, my picture taken and advertised, and I was sent on my way – citing tenuous reasons for not renewing my contract...My current workplace embraces Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander voices and is recognising the importance of self- determination.”

BUT INDIGENOUS-LED APPROACHES SEEM TO BE THE EXCEPTION NOT THE RULE

However, other comments shared by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reveal organisations continue to hire non-Indigenous people to lead the work.

“We have white fellas in positions that should be identified positions... this person has no cultural authority responsibility or knowledge to be able to do this. This is unsafe for those staff and totally inappropriate.”

“I am the only Aboriginal in 200 staff. It is not a culturally safe place to work...There are people here that believe that since they have done a workshop, they know everything about us and even have done the RAP without including me or asking me for advice.”

Some respondents talked of how organisations often confused “Indigenous-led” with “consulted with.”

“Our Elder needs to be respected [to have] culturally motivated decisions made with/by that manager /Elder not just ‘we consulted with them’ but executive made the decision!”

Overall, respondents’ comments revealed that tokenistic treatment was more common than truly Indigenous-led approaches in workplaces. Many respondents shared their experience of being the only Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employee in their organisation, or one of only very few, resulting in them being treated in very tokenistic ways.

“I often get asked to be the ‘token Black’ to tick off the ethics and help a non-Aboriginal research team to complete their ethics documents.”

“Being ‘identified’ leads to tokenistic opportunities at work for example “Oh you’re Aboriginal, let’s put you on this project” to later find out that that job had a requirement to place Aboriginal people on it to win the work.”

“[Organisations need to] stop Black cladding. I feel I am a token...just a way for the organisation to attract more funding.”

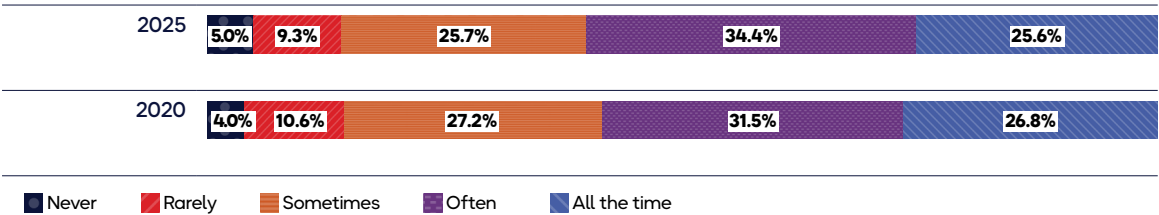
“I was put in the role of Aboriginal Education Teacher at my school. I was excited about the chance to embed Aboriginal perspectives into classrooms and connecting with teachers to assist. I was also excited about launching our RAP and being a part of Aboriginal initiatives. I was called a Token Aboriginal by my Principal. I continued to try but the racism affected me, and I no longer am confident teaching Aboriginal perspectives or sharing my ideas.”

NO IMPROVEMENT IN VALUING CULTURAL SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND CONTRIBUTIONS

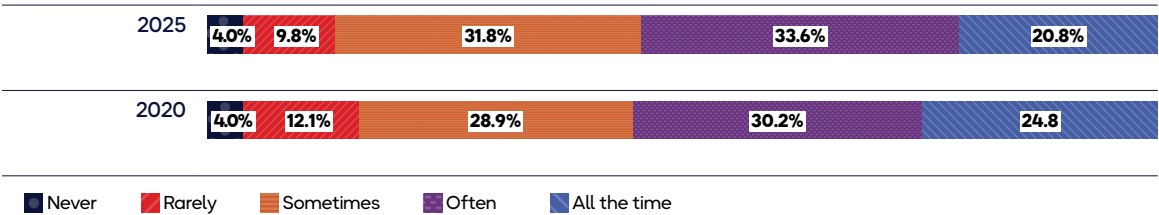
Such tokenistic treatment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff is not surprising given we found decreases or no change in the percentage of respondents reporting that:

- their workplace always values the contributions of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (from 25% in 2020 to 21% in 2025), and
- they always feel valued and supported as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employee (from 27% in 2020 to 26% in 2025),

I feel valued and supported as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander member in my workplace



My workplace values the skills, perspectives and experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples



TRUTH 3: Develop organisational principles to make clear how Indigenous community engagement and employment should work in practice

“If we applied the principles of First Nations cultural lore to business practices the world would be a much safer happier place for everyone”

Status: Improvement

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

Consider developing specific principles for your own organisation, which guide how Indigenous community engagement and employment should work in day-to-day practice. Work in a participatory way with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff and community members to develop these principles. You can then be confident that the principles have been Indigenous led and informed and are culturally appropriate. Consider looking beyond Indigenous staff to include the broader community your organisation serves or is situated in.

DOUBLING OF ORGANISATIONS WITH ACTIVE RECONCILIATION ACTION PLANS

The Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Framework provides employers with a clear set of organisational principles that guide meaningful Indigenous community engagement and employment. The framework, developed by Reconciliation Australia, helps organisations turn good intentions into tangible actions through a focus on three core pillars or guiding principles – relationships, respect and opportunities. Together, these outline how to build culturally safe environments, collaborate genuinely with Indigenous communities, and embed employment pathways that are sustainable and strengths-based.

In the past five years, the number of Australian organisations which have an active Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) has doubled:

- in 2020, there were roughly 1,100 organisations with active RAP,²⁷ and
- this increased to 2,283 organisations in 2025.²⁸

This clearly demonstrates a growth in organisations who have meaningful organisational principles guiding their Indigenous community engagement and employment.

ENCOURAGING GROWTH BUT GUIDING FRAMEWORKS ARE FAR FROM WIDESPREAD

While the growth in organisations using the RAP framework to guide their Indigenous employment practice is encouraging, it remains far from standard business practice.

- In 2025, over 3,000 organisations had formalised their commitment to reconciliation through RAP, and 2,283 organisations had an active RAP (i.e. reported on their RAP to Reconciliation Australia).
- But there were close to 1 million employing businesses in Australia.²⁹

CULTURALLY INAPPROPRIATE PRACTICE IS COMMON

Many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander respondents talked of their (non-Indigenous) organisation being ignorant about culturally safe and appropriate ways of doing Indigenous community engagement and employment.

“We are currently working on a project around story telling with elders and those with historical significance; one non-Indigenous person said, ‘I could do this without you.’”

“I had racist teachers tell me that I was not to help Indigenous students who wanted to come to me for help. I had racist parents of non-Indigenous children expect they can culturally appropriate Indigenous art and I try to educate and they complain. [They said] they should have the right to do whatever they want. No awareness or respect.”

Respondents also spoke of their guidance on how Indigenous community engagement and employment should work in practice being ignored and/or blocked.

“People tell me to stay in my lane – when I suggest something it goes unheard.”

“My attempts to facilitate better cultural safety were met with strong resistance and it wasn’t until after I had quit over issues with racism that I found out about other First Nations staff in our team who did not identify at work because [similar] matters that concerned them.”

“What they don’t seem to realise is that...I know some things...Identity is more than who your mob are where you’re from – it is the sum of cultural and social knowledge and how that informs how you work. I often have to explain simple concepts by way of justification for anything I say and do.”

"I've observed some significant changes over time...One of the most concerning shifts has been the removal or defunding of valued programs that had strong community impact and cultural legitimacy. These decisions are often made without proper consultation or transparency, and they leave gaps in support for mob that are not easily replaced. This has a direct impact on trust engagement and outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff and communities."

Respondents often said that their organisation was not interested in their guidance about how to engage with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples as they had been hired only for their identity (for "Blak cladding", capacity to "tick a box" or to be a "Blak trophy").

"It's a tick box – maybe they get more funding [or] their annual report looks better...[but] we're very rarely put in leadership positions where we could actually do a lot to contribute and make changes... [It] is embarrassing when working in Indigenous communities [as the Department] still has a white saviour/paternalistic way of putting people into these positions."

"We're often asked to bring [our] perspective into systems that don't know how to receive it. Systems that struggle to be relational, that prioritise risk over trust...[so] we are too often undervalued, under-recognised and underutilised."

TRUTH 4: Focus on workplace readiness (cultural safety) rather than worker readiness

"My experience has shifted significantly. I feel culturally unsafe in my current role. My identity is often treated as tokenistic, and I've experienced interactions that feel patronising and culturally inappropriate... As a result, I now work from home unless I am required to be on campus as it is currently the only way I can manage my wellbeing in this environment."

