



First Nations young people

**YOUNG AND WISE ROUNDTABLE REPORT
2026**



Cohort snapshot

5 PARTICIPANTS	10 APPLICANTS	2 SESSIONS	June 2026 CONDUCTED
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How we ran this

Two online roundtables were held via Microsoft Teams on 10 and 11 June 2026, part 1 and 2 of a single conversation, split across two evenings allowing rapport to build and giving the group more time to revisit and deepen earlier threads.

Each session opened with safety and housekeeping. Participants were reminded they controlled what they shared and could skip any question, go off-camera, or take breaks. First Nations crisis and support services were shared in the chat, alongside facilitator contact details for a private debrief.

Special acknowledgement

For Part 2, ARACY was joined by Kristen Franks, a Ngambri Walgalu Aboriginal woman and Assistant Director in the Strategic Health and Disability Section of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). We thank Kristen for helping refine the roundtable questions, and for participating in the session. She offered participants a cultural touchstone, shared lived and professional wisdom, and modelled cultural safety. ARACY is grateful for her generosity and partnership.

Who participated

Five young people took part across the two sessions and all self-identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Participants unable to make the second session were invited to complete the Mentimetre survey in their own time to respond to any questions missed.

	Part 1 — 10 June 2026	Part 2 — 11 June 2026
Participants	5	3
Age range	18-25 years	23-25 years
Gender	Female: 5	Female: 3
State/ Territory	WA (3), SA (1), NSW (1)	WA (2), NSW (1)
Intersecting identities	Rural, regional and remote (3) LGBTIQA+ (1)	Rural, regional and remote (2)

Named participants: Jazmin, Kerri, Sian and 'BW'. One participant asked to remain fully de-identified. Names and nicknames follow each participant's recorded consent preference.

Scope and limitations

Limitations that apply across all Series 2 cohorts are set out at 2.7 Limitations and considerations. The points below are specific to this cohort. This was the smallest cohort, with five participants in the first session and three in the second, all identifying as female, mostly older young adults, and most living in Western Australia. Facilitators acknowledged that ARACY may be perceived as a predominantly non-Indigenous organisation and that participation rested on participants' trust, underscoring the importance of culturally safe recruitment and engagement.

One participant reflected in their Folktale that the group was small, and that future sessions would benefit from more time and a broader range of voices. ARACY shares this view. Because Series 2 cohorts overlap, findings are combined into one report and read as a collective set of lived-experience insights, each indicative rather than representative.

At the EOI stage, when applicants selected the Nest domains they most wanted to talk about, Positive Sense of Identity and Culture was chosen by every applicant (10 of 10). In discussion, that is exactly what carried the conversation: culture as identity, belonging, survival and strength.

Ranked First Nations applicants' wellbeing domains:

Rank	The Nest domain	Frequency (qualitative)
1	Positive Sense of Identity and Culture	Most frequent
2	Valued, Loved and Safe	Most frequent
3	Learning	Frequent
3	Healthy	Frequent
5	Participating	Moderate
6	Material Basics	Less frequent

Note: Exact percentages not shown; this table reflects qualitative ranking of EOI frequency. Individuals could select multiple domains.

What this signals: Identity and culture is not one priority among six for these young people; it is the lens through which every other domain is understood. Health, learning, safety and participation were all described in cultural terms: culturally safe clinicians, language revival in schools, seeing yourself in the services you attend. Programs designed for First Nations young people that treat culture as a discrete "domain", rather than the foundation, risk missing how wellbeing actually works for this cohort.

Key messages



The short version: Five young First Nations people came to these roundtables with clear insight into what keeps them strong and where systems fall short. Their strongest message was that culture is infrastructure: not one wellbeing domain among six, but the foundation for health, safety, learning, participation, identity and belonging. Participants spoke about culture as survival, about being forced to leave Country to study or find safety, and about the impacts of language loss, racism in schools, housing insecurity and services that are not culturally safe. They were clear that cultural safety is demonstrated through action, accountability and representation, not statements alone. They called for more First Nations workers, stronger cultural and family supports, stable housing, and pathways that allow young people to thrive while staying connected to Country, culture and community.

