

First Nations student guidebook

Cultural responsiveness in learning
and teaching at CDU



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Acknowledgement of Country and recognition of Australian First Nations traditional owners and cultures

Charles Darwin University acknowledges and respects the many Australian First Nations traditional custodians of the lands upon which our campuses and centres are located.

We acknowledge and pay our respect to the Larrakia who are the traditional custodians of the lands upon which our Darwin Casuarina, Waterfront and Palmerston campuses are located.

We acknowledge and pay our respect to the Arrernte who are the traditional custodians of the lands upon which our Alice Springs campus is located.

We acknowledge and pay our respect to the Jawoyn, Wardaman and Dagoman who are the traditional custodians of the lands upon which our Katherine campuses are located.

We acknowledge and pay our respect to the Yolŋu who are the traditional custodians of the lands upon which our Nhulunbuy Centre is located.

This guidebook uses the terms First Nations, Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interchangeably, reflecting the original language in cited and paraphrased sources as well as the language used by participants in “Higher Education and First Nations Students: The CDU Story.”

We acknowledge and pay our respect to the Gadigal who are the traditional custodians of the lands upon which our Sydney campus is located.

We acknowledge and pay our respect to the Turrbal and Yuggera who are the traditional custodians of the lands upon which our Brisbane centre is located.

We acknowledge and pay our respect to the Warumungu who are the traditional custodians of the lands upon which our Tennant Creek centre is located.

We also acknowledge and pay our respect to the Mirrarr (Jabiru), the Kungarakana and Warrai (Batchelor, Adelaide River), the Anindilyakwa (Groote Eylandt) and the Tiwi (Tiwi Islands) people.



Professor Ruth Wallace, Pro Vice Chancellor of the Faculty of Arts and Society at CDU, endorses this resource based on the findings of the "Higher Education and First Nations Students: The CDU Story" project. This student pocket guidebook will help to orient First Nations students to studying at CDU and provide information to both nurture a sense of belonging, and support success.

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Introduction

Welcome! Being a new student in tertiary education can be daunting. Being a First Nations student can be even more daunting if you feel like you are in the minority or can't see many other First Nations students on campus or in class. All CDU staff are here to support you in your studies, and we want to see you succeed. This student pocket guidebook will help you orient yourself to the systems and processes in place at CDU to support your success.

As stated in the [CDU Strategic Plan 2021–2026](#) (CDU, 2021), we believe in recognizing, embedding and celebrating the transformative leadership of First Nations people. We believe in diversity as a strength and welcome differences in culture, race, religion, gender identity, ability and sexuality. CDU lecturers are aware of the challenges students may face

and they know how to support your learning and create learning environments that are culturally inclusive. CDU lecturers have access to professional development and resources, such as a lecturer guidebook with information about cultural responsiveness and inclusive strategies, which they can use.

We wish you the best learning experience possible and encourage you to take a moment to read through this guidebook.

At the end of this guidebook, you will find a directory of support services for First Nations students and other general services and opportunities. You might find this directory particularly useful at the beginning of your journey at CDU.





1. Cultural responsiveness and its importance in Higher Education

1.1. What is cultural responsiveness?

Cultural responsiveness can be defined as competently understanding, interacting, and communicating effectively and sensitively with others from a different background. Lecturers who are culturally responsive will create teaching and learning environments that can improve your outcomes, strengthen engagement, and build relationships with you based on cultural respect and understanding.

Cultural responsiveness is central to the inclusion, safety, and overall health and well-being of First Nations people. All staff at CDU are continually developing their capabilities to be culturally responsive. Being culturally responsive involves learning from and relating respectfully to First Nations people to develop meaningful and collaborative relationships (Government of South Australia, 2022).



It is a strengths-based action-orientated approach that requires critical reflection to develop awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and understanding of the diverse histories and cultures of Aboriginal people.

Cultural responsiveness emphasizes the importance of creating spaces that are culturally safe. CDU lecturers and professional staff are aware of the impact their interactions have with First Nations students in teaching, research, and professional service delivery. They acknowledge the need for ongoing self-reflection and self-awareness to be able to create culturally safe spaces for students.

