Culture is Life

Yearly Report

2025

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Front cover photo caption:
Alumni Gathering fire at Garambi Baan
(Laughing Waters, VIC).
Credit: Culture is Life

Who We Are

Acknowledgement of Country

Culture is Life would like to acknowledge and pay respects to the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways of Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of our nation. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to live in spiritual and sacred relationships with this country. Sovereignty was never ceded.

Culture is Life

Culture is Life is an Aboriginal-led Not-For-Profit organisation. We believe that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have the right to thrive and flourish; strong in knowing who they are, where they come from and who they are connected to. All our efforts deepen young people's experiences of culture as protection through thoughtfully designed, simple to access and easy to use policies, projects, resources and campaigns. We join together with others to create meaningful lives for all our young people with a special emphasis on those experiencing vulnerability and who are at risk of self-harm and suicide.

Fellows on a cultural tour with Uncle Moogy Sumner on Kaurna Country.
Credit: Culture is Life

Our Values

Respect - we strive for collective understanding, growth and fostering a sense of belonging through care, focus, presence and listening in our work.

Responsibility - we are committed to our cultural responsibilities, our organisation and our own wellbeing, learning and growth. We work in collaboration through open, clear communication.

Reciprocity - we bring care, curiosity, openness and vulnerability to our collective work. We seek to learn, understand and use our voice and affirming actions in line with our roles and responsibilities.

Relatedness - we honour our connection to Country, bring care and joy to our relationships, and commit to developing ourselves for the collective good.

Our Board

The following Board members held roles during 2025

Justin Mohamed (Gooreng Gooreng) - Chair

Jane Pound - Director

Lily Graham (Palawa) - Director

Bonnie Dukakis (Gunditjmara) - Director

Dr. Clinton Schultz (Gamilaroi) - Advisor

Our Staff

The following staff members held roles during 2025

Belinda Duarte AM (Wotjobaluk & Dja Dja Wurrung) - CEO

Aunty Stephanie Armstrong (Gamilaraay & Bigambul) - Elder Consultant

Thara Brown (Yorta Yorta) - General Manager (Programs)

Chris Dragisic (Yuin) - Finance

Alex Shain - Operations

Manny Williams (Kalkadoon, Pitta Pitta & Bundjalung) - Programs Officer (Fullaship)

Madeline Wells (Mutti Mutti, Wadi Wadi, Wotjobaluk, Trulwulway & Plangermaireener) - Programs Officer

Sofii McKenzie-Kirkbright (Wiradjuri) - Brand Manager

Caitlin Leahy - Measurement & Evaluation

Strategic Narrative

Because: The incidence of suicide and intentional self harm among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 15 to 24 is at a crisis level.

We work to: Deepen young people's experiences of culture as a protective factor.

To support: Young people to live a life they value, to influence society and to promote understanding and skills through cultural healing practices.

That leads to: Increased health, wellbeing, visibility and influence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and in activating and embedding cultural outcomes in key settings.

And results in: All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people being proud custodians of the oldest living culture on Earth and having opportunities to connect, contribute and thrive.

Leadership Reports

CEO Reflections on 2025

Dalk muwil (Hello all)

In the post-referendum landscape, 2025 was a year defined by change, resilience and a reconsidered approach for Culture is Life given the environment and challenges faced. Communities across the country experienced a rise in racism, highlighting the need for more anti-racism reform as well as critical service support for Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB). While 'referendum fatigue' and systemic problems remain, a significant burden is placed on First Nations communities throughout Australia, affecting collective SEWB. However, the growing global solidarity amongst First Nations peoples provides solace and momentum for change and advocacy.

Against a backdrop of broader sector changes and strategic resets within the philanthropic community, we remain acutely aware of the systemic challenges for First Nations communities, children and young people. These include; the over-representation of children in out-of-home care, the crisis of suicide and self-harm for young people, and the structures that continue to fail them. In response, Culture is Life continues to 'back young mob' in their aspirations and pathways, we advocate for and with them, and better educate the education settings they attend. By adapting our operations through this changing landscape through responsiveness and flexibility, our work continues, fueled by the passion and devotion of our staff, board, fullas (fellows), Alumni and broader Culture is Life family.

The transitions of 2025 were significant for us with staffing movements. We acknowledge the critical foundations laid by our former General Manager (Programs), Thara Brown, Programs Officer, Madeline Wells and Branding Manager Sofii McKenzie-Kirkbright. Their work across the organisation, on the Fullaship program and our education activities leaves a lasting legacy, and we thank them for their contributions as they transition into new professional pathways, however remaining part of the Culture is Life family.

We are guided by the tireless Eldership of Aunty Steph Armstrong, the Alumni leadership and mentoring of Manny Williams, the financial rigor and diligence of Chris Dragisic, and the dedicated allyship of Caitlin Leahy and Alex Shain. We were particularly grateful for the support of contractor Olivia Carolan as a key team led on *The Australian Wars* social impact strategy together with the presence of original member of Culturesquad Mark Nannup in our programming. We are excited to welcome his experience again in 2026 together with our dedicated Fullaship Alumni working group.