Six clear messages from young First Nations people

Six core themes emerged offering practical guidance for policy, partnership and investment:

	Problem statement	Roundtable insights
1	Culture and identity are not consistently recognised as foundational to First Nations young people's wellbeing.	Culture and identity were chosen as a priority by every applicant and described as inseparable from wellbeing: connection to Country, language, totems, family and community. Staying strong was tied directly to staying connected, and that connection held as a source of resilience even where distance made it harder to maintain.
2	Pathways to education, work and safety do not adequately support young people to stay connected to Country.	Moving away for university, work or safety often came at the cost of connection, language and a sense of belonging. Opportunity and culture were too often experienced as a trade-off, rather than something that could be pursued together.
3	Services are not consistently culturally safe, and cultural safety is not always matched by action.	Services felt safe when staffed by First Nations workers, or by people who were genuinely culturally safe. Indigenous health clinics, university Indigenous units, and the few schools that embedded culture were valued highly. Cultural safety was understood as action and follow-through, not statements of intent.

	Problem statement	Roundtable insights
4	Schools do not consistently teach the topics that matter <u>most</u>, or sustain the roles that support First Nations students.	Mental health, racism and discrimination were barely covered in <u>schools</u> , or taught too late to be useful. Aboriginal liaison roles, where they existed, were rare, overstretched and poorly supported, and the relationship was often lost when a worker left.
5	Stable housing and consistent access to First Nations workers, mentors and role models are not adequately treated as foundations for wellbeing.	Given a notional budget, the largest allocations went to safe, stable housing and to more First Nations workers, mentors and role models. Housing was linked directly to mental health, study, and keeping families together and out of the child protection system.
6	The cultural load carried by young First Nations people is not adequately recognised, resourced or bounded.	Being asked to represent, educate and advocate, sometimes as the only First Nations person in the room, placed an ongoing cultural load on young people. This contribution should be recognised, paid and bounded, so that young people are supported rather than used.

Broader Young and Wise 2026 Survey findings reinforce several practical priorities raised in this chapter, including youth-specialist health care, food and cost-of-living support, bullying being properly dealt with, and meaningful participation in decisions. However, the First Nations roundtable adds a distinct and essential finding that the broader survey does not capture in the same depth: culture, Country, language, kinship and community are not simply one part of wellbeing, but foundational to how wellbeing is experienced.

What young people are telling us and where this aligns nationally

What these young people told us closely reflects what young people are saying nationally, and the First Nations findings in ARACY's Young and Wise Report align closely with what this cohort described. The patterns below draw on that report's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data.

Culture and Country are foundational to wellbeing. The Young and Wise Report describes the health and wellbeing of First Nations young people as interconnected with culture and Country, and calls for a strengths-based approach that recognises the resilience of Aboriginal young people (Young and Wise, 2024, p.206). That is exactly what this cohort placed at the centre: culture as identity, belonging and resilience, and why distance from Country registers as a wellbeing risk.

Safety at school is uneven. Nationally, just over half (53 per cent) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reported feeling safe at school, a lower rate than the general population, and bullying remains a persistent concern in the school years (Young and Wise, 2024, pp.56–57). This mirrors participants' accounts of racism and bullying at school, in one case driving a young person out in Year 6.

On mental health, the report calls for support that is culturally responsive and community-led, for the removal of barriers that stop First Nations young people getting help when they ask for it, and for a shift away from deficit framing toward the strength and resilience of Aboriginal young people (Young and Wise, 2024, pp.220–221). This aligns with participants' descriptions of stigma and "attention-seeker" labels, and their call for earlier, First Nations-led support.

Cultural safety is felt when young people see themselves in a service. First Nations university students in the report call for inclusive First Nations units and for institutions where they feel safe and connected (Young and Wise, 2024, p.235), echoing this cohort's praise for university Indigenous units and Indigenous health clinics, and their warning about services that stereotype.

Finally, First Nations young people want to be heard and trusted. In the report they call for many seats at the decision-making table, not one, and for the right to speak and be heard on matters that affect them (Young and Wise, 2024, pp.240–241). This directly reflects participants' call to be in the rooms where decisions about their lives are made.



Key insights from the roundtables

Culture, identity and staying strong

Asked what wellbeing meant, participants offered belonging, connection, identity, support, culture, and “filling your cup up”. No two word-cloud answers were repeated, reflecting a different meaning of wellbeing for each participant. Connection to culture was described as a daily act, and a source of resilience under pressure.



“...culture is who we are. It's a part of our identity and it's a part of our belonging...you've got all these struggles every single day that you've got to push through...the only way you can keep going is to remember the resilience of our old people and how, you know, they tried to kill us off and we're still here and we're still fighting and we're keeping that fire burning. So I'd say we got to connect in some sense every day.”

