

# Co-designing a relational ethical decision-making framework with Aboriginal Elders and young people to address health inequities

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## Abstract

State and National Government policies in Australia increasingly emphasise the need for partnerships and relationships to deliver positive outcomes for First Nations peoples. However, whether these partnerships embody First Nations relational ways of working, or meet the needs and priorities of communities, is not well known. An Aboriginal participatory action research project, grounded in an Aboriginal research methodology, *Debakarn, Koorliny Wangkiny*, brought together Elders, young people and service providers in Perth, Western Australia, to co-design an ethical decision-making framework. Applying the knowledge and wisdom of Elders, this framework was trialled with three community service organisations to assess the cultural safety of their service provision to Aboriginal people. The findings suggest that this co-designed ethical decision-making framework can be used to implement ethical standards and embed more authentic culturally safe practices and processes by developing meaningful relationships with First Nations People and Communities.

## Keywords

*Debakarn Koorliny Wangkiny*, aboriginal participatory action research, systems change, first nations worldviews, culture, ways of working, meaningful relationships, ethics, strengths-based solutions, co-design, aboriginal ways of working, work practice

## Introduction

First Nations<sup>1</sup> Elders, leaders and Community members in Australia have repeatedly called for stronger and more relational approaches to governance and practice in health services. In 2020, at the time the research project described in this paper was proposed, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a major health threat to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. The pandemic was viewed by many as an opportunity to ensure strategic long-term changes in healthcare services as well as responding to the very clear and present threat the crisis posed to First Nations Communities (Markham et al., 2020; Milroy, 2020). Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and local Community-led responses to COVID-19 were immediately mobilised and were highly effective in ensuring there were very low rates of transmission and infection among Australian First Nations Communities, and consequently minimal loss of life (Eades et al., 2020; Finlay and Wenitong, 2020; Milroy, 2020). This was also evident in other First Nations Communities globally (e.g., Mariani, 2021). Importantly, including local Community responses informed by local cultural knowledge provided strong evidence of self-determination as fundamental to achieving improvements in health and wellbeing outcomes in order to address the growing gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing indicators and the general Australian population (Joint Council on Closing the Gap, 2020; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2024). The challenge, however, as recognised at the time, was how to implement effective strategies in partnership with local Community members in a timely and culturally safe

way. A greater understanding of the ways in which Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing can inform decision making was recognised as being well overdue. The Australian government's Joint Council on Closing the Gap agreement targets remain largely unfulfilled (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2024).

The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated a clear need for more meaningful relationships and authentic partnerships to redress the impact of colonisation and its systemic practices that, have and continue to, negatively impact Aboriginal communities. Accordingly, strengths-based, local place-based Community-led solutions are necessary to ensure responses to health inequities are culturally safe, relevant, and meet the self-identified needs and priorities of Aboriginal peoples and their communities.

### *Ethics*

The WA Health Ethics Committee at the Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia approved (HREC 1035) the research project on 27th November 2020. Derbarl Yerrigan Health Services Aboriginal Corporation provided a letter of support for the project, signed 22nd December 2020, as required by the WA Aboriginal Ethics Committee. [removed for review] Human Research Ethics Office reciprocal ethics approval (HRE2021-0179) was granted on 16th April 2021.

### **Nyitting (Beginning): Origins of the ethical decision-making project**

Since the *Nyitting* (Nyoongar word for 'beginning') when the *Boodja* ('Country') was formed, the assertion of cultural values and ethical standards has framed Nyoongar peoples' decision-making processes. Many Australian First Nations have a range of words that reflect a strong ethical sense of duty, responsibility, respect and care for others. For example, Nyoongar people in the southwest of Western Australia use the term *Debakarn*, meaning steady, to allow time to pause and reflect on what should happen next (Wright et al., 2023). In central Australia, the *Anangu* have a phrase, *Uti Kulintjaku*, meaning to think and understand clearly. The *Arrernte* people, also in central Australia talk about *altyerre* or *altyerrke*, which translates to "law", the importance of caring for and looking after family and Country within a complex and sophisticated kin structure (Liddle Perrule and Judd, 2018). The challenge with cross-cultural work is to acknowledge and value lived experiences and cultural protocols and ethical values that reflect First Nations' worldviews. The way to develop these complex understandings is to do so by having meaningful dialogue and ongoing respectful relationships with First Nations people.

Shortly after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers and Community members living on *Wadjuk Nyoongar Boodja* in Western Australia (WA) wrote to the WA state premier and the health minister to advocate for the need for Community Elders to be involved in the decision-making process for Covid-19. The outcome was the WA Government releasing funds for Covid-19 research projects to be conducted. The group determined that the best approach was for an ethical decision-making framework to be co-designed with

Aboriginal Elders and other Community members. This would equip all levels of government to provide timely and, more importantly, equitable, responses to Aboriginal people and their Communities across Western Australia and globally in times of crisis and beyond.

This paper presents the story of how an Ethical Decision-Making Framework ('the EDM Framework') was co-designed, implemented and trialled with Nyoongar Elders, Community members and organisational staff and leaders. This led to the creation of a flexible, accountable, and culturally safe multifunctional decision-making framework, grounded in respectful and reciprocal relationships. The EDM Framework is, importantly, an experiential organisational practice that provides for greater levels of accountability, cultural safety and relational ways of working with Aboriginal people and communities. This will importantly, improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal people through the lens that is place-based, embedded in Country and based on cultural protocols and lived experiences.

With appropriate commitment by government and non-government organisations, the EDM Framework has the potential to ensure more culturally appropriate responses, accountability and transparency. When these relationships are meaningful, authentic, and respectful they set the foundations to bring about positive social change in service delivery as well as decision making. "Relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (Wilson, 2008: 7, emphasis included).