Status: Little overall change

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

To date, much of the dialogue in the Indigenous employment sector has focused on building Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff capability and ignored workplace readiness – that is, how culturally safe the workplace is for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff to identify at work. Organisations need to work with their staff to assess baseline current cultural safety levels and determine how to improve these results.

SOME SMALL POSITIVE CHANGES

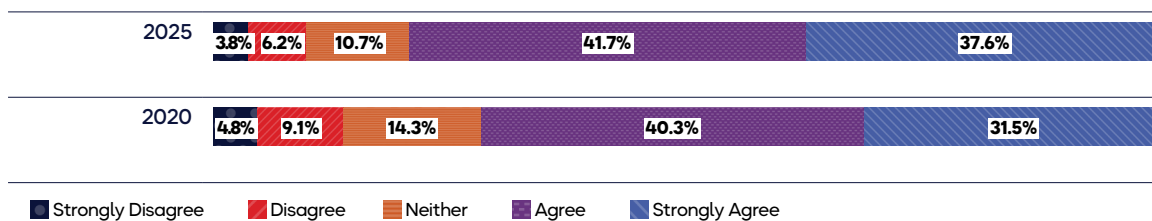
"My initial experience was not very positive but as my workplace has aged and become more culturally safe my experiences have changed, and it has become safer. My agency is now starting to embed cultural safety into all areas, and this is making a real difference with how safe I feel."

For two cultural safety-related survey questions, there were some small positive changes. For example, between 2020 and 2025 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers were:

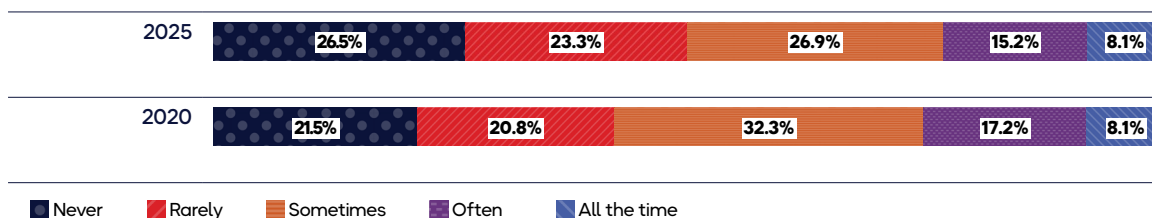
- more likely to strongly agree or agree that it is safe for them to share their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity with people at work (from 73% in 2020 to 79% in 2025)
- less likely to report that co-workers react negatively to Indigenous people accessing cultural leave (58% experienced this all the time, often, or sometimes in 2020 compared to 50% in 2025).

"We now have a 'Cultural Safety' policy. It is required that there is at least one person who identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person on recruitment panels especially when recruiting to an identified role. I have people reaching out to undertake the cultural workshops I have developed more than prior to 2020."

It is safe for me to share my Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity with people at work



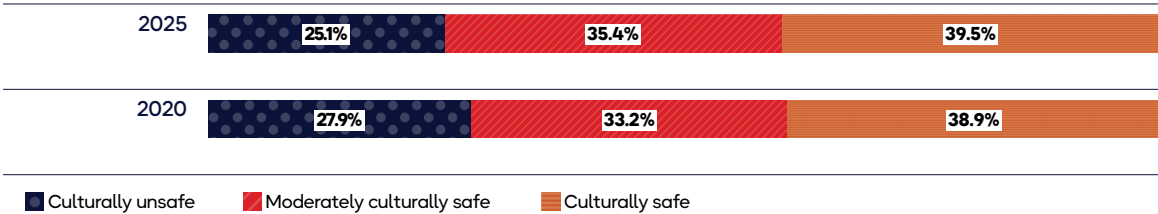
Co-workers react negatively to people accessing cultural leave



BUT THERE WAS LITTLE CHANGE IN OVERALL CULTURAL SAFETY

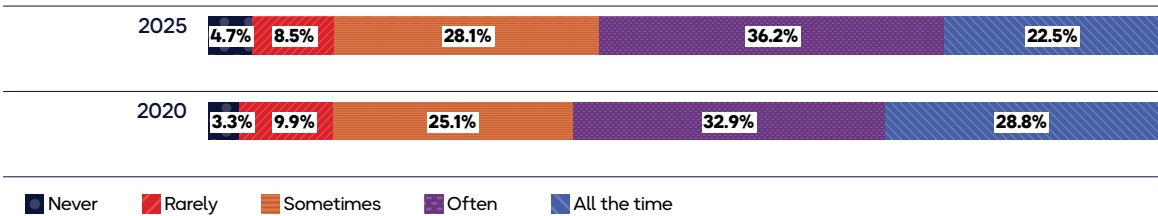
While there were some small improvements for specific cultural safety-related questions, there was no change in overall cultural safety of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers. We measured overall cultural safety by creating a mean cultural safety score from six cultural safety-related questions. In 2020, 39% of workers experienced cultural safety at work compared to 40% in 2025 (see bar chart below).

% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in culturally safe workplaces



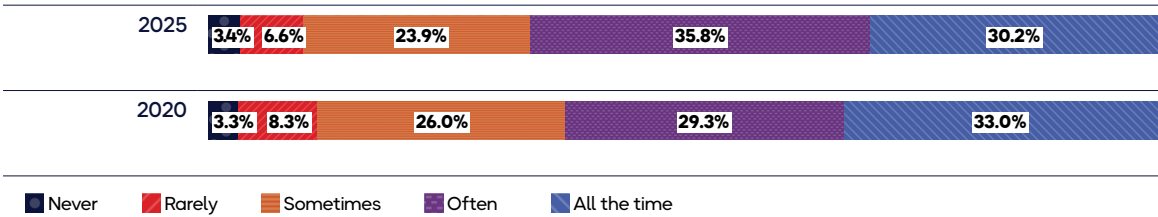
Added to this, when we asked a question specifically about cultural safety (i.e. to what extent does your workplace provide a culturally safe place to work for Indigenous people?), as the bar chart below shows, the percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers who reported that their workplace was culturally safe all the time fell – from 29% in 2020 to 23% in 2025.

My workplace provides a culturally safe place of work for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples



There were also no notable or only mixed changes when we asked respondents how often they felt comfortable expressing their cultural beliefs. There was a small increase in workers who said they were comfortable expressing their cultural beliefs at work all the time or often (from 62% in 2020 to 66% in 2025) but this was countered by a reduction in workers saying they were comfortable all the time (from 33% to 30%).

I am comfortable expressing my cultural and personal beliefs at work



CULTURALLY UNSAFE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES REMAIN COMMON

While some positive workplace experiences were shared by respondents, there were an equal share of negative ones. Respondents spoke of experiencing racism when they shared their identity, this racism being left unchecked, and requests for support and/or initiatives to improve cultural safety being ignored.

“They refused to implement identified roles despite 14% of the client population identifying as Aboriginal. They defunded the cultural liaison role I was working in. They ignored me when I said a cultural safety plan was needed.”

“A Director made a comment suggesting that there was no space for Aboriginal people in leadership – a statement that was clearly racist and deeply hurtful. I reported the incident, shared how it made me feel and clearly explained why it was inappropriate and harmful. However, I received no feedback, no response, and no closure... The Director remained in their role and was later promoted...[This] highlighted a lack of culturally safe reporting mechanisms and meaningful accountability. As a result, I came to believe that speaking up would change little – and that’s a heartbreaking realisation for any First Nations employee.”

TRUTH 5: Recognise identity strain and educate non-Indigenous staff about how to interact with their Indigenous colleagues in ways that reduce this.

"I am currently in a position where Aboriginality is a requirement of my job, so I don't have a choice not to share. I have always been open about my identity but find the strain and cultural burden at my current workplace is very high on Aboriginal people and it is exhausting. If it wasn't a requirement of my job I would consider not identifying."