Universities should be safe, discrimination and harm-free places (Universities Australia, 2022). It is our priority to make you feel culturally safe as a First Nations student at CDU. We want CDU to be a place where First Nations students and staff can participate and succeed in an environment that values your cultural identities, knowledge, and ways of knowing,

being, and doing. You can also refer to CDU's [Anti-Racism Policy](#) (CDU, 2023a), [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy](#) (CDU, 2023b) and [CDU Code of Conduct – Students](#) (CDU, 2022a).

By feeling culturally safe, we hope you will be empowered to address any challenges you face by accessing the CDU services that you need, building trust, and forming relationships to succeed.



1.2. Why is cultural responsiveness important for me as a First Nations student at CDU?

A culturally responsive learning environment is one where there is mutual respect, effective relationships, clear communication, explicit understanding of expectations, and critical self-reflection. In these student-centred environments, you should see your lecturers as facilitators of your learning, not experts. They, too, are learners in their own journeys towards being culturally responsive.

Your lecturers will strive to create culturally responsive learning environments using strength-based approaches that encourage you to draw on your unique prior knowledge and skills. They will contextualize learning to relate to your life, experiences, aims, and values and link learning materials to your backgrounds to ensure you have a voice. Examples, readings, case studies, audio and visual materials will be carefully chosen to affirm your belonging in your learning journey.



Lecturers at CDU will co-establish class expectations with students and ensure these are empowering for you. They will teach in a way that helps you to learn best and be a cultural ally to support your academic success. Learning in a culturally responsive environment at CDU means you:

- > Are free to express who you are and share your opinions and points of view.
- > Feel safe from abuse, harassment, or unfair criticism.
- > Can fully participate in your learning, aim to study better and achieve higher academic results, experience less stress, and have enhanced career prospects.

CDU has policies that bind all staff and students, for example, the CDU Code of Conduct – Employees and the [CDU Code of Conduct – Students](#) (CDU, 2022a). The latter states that we, as the University, are “enriched by diverse contributions from students

and staff and [that CDU] encourages the respectful sharing of different perspectives and experiences” (CDU, 2022a). This document further defines the expected standards of behaviour of students from all backgrounds at the University. In relation to cultural responsiveness, all students are expected to co-create a respectful environment for example by “listening to opposing views with an inquiring mind and engaging constructively with others who express differing views or beliefs” and by “collaborating with students from diverse backgrounds in group work, projects and other activities” (CDU, 2022a).

If you feel that you are not being treated respectfully, the First Nations Student Support Team can support you. Please see Section 4. “Relevant CDU support services” for their contact details.



2. A First Nations focus

2.1. Who are First Nations students at CDU?

The CDU data shows that there are many First Nations undergraduate students at CDU. The 2021–2023 aggregate-level data recorded 1,292 First Nations undergraduate students (this figure excludes those in enabling courses) of whom 80% were women and 20% were men. The disciplines of nursing, education, law, social sciences, health science, psychology, social work and midwifery recorded the highest numbers of First Nations undergraduate students, ranging from over 300 to 70.

In 2021–2023, CDU saw 66.8% of First Nations undergraduate women complete or be retained, while the corresponding proportion for men was 64.8%. Information in this guidebook is intended to support you as a First Nations undergraduate student and to contribute to your improved satisfaction, retention, and completion.

In 2021–2023, more than two-thirds of all First Nations undergraduate students came to CDU from regional, remote, and very remote parts of Australia (78%) and 22% from major cities. First Nations undergraduate students come to CDU knowing what they wish to study with 94.3% remaining in the same course they commenced and fewer than 6% changing courses.



2.2. How could First Nations content be embedded in my course?

The term “First Nations content” refers to curriculum content about issues relevant to First Nations people, or about First Nations people, and it may include First Nations knowledges, where permitted.