I would like to formally thank everyone who has shared in our journey. Specifically, I thank our 2025 Board members: Chair Justin Mohamed, Bonnie Dukakis, Lily Edwards (outgoing), Dr. Clinton Schultz, and Jane Pound who volunteer their time and expertise. Our work is also only possible through the continued trust and support of Annamila First Nations Foundation, Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, NIAA and other generous supporters. **And lastly, I want to thank the young people who are part of the Culture is Life family. Thank you for investing in the programs and guiding our work through your truth, openness and ambition to make critical change happen. Your bravery and insights will shape the change needed for future generations.**

Belinda Duarte
Wotjobaluk & Dja Dja Wurrung
CEO Culture is Life

Chair Reflections on 2025

Kau Culture is Life family and friends

Over the last two years there have been significant changes in reform in youth affairs for First Nations children and young people. The shift has moved to shared decision making and community control, focused on formal partnerships with First Nations peak bodies. As a former Commissioner for Children, I am delighted to see this change and emerging activity in this space, including the appointment of a National Commissioner for First Nations Children and Young people to provide an independent voice for young mob at a federal level. As Chair of Culture is Life I am delighted to say that during her tenure as Deputy Chair of the Yorook Justice Commission, Commissioner Sue-Anne Hunter spent time with the Fellows at Laughing Waters – her homelands as a Traditional Owner of Wurundjeri – to share her wisdom and insights and hear from young people.

The year saw Indigenous-led Not-for-Profits (NFPs) in Australia navigating a landscape defined by a 'Post-Voice' strategic redirection, where the focus has shifted from national constitutional reform to localised self-determination and economic sovereignty.

Different states have had diverging change and contrast. Queensland expanded the mandate of the Family and Child Commission through the Child Safe Organisation Act in 2024, where it increased focus on culturally safe oversight and systemic change for First Nations children. However, in contrast, we have had a concerning and controversial policy shift in the Northern Territory (NT) which lowered the minimum age of criminal responsibility back to 10 years old. In Victoria, the insights and learning from Yoorook and Treaty development will clearly provide greater directive and decision making powers for local policy and reform that directly affects young people.

In addition further reform affecting First Nations Young people across the country included the First Nations Education Policy (2025–2026) which is a new national policy to redefine the aspirations for First Nations learners from early childhood through to tertiary education.

In March 2025, the Department of Education signed landmark agreements with SNAICC (National Voice for our Children) and NATSIEC (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Corporation) to ensure these organisations have an equal say in education policy. We as an organisation will look with interest in what evolves from this agreement.

There has been government investment in a range of areas. One of interest for Culture is Life is the establishment of a First Nations Youth Advisory Group established by the Office for Youth. Given our commitment to ensure young people's voices are heard and needs are addressed, we support this developing work and are proud to say we are contributing directly to opportunities that provide advocacy platforms.

The Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) have continued to play an important role in the care of communities including young people. Investment has been made through the Closing the Gap priorities as well as mental health reform towards SEWB sites across the country. I am particularly proud to note our work at Culture is Life, and how it contributes to a number of priorities as part of Closing the Gap and SEWB needs for young people. We continue to welcome partnerships in this space.

With strategic reform occurring in the philanthropic sector, it has meant a number of key influencers in this space have taken much longer to consider the next steps of investment following the Voice referendum. This has had significant implications across the sector.

In 2025, through these persisting pressures, we achieved our strategic goals of ensuring we support young people nationwide in pathways through our Fullaship program and sought small grant investment into our alumni. We remain committed to providing platforms for their voices to be heard at a national level in suicide prevention and the social & emotional wellbeing sector at both national and international arenas, such as the World Indigenous Suicide Prevention conference.

In addition, we continue to increase capacity and build resources that contribute to education knowledge systems, educator training and assets. With a small team, this year has required extensive adaptability, high resilience, persistence and a cost-effective integrated approach to how we work. We continue to actively cultivate sustainable funding pathways with other key funders.

Major highlights for the year included:

- The completion of the 2024 Fullaship and the commencement of the 2025 program.
- Recognition as finalists in the 2025 National NAIDOC Innovation Awards.
- The launch of NAIDOC education resources, which reached the highest download rate in ABC Education's history.
- The social impact of *"The Australian Wars"* resources, providing a critical legacy for the education sector.

I would like to thank all staff, board members and our partners for your contribution. **Backing our model means backing the aspirations of young people and when people and partners share the same values, the critical change can happen.** This work continues to remain essential for First Nations young people, their social emotional wellbeing, aspirations and pathways for the future.

