

FRAMEWORK FOR THE GOVERNANCE OF INDIGENOUS DATA: HUMANITIES, ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INDIGENOUS RESEARCH DATA COMMONS

An output of Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities
and the Language Data Commons of Australia.

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Indigenous
Data Network

LDaCA
Language Data Commons of Australia



THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
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FRAMEWORK FOR THE GOVERNANCE OF INDIGENOUS DATA: HUMANITIES, ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INDIGENOUS RESEARCH DATA COMMONS

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Image – Marc Grimwaade / ARDC

FOREWORD

By Grant Sarra

The empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in all our diversity, to overcome the myriad structural disadvantages that curtail lives and diminish quality of life is a multifaceted challenge that demands a range of tailored, strategic efforts, backed by the resources required to sustain them. Across Indigenous Australia, there has always been a burgeoning demand for locally informed practical tools that accurately identify, on our own terms, the priorities that will most improve our life outcomes.

In the context of authentically Closing the Gap, I know that how we work together matters as much as the policies we produce. As one of many who have helped facilitate these conversations, I commend all who have come together with the right hearts and minds to transcend the problems we face and to develop the Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data as a powerful vehicle for Indigenous-led solutions. Emerging from three years of rich, culturally respectful and kinship-led consultation and collaboration, it stands as a critical tool for Indigenous peoples to optimise the governance, collection, access and use of data to support our collective empowerment.

The journey towards this Framework has been marked by robust discourse and a shared commitment to actionable solutions. Through co-design workshops and extensive dialogue with stakeholders from academia, government, and Indigenous communities, a clear mandate has emerged: *the need for Indigenous-led governance frameworks that are both implementable and adaptable to the diverse needs of communities across time*. When our communities are at the centre of decisions, and when data is treated as part of our living relationship to Country, kin and culture, it becomes a force for self-determination rather than another instrument of deficit and surveillance. Over the three years of consultation and collaboration, many people have shaped this Framework into a shared vision for how data about us—and data that affects us—should be governed in line with our rights, values and aspirations.

This Framework is more than a technical document; it is a vital tool for Indigenous peoples seeking to strengthen our own governance and ensure that the collection, access, and use of data are conducted with our authority and for our benefit. It lays out a path for us to move from being merely the subjects of data to its authors and custodians, so that information becomes a resource for accountability, community priorities, and nation-building, not just a record of our disadvantage.

Our deep disappointment and frustration with the Closing the Gap reports have driven us to confront long-standing problems in the data and reporting on social and economic indicators used to respond to the stark inequities faced by Indigenous Australians. The lack of satisfactory progress against the targets prompted a revised Closing the Gap strategy that explicitly addressed how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had been sidelined in deciding how to meet those targets. On the ground, at the local and regional levels, the people doing the hard work of improving life outcomes often have little access to relevant data and minimal resources or support to bring datasets together to inform local priorities.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has taken important steps to address this by creating the Regional Insights for Indigenous Communities website, which brings together regional statistics on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities. This is a significant step forward, even as we recognise there is still a long way to go.

The 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap, developed through the National Federation Reform Council and the Coalition of Peaks, is built around four Priority Reforms. Priority Reform Four acknowledges that access to regionally disaggregated data is essential if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are to make informed decisions about our lives and futures. It aims to ensure that our people have access to and the capability to work with locally relevant data, so we can set and monitor efforts to close the gap, determine our own priorities, and drive our own development.

Five years on from the establishment of the HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons, this Framework stands as a beacon for where we need to go next: a future in which Indigenous peoples' rights and interests are actively upheld in data governance. It is a clear call to action for institutions, researchers and practitioners to engage meaningfully with Indigenous knowledge systems and to honour self-determination as a guiding principle in our shared digital landscape.

This Framework will be a powerful tool for those committed to the authentic empowerment of Indigenous Australians. It will support communities in defining their own priorities using trustworthy data and evidence, and in identifying local and regional targets that reflect their specific needs and aspirations. Crucially, the new targets and indicators include measures of our cultural and linguistic wellbeing, which are central to sustaining and strengthening our cultures and languages for future generations.

Ultimately, the validation of our rights depends on our ability to create real, tangible change in our daily lives. This Framework sets out how data users—both Indigenous data custodians and others—can adopt approaches that make them genuine partners in shaping regional outcomes and improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

THIS FRAMEWORK IS MORE THAN A TECHNICAL DOCUMENT; IT IS A VITAL TOOL FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES SEEKING TO STRENGTHEN OUR OWN GOVERNANCE AND ENSURE THAT THE COLLECTION, ACCESS, AND USE OF DATA ARE CONDUCTED WITH OUR AUTHORITY AND FOR OUR BENEFIT.

Grant Sarra,
Bachelor of Business (Public Sector Management),
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Grant Sarra has facilitated stakeholder engagement events for the ARDC HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons since 2021.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data has been developed to guide ethical, inclusive, and culturally grounded data practices across the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, and Indigenous Research Data Commons (HASS and Indigenous RDC).

It responds to long-standing calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for greater control over data that affects their lives, lands, cultures, and futures. The Framework is the result of extensive consultation, co-design, and collaboration with Indigenous data custodians, researchers, institutions, and policymakers. It is intended to be adopted across all HASS and Indigenous RDC activities.

This Framework affirms that Indigenous data governance is essential to Indigenous self-determination. It defines Indigenous data as information generated by, about, or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, encompassing cultural, ecological, linguistic, genealogical, and community-generated knowledge. The Framework recognises that all data - whether held by governments, institutions, or communities - has implications for Indigenous peoples and must be governed in ways that respect Indigenous rights, laws, and relational worldviews.

The Framework is structured around three interrelated components: a Governance Model, a set of Governance Guidelines, and a Monitoring and Accountability structure. The Governance Model identifies five foundational elements:

- 1 RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS ASSETS**
- 2 PARTNERSHIP**
- 3 BUILDING CAPABILITIES**
- 4 SELF-DETERMINATION**
- 5 INCLUSIVE DATA ECOSYSTEM**

These elements underpin the Framework's guidelines and practices, which provide actionable strategies for institutions and communities to embed Indigenous governance across the data lifecycle.



Dr Rose Barrowcliffe, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Macquarie University and First Nations Archives Advisor, Queensland State Archives speaking at the Language Data Commons of Australia workshop on Repositories and Workspaces, 2024. — David Hannah / ARDC



The participants in the roundtable on Implementing Indigenous Data Licensing and Access, held at the University of Queensland on Jagera and Turrbal Country. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

The Framework is grounded in the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) and complements the FAIR Principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable).

Together, these principles offer a dual foundation for technical excellence and cultural integrity. The CARE Principles emphasise that data governance must be people and purpose-oriented, ensuring that Indigenous communities derive benefit from data, retain authority over its use, and are protected through ethical practices. The FAIR Principles support transparency, discoverability, and reuse of data assets, but must be applied in ways that do not compromise Indigenous rights or cultural protocols.

THE FRAMEWORK OUTLINES FIVE KEY GUIDELINES THAT ALIGN WITH THE FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS:

1 RECOGNISING INDIGENOUS DATA ASSETS

Institutions must identify and acknowledge Indigenous data assets and Indigenous-held data, respect Indigenous custodianship, and ensure that data is findable and accessible to Indigenous communities.

2 PARTNERING WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND ENTITIES

Ethical governance requires genuine partnerships that centre Indigenous leadership, priorities, and decision-making. Co-design, shared governance, and long-term relationships are essential.

3 BUILDING AND ENABLING DATA CAPABILITIES

Indigenous communities must be supported to strengthen their capacity to manage, interpret, and govern data. This includes training, infrastructure, and institutional reform.

4 SUPPORTING INDIGENOUS SELF-DETERMINATION IN DATA ACCESS AND USE

Indigenous communities must have the ability to access and use data in ways that align with their priorities and governance protocols.

5 BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE DATA ECOSYSTEM

Institutions must foster cultural safety, transparency, and accountability across all levels of data practice and, where appropriate, embed Indigenous knowledge systems and governance protocols.

The Framework also addresses systemic barriers to Indigenous participation in Australia's data environment, including legislative exclusions under the *Data Availability and Transparency Act 2022*. It calls for reforms to ensure that Indigenous data custodians are recognised, resourced, and empowered to participate in national data-sharing frameworks.

Implementation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms are embedded throughout the Framework. Regular reporting, public transparency, community feedback mechanisms, and independent evaluation will ensure that the Framework is implemented with integrity and responsiveness.

This Framework is not a static document. It provides a dynamic, practical approach designed to evolve in response to community needs, technological developments, and policy changes. It offers a principled and practical guide for transforming Australia's research infrastructure to support Indigenous data sovereignty, cultural revitalisation, and community empowerment.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PURPOSE AND SCOPE	8
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	10
Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Indigenous RDC	10
Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities (IIRC)	12
Language Data Commons of Australia (LDaCA)	13
INDIGENOUS DATA GOVERNANCE	14
What Is Indigenous Data?	14
Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance	15
Understanding Indigenous Data Governance in Community Settings	22
OVERVIEW OF THE FRAMEWORK	25
Recognition	26
Partnership	26
Capabilities	26
Self-Determination	27
Inclusivity	27
GOVERNANCE GUIDELINES AND PRACTICES FOR THE HASS AND INDIGENOUS RDC	28
Guideline 1 : Recognising Indigenous Data Assets	28
Guideline 2 : Partnering with Indigenous people and Entities	30
Guideline 3 : Build and Enable Data Capabilities	31
Guideline 4 : Indigenous Self-Determination: Data Access and Use	32
Guideline 5 : Building an Inclusive Data Ecosystem	33
IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY	34
Reporting and Transparency	35
Indigenous Community Accountability	35
Adaptive Governance and Continuous Improvement	35
Governance of the Indigenous Data Evaluation Matrix	35
CONCLUSION	37
ARTIST STATEMENT	38
TERMS, DEFINITIONS AND ACRONYMS	40
REFERENCES	41
APPENDIX 1: ATTRIBUTIONS	44
APPENDIX 2: EVALUATION MATRIX TOOL EXAMPLE	45

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The *Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data* has been developed to guide the ethical, inclusive, and effective management of Indigenous data within the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Indigenous Research Data Commons (HASS and Indigenous RDC). It responds to the growing recognition that Indigenous Data Governance is essential for enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to exercise their rights to self-determination, cultural authority, and equitable participation in research and data ecosystems.