In this paper we describe the different components of the EDM Framework and outline the implications of implementing it across a range of contexts. We conclude with a call to action for mainstream organisations to meaningfully commit to embedding relational ways of working so as to ensure greater transparency and accountability.

### *Overview of the ethical decision making framework*

The EDM project forms part of a larger longitudinal research program (Looking Forward, 2024). The Looking Forward research program is guided by a relational methodology which aligns with the priorities and rhythms of the local Community of whom some members are co-researchers. The research program effectively responds to long-term, complex challenges First Nations Communities face when accessing health services (Culbong et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2015).

The EDM Framework is a relational, culturally safe multifunctional tool based on principles, goals and aspirations deemed important to and determined by Nyoongar Elders and Aboriginal Community members living on *Wadjuk Nyoongar Boodja*. It consists of a set of excellence criteria and a guide for evaluating an organisation by applying the criteria. The EDM Framework is both necessary and critical, for it has the potential to positively impact systemic change in all areas of government and service provision that would improve the lives of First Nations peoples, their families and their Communities. Prioritising relational work practices and relational ethical standpoints means that First Nations Communities can (re)assert their rights to make decisions that are both relevant and important to them.

The implementation of the EDM Framework and the application of relational methodologies that incorporate ethical decision-making involving Elders as knowledge

holders will ensure more meaningful outcomes for First Nations people. Elders, Community members and health service organisations are currently utilising the EDM Framework to (i) structure service practices so as to engage more relationally with Community, (ii) measure accountability and responsiveness based on more relational ways of working (including key performance indicators) and (iii) as an evaluation tool to assess both the impact and effectiveness of these relationships to bring about new ways of working and embed them within the organisation.

Prior to commencing the EDM framework project the Looking Forward research team was especially mindful of both the moral and ethical implications of engaging the Community in a project at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (see for example [Townsend et al., 2020](#)). For a predominantly Aboriginal research team, moral and ethical issues were always present. Navigating the tensions between being a researcher and a Community member can be difficult, as *Palyku* researcher Kwaymullina notes from their experience as a researcher, “from the lived experiences of Indigeneity in the academy” ([Kwaymullina, 2016](#): 438).

## **Aboriginal participatory action research methodology**

Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR) was used as the methodology to develop the EDM Framework. APAR was selected because it provides the necessary conditions to foreground Aboriginal worldviews ([Dudgeon et al., 2020](#); [Wright et al., 2023](#)). APAR is inclusive of participants working as “agents for change” across areas of service delivery to Aboriginal people to influence “structural impacts,” which greatly influence social, mental health and wellbeing ([Wright et al., 2015](#): 27). A major strength of APAR is its flexibility to realign methods to fit the rhythms of, and responses from, the Community ([Referendum Council, 2017](#); [Wright et al., 2015](#)). It is important to recognise the conditions that drive Aboriginal-led strength-based approaches and value-add to building impactful solutions.

The Looking Forward research program’s *Debakarn Koorliny Wangkiny* (DKW) research methodology ([Wright et al., 2023](#)) was also used in conjunction with APAR for the EDM project. DKW enables a respectful and culturally safe shared space where new approaches, ideas, and practices are tested and validated alongside the Community. The DKW was co-designed with Elders from the Nyoongar Community and trialled for 10 years within mainstream mental health and alcohol and drug support services by the Looking Forward research team ([Culbong et al., 2022](#); [Wright et al., 2021](#); [Wright et al., 2015](#)). The project’s engagement phase enabled service staff to understand the importance of reciprocity as a core value in an Aboriginal decision-making process ([Haynes et al., 2019](#); [Wright et al., 2021](#)). Engaging with and having established relationships with Aboriginal people and their Communities is a key prerequisite for the EDM Framework. The participant co-researchers who co-designed the Framework also recognised that meaningful relationships should include shared accountability and responsibility as both are necessary and critical for working effectively with Aboriginal people and their communities. Shared accountability and responsibility are the recognition of the unique position and status held by Elders and young people and their roles as legitimate voices of

the Community. Accountability and responsibility by practitioners are also requirements for both listening and responding authentically to the wisdom and expertise offered by the Elders and the Community. These kinds of culturally secure co-design processes are essential to adopting a decolonising approach to research by acknowledging and mitigating history and past practices, fostering trust, and ensuring ethical decision-making informs relevant and timely responses to health inequities (Haynes et al., 2019; Kennedy et al., 2022; Sherwood, 2013).

### *Aboriginal participatory action research: Privileging Aboriginal voices through co-design*

The voices of Aboriginal co-researchers are foundational to the process, validity and power of APAR. Foregrounding Aboriginal voices creates the space necessary to shift the power balance and build the trust required to work together in a meaningful way. In order to honour and privilege their voices and ensure the cultural safety of the Aboriginal co-researchers, only Aboriginal people were invited to participate in the first workshop, which laid the foundation for the Framework.

In setting the space for co-design, the Elders and youth co-researchers were very clear about what has not worked in the past, and what needs to change.

There was a call for service leaders in organisations to learn how to work relationally with their clients, and to listen and learn from the Elders and leaders from other organisations, such as Aboriginal controlled and managed organisations:

CEOs need to listen, really listen, learn our ways of working, respect our culture, respect our way of working. Don't just expect us to work in the White man's ways. You meet us halfway if we are to work together. (Workshop 1, Elder, 2021)

The Elders pointed out that, all too often, organisations have offered only words, promises and platitudes. It was agreed that the Framework must include questions that ensure organisations and services reflect on their level of engagement and action and can build their evidence of these:

It's a lot to do with trust and being honest. It's okay talking, but to win people's trust you have to be honest about what you are doing (Workshop 1, Elder, 2021).