Status: No overall change

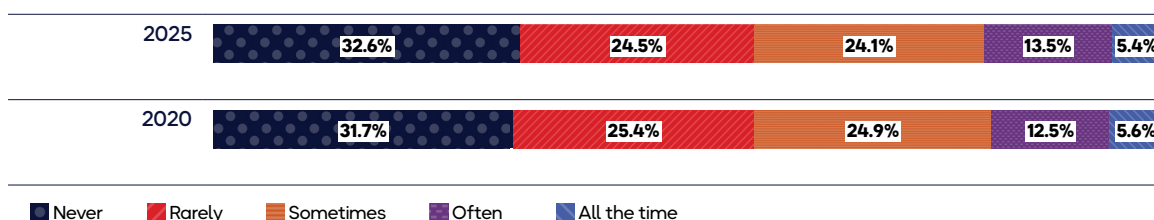
ABOUT THIS TRUTH

Creating a culturally safe and inclusive workplace requires taking into account the identity strain that close to two-thirds (63%) of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers report dealing with at work.³⁰ Identity strain can happen for instance when an Indigenous person has to work harder to prove that they can do the job, is questioned about whether they are really Indigenous, is asked to do something that compromises their cultural identity or is told to 'tone it down' or be less outspoken about Indigenous issues.

NO IMPROVEMENT IN IDENTITY STRAIN

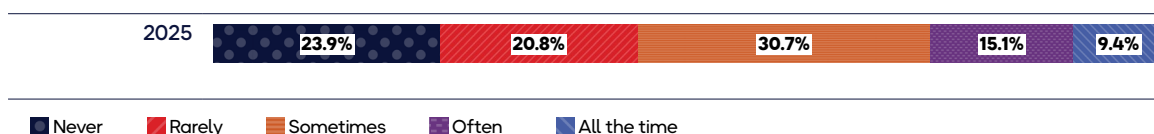
Between 2020 and 2025, there were no changes in the percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers who said they were asked to do something that made them compromise their cultural integrity – in both years, 43% reported that this happened all the time, often or sometimes.

I am asked to do something that compromises my cultural integrity



We also asked Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers how often they felt their identity was judged as not fully fitting in with workplace culture expectations and found that 55% experienced this all the time, often or sometimes.

I feel that my identity is judged or does not fully fit within the expectations of my workplace culture



IDENTITY STRAIN CUTS DEEP

Many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers spoke of the hurt and harm they experienced when their Indigeneity was repeatedly challenged by non-Indigenous people.

"Why Am I Not Blak Enough for Non-Aboriginal people? ...non-Aboriginal people question who I am... instead of being accepted for all of who I am I often feel like I have to prove myself...I've heard it too many times: 'You don't look Aboriginal' or 'Are you really Aboriginal?' These comments may sound harmless to some, but they cut deep. They question something sacred. What many don't understand is that Aboriginality is not about how someone looks – it's about connection. To culture. To Country. To community. You don't get to measure that from the outside... [This is about] making space for the diverse realities of Aboriginal identity. We are not all the same and that's not something to be fixed. It's something to be celebrated."

"I've always shared my Aboriginal identity in the workplace...[but] non-Indigenous colleagues don't take you seriously when you say you're Aboriginal. They question it – silently or not – despite your lived experience, your commitment to community, and your career walking alongside mob... [It] leaves a mark on your mental health even when you show up strong on the outside. Still, I've never once considered hiding who I am. Because to deny that part of me – to shrink myself in rooms that already struggle to make space for us is something I refuse to do... I'll keep doing that even when it's hard. Because the next generation deserves a workplace where they don't have to choose between visibility and safety."

Others spoke of the strain of having to constantly educate non-Indigenous workers about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

"You become the poster child for Aboriginal events, or you get a million questions and asked to speak for mob. OR people presume you got the role due to your Aboriginality not your qualifications."

"While I am proud to be Aboriginal sometimes it's easier to not actively speak about it to avoid awkward conversations. While this goes against my morals it can be culturally 'draining.'"

"Sharing my Aboriginality at work can be a complex and personal decision...[as] it carries the risk of identity strain being asked to represent all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people or facing discrimination and racism."

TRUTH 6: Recognise and remunerate cultural load as part of an employee's workload.

"They are taking Reconciliation more seriously but on the other hand I have had to do more work (unpaid) to support change."

Status: Slight improvement, though formal recognition and remuneration are not common and cultural load remains high

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

Cultural load is the (often invisible) additional workload borne by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people at work, where they are either the only Indigenous person or one of a small number of Indigenous people.³¹ Cultural load can come from, for instance, having extra Indigenous-related work demands that non Indigenous colleagues do not have, expectations to educate non-Indigenous colleagues about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and racism, and to talk on behalf of all Indigenous people. Often, neither these additional duties nor the time spent on this work is fairly recognised or remunerated. Organisations need to understand cultural load and recognise and reward it. This provides Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees with the opportunity to spend time on and be fairly compensated for this important aspect of their work.

ORGANISATIONS ARE STARTING TO CONSIDER CULTURAL LOAD, BUT FORMAL RECOGNITION IS NOT COMMON

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers' comments indicated some organisations have become more aware of cultural load since 2020 when we last conducted *Gari Yala*.

"We've been calling out cultural load, and the organisation is becoming more coherent about what this is and not placing this expectation on our First Nations staff."

"[While] I do feel that there is an increased expectation to take on the cultural load, I will acknowledge that the workplace is trying to change this."

However, when we specifically asked workers whether their organisation had a formal policy or process to compensate (financially or otherwise) Indigenous workers for additional cultural contributions, most respondents (75%) said their organisation did not formally recognise or remunerate cultural load (48%) or that they did not know if their organisation did (27%).

Formal financial recognition. Overall, 21% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers were in organisations that provided some financial compensation for additional cultural responsibilities and contributions. Respondent comments suggest that most commonly this was through ad hoc payments for time (e.g. for speaking engagements).

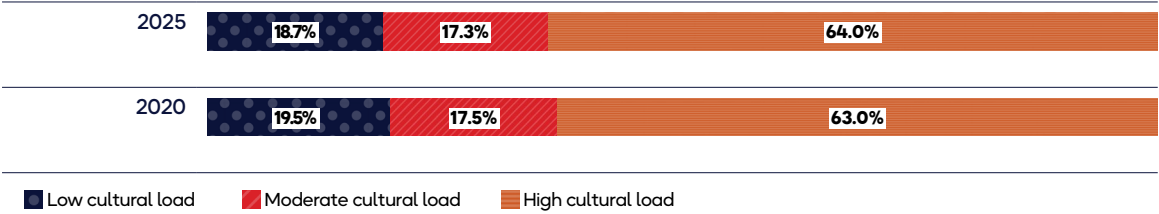
Formal non-financial recognition. Overall, a further 5% of respondents worked in an organisation that compensated employees in a non-financial way for cultural load. Comments from these respondents indicated that the most common non-financial compensation methods were (in order of commonality):

- providing paid time off for attendance including Time Off In Lieu (TOIL), Accrued Time Leave (ATL) or other forms of leave (referred to variously as flex time, cultural leave, floating holidays, an additional holiday),
- updating position descriptions to include cultural work, and
- adjusting workload allocation to take into account cultural load.

BUT HIGH CULTURAL LOAD CONTINUES

While organisations are starting to find ways to recognise (and less commonly) remunerate cultural load, respondents’ cultural load was high in 2020 and remained high in 2025. In 2020, 63% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported having higher cultural load compared to 64% in 2025. The bar chart below shows the notable lack of change in cultural load – whether high, moderate or low.

% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers with high, moderate and low cultural load



The lack of change in cultural load between 2020 and 2025 was reflected in respondent comments.

“The cultural load is evident when I’m expected to be the sole expert on all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander matters in the workplace. It’s unfair as it’s not my job to educate everyone single-handedly and it feels like an extra burden imposed due to the lack of understanding and proper training in the organisation.”

Many spoke of feeling obligated to take on this extra work as not doing so could result in the work not being done in a culturally appropriate way or not being done at all. In fact, of all respondents who spent time on cultural work in the workplace, 52% said they did so as they wanted to ensure the work was done in a culturally appropriate way, 24% said their workplace was not effectively addressing the issue, and 21% said that there was no one else available or qualified to do it.

“Mostly it feels that it is expected I will complete the [extra work] ... and when I don’t contribute co-workers act as though I am being rude or not doing my job. I genuinely also don’t want them to get it wrong, and I am proud of my culture, and I want to support better knowledge inclusion and understanding.”

“I didn’t want to do any of it because I think that’s the organisation’s responsibility not mine... I do it because I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t. I couldn’t stand by watching nothing getting done knowing that I could help. That’s how all the progress that’s gotten me to this point has been.”