The Framework is an output of the Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities (IIRC) and Language Data Commons of Australia (LDAaCA) focus areas of the HASS and Indigenous RDC, and the culmination of a series of lengthy consultations spanning three years. These consultations engaged beyond the HASS and Indigenous RDC communities, including external partners, stakeholders, and users of the digital research infrastructure in development. This consultation, which included discourse that was both robust and solutions-oriented, revealed an appetite to increase Indigenous Data Governance competencies and calls for implementable support.

Notably, in February 2024, the ARDC conducted two co-design workshops to shape plans for investment in the Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities focus area (Langton, Smith et al., 2025). These workshops were open to all and were attended by 80 participants from 29 organisations, including Australian universities, AIATSIS, CSIRO, GLAM, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, research data providers, the Federal Government, and peak bodies.

Participants at the co-design workshops called for:

- ▶ Indigenous-led design of governance frameworks
- ▶ Indigenous involvement in the implementation of frameworks
- ▶ Flexibility in implementing frameworks to handle the needs of diverse communities and changes over time.

Five years after the establishment of the HASS and Indigenous RDC, it is evident that we must establish a framework for the governance of Indigenous data to enable institutions, researchers, communities, data practitioners, and those aligned with the RDC to engage appropriately with Indigenous peoples' rights and interests.



Uncle Michael Williams (rightmost) leading a yarning circle at the ARDC HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons Summer School 2025. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC



Lachlan Walker, Community Researcher, Institute for Urban Indigenous Health, participating in the 2023 HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons Computational Skills Summer School. — Renee Nowytarger / ARDC

This Framework provides practical guidance for institutions, researchers, data custodians, and infrastructure providers engaged in HASS and Indigenous RDC activities. It outlines a governance model, five key guidelines, and a set of monitoring and evaluation practices that support the responsible stewardship of Indigenous data. These components are designed to ensure that Indigenous communities are meaningfully involved at every stage of the data lifecycle—from creation and collection to access, analysis, interpretation, and reuse.

The Framework is grounded in the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) and complements the FAIR Principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable). Together, these principles provide a dual foundation for technical excellence and cultural integrity in data practice.

The scope of this Framework includes:

- ▶ Indigenous data generated by, about, or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- ▶ Data held by research institutions, government agencies, GLAM organisations, and other entities participating in the HASS and Indigenous RDC
- ▶ Governance practices that support Indigenous-led decision-making, capability building, and inclusive data ecosystems
- ▶ Alignment with national policy frameworks, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and relevant laws and legislative instruments.



The Governance Model provides a conceptualisation on which the guidelines and practices are framed. The five elements considered within this model are: Recognition of Indigenous data assets, Partnership, Building capabilities, Self-determination, and Inclusive data ecosystem. These elements guide the Governance Guidelines and Practices, which provide further detail and methods to strengthen Indigenous data governance when working with or managing projects involving Indigenous data. The Evaluation Matrix is designed to support assessment of the Framework for each user, ensuring robust monitoring and accountability measures are in place.

This Framework is intended to be adopted across all HASS and Indigenous RDC focus areas and projects, and to inform broader efforts to embed Indigenous Data Governance within Australia’s national digital research infrastructure.



Uncle Michael Williams, Gooreng Gooreng man and former head of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies unit at the University of Queensland, speaking at the 2024 HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons Summer School in Melbourne on Wurundjeri Country. — David Hannah / ARDC



Professor Sandra Phillips, Associate Dean (Indigenous), Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne, speaking at Bringing Data to Life: Co-Designing a Language Data Commons in 2022. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Indigenous RDC

The ARDC drives the development of world-class national digital research infrastructure that gives Australian researchers a competitive advantage through data and creates impact by enabling world-class data-intensive research. The ARDC facilitates access to nationally significant research data sets and tools from academia, industry and government for all Australian researchers through a research data commons model (RDC) that brings together people, skills, data and related resources, such as storage, compute, software, and models, within an integrated research infrastructure ecosystem. It runs programs and forms partnerships that ensure Australian researchers are internationally competitive by providing access to high-quality data assets, platforms, infrastructure, policies, people, and training to transform our lives. The ARDC is enabled by the Australian Government's National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS).

Research data generated in the HASS disciplines are essential to enhancing our understanding of culture, society, and human wellbeing. In 2021, the HASS and Indigenous RDC were established by the ARDC in partnership with the research community to create comprehensive national digital and research data infrastructure capabilities. Focus areas within the HASS and Indigenous RDC include:

- ▶ Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities (IIRC)
- ▶ Language Data Commons of Australia (LDaCA)
- ▶ Social Science Research Infrastructure Network (SSRIN)
- ▶ ARDC Community Data Lab (CDL)
- ▶ Australian Creative Histories and Futures (ACHF)
- ▶ Australian Internet Observatory (AIO)

THE ARDC DRIVES THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORLD-CLASS NATIONAL DIGITAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE THAT GIVES AUSTRALIAN RESEARCHERS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE THROUGH DATA AND CREATES IMPACT BY ENABLING WORLD-CLASS DATA-INTENSIVE RESEARCH.

The HASS and Indigenous RDC partnerships support HASS and Indigenous research communities by:

- ▶ breaking down barriers to data discovery, access, sharing, use and governance
- ▶ driving culture change in data sharing and collaboration to support ethical, culturally safe, and best-practice data use
- ▶ accelerating the usage of digital research platforms for easier, faster, and more impactful research
- ▶ fostering cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary partnerships through collaborative infrastructure projects, federated models and shared governance
- ▶ promoting Indigenous Data Governance, self-determination and the FAIR and CARE principles
- ▶ building Australia's leadership in HASS and in global Indigenous digital research infrastructure.

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of Indigenous Data Governance, the landscape of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research data assets and infrastructure in Australia remains fragmented and under-resourced, exposing them to risks of loss and significantly constraining data discovery, access, and use.

Indigenous people have expressed their concerns about the state of their data assets and infrastructure, pointing to their need for resources and measures to:

- ▶ build their digital and data infrastructure ecosystems
- ▶ strengthen capabilities to identify and prioritise their research needs
- ▶ access to data held by government and corporate data custodians to enable data-sharing and analysis
- ▶ improved data collection and analysis
- ▶ digitise pre-digital archives and records
- ▶ safely and securely store data.

(FLA, 2015; Lowitja Institute, 2023, 2024; Rose et al., 2023; Woods, 2023)

To ensure ethical, inclusive, and effective data practice, all activities within the HASS and Indigenous RDC must actively reflect and uphold the principles of Indigenous Data Governance. The ARDC is internationally recognised for its leadership in promoting the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) (Wilkinson et al., 2016), and is committed to advancing the CARE principles (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) (Carroll et al., 2020) in relation to Indigenous data. These principles are not discretionary; they are essential to responsible data stewardship. While the FAIR principles guide data practice across thematic RDCs (HASS and Indigenous, People and Planet), there is a further imperative to embed CARE alongside FAIR, particularly in the governance of data created by or about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The HASS and Indigenous RDC play a critical role in advancing the cultural and social dimensions of research and addressing national challenges. By upholding the FAIR and CARE principles, it supports the preservation of Indigenous knowledge and data and actively contributes to the development of robust Indigenous data governance frameworks.

INTERNATIONALLY, THE IIRC ARCHITECTURE SETS A PRECEDENT FOR EMBEDDING INDIGENOUS DATA GOVERNANCE IN DIGITAL RESEARCH SYSTEMS

Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities (IIRC)

This Framework draws on the work of the HASS and Indigenous RDC focus area 'Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities: Building an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research Data Commons'. This project, led by Melbourne Laureate Professor Marcia Langton (Co-Chair, Indigenous Data Network, University of Melbourne), is developing an Indigenous research capability program that celebrates, supports and enhances the capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and entities, and researchers at the interface of research data science and Indigenous knowledge systems.

The IIRCs technical architecture is underpinned by a suite of interoperable tools and resources developed by the Indigenous Data Network, accessible via idnau.org. These include the IDN Metadata Profile, Metadata Entry Tool, IDN Catalogue, IDN Vocabularies, Catalogue Profile, and Agents Database - each designed to operationalise Indigenous Data Governance (IDG) principles in digital environments. Together, they form a federated infrastructure that enables Indigenous data custodians to manage, describe, and share data in ways that reflect Indigenous priorities, legal rights, and cultural protocols. The architecture supports decentralised governance by linking repositories and catalogues without centralising raw data, thereby preserving local control.



Melbourne Laureate Professor Dr Marcia Langton AO, BA (Hons), ANU, PhD Macq. U, D. Litt. ANU, FASSA, Associate Provost, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, The University of Melbourne, speaking at a workshop on Repositories and Workspaces, 2024. — David Hannah / ARDC

The system is built on semantic web and knowledge graph principles, allowing metadata to be machine-readable, extensible, and aligned with FAIR and CARE standards. The FAIR and CARE Calculator and Catalogue Profile provide mechanisms for assessing metadata quality and governance compliance. At the same time, the AgentsDB supports attribution and provenance tracking for Indigenous knowledge holders and contributors. These tools are embedded across all project streams, from digitisation and cataloguing of endangered archives to spatio-temporal mapping and repository development, ensuring that Indigenous data governance is not an add-on but a foundational component of the infrastructure.

Internationally, the IIRC architecture sets a precedent for embedding Indigenous data governance in digital research systems. Its integration of multilingual spatial datasets and distributed licensing (e.g. via REMS) demonstrates how technical systems can be designed to uphold Indigenous rights and cultural integrity. Collaborations with Ainu and Makassan institutions and European partners such as CNRS and the Musée du Quai Branly extend the architecture's influence, offering a globally relevant model for ethical, rights-based, and culturally secure data governance. The IIRC infrastructure is not only nationally transformative—it is internationally leading. The work of the IIRC focus area has directly informed the development of the Framework, providing both the conceptual foundation and practical tooling required to embed Indigenous Data Governance across national research infrastructure.