— Jazmin, First Nations Roundtable



“Sometimes even seeing my totem, that kind of, you know, resets me because it makes me feel like that I've got my ancestors with me and they're guiding me and I'm not alone as well.”

— Deidentified, First Nations Roundtable



“For the spirit connection... for myself, growing up on the coast was my connection and that was where I felt most strongest, especially going through tough times, where being in the city, it was a lot different and a lot harder to really adjust.”

— Kerri, First Nations Roundtable

Several participants spoke about language loss and revival, often tied directly to the Stolen Generations. Two described their own families' experience.



“My great-grandfather was part of the Stolen Generations...So we had a big disconnect from language, culture, everything...so we didn't get to learn the language the way that our elders did. But it's a really big point that my family, like my mum and my three sisters are trying to do ourselves because obviously we grew up away from country so we are relearning it ourselves, trying to get in contact with elders back home and just yeah, trying to put it into use every day as well.”

— Sian, First Nations Roundtable



“...we're also Stolen Generation. My grandfather was...So it's been a struggle trying to find family and connections with them, as well as my grandmother's side, due to her being put in a home. So we've lost a big chunk of connection from both grandparents ... just trying to reach out to elders again, family members... that are connected with both sides, rekindling, learning language, learning culture.”

— Kerri, First Nations Roundtable

Participants praised First Nations-led language schools where Elders and young people learn together, and warned against tokenistic efforts, including signage with incorrect language, or pressure on small children to carry revival alone.



"...I don't understand why we can't incorporate learning the languages that you're on instead of one in a different country that you're probably never going to visit...once these [First Nations languages] are gone, it's like gone forever. And then that's the sad part, and that's just how it is really. And we can't gatekeep knowledge."

— Jazmin, First Nations Roundtable



What this means for policy: For this cohort, culture is the precondition for wellbeing, not a parallel domain. Language revival, on-Country connection and First Nations-led programs are health and education infrastructure. Distance from Country, driven by study, work and safety, is a wellbeing risk in its own right. Policy that supports staying connected (and returning) does direct mental-health work.

Having to leave Country for opportunity and safety

A consistent thread was that young people felt pushed to relocate for university, careers or safety, at a cost of connection and wellbeing. However, the same young people who left also described cities as, at times, more culturally safe than the regional places they grew up in.



"I also had to move from the Northern Territory to WA for uni as well... And unfortunately, it just sucks that most Aboriginal young people have to travel away from where they're connected to and where they feel safe. And I think that's what I really struggled with, was not feeling safe to the country that I was on."

— Deidentified, First Nations Roundtable



"...before I moved away, you know, I didn't realise the opportunities out there. So I guess in a sense, like I feel like once you move to the major cities and things like that, there are opportunities, but there's also so many more people still out in rural and regional areas that, you know don't even know these opportunities exist...that's kind of what I was like before I came to Sydney."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



"I also think that where a lot of other young people also struggle is that within those regional areas, we don't have enough people advocating for those changes and for, you know, those opportunities that those young people deserve...I'm in a regional reference group and we have meetings with the Director General of the Department of Communities. And, you know, when we talk about these issues in regional areas, I just feel like they're just trying to tick another box at the end of the day."

— Deidentified, First Nations Roundtable

The Young and Wise 2026 Survey findings reinforce this: respondents ranked more subject choices and clearer pathways after school as a leading priority. The First Nations roundtable adds a critical place and culture dimension: for First Nations young people, accessing opportunity can require leaving Country, family and cultural grounding. Pathway policy should consider not only whether opportunities exist, but whether young people can reach them while staying connected to Country and community.



What this means for policy: The pull away from Country is structural. Tertiary study, specialist health, and safety are concentrated in cities. Investment that brings pathways and culturally safe services to regional and remote communities lets young people build futures without trading away connection.

Cultural safety means seeing yourself in the service

Participants were clear that cultural safety is felt, not declared. It showed up as First Nations staff, non-judgement, no stereotyping, and above all, action that follows. Indigenous health clinics and university Indigenous units were named as places that did it well; some mainstream services were described as rude or stereotyping.



"...I think a really key part of having access to the counsellors and wellbeing stuff is also having like...culturally safe and responsive ones is really important...you can't have a one size shoe for everyone...Every individual is different. So I think that having just the one person for thousands of students is inappropriate...Also, you're not catering to everyone's needs..."

