Co-Design Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

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Co-designing with Indigenous communities is a relational, Indigenous-led approach to research and innovation in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples actively shape the purpose, processes, governance, and outcomes of projects that affect them. Co-design is not consultation. It moves beyond consultation to recognise Indigenous leadership, agency, community integrity, cultural protocols, shared power, and relationality. [1]

Co-design is grounded in relationships, trust, accountability, and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. It is a context-specific process shaped by community priorities, authority, and protocols. [2]

Why is it relevant?

Co-design matters because:

- It centres Indigenous self-determination. Co-design recognises Indigenous authority over research agendas, knowledges, and outcomes that affect their communities. [3]
- It strengthens research quality and relevance. Indigenous-led co-design supports more culturally grounded, context-aware, and ethically robust innovation. [3]
- It supports responsible innovation. In emerging technologies with uncertainty and long-term impacts, co-design enables early identification of values, risks, and desired futures.
- It builds trust and legitimacy. Research developed through co-design is more likely to be socially legitimate, sustainable, and supported over time.

Practical Steps

Effective co-design requires time, care, and reflexivity. Practical considerations include:

1. *Start with relationships, not projects*. Co-design begins before research questions are finalised. Invest time in building trust and understanding community priorities.
2. *Respect Indigenous governance and leadership*. Communities determine who speaks for Country, how decisions are made, and what forms of participation are appropriate.
3. *Share power and decision-making*. Co-design involves shared authority over research goals, methods, data, interpretation, and dissemination, not just input at selected stages.
4. *Be flexible and responsive*. Timelines, methods, and outcomes may need to adapt to community contexts, cultural obligations, and emerging insights.
5. *Ensure reciprocity and benefit*. Co-design must result in outcomes valued by communities, such as capacity building, employment, resources, and long-term partnerships.
6. *Commit to accountability over time*. Responsibilities do not end with project completion. Ongoing communication and follow-through are essential.

Case Study

An Indigenous-led partnership between Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation and university researchers illustrates best practice in co-design with Indigenous communities. From the outset, Yolŋu governance and community priorities shaped the research focus, the use of monitoring technologies, and the governance of data. [4] Indigenous representatives participated in ongoing decision-making and interpretation of findings, ensuring knowledge production and technological innovation aligned with cultural values and community aspirations while strengthening scientific relevance and ethical accountability. [5] [6] [7]

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