Justin Mohamed
Gooreng Gooreng
Chair Culture is Life

Overview of the Year

Young People

15 Fellows Involved in Fullaship

Location
from 7 States and Territories across Australia

Gender
8 male,
7 female,
1 non-binary

Age
Between 19 and 28 years (average 22 years)

23
Fullaship Alumni

89%
Fullaship completion rate to date

80%
of Alumni have participated in CisL activities

Education

4.6K
resources downloaded from CisL Education Platform

12.4K
views of CisL Education Platform

87.3K
views of our resources across ABC Education and SBS Learn

Top 10
most viewed in ABC Education's resources for the third year running

302 educators trained in truth telling and Frontier Wars history

91% agreed the professional development had **increased their confidence** to teach Frontier Wars history

95% agreed the professional development had **increased motivation** to teach Frontier Wars history

88% agreed the professional development **improved their understanding** of our nation's true history and the experiences of First Nations people

98% agreed the presenters and the structure of the professional development created a **safe space to discuss a difficult issue**

Online Impact

60.5K
views of Culture is Life website

725
new website subscribers

50.1K
EDM's opened

4.1%
EDM click rate

30%
EDM open rate

426K
Instagram accounts reached

196K
TikTok video views

122K
Facebook accounts reached

7,730
organic Instagram reach of 2 Black Magic Woman podcast episodes

Self-Determination

40+
First Nations collaborators around Australia

12
Elders involved as guides, mentors and facilitators

71%
First Nations staff and Board of Culture is Life

Fullship Program

During 2025, we wrapped up Cohort 3 of the Fullship program with a final Intensive and graduation Ceremony held in Mangandjin (Brisbane) in February. These Fellows had deepened their personal and cultural connections through three enriching Intensives and a suite of online workshops and individual mentoring. They pursued personal development pathways through training and skills development, creative projects, traveling to events that aligned with their interests and goals and spending time on Country with Elders and community.

We recruited and welcomed a new cohort of 8 Fellows to begin their 12-month journey and they have been progressing through their personal development pathways supported by online content and two in-person Intensives in Kaurna Country (Adelaide) in July and Larrakia Country (Darwin) in October.

Fullship NAIDOC Innovation Finalist

We were honoured that our Fullship Program was selected as a finalist for the 2025 NAIDOC Innovation Award. The award was announced at the National NAIDOC Awards Ceremony in Boorloo (Perth) in July. We were even more honoured that we were nominated by our deadly Fullship Alumni, led by Cohort 2 Fellow, Shaylem Wilson (Ngarrindjeri).

In Shaylem's words:

"This program is like no other. It's not just about leadership or development, it's about identity, healing, pride, and deep connection to Culture, Community and Country. I'll forever be honoured to have been a part of the Fullship journey and to continue walking alongside the incredible alumni community it has created. The relationships, growth, and strength I've found through this program will stay with me for life."

Fullship Alumni and CisL staff at the NAIDOC Awards Ceremony in Boorloo (Perth).
Credit: National NAIDOC Ball Official Photographer

Fellows and staff on Kaurna Country, Fullaship second intensive.
Credit: Culture is Life

Cohort 3 - It's A Wrap

Cohort 3 Fellows at their Ceremony in February 2025.
Credit: Lewis James Bin Doraho

Cohort 3 Fellows

9 Fellows
Participated in the Cohort 3 program

Location
from 6 States and Territories across Australia

Gender
4 male,
4 female,
1 non-binary

111 Applicants
from across Australia (28% more than 2023)

7 Mobs
Fellows identified with 7 different Nations and Clan groups

Age
Between 19 and 26 years (average 22 years)

Engagement

89%
(8 out of 9 Fellows) graduated from the program

93%
average attendance at Intensives

61%
average attendance at monthly online workshops

$26K
in personal development small grants accessed by Fellows

Effectiveness

100% satisfaction with Fullaship program overall

100% satisfaction with Fullaship intensives

100% satisfaction with regular one-on-one check ins

80% satisfaction with personal development support

80% satisfaction with monthly online workshops

"Many agreed that this program is unlike any other they have attended before. It feels authentically Aboriginal, culturally safe, and thoughtfully planned."
- Closing Circle report, Intensive 1

"The Culture is Life program provided a rich, transformative experience for participants, creating opportunities for deep cultural engagement, personal growth, and connection with others."
- Closing Circle report, Intensive 3

Self-Determination

97% mob support

Of 31 people engaged as Elders, speakers, facilitators and mentors, 97% were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people.

Place-based engagements

9 Elders, 7 Traditional Owners, 6 local mob-led organisations in Naarm (Melbourne), Gimuy (Cairns) and Magandjin (Brisbane).