CDU lecturers are committed to making their units inclusive and culturally safe for First Nations students (read about cultural responsiveness and cultural safety in Section 1.1. of this guidebook). They strive to incorporate First Nations content as a core component of their teaching so that you can see yourself reflected in your academic learning journey. Some of your peers in the class are going to be non-First Nations and international students. Working with First Nations content will enrich their learning experience and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

CDU commits to embedding First Nations content in its key documents such as the

[CDU Strategic Plan 2021–2026](#) (CDU, 2021), the [CDU 2022–2026 First Nations Leadership Core Plan](#) (CDU, 2022b) and other important documents. This is in line with university strategies across Australia.

Your lecturer may embed First Nations content in several ways.

1. The topic may be specifically about First Nations people or culture.
2. The topic may be more general, such as health, housing, or education, and may include relevant First Nations examples.
3. The topic may include elements of First Nations knowledges (Indigenous knowledges) owned by First Nations peoples. In this case, the lecturer may have a First Nations person come in to give a guest lecture, have gained permission to share the information, or have their lecture informed by First Nations input or resources.

2.3. What is a First Nations pedagogy?

The term “First Nations pedagogy”, which may also be called Indigenous pedagogy, refers to additional teaching strategies used to best cater for the learning styles or needs of First Nations students. While there are pedagogies that can be applied generally, such as the [8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning](#) (8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning, n.d.), it is important to differentiate to the local First Nations people and local First Nations language groups where the learning is occurring as much as possible. For example, if you are studying at one of the CDU campuses in Darwin, your lecturer may incorporate some Larrakia words or invite a local Larrakia guest speaker to your class.

First Nations pedagogies are flexible and allow you to show what you have learned in different ways, like working in teams rather than, for example, only writing individual essays. First Nations pedagogies focus on

building connections (they are relational), they are centred on you and often include experiential or practical activities that help you learn by doing. First Nations pedagogies recognize that you may also have your own places and practices of learning which are different to those of the classroom. You will be welcome to draw on them, talk about them and rely on them as you make your way through university studies.

Your knowledge and ways of learning as a First Nations student will be respected by your lecturers and tutors. However, you do not need to share them with others if you choose not to.



3. First Nations student success strategies

This section uses information collected from First Nations undergraduate students and lecturing staff at CDU in the “Higher Education and First Nations Students: The CDU Story” project. First Nations undergraduate students were asked to give advice to their peers, and lecturers were asked to identify the “tell-tale signs” of student success in their classrooms.

3.1. First Nations student success strategies

Examples of First Nations undergraduate students’ responses (direct quotes) are provided below.

My advice to other First Nations students is to study a field which has interested them for some time and will lead them toward a rewarding career path.

Seeking and using support from others are important, additional strategies. You may talk with a fellow First Nations student, take advantage of the free Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) led by recent students who excelled in their studies, or use the support available from the First Nations Student Support Services.

Take advantage of the one-on-one tutoring support.

Pre-recorded lectures and PASS students have made it easier to combine study with work and parenting responsibilities.

The course materials were really good, however the assistance from the Indigenous Student Support Services was excellent.

Being able to access all previous work, videos of lectures and unit material through Learnline at any time assisted in my studies and assignments.

What got me through was being able to sit down with a fellow First Nations nurse and

process/reconcile the differences in 'White healthcare' and what was expected of me versus how I felt. Having a mentor in the workplace made all the difference.

I have a tutor who helps review my work, and I can ask questions.

The advice above refers to CDU services aimed specifically at supporting First Nations students and to services available to all students. You can find information and contact details for these and other support services in Section 4. "Relevant CDU support services" below.

First Nations undergraduate students found their lecturers to be supportive and understanding.

CDU lecturers are accessible and dedicated to helping you succeed academically. Don't hesitate to reach out to them.

Really appreciate the individual support we get from the lecturer, and they are always accessible if we have questions or need help.

The lecturer is the best thing about this course. They are dedicated, knowledgeable and goes the extra mile.

They [lecturers] were supportive and understanding and adapted deadlines to meet the needs of what I was going through.