The Elders explained the need for a developmental process to be embedded into organisations as a way of ensuring ongoing and sustainable engagement with Aboriginal Elders and the Community:

We really need to focus on the next generation of Aboriginal leaders. ... The Elders won't be around forever. We need to develop the next generation. That's the focus now: embed this ... so that it lives on beyond us.... (Workshop 1, Elder, 2021).

Transparency and ensuring a level of replicability for other organisations to follow in using the EDM Framework was considered vital:

It's about transparency, not just for Community and for our organization.... It helps other organizations in future, too, should this project go further than ... [these] organisations (Workshop 1, Aboriginal Young Person, 2021).

## Methods

### *Study design and participants*

Perth (*Boorloo*) based *Nyoongar* Elders ( $n = 6$ ) and Aboriginal Community members ( $n = 7$ ) were recruited as co-researchers via purposive sampling to remain accountable to the local context and culture, the co-design approach used, and based on their capacity to engage over an extended period. An advantage was that all the Aboriginal co-researchers involved in the project have extensive lived experience and expertise in community-based participatory action research on ways to improve the social and emotional wellbeing with Aboriginal families and communities (Wright, 2011; Wright et al., 2021; Looking Forward, 2024). From this previous work came knowledge and experience that both informed and guided the overall process directing and shaping the development of the project.

Together with the Elders and Community members, senior executive staff ( $n = 7$ ) from three non-government service organisations were recruited via the same means. The first organisation was a large not-for-profit which runs programs that include counselling, disability support, family and domestic violence support, financial assistance, housing and homelessness support, parenting support, sexual abuse support, suicide postvention, youth services and workplace support. The second organisation was a medium to large community-based organisation that provides mental health services and supported accommodation across Western Australia, working alongside people to support their recovery and wellbeing. The third organisation, also a medium size community-based organisation, provides a range of services, including alcohol and other drugs, mental health, family and domestic violence, youth justice and bail, outreach and street yarning (an Aboriginal form of communication), delivered in collaboration with local providers to help individuals, families and communities regain control of their lives. Written informed consent was obtained from all co-researchers and service partner participants. Table one below provides a summary of the project activities that included Elders, young people and participating service staff.

The project involved an engagement and community governance phase, an exploratory data gathering phase, a co-design phase, and a trial implementation phase, across a 3-year timeframe. A significant proportion of time was dedicated to the engagement and community governance phase to establish the trust and relationships fundamental to the success of the co-design efforts that follow. Participating service staff included senior executives, health workers, clinicians, administrators, and others. Participating staff were required to be present and open to learning different ways and were instructed to be open

and teachable during the process. Working with uncertainty and with humility are core requirements for meaningful relationships to be developed between Elders, Community members and service staff. There was also the requirement for service staff to respect the status of the Elders, and stay connected, regardless, to the experience as it unfolded. This enabled staff to be both reflexive (open to what is occurring at the emotional level) and reflective (thinking calmly about what was discussed) in their learning. This helped them to ‘join the dots’ both in their understanding as well as recognising where they needed to unlearn any long-held assumptions and biases and relearn ways of working relationally. The project team were mindful to respectfully “hold” the uncomfortable and challenging spaces experienced by the co-researchers and staff as they continued to weave and share new understandings and new knowledge that was generated from their collaborations (Wright et al., 2015: 62).

Once the engagement and governance processes had been established, the co-researchers came together in a series of preparation meetings to explore the research question: *What are the essential features of a culturally secure ethical decision-making framework?* Three co-design workshops were held and all of the sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As both the co-researchers and practitioners became more familiar with the co-design approach, their confidence and capacity increased thus making their collective contributions deeper and more meaningful, as one of the Elders stated.

... being all on the same page.... It’s not like some other organisations. They’ll do something on a paper and then they’ll come in and ask you to add to it.... That’s the biggest letdown and that’s a learning process. If you want to work with Aboriginal people, be honest and then you’ll win their trust and then you can carry on and start your process, but always start from the grassroots. (Workshop 1, Elder, 2021)

### *Co-designing an ethical decision-making framework (the ‘how’)*

As mentioned above, three co-design workshops produced the EDM Framework draft (see Table 1 below). Participation in the first workshop was restricted to Elders and young people to ensure their voices, priorities and values were privileged in the content development of the Framework. Subsequent workshops were attended by Elders, Aboriginal young people, senior service leaders, and other relevant staff from the three organisations. The EDM Framework was refined through a robust, rigorous and constructive process of dialogue between all stakeholders that built consensus around the thematic content (see also Wright et al., 2021).

The primary documents used to guide the discussion for the development of the EDM Framework included the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (NHMRC, 2018a) guidelines, the *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders* (NHMRC, 2018a) and the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (2022). Both documents outline a values-based regime focusing on



**Table 1.** Summary of Workshop Attendance and Process.

Project Activity	Workshop Attendees			Total
	Number of aboriginal elders	Number of Aboriginal young people	Number of service staff	
<b>Workshop 1 (Aboriginal Elders &amp; Youth Only)</b> 9 <sup>th</sup> September 2021: Key principles/values for EDM and building meaningful relationships	6	4	0	10
<b>Workshop 2</b> 22 <sup>nd</sup> October 2021: Finalising the draft EDM framework – developed the definitions	7	4	7	18
<b>Workshop 3</b> 12 <sup>th</sup> November 2021: Presenting the draft guide for applying the framework	6	3	7	16

spirit and integrity, cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility. The *National Statement* (2018) ensures accountability and adherence to a code of conduct required for undertaking research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The research team engaged in lengthy discussions with the Elders and young people, who, in reviewing these documents in preparation for the first workshop, recognised the potential for these documents to be highly applicable in the service context, knowing that the development of the NHMRC *Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders* (2018b) had been actively informed by numerous consultations and engagements with First Nations scholars, leaders and Community members for the purposes of conducting culturally safe research. The values and principles captured in the NHMRC guidelines and code of conduct resonated strongly with the Elders and young people who felt confident in aligning an equally values-driven approach with services to work more relationally.

