

Indigenous Knowledges Symposium

In Practice | **Cultural Safety: Walking the Talk in Our National, State and Territory Libraries**



Dr Barbara Lemon, National and State Libraries Australia



Cultural Safety: Walking the talk in our national, state and territory libraries

Dr Barbara Lemon, National & State Libraries Australasia



What is involved in the Culturally Safe Libraries Program?

1. **Completion of online training for all staff:** Core Cultural Learning developed by AIATSIS, with in-person debrief sessions
2. **Creation of a suite of online resources for libraries:** developed around the ATSILIRN Protocols – videos, case studies, activities
3. **Delivery of Indigenous collections workshops:** one per NSLA library by facilitator Lesley Acres, including national and local content
4. **Instigation of library-specific initiatives** such as exhibitions, creation of Indigenous-identified positions, establishment of advisory groups, and improvements to descriptive practices
5. **Commitment to a set of national cultural competency principles**

<https://www.nsla.org.au/our-work/culturally-safe-libraries>



Why ask staff to do this?

Why are we doing this project?



"It's not a three-year project, it's a learning program to transform organisational culture and the culture of the sector. There are grand ideas and aspirations that sit behind this."

- Steering Group member

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Y4dfy42420>

ATSILIRN PROTOCOL 2: CONTENT AND PERSPECTIVES

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The second ATSILIRN protocol is about ensuring that the collection materials we hold by and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are comprehensive, inclusive and reflect all perspectives. It's about building collections that tell the whole story.

Much of the material in our collections relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was produced by colonists' diaries and letters, anthropologists' field notes, historians' interview and research notes, and so on. For many Torres Strait Islander communities' perceptions of collecting institutions are not positive. Institutions such as museums and libraries are places where items were 'taken' without permission, and remain hidden from their traditional owners. Many of these items are 'sorry business', meaning they are distressing and sensitive. Examples of sorry business in our collections include Torres Strait Islander peoples, government removal registers and materials relating to the Stolen Generations.

Protocol two stresses the need for a balance of perspectives, to ensure that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are equally represented. For some libraries, achieving this balance will involve a focus on acquiring material from Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Along with considering the content of our collections, libraries need to engage in continuing, appropriate and respectful ways to manage our collections. As we learned in the AIATSIS Core training, engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, building productive relationships, and respecting the knowledge and experience they bring to the table.

Raising awareness of different perspectives also involves promoting the existence and availability of collections. For some libraries this may be achieved by providing a specific space, such as *kuril dhagun* at the State Library of NSW, or descriptors in catalogue records, or place stickers on books which illustrate Indigenous experiences or values. For more information on descriptors of records, and about secret, sacred or sensitive materials and cultural permissions in Protocols 5 and 6, see the video below.

In the video below, Marika Duczynski talks more about what libraries can do to ensure their collections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander materials.

