

Occupational Therapy Australia's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP):

How can occupational
therapists facilitate respectful
communication and processes
when work with Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander people?

**Developed by First Nation
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Purpose

The overall purpose of this document is to facilitate Occupational Therapy Australia and the broader occupational therapy profession to foster respectful communication and processes when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This document provides information and strategies on how to advocate for respectful communication and processes, via the Occupational Therapy Australia's consultation process with members about the draft Reconciliation Action Plan.

What is a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)?



RAPs provide a strategic framework that support organisations to continually grow and contribute to the reconciliation movement in Australia. A key component of RAPs is fostering genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The video provides explains the importance of RAPs, which are administered by Reconciliation Australia.

Occupational Therapy Australia committed to developing a RAP in 2013, and recently released a draft RAP for consultation with Occupational Therapy Australia members.

Key information about the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Network (NATSIOTN)?

Key information about NATSIOTN includes:

- Corrine Butler, Christopher Henaway and Chontel Gibson co-founded NATSIOTN in 2013.
- NATSIOTN provides a space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OTS to support each other and to contribute to the cultural competency journey of the profession.
- Many NATSIOTN projects result in education activities for occupational therapists, which are mostly delivered at Occupational Therapy Australia events.
- NATSIOTN is a formal stakeholder and member in many different organisations. For example, NATSIOTN recommended one of its members to sit on the reference group to revise the [Occupational Therapy Council's accreditation standards for occupational therapy entry level education](#).
- Some members of NATSIOTN are members of Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA). These entities have distinct functions and compliment the much needed work required for Occupational Therapy Australia's cultural competency journey.

How has NATSIOTN supported Occupational Therapy Australia over the last 6+ years?

NATSIOTN members advocated via an Aboriginal board member for a RAP, which was then included in Occupational Therapy Australia's Strategic Plan 2013-2017.

From that point in time, NATSIOTN provided advice to the board about partnership arrangements with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities and provided advice via the First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders about the RAP.

NATSIOTN and IAHA members provided expertise and high-level advice, such as:

- ❖ leading RAP WG meetings and preparing information so the meeting is more welcoming for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OTs.
- ❖ providing individual and collective mentoring sessions with Occupational Therapy Australia delegates
- ❖ providing emotional support while OTA delegates reconcile the true history of Australia
- ❖ providing important information and resources relating to topics, like colonisation in Australia, the ongoing impact of colonisation in Australia, and the role of occupational therapy in colonisation and decolonisation, and much more.

How has NATSIOTN supported Occupational Therapy Australia over the last 6+ years? (Continued)

NATSIOTN members have brought their community partners into Occupational Therapy Australia, and supported Occupational Therapy Australia delegates to use respectful engagement principles when working with these partners.

NATSIOTN members significantly contributed to education days for Occupational Therapy Australia's national conferences via Occupational Therapy Australia delegates and processes. Examples of significant contributions included:

- ❖ Designing the education sessions relating to decolonisation and cultural safety
- ❖ Making a number of suggestions on how to run culturally safe conferences.

NATSIOTN role modelled how to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example, NATSIOTN shared the very little power/space that Occupational Therapy Australia gave them. One way NATSIOTN did this was to ensure more than one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy representative is sitting at the table, presenting, etc.

What are the key issues relating to Occupational Therapy Australia's RAP?

Although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapists have been involved in the RAP process, there is a belief that there are three key issues.

The three key issues relating to Occupational Therapy Australia's RAP journey (thus far) include:

1. The procedural issues with developing the RAP.
2. The RAP process reflects the process of colonisation
3. Some statements in the proposed RAP document.

Issue 1: What are the procedural issues relating to Occupational Therapy Australia's RAP?

The procedural issues with the RAP will be explored under the four principles that are foundational and fundamental to [The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.](#)

Principle 1: Self-determination, which refers to the freedom to live well, determine what it means to live well and live according to one's own values.

During the RAP process, NATSIOTN encouraged Occupational Therapy Australia to use good practices when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders remained at the partnership table, they were not properly informed of all the processes relating to the RAP. Being informed is a fundamental principle of self-determination, and not being informed is viewed as being a form of exclusion and oppression.