Language Data Commons of Australia (LDA CA)

This Framework also draws on the work of the HASS and Indigenous RDC focus area, 'Language Data Commons of Australia' (LDA CA). Australia is a massively multilingual country in one of the world's most linguistically diverse regions and is home to the world's oldest continuous living cultures. The LDA CA project, which is led by Professor Michael Haugh (University of Queensland), aims to establish a nationally distributed research infrastructure for languages in Australia and its region, while also securing at-risk collections, and ensuring the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of Australia and its region is available for analysis, reuse and repurposing by researchers and communities now and into the future. A key objective is to make nationally significant data available for use while providing a model for ensuring continued access with appropriate community control.

LDA CA has built a sustainable archiving infrastructure based on the Oxford Common File Layout (OCFL) standard and the RO-Crate metadata and packaging standard, as described in the Protocols for Implementing Long-term Archival Repositories Services (PILARS). The technical architecture of LDA CA supports the most flexible data linkage while balancing the requirement that metadata be machine-readable with the practical imperative that it must also remain human-readable. Access and authorisation are handled by the REMs resource management package and CILogon alongside the facilities of the Australian Access Federation (Sefton et al., 2023; Foley et al., 2024). An extensible metadata profile, based on schema.org principles and including categories from the OLAC metadata scheme, has been developed and is implemented in a tool for editing metadata to create RO-Crates (Crate-O). Access to language data is provided via a portal application (Oni), built to display metadata from RO-Crates, with indexing of relevant fields and support for faceted search. The app can be used with any data packaged with RO-Crates, which means that the LDA CA data portal can provide federated access to materials distributed across different archival repositories implemented in different (proprietary) systems. LDA CA has also developed an integrated analytics environment for researchers to create fully described, reproducible research on written, spoken, multimodal and signed text in accordance with Open Science principles, and aligned with community expectations for research of practical benefit, as well as providing advice and training for researchers and communities (Haugh et al., 2025).

Indigenous languages and cultures are central to LDA CA's social and technical architecture. LDA CA is committed to ensuring that language data is made available in ways that meet community expectations, in line with the maxims of 'as open as possible, as closed as necessary' and 'respectful sharing'. LDA CA employs the CAREful FAIRness Implementation Principles for language and cultural data to ensure its collections are managed and made available in ways that are appropriate to Indigenous community expectations (McLellan et al., 2025, forthcoming; Sefton et al., 2023). These principles are designed to maximise Sustainability, Transparency, Autonomy, Accountability and Contextualisability in the secure, sharing, reuse and repurposing of language and cultural data. These implementation principles have been iteratively developed and tested through multiple, ongoing relationship-centred collaborations with Indigenous communities and Indigenous-controlled organisations, and they are realised through the underlying social and technical architecture of LDA CA. The infrastructure developed by LDA CA is nationally transformative and internationally leading in providing practical, on-the-ground demonstrations of how a national research infrastructure can respectfully address the attested needs and expectations of Indigenous communities and stakeholders (McLellan et al., 2026, forthcoming).

LDA CA IS COMMITTED TO ENSURING THAT LANGUAGE DATA IS MADE AVAILABLE IN WAYS THAT MEET COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS, IN LINE WITH THE MAXIMS OF 'AS OPEN AS POSSIBLE, AS CLOSED AS NECESSARY' AND 'RESPECTFUL SHARING'.

INDIGENOUS DATA GOVERNANCE

What Is Indigenous Data?

Indigenous data encompasses a broad and evolving category of information that reflects the lived experiences, knowledge systems, and governance priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. According to the Indigenous Data Network (IDN), Indigenous data refers to:

Data generated, intentionally or not, by, about, or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Indigenous data refers to information, in any format or medium, collected, analysed, stored, and interpreted within the context of Indigenous individuals, collectives, populations, entities, lifeways, cultures, knowledge systems, lands, biodiversity, water and other resources. It includes data collected, used, or stored by any agency, department, laboratory, organisation, corporation, statutory body, university or research institute, conducted by, with, and about Indigenous people or people, and data that Indigenous communities have generated and maintained themselves. (Indigenous Data Network, 2024).

This definition highlights several key dimensions:

SCOPE

Indigenous data is not limited to demographic or statistical information. It includes cultural, ecological, linguistic, genealogical, and community-generated knowledge, whether digitised or held in oral, visual, or material forms.

CONTEXTUALITY

The meaning and significance of Indigenous data are shaped by Indigenous worldviews, relationships, and responsibilities. Data must be understood within the cultural, historical, and political contexts in which it is produced and used.

MULTIPLICITY OF SOURCES

Indigenous data may be held by governments, research institutions, corporations, or Indigenous organisations. It includes both externally generated data and data created and maintained by Indigenous communities themselves.

RELATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Indigenous data is not simply about representation—it is about control, access, and accountability. Indigenous communities have the right to determine how data about them is collected, interpreted, and used, in accordance with their laws, values, and governance structures.

This definition of Indigenous data is both expansive and relational, which is critical to ethical and culturally appropriate data practices. It also supports the principles of Indigenous data governance, facilitating the restoration of authority and agency to Indigenous people over the data that affects their lives and futures.

However, it is also important to note that all Australian data is relevant to Indigenous Australians, who form a minority in the general Australian population. Data linkage will be necessary in most circumstances to measure inequity for initiatives under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to measure social and economic indicators, and for many types of research.



Nola Turner-Jensen, Research Fellow - Indigenous Knowledge Institute at The University of Melbourne, speaking at the Implementing Indigenous Data Licensing and Access workshop in 2023. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

THE CONCEPT OF INDIGENOUS DATA SOVEREIGNTY HAS EMERGED AS A POWERFUL MANIFESTO FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' RIGHTS TO CONTROL DATA RELATED TO THEIR COMMUNITIES, CULTURES, LANDS, AND KNOWLEDGES.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance

The concept of Indigenous data sovereignty has emerged as a powerful manifesto for Indigenous peoples' rights to control data related to their communities, cultures, lands, and knowledges. It is grounded in the broader political and cultural struggle for self-determination and the reclamation of authority over Indigenous knowledge systems (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). In Australia, the movement has gained momentum in response to the historical and ongoing extraction, misrepresentation, and mismanagement of Indigenous data by state and institutional actors (Rose, Langton, Smith, & Clinch, 2023).

While the language of sovereignty may hold political resonance, it is also conceptually and legally fraught. In contexts such as Australia, the state does not formally recognise Indigenous sovereignty and, as such, the concept lacks enforceable legal standing. This creates a fundamental tension: Indigenous communities may assert sovereignty over data, but without institutional mechanisms to uphold these claims, sovereignty remains largely symbolic. Moreover, in the international context, nation-states assert their national sovereignty over data to protect themselves from other nations and other actors that may attempt to obtain or access to them. This is a matter of high priority in the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development Working Group on Data Governance at All Levels. The rights of Indigenous peoples with respect to data are addressed, including concerns about whether current intellectual property regimes adequately protect collectively held knowledge, including that of Indigenous peoples and local communities, from misappropriation or unauthorised commercialisation.

The concept of sovereignty, traditionally associated with supreme authority, independence, and self-governance within defined territorial boundaries, has been a foundation of international law and political theory. In the Westphalian model of nation-states, sovereignty encompasses territorial integrity, legal authority, and the principle of non-intervention. However, applying this concept to Indigenous contexts, particularly when addressing Indigenous data, presents significant theoretical and practical challenges.

The transposition of traditional concepts of sovereignty to data governance encounters several epistemological and ontological obstacles. The digital nature of data transcends geographical boundaries, complicating jurisdictional delineations. Further, the frequent traversal of data across multiple legal jurisdictions problematises the assertion of exclusive sovereign control. This complexity is particularly acute for Indigenous people, whose existence within nation-states that claim overarching sovereignty creates conflicts asserting data rights. The intangible and fluid nature of data further challenges conventional notions of possession and control central to the discourse of sovereignty. Finally, and most importantly, in Australia, data are held by government-authorised data custodians under Australian law. Hence, the data custodians have substantial ownership and control rights over the data. In national data schemes and frameworks, Indigenous data is rarely recognised, thus the likelihood of Indigenous peoples or entities successfully claiming ownership and control over such data is low. For example, Australia's *Data Availability and Transparency Act 2022* (DAT Act) does not include any mention of Indigenous people, Indigenous data or data relating to Indigenous people and fails to facilitate Indigenous entities or individuals entry to the data sharing scheme.



Visiting the Queensland Memory Collection of the State Library of Queensland during the ARDC Indigenous Data Governance Masterclass 2025. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

The concept of sovereignty also carries a complex and contentious historical legacy, particularly in Indigenous contexts. Rooted in European political philosophy, sovereignty has been instrumentalised to justify colonial expansion and the dispossession of Indigenous lands and rights. The Doctrine of Discovery, for instance, was employed to assert colonial sovereignty over Indigenous territories, effectively negating pre-existing Indigenous sovereignty claims (Miller, 2006). As such, the contemporary adoption of the discourse of sovereignty by Indigenous peoples presents a paradox. This appropriation could be interpreted as a form of discursive resistance, one that reclaims and redefines a concept central to historical oppression. However, critics argue that employing the term 'sovereignty' may inadvertently validate a concept fundamentally at odds with many Indigenous worldviews, which often emphasise interconnectedness, stewardship, and collective responsibility over notions of absolute authority and territorial control (Bauder & Mueller, 2023; Flores, 2025).



ARDC Indigenous Data Governance Masterclass participants interacting with Indigenous materials during a tour of the Queensland Memory Collection of the State Library of Queensland in 2025. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

In sum, the application of 'sovereignty' in Indigenous contexts can be viewed as an attempt to translate Indigenous rights and governance into terms recognisable within Western legal and political frameworks. While this approach may offer pragmatic advantages in engaging with state systems, it risks oversimplifying or misrepresenting the nuanced and diverse ways in which Indigenous peoples themselves conceptualise their rights and relationships to land, resources, and data. In practice, Indigenous data sovereignty generally denotes a form of qualified sovereignty; a negotiated authority over data existing within overarching state structures.