The first co-design workshop identified the key principles and values for building meaningful relationships that are central to developing an ethical decision-making process. Three key statements were raised and discussed in the workshop. First, the value and necessity of meaningful relationships within services and with practitioners; second, ensuring mechanisms were in place for holding and sustaining relationships; and, third, that organisations ensure the structural conditions for meaningful relationships are present.

The second workshop, including Elders and young people, was conducted to present the draft Framework themes to service providers and to respond by defining each of its core values or attributes, using their respective organisational contexts. The information shared at this workshop was collated and the EDM Framework template was developed.

This provided the working definitions for the values or attributes identified, indicators of how this might be enacted in a service, and examples of these activities.

The workshops were recorded and recordings transcribed verbatim. Critical to the workshop transcripts analysis was the pre-coding. Developed by the Looking Forward team, the pre-coding process is underpinned by the team's relational methodology. The transcripts are first read separately by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members. A group discussion about the transcripts is conducted with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal team members input, after conducting an Acknowledgment to Country and a round of personal check-ins. This establishes a reflective space and brings each team members' positionality to the fore. This ensures a balance of views and opinions before coding is conducted within Nvivo data management software (Lumivero, 2023). The comments from each of the pre-coding discussions were written and recorded as a memo and then included in the overall analysis of the data.

The cleaned transcripts were then coded and, together with researcher observational notes, were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021, 2023) based on responses to the three key statements. Initial analysis was conducted by two Aboriginal researchers, one male and one female. A diagram was developed to capture the key themes and presented back to co-researchers for consensus building and to inform the next steps in the co-design process. The diagram (Figure 1) below clearly shows that relationships and generating shared intentions with the Community were essential. These findings were subject to a rechecking with Aboriginal people involved and agreement reached to share these themes with the wider project participant group.

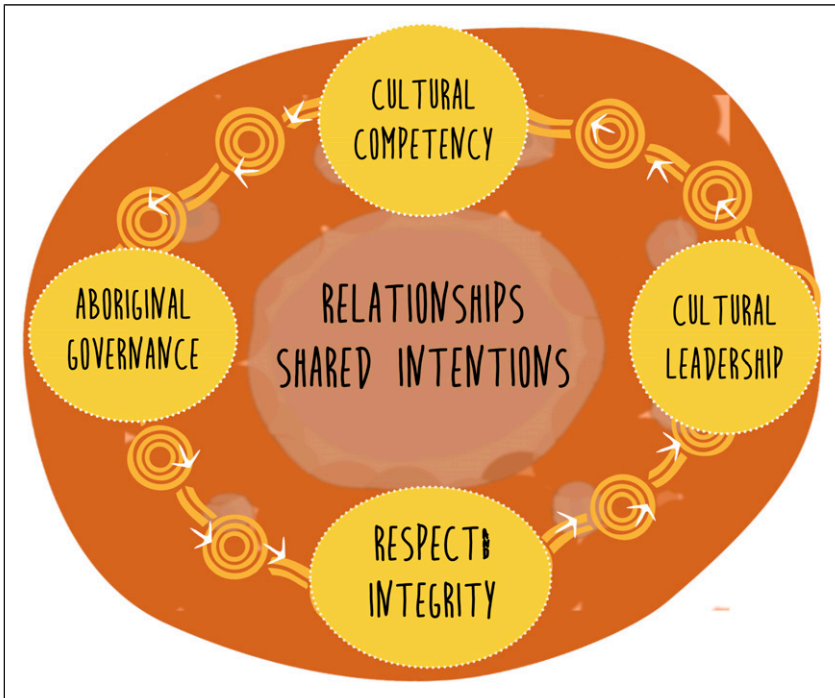
The draft EDM framework was presented in the third and final workshop and consisted of a set of Excellence Criteria for Working with Aboriginal People (see reference removed for review), and a Guide for Applying the Excellence Criteria within organisations. The Excellence Criteria are: Relationships, Reciprocity, Shared Accountability and Responsibility, Aboriginal Governance, Cultural Security, Cultural Leadership, and Respect and Integrity (see Table 2).

The Guide for Applying the Excellence Criteria consisted of a set of questions based on the seven Excellence Criteria, with the expectation that the three organisations would prepare written responses to each of the seven questions as part of a trial implementation (see Table 3).

## **Trial implementation**

The three non-government service organisations agreed to implement the draft EDM Framework over a 6-month period. Senior executive and managerial staff were involved in the trial, in collaboration with Aboriginal Elders and Community members. The task of each organisation was to, (a) implement the framework in a way that was meaningful and responsive to their existing relationships; and, (b) document their responses to the Excellence Criteria outlined in the Framework.