First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders asked Occupational Therapy Australia to review any acknowledgement about NATSIOTN's contribution to the (draft) RAP before it became public. However, First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders were not provided with an opportunity to review the RAP acknowledgements (or the lack of acknowledgement) before it was made public in the draft RAP. Occupational Therapy Australia's recent exclusion of NATSIOTN in the RAP process suggests that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupational therapists (and their work) are welcomed in Occupational Therapy Australia. Self-determination cannot be achieved when a collective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupational therapists are excluded from a professional body and important processes, like the RAP.

Principle 2: Participation in decision making is best done in partnership with Indigenous people. This means that people are free to make decisions, without feeling coerced, are provided with all relevant information in a timely manner, and the information is provided in a respectful way.

Throughout the RAP process, First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders requested minutes for meetings held with Occupational Therapy Australia. For the most part, no meeting minutes were received. This was a problem because Occupational Therapy Australia sometimes appeared to misinterpret information about protocols and communication, and provided no avenue to clear up these misinterpretations.

More recently, Occupational Therapy Australia said that First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders could expect to hear about decisions relating to the RAP with other Occupational Therapy Australia members. For the First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders and NATSIOTN, it felt that Occupational Therapy Australia walked away from the partnership table, and continued to make decisions without appropriate processes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Importantly, Occupational Therapy Australia's current governance structures give board directors the 'authority' to choose communication strategies and processes. Thus far, the chosen communication strategies and processes have restricted and/or excluded First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy community's participation in the RAP decision-making processes. This means that non-Indigenous occupational therapists have decided on the position, place and space of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within that partnership.

Principle 3: Indigenous people have a right to culture, which encompasses things like access to country, knowledge, language and spirituality.

In the occupational therapy profession's competency standards, one professional behaviour states:

An occupational therapist understands and responds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health philosophies, leadership, research, and practices.

Therefore, at a minimum, the Occupational Therapy Australia's RAP process and draft document released for consultation should have included:

1. A list of or reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OTs publications, which relate to a range of topics like, strength-based approaches, occupations, healing, cultural wellbeing and more. These publications use Indigenous knowledges as a foundation, and illustrate how occupational therapy can respectfully engage with Indigenous people and knowledges.
2. An acknowledgement of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OTs scholarly work has contributed to the professionalisation of occupational therapy work. That scholarly work has primarily focused on partnership development between occupational therapist and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as cultural safety.

It feels that Occupational Therapy Australia delegates are unable to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OTs as leaders because if they did, they would acknowledge those who are best placed to make decisions (about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their health philosophies, leadership, research and practice) and are placed in positions to make the decisions.

Principle 4: Equality and non-discrimination. Equality refers to people having the right to be free and considered equal to all groups of people. Non-discrimination refers to not being denied their rights.

It feels that the current governance frameworks in Occupational Therapy Australia have been used in ways that promote inequality. For example, it was NATSIOTN who suggested a MoU between NATSIOTN, IAHA and Occupational Therapy Australia, and they did so, to provide another avenue to re-set the partnership arrangements. When the RAP was released for consultation with members, NATSIOTN discovered that Occupational Therapy Australia did not include them in the proposed MoU. That exclusion resulted in there being a perception that Occupational Therapy Australia did not consider that all Indigenous occupational therapy entities are equal or worthy of a place at the partnership table in Occupational Therapy Australia.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Maori OTs have a similar network to NATSIOTN. The Maori OT's relationship with their Occupational Therapy Association is visible, as is the relationship between the different knowledge systems. Please see the [Occupational Therapy NZ/Whakaora Ngangahau Aotearoa website](#) for details on the [governance structure](#) and how Indigenous worldviews are treated equally with non-Indigenous world views in an occupational therapy association (see the [Treaty Governance Model Diagram](#)).

Issue 2: Why is OTA's RAP viewed by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapists as being another form of colonisation?