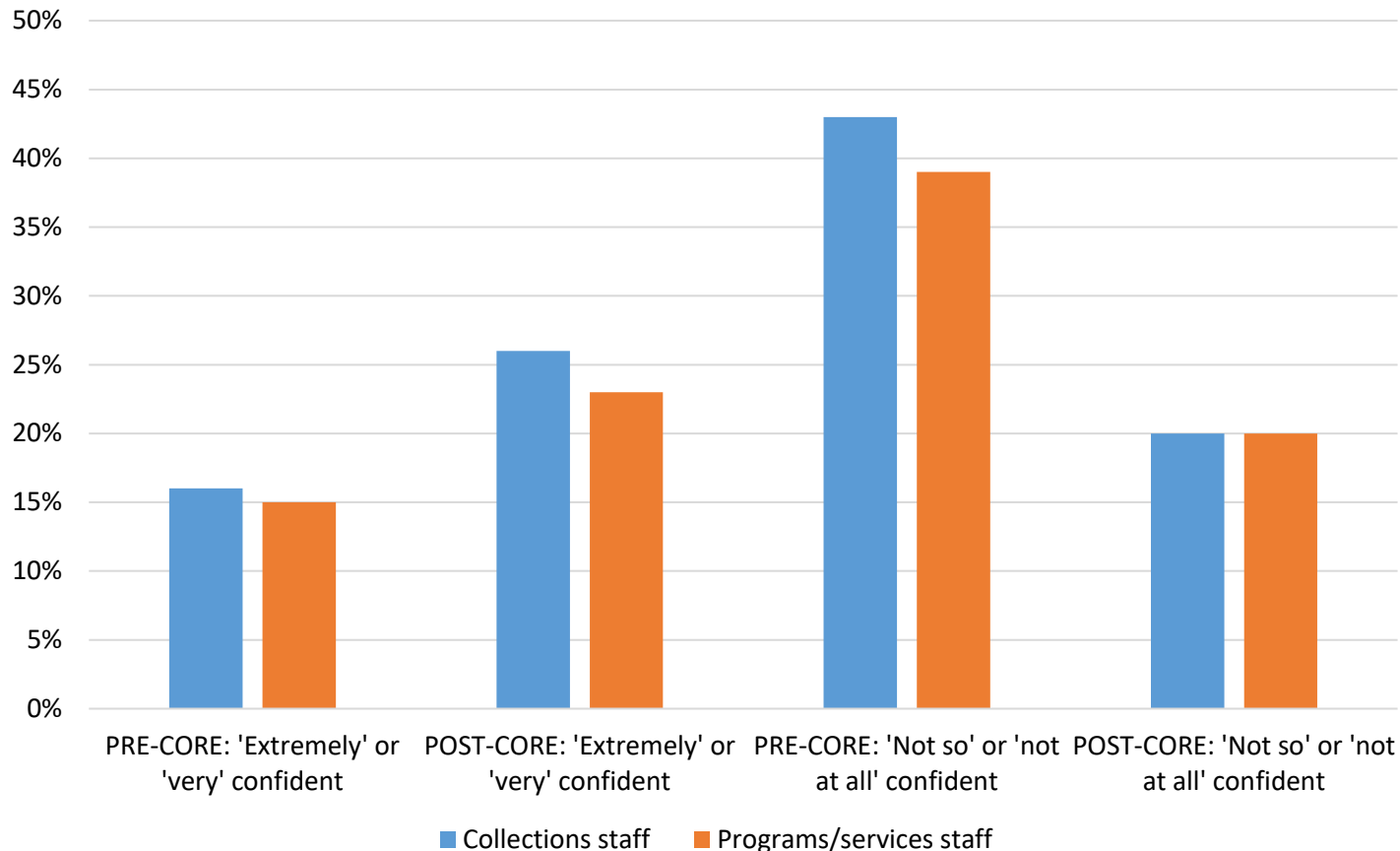


L to R: Nathan Williams, Marika Duczynski, Denien Toomath, Allison Lubransky-Moy, Melissa Jackson, Damien Webb and Ronald Briggs. Image credit: Joy Lai, SLNSW



The good, the bad and the ugly

Confidence levels in collections staff and programs/services staff pre- and post-Core



"It's accessible, it's got depth, it's got real life examples, it's comprehensive - it's the best online training experience I've had."

"I really liked the idea of asking people to reflect on themselves as humans rather than as professionals."

"It's an important strategy and way of focusing on what Western culture doesn't know. An alternate and prior knowledge that needs to be considered alongside and with (not as an optional adjunct [to]) every decision."

The good, the bad and the ugly

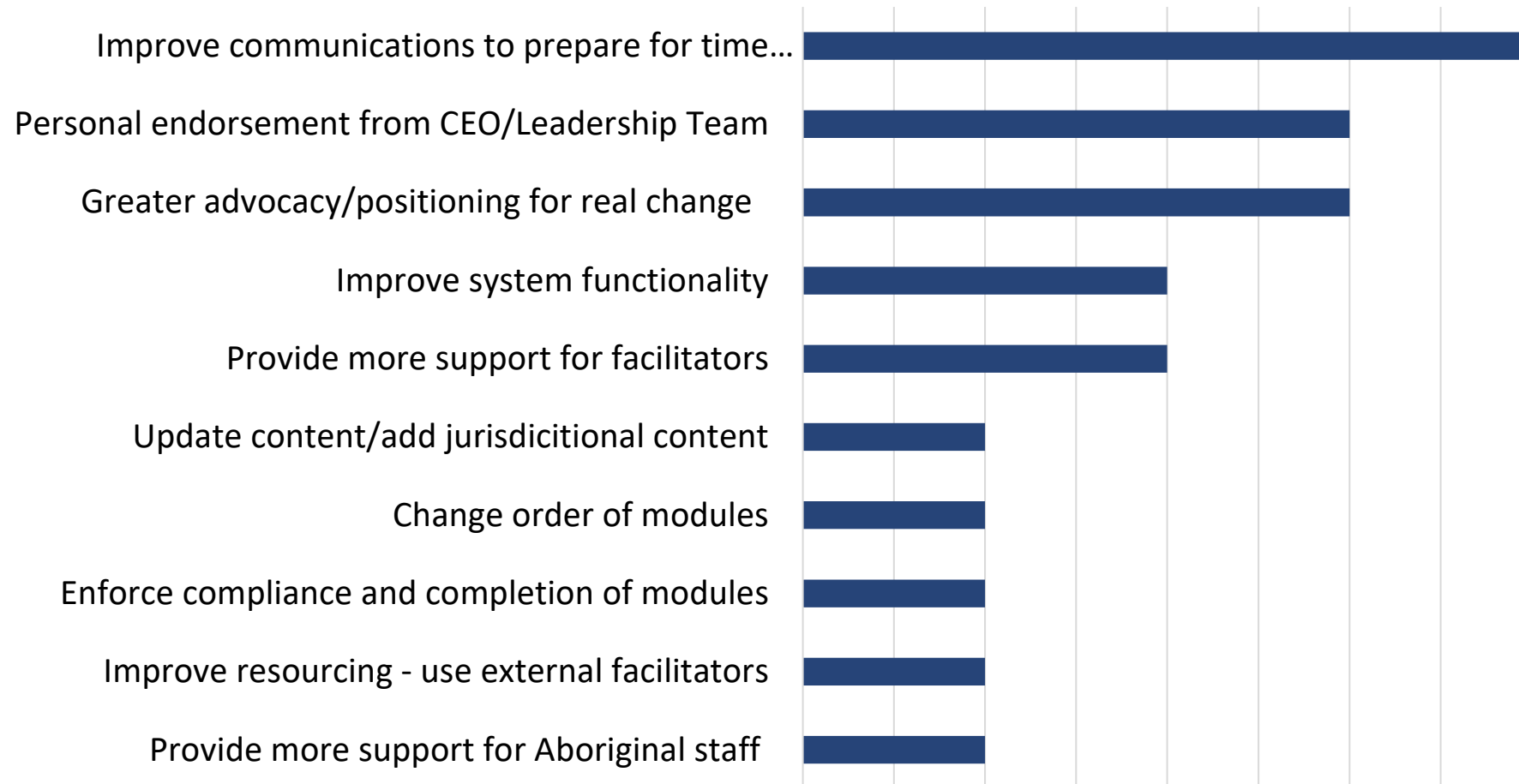
“There were some expectations that maybe you’d get to go and have a cultural experience – are we going to get to go and talk to Elders? Or have a smoking ceremony?... It was like, we’re not trying to teach you culture, we’re asking you to examine yours in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander positioning and authority and access, and that took people a while. But people really did cotton onto it.”

