

Mapping the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives & Information Services

This collaborative research project was undertaken to gauge the impact of the 1995 publication, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*, in the library profession. It was also to identify areas where the Protocols could be improved. Our key research question for the project was: Did the Protocol driven strategy work in the profession? Forthcoming research papers will explore this question in more depth. A web version of this report is also forthcoming and will have hyperlinks to other documents associated with this project.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives & Information Services (hereafter Protocols) was published in 1995 in conjunction with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resources Network (ATSILIRN).

The Protocols address issues and concerns related to Indigenous materials held in libraries, archives and other information services, as well as those related to the provision of services for Indigenous people. The Protocols serve as a guide to assist library and information service providers when handling Indigenous materials and interacting with Indigenous peoples.

However, after a decade in circulation, there is little in the research literature that identifies the extent of its use, or its value and effectiveness in workplaces across the LIS sector.

2.0 MAPPING THE PROTOCOLS

This research project sought baseline data on the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives & Information Services (Byrne et al, 1995) in libraries and archives across Australia. The aim was to assess how useful the Protocols were as a strategy to address Indigenous information issues, to identify emerging issues that should be included, and to gather views from the profession on how the document could be improved to assist practice more effectively.

A key objective for the project was to seek research data¹ to inform a revised edition of the Protocols and subsequently to disseminate the revised Protocols across the Library, Archives and Information Services sector.

¹ UTS requires all research projects conducted by its staff to gain ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Committee. See Ethics Application Form, Information Sheet, Consent Form, UTS approval, and an Ethics Report at the completion of the project.

3.0 DATA COLLECTION PROCESS & INSTRUMENTS

3.1 Survey

A written survey was disseminated across the sector in hard and electronic formats. As many organisations as possible were targeted: National, State, public, university and school libraries, some specialist libraries, National and State archives and some museums. The survey asked:

- Whether the Protocols had been formally adopted.
- Whether the Protocols had been used to guide policy.
- Whether the Protocols had been used in any way.
- If the Protocols were generally useful or not.
- To what extent the eleven categories in the Protocols were most to least useful.
- What the best aspects of the Protocols were.
- How the Protocols might be improved.
- What other or emerging issues were considered relevant.

Approximately 20% (222) of organisations contacted responded to the survey. Of these, 34% had used the Protocols in some way. However, some of those who had not used them subsequently read them and responded to some of the questions, particularly questions around perceptions of usefulness and ways to improve them.

A preliminary summary of the findings was produced in early June 2004.

3.2 Interviews

The written survey was supported by interviews in selected sites in state and territory capitals and because of the expansion of Indigenous Knowledge Centres in North Queensland Cairns was also included.

Interviews provided the opportunity for in-depth discussions focusing on:

- How to improve the Protocols to make them more useful.
- New issues.
- The barriers to implementation and mechanisms that help work around them.
- Examples of good practice.
- Ways to promote the Protocols.
- Good practice within organisations and more generally across the sector.

Although considerable evidence was gathered of professional practice guided by the Protocols, what also emerged was fairly consistent reporting of the difficulties that organisations contend with in relation to Indigenous information issues and which affect the capacity to implement some principles of the Protocols. Substantial data was also offered on organisational perspectives of possible ways to improve the usefulness of the Protocols. As the interview process progressed, it became clear that organisations needed more substantive information on how to implement the Protocols, including case studies of practice.

4.0 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS²

The following summary presents the findings from the survey and interviews. It highlights the issues raised from both professionals' and organisations' perspectives and the implications of these for revamping the Protocols as a guide for practice.

4.1 Formal adoption:

Very few organisations had formally adopted the Protocols.

8% of respondents had formally adopted the Protocols and another 9% were considering doing so. The primary reasons given for not adopting included the obligation to comply with governing bodies. This did not necessarily mean a conflict of principles, but that legislative and other requirements dictate policy and procedures. The formal adoption of Protocols entails time-consuming bureaucratic processes for a number of organisations. The intention to formally adopt the Protocols was often outweighed by more practical concerns associated with their implementation.