The right of peoples to self-determination is a foundational principle of international law, affirmed in the Charter of the United Nations and codified in Article 1 of both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.¹ It is a collective right enabling peoples to determine their political status and direct their economic, social and cultural development. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) confirms that Indigenous peoples hold this right on an equal footing with all peoples (article 3) and defines its practical content as autonomy and self-government in matters of internal and local affairs (article 4).² In Australia, the effective realisation of self-determination requires the decision-making authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. International law frames self-determination as a continuing process of participation, authority and recognition.³



Dr Andrea Clarke from the Improving Indigenous Research Capability, presenting at the 2026 HASS and Indigenous RDC Summer School in Ballarat.
— Michelle McFarlane / ARDC



As an alternative to 'sovereignty', then, Indigenous data governance offers a pragmatic and more culturally appropriate framework for addressing the complex challenges of data management in Indigenous contexts, but one based on the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination. This approach centres on the practical aspects of managing, controlling, and utilising data, which are core concerns for Indigenous people. The concept of 'governance' inherently provides the flexibility required to encompass a wide range of practices, principles, and systems that reflect diverse Indigenous approaches to data management. Governance approaches align with collaborative methodologies, facilitating work within existing legal and political frameworks while robustly asserting Indigenous rights and interests. Importantly, 'governance' resonates strongly with Indigenous concepts of stewardship, responsibility, and collective decision-making, ensuring cultural appropriateness. This framing encourages productive and inclusive discussions about Indigenous data rights by focusing on practical management rather than abstract legal concepts.

- 1 Charter of the United Nations arts 1(2), 55; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 999 UNTS 171 (entered into force 23 March 1976) art 1; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 993 UNTS 3 (entered into force 3 January 1976) art 1.
- 2 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, GA Res 61/295, UN GAOR, 61st sess, 107th plen mtg, UN Doc A/RES/61/295 (13 September 2007) arts 3–4.
- 3 See Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, UN Doc A/CONF.157/24 (25 June 1993) pt I [2]; Human Rights Committee, General Comment No 12: Article 1 (Right to Self-Determination), UN Doc HRI/GEN/1/Rev.9 (1984).

SOVEREIGNTY, AS A CONCEPT, PRESUPPOSES A BINARY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STATE; EITHER RECOGNISED OR DENIED. GOVERNANCE, BY CONTRAST, IS A RELATIONAL, ITERATIVE, AND ADAPTABLE PROCESS.

While we do not dispute the Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles as abstract rights, in the absence of Australian policy and legislation recognising the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, our concern is to map out practical pathways, based on the Indigenous right to self-determination, to effective Indigenous data governance, greater recognition of Indigenous data assets and Indigenous ownership of, and rights in data, and the rights of Indigenous people as data custodians, their legal rights to use, share, store and report such data and compliance with their decisions about data use. The credibility of this Framework lies in its effectiveness in enabling greater empowerment of Indigenous peoples by recognising their rights in data and the data-driven pursuit of their social and cultural wellbeing and improved political status.

Framing Indigenous data management in terms of governance has significant implications for the discourse and practice of Indigenous data rights and management. This approach facilitates more constructive dialogues with governments, institutions, and other stakeholders by focusing on practical implementation and collaborative solutions. It enables the development of nuanced, culturally appropriate frameworks that accurately reflect the diverse ways in which Indigenous communities approach data and knowledge management. These include access and control over stranded data assets held by government agencies (Rose et al., 2023); navigating jurisdictional ambiguity within non-Indigenous institutions (Carroll et al., 2019); embedding Indigenous epistemologies in metadata, classification, and archival systems (Weibe, 2026); and ensuring operational accountability beyond symbolic recognition (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

This distinction is not merely semantic. Sovereignty, as a concept, presupposes a binary relationship with the state; either recognised or denied. Governance, by contrast, is a relational, iterative, and adaptable process. It enables Indigenous communities to negotiate authority over data in a context-specific manner, grounded in Indigenous law, values, and relational worldviews. It also facilitates collaboration with institutions, researchers, and governments without relinquishing Indigenous control or compromising cultural integrity.

Indigenous data governance does not replace sovereignty: it operationalises it. It provides the tools and processes by which Indigenous communities can enact sovereignty in practice, even without formal legal recognition. While Indigenous data sovereignty remains a vital political and ethical claim, its practical limitations in the Australian context necessitate a shift toward governance. Indigenous data governance provides a framework that is both principled and actionable, enabling communities to exercise control over data in ways that reflect their laws, values, and aspirations. It is not a retreat from sovereignty, but a strategic reconfiguration: one that prioritises Indigenous agency, cultural integrity, and long-term data futures. Interpreting and presenting data to a relevant audience involves data linkage, which may involve linking Indigenous data assets to government-held data assets. This occurs, for instance, in the health sector when Aboriginal community-controlled health services link patient data to Medicare data. It also involves the enrichment and reconfiguration of metadata for Indigenous data assets and assets held by national and regional GLAM institutions. This occurs, for instance, when Indigenous communities and Indigenous-controlled organisations adapt and extend metadata schema for language and cultural data to align with Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems.



Associate Professor Kristen Smith, Indigenous Data Network, The University of Melbourne. — Michelle McFarlane / ARDC



Participant speaking at the 2026 ARDC HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons Summer School. — Michelle McFarlane / ARDC

The FAIR and CARE Principles

Two complementary sets inform the Framework of principles: the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance and the FAIR Principles for scientific data management and stewardship. Together, they provide a foundation for ethical, inclusive, and technically robust data practices across the HASS and Indigenous RDC.

THE CARE PRINCIPLES (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) were developed by the Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA) to reflect the unique rights and interests of Indigenous Peoples regarding data. These principles emphasise that data governance must be people- and purpose-oriented, ensuring that Indigenous communities derive benefit from data, retain authority over its use, and are protected through ethical practices (Carroll et al., 2020; GIDA, 2020).

COLLECTIVE BENEFIT

Data ecosystems shall be designed and function in ways that enable Indigenous Peoples to derive benefit from the data.

AUTHORITY TO CONTROL

Indigenous Peoples' rights and interests in Indigenous data must be recognised and their authority to control such data be empowered. Indigenous data governance enables Indigenous Peoples and governing bodies to determine how Indigenous Peoples, as well as Indigenous lands, territories, resources, knowledges and geographical indicators, are represented and identified within data.

RESPONSIBILITY

Those working with Indigenous data have a responsibility to share how those data are used to support Indigenous Peoples' self-determination and collective benefit. Accountability requires meaningful and openly available evidence of these efforts and the benefits accruing to Indigenous Peoples.

ETHICS

Indigenous Peoples' rights and wellbeing should be the primary concern at all stages of the data life cycle and across the data ecosystem. (GIDA 2020)

The CARE principles for Indigenous data governance (GIDA 2020) set out the following values and standards for custodians of Indigenous data:

THE FAIR PRINCIPLES (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) focus on the technical dimensions of data management and stewardship. Widely adopted across research infrastructure initiatives, FAIR promotes transparency, discoverability, and reuse of data assets to maximise research impact and innovation (Wilkinson et al., 2016). However, FAIR alone does not address the power dynamics, cultural sensitivities, or historical contexts that shape Indigenous data governance.

The CARE Principles underscore the "right to create value from Indigenous data in ways that are grounded in Indigenous worldviews and realise opportunities within the knowledge economy". They also reflect "the crucial role of data in advancing Indigenous innovation and self-determination" (Russo Carroll et al., 2018).

By integrating the CARE and FAIR principles, the Framework supports a dual approach: one that ensures data is technically sound and ethically governed, and that Indigenous communities are empowered to shape how data about them is created, accessed, and used.

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) refers to the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to control, protect, and benefit from their cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. Article 31 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* affirms these rights, encompassing cultural expressions, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and intellectual property derived from Indigenous sciences, technologies, and practices (UN General Assembly, 2007). In addition to affirming self-determination and free, prior, and informed consent, the Declaration calls for legal and policy safeguards that prevent harm to Indigenous knowledge systems and promote equitable economic opportunities.

**THIS FRAMEWORK AFFIRMS
INDIGENOUS RIGHTS TO MANAGE,
CONTROL, AND BENEFIT FROM
THEIR CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE
AND EXPRESSIONS.**



Robert McLellan, LDaCA and The University of Queensland, speaking at the 2025 ARDC Indigenous Data Masterclass. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

In Australia, ICIP currently lacks direct legislative protection (Janke, 2019). In response to these gaps, the Australian Government is drafting new stand-alone ICIP legislation, informed by the Productivity Commission's 2022 report on Indigenous visual arts and crafts. This legislation aims to address unauthorised use of Indigenous cultural expressions and establish enforceable rights for Indigenous communities. A staged approach is being taken, with initial focus on commercial misuse and broader ICIP protections to follow (Productivity Commission, 2022). The legislative process is being guided by a First Nations Expert Working Group, chaired by Dr Terri Janke, and established under the national cultural policy *Revive*. This group ensures that First Nations knowledge, or, to use the internationally recognised term, Indigenous knowledge systems, and 'lived experience' underpin the development of the legislation (Office for the Arts, 2024).

This framework affirms Indigenous rights to manage, control, and benefit from their cultural knowledge and expressions. It promotes integration with CARE and FAIR principles, ensuring data is findable, accessible (to those with appropriate rights), and reusable in ways that support community-defined values.

ICIP principles are central to this governance framework. While ICIP focuses on the protection of cultural and intellectual expressions, Indigenous Data Governance (IDG) provides the broader mechanism through which these rights are enacted, respected, and operationalised.