59% of respondents post-training said they did not know how to put their learning into practice. **They did not know what to do next.** 8% said the course was not relevant to their role.

“Definitely one of the early pushbacks we got from HR was around some of the activities we were planning and discussions we were planning to use in those facilitated sessions... What they were assessing in terms of risk was asking staff about things like their privilege, their cultural background, which are big HR ‘no-nos’. We’re trying to mitigate cultural risk but they were seeing that mitigation of cultural risk as a risk in other ways.”

What would you do differently if you started over?...

Proportion of responses from nine interviews with Steering Group members:



Call to action for NSLA leaders

1. **Provision of visible leadership** including clear expectations of staff, consistent messages and demonstrated investment in the short and long-term outcomes of the program.
2. **Due consideration of the significant risk** (financial, social and cultural) in not seeing through the objectives of the program to the fullest possible extent.
3. **Shifting of the rhetoric and intent** from 'supporting' Indigenous programs (which only reinforces the sense of otherness and attitude of 'not relevant to my role') to setting an expectation of fully-integrated culturally appropriate policy and practice in every aspect of library business.
4. **Provision of clearly documented and tested channels for staff** to consult with or about Indigenous communities, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are not approached by default to provide advice and cultural labour where it is not part of their paid professional role.
5. **Assurance that all staff are aware** that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in identified positions are the 'face' of the library as far as their communities are concerned, and are often held personally responsible for the actions and decisions of others.

“I will believe that there has been structural and genuine change when I see an Aboriginal Executive or CEO. When I see us in positions of authority that don’t require cultural labour. When I see an Aboriginal speaker invited to speak about something in a library that isn’t diversity, inclusion or Aboriginal dreaming knowledge. When I see us exist as professionals and peers in ways that aren’t contingent on how we can delight and inform non-Aboriginal people.”

- Steering Group member, 2020

NSLA resources and what next

- Culturally Safe Libraries: Working with Indigenous Collections <https://www.nsla.org.au/resources/cslp-collections>
- Culturally Safe Libraries: ALIA In-depth Leadership Series <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D-Ow9aVfI8>
- ATSILIRN Protocols <https://atsilirn.aiatsis.gov.au/protocols.php>
- NSLA position statement: Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) <https://www.nsla.org.au/index.php/resources/position-statement-indigenous-cultural-and-intellectual-property-icip>
- NSLA Indigenous cultural competency principles <https://www.nsla.org.au/index.php/resources/icc-principles>
- NSLA position statement: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections and services in NSLA libraries <https://www.nsla.org.au/index.php/resources/first-nations-collections-and-services>
- Working with community (guidelines) <https://www.nsla.org.au/resources/working-community>

What next?...

- Annual audit across NSLA libraries until 2025 based on ATSILIRN Protocols, with results published
- Audit of contemporary Indigenous collections in four libraries, with recommendations to be actioned
- Establishment of Indigenous Advisory Group or similar for NSLA
- Continued support of NSLA Blakforce: peer support network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff
- Continued participation in OCLC *Reimagine Descriptive Workflows* project