4.2 As a guide for policy development:

Over a quarter of respondents had used the Protocols as a guide for policy development.

7% indicated often and 21% indicated sometimes. Sometimes reference to the Protocols is included in, for example, collection development policy.

4.3 Extent of use:

A third of respondents indicated they had used the Protocols in some way.

34% indicated they had used the Protocols in some way; 66% had never used them. Some respondents had not used them because they had not seen them but subsequently read them and felt that they were generally complying with the principles of the Protocols. A number of respondents who had not seen the Protocols prior to distribution of the survey indicated they would use them in the future.

4.4 Usefulness:

A large proportion of those who had used the Protocols indicated that they were useful or very useful.

84% indicated the Protocols are very useful or useful. 7% indicated that the Protocols are informative but not useful, and 1% useless.

The sections of the Protocols considered to be the most relevant are: content and perspectives; accessibility and use; subject headings/classification of materials; offensive materials; awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and issues.

² See list of [organisations](#) participated in survey and interviews

The least relevant are considered to be: governance and management; staffing; copying and repatriation. Further probing indicated that this was generally because these are the hardest areas to implement.

4.5 The best aspects of the Protocols:

The best aspect of the Protocols was as an introduction or starting point for raising awareness and understanding of Indigenous information issues in libraries and archives.

Responses from both the survey and interviews indicated a general consensus that the Protocols provide a very useful starting point for addressing Indigenous issues in libraries - a first and general reference. They are useful for raising awareness and were used by some in induction of new staff. They also provide an external authority for professionals and organisations that want to respond to the issues.

4.6 How might the Protocols be improved:

The Protocols should remain as broad principles but would be improved by the addition of supporting information.

It was considered appropriate by most that the Protocols remain as broad principles rather than prescriptions for practice. The diversity of both the LIS sector and the Indigenous community invariably means that issues need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

However, there was strong consensus across all organisations interviewed that although a useful starting point, the Protocols often did not provide enough depth of information to assist organisations to apply them. Some organisations indicated that fear of doing the wrong thing sometimes led to inaction, especially when issues could not be easily clarified or resolved.

Many respondents suggested that to be more effective the Protocols needed to be supported by quick and easy access to:

- Practical 'how to' or 'what to do' information to implement the principles.
- More focussed information for specific sectors.
- More information, including scholarly information, which explicates the underlying issues and rationales of appropriate practice in new, complex or contested situations.

A range of suggestions was also offered on how to present such information.

More detail on suggestions in these four areas is presented below.

The Protocols would be improved by inclusion of or direction to further practical information to support each principle.

This includes providing information, examples and case studies relating to, for example, collection development, intellectual property, subject headings, offensive or secret/sacred issues, developing relationships with Indigenous people/communities, successful employment strategies etc.

The Protocols would be improved by the inclusion of practical information that was sector-specific.

Some respondents expressed a need for more context and detail relating to the individual sectors. If sections of the Protocols appeared to be either irrelevant or impossible to comply with, then the Protocols were less likely to be referred to or incorporated into practice.

For example, some school, university, and public libraries indicated that the Protocols did not have much relevance to their particular sector and clients' needs. Some from these organisations indicated it would be easier to respond if they had more specific information or direction about the aspects of the Protocols that applied to their context and what action would be appropriate.

These professionals would prefer to see more focussed (and in some cases briefer and in plainer language) guidelines specific to their sector (eg. some universities, schools) and presented in formats that would facilitate quick reference and save time.

A range of formats and modes was suggested to facilitate quick and easy access to supporting practical information.

A range of formats of information was suggested:

- Case studies and examples of practice from similar organisations
- Fact sheets
- Common question and answer sheets
- Templates for warnings for sensitive materials
- Contact lists
- Lists of new Indigenous publications
- Lists of relevant Indigenous people/organisations.