TRUTH 7: Consult with Indigenous staff on how to minimise cultural load while maintaining organisational activity.

"[I have] high cultural load however I am passionate about quality Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education, so I am always going to try my hardest to engage with and promote that. I do notice that significant time is given to other staff members to organise activities like band or sports however there is no time carved out for cultural activities."

Status: Slight improvement, though recognition and remuneration are not common and cultural load remains high

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

The number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-focused activities that an organisation implements can build cultural safety but if not resourced properly can also place additional pressures on Indigenous staff which non-Indigenous staff do not have. Organisations need to recognise and reward the time and effort that Indigenous people invest in making the workplace culturally safe and inclusive. Organisations should also look at opportunities to share the load of activity development in culturally appropriate ways with non-Indigenous staff.

SOME ORGANISATIONS ARE TRYING TO CONSULT TO MINIMISE CULTURAL LOAD

Some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers talked of how, since 2020, their organisation was conscious of minimising Indigenous staff's unfair cultural load and had consulted about this or was currently doing so.

"We had consultation with all Indigenous staff to identify issues in our workplace around racism, cultural load and things of that nature."

"Conversations are being held now to work through what is appropriate."

Leaders setting the tone. Occasionally, respondents noted that this was being driven by senior executives.

"Having an Aboriginal CEO has changed the way we work... She distinguishes between colonial load and cultural responsibility and all staff including non-Indigenous need to know the difference and how that impacts their work."

"There is a shift in our Executive and Senior Management Team to distribute the load/ responsibility regarding Reconciliation rather than it sitting with First Nations staff to do the heavy lifting or help educate staff. It is everyone's responsibility."

Managers initiating discussions. Others commented on how having an understanding and supportive immediate manager who discussed cultural load with them was key to ensuring this load was recognised and effectively navigated.

"I once volunteered to be the Recruiter for any Identified and Targeted roles and my manager said he did not want to put that cultural load on me which I appreciate."

"I'm lucky. My place of work is very aware of the cultural load...[and] I have a manager who is very aware of Cultural Load."

Teams initiating discussions. Having a supportive team also played a key role in enabling cultural load to be effectively addressed navigated.

"I am more strongly and freely supported...and if I have to wear the cultural accountability to my people of stepping into the position of wearing the cultural load then my immediate and extended team look to help support and protect me in doing so."

CONSULTATIONS ARE SOMETIMES LEADING TO CHANGES

Policy changes. Several respondent comments suggested that these organisational, managerial, and/or team discussions and consultations led to cultural load being embedded in policies including RAPs.

"Cultural load has been recognised in the RAP, Close the Gap policies [and it's] having a big impact on how staff are treated."

Fairer work allocation. Other respondents described how their organisation made sure non-Indigenous workers helped share the load including by investing in workforce cultural capability.

"With all the work we've done to build cultural competency, it is safe for myself and others to say do your own research and learn things in your own time. Still happy to have a conversation but its more about not being the only First Nations person to answer everyone's question."

Effective resourcing of work. Sometimes respondents noted that work was now being resourced more effectively through the creation of new (identified) positions.

“More identified positions have been created where cultural load is factored into their roles taking some pressure off other staff members.”

“The organisation is much more aware of cultural load and ensuring that there is a set First Nations Directorate that shoulders the work to make the organisation more cultural capable and safe.”

BUT ELSEWHERE, CULTURAL LOAD STAYED HIGH AND EVEN INCREASED

While certainly organisations seem to be starting to consult about and address cultural load, this has not yet translated into reduced cultural load for respondents. As noted in the previous Truth, respondents' cultural load was high in 2020 and remained high in 2025. In 2020, 63% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported having high cultural load compared to 64% in 2025.

Added to this, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers commented on how increased organisational awareness and activity around diversity and inclusion (D&I) generally and Indigenous-related work specifically in the past five years was placing a growing burden on them.

“With the rise of RAPs /Indigenous related work/D&I...the pressure and workload have increased. And no-one cares...[about] sustainable change, and they don't care about the people doing the work. I've not just observed this for myself but for other mob too!”

For many, the load was now amplified as organisational aspirations around Indigenous work had increased but organisational resourcing had not kept pace.

“I feel expectations are higher in the workplace [but] there are limited First Nations employees employed so the load always goes to the few.”

“Cultural load understanding is slowly improving across the workplace at the higher levels...[but] you have to take things on to keep abreast of things to ensure it's culturally appropriate. Because the First Nations work force is just not there to spread the load.”

“I have been a huge part of actively promoting our First Nations employee network and collaborating with others to promote corporate event days such as NAIDOC and NRW. This is however becoming a cultural load. Rarely do others pitch in and give a hand...We either get serious about this being part of our workplaces or we drop it altogether.”

TRUTH 8: Focus on sustainable careers and career development, rather than just short-term appointments.

“Once they know [my identity it] makes it impossible to be recognised for your skill set or gain career advancement.”

Status: No overall change

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

Lack of career progression is a key reason that organisations lose Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Indigenous staff. To build sustainable career development for Indigenous staff organisations can create and communicate clear career paths from entry level through to senior executive roles, provide Indigenous mentors to employees entering the workforce for the first time, ensure staff in identified roles are provided with development and progression opportunities, and ensure cultural skills are valued, recognised, and fairly remunerated.

LACK OF CAREER OPPORTUNITIES REMAINS THE MAIN REASON INDIGENOUS STAFF LEAVE

In both 2020 and 2025, lack of career opportunities and lack of career development were the two main reasons Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers gave for intending to leave their employer in the coming year.

What is the main reason for your intention to find a new job within the next year?	2020	2025
Lack of career opportunities/promotion	21.1%	18.3%
Lack of career development	19.3%	17.3%

CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS REMAIN UNCOMMON

It is not surprising that lack of career opportunities is the main reason for Indigenous staff attrition given formal career development programs are not common.

- In 2020, only 25% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reported that their organisation had a formal career development program for Indigenous employees, and this reduced to 22% in 2025.
- Similarly, in 2020, 20% of workers reported that their organisation provided Indigenous (leader/elder) support or sponsorship of new and young staff, and this reduced to 17% in 2025.

When we asked Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers what organisations could do to provide a more inclusive workplace for Indigenous people, many spoke of the need for career paths for entry-level Indigenous staff to ensure they weren't permanently stuck in junior roles.

“More effort could be spent supporting junior employees to undertake some career development / planning and supporting upskilling and/or internal mobility to allow them to build new skills not get stuck in junior roles permanently.”

“My organisation could better support First Nations entry level staff (i.e. APS1-4) with training and development to assist their progression through the APS levels. This might involve formal career plans leadership and development training support and mentoring.”

Many respondents working in identified roles spoke of these roles having career ceilings that blocked career progress.

“In my role there are no opportunities for career advancement into leadership despite being a university qualified employee with a high level of experience. I have never been approached to consider leadership or management. I am completely stuck in the only First Nations identified role they offer and [this is the same for] other [First Nations] staff.”

Others spoke of being pushed into or “pigeon-holed” in (non-identified) cultural roles with career “ceilings.” This resulted in their broader skills set including leadership capabilities being overlooked and promotion opportunities denied.

“With my entire soul I regret sharing in my recent workplace that I am Aboriginal. After sharing I was continuously assigned to RAP/Indigenous tasks and projects without any proper training or support...When I told [non-Indigenous managers] I had more interests outside this work it was never taken seriously... I felt like they reduced my skills/knowledge/and self to solely my Aboriginal identity... The whole experience left me burnt out and I felt dehumanised like they only saw me for my Blakness and nothing more.”

“Being pigeonholed into cultural roles often means that my other leadership strengths like strategic thinking, facilitation, governance, organisational development, are overlooked. As a result, career opportunities can be missed. I’ve seen First Nations staff passed over or boxed in because organisations fail to see the full breadth of our capability.”

Respondents also described how raising racism concerns had been a career limiting move for them.

“We have to stay quiet in the face of racism or be overlooked for opportunities or seen as a problem to be managed out.”

“When inappropriate or racist comments came from the CEO or other senior leaders, there was a clear reluctance to challenge that behaviour internally often out of fear of retribution or that speaking up would be seen as a career-limiting move.”

Remuneration was also raised by some respondents, including the way Indigenous people in identified roles were paid less than equivalent or lower responsibility non-Indigenous roles.