Through tri-weekly or monthly meetings, the project team provided ongoing and regular support to each of the organisations during the trial. To introduce and reinforce a more relational approach, grounded in Aboriginal ways of working, a three-stage



**Figure 1.** Capturing the themes – ethical decision-making framework. Created by A. Ramirez-Watkins, 2021.

**Table 2.** Excellence criteria for working with aboriginal people.

1. Relationships
2. Reciprocity
3. Shared Accountability and Responsibility
4. Aboriginal Governance
5. Cultural Security
6. Cultural Leadership
7. Respect and Integrity

approach was adopted for the working group meetings. Firstly, each meeting commenced with an *Acknowledgement of Country*, which is in accordance with *Nyoongar* cultural protocols (rotating the responsibility for giving the Acknowledgement supported organisational staff to build their confidence in delivering a personalised and heartfelt Acknowledgement). Secondly, each meeting included 1 minute's silence to recognise those who have passed in the Community. Thirdly, in each meeting group members were

**Table 3.** Excellence Criteria for Working With Aboriginal People: Guiding Questions.

- 
1. Describe how your organisation has meaningful **relationships** with local Aboriginal Community(s) in the areas where your services are delivered.
  2. Describe how the organisation demonstrates **reciprocity** (gives back to the Community).
  3. Describe how the organisation is **accountable** to, and holds **responsibility** for, local Aboriginal families and Community.
  4. Describe how the organisation recognises and has integrated Aboriginal cultural leadership and the authority of the Elders into its services, policies, and practices.
  5. Describe how the organisation has embedded **Aboriginal** ways of being, knowing and doing in its **governance** structures.
  6. Describe how the workforce within your organisation is **confident, secure, competent** and has capacity to work with Aboriginal people.
  7. Describe how the organisation demonstrates **respect** for Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing, and maintains **integrity** in working together with the Community.
- 

encouraged to do an individual ‘check-in’. This involved each group member sharing a recent experience for two to 3 minutes that occurred in their personal lives. Working relationally requires the ability to move between the personal and transactional. The ‘check in’ allows for relationships by building familiarity and connecting at a deeper human level (Wright et al., 2023).

The service organisations prepared written responses against each of the seven Excellence Criteria. To fully capture the depth and breadth of their relationships and ways of working with First Nations Communities across Western Australia (WA), each organisation was asked to provide two example responses from Community and staff to the Excellence Criteria questions: one focused on the Perth metropolitan region and the other on a service delivered in either a regional or remote area of Western Australia.

The first organisation made a deliberate decision about where they would pilot the framework based on the organisation’s “place-based” focus. Two regional centres were chosen – one a large outer urban centre and the other a smaller regional service centre. These two sites were chosen for their vastly different contexts (both in terms of services delivered and the nature of the relationship with the local Aboriginal Community in each location), so they were able to test the veracity of the EDM Framework in two very different contexts.

The second organisation used the EDM Framework as the basis to design and administer a survey to their staff. This organisation has had a long-standing relationship with local *Nyoongar* Elders, and benefits from strong Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leadership within the organisation. They saw the potential of the Framework to nourish and broaden these relationships over time and assist in the challenges of implementing work with the Elders across a large organisation.

The third organisation used the Framework to begin an ongoing whole-of-organisation cultural security evaluation process in consultation with a local *Nyoongar* Elder and cultural advisor, the CEO and research and evaluation staff. It was anticipated that these responses will grow and adapt over time, and include broader consultation, with a

particular focus on input from Aboriginal staff members, partners, and Community stakeholders.

### *Excellence criteria for working with Aboriginal people: Trial implementation outcomes and learnings*

The trial implementation demonstrated the EDM Framework to be characteristically flexible; a multifunctional contextual tool which asserts the need for authentic cultural security across all its criteria. The outcomes and learnings from the trial implementation are described below using the thematic headings of flexibility, multifunctionality and cultural security. These thematic headings were discussed during the analysis process, particularly the pre-coding sessions. It was agreed that these broad themes would help shape the discussion about the outcomes. While the criteria are interrelated, we have discussed the learnings that relate to each criterion as a thematic grouping.

*Flexibility of the ethical decision-making framework.* The flexibility of the EDM Framework was evidenced by the service organisations that took part in the trial. The Framework was able to be utilised at a program and organisational level. More recently the Framework has been used at an individual reflective practice level.

The versatility of the EDM Framework was proven by each site achieving different results and outcomes. The process proved valuable in terms of evaluation and critical reflection in setting a path forward in responding to the needs and priorities of the Aboriginal communities with whom they work:

The EDM Framework translates across all areas of the organisation – but local context is important too. It helped us think about placed-based responses, about being connected to the Aboriginal Community, and about relational ways of working (Organisation 3 report, 2022).

*Criterion one, relationships.* The relational approach takes time and needs to be held in a spirit of reciprocity where cultural accountability is continuously maintained throughout the process. Meaningful reciprocal relationships build the trust and respect required to explore and hold the tensions inherent in different worldviews (Wright et al., 2023: 4). Building and sustaining relationships requires resources, namely an investment of time and energy by organisations. Aboriginal Elders and young people pointed out the danger in approaching the relational task as a “tick-box” exercise:

They have to accept that they’re going to be wrong ... that they’re not going to know things. They have to be ready to learn. You cannot sit back and say, “I had a conversation with an Aboriginal person once,” and then tick a box. This takes months. It takes time to know and understand a person or people (Aboriginal Young Person, Workshop 1, 2021).

For the service organisations involved in the trial, the EDM Framework provided a starting point, a way to begin the conversations, both with Aboriginal people and with staff in the organisation around the importance of relationships. The Framework enabled

the trial sites “to slow down, and be quiet” (*debakarn, debakarn* – Nyoongar word for “go steady”). The check-in process used in the working group meetings was also used in building relationships not just with the families and their clients – but also in their own meetings: “It’s just kind of magic” (Organisation 1 trial implementation report, 2022).

[The EDM Framework] ... really shifted the way in which ... the team approached [their] everyday work, but it wasn’t until the carving out of this space that they’ve really been able to reflect on what that change has been, and that was really powerful; powerful for them trying to think if there’s anything else.... People now stop, listen, and share more (Organisation 2 trial implementation report, 2022).

For one organisation, despite there being a solid existing relationship for almost a decade between the Elders and the CEO, the EDM Framework identified that sustaining and integrating those relationships into wider service delivery or policy had not been entirely successful.