A range of modes for practical assistance was suggested. These included access to:

- Web-based information
- Discussion lists
- Telephone referral services or assistance
- Face to face professional development
- Printed documents.

Access to further information, including scholarly information, which develops professional understanding of the underlying issues, would be useful.

Some respondents suggested that education on the underlying issues needed to be addressed more effectively, to enable professionals to respond more confidently to often complex situations. A number of approaches were considered useful, including:

- Better access to related information that developed understanding of underlying issues, for example, Indigenous intellectual property concerns. This could be provided via links to relevant websites, selected articles etc.
- The inclusion of Indigenous information issues into professional preparation and Indigenous Studies programs.
- More effective education for general understanding of the need for Protocols and why the issues are important to Indigenous people.

4.7 Improving the Presentation of the Protocols

There was broad consensus that an electronic website could effectively present the Protocols and provide supplementary information to assist the implementation the Protocols. Printed material was still considered to be important by some, particularly in terms of 'formalising' the Protocols.

There was a range of views expressed on improving the presentation of the Protocols. These included:

- Retaining them in both print and electronic form.
- Providing more detailed information with them.
- Making them more succinct and relevant to specific sectors' needs.
- Branding the Protocols to promote recognition. A logo was suggested as a way of doing this.
- Making them more visible across the sector by linking them to professional websites, for example, ALIA, and key library (eg State Libraries) websites.
- Using posters/brochures to present and promote Indigenous information issues on site.

4.8 Promotion of the Protocols

Promotion and dissemination of the Protocols needs to be more effective

There was consensus among many who used the Protocols that dissemination of the Protocols had not been maintained following publication in 1995. This was supported by the comments of respondents who had not heard of them and those who said they remembered them but had not sighted or used them recently. Some who were aware of the electronic form were unaware a longer printed version existed.

A range of suggestions for improving the dissemination of Protocols was suggested. These included:

- An outreach campaign to re-launch them, including forums for groups of organisations or visits to organisations/cities/regions to educate professionals about what they mean.
- Promotion and endorsement from both senior management and from frontline professionals.
- Ongoing professional development addressing the issues within organisations and across the LIS sector in a way that responds to shared concerns and needs (perhaps on a sector by sector basis).
- The use of forums, conferences, seminars, special interest groups, discussion lists etc to share knowledge and provide assistance.
- The reinvigoration of ATSLIRN as a 'face', focus and reference point for Indigenous information issues.
- An electronic web presence that links to layers of related and more substantial information about the issues. The website should provide information for different sectors, with examples of practice, useful timesavers, professional/scholarly articles, discussion lists, contacts for further assistance, and how to find appropriate Indigenous contacts. It was commonly believed this would assist the implementation process. However, some stressed that this was insufficient on its own.
- A reference service, for example, a telephone reference service or State liaison contacts.
- Raising awareness of the Protocols in professional preparation and continuing professional education programs.

4.9 New Issues

There was broad consensus that guidelines for approaching the issues associated with digitisation of and electronic access to Indigenous information and cultural materials would be useful, along with advice on how to handle the deposit of private/research collections to be held in libraries. It was also suggested that the Protocols could draw attention to issues associated with the public display of Indigenous materials.

Attention was also drawn to issues that, whilst not new, were considered by some to need inclusion or updating, such as:

- More specific protocols for interacting with Indigenous communities.
- Guidelines for communicating with Indigenous clients.
- The inclusion of updated and additional information on copyright issues and intellectual property developments.

There was no general consensus that the Protocols should include specific guidelines for interacting with communities and communicating with Indigenous clients. However, it was conceded by some that accessible information on the issues associated with these aspects of service would be useful.

4.10 Barriers to Implementation

The lack of supporting information to assist implementation was considered to be a barrier to implementation.

This has been discussed above.