We encourage you to follow the strategies these students have used: be an active learner and approach your lecturer with questions. If needed, you may also negotiate assignment deadlines with them. Your lecturers understand life circumstances and are dedicated to helping you complete your units, so ensure that you communicate with them.

3.2. Advice from lecturers

CDU lecturers offered the following tips for success in your learning and completing your degree:

Have your aim, drive and passion to make an impact and believe in yourself. Self-belief is the single most important factor in achieving completion.

Attend the O-Week – that will help you in the beginning.

Come to class in person and stay for the whole time, engage in the class and chat with other classmates. Engage and ask questions, even if you say ...this might be a stupid question...Even if you are sending a panic email, reach out.

You can reach out beforehand, even before the semester starts – that's a great time, ask about reading materials – maybe get to know the lecturer and build a relationship and understand who is the person that I'm going

to be learning from. That is good and it often continues on for this student.

Reach out regularly by email, phone or Zoom. This is really critical because the students who reach out are the ones who want to know how to improve their work. And so I know that when they are reaching out to me and seeking a meeting and feedback on [an assignment] before or after it has been submitted, they're resolved, they're tuned into their work, and they're serious about their work.

Read the feedback and take it on board. It would be a sign of success if I noticed [that] the feedback that I gave in one assignment [is] applied in the next [assignment].

Go beyond the nominated class readings. Go to the library and search for other sources of information to include in [your] assessments.

The advice above shows that students learn well when they are proactive and engaged in their studies, when they communicate with their lecturers and interact face-to-face and socially with other students. While this may not be possible for external students who learn online, they can interact with their peers in online classes, and all students can always contact their lecturer.

Lecturers encourage students to drive their own learning by participating in activities outside of class. Examples include seeking tutoring, as mentioned by the First Nations undergraduate students above, applying for scholarships and internships, and joining activities held by CDU for First Nations students. The First Nations Student Support team (refer to Section 4. “Relevant CDU support services” below) is the best first point of contact for academic support, as well as for cultural and social activities.

Reach out for help; you are not alone.

Show up, ask for help, ask for tutoring.

Use the resources: different scholarships and different services like (...) internships.

Come to Uni groups, barbeques, or First Nations cultural activities.

The final advice is to persist, though using the strategies shared by your First Nations undergraduate peers and their lecturers at CDU.

Persevere, no matter what life throws at you.





4. Relevant CDU support services

4.1. List of support services

CDU offers academic, pastoral, and other support services for First Nations undergraduate students studying on-campus, online, or in hybrid mode. The information below is current as of mid-2024. Please check the CDU website and specific service websites for updates, as some in-person services will move to Danala, the new Education and Community Precinct in Darwin CBD, in 2025. You may also access the [“First Nations Student Guide: Information for Higher Education Students”](#) prepared by the First Nations Student Support team.

Services for First Nations students

Financial support: Navigate from www.cdu.edu.au/current-students/life-health-wellbeing/financial-health-wellbeing to determine if and what financial assistance may be available through ABSTUDY. The Away from Base (AWF) program offers financial support to First Nations students who travel away

from home (study location) for short periods to complete compulsory course requirements such as placements. For further information, go to www.cdu.edu.au/first-nations-leadership/away-base-afb-program.

Free First Nations Student Support: This team offers comprehensive assistance to all First Nations students across all CDU campuses. Examples of services are: guidance on pre-enrolment, recognition of prior learning (RPL), course selection, study plans, using Learnline, library resources, scholarships, AWF program and Academic Language Learning Support. The Team advocates for students and offers referrals to CDU free and confidential counselling and to the First Nations Tutorial Support. The staff maintains regular contact with students. Individual appointments are booked on www.cdu.edu.au/first-nations-leadership/first-nations-students-individual-support-booking. More information and staff

details are available at: www.cdu.edu.au/first-nations-leadership/first-nations-student-support, by calling **08 8946 6479** or by email: fnsreception@cdu.edu.au.