How easy it is as a non-Aboriginal organisation just to slip back into those transactional ways of working, and acknowledges that there are lots of external forces, like the tender writing process – all sorts of things that really impact on your ability to be more relational (Organisation 2 trial implementation report, 2022).

Understanding how an organisation is perceived by Aboriginal Communities is often difficult because of the lack of open, honest and collaborative meaningful relationships. The EDM Framework takes the guesswork out of this, by asking the Community directly, through those questions, what they believe the relationship is from their perspective.

It might take six cups of tea with someone before they’re ready to come through the door as a client, but we only measure the door opening and that person coming in as a client and so a willingness to change our capacity to really measure the impact of relationships on services, and how those two can’t really be pulled apart. They’re intertwined inextricably, so starting to encourage people to measure those cups of tea, those conversations, that outreach that happens, that creates a relationship with someone that makes that person feel comfortable (Organisation 3 trial implementation report, 2022).

### *Multifunctionality of the ethical decision-making framework*

The EDM Framework can be implemented as a template and guide to shape existing organisational procedures and policies. One organisation used the Framework to shape their Reconciliation Action Plan, another used the Framework to guide their tender preparation for funding. Another organisation worked more directly with staff to use the Framework as a reflective tool to prepare them for further conversations about engaging more with Aboriginal Community members.

As a multifunctional tool, the EDM Framework offers organisations myriad ways to develop their processes that are firmly based on Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and working, as the following criteria examples show.

*Criterion four, Aboriginal governance and criterion six, cultural leadership.* The multifunctional capacity of the EDM Framework is demonstrated through the application of criterion four, Aboriginal governance and criterion six, Cultural leadership. Some examples of cultural leadership described in the trial organisations include; Elders being formally consulted on any cultural education programs including children’s stories and songs, so that languages are used appropriately; open-door policy where Elders can attend staff meetings and “the kettle is always on”; and, having Elders evaluate a parenting program through a cultural lens to ensure its cultural safety, which resulted in further training for young parents.

One organisation whose longstanding relationship with local Elders is primarily only with the CEO, discovered that the cultural leadership and guidance provided by the Elders was not being integrated across the service. Therefore, it is not present in the organisation’s policies, practices and processes.

I can issue policies and statements and have high-level relationships, but if it doesn’t land on the ground, it’s all meaningless. People outside the organisation verified for us what’s working (Organisation 2 trial implementation report, 2022).

In addition, within this organisation, the Elders made it clear that they wished to see greater commitment from the organisation’s Board members:

We’ve never really had the buy in from the Board. I’m sure they are nice people, they’ve invited us to some dinners, end of year events and things, but we haven’t seen real genuine commitment to reconciliation. I think the CEO is allowed to do whatever he wants to in this space, which is good, but we wish the Board was pushing more and leading from the front (Elder cited in Organisation 2 trial implementation report, 2022).

The organisation is currently exploring the establishment of a working group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff guided by Elders and informed by Aboriginal Terms of Reference, to address this concern and respond to other findings from the application of the EDM Framework.

For another participating organisation, the trial sites revealed that cultural leadership needed to also occur at the local level. By building relationships with local communities and people, localised leadership can be identified and incorporated into all areas of service delivery. Localised leadership provides cultural authority and security to both staff and Aboriginal people engaged with and in the service.

... this kind of captured everything that will kind of doing and it helped for me to kind of present then (leadership) are able to say what happens as an organisational role. So that was really good process for me and also for the group to go to the Aboriginal advisory group and chat to them about it (Organisation 1 trial implementation report, 2022).

The exercise of developing responses to the EDM Framework allowed the services to see where lines of communication were broken between the policy and practice levels, such as that described by the Elders and the lack of connection to the Board in one organisation. The EDM Framework creates the space for direct feedback from the Community to the organisation to embed cultural knowledge and leadership, and support both existing governance structures as well as identify cultural gaps in these areas. The veracity of the organisations' Excellence Criteria responses must be corroborated by the wider Aboriginal Community. For example, one organisation found that, at the local level, cultural leadership needed to be more evident. Supporting cultural authority at regional sites has now required a deeper conversation between the organisation and their local Community.

### *Building cultural security with the ethical decision-making framework*

Cultural security was identified as a priority area in all of the organisations and is linked to key organisational documents such as the Reconciliation Action Plan and an organisational Strategic Plan. The EDM Framework provided the organisations with a structure to question how effective they are in working with and supporting Aboriginal people. It offered a guide to connecting and reflecting, and suggested approaches for engaging and evaluating respectful Aboriginal involvement in decision-making at all levels and in all facets of the organisation. The Excellence Criteria seeks to address cultural security through criterion two, Reciprocity, criterion three, Accountability and responsibility, criterion five, Cultural security, and criterion seven, Respect and integrity. An example of enhanced cultural security is given in one of the organisation's responses to the EDM Framework during the trial implementation phase:

“Employing [Aboriginal] staff who are also members of the local Aboriginal Community has had significant positive impact on engagement with local families at the service. This is a key aspect of cultural security at the site, as for many Aboriginal people it is difficult to approach a service and seeing Aboriginal people working there can make them feel more comfortable attending” (Organisation 1 trial implementation report, 2022).

Defining or describing cultural security is challenging, as it is often evidenced in how people feel and the diversity of peoples' lived experiences rather than maintaining an abstract or theoretical definition. This leads to a greater understanding of reciprocity, accountability and responsibility.

*Criterion two, reciprocity and criterion three, accountability and responsibility.* Reciprocal relationships enhance and deepen interactions and are vital and necessary for trust to be established. Reciprocity is critical to forming and sustaining relationships and building an organisational culture based on valuing and respecting Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing. One organisation clearly identified the need to keep Community and Elders informed and engaged through the ongoing processes of the service.