Impact

Cultural Wellbeing

6 Fellows reported changes in their cultural wellbeing and value in cultural identity

"More grounding in myself. A better focus on self-care and filling my own cup. Genuine connections with young people around my own age that are strong and driven in their own ways and passions - this was great for me."
- Cohort 3 Fellow

Connection

4 Fellows reported deepening connection to culture, Country and community

"I will take what I saw others doing in their community and try to implement them to connect with and engage with my community more."
- Cohort 3 Fellow

Advocacy

6 Fellows reported changes in their advocacy and influence

"This program improved my confidence by a million times over. I feel like I am equipped to be able to advocate for mob. It's honestly a life changing program" - Cohort 3 Fellow

Cohort 4 - The Story So Far...

Cohort 4 Fellows, staff and facilitators on their final intensive.
Credit: Culture is Life

Cohort 4 Fellows

7 Fellows
Currently engaged in the Cohort 4 program

Location
from 4 States and Territories across Australia

Gender
4 male,
3 female,
0 non-binary

121 Applicants
from across Australia (10% more than 2024)

18 Mobs
Fellows identified with 18 different Nations and Clan groups

Age
Between 19 and 28 years (average 22 years)

Engagement

73
individual check ins

100%
average attendance at Intensives

85%
average attendance at monthly online workshops

Effectiveness

100% satisfaction with Fullaship program overall

100% satisfaction with Fullaship intensives

100% satisfaction with regular one-on-one check ins

100% satisfaction with personal development support

80% satisfaction with monthly online workshops

Self-Determination

100% mob support

26 First Nations people engaged so far as Elders, speakers, facilitators and mentors.

Place-based engagements

7 Elders, 4 Traditional Owners, 6 local mob-led organisations on Kaurna Country (Adelaide) and Larrakia Country (Darwin)

Places We've Been

1. Magandjin (Brisbane): Cohort 3 - Final Intensive and Ceremony

In February, our Cohort 3 Fellows gathered on the banks of the river in Magandjin for their final Intensive - a bittersweet milestone marking the end of a transformative 12-month journey. The week began with a powerful Welcome to Yagarabul Country and an ochre ceremony led by Elder, Gaja Kerry Charlton who explained protocols whilst visiting and staying in Magandjin.

The journey continued across the water as the Minjerribah Moorgumpin Elders-in-Council led a Cultural Tour of Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island), exploring the complex history and enduring politics of this sacred place. Back on the mainland, the energy remained high; four Fellows stepped into the booth to record episodes for the Black Magic Woman podcast with Mundanara Bayles, while others yarned with Professor Chelsea Watego at Queensland University of Technology about advocacy, justice, and the power of truth-telling. The inspiration flowed into the evening with a special dinner guest, Dr. Anita Heiss.

As the Fellows navigated deep sessions on language and identity, a Closing Circle facilitated by Dr. Leda Barnett from ABSTARR provided a safe harbour for reflection. **As noted in the ABSTARR report: "The program provided a rich, transformative experience... creating opportunities for deep cultural engagement and personal growth. While there were challenges related to the program's intensity, these were embraced as essential catalyst for future growth."**

Cohort 3 Fellows and staff with Prof. Chelsea Watego at QUT.
Credit: Culture is Life

2. Kaurna Country (Adelaide): Cohort 4 - First Intensive

In July, the 2025 Fullaship group met for the first time on beautiful Kaurna Country. From day one, they showed a collective commitment to grow together with love, respect, vulnerability and a shared sense of purpose. Fellows were immersed in the smoke and stories of Kaurna Country, guided by Uncle Moogy and Uncle Frank. A weaving workshop with Aunty Elaine Magias fostered immediate connection and grounding.

The week brought together some powerful mentors, through personal development yarns with Fullaship Alumni Malachi Murljacic (Kunja) and Shaylem Wilson (Ngarrindjeri), as well as heartfelt storytelling through a song workshop with Aunty Vonda Last. An advocacy roundtable with Shona Reid, local youth advocates and Elders challenged the Fellows to think big, while a visit to the Colebrook Home memorial offered a solemn space to honour the Stolen Generations.

Smiles shone through with a deadly photoshoot and the foundations of a new family were laid. **As the ABSTARR-facilitated Closing Circle reflected: "Connecting with like-minded people and feeling safe to be their authentic, vulnerable selves was a significant highlight... a catalyst for lifelong friendships."**

Fellows on a cultural tour with Uncle Frank Wanganeen on Kaurna Country. Credit: Culture is Life

3. Larrakia Country (Darwin): Cohort 4 - Second Intensive

October saw our Fellows reunite in the tropical heat of Garramilla (Darwin) for a week defined by deep reflection and reconnection with self, community, and Country. We began with a striking Saltwater Ceremony and Welcome by Larrakia Elder Uncle Dr. Richard Fejo, who also shared his knowledge of the intricacies of kinship and traditional decision-making. The group then cleansed and cooled off in the fresh waters of Florence Falls (Koongarakan Country).