— Sian, First Nations Roundtable



" We've got... pediatricians, we've got podiatrists that come out to these services [Indigenous health clinics] as well to give free checkups. I felt very safe going into them and ... I studied with them. So doing prac in the building, just it felt very comfortable and knowing that I was helping mob get what they need to as well..."

— Kerri, First Nations Roundtable



"I found the unis quite good. Like they have dedicated Indigenous units that offer like free tutoring. They also had an option for like grocery vouchers if you needed...people were a bit more educated, and kind of aware of, you know, like cultural safety and things like that."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



"...when you're implementing actions, it's like a lot of people talk about having safe environments, but is there any action?...My second point being accountability frameworks and having those things in place so that there are people or organisations or just like staff and stuff that are holding them accountable for those promises that they're making...."

— Sian, First Nations Roundtable

Broader Young and Wise 2026 Survey findings reinforce the centrality of health and wellbeing access, with healthcare teams specialising in young people’s physical and mental health receiving the highest investment priority. The First Nations roundtable adds critical specificity: for First Nations young people, access depends not only on availability, but on whether services are culturally safe, First Nations-led or First Nations-staffed, accountable and trusted.



What this means for policy: Cultural safety is built through action, not statements. It becomes real when services are staffed by First Nations workers, follow through on their commitments, and are backed by accountability frameworks that make those commitments stick. Valuing young people's cultural contribution, and protecting them from being over-relied on to represent, educate and advocate for others, is part of safe, effective practice.

Schools, services and systems
 Participants recalled school wellbeing education as thin on the topics that mattered most; mental health, racism and discrimination, sexual health, with physical health and nutrition more reliably covered. Aboriginal liaison support, where it existed, was rare and fragile. The Mentimeter rating activity followed the same pattern. Every topic rated below the midpoint, with preventing racism and discrimination lowest (1.2) and physical health highest (2.6).

Did you have school lessons, workshops or guest speakers on these wellbeing topics? How helpful were they in helping you make good decisions?
 (1= Didn’t Help/ Didn’t Receive and 5 = Helped me a lot)

Topic	Roundtable (n=5)	Young and Wise 2026 Survey
Digital safety and wellbeing	1.8	2.73
Managing Mental Health	1.6	2.74
Nutrition	2.2	2.77
Physical Health	2.6	3.46
Preventing Racism and Discrimination	1.2	2.7
Respectful Relationships	1.8	3.15
Sexual Health	1.6	3.15
Substances	2.4	3.03

Note: One combined roundtable was held for this cohort, so there is one result column.
Note: Sexual Health and Respectful Relationships were asked separately in the roundtables. The National Survey combined them into one item, so the same survey score (3.15) appears on both rows.
Note: Indicative only. Small sample. Copied verbatim from the Mentimeter weighted average.



"...we didn't get any anti-bullying, preventing racism, types of talks or workshops. It was, yeah, more mainly around the physical health and nutrients. Everything else was very lightly or not even touched on... we didn't really have textbooks at our school. Most of it was just done through teachers, mainly just their own knowledge. They did, I'll give them credit for trying their best to touch on topics, but they were very quickly skimmed over."

— Kerri, First Nations Roundtable



"...to quickly answer your education question, there wasn't much. We had an Aboriginal liaison officer and I remember she would get us together, like sometimes in lunch times to like go talk about things, but it was actually quite rare...I think it was like, maybe like once a year or something."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



"[on accessing Indigenous learnings]... we had absolutely nothing throughout primary school. They didn't even talk about it. We didn't even learn it in history. There was no community. There was no liaison officer. There was nothing... I decided to leave the area that I grew up in to go to high school...they had an Indigenous officer who obviously would help us through school and just provided like a cultural safe environment. But the school didn't treat her well and she left and now they haven't brought anyone into that role."

— Sian, First Nations Roundtable

On bullying, participants described schools that managed appearances rather than harm, with serious consequences when it was left unaddressed.



"...I do think bullying and that really impacts like people finishing school, because my brother had like quite a rough time at school and like dropped out in Year 10. And then like one of my cousins, she also got bullied ... it was actually like quite racist bullying as well. And she stopped going to school in Year 6..."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



"I think a lot of the time schools often just kind of sweep it [bullying] under the rug and they get someone to apologise, and all that's well and good but it doesn't feel like those people that are being bullied are quite heard or understood."