Colonisation in Australia occurred because European people:

1. Came to Australia
2. Used resources in ways that compromised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their existence
3. Omitted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the history pages

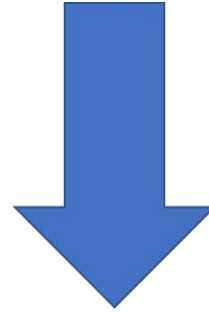
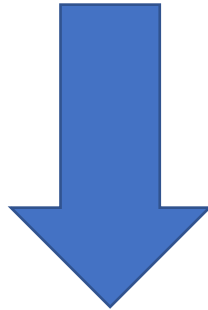
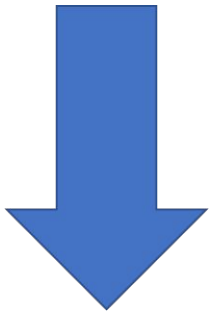
NATSIOTN feel that the RAP process reflects colonisation, because OT Australia:

1. Came to the partnership table
2. Walked away from the partnership table after gaining access to NATSIOTN resources (e.g. expertise)
3. Omitted NATSIOTN from the draft RAP documentation and future MoU.

Issue 3: How can we strengthen the proposed RAP?

The only way to strengthen the draft RAP, is for Occupational Therapy Australia to repair its relationships with the First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders, NATSIOTN and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy community. This can be achieved by undertaking respectful consultation processes with all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupational therapists. That repair process can also be used to inform the RAP documentation, before it is submitted to Reconciliation Australia.

In the meantime, here with some preliminary suggestions about the draft RAP.



Deliverable

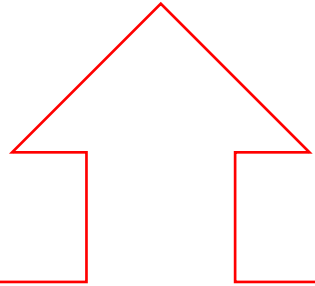
- a. Form RAP Working Group. Include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation as well as representation from a range of OTA staff.
- b. Develop and approve Terms of Reference for the RAP Working Group as consistent with OTA governance framework.
- c. RAP Working Group to meet quarterly to manage and monitor the actions and deliverables detailed in the Reflect RAP and report on progress.
- d. Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are represented on the RAP Working Group for the life of the RAP.
- e. RAP champion/Chair to forward monthly updates to Working Group members to ensure actions are achieved within allocated timeline.
- f. Seek OTA Member consultation and feedback on the Reflect RAP prior to submission for endorsement.
- g. Formally adopt and launch the RAP.
- h. Develop Terms of Reference for Steering Committee as consistent with OTA governance framework.
- i. Steering committee to guide and make recommendations on the implementation of the Reflect RAP and to develop the initiatives and opportunities for consideration in the next Innovate RAP.
- j. Seek Expressions of Interest from OTA membership. Composition of Steering committee to have at least two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation for the life of the committee.

NATSIO TN should nominate representatives.
E.G. IAHA representation to ensure OT community needs are met

RAP WGs should consist of 50% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and half of these representatives need to be experienced First Nation OTS.

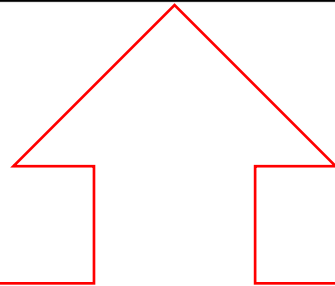
TOR should align with good practice for working with First Nation people, which means that the current OTA governance framework needs to be leveraged for inclusion.

Action	Deliverable
<p>2. Establish and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations.</p>	<p>a. Review and prioritise the identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations within our local area. Identify their sphere of influence.</p> <p>b. Research best practice and principles that support partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations.</p>



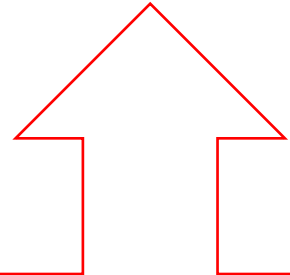
Occupational Therapy Australia needs to right its wrongs with past partnerships.

To date, First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders have felt that Occupational Therapy Australia were working in ways that caused disharmony between community members and the different Indigenous occupational therapy entities.



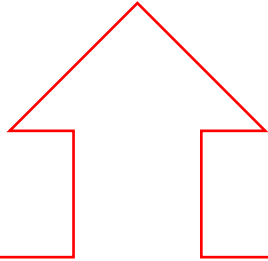
Research for best practice already exists, and has been included in many of Occupational Therapy Australia events. Occupational Therapy Australia needs to use the information that it has at hand.