Our deadly Alumni, Hakon Dyrting (Djugun, Yawuru & Garrawa), hosted the Fellows at the NT Indigenous Business Network where sessions were focused on Fellows' core values and the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) framework. 'Who You?' presentations allowed Fellows to share their journeys with pride and vulnerability. The group also yarned with Gen Grieves on the vital role of self-determination in storytelling.

A highlight of the week was visiting Children's Ground and the Minramana Aboriginal Community. Witnessing sustainable community uplift work first-hand was inspiring and our bush medicine workshop with Aunty Cheryl showed us the healing properties of the land. Dr. Carmen Cubillo facilitated our final Closing Circle, holding space for the group to process the learning and spiritual growth experienced on Larrakia Country.

Fellows swimming at Florence Falls after a cultural tour with Uncle Richard Fejo.
Credit: Culture is Life

Fullaship Alumni

Our Alumni aren't just staying connected; they're building the future. Culture is Life is supporting a vibrant group of 23 former Fellows spread across the continent. They are continuing to engage with each other, through Culture is Life, to shape the future direction of the Fullaship program.

Alumni Structure

Building on the energy of the Inaugural 2024 Alumni Gathering in Naarm, the group met three times this year to co-design a more formal post-Fullaship pathway. Following a successful self-led survey and nomination process, a new working group was formed, featuring four Fellows from across three cohorts. They are currently partnering with Culture is Life to formalise Alumni governance, ensuring this community continues to thrive on its own terms.

Watch our 2024 Alumni video here

Alumni Engagement

80% (19 out of 23) of the current Alumni have participated in at least one Alumni or Fullaship activity since completing their own Fullaship program. This shows that Fellows continue to invest in their peer network and reciprocate the opportunities they've been given by supporting new Fellows. Online meetings have had an attendance rate of 47%, which is positive given the challenges of online engagement.

Giving Back to Fullaship

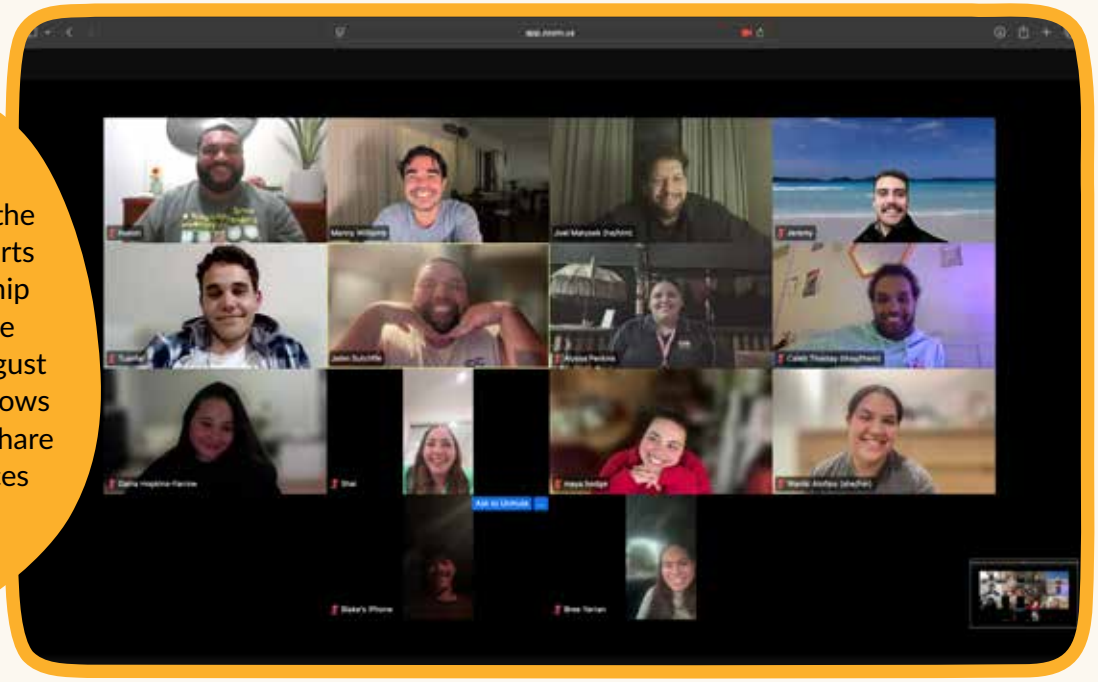
Alumni are continually giving back to the Fullaship program through involvement in Intensives and monthly online workshops, linking current Fellows with mentors and opportunities, and promoting the program through sector activities and events.

Alumni giving back

Fullaship Alumni
Fullaship Alumni attending Cohort 3 Ceremony

5 Alumni from Cohorts 1 and 2 attended (at their own cost) the Ceremony for Cohort 3 Fellows in Mangandjin (Brisbane) and two em-ceed the event.

8 Alumni from the first three cohorts joined a Fullaship monthly online workshop in August with current Fellows to connect and share their experiences and advice.