ARDC Indigenous Data Masterclass participants look at photobook collections from AIATSIS. Some participants were able to contribute valuable metadata. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

Closing the Gap Priority Reform Four

In Australia, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) outlines four Priority Reforms, including Priority Reform Four, which calls for shared access to data and information at a regional level. The Agreement recognises that Indigenous communities must have access to locally relevant data and the capability to use it to set priorities and monitor progress (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020 introduced a renewed framework for addressing disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Central to this framework are four Priority Reforms: (1) establishing formal partnerships that support Indigenous governance and decision-making; (2) strengthening the community-controlled sector through investment in infrastructure, workforce, and governance; (3) addressing institutional racism to ensure culturally safe service access; and (4) enabling Indigenous communities to access and use data to drive their own development. These reforms reflect the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are supported by new accountability measures and shared implementation responsibilities across governments.

Priority Reform Four emphasises the importance of access to regionally disaggregated and locally relevant data to support informed decision-making by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It outlines four expectations: establishing partnerships for improved data governance; ensuring communities have access to the same data used by governments; improving the granularity, accessibility, and timeliness of data; and building Indigenous capability in data collection and interpretation. While the reform sets a clear direction for data sharing and capacity building, the commitments made by governments, including recommendations from the Indigenous Data Network, were not embedded within the national Data and Availability and Transparency Act 2022, which was implemented to increase the availability of Australian Government data, highlighting a critical gap between policy intent and implementation (Indigenous Data Network 2022).

The Productivity Commission's review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2024) also found that governments have failed to prioritise the Agreement's reform agenda. The report highlights the urgent need for robust Indigenous data governance frameworks to support meaningful implementation. The review noted that Indigenous data sovereignty remains a foundational principle, yet emphasised that governance mechanisms are essential for translating sovereignty ideals into actionable strategies for Indigenous communities.

Key findings from the Review included:

- ▶ Shared decision-making commitments are rarely realised in practice.
- ▶ Government policy does not adequately reflect the value of the community-controlled sector.
- ▶ Organisational transformation within government shows little evidence of progress.
- ▶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data initiatives are not sufficiently enabled.
- ▶ Performance reporting offers only a partial view of progress.
- ▶ Insufficient accountability mechanisms to deliver on the Agreement's commitments (Productivity Commission, 2024).

The HASS and Indigenous RDC community support the critique outlined by the Productivity Commission review. The need to develop a competent and inclusive data ecosystem is central to the governance model introduced in the following section.

The Productivity Commission review also recommended additional commitments to drive systemic change. Among other suggestions, they proposed a Bureau of Indigenous Data to advance Indigenous data governance and support data development aligned with the Agreement. However, this initiative was not endorsed by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap (Joint Council, 2024).

Understanding Indigenous Data Governance in Community Settings

Research collaborations and partnerships with Indigenous people, communities and corporations are increasingly common to fulfil Indigenous aspirations for their Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights in data creation and collection, and to address their right to determine their priorities and cultural, social and economic investments in research projects. These rights are recognised in several ways through institutional ethics guidelines and processes, including the AIATSIS (2020) Code of Ethics and the NHMRC (2025) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, as well as in the evolving Indigenous data governance environment. Understanding Indigenous data governance in community settings is therefore important for enhancing data capacity. It is inevitable that the roles of researchers and other personnel in HASS and Indigenous RDC projects will evolve beyond contractual partnerships for access to Aboriginal communities and populations, and beyond extractive research practices in favour of capacity-building activities for Indigenous participants in research. Several universities and research institutes are recognised data users under the terms of the *DAT Act*. They are therefore able to access data collected by government agencies, such as health, education, employment, and environmental conservation departments, as well as police and correctional services. However, Indigenous community-controlled corporations rarely have access to such data, reflecting ongoing structural inequalities in access to data. Yet they aspire to do so not only to understand trends in their social and economic status but also to improve their data capacity through data linkage projects.

In the evolving landscape of Indigenous affairs, data has emerged as a critical resource for self-determination and community development. Greater access to data and information is critical for Indigenous community corporations to deliver targeted and successful programs. Maximising access and use of public sector data from both federal and state governments is therefore critical in ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can aggregate datasets that reflect their community priorities.

There is a general trend towards digitisation and more sophisticated data management systems, yet the maturity and capacity of data ecosystems vary significantly. This variation is influenced by factors such as organisational age, size, and the specific services provided. For instance, newer organisations established in the digital era demonstrate different data management trajectories than their older counterparts, which have transitioned from paper-based systems. One example of a rapidly maturing data ecosystem is that of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service in Queensland, which has worked closely with the School of Computer Science at the Queensland University of Technology.⁴ Another example of a rapidly maturing data ecosystem is that of the Anindilyakwa Land Council in the Northern Territory which commissioned a comprehensive report from the First Nations Portfolio of the Australian National University (First Nations Portfolio, Australian National University, 2022).

IT IS INEVITABLE THAT THE ROLES OF RESEARCHERS AND OTHER PERSONNEL IN HASS AND INDIGENOUS RDC PROJECTS WILL EVOLVE BEYOND CONTRACTUAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR ACCESS TO ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES AND POPULATIONS, AND BEYOND EXTRACTIVE RESEARCH PRACTICES IN FAVOUR OF CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES FOR INDIGENOUS PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH.

⁴ Indigenous Studies Unit, MSPGH, MDHS, The University of Melbourne, Vimeo series: Indigenous Data Network, Indigenous Data Network, Indigenous Data governance and Sovereignty in Action in a Community Controlled Organisation: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/11425886?video=946553361>; see also <https://vimeo.com/indigenouom>

Another significant challenge for Indigenous data governance is the persistence of data silos. Although many organisations express a shared commitment to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, they often operate with minimal data-sharing capacity. This fragmentation constrains the ability of Indigenous communities and organisations to access coherent, comprehensive information. This fragmentation hampers the potential for collaborative, data-driven approaches to community development. When data custodians fail to share data with key Indigenous corporations, and information about the data collected about Aboriginal people in their service areas, some of which are very large regions, the quality of the data available to Indigenous people to determine their priorities for community advancement is poor and inadequate. Moreover, potential duplication and inconsistency in data collection can lead to resource wastage and missed opportunities to use the data more effectively. Indigenous corporations may capture essential data, forming data assets that inform their service delivery priorities, but they often duplicate data already collected by data custodians. Without transparent mechanisms for data and information sharing, such duplication represents an inefficient use of limited organisational capacity, including the small pool of skilled staff and the constraints imposed by tightly regulated government grant funding.

Indigenous corporations, particularly those providing essential services, face stringent external reporting requirements for funding. Their aspirations for community-defined data and for addressing the need to collect critical local and regional population and other data are hindered by a lack of funding and by government departments' limited understanding of Indigenous data needs that extend beyond their requirements. Government-prescribed data collection and reporting systems that fail to capture the nuanced cultural and social realities of community life and service delivery limit the data needs of these vital Indigenous corporations. An example is the high mobility levels of some Aboriginal populations and the cultural determinants of residential locations, such as seasonal and ceremonial cycles.

WHEN DATA CUSTODIANS FAIL TO SHARE DATA WITH KEY INDIGENOUS CORPORATIONS, AND INFORMATION ABOUT THE DATA COLLECTED ABOUT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN THEIR SERVICE AREAS, SOME OF WHICH ARE VERY LARGE REGIONS, THE QUALITY OF THE DATA AVAILABLE TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO DETERMINE THEIR PRIORITIES FOR COMMUNITY ADVANCEMENT IS POOR AND INADEQUATE.

This disconnect between standardised reporting metrics and on-the-ground realities underscores the importance of developing data governance frameworks that are responsive to community priorities and cultural contexts. It also points to the need for greater flexibility in funding arrangements and reporting mechanisms to allow for more meaningful and accurate representations of community outcomes.

There are several key enablers for advancing Indigenous data ecosystems. These include developing data-sharing agreements between organisations, investing in data literacy and education programmes for staff, and exploring community-owned data platforms. Building local capacity to collect, analyse, and utilise data in ways that align with community aspirations is a high priority for community-controlled Aboriginal service delivery corporations. Staff training in data literacy is fundamental to enabling community ownership of data, empowering them to identify policy and service delivery priorities based on evidence. This is vital for informing their responses to community needs more effectively (Cook, Corporal & Mengersen, 2025).

While there are successes in advancing data ecosystem maturity, data usage, interpretation, and presentation across several large Indigenous corporations, significant barriers persist. These include limited access to disaggregated data relevant to specific communities, financial constraints in acquiring and maintaining sophisticated data infrastructure, and challenges in retaining staff with specialised data skills. The high turnover of personnel in some organisations leads to discontinuities in data knowledge and practices, highlighting the need for robust knowledge management systems and ongoing training programs (Langton, Smith et al., 2025).

Innovative approaches to overcoming these challenges are being developed. Some organisations are exploring collaborative projects to develop shared data dashboards, particularly in areas such as early childhood development. These initiatives hold promise for breaking down data silos and fostering more integrated approaches to service delivery and community development.

The current state of Indigenous data ecosystems within the community, ranging from poor to well-advanced, underscores the critical importance of robust data governance in improving community outcomes in health, education, and other social determinants of wellbeing. While significant challenges remain, there is a growing awareness of the power of data and a commitment to developing culturally grounded, community-driven data practices. Enabling more powerful data-driven research capacity in these community settings will require continued investment in building the data capacity of Indigenous community and corporation staff. This includes not only technical infrastructure but also human capital development and the cultivation of data cultures that align with Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for policy frameworks that support Indigenous data governance and facilitate greater access to and control over data relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. By addressing these challenges and building on existing strengths, Indigenous organisations can enhance their ability to leverage data for improved decision-making, service delivery, and advocacy. This, in turn, will contribute to more effective, culturally appropriate, and community-driven approaches to closing the gap and improving outcomes for Indigenous peoples across Australia.



Melbourne Laureate Professor Marcia Langton AO presenting at the inaugural Indigenous Datathon: Applying Indigenous Data Governance to Healthcare held in October 2025 and run by the Indigenous Data Network, University of Melbourne. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

The HASS and Indigenous RDC has a critical role in fostering competencies in Indigenous data governance and supporting the broader research data community to engage ethically and effectively with Indigenous data. These commitments to the CARE and FAIR principles are operationalised by providing a practical framework for embedding Indigenous Data Governance within research infrastructure. These principles support the development of inclusive data ecosystems that respect Indigenous rights, promote cultural integrity, and enable communities to derive meaningful benefit from data. This Framework therefore serves not only as a guide for ethical data practice, but also as a mechanism for implementing the aspirations of UNDRIP, Closing the Gap, and the Indigenous data sovereignty movement in Australia.