The best way to partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is to communicate respectfully and put in place appropriate processes, including culturally safe governance arrangements.



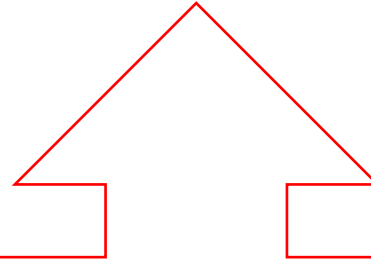
Currently, Occupational Therapy Australia are not in a position to identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's sphere of influence, nor do they have the confidence of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy community to do that work safely, effectively or accurately.

- e. Continue to build relationships with our known Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members. Develop a work plan to investigate the implementation of an identifier question in our member database.



Replace the word “build” to
“repair”

Acknowledge NATSIOTN in the
document.



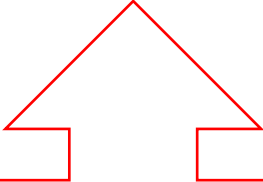
Delete last sentence and replace with:

Work with known Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy members and potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy members, with the aim of understanding how to repair the relationships and build trust for future relationships.

NB: Trust is built by using respectful communication and appropriate processes.

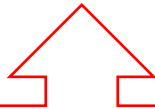
6. Continue to nurture relationships

- a. Commence discussions with Indigenous Allied Health Australia regarding Memorandum of Understanding, solidifying our relationship thus far and our commitment going forward.
- b. Provide updates and reports to original working and steering committees with progress and opportunities for input and consultation.



Occupational Therapy Australia's decision to omit NATSIOTN from the draft RAP and MoU has placed all key parties in a difficult position. Occupational Therapy Australia will need to repair the relational cost of making that decision, and if they do not, it will be difficult for Occupational Therapy Australia to bring a collective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OTs to the table - not just now, but also in years to come.

Action	Deliverable
<p>7. Increase understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge and rights through cultural learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Acknowledge the need for increasing understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge and rights within our organisation and demonstrate this in the next Strategic Plan.b. Conduct a review of cultural learning needs within our organisation.c. Facilitate access to cultural emersion/ awareness programs for professional development training across the organisation.d. Increase staff knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and achievements by encouraging the use of Reconciliation Australia's Share Our Pride online cultural awareness tool.e. Board Members, executive and senior management group actively participate and promote cultural awareness training enhancing OTA's commitment to reconciliation.f. Capture data and measure OTA's current level of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures histories and achievements.g. Review the Continuing Professional Development offerings for OTA and explore professional development opportunities that are accessible regardless of location. Ensure these are aligned to Australian Occupational Therapy competency standards as outlined by the Allied Health Practitioner Regulation Agency.



Include a deliverable that states:
To acknowledge and value the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupational therapists, including how they express partnerships, work with communities, understand occupations and decolonise the occupational therapy profession.

In summary,

The RAP processes and proposed plan are not aligned with good principles for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The misalignment has caused a level of distrust.

Trust needs to be restored before the RAP can be further progressed and/or finalised.

Trust can be restored by bringing all key partners to the partnership table, and do so by using respectful communication and appropriate processes.

Way forward – How to advocate for a respectful RAP?

Occupational Therapy Australia members can support their fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander OTs, by writing to Occupational Therapy Australia and asking them to change the current communication and processes, before the RAP is progressed any further.

Occupational Therapy Australia members can request that:

- First and foremost, Occupational Therapy Australia repair the relationship with NATSIOTN and the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy community, and this needs to be done before progressing the RAP any further.
- OT Australia should work with all parties at the partner table to establish and agree on respectful communication and appropriate processes for the partnership, RAP and broader work in occupational therapy.
- Occupational Therapy Australia co-opt two board directors, that NATSIOTN recommends. These co-opted directors will ensure that at least two board directors have the appropriate skills and knowledge in relation to working Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and can help start influencing broader governance changes.
- Occupational Therapy Australia include NATSIOTN in its proposed MoU.
- Occupational Therapy Australia, through a process suggested by the First Nation Occupational Therapy Leaders, work with the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Occupational Therapy community to develop respectful statements that can be included in the final RAP documentation.