Fellows and Alumni catching up online.
Credit: Culture is Life

Alumni yarns with Fellows on Kaurna Country.
Credit: Culture is Life

During the current Fellow's first Intensive in Kaurna Country, local Alumni Shaylem (Ngarrindjeri) (Cohort 2) and Malachi (Kunja) (Cohort 1) ran a session with the Fellows to share their experiences. Shaylem also introduced Fellows to inspiring advocates from SA, including her Dad, Uncle Bill Wilson.

In Larrakia Country (Darwin), local Alumni Hakon Dyrting (Djugun, Yawuru & Garrawa) (Cohort 2) joined the Fellows for their second Intensive and at his workplace – Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network (NTIBN) – he facilitated the provision of a fully equipped meeting space for the group.

Cohort 2 Fellows, led by Shaylem (Ngarrindjeri), nominated the program for a NAIDOC Innovation Award, submitting a heartfelt application which led to the program being selected as one of three finalists!

In September, Cohort 1 Fellow Caleb (Meriam & Erub Kebi Le) co-presented the results of the Alumni River Reflections evaluation at the Indigenous Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing conference in Naarm.

Education

Our education work continued to increase access to more Aboriginal-led and co-designed educational materials, training and tools that support cultural outcomes that impact wellbeing. During 2025, our official NAIDOC Education Resources once again reached ABC Education's top 10 resources and we saw a significant increase in people accessing our curriculum resources for *The Australian Wars*.

Our education sector collaborations and professional development offerings for teachers this year unequivocally showed increased knowledge, confidence and motivation to teach Frontier Wars history.

NAIDOC 2025 Resource and Launch

For the third year running, CisL partnered with the National NAIDOC Committee and ABC Education to create the Official 2025 NAIDOC Week education resources for Early Learning to Year 10. Culture is Life's staff, curriculum writers and Fullaship Alumni gathered in Boorloo (Perth) in July to celebrate the launch of Resources.

This year, NAIDOC honoured the next generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders whose strength and vision transforms communities and the world, and whose legacies will live on for generations as their Elders before them.

Reach and Engagement

First two weeks of release:

2.3K page views on CisL website

49.5K page views on ABC Education

647 downloads from CisL website

205 new subscribers
to CisL education platform

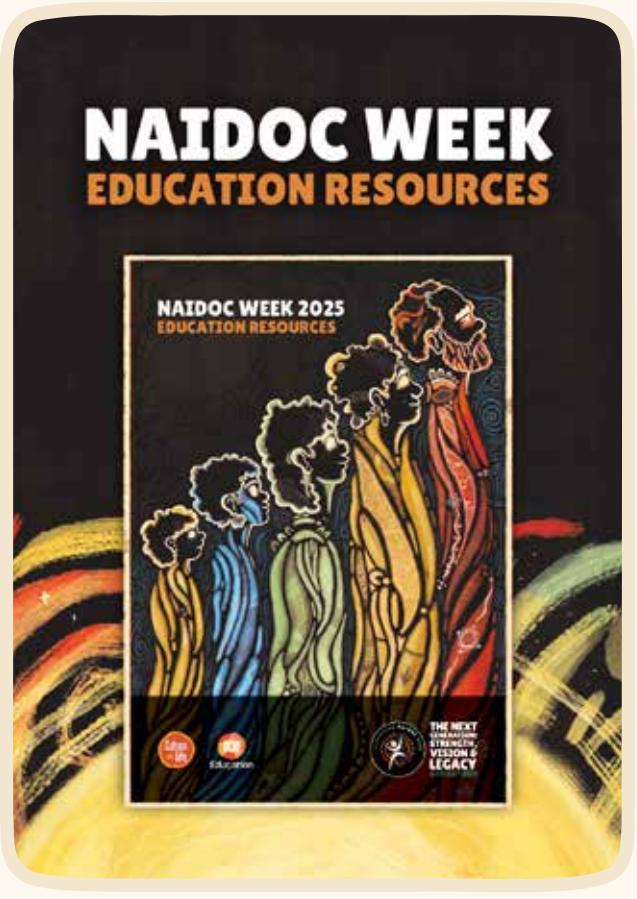
5K opened our EDM and 2077
clicked through to the resource

Top ten most used resources
on the ABC Education platform

Self-Determination

The resource was the result of an entirely First Nations team of creatives including:

- **Authors:** Thara Brown (Yorta Yorta), Aunty Stephanie Armstrong OAM (Gamilaraay/Bigambul), Jasmine Miller (Wirangu/Kokatha/Mirning), Jessine Bonzas (Bardi/Jawi) and Arkeria Armstrong (Gamilaraay/Bigambul).
- **Contributors** (and Fullaship Alumni): Irwin Lewis (Gooniyandi/Nhanda/Widi/Wiradjuri), Manny Williams (Kalkadoon/Pitta Pitta/Bundjalung) and Shaylem Wilson (Ngarrindjeri).
- **Designers:** Nani Creative.
- **Printers:** Blak Line Industries.