“Aboriginal roles in our Department are not paid at the same level as other Managers. This needs to be addressed immediately...our workload is bigger and we are not remunerated fairly for the work we do when we get into leadership roles such as Coordinators or Managers when you compare/role of non-Aboriginal people in the same kind of roles.”

“I work in an identified role, but I am paid \$17,500.00 less than my colleague who works in the same role as me.”



TRUTH 9: Take action to address workplace racism

“There must be real-world consequences for racism. When racism is reported it must be taken seriously acted upon swiftly and met with appropriate outcomes. Ignoring it only reinforces unsafe environments and silences First Nations voices.”

Status: No overall change

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

Racism manifests in many ways and can have a dramatic impact on individuals, harming job satisfaction, intentions to stay and wellbeing. Often, harm comes as much from the actions organisations take (or don't) as it does the racist incident itself. To address racism, organisations need take an anti-racism approach and:

- develop, regularly review and promote racism complaint procedures and anti-discrimination compliance training,
- train managers on how to constructively address and effectively resolve racism and exclusion, and
- train all staff on what constitutes racist behaviour and how to respond appropriately to a person raising a concern about racist behaviour.

NO CHANGE IN ANTI-RACISM ACTIVITY

Organisational activities focused on preventing and/or addressing racism at work were not common in 2020 and have not increased in prevalence since then. In both 2020 and 2025, roughly a third of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people worked in organisations:

- with a racism complaint procedure (31% in 2025 and 33% in 2020), or
- with anti-discrimination compliance training that included reference to Indigenous discrimination and harassment (37% in 2025 and 36% in 2020).

In both years, only one in five (21%) respondents worked in organisations that had both a racism complaint procedure and anti-discrimination compliance training that addressed racism experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

ORGANISATIONS STILL FOCUS MORE ON MARKING SIGNIFICANT DAYS THAN ADDRESSING RACISM

In both 2020 and 2025, marking days of significance was by far and away the most common initiative – 70% of Indigenous workers reported that their organisation marked such days in 2020 and 68% in 2025.

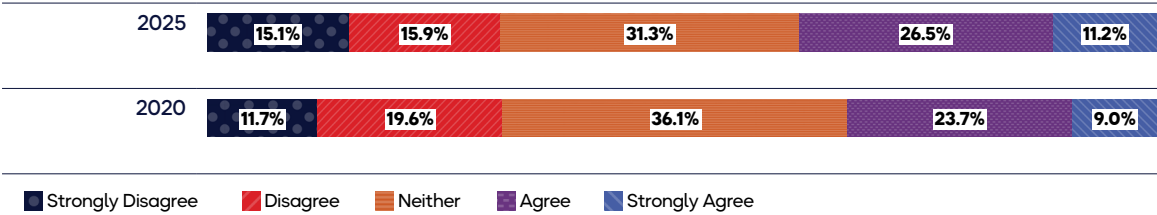
In contrast, in both years, anti-discrimination training that referenced Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander discrimination and harassment and racism complaint procedures were between the 9th and 12th most common initiatives – complaint procedure (31% in 2025 and 33% in 2020) and compliance training (37% in 2025 and 36% in 2020).

EFFECTIVE SUPPORT WHEN FACING RACISM REMAINS LOW

In both 2020 and 2025, it was not common for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers experiencing racism at work to have the workplace support they needed.

- in 2020, 33% strongly agreed or agreed they had the workplace support they needed when experiencing racism at work, rising to 38% in 2025.
- however, this was offset to some degree by the percentage of Indigenous workers who strongly disagreed they had the workplace support they needed increasing from 12% in 2020 to 15% in 2025.

I had the workplace support I needed when I experienced unfair treatment and/or racial slurs or jokes at work Islander employees



Comments shared by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers underscored these findings, showing how far Australian workplaces have to go to effectively respond to and prevent workplace racism.

“People who called out racism were often isolated, discredited or made to carry the burden alone. The systems in place claimed to support equity but lacked the integrity and accountability to respond when it mattered most.”

“I experienced both racism and retaliation after a bystander reported inappropriate behaviour directed toward me. Rather than addressing the conduct the response resulted in my removal from the team and ultimately led to my resignation.”

TRUTH 10: Look to high-impact initiatives – those that research shows are linked to better wellbeing and retention for Indigenous staff

“Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people have left advisory roles because the organisation is not culturally responsive or engaging with community in meaningful ways. A lot of the work is very surface level to be able to tick a box rather than to make genuine improvements. Anti-racism work has been side-lined due to the political environment.”

Status: No overall change

ABOUT THIS TRUTH

It is not uncommon for organisations to focus on implementing popular initiatives rather than those demonstrated to be effective.³² *Gari Yala* findings revealed five workplace initiatives were consistently associated with better wellbeing and retention of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff, despite these initiatives being some of the least commonly implemented in respondents’ organisations.³³ These initiatives were:

- Formal career development programs for Indigenous employees
- Racism complaint procedures
- Indigenous (Leader/Elder) support or sponsorship of new and young staff
- Anti-discrimination compliance training that includes reference to Indigenous people
- Celebrating Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander days or weeks of significance.

NO INCREASE IN PREVALENCE OF HIGH IMPACT INITIATIVES

Six years on from the inaugural *Gari Yala* survey, not much has changed when it comes to the prevalence with which high impact initiatives have been implemented in Australian workplaces. With the exceptions of compliance training, all initiatives have decreased in prevalence – and compliance training has only increased by 1%.

Prevalence of high impact Indigenous-related organisational activities		2020 %	2025 %	Change
1.	Celebrating Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander days/weeks of significance e.g. NAIDOC Week and Reconciliation Week	70%	68%	-2%
2.	Anti-discrimination compliance training that includes reference to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander discrimination and harassment	36%	37%	+1%
3.	Racism complaint procedure	33%	31%	-2%
4.	A formal career development program for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees	25%	22%	-3%
5.	Indigenous (Leader/Elder) support or sponsorship of new and young staff	20%	17%	-3%

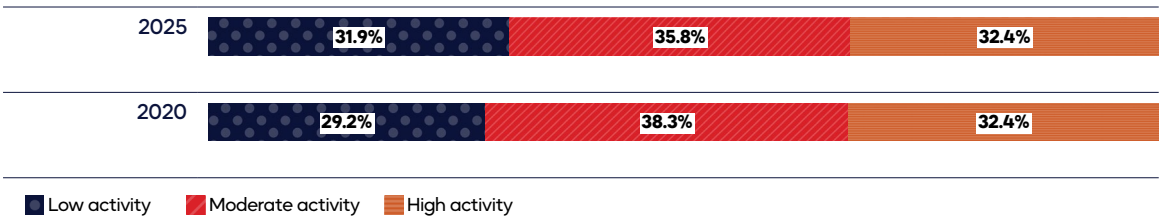
NO INCREASE IN OVERALL ORGANISATIONAL ACTIVITY

We also found no notable increase in organisational activity relating to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employment since 2020 (see bar chart below).

In both 2020 and 2025, a third of organisations were high activity (32%).

If anything, there was a small increase in the percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in low activity organisations (from 29% in 2020 to 32% in 2025) and a small decrease in those in moderate activity organisations (from 38% in 2020 to 36% in 2025).

% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers in high activity, moderate activity and low activity organisations



MOST ORGANISATIONAL INITIATIVES DID NOT INCREASE IN PREVALENCE

In 2020 and 2025, we asked Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers about the prevalence of 13 different Indigenous employment-related organisational initiatives or activities. The Table below lists these in 2025 frequency order.