— Sian, First Nations Roundtable

Participants did point to examples of what works, including South Australia's Aboriginal sporting academy (SAASTA) for school engagement and pathways, First Nations primary schools and language schools, and university Indigenous units.

The Young and Wise 2026 Survey findings reinforce schools as wellbeing settings: respondents named bullying being properly dealt with, clearer pathways, access to counsellors or GPs, better routines and affordable healthy food as key changes. This aligns with First Nations participants' accounts of schools as places where wellbeing depends on whether racism and bullying are addressed, cultural roles are properly resourced, and young people can see culture, language and First Nations identity reflected in learning and support.



What this means for policy: First Nations young people need school-based wellbeing supports that address the hard topics together, mental health, racism, sexual health, and cultural safety, delivered through properly resourced and retained Aboriginal liaison and cultural roles, not services that disappear when one worker leaves. This is a health and safety issue as much as an educational one: bullying and racism need enforced follow-through, because the cost of inaction is measured in young people leaving school altogether, with all the health and life-course consequences that follow.

Mental health, and alcohol and other drugs

Participants described early warning signs of mental health challenges as withdrawal, disconnection, mood change and isolation, and noted that "attention-seeker" labels stop young people reaching out. One Mentimetre response captured the group's view: 'people often show they are struggling before they tell us'. Stigma was felt to be easing for this older cohort, but not gone.



"...I feel like now mental health's grown into more, you know, it's more recognised...I don't really feel shame or anything around it anymore. I mean, I wouldn't like shout it from the rooftops if I was struggling or anything, but you know, I wouldn't hesitate in...talking to my partner or you know, close people or whatever."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable

On alcohol and other drugs, participants resisted generalising about First Nations young people specifically. One linked early exposure to peer pressure and older social circles in her home community; another felt the bigger factors were age and rural setting, not Aboriginality.



"Um, where I grew up, once kids were hitting like 13, it became a standard and a bit of a trend to go out drinking, smoking, hanging out with kids twice their age, that's really like resulting in quite a lot of... issues within the school and within the community, like there was a lot of damage. Quite a few kids were falling pregnant due to this...all of them were, well, pretty much peer pressured from older siblings and friends of friends."

— Kerri, First Nations Roundtable



"...I think it's more just young people, like whether they're Aboriginal or not... I think it's more...I was raised in a rural area ...then again...there was still drugs and that, even at uni."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



What this means for policy: Messaging and services should be designed with young people, using language they use, and avoiding scare tactics and deficit framing. Drug and alcohol responses for First Nations young people should be culturally respectful and avoid stereotyping; participants were quick to reject a narrative that pathologises their communities.

Social media and digital wellbeing

This older cohort felt relatively safe online but still exposed to racism. Participants noted social media can also be a place of solidarity and safety for mob, when the algorithm and networks are right. On age restrictions, the group's view was pragmatic: bans are easily bypassed, so education matters more.



"... I'm pretty safe online. I think, you know, there's still things that go around like just the past few weeks, you know, something that's been bigger than news is that like lady, I don't know, Instagrammer who made that really racist video...stuff like that, it still kind of like, you know, triggers you..."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



What this means for policy: For First Nations young people, online spaces carry both racism and connection. Equal access matters and a digital divide exacerbated by poverty and remoteness is a wellbeing issue. Education and digital literacy, not bans alone, are what participants backed.

Priority solutions from young people

In the final activity, participants completed a hypothetical budget-allocation exercise, distributing 100 points across eight possible investments to improve the wellbeing of First Nations young people. As with other activities in this consultation, results are indicative rather than representative.

Treasurer! You have \$100 billion to spend on improving the wellbeing of First Nations young people. How will you spend it?

Investment area	Priorit ...*
Safe, stable housing and stronger support for families and communities	20%
First Nations-led mental health and wellbeing <u>supports</u>	17%
More First Nations workers, mentors and role models in schools and services	17%
More opportunities for young First Nations people to lead decisions and create change	13%
Community-led programs strengthening connection to culture, language, Elders and Country	10%
Safer schools, communities and online spaces free from racism and discrimination	10%
Culturally safe schools and services	7%
Better access to community spaces, youth programs, sport and cultural activities	7%

*Mentimeter export, Part 2. Based on three respondents. Indicative only — not a statistically valid result.