The Official 2025 NAIDOC Week Education Resource. Credit: Nani Creative

The Australian Wars Education Impact Campaign

As we wrap up our campaign, we are reflecting on more than three years of supporting educators to engage in truth telling about Frontier Wars history through *The Australian Wars*. This has been a wonderful partnership between Culture is Life, Rachel Perkins, Blackfella Films and SBS Learn with funding provided from Shark Island Foundation. Here, we share some highlights from the final year and a snapshot of the campaign's overall impact.

Live Panel With Rachel Perkins and Marcia Langton

In March we collaborated with Ngarrngga at the University of Melbourne to host a live panel featuring Rachel Perkins, Marcia Langton, CisL CEO Belinda Duarte, and senior secondary history educator, Bill Lewis, facilitated by Professor of Indigenous Education and Director of Ngarrngga, Melitta Hogarth. Aiming to address educator reticence and confidence, pannellists explored issues with nuance and depth, facilitating an evening of powerful discussion and truth-telling. There were 146 attendees in total (121 in-person and 25 online). Surveys showed that the Panel helped to increase understanding, motivation, and confidence to teach or support the teaching of Frontier Wars history.

Educators tune in to an engaging panel on teaching *The Australian Wars* hosted by Culture is Life and Ngarrngga at the University of Melbourne.
Credit: The University of Melbourne

Year Eight NSW Resource

A major highlight during Year 3 was our collaboration with the History Teachers Association of NSW (HTANSW) to develop a critical new 6-week teaching program: "Aboriginal Peoples' Experiences of Colonisation", to support teachers to meet NSW's mandatory syllabus updates coming into effect in 2027. The materials include sample teaching resources and classroom ready episode guides. One of our collaborators shared a heartfelt reflection on the co-design process we used; **"Seeing that collaboration gives people confidence. It was this really open, welcoming kind of process and if that's a little microcosm of the way Rachel wants to promote this series, it's a huge example of giving confidence to teachers that we are all part of this in unique ways. We're sharing the burden."**

Pre-Service Teacher Course at La Trobe University

To better equip pre-service teachers with tools to teach truth-telling and Frontier Wars content, we strengthened our collaboration with Dr. Scott Alterator (Kamilaroi and Gandangarra) from the School of Education at La Trobe University. We developed custom materials together for his first year, second year and Masters subjects, covering strategies, practical tools, and resources to teach Australia's Frontier History with humility and authenticity. 120 Masters students have been taught the new material so far, with 1700 undergraduate and postgraduate students set to take the course in 2026.

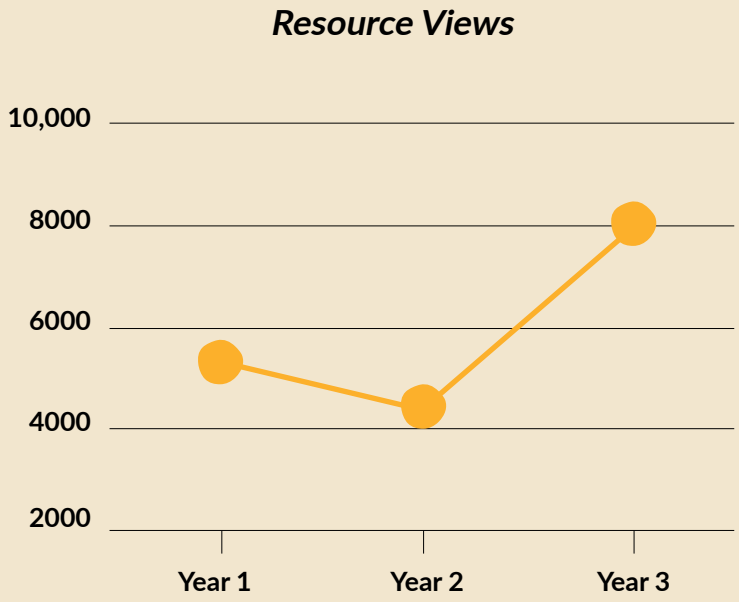
The Australian Wars Education Impact Snapshot 2022-2025

Education Resources

18.3K
Page views of curriculum resources across platforms

5K
Subscribers to Cisl Education Platform

79%
of educators surveyed rated the resources as 'excellent' or 'very good'



Digital Campaigns

1.1 mil
TikTok video views of Heal Our History campaign 2023

658K
IG video plays of Reconcilliation Week Campaign 2024

14.6K
EDMs opened

722
EDM click through

28%
EDM open rate

Partnerships

6
First Nations educators involved in development of education resources

15
strategic partners working on key campaign initiatives

Professional Development

14
webinars, workshops, conference presentations and key note addresses

1.7K
educators undertaking professional development

1K
views of on-demand professional development videos

96% agreed the professional development had **increased their confidence** to teach Frontier Wars history