Eight initiatives decreased in prevalence (by between -1% and -6%):

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander network groups (-6%)
- Knowledge sharing and cultural awareness training (-3%)
- Reconciliation Action Plan (-3%)
- Recruitment program for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees (-3%)
- Formal career development program for Indigenous employees (-3%)
- Indigenous (Leader/Elder) support or sponsorship of new and young staff (-3%)
- Celebrating days/weeks of significance (-2%)
- Racism complaint procedure (-2%)

Five initiatives increased in prevalence (by between +1% and +8%):

- Cultural leave policies (including paid and unpaid) (+8%)
- Identified Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander positions (+4%)
- Data on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employment (+2%)
- Using Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suppliers/ contractors (+1%)
- Anti-discrimination compliance training that includes reference to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander discrimination and harassment (+1%)

Prevalence of Indigenous-related organisational activities in 2020 versus 2025	2020 %	2025 %	Change
Celebrating Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander days/weeks of significance e.g. NAIDOC Week and Reconciliation Week	70%	68%	-2%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander knowledge sharing and cultural awareness training	53%	50%	-3%
Identified Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander positions	52%	56%	+4%
Using Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suppliers/contractors	49%	50%	+1%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander network groups	49%	43%	-6%
Reconciliation Action Plan	49%	46%	-3%
Cultural leave policies	47%	55%	+8%
A formal recruitment program for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees	37%	34%	-3%
Data on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander demographics, engagement or other HR related metrics	36%	38%	+2%
Anti-discrimination compliance training that includes reference to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander discrimination and harassment	36%	37%	+1%
Racism complaint procedure	33%	31%	-2%
A formal career development program for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees	25%	22%	-3%
Indigenous (Leader/Elder) support or sponsorship of new and young staff	20%	17%	-3%

APPENDIX A:

RESEARCH

METHOD

Ethics approval

Both the inaugural *Gari Yala* project and this *Gari Yala 2* project received approval from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH20-4791 and ETH24-9734 respectively). Our research approach aligned with UTS guidelines for ethical and culturally safe research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, ensuring that all elements of participation, confidentiality and data use respected Indigenous data sovereignty principles.

Survey development

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF QUESTION BANK

An in-depth review of industry and academic research investigating the experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace was conducted in early 2020. This also included a review of broad research looking at affiliation, exclusion, racism, cultural safety, cultural labour/ load, organisational authenticity, workplace support and wellbeing. A bank of over 200 potential survey questions was developed, with questions based on the key themes identified in the literature review.

DEVELOPMENT OF DRAFT SURVEY

The project team consulted with an Expert Panel of academics and employment practitioners to inform development and distribution of the survey. The Expert Panel provided feedback on a first draft of the *Gari Yala* survey, which was based on the key themes identified in the literature review. Specifically, the Expert Panel considered:

- critical content areas to include in the survey
- refinement of proposed survey questions
- how to ensure a strengths-based approach
- key diversity-related demographics to include for intersectionality analysis, and
- appropriate sampling procedure and employment timeframe.

On this basis, a draft survey of over 90 questions was developed, with questions focusing on measuring affiliation, cultural safety, cultural load, identity strain, exclusion and racism, workplace support, organisational authenticity, workplace outcomes and diversity-related demographics. A second workshop was then held with Expert Panellists to seek their feedback prior to piloting this draft survey.

PILOT OF DRAFT SURVEY

In early 2020, the draft survey was piloted in 3 organisations, through administering the survey to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander network groups within these organisations. In all, 57 respondents completed the survey. Statistical analysis of the pilot sample dataset was conducted to assist with reducing the survey length to 56 questions to minimise respondent fatigue. Specifically, frequency tables, chi-square tests of independence and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) were conducted to determine which items should be retained and which could be dropped.

FINALISATION OF SURVEY

The pilot findings were used to help finalise a 56-question survey. The survey questions were chosen based on their ability to generate findings that were academically rigorous and covered key workplace experience themes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers. The final survey covered 10 key areas:

1. Affiliation
2. Strengths and Contributions
3. Cultural Safety
4. Cultural Load
5. Identity Strain
6. Exclusion and Racism
7. Effectiveness of Workplace Support
8. Organisational Authenticity
9. Wellbeing and Retention
10. Demographics (i.e. socio-demographics, job and organisational demographics).



Data collection

SURVEY SAMPLE

For *Gari Yala 2*, we surveyed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians who were employed at the time of responding or had been employed in the past 2 years.

A combination of 2 sampling methods was used to attain the final sample:

- Polity Research & Consulting were commissioned to conduct an online survey of 306 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander respondents, administered through a research-only survey panel. This approach did not use a probability sample – as with all internet surveying in Australia, the sample was drawn from nonprobability opt-in panels of survey volunteers maintained by the commercial provider.
- The survey was also administered using a non-probability/snowballing convenience sampling method. The survey was distributed through networks, trusted social media groups for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, sponsor employee resource groups and community groups. Using this approach, an additional 852 respondents completed the survey.

Findings are based on the total responses from 1,158 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers based in Australia who completed the survey (see Appendix B for characteristics of the survey sample).

FIELDWORK

The research was conducted online between 14 April and 1 June 2025. Participants who were recruited from a professional market- and social-research panel received a small incentive for their participation. Survey responses were time stamped to enable comparison of responses collected prior to the election (3 May) and post-election. We observed some limited differences between some survey items pre- and post-election differences however these were small in magnitude and potentially spurious in nature.



Survey measures

Cultural safety. Cultural safety means being able to practise your culture free of ridicule or condemnation.³⁴ It occurs when a workplace acknowledges, respects and accommodates difference. Unsafe cultural practice is any action which diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and wellbeing of an individual.³⁵ A culturally safe workplace is one where power imbalances are addressed, diversity is valued, and systemic barriers to inclusion are actively dismantled.

Culturally safe, somewhat culturally safe, and culturally unsafe workplaces. Respondents completed 6 items relating to cultural safety, expressing cultural beliefs, being valued as an Indigenous employee, Indigenous-focused roles and cultural leave. Each respondent's responses were used to create a composite score out of 5 (where 5 = culturally safe all the time and 1 = never culturally safe). Respondents in culturally safe workplaces scored their workplace on average 4 or more out of 5 on survey questions asking how often their workplace was culturally safe. Respondents in somewhat culturally safe workplaces scored their workplace on

average between 3 and 4 out of 5, while respondents in culturally unsafe workplaces scored their workplace on average 3 or less out of 5.

Cultural load. Cultural load is the (often invisible) load borne by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace, where they are either the only Indigenous person or are one of a small number of Indigenous people.³⁶ This creates an additional workload associated with, for instance, being consistently expected to respond to all things relating to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace and speak on behalf of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.³⁷

High, moderate, and low cultural load. Respondents completed 4 items relating to the extent to which they experience having extra work demands and educational expectations placed on them because of their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity. Each respondent's responses were used to create a composite score out of 5 (where 5 = never experienced cultural load and 1 = always experienced cultural load). Respondents with low cultural load scored on average 4 or more out of 5 on survey questions asking how often they experienced cultural load. Respondents with moderate cultural load scored on average between 3 and 4 out of 5, while respondents with high cultural load scored on average 3 or less out of 5.

Discrimination, racism and exclusion. Discrimination was defined as being treated unfairly at work because of a person's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander identity. Being 'treated unfairly' referred to a respondent being treated as if they were inferior, being treated rudely or with disrespect, being ignored, insulted, harassed, stereotyped, discriminated against or having unfair assumptions made about them. We have used the broad term 'racism' in our study because we are reporting on race-based discrimination, race-based harassment and race-based exclusion in the workplace, using questions adapted from the Measure of Indigenous Racism Experiences,³⁸ the Everyday Discrimination Scale³⁹ and the Chronic Work Discrimination and Harassment Scale.⁴⁰

Unpaid workplace demands. Unpaid workplace demands refers to the additional work done by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees, drawing upon their community, cultural and spiritual connections, which is unpaid workload beyond core responsibilities in position descriptions and expected by the employer to be undertaken.

High, moderate, and low organisational activity. Respondents were given a list of 15 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander focused initiatives and asked which ones their organisation had in place. Respondents in high-activity organisations indicated their organisation had implemented 9 or more of these initiatives. Moderate-activity organisations had between 4 and 8 of the possible initiatives, while low-activity organisations had implemented 3 or fewer of the possible initiatives.

Survey changes made in 2025

The 2025 *Gari Yala* 2.0 survey was intentionally designed to remain as close as possible to the 2020 *Gari Yala* survey to enable meaningful comparison over time. Where questions were substantially changed or newly introduced, results have been interpreted with care and direct comparisons to 2020 data have not been made.

All changes were developed with input and guidance from the *Gari Yala* 2 Expert Panel to ensure cultural integrity, relevance, and alignment with evolving community and policy conversations. These changes are summarised below.

Identity strain. Two questions on identity strain were removed and replaced with a new item to better capture contemporary experiences.

Cultural leave. New questions on cultural leave were added to assess both the availability of cultural leave in workplaces and experiences, both positive and negative, when accessing it.