Some organisations or professionals cannot implement or do not have responsibility for all areas covered by the Protocols due to the requirement to comply with relevant legislative Acts, governing or other bodies, and/or broader institutional policies and initiatives. It was considered that this needed acknowledgement within the Protocols' preamble.

Some organisations found ways around these barriers. Others adopted aspects of the Protocols, for example, employment, by integrating the principles outlined in the Protocols with broader institutional or government policy.

The challenges in maintaining a sustained focus on the issues addressed in the Protocols were seen to be a barrier to implementation. Leadership and co-operation across all LIS sectors were considered necessary by some to address this. The importance of Indigenous involvement was also emphasised.

Ineffective promotion and dissemination of the Protocols have been discussed above.

A number of individuals suggested that leadership across the sector as well as within organisations was required to keep the issues on the agenda and ensure that momentum was sustained.

More than one organisation thought that there were some issues that could be dealt with more effectively on a larger co-operative basis but that this would require leadership or a sustained agenda to drive them. These included employment, professional development and mechanisms for sharing of practice.

Some professionals expressed the view that to do this the Protocols needed an organisational face behind them, a focal point. Both ATSLIRN, CASL and ALIA were mentioned.

Another view expressed was that formal inclusion of Indigenous people on Boards, advisory, steering, and special interest groups was a way to keep a focus on Indigenous issues within organisations.

The Protocols were thought by some to require 'more teeth' to encourage compliance. Goodwill and faith were not thought to be sufficient but it was not clear how or whether compliance could be ensured.

Indigenous employment and training was a significant area of challenge preventing full implementation of the Protocols for many organisations.

Many cited recruitment and training of Indigenous staff as an ongoing challenge. Concerns that were raised as requiring more attention included:

- The roles and functions assigned to Indigenous staff.
- The difficulties attracting and retaining Indigenous staff.
- How to promote the profession to Indigenous people.
- The particular problems in training Indigenous staff in remote areas.
- The inadequate funding arrangements that did not encourage Indigenous people to stay in the profession (eg 'work for the dole' scheme).
- The general lack of long-term, sustainable employment strategies across the sector.

From the Indigenous perspective, there was a cluster of concerns raised about the roles and functions of Indigenous staff that warrant consideration in the formulation of a renewed Indigenous employment strategy. These included:

- The oft-assumed expectation that an Indigenous employee act as 'expert' on all Indigenous issues. This held implications for the ongoing education of all staff on Indigenous issues well as the broader development of the Indigenous employee's professional skills.
- The difficulties and frustrations Indigenous employees face in communicating Indigenous perspectives and concerns about practice to more senior levels of management.
- The general inflexibility of the approach to qualifications that overlooked the development of paraprofessional levels and/or cultural knowledge and/or other qualifications/skills of Indigenous people. It was thought by some that more flexibility in this area might assist Indigenous recruitment into the profession.
- The isolation experienced by some Indigenous employees as the only Indigenous member of an organisation.
- The general lack of recognition of the many competing demands on able Indigenous professionals (and students) who take seriously their duty to fulfil Indigenous community service and extended family obligations, as an important contribution to improving Indigenous futures.

A lack of consistent provision of professional development and training for the LIS sector on issues addressed by the Protocols was seen to be a barrier to implementation.

As discussed earlier in this report, the need for education and ongoing professional development on the issues addressed by the Protocols presented a barrier to implementation. Comments suggested that this needed to be addressed both within professional preparation programs and via more in-service professional development.

Many thought that additions to the website covering ways to approach training and development would be helpful, but not on its own be sufficient and that further strategies are required.

Face-to-face outreach to organisations was suggested.

Externally provided professional development seminars or kits (such as videos) were considered potentially useful for organisations without the knowledge or resources to undertake professional development themselves.

