

A Guide To Appropriate Language And Terminology

It is important to be sensitive to the use of appropriate language and terminology when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This guide is to inform you on preferred terminology for the School of Indigenous Studies, so you can become more confident in your choices about what terms to use. However, it is not definitive and cannot cover all contexts, so as a general rule, if in doubt, ASK first!

Collective and Inclusive Terms

‘Indigenous people(s)’ and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(s)’ are terms commonly used to collectively refer to Australia’s first peoples.

‘Indigenous peoples’ is a term most frequently used in an international context, particularly in relation to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples www.social.un.org/index/IndigenousPeoples.aspx

For more information see: Indigenous Peoples Indigenous Voices Fact Sheet: Who Are Indigenous Peoples? www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people object to using the term ‘Indigenous’ because it fails to respect their own identity and preferences and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ is the preferred term.

However, both terms ‘Indigenous people(s)’ and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people(s)’ are acceptable to use in the course. Use capital letters for ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ when you are referring specifically to Aboriginal peoples in Australia.

In many areas, the term ‘Aboriginal people’ is increasingly used in preference to ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’. In Western Australia there has been a clear and stated community preference for use of the term ‘Aboriginal people’ as the inclusive term rather than ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’. This is demonstrated by the following examples from two key government agencies:

- In 2013, Western Australia’s Department of Indigenous Affairs replaced the term ‘Indigenous’ in its title with ‘Aboriginal’, its stated reason being that: "The Department of Aboriginal Affairs (formerly Indigenous Affairs) has been renamed to more accurately reflect the identity of Aboriginal people in Western Australia. This change is in line with requests from the State's Aboriginal community." <http://www.daa.wa.gov.au/>
- The Department of Health (WA) stated rationale on using the term ‘Aboriginal’ is that: "Within Western Australia, the term Aboriginal is used in preference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, in recognition that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of Western Australia. No disrespect is intended to our Torres Strait Islander colleagues and community". <http://www.aboriginal.health.wa.gov.au/home/> ‘Aboriginal people(s)’ is also appropriate to use in the course.

Diverse Communities

‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ are both terms imposed after colonisation, which don’t reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the more than 250 Aboriginal language groups across Australia as well as the diversity within each of these groups.

Aboriginal peoples prefer to identify themselves in their own language terms e.g. Noongar, Palyku, Yamatji. Students should be sensitive to this use, but care should be taken to have an appropriate Aboriginal reference point when using these terms. It can be confusing as spellings may have changed over time or may merely reflect regional or individual preferences. For example, UWA uses ‘Noongar’ as per the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council <http://www.noongar.org.au>