Cultural load. The survey substantially expanded its measurement of cultural load, responding to growing discussions since 2020 around colonial load and cultural responsibility. New items examine whether Indigenous cultural knowledge is valued at work, distinguish between voluntary cultural responsibilities and expectations driven by systemic or organisational bias, and quantify both paid and unpaid time spent on cultural responsibilities. These questions also explored whether this work is formally recognised, included in job descriptions, or compensated through workplace policies.

Cultural responsibility. A new set of questions focussed on cultural responsibility were developed to capture the extent to which respondents voluntarily engage in cultural activities, build connections between community and workplace, and feel a personal or moral responsibility to foster cultural understanding and inclusion at work.

Organisational authenticity. Four questions on organisational authenticity were removed, leaving a single overarching item.

Workplace changes. Two new open-ended questions were added to capture perceived changes in workplace culture since 2020, with a focus on inclusion, respect, and racism, as well as respondents' interpretations of what has driven these changes.

Wellbeing and demographics. Additional updates include the introduction of two new questions on health and wellbeing, updated demographic questions (including sex assigned at birth and revised sexual orientation items aligned with current best practice), and a new role-based question identifying whether respondents' formal job descriptions include responsibility for Indigenous workplace matters.

Finally, several additional questions were included but are not reported in the current report. These include new items on cultural safety and connection, such as opportunities to connect with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, experiences of non-Indigenous people speaking on behalf of Indigenous peoples, and organisational support for Indigenous staff networks and connection.

Data analysis

TESTING VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

To ensure that Cultural Safety, Cultural Load and Overall Racism scales met academic and industry standards of rigor, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the sample data.

Cultural Safety: TLI (0.99), CFI (0.99), RMSEA (0.042) and SRMR (0.002) scores within the threshold for good fit.⁴¹

Cultural Load: TLI (0.99), CFI (0.99), RMSEA (0.051) and SRMR (0.007) scores within the threshold for good fit.

Overall Racism: TLI (0.98), CFI (0.99), RMSEA (0.050) and SRMR (0.003) scores within the threshold for good fit.

Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the internal reliability for each of the above constructs, with results indicating good reliability – Cultural Safety had an alpha score of 0.87, Cultural Load 0.90, and Overall Racism 0.93.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS FOR COMPARISON

SPSS Statistics software was used to conduct the statistical analysis. For each contingency table, a chi-squared statistic was calculated to determine whether there was an association between the 2 variables. The association between the 2 variables in a given contingency table was considered significant if the p-value for the chi-squared statistic was less than .05 (i.e. the α criterion). Except where qualified in the text, all reported findings were significantly different at the 95% confidence level. For contingency tables considered statistically significant, adjusted standardised residuals greater (in absolute size) than ± 1.96 were examined to determine what was driving the association (for example, whether one group responded with more agreement to a given question than another group).

Where percentage changes were small in magnitude between 2020 and 2025 results, we ran independent samples t-tests to see whether test scores between the two years were statistically significant. For example, for the survey question "Non-Indigenous employees make inappropriate comments or assumptions about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people" the mean 2020 score was 3.53 out of 5, while the mean 2025 score was 2.63. The t-test showed that this difference in mean scores was statistically significant.

Limitations

Previous studies have shown that online research produces results that are at least as accurate as (and sometimes more accurate than) telephone research. However, a benefit of this approach is the removal of any interviewer bias that may come into play when discussing sensitive issues. Online surveys also have the advantage of allowing people to respond at their own pace, giving them enough time to properly consider important and complex issues. However, it is possible that this method over samples the computer-literate population which, on average, may be more educated than the general population of workers.

APPENDIX B:

SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTER- ISTICS

Demographic	N=	%
ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER IDENTITY		
Aboriginal	1006	86.9%
Torres Strait Islander	50	4.3%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	102	8.8%
AGE		
18-24 years	84	7.3%
25-29 years	115	9.9%
30-34 years	160	13.8%
35-39 years	161	13.9%
40-44 years	163	14.1%
45-49 years	135	11.7%
50-54 years	132	11.4%
55-59 years	105	9.1%
60-64 years	67	5.8%
65-66 years	27	2.3%
70+ years	9	0.8%
GENDER		
Man or male	362	31.3%
Woman or female	760	65.6%
Other gender/non-binary/gender fluid	22	1.9%
Prefer not to answer	14	1.2%
DEGREE QUALIFIED		
Postgraduate	216	18.7%
Graduate diploma/graduate certificate	80	6.9%
Bachelor degree	291	25.1%
Advanced diploma or diploma	164	14.2%
Cert I, II, III or IV	231	19.9%
Secondary education	129	11.1%
Primary education	8	0.7%
Other education	39	3.4%

Demographic	N=	%
STATE		
ACT	51	4.4%
NSW	348	30.1%
NT	51	4.4%
QLD	297	25.6%
SA	57	4.9%
TAS	38	3.3%
VIC	205	17.7%
WA	111	9.6%
WORK HISTORY		
Currently in paid employment	1124	97.1%
Not currently employed, but have been in paid employment in last 2 years	34	2.9%
EMPLOYMENT TYPE		
Working full-time permanent	899	77.6%
Working part-time permanent	160	13.8%
Working contract based	99	8.5%
Working casual – fixed and temporary	48	4.1%
Self employed	23	2.0%
Gig economy employment (working casually for temporary employer)	4	0.3%
ROLE TYPE		
Senior executive	64	5.5%
Managerial	250	21.6%
Deputy managerial	142	12.3%
Employee	629	54.3%
Entry-level	73	6.3%
INDIGENOUS FOCUS IN ROLE		
An identified role	417	36.0%
Role formally involves working on Indigenous workplace matters	741	64.0%
ORGANISATION TYPE		
Private/Corporate organisation	385	33.2%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander focused government organisation	147	12.7%
Non-Indigenous focused government organisation	330	28.5%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander focused Not for Profit	80	6.9%
Non-Indigenous focused Not for Profit	98	8.5%
Other, please specify	118	10.2%

Demographic	N=	%
INDUSTRY		
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	31	2.7%
Mining	18	1.6%
Manufacturing	30	2.6%
Electricity, gas, water and waste services	27	2.3%
Construction	18	1.6%
Wholesale trade	4	0.3%
Retail trade	30	2.6%
Accommodation and food services	59	5.1%
Transport, postal and warehousing	8	0.7%
Information media and telecommunications	23	2.0%
Financial and insurance services	43	3.7%
Rental, hiring and real estate services	1	0.1%
Professional, scientific and technical services	59	5.1%
Administrative and support services	219	18.9%
Public administration and safety	75	6.5%
Education and training	198	17.1%
Healthcare and social assistance	138	11.9%
Arts and recreation services	22	1.9%
Other (please specify), inadequately described and not stated	155	13.4%
CARE		
Did not provide care	598	51.6%
Cared for child/children with disability	139	12.0%
Cared for child/children without disability	282	24.4%
Cared for adult/adults with disability	179	15.5%
Cared for adult/adults without disability	178	15.4%
DISABILITY		
With disability	249	21.5%
SEXUAL ORIENTATION		
LGBQ+	180	15.5%

ENDNOTES

1 See the Unpaid Workplace Demands Chapter for detailed information on how we calculated this estimate. In short, it was derived by establishing that 55.1% of full-time Indigenous employees whose formal role did not involve Indigenous workplace matters worked at least one or more hours per week unpaid on cultural work (38.5% of these workers actually worked 3 or more hours and 23% worked 6 or more hours). Using the most conservative estimate above (i.e. 55% of the cohort working an additional work week each year), this suggests, extrapolated over a 50-year working life, 1 in 2 full-time Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander employees are working at least an additional year of unpaid workplace demands.

2 118 years estimate was calculated by using two survey observations – 26% of Indigenous workers reporting they never heard racial slurs in 2020, rising to 29% in 2025. We estimated the average improvement at +0.6 percentage points per year. Applying this rate as a linear trend would mean it would take another 118 years (71% divided by 0.6%) to reach 100% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reporting they never heard racial slurs. This illustrative trajectory: is of only one form of racism (i.e. racial slurs) not of workplace racism generally; is based on only two data points in time as no other chronological data points were available; and assumes uniform change though we're conscious realworld change can be nonlinear, being policydependent.