Report back what you're doing and ... see how you're going in 12 months and, you know, just keep going on that journey. And I think the ... ethical decision-making framework can have such a big impact in the wider Community (Organisation 2 trial implementation report, 2022).

One organisation described how they give back to the local Community at their various regional sites:

One way that [organisation] staff give back to the Community is through involvement with local events. For example, the service has helped to organise and host Community NAIDOC week events and has hosted a reconciliation barbecue (Organisation 1 trial implementation report, 2022).

This same organisation hosts various playgroups, grandparent groups and other gatherings for families to attend, with food provided. Often, people, such as the grandparents, are invited to attend local staff meetings and share their knowledge and stories. Staff get to know more about what is happening in the Community and pick up some cultural learning in subtle and incidental forms at the same time.

Being accountable to the Community requires a commitment by an organisation to the recognition of the unique position and status held and provided by the Elders and young people and their roles as legitimate voices of the Community. On reviewing the EDM framework, the Elders emphasised the importance of: ensuring that local Community is recognised and acknowledged in order for the Excellence Criteria to have more broader acceptability and applicability; establishing a similar process for Aboriginal people to evaluate a service; ensuring gendered representation in the process; and, maximising the potential for the EDM framework to be used in/for/with Aboriginal people.

One organisation noted that the EDM Framework was:

...a model for us to check and assess our organisation against to see how we operate in a range of ways. From the Board, through to the Executive Team, through to our service delivery, through to our culture, to see the degree to which we are truly supportive of Aboriginal communities and walking alongside and supporting them. So, my long-term vision is to see it embedded in how we work and in how we operate (Organisation 1 trial implementation report, 2022).

Resourcing and investment are a large part of an organisation's commitment to reciprocity and accountability. For example, giving preference to local Aboriginal-run businesses, supporting local events with funding, and when developing program or service funding applications, organisations acknowledge the input of Aboriginal staff in the application development as well as their standing in the local Community.

*Criterion five, cultural security and criterion seven, respect and integrity.* Engaging with the framework provides a structured approach to understanding how organisational policies and plans are implemented and what they might look like at a service delivery level.

Demonstrating respect and integrity means “getting the facts on the ground; not missing the mark” (Organisation 1 trial implementation report, 2022). The EDM framework guidelines describe respect and integrity as “following through with what you say and do...being genuine...[and]...modelling what you believe and having the fearlessness and confidence to face challenges” (from the EDM Framework guidelines).

In addition, the potential to use the Framework to work better with Aboriginal Community Organisations was also identified as a long term and strategic approach that could be tracked and evaluated through the Framework itself. The EDMF could be used to provide:

“a structure to thinking through what are the important dimensions of working with the Aboriginal Community and to check ourselves, as organisations, around the way in which we operate in each place” (Organisation 1 trial implementation report, 2022).

One organisation reported on their staff showing respect and integrity at one local site, where they engaged with an existing local Elders group. They were cognisant of when their presence was not necessary and so maintained a respectful distance until invited into a meeting or discussion by Elders.

Another organisation described how the Elders with whom they work co-designed a Memorandum of Understanding with a local Aboriginal Community organisation to ensure local cultural practices and priorities were highlighted. The CEO of this organisation is remunerated for those times when they input into the lead organisation’s governance committees, in recognition of their knowledge, Community standing and experience.

Another organisation provides localised cultural awareness training to staff as part of their onboarding processes to show respect for local Aboriginal knowledge and history:

Cultural awareness training is embedded into our onboarding process, with each new staff member participating in online training provided by Aboriginal Insights. This training is supplemented by in-person, regional specific training where available (Organisation 3 trial implementation report, 2022).

These criteria are interrelated, as they should be, in order to provide an overarching process that recognises the complex nature of relationships, the multifaceted operations of organisations, as well as Community engagement and respectfully navigating different worldviews.

## Discussion

Feedback from the co-researchers primarily focused on how the veracity of the organisations’ Excellence Criteria responses would be corroborated by the wider Aboriginal Community. The co-researchers were concerned that the findings of each organisation’s Excellence Criteria assessment process would only be relayed internally or documented in the organisation’s annual report, tender applications or other formal documentation.

Generally, the findings from the project showed that the three service organisations were and are still very keen to ensure greater transparency and accountability of engagement and service provision with their local Aboriginal communities. Of concern is the lack of any genuine progress and oversight in ensuring organisations receiving government funding are proficient, culturally safe and adequately prepared to work with Aboriginal people. This is of real and urgent concern to Aboriginal people for they have little or no agency in response to the provision of services they receive.

The Australian National Closing the Gap (CTG) Agreement is a national document that formalises partnerships between the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak Organisations and all Australian Governments ([Joint Council on Closing the Gap, 2020](#)). It outlines the need for a strong commitment from all parties to develop future policy in full and genuine partnership Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It asserts that parties will listen to the voices and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and prioritise reforms that include formal partnerships and shared decision-making. It includes a commitment to building the Aboriginal Community-Controlled Sector and transforming government organisations and their systemic and structural transformation to improve accountability and responsiveness to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### *Process drives successful outcomes*

What was clearly evident from the project findings is that both the co-design process and the trial implementation of the EDM Framework were successful. By using the *Debakarn Koorliny Wangkiny* methodology, steady, steady working together process, as the first step in the engagement phase, the conditions for meaningful relationships are realised, developed and sustained. The second step is for organisations and services to use the EDM Framework as a tool to self-assess the quality of their relationships with Aboriginal peoples and how effectively they are implementing the changes needed to ensure meaningful relationships are sustained. The strength of the EDM Framework is that, in its design, it incorporates, privileges and recognises Aboriginal people's voice as an equal partner in assessing the service organisations' cultural security and responsiveness. If this cannot be achieved within the first Excellence criterion, "Describe how your organisation has *meaningful relationships* with local Aboriginal Community(s) in the areas where your services are delivered", then an organisation is not able to say that it is working effectively nor safely with Aboriginal people.