In discussion, both participants who spoke independently reached the same two priorities: housing and First Nations workers. Their reasoning matters more than the figures.



"... I put like 30 into housing. So safe, stable housing and stronger support for families and communities... housing, like, you know, those fundamental things are really important...it affects your mental health, doesn't give you a place to study. It doesn't, you know, it affects pretty much every aspect of your life... I allocated quite a fair bit to also more First Nations workers, mentors and role models... whether it be in education or health..."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



"I put more towards First Nation workers as well as housing. As we know, most of the mob that have housing issues are involved with, unfortunately, DCP [Department for Child Protection]. So that does create such a big impact on both family and child that may possibly be removed. And then just having more First Nation workers within those services... to get kids reunited either back with family members or someone of the same culture, so there's not that big gap."

— Kerri, First Nations Roundtable



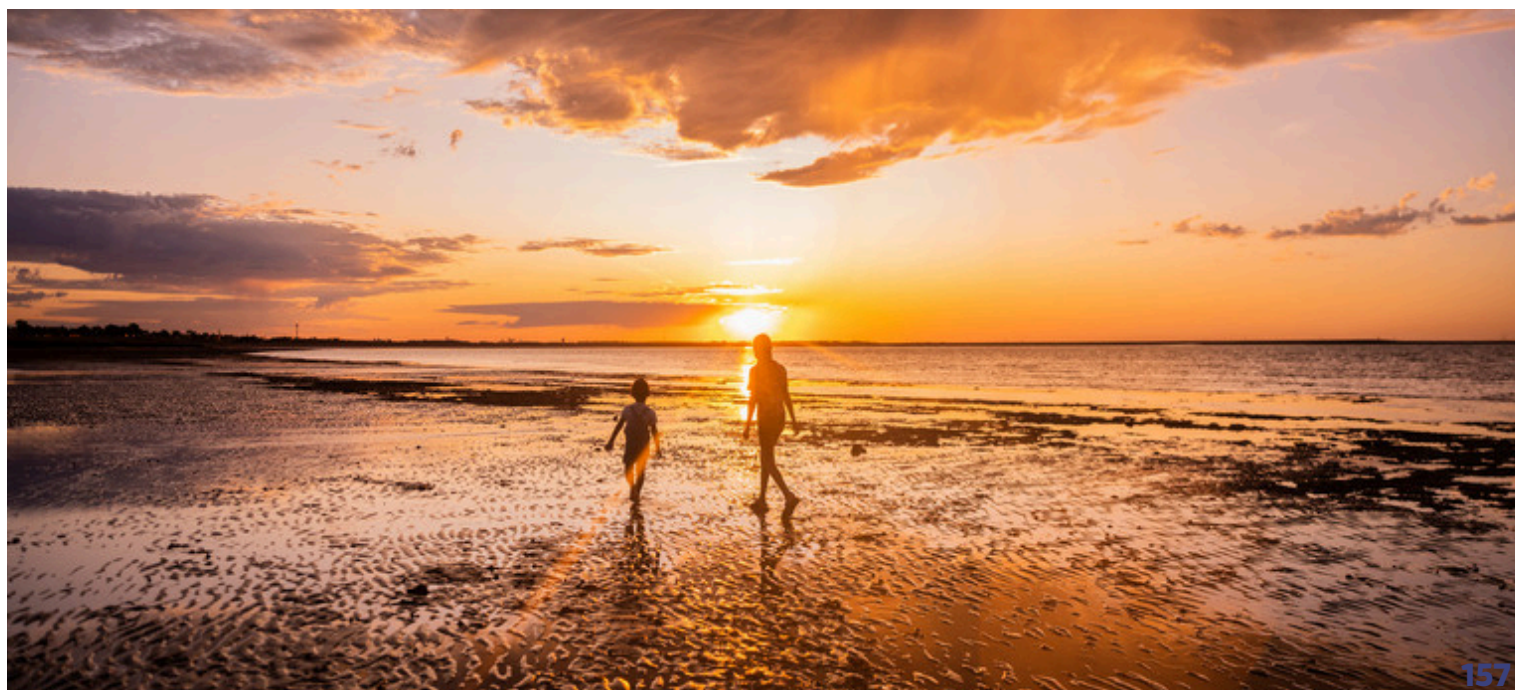
"... there's a lot of [university] pathways, but for example, like my cousins and stuff who didn't go to uni there, I've tried to look at things for them... uni is so much of a jump. They kind of need something a bit more entry level but... there's no way to get that... like, you know, rich corporate places that have more of the opportunities opposed to like, you know, like hospitality and things."