OVERVIEW OF THE FRAMEWORK

The Framework provides a structured approach to embedding Indigenous Data Governance across the HASS and Indigenous RDC. It is designed to support institutions, researchers, data custodians, and infrastructure providers to implement ethical, inclusive, and culturally responsive data practices.

THE FRAMEWORK COMPRISES THREE INTERRELATED COMPONENTS:

THE GOVERNANCE MODEL

GOVERNANCE GUIDELINES AND PRACTICES

EVALUATION MATRIX

This Framework offers a conceptual model for guiding the application of Indigenous Data Governance. The Governance Model is built around five components:

RECOGNISING INDIGENOUS DATA ASSETS

Acknowledging the ownership and rights of Indigenous people and entities over their data, including observing their legal rights to use, share, store and report such data and complying with their decisions, while also supporting their status as data custodians.

PARTNERING WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

Ensuring collective benefit, meaningful representation of, and collaboration with, Indigenous communities, respecting their perspectives and complying with their rights.

BUILDING AND ENABLING DATA-RELATED CAPABILITIES

Empowering Indigenous data custodians and stakeholders with the skills and resources necessary for effective data management and utilisation, and especially data ecosystem maturity, including cybersecurity measures to enable their qualification for data access.

PROVIDING KNOWLEDGE, ACCESSIBILITY, AND USABILITY OF DATA ASSETS

Ensuring Indigenous communities have access to and benefit from data resources, emphasising transparency and inclusivity, to galvanise and support Indigenous self-determination.

BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE DATA ECOSYSTEM

Fostering collaboration and inclusivity within the research data landscape to promote greater accessibility, collective growth and understanding.

These elements are interdependent and collectively support the development of a robust data ecosystem.

This Governance Model provides the conceptual foundation for embedding Indigenous Data Governance across the HASS and Indigenous RDC. It articulates the principles and conditions that underpin ethical, inclusive, and culturally grounded data practice. Each of the five elements outlined reflects a distinct conceptual role and aligns with both the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Carroll et al., 2020) and the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020).

RECOGNITION

Recognition of Indigenous data assets refers to the formal and cultural acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as data rights-holders and as active participants in the data lifecycle. This includes recognising Indigenous peoples as creators of data, through community knowledge, cultural practices, and research contributions; as users of data, who interpret, apply, and derive meaning from data in ways that reflect Indigenous priorities; and as managers of data, who govern its access, storage, and use according to Indigenous laws and protocols.

Governance Logic:

Recognition affirms the legitimacy of Indigenous governance systems and the authority of Indigenous communities to determine how data about them is collected, interpreted, and used. It challenges colonial data practices that have historically excluded Indigenous voices and repositions Indigenous people as central agents in data governance.

Conceptual Role:

As the conceptual foundation of the Framework, recognition underpins and enables all the other governance functions within the HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons. It legitimises Indigenous authority and sets the conditions for ethical research engagement.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnership refers to the establishment of genuine, respectful, and enduring relationships with Indigenous people and entities that centre Indigenous leadership, priorities, and governance. It recognises Indigenous peoples not only as stakeholders but as co-creators, co-managers, and co-decision-makers in all aspects of the data lifecycle. Partnerships must be based on trust and shared authority and must reflect Indigenous governance protocols and cultural values.

Governance Logic:

Partnership operationalises recognition by embedding Indigenous leadership and co-design into governance structures. It ensures that governance is enacted through Indigenous agency rather than merely symbolic inclusion.

Conceptual Role:

Partnership is the mechanism through which shared governance is realised in the HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons. It transforms institutional relationships and ensures that Indigenous perspectives shape data practices.

CAPABILITIES

Capabilities refer to building the institutional, technical, and cultural capacities required for Indigenous communities to govern and manage data assets. This includes research infrastructure, training in data management and analysis, legal literacy regarding data rights and research ethics, and access to tools that support data governance.

Governance Logic:

Capabilities act as enabling factors; they provide the foundation for recognition and partnerships to be effectively supported by resources and systems.

Conceptual Role:

Institutional, technical and cultural capabilities ensure that governance is actionable and sustainable in practice.

SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination refers to the rights of Indigenous people to access and use their data. It also encompasses the rights of Indigenous peoples to define, control, and benefit from data about themselves. This pillar includes the ability to set priorities, interpret data through Indigenous worldviews, and refuse participation in systems that cause harm. Additionally, it involves the power to determine how Indigenous data is collected, owned, and applied in research, in a manner that aligns with cultural values and community aspirations.

Governance Logic:

Self-determination reframes data from being a tool of surveillance and academic inquiry to a tool of Indigenous empowerment, enabling Indigenous peoples to shape their own narratives and futures through data.

Conceptual Role:

Self-determination functions as the primary objective of governance, orienting research data utilisation towards the advancement of Indigenous-defined futures.

INCLUSIVITY

Inclusive refers to the need for inclusive research data ecosystems in which research data is created, stored, accessed, reused and repurposed within focus areas of the HASS and Indigenous RDC. It encompasses diverse cultural perspectives, equitable legal frameworks, interoperable technical systems, and collaborative research networks. This inclusive data ecosystem prioritises Indigenous data governance needs while also supporting the broader HASS research community.

Governance Logic:

An inclusive data ecosystem is one in which inclusionary and culturally safe governance, responsive to Indigenous laws and knowledges, while also facilitating HASS research objectives and methodologies, is enacted and practised.

Conceptual Role:

An inclusive data ecosystem sustains governance across the research data lifecycle and across institutions, ensuring Indigenous voices are central in relevant projects while fostering broader inclusivity in HASS research data management.

GOVERNANCE GUIDELINES AND PRACTICES FOR THE HASS AND INDIGENOUS RDC

The Framework outlines five key guidelines. These guidelines aim to translate the five elements of the governance model into actionable steps that should be implemented by institutions, researchers, and other data custodians.

GUIDELINE 1: Recognising Indigenous Data Assets

Indigenous peoples and entities have inherent rights to data that relates to them. These rights extend not only to data collected by external actors, but also to the rich and diverse data Indigenous communities generate, maintain, and govern themselves. Recognising the data assets owned by Indigenous people and entities, and observing their legal rights to use, share, store, and report such data, is foundational to ethical data governance. Institutions and researchers must comply with Indigenous decisions on data access and use while also supporting Indigenous status as data custodians.

Indigenous communities and organisations actively generate, manage, and interpret data across a wide range of domains, including cultural heritage, language, land management, health, and governance. These data assets are often overlooked or undervalued by researchers and government agencies, despite their critical role in community decision-making, cultural continuity, and policy development. Recognition must go beyond symbolic acknowledgment to include practical measures that affirm Indigenous authority, protect data integrity, and support Indigenous-led data infrastructures.

Recognising Indigenous data assets means affirming the legitimacy, authority, and value of Indigenous data practices. It requires institutions to engage respectfully with Indigenous data holders, support Indigenous-led data initiatives, and ensure that Indigenous data is governed in accordance with Indigenous laws, values, and protocols.

GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES:

Identify and acknowledge Indigenous-held data assets: Conduct audits that include not only institutional holdings but also data generated, maintained, and governed by Indigenous communities, organisations, and knowledge holders.

Review metadata and provenance for Indigenous authority and consent: Ensure that data records reflect appropriate cultural protocols, community permissions, and Indigenous custodianship, including recognition of community-generated metadata.

Ensure Indigenous data is findable, accessible, and usable by communities: Support mechanisms that enable Indigenous communities to locate, access, and use data relevant to their priorities, including data they have created or contributed to.

Align with Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights and ethical frameworks: Embed principles from ICIP, AIATSIS Code of Ethics, NHMRC guidelines, and the CARE Principles to ensure culturally respectful and rights-based data governance.

Support Indigenous-led policy reform and data governance initiatives: Advocate for structural changes that recognise Indigenous data rights, including the formal recognition of Indigenous-held data and support for Indigenous data infrastructures.

CARE PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Authority to Control:

Recognise that Indigenous peoples and entities have the right to govern data they generate and maintain, as well as data collected about them by others. This includes respecting Indigenous governance structures and protocols around data access, use, and sharing.

Collective Benefit:

Ensure that data practices contribute to the wellbeing and priorities of Indigenous communities, including the recognition and support of Indigenous-held data assets and infrastructures.

FAIR PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Findable:

Indigenous data—especially community-held and locally governed data—must be made findable through culturally appropriate cataloguing and metadata practices that respect Indigenous knowledge systems.

Accessible:

Data should be accessible to Indigenous communities in ways that uphold cultural protocols, consent, and governance rights, including access to data they have created or contributed to.

CLOSING THE GAP ALIGNMENT

Priority Reform 1:

Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision-Making; recognition of Indigenous authority is essential to shared governance.

GUIDELINE 2 : Partnering with Indigenous people and Entities

Ethical data governance requires genuine partnerships with Indigenous people and entities that centre Indigenous leadership, priorities, and governance. These partnerships must go beyond consultation to actively support Indigenous-led data work and decision-making. Indigenous people and groups are more than research participants; Indigenous people are knowledge holders, data custodians, and analysts. Co-design, collaborative research, and shared governance are necessary to facilitate data practices that reflect Indigenous values, laws, and aspirations.

GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES

Co-design Indigenous-led research and data initiatives with Indigenous people and entities, ensuring Indigenous leadership and decision-making authority.

Establish formal data-sharing agreements that reflect Indigenous governance protocols, cultural values, and community priorities.

Establish diverse representation and respect for cultural protocols in all stages of data work, including planning, analysis, and dissemination.

Allocate resources equitably to support Indigenous-led data collection, analysis, infrastructure, and capacity building.

Build long-term, trust-based relationships founded in transparency, reciprocity, and accountability.

CARE PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Collective Benefit:

Ensure that data partnerships contribute to the wellbeing and aspirations of Indigenous communities, including support for Indigenous-led data initiatives.