### *Accountability and responsibility and reciprocity: Core ethical values*

The recognisable functionality of the EDM Framework to both respond to the organisation and Aboriginal Community needs ensures a collective and shared decision-making process. The co-researchers, that is, Elders and Community members, stated the need for organisations to prioritise and ensure feedback to the Community via a public forum and that this was non-negotiable. Public forums are considered an essential medium for this provides Community members with the opportunity to interrogate organisations on their

claims. Taking this action would be a demonstration of the Accountability and Responsibility criterion and would also provide an opportunity to further build on and strengthen the organisation's relationships with Aboriginal Communities. Transparency, and importantly their presence, provides a more authentic approach to service provision.

The implementation of the DKW methodology and EDM framework with the three organisations has allowed for more sustainable and valued partnership with the Aboriginal Elders and Community members. Based on the positive outcomes of the trial implementation it is possible to provide culturally safe services for Aboriginal people. Through the implementation of the EDM Framework there is a high likelihood that it will have wider applicability when used in conjunction with DKW.

To achieve better outcomes that close the gap for Australian First Nations peoples and ultimately decolonise current operational models so as to re-design how services and organisations work, an ambitious approach is both necessary and urgently required. The EDM Framework offers a pathway and approach for real change and improvements in responding directly to the needs of Community.

### *Project limitations and challenges*

The COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak at the time of the EDM project. This significantly limited the then Health Minister's capacity to consider the proposal and to participate as was originally planned, given the priorities they faced in containing the pandemic. The project plan was revised to avoid further delays to the proposed timeline. The three non-government mainstream organisations agreed to be involved in the project in place of government participants. Both the service organisations and the Perth Co-researcher group authorised the revised project plan moving forward.

Vaccination rates amongst Aboriginal populations in regional areas of Western Australia were relatively low at the time, meaning communities were particularly vulnerable to exposure to COVID-19. Therefore, it was not possible to involve Aboriginal communities outside of the Perth metropolitan area in this project. Aboriginal Community members from regional areas were involved in the Framework trial through their engagement with the regional sites of the three participating non-government agencies. These factors remind us of the dire need to ensure engagement with Aboriginal communities is facilitated in more reasonable times outside of these crises so that efforts to engage during crises are meaningful and well-established.

Despite the restricted capacity to meet regularly face-to-face and other challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing meetings were held with each organisation throughout the trial to help them establish a relevant and tailored process for meaningfully capturing their stories and information needed to respond to the Excellence Criteria.

### **Conclusion: A call to action**

Ethical decision-making practices in First Nations contexts are not possible without meaningful relationships and genuine reciprocity. For organisational policies, plans and

frameworks to have a tangible, positive and measurable impact on the lives of Aboriginal people, it is essential that Elders and Community members lead the design, implementation and evaluation of these strategies. For the implementation of the EDM Framework to be effective and authentic, Elders and Community members must be involved in preparing an organisation's responses to the Excellence Criteria and determining next steps; staff must engage in ongoing critical reflection with peers and Aboriginal Community members; all stakeholders must make time and space for the relational over the transactional; and, organisations need to share the learnings and outcomes from applying the EDM framework with the wider Aboriginal Community.

The three organisations, backed by their leadership, took the 'risk' of being open and exploratory in their participation in this project. Particularly encouraging was their willingness to apply the framework in a reflective and reflexive manner, as all three organisations have recognised there is a need to change aspects of their work to improve service provision for Aboriginal people. The intention to integrate the framework as part of their ongoing operations beyond this trial implementation is encouraging.

This project found the EDM Framework to be a powerful tool to integrate relational service provision into organisations. Staff confirmed the positive impact on their relationships with Aboriginal clients, driven by their renewed focus on accountability. The EDM Framework could be used by a broad range of service organisations to first evaluate their cultural security levels and second to follow the guidelines to build staff confidence, competency and capacity. The success of the EDM Framework's implementation depends significantly on their agreement to work in a *bididiya-to-bididiya* (meaning "boss-to-boss" in Nyoongar) way with Elders to ensure a high-level of leadership and commitment that aligns with Aboriginal cultural protocols.

In closing, one organisation's reflections about feeding back to the Community serves as a reminder that to work relationally is to remain authentic, honest and accountable:

I think we all have a responsibility as service providers to report back what hasn't worked. Because ... if we just report back that we're fantastic and we've met the KPIs, then the tenders and the opportunities don't change to acknowledge the things that aren't working in the Community. So, it's a really important part of that process (Organisation 3 trial implementation report, 2022).

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## Note

1. We recognise and pay our respects to Australia's First Peoples. Before colonisation, Australia had many Nations now referred to as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We acknowledge that First Nations sovereignty was never ceded and that their laws and customs continue strongly despite the impact of colonisation. We acknowledge the land and waters on which we conduct our research, *Wadjuk Nyoongar Boodja*, and pay our respects to the traditional custodians and Elders past, present and emerging. In this paper we refer sometimes to *Nyoongar* people and other times more generally to Aboriginal people, recognising that not all Aboriginal people living on *Wadjuk Nyoongar Boodja* (Country) are *Nyoongar*. We use the phrase First Nations to respectfully encompass Indigenous and First Peoples globally. We also capitalise 'Country' and 'Community' to demonstrate our respect for First Nations enduring connection to land and waters.

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