— BW, First Nations Roundtable



"We've got a lot of opportunities in things like mining and health industries, but nothing really more...if they want to get into... politics and things like that, it's rare to find those types of pathways for First Nations mob."

— Kerri, First Nations Roundtable



Cohort specific policy signals

Policies specifically targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or directly relevant to the experiences shared in these sessions. The analysis is not a formal evaluation, but a lived-experience-informed signal of how policy settings may be experienced by this group.

Policy / Strategy	What it aims to do	What participants told us	Signal
National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020) — including Priority Reforms and Outcome Areas	Close the gap in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians, with community control and self-determination at the centre.	Participants described Centrelink and NDIS as receiving the lowest cultural safety ratings of any service type. In contrast, Aboriginal community-controlled health services were described as genuinely safe and effective – places where they "felt very comfortable". Participants emphasised that accountability means seeing tangible action and evidence that feedback has led to change.	Partially reaching – community-controlled services succeeding; mainstream implementation inconsistent
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031	Improve health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through culturally safe, responsive and equitable health services and systems.	Aboriginal community-controlled health clinics were consistently described as the safest and most trusted healthcare, with some participants travelling specifically to access them. Mainstream services, including some GPs and employment services, were described as less culturally safe and more variable in quality.	Strong – where Aboriginal community-controlled services lead
Healing and Reparations — Stolen Generations legacy programs (including Territories Stolen Generations Redress Scheme)	Acknowledge and address the ongoing intergenerational impacts of the Stolen Generations, including rebuilding connection to family, culture, language and Country.	Participants described ongoing intergenerational impacts of forced removal, including the loss of language and cultural knowledge. Many were actively reconnecting with language and culture through Elders and <u>family</u> , <u>but</u> described these efforts as largely self-driven and under-supported.	Partially reaching – healing continuing, with language reclamation needing stronger support

Policy / Strategy	What it aims to do	What participants told us	Signal
National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (Closing the Gap Education Targets)	Improve attendance, Year 12 completion and post-school pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.	Participants described racist bullying, inconsistent responses from schools and limited cultural safety as contributing to school disengagement. They also noted that Aboriginal studies, cultural education and Aboriginal liaison roles were not consistently available or sustained.	Partially reaching – educational goals undermined by inconsistent cultural safety
Voice, Treaty, Truth — Treaty processes and ATSIC legacy (including post-Voice Referendum context, 2023)	Advance self-determination through truth-telling, treaty and stronger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in decision-making.	Participants described taking on significant advocacy and advisory roles, but said lived experience expertise often came with cultural load, inadequate compensation and limited decision-making power. They wanted participation to come with genuine influence, recognition and payment.	Partially reaching – participation growing, with stronger shared decision-making still needed
National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Peoples' Mental Health and Social Emotional Wellbeing 2017–2023	Improve mental health and social and emotional wellbeing through culturally informed, community-controlled approaches.	Participants described wellbeing through concepts like connection, belonging, identity and 'filling your cup' — frameworks that align with social and emotional wellbeing models rather than clinical mental health definitions. Financial stress and parental mental health were named as top concerns for caregivers. The framing of wellbeing as relational and collective — not individual — was consistent across both sessions and sits well outside biomedical mental health service design.	Partially reaching – framework aligns well; service delivery remains uneven

Policy / Strategy	What it aims to do	What participants told us	Signal
Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024	Protect children and young people under 16 from potential harms on age-restricted social media platforms.	Scare tactics were described as ineffective for changing young people's behaviour around substances, social media and other risks. Police-delivered presentations at school were described as following the same approach — 'They try scare tactics. People still got to use social media.' Participants described adapting being more important than trying to prohibit. The age restriction was not discussed directly in depth but the pattern of scare-tactic responses was raised across multiple contexts.	Mixed – connection valued; education preferred over restrictions
National Agreement on Closing the Gap — Priority Reform 3: Transforming Government Organisations	Transform mainstream government organisations so they are culturally safe, accountable and responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.	Centrelink, NDIS and service agencies scored lowest for cultural safety. Long waiting times — two to three hours to reach an operator — were described as leading people to simply hang up and go without. Service staff were described as stereotyping, being rude or assuming ineligibility. The contrast with First Nations-specific services (which were described as responsive and safe) was sharp, suggesting transformation of mainstream services is still incomplete.	Not yet reaching — mainstream service transformation lagging significantly behind community-controlled sector

Links to the Nest: top 3 issues for further development

The First Nations roundtable identified a wide range of opportunities for further research, policy development and implementation attention. The three priorities below capture the strongest lived-experience signals from this cohort and show where further work could most improve wellbeing across multiple Nest domains.