Responsibility:

Uphold ethical obligations to Indigenous partners by respecting cultural protocols, ensuring transparency, and maintaining accountability throughout the data lifecycle.

FAIR PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Accessible:

Ensure that data generated through partnerships is accessible to Indigenous communities in culturally appropriate ways, respecting their governance protocols and consent processes.

CLOSING THE GAP ALIGNMENT

Priority Reform 2 – Building the Community-Controlled Sector:

Partnership supports Indigenous-led governance and institutional transformation.

GUIDELINE 3 : Build and Enable Data Capabilities

Building data capabilities is essential for ethical and effective data governance. Indigenous communities must be supported to strengthen their capacity to manage, interpret, and govern data in ways that reflect their cultural values, priorities, and knowledge systems. Equally, researchers and government data custodians must build their understanding of Indigenous data governance, cultural protocols, and relational accountability to ensure respectful and informed engagement.

Capacity building is not a one-way process; it must be reciprocal, community-led, and grounded in long-term relationships. It encompasses technical training, cultural education, and institutional change to support Indigenous-led data futures.

GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES

Deliver tailored training and mentorship programs for Indigenous communities, researchers, and data custodians, reflecting Indigenous pedagogies and governance principles.

Provide access to appropriate technology and software, ensuring tools are usable, secure, and adaptable to local needs.

Support community-led research and internships, enabling Indigenous people to lead data projects and build expertise.

Develop culturally appropriate learning resources that embed Indigenous languages, concepts, and knowledge systems.

Create pathways for sustained capacity building, including long-term investment in Indigenous data infrastructure and institutional reform across the government and research sectors.

CARE PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Responsibility:

Support ethical and accountable capacity-building efforts that respect Indigenous governance and cultural protocols.

Ethics:

Ensure that training, tools, and resources are delivered in ways that uphold Indigenous values and avoid extractive or paternalistic approaches.

FAIR PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Accessible:

Ensure that data tools, resources, and learning opportunities are accessible to Indigenous communities and institutional partners, both technically and culturally.

CLOSING THE GAP ALIGNMENT

Priority Reform 3 – Transforming Government Organisations:

Capacity-building is essential for governments to engage ethically and effectively with Indigenous data.

GUIDELINE 4 : Indigenous Self-Determination: Data Access and Use

Indigenous communities must be able to access, interpret, and use data in ways that reflect their priorities, cultural values, and governance protocols. Access is not simply a technical issue: it is relational, ethical, and political. Supporting Indigenous data access means recognising Indigenous authority over data, enabling meaningful use, and ensuring that data infrastructures are responsive to Indigenous needs.

This also includes building the capabilities of researchers, institutions, and government data custodians to understand and respect Indigenous governance frameworks, cultural protocols, and data responsibilities. Access must be reciprocal: Indigenous communities need access to data held by institutions, and institutions must learn to engage appropriately with Indigenous-held data.

GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES

Improve metadata quality and availability to ensure it reflects Indigenous contexts, languages, and knowledge systems.

Create user-friendly portals and access guides that are culturally appropriate and designed in collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Enable community-led metadata enrichment, facilitating Indigenous communities to define, describe, and contextualise data in their own terms.

Build data awareness and analytical capacity within Indigenous communities and among researchers and data custodians.

Support reciprocal access frameworks, where institutions commit to returning and sharing data with Indigenous communities in culturally respectful ways.

CARE PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Responsibility:

Ensure that data access practices uphold Indigenous governance protocols and cultural responsibilities.

Ethics:

Promote ethical access and use of data that respects Indigenous values, avoids harm, and supports community priorities.

FAIR PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Accessible:

Ensure that data is accessible to Indigenous communities in ways that are culturally appropriate, technically feasible, and governed by Indigenous-defined protocols.

CLOSING THE GAP ALIGNMENT

Priority Reform 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level:

Self-determination requires access to locally relevant data governed by Indigenous protocols.

GUIDELINE 5 : Building an Inclusive Data Ecosystem

An inclusive data ecosystem must reflect Indigenous knowledge systems, governance protocols, and leadership. This means embedding cultural safety, transparency, and accountability across all levels of data practice, from policy and infrastructure to research and community engagement. Inclusion is more than participation; it is about recognising Indigenous authority, supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, and transforming institutional cultures to uphold Indigenous values and responsibilities.

Building such an ecosystem requires ongoing commitment from institutions, researchers, and governments to engage respectfully, share power, and support Indigenous-defined data futures.

GOVERNANCE PRACTICES

Develop inclusive policies and governance structures that embed Indigenous leadership, cultural protocols, and relational accountability.

Provide cultural competency training for researchers, data custodians, and institutional staff to support respectful and informed engagement.

Support Indigenous-led initiatives and representation in decision-making bodies, advisory groups, and governance forums.

Embed continuous evaluation and improvement through Indigenous-led review processes, feedback mechanisms, and adaptive governance models.

CARE PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Collective Benefit:

Design systems and policies that deliver tangible benefits to Indigenous communities and support long-term community priorities.

Ethics:

Ensure that all data practices are culturally safe, respectful, and aligned with Indigenous values and governance protocols.

FAIR PRINCIPLES ALIGNMENT

Reusable:

Support data practices that enable Indigenous communities to reuse and repurpose data in culturally appropriate ways, including data they have contributed to or generated.

CLOSING THE GAP ALIGNMENT

Supports **all four Priority Reforms** by embedding Indigenous governance into national infrastructure and enabling systemic change.

These guidelines are designed to be adaptable across diverse institutional contexts and responsive to the needs of different Indigenous communities.

IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Implementing the Indigenous Data Governance Framework requires a deliberate, inclusive, and culturally informed approach that centres Indigenous leadership and governance at every stage. Rather than relying on abstract tools or metrics, implementation must be driven by relationships, responsibilities, and the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The first step in implementation is institutional commitment. It is anticipated that organisations participating in the HASS and Indigenous RDC focus areas will adopt and customise the Framework. Furthermore, all HASS and Indigenous RDC focus areas should endeavour to embed its principles, particularly CARE and FAIR, into their governance structures, operational policies, and data practices. This includes recognising Indigenous authority over data assets, ensuring ethical engagement, and supporting Indigenous-led decision-making throughout the data lifecycle.

Implementation of the Framework needs to be Indigenous-led. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, and data custodians must be supported to lead the design, management, and evaluation of data initiatives. This includes co-developing governance protocols, establishing culturally appropriate consent processes, and ensuring that data infrastructures reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and priorities. HASS and Indigenous RDC focus areas and partner institutions must commit to moving beyond consultation and towards genuine partnerships that share power and resources.

Capacity building is essential. Institutions should invest in long-term training, mentorship, and infrastructure to support Indigenous communities in managing, interpreting, and governing their data. This includes supporting community-led digitisation, metadata enrichment, repository development, and data analysis. At the same time, non-Indigenous researchers and data custodians must build their cultural competency and understanding of Indigenous governance principles to ensure respectful and informed engagement.

Implementation also requires developing formal agreements that reflect Indigenous governance. These may include data-sharing agreements, memoranda of understanding, co-authorship arrangements, and protocols for attribution and provenance. Such agreements must be co-designed with Indigenous communities and reviewed regularly to ensure they remain aligned with community values and priorities.

Importantly, implementation should be adaptive.

The Framework is not static; it must evolve in response to community feedback, legislative changes, technological developments, and emerging risks. Institutions must commit to ongoing reflection and learning, and to revising their practices in collaboration with Indigenous stakeholders. This includes establishing mechanisms for community feedback, conducting regular reviews of governance practices, and ensuring that implementation remains responsive to the diverse needs of Indigenous communities.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FRAMEWORK NEEDS TO BE INDIGENOUS-LED. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITIES, ORGANISATIONS, AND DATA CUSTODIANS MUST BE SUPPORTED TO LEAD THE DESIGN, MANAGEMENT, AND EVALUATION OF DATA INITIATIVES.

Reporting and Transparency

The HASS and Indigenous RDC project members hold fortnightly Focus Area meetings attended by Focus Area leads and project staff. At this meeting, each Focus Area will be asked to report on the Framework. Additionally, this group:

- ▶ Promotes collaboration on Indigenous Data Governance across HASS and Indigenous RDC Focus Areas
- ▶ Supports situational awareness across focus areas in Indigenous Data Governance work packages
- ▶ Coheres shared understandings and implementation practices in Indigenous Data Governance
- ▶ Monitors the implementation of the Framework for Indigenous Data Governance across the Focus Areas.

Additional reporting detailing the implementation of the framework will be provided in the focus area monthly traffic light reports and regular detailed progress reports as contracted.

Indigenous Community Accountability

Accountability to Indigenous communities is central to the Framework. Culturally safe feedback mechanisms will be established to enable Indigenous stakeholders to provide input, raise concerns, and propose improvements. These mechanisms may include community forums, digital portals, and on-country consultations. Indigenous communities must be given the opportunity to respond to how their data is used, interpreted, and represented, and consent agreements must be reviewed periodically to ensure ongoing alignment with community priorities. Community-led review panels will be supported in conducting independent assessments of data projects affecting them, with the authority to recommend corrective actions, data withdrawal, or reclassification when governance breaches occur.

Adaptive Governance and Continuous Improvement

The Framework will be treated as a living document, subject to annual review to incorporate legislative and policy changes, community feedback, emerging priorities, and technological developments. A transparent revision history will be maintained, and all updates will be co-designed with Indigenous stakeholders. Scenario-based reviews will be conducted regularly to test the resilience of governance structures in response to challenges such as data breaches, contested consent, and cross-jurisdictional data sharing.

Governance of the Indigenous Data Evaluation Matrix

This matrix is designed to help assess the implementation of the Framework across the five key pillars.

For each pillar, evaluate progress across three dimensions:

STRATEGY

What concrete actions have been taken to implement this pillar?

OUTCOMES

What measurable results have been achieved?

CHALLENGES

What obstacles have been encountered and how are they being addressed?