3 Forde, C., Bamblett, L., Lovett, R., Gorringer, S., & Fogarty, B. (2013). *Discourse, deficit and identity: Aboriginality, the race paradigm and the language of representation in contemporary Australia*. Media International Australia, 149(1), 162–173.

Hunter, B., Dinku, Y., Eva, C., Markham, F., & Murray, M. (2022). *Employment and Indigenous mental health*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare for the Indigenous Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Clearinghouse.

Jordan, K. (2018). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment policy and welfare to work: The Community Development Programme and the need for new narratives, new alliances and new institutions. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 53(3), 239–261.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024, July 24). *Estimates and projections, Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population, 2011 to 2031*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-and-projections-australian-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-population/2011-2031>

5 Indigenous Business Australia. (2025). *First Nations: Boosting Australia's productivity: How First Nations people, knowledge, frameworks and assets can address Australia's productivity challenges*. Indigenous Business Australia. <https://iba.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/IBA-submission-First-Nations-boosting-productivity-Final.pdf>

6 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025, October 16). *Employment of First Nations people*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>

7 Lahn, J. (2013). *Aboriginal professionals: Work, class and culture* (CAEPR Working Paper No. 89/2013). Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

Grant, S. (2016, December 8). *New Indigenous middle class finds place in modern economy*. Pursuit. The University of Melbourne. <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/new-indigenous-middle-class-finds-place-in-modern-economy>

8 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025, October 16). *Employment of First Nations people*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>

9 Indigenous Business Australia. (2025). *First Nations: Boosting Australia's productivity: How First Nations people, knowledge, frameworks and assets can address Australia's productivity challenges*. Indigenous Business Australia. <https://iba.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/IBA-submission-First-Nations-boosting-productivity-Final.pdf>

10 Perkins, R. (2010). *First Australians*. The Miegunyah Press.

11 Anthony, T., & Gray, S. (2020, June 11). Was there slavery in Australia? Yes. It shouldn't even be up for debate. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/was-there-slavery-in-australia-yes-it-shouldnt-even-be-up-for-debate-140544>

12 Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research. (2025, June). *Closing the Gap National Agreement: Independent review of progress and systemic change*. University of Technology Sydney. <https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2025/06/review-finds-misalignment-of-visions-for-closing-the-gap>

Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research. (2025). *Independent review of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander over-representation in the ACT criminal justice system*. University of Technology Sydney. <https://www.uts.edu.au/research/centres/jumbunna-institute-indigenous-education-and-research/our-research-hubs/indigenous-law-and-justice-hub/act-review-first-nations-over-representation/contentassets/jumbunna-act-review-final-report-20250716.pdf>

13 Foley, D. (2003). Indigenous epistemology and Indigenous standpoint theory. *Social Alternatives*, 22(1), 44–52.

Nakata, M. (2007). The cultural interface. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(1, Suppl.), 7–14.

Ardill, A. (2013). Australian sovereignty, Indigenous standpoint theory and feminist standpoint theory. *Griffith Law Review*, 22(2), 315–343.

14 Allen, B. J. (2017). Standpoint theory. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of intercultural communication* (p. 2). John Wiley & Sons.

15 Williams, M., Ragg, M., & Manton, D. (2020). *Aboriginal allied health workforce pathways scoping project: Final report*. NSW Ministry of Health.

16 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023, August 31). *Estimates of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release>

17 Australian Law Reform Commission. (2010, July 28). Legal definitions of Aboriginality (Essentially Yours: The protection of human genetic information in Australia, ALRC Report 96). <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/essentially-yours-the-protection-of-human-genetic-information-in-australia-alrc-report-96/36-kinship-and-identity/legal-definitions-of-aboriginality/>

18 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. (2025, October 13). *First Peoples of Australia*. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/first-peoples-australia>

19 University of Melbourne Faculty of Fine Arts and Music. (2018, June 8). *Five deadly questions for Richard Frankland*. <https://finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/about-us/news/five-deadly-questions-for-richard-frankland>

20 Adapted from National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Association. (2013). *Cultural safety framework*. https://www.naatsihwp.org.au/sites/default/files/naatsihwa-cultural_safety-framework_summary.pdf

21 Anderson, P., Mapedzahama, V., Kaabel, A., & O'Leary, J. (2022). *Racism at work: How organisations can stand up to and end workplace racism*. DCA.

22 Because the overall racism measure reflects the mean of nine items, dichotomising the scale captures cumulative exposure across different forms of racism. As a result, the proportion classified as experiencing racism sometimes/often/very often is higher than for any single item considered in isolation.

23 118 years estimate was calculated by using two survey observations – 26% of Indigenous workers reporting they never heard racial slurs in 2020, rising to 29% in 2025. We estimated the average improvement at +0.6 percentage points per year. Applying this rate as a linear trend would mean it would take another 118 years (71% divided by 0.6%) to reach 100% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers reporting they never heard racial slurs. This illustrative trajectory: is of only one form of racism (i.e. racial slurs) not of workplace racism generally; is based on only two data points in time as no other chronological data points were available; and assumes uniform change though we're conscious realworld change can be nonlinear, being policydependent.

24 See above Endnote for method and assumptions used to calculate 118 year estimate

- 25 Reconciliation Australia (2021) *2021 State of Reconciliation in Australia Report: Moving from safe to brave*. https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/State-of-Reconciliation-2021-Summary-Report_web.pdf
- 26 Reconciliation Australia (2025) *2024 Australian Reconciliation Barometer: Racism and First Nations Peoples*. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/publication/2024-australian-reconciliation-barometer-racism-and-first-nations-peoples/>
- 27 Reconciliation Australia. (2021). *2020 RAP Impact Report*. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/publication/2020-rap-impact-report/>
- 28 Reconciliation Australia. (2025). *RAP Impact Report 2024*. <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/publication/rap-impact-report-2024/>
- 29 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025, August 26). *Counts of Australian businesses, including entries and exits, July 2021 – June 2025* [Statistical release]. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/business-indicators/counts-australian-businesses-including-entries-and-exits/latest-release>
- 30 Jumbunna Institute (2020). *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth): Centring the work experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians at work*. Jumbunna Institute, Sydney.
- 31 Ragg, M. (2019, November 28). The enormous load on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander leaders. Croakey. <https://croakey.org/the-enormous-load-on-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-leaders/>
- 32 Russell, G., O'Leary, J. and Rozsnyoi, J. (2019). *Change At Work: Designing Diversity and Inclusion Differently to Achieve Organisational Change*, DCA, Sydney.
- 33 Jumbunna Institute (2020). *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth)*.
- 34 Dalgarno, P. (2018, June 8). *Five deadly questions for Richard Frankland*. University of Melbourne Faculty of Fine Arts and Music News. <https://finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/about-us/news/five-deadly-questions-for-richard-frankland>
- 35 Adapted from the National Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Health Workers Association, Cultural Safety Framework.
- 36 Ragg, M. (2019, November 28). The enormous load on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander leaders. Croakey. <https://croakey.org/the-enormous-load-on-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-leaders/>
- 37 Victorian Public Service Commission. (n.d.). *Supporting Aboriginal staff*. <https://www.vpsc.vic.gov.au/managing-employees/engaging-and-retaining-employees/first-nations-people/supporting-aboriginal-and-or-torres-strait-islander-staff>
- 38 Paradies, Y. C., & Cunningham, J. (2008). Development and validation of the Measure of Indigenous Racism Experiences (MIRE). *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 7(9), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-9276-7-9>
- 39 Williams, D. R., Yu, Y., Jackson, J. S., & Anderson, N. B. (1997). Racial differences in physical and mental health: Socio-economic status, stress and discrimination. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 2(3), 335–351.
- Williams, D. R., González, H. M., Williams, S., Mohammed, S. A., Moomal, H., & Stein, D. J. (2008). Perceived discrimination, race and health in South Africa: Findings from the South Africa Stress and Health Study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 67(3), 441–452.
- 40 Chronic Work Discrimination and Harassment Scale (From the YES Study)
- McNeilly, M. D., Anderson, N. B., Armstead, C. A., Clark, R., Corbett, M., Robinson, E. L., Pieper, C. F., & Lepisto, E. M. (1996). The Perceived Racism Scale: A multidimensional assessment of the experience of white racism among African Americans. *Ethnicity & Disease*, 6(1–2), 154–166.
- 41 Hu, L., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 6(1), 1–55.