Free First Nations Tutorial Support: Tutoring is available between 1 to 8 hours per week in-person and online. Tutors support students with understanding assessments, research skills and referencing, study skills, time management, and planning workloads. Tutors undergo thorough vetting for cultural sensitivity, formal qualifications, and disciplines in which they can tutor. They adhere to the CDU policies, rules and procedures. Students and tutors are encouraged to use First Nations Student Services facilities on Casuarina (**the Gurinbey Centre, Blue 2.1**), Alice Springs (**Akaltye Centre, Red 2**), and Katherine (**Yangan.garr Centre**) campuses. Registration for tutoring support is online: www.cdu.edu.au/first-nations-leadership/first-nations-tutorial-support-ts. First Nations students are welcome to register as tutors via the same link.

General and pastoral services for all students

CDU Bookstore: The physical store is located at the Casuarina Campus and sells textbooks, other books, and other items (e.g., for placements) to clients in-store and online. It does not sell or buy back secondhand textbooks. For more information go to: <https://bookshop.cdu.edu.au>.

CDU Careers Centre: The Careers Centre has an in-person and online presence: www.cdu.edu.au/careers, also accessible from the Student Portal. It serves all CDU students and graduates regardless of the mode of study and location. It offers group workshops, group drop-in sessions (Casuarina, Darwin Waterfront, Sydney campuses, contact the Careers Centre for frequency) and individual in-person and online consultations. A highly popular mentoring program runs every semester – students are mentored by government or industry peers (CDU Alumni often mentor to ‘give back’). The insights to industry (i2i) program of industry presentations,

Q&A panels and networking events enable students to make connections with the industry. Employers contact the Careers Centre regularly seeking to engage students.

CDU Library: In-person or online (www.cdu.edu.au/library/students), the Library is the go-to place for all students to access electronic and printed learning resources, find a quiet study space and to print, copy and scan. At the time of writing in mid-2024, the Library has four physical locations: on Larrakia Country (Casuarina, Palmerston), Arrernte Country (Alice Springs) and Gadigal Country (Sydney). For opening hours, visit: www.cdu.edu.au/library/campus-libraries. Contact the Casuarina Library at **08 8946 7016**, Palmerston Library at **08 8946 7870**, Arrernte Country (Alice Springs) at **08 8959 5233**, and Gadigal Country (Sydney) at **02 8047 4141**. To email use: askthelibrary@cdu.edu.au, or the online form: www.cdu.edu.au/library/contact-us.

Take note of additional, free services to all students. The **Library's Language and Learning Support Team** offers individual consultations about assessments and study skills. In-person consultations are available at the Casuarina, Palmerston, and Sydney campuses; online consultations are available to all students regardless of location. To book, go to: www.cdu.edu.au/library/language-and-learning-support. The team also provides in-person and online workshops and drop-in sessions to develop study skills. Book at: www.cdu.edu.au/library/language-and-learning-support.

Librarians offer 20-minute-long, free individual consultations to assist all students, for example, with information searching skills and referencing styles. In-person consultations are available at the Casuarina, Darwin Waterfront and Sydney campuses. Online consultations are available to all students regardless of location. Book at: <https://libcal.cdu.edu.au/appointments>.

Peer advisors: Senior, high-achieving students are available to assist with assessments and understanding the unit content through group sessions or individual mentoring. Visit the program page <https://www.cdu.edu.au/library/language-and-learning-support/peer-advisors> to find out more, or email: askthelibrary@cdu.edu.au for general queries.

CDU student groups: A variety of student groups are open to all students. They foster connections, fun, and shared interests and serve primarily Darwin-based students. They cover sports, hobbies, discipline-related interests like IT or allied health, causes such as women’s empowerment, faiths, and there is a group for student parents. Details of the current groups and information on how to join can be found by clicking on “Join a student group” on this website: www.cdu.edu.au/current-students. Involvement in these groups, whether through volunteering or holding a leadership position, can enhance skills,

confidence, and independence while offering experiences valued by employers. Students can also start new groups.

CDU Wellbeing Support: This line is available to all students 24/7 for urgent support. Call: **1300 933 393**, or SMS **0488 884 144**.