Rate progress in each area on a scale of 1 ▶ 5



Pillar 1

RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS DATA ASSETS

Dimension	Rating (1-5)	Notes
STRATEGY		
OUTCOMES		
CHALLENGES		

Pillar 2

PARTNERSHIP

Dimension	Rating (1-5)	Notes
STRATEGY		
OUTCOMES		
CHALLENGES		

Pillar 3

BUILDING CAPABILITIES

Dimension	Rating (1-5)	Notes
STRATEGY		
OUTCOMES		
CHALLENGES		

Pillar 4

SELF-DETERMINATION

Dimension	Rating (1-5)	Notes
STRATEGY		
OUTCOMES		
CHALLENGES		

Pillar 5

INCLUSIVE DATA ECOSYSTEM

Dimension	Rating (1-5)	Notes
STRATEGY		
OUTCOMES		
CHALLENGES		

Additional Evaluation Questions:

1. How have Indigenous communities been involved in the implementation process?
2. What mechanisms are in place for ongoing feedback and improvement?
3. How is the implementation of this Framework transforming institutional practices?
4. What unexpected outcomes (positive or negative) have emerged during implementation?
5. How is implementation progress being communicated to stakeholders?

This tool provides a structured way to assess implementation progress, identify areas for improvement, and ensure accountability to Indigenous communities and governance principles. It should be used biannually, and in consultation with Indigenous partners and advisory bodies. An example of the Evaluation Matrix Tool is provided in Appendix 2.



Participants at the inaugural Indigenous Datathon: Applying Indigenous Data Governance to Healthcare held in October 2025 and run by the Indigenous Data Network, University of Melbourne. — Marc Grimwade / ARDC

THIS FRAMEWORK IS BOTH A TOOL AND A COMMITMENT. A TOOL FOR EMBEDDING INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE IN NATIONAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE, AND A COMMITMENT TO UPHOLD THE RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND ASPIRATIONS OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES IN ALL DATA-RELATED ENDEAVOURS.

CONCLUSION

The HASS and Indigenous RDC Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data represents a critical intervention in the evolving landscape of research infrastructure and data practice in Australia. It responds to longstanding calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for ethical, inclusive, and culturally grounded approaches to data governance; approaches that affirm Indigenous rights, uphold relational accountability, and support self-determined futures.

By centring Indigenous governance principles and embedding the CARE and FAIR value frameworks, this document offers a practical and principled guide for institutions, researchers, and data custodians working within the HASS and Indigenous RDC. It articulates a vision of data governance that is not merely technical, but deeply relational, centring Indigenous knowledges, cultural protocols, and community-defined priorities.

The Framework acknowledges that Indigenous data is not neutral or abstract; it is situated, embodied, and politically charged. As such, its governance must be led by Indigenous people, informed by Indigenous knowledge systems, and supported by institutional transformation. The guidelines and practices outlined herein provide a foundation for this work, offering pathways for recognition, partnership, capability building, self-determination, and inclusion.

Implementation, accountability and evaluation are not ancillary components but critical mechanisms for ensuring that the Framework is enacted with integrity. Institutions must commit to long-term engagement, resource allocation, and adaptive governance, recognising that the work of Indigenous data governance is ongoing, iterative, and responsive to community needs.

This Framework is both a tool and a commitment. A tool for embedding Indigenous governance in national research infrastructure, and a commitment to uphold the rights, responsibilities, and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all data-related endeavours. It is a step toward transforming the data ecosystem into one that reflects and respects Indigenous sovereignty, cultural integrity, and collective benefit.



ARTIST STATEMENT

Dylan Sarra is a Gooreng Gooreng/Taribelang artist from the Central Queensland region and currently resides in Brisbane, Australia. With a focus on exploring identity and place, Dylan uses a range of disciplines, including print, digital works, and sculpture, to gently persuade an audience to humanise the Indigenous experience. He is involved in the research and development of cultural knowledge and practice, which, in turn, can be shared with the wider community from which these stories take place. It is his aim that all people can not only be intrigued by Indigenous culture but also start to appreciate the role we all play in acknowledging our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

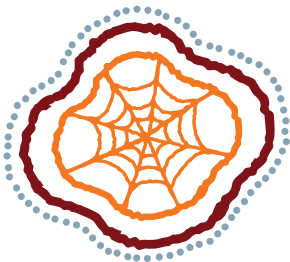
This artwork that Dylan has created for this framework (shown above) represents the journey towards understanding First Nations history, achieving balance in our modern age, and building a just and equitable society. It reminds us of the importance of valuing our shared history, finding balance in our actions, and creating a society that respects and includes everyone. The visual elements symbolise the pillars of good governance, interconnectedness between people, and the need to embrace traditional knowledge and sustainable practices. It serves as a powerful reminder of the significance of our past in shaping a better future.

ELEMENTS EXPLAINED



SELF DETERMINATION

The First Nations' practice of navigating by the stars, using constellations as a compass, serves as a powerful metaphor for self-determination. Just as the stars guide their way, First Nations people rely on our inner compass, our values, traditions, and ancestral knowledge, to navigate through life's challenges and make independent choices. This metaphor highlights the importance of self-reliance, inner strength, and the ability to chart one's own path. It signifies the deep connection to their heritage and the resilience of First Nations people in preserving our culture and identity, ultimately leading to self-determination and a sense of purpose.



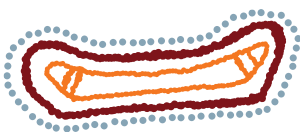
INDIGENOUS DATA ECOSYSTEMS

The First Nations' understanding of a spiderweb serves as a powerful metaphor for an Indigenous data ecosystem. Just as a spiderweb is intricately woven, interconnected, and resilient, an Indigenous data ecosystem is a complex network that encompasses diverse sources of knowledge, cultural practices, and traditional wisdom. Like the strands of a spiderweb, each element within the ecosystem has a unique role and contribution, forming a cohesive whole. This metaphor highlights the importance of interconnectedness, collaboration, and the recognition of multiple perspectives within our data governance. It signifies the strength and resilience of Indigenous knowledge systems, emphasizing the need to protect and nurture this delicate web for the benefit of present and future generations.



REPRESENTATION

The First Nations People of Australia have long recognised the symbolism and significance of the Australian native bee and its collaborative partnerships. We see the bees as a model for human relationships, highlighting the importance of interdependence, cooperation, and valuing diverse perspectives. First Nations People understand that just as bees work together for the survival of their colonies, partnerships thrive when individuals come together in a spirit of collaboration and support. They also recognise the resilience of the bees in adapting to different environments, and this resilience serves as a lesson for overcoming challenges within partnerships.



CAPABILITIES

A First Nations traditionally built canoe symbolises capability through its construction process, showcasing resourcefulness and problem-solving abilities. The collaborative effort involved highlights teamwork and the value of collective effort. The canoe's ability to navigate through various water conditions represents resilience and adaptability in the face of challenges. Overall, the canoe serves as a metaphor for the knowledge, skills, unity, and strength of First Nations people, emphasising their capability to thrive and succeed in diverse environments.

TERMS, DEFINITIONS AND ACRONYMS

ARDC

Australian Research Data Commons

CARE Principles

Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics

Data Custodian / Steward

Responsible for the safekeeping and stewardship of data assets and metadata.

Data Linkage

Ways of bringing information from different sources together to create a new and richer dataset.

FAIR Principles

Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable

GLAM

Galleries, libraries, archives and museums

HASS and Indigenous RDC

Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences and Indigenous Research Data Commons

Indigenous Data

Data generated, intentionally or not, by, about, or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Indigenous data refers to information, in any format or medium, collected, analysed, stored, and interpreted within the context of Indigenous individuals, collectives, populations, entities, lifeways, cultures, knowledge systems, lands, biodiversity, water and other resources.

It includes data collected, used, or stored by any agency, department, laboratory, organisation, corporation, statutory body, university or research institute, conducted by, with, and about Indigenous people or peoples, and data that Indigenous communities have generated and maintained themselves (Indigenous Data Network, 2024).

ICIP

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property

IDG

Indigenous Data Governance

IDN

Indigenous Data Network

IIRC

Improving Indigenous Research Capabilities

LDaCA

Language Data Commons of Australia

Metadata

Data that provides information about other data, but which is not the content of the data itself.

NCRIS

National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy

RDC

Research Data Commons

Thematic RDC

Thematic Research Data Commons

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APPENDIX 1: ATTRIBUTIONS

The following are attributed to the respectful sharing of knowledge and experiences at the IDN Roundtable event 'Developing & Adopting Indigenous Data Governance Frameworks'. Their insights culminated in the drafting of the HASS & Indigenous RDC Framework for the Governance of Indigenous Data.

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APPENDIX 2: EVALUATION MATRIX TOOL EXAMPLE

See below for an example of how the Implementation Evaluation Matrix might be filled out for one of the pillars. This example demonstrates how the tool can provide a nuanced assessment of implementation progress, highlighting both achievements and areas for improvement. It allows for enabling scoring while also capturing qualitative, crucial insights that are critical to implementing Indigenous data governance.

Pillar 2: PARTNERSHIP

Dimension	Rating (1-5)	Notes
STRATEGY	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▷ Established formal data-sharing agreements with 3 Indigenous organisations <insert organisation names> ▷ Implemented co-design process for new research projects <insert details> ▷ Created Indigenous Advisory Board for data governance
OUTCOMES	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▷ 2 collaborative activities launched <name activities> ▷ Increased Indigenous representation in decision-making bodies by 30% <provide details> ▷ Positive feedback from community partners on engagement process
CHALLENGES	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▷ Difficulty in aligning institutional timelines with community consultation needs <provide of detail here> ▷ Limited funding for long-term relationship building <detail specifics> ▷ Need for more cultural competency training for non-Indigenous staff <outlines steps towards training>

Overall Pillar Score: 9/15

Additional Notes

The partnership pillar has made substantial progress in implementing its strategy, with formal structures now in place to support Indigenous-led decision-making and collaborative activities. Outcomes are starting to emerge; however, more time is needed to realise the full impact of these initiatives. Challenges remain, particularly regarding institutional flexibility and resource allocation for sustained engagement. Next steps include seeking additional funding for relationship-building activities and expanding cultural competency training across the project and its partners.