One Indigenous professional cautioned against organisations using their Indigenous employees to run staff cultural-awareness training sessions. Any resultant discomfort or tension carried the potential to disturb professional relationships within the organisation. It was suggested that external providers be used, but that this could include Indigenous professionals from other organisations.

Other suggestions included forums, seminars, conferences (like the early ATSLIRN conferences), and more focussed dissemination of relevant publications.

Funding arrangements were repeatedly cited as a barrier to implementing some aspects of the Protocols.

Funding to address Indigenous issues tends to be project-based rather than long-term and sustainable, but implementation of some aspects of the Protocols requires considerable long-term investment of time and resources.

Funding issues were particularly relevant to:

- Sustainable employment strategies.
- Resolution of complex issues such as retrospectively identifying, indexing materials and establishing access conditions for Indigenous collections and promoting them to Indigenous communities and people.
- Implementing consistent training or professional development strategies.
- Developing outreach strategies to encourage Indigenous use of libraries and archives.

5.0 FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

The results of the research confirmed progress in a number of areas, inertia in others, and inadequate and inconsistent awareness of the Protocols across the sector.

There was evidence of increasing innovations in practice developed in the course of implementing the Protocols and emerging from a general increase in awareness of Indigenous issues.

Implications from this study include:

- The need to follow up on the suggestions for improvement, particularly the development of a website that can carry more substantive information.³
- Investigation and development of other mechanisms for dissemination and promotion of the Protocols will require consideration and consultation with various stakeholders.
- The inclusion of examples of best practice and the development of mechanisms for co-operative sharing of ideas, knowledge and experience needs further consideration and consultation.
- The need for leadership at the National and State levels to raise and maintain Indigenous issues addressed by the Protocols on a long-term, sustainable agenda.
- Consideration of a co-operative, cross-sector, whole of profession approach to issues that cannot be addressed by organisations working in isolation, for example, employment, the

³ (See Appendix 11 for draft storyboard of website)

inclusion of Indigenous issues in professional preparation and development programs, advocacy for sustainable and appropriate levels of funding.

- Consideration to provide appropriate support for ATSILIRN as the appropriate focus/reference point for Indigenous information issues as addressed by the Protocols.

6.0 MOVING FORWARD

This report concludes Stage 1 of the research project. The research team will continue with Stage 2 in 2005. The following activities in Stage 2 are designed to progress a working model for the maintenance and continual review of high standards of practice in the LIS sector.

- Revise the Protocols document to reflect feedback from surveys and interviews, in particular, the development of a section to deal with digitisation and electronic access issues and seek its formal endorsement.
- Develop an online version/website for Protocols to reflect feedback from surveys and interviews.
- Develop a process for ongoing review/renewal of the Protocols to maintain currency and focus on Indigenous information issues.
- Develop operations manual for the website, document ongoing maintenance areas, and cost the management of the site.
- Investigate possibilities for a future home for the Protocols website.
- Assist, where appropriate, in the process to reinvigorate ATSILIRN and seek appropriate mechanisms for their involvement in the ongoing development of the Protocols.

7.0 CONCLUSION

- The progress made with Indigenous issues across the LIS sector over the last decade has largely been the result of considerable individual goodwill and professional effort of many. This needs to be appreciated and acknowledged.
- The experience, observations, concerns and frustrations of Indigenous and other professionals in the LIS sector who have developed good practice under considerable time, knowledge, and resource constraints also need to be appreciated and acknowledged.
- The Protocols have been useful to those who have used them as a starting point. They have confirmed the practice of those already aware of and working across the issues. The overwhelming message to come out of this project is that timely access to more substantial information is needed to assist in the implementation of the Protocols and more effective dissemination needs to occur to broaden their practical use across the sector.

The critical issue to developing and maintaining high standards of practice in Indigenous information management and services continues to be the development of genuine and mutually productive relationships with Indigenous individuals, groups and communities. Almost all participants in this research project, across all sectors, who were attempting to address and resolve complex or difficult issues emphasised this point.