Current student complaints: The Complaints Team supports all current students, regardless of location, with academic and non-academic matters, unfair treatment or other concerns affecting their CDU experience. The process includes local resolution, formal complaint, and appeal stages, ensuring fairness and transparency. Outcomes are tailored to the situation, including mediation, improvements, or disciplinary actions, if necessary. For more information, go to: <https://www.cdu.edu.au/current-students/life-health-wellbeing/complaints>. Call **08 8946 7738**, email: complaints@cdu.edu.au. To visit in person, go to **Blue 5.1.35** at the Casuarina Campus.



Digital Technology Solutions (DTS): The DTS Service Desk staff (formerly the IT Service Desk, your lecturer may still refer to them by this name) assist all students with the internet, computers, assisted IT equipment and printers, primarily over the phone. Call **08 7943 6600** (or dial the last 4 digits if calling from CDU phones); alternatively, visit the DTS Kiosk at the Library on Casuarina Campus (closed on weekends). Step-by-step advice on activating a student account, setting up a student email, resetting a password, connecting personal devices to a CDU email account, accessing Wi-Fi and using eduroam can be found here: <https://www.cdu.edu.au/dts/students>. Faults can be reported by email: itsupport@cdu.edu.au.

Free, confidential Access and Inclusion support: This team offers in-person (Casuarina, Sydney campuses) and online counselling and drop-in well-being check sessions. It puts in place adjustments

to allow all students with a disability, medical or mental condition (temporary or permanent) as well as carers, equal access and participation in CDU life. Adjustments are made through personalized Access Plans developed between the student and a counsellor. The student can then share it with lecturers for implementation. Examples include more time during exams or adjusted submission deadlines for assessments. An Access Plan does not disclose the condition or appear in formal documentation. For more information and support arrangements, visit: www.cdu.edu.au/current-students/life-health-wellbeing/access-inclusion or email: counselling@cdu.edu.au.

Learnline: CDU's online learning platform is Learnline. To learn how to use it, including joining and participating in online classes, using assistive software, and who to speak with to resolve a problem, go to: www.cdu.edu.au/current-students/services/learnline.

Support is available 24/7 at **1800 984 057** or by following the link to the online chat from the above website.

Online tutoring: All students can use this 24/7 service through their Learnline units. For questions, email: askthelibrary@cdu.edu.au.

Safety and emergency: In an emergency, call **000**, then contact the University Security team on **1800 646 501** (24/7 Australia-wide, free call), **08 8946 7777** (24/7 on Casuarina Campus) or use the SafeZone app. To email CDU Security, use: security@cdu.edu.au. The **SafeZone app** sends notifications in emergencies such as cyclone watches and related campus closures. Information, including a link to download the app, can be found here: www.cdu.edu.au/locations/casuarina-campus/security. Learn about CDU emergency procedures here: www.cdu.edu.au/emergency/emergency-information.

Short-term opportunities to inform student experience at CDU: The “Your Voice Student Network” invites all interested students to provide feedback on their experience at CDU. Commitment involves participating in focus groups, workshops, interviews and an online community to give feedback on teaching and other student services; this information is then shared anonymously with teaching and other areas at CDU. These opportunities are not targeted exclusively at First Nations students, though First Nations students can disclose their status when registering. Students studying at any CDU location and online are invited and participation can be in-person or online. Participation in three sessions during a semester comes with an AU\$ 100.00 eCard to thank students for their contribution and a certificate. Information how to join the initiative can be found by clicking on “Your Voice Student Network” on this website: www.cdu.edu.au/current-students.

Non-CDU service: 13YARN (13 92 76) is a free, confidential Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support line that is run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is free to call from any mobile or pay phone and available 24/7. See www.13yarn.org.au.





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The project received ethics clearance from the CDU Human Research Ethics Committee in 2022.

<https://firstnationsuccess.cdu.edu.au>

All information contained in this guide is correct at the time of publication, but it is subject to change as information is reviewed and updated throughout the year. It is recommended to check the CDU website for the most up-to-date information.

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