For First Nations young people, these issues should not be read as separate or siloed. Participants described wellbeing as grounded in culture, Country, family, kinship, language, community and self-determination. Culture is therefore not only one Nest domain; it shapes how all domains are experienced.

- 1. Culture, Country and First Nations-led wellbeing as the foundation**
- 2. Culturally safe schools, services and workforces**
- 3. Housing, family stability and protected First Nations youth leadership**

1. Culture, Country and First Nations-led wellbeing as the foundation

First Nations young people described culture, Country, language, totems, Elders, family and community as central to identity, belonging, resilience and wellbeing. Culture was not framed as an additional program area or optional support. It was described as the foundation through which health, safety, learning, participation and material basics are experienced.

Further development should focus on how policy and investment can strengthen culture as wellbeing infrastructure. This includes First Nations-led cultural programs, language revitalisation, on-Country learning, community-controlled models, Elders and intergenerational learning, and opportunities for young people to stay connected to Country, kin and community. It should also consider the structural pressure some young people experience to leave Country for study, work, services or safety, and how policy can support opportunity without requiring disconnection.

- **Relevant Nest domains:** Positive Sense of Identity and Culture; Healthy; Valued, Loved and Safe; Learning; Participating.
- **Key policy-development question:** How can governments invest in culture, Country, language and community connection as core wellbeing infrastructure for First Nations young people, rather than treating culture as an additional or separate program stream?

2. Culturally safe schools, services and workforces

Participants described cultural safety as something young people experience through action, not statements. They valued First Nations staff, Aboriginal health workers, Indigenous health clinics, university Indigenous units, Aboriginal liaison roles and services where young people could see themselves reflected. Mainstream services were described as inconsistent, particularly where stereotyping, weak follow-through or lack of representation undermined trust.

Schools were also identified as key sites for further development. Participants described wellbeing education as thin on mental health, racism, sexual health and discrimination, and noted that Aboriginal Studies, language learning and Aboriginal liaison roles were not consistently available or properly resourced. Racism and bullying were also described as issues that can lead to disengagement when schools respond superficially or inconsistently.

Further development should focus on implementation and accountability: how schools, health services and mainstream systems demonstrate cultural safety in practice. This includes First Nations workforce investment, retention of Aboriginal liaison and cultural roles, stronger anti-racism responses, culturally safe wellbeing education, and measures of cultural safety based on young people's experiences rather than institutional intent alone.

- **Relevant Nest domains:** Valued, Loved and Safe; Healthy; Learning; Positive Sense of Identity and Culture; Participating.
- **Key policy-development question:** How can governments ensure cultural safety is measured and strengthened through young people's lived experience of services and schools, rather than through policy commitments or symbolic inclusion alone?

3. Housing, family stability and protected First Nations youth leadership

Housing was the strongest material priority raised by First Nations participants. Young people linked safe, stable housing to mental health, education, family stability, safety and preventing child protection involvement. Housing and material basics were therefore not described as separate from culture or family; they were connected to kinship, community, child protection prevention and maintaining connection to Country.

Participants also emphasised the importance of First Nations young people being involved in decisions that affect them. However, they also named the cultural load that can come with being asked to represent community, educate others or be the only First Nations young person in a room. Participation should therefore be paid, credited, mentored, bounded and connected to real influence.

Further development should focus on the relationship between material stability, family support and sustainable leadership. This includes safe housing, family-led and community-controlled supports, child protection prevention, diverse pathways beyond university, First Nations mentors and role models, and youth leadership pipelines that protect young people from tokenism and burnout.

- **Relevant Nest domains:** Material Basics; Valued, Loved and Safe; Participating; Positive Sense of Identity and Culture; Healthy; Learning.
- **Key policy-development question:** How can governments strengthen housing, family stability and First Nations youth leadership in ways that keep young people connected to kin, culture, community and Country, while protecting them from cultural load?





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