95% agreed the professional development had **increased motivation** to teach Frontier Wars history

79% agreed the professional development had **increased their confidence** in teaching first nations knowledges and perspectives

88% agreed the professional development **improved their understanding** of our nation's true history and experiences of First Nations people

54% agreed they had **embedded cultural content, values and/or approaches** into their settings as a result of the resources or projects

30% increase in **understanding of cultural safety** from before the professional development to after the professional development

"I left the webinar feeling so inspired to encourage the teachers I work with to have the confidence to teach as co-learners, our Australian history and truth, starting at a local level... 'A shared history... if you are Australian, this is your story too and we all need to carry it' has been on my mind since the webinar, and one that will continually revisit."

- Webinar participant, 2024

Conferences and Events

AIPA Indigenous Suicide Prevention Forum

The Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association (AIPA) hosted the 4th Indigenous Suicide Prevention Conference on Eora Country (Sydney) in March. This annual forum offers a platform for experts, community leaders, and practitioners to come together to share their insights, learn from one another, and form partnerships to strengthen a collective approach to suicide prevention. As Committee members, our General Manager, Thara Brown, and Fullaship Officer, Manny Williams helped shape the youth focus of the forum. They designed a Youth Panel: 'Amplifying Youth Voices into all Aspects of Community Building', facilitated by Mark Nannup, Actor and Community Engagement Facilitator and featuring Hamani Tanginoa, First Nations Youth Voice Coordinator, YMCA NSW; Leyesha Roberts, Aboriginal Health Advocate and 2024 NAIDOC Youth Award Finalist; Bianca Hunt, TV presenter, media personality, interviewer and author; and Kobie Dee, singer, songwriter, rapper and advocate. Over 200 people attended the Forum.

Philanthropy Australia

Philanthropy Australia (PA) hosted the Philanthropy Leadership summit from August 5th - 7th 2025. The focus for the summit was to prioritise a robust examination of leadership in all its forms. It was a critical gathering that convened diverse leaders and PA wanted to ensure First Nations perspectives were present. Although a small cohort, the workshops and sessions did ensure First Nations speakers were presenting and also provided space to share reflections in the main plenary sessions.

Two Culture is Life staff were supported to attend as alumni of the Fellowship for Indigenous Leadership (FIL). Elder Aunty Stephanie Armstrong – who has a long history in education and critical cultural work supporting young people – regularly contributed to discussions through the summit with her invaluable knowledge and expertise.

CEO Belinda Duarte was also provided the opportunity to attend and present in real world leadership sessions and as a panellist on Investing in Leadership: Growing Civil Society's Capacity in a Time of Crisis. Her focus reiterated the importance of programs like FIL and providing pathways of support for young people as an organisation (which has since ceased) together with the work of Culture is Life and the essential need for the unique work of the Fullaship program.

These gatherings are a critical reminder of the evolving landscape of philanthropy and sector leadership and of how agendas intersect with the broader community, in the face of continued inequity and challenges faced by First Nations communities and organisations. Culture is Life was particularly appreciative of the support for staff to attend to deepen understanding of the landscape, build relationships and share knowledge and perspectives on what's essential to invest in to address equity for future generations in Australia.

Indigenous Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum

Fullaship Alumni Caleb Thaiday (Meriam/Erub Kebi Le) shared their wisdom at the Indigenous Youth Mental Health & Wellbeing Forum in Naarm. The Forum, hosted by Headspace National, VACCHO and The Balit Durn Durn Centre of Excellence, brought together 140+ people from health, wellbeing, advocacy, sport and education organisations — all committed to supporting First Nations young people.

With humour and heart, Caleb spoke about the cultural wellbeing they found through Fullaship (Cohort 1, 2022) and reminded us that we need to redefine our ideas about leadership so young mob have space to be themselves. Together with our Manager of Measurement & Evaluation, Caitlin Leahy, they presented findings from our River Reflections evaluation with Fullaship Alumni. Their message was clear: safe, culturally grounded blak spaces for storytelling and evaluation are vital.

Caleb Thaiday (Meriam & Erub Kebi Le) presents at the Indigenous Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Forum. Credit: Thara Brown

Impact Stories

During this year we consolidated our systems and tools for measuring impact, supported by the new Measurement and Evaluation (M&E) role within our team. We have invested in processes that help us to reflect as a team, celebrate impact, and make evidence-based decisions. A central focus is co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, Elders and communities, ensuring their voices and priorities shape our work. For that reason, we strive for a balance between figures and stats, and participatory, qualitative methods which promote deeper learning and reflection.

Fullaship River Reflections

These excerpts come from stories collected through a qualitative evaluation tool by Culture is Life in November 2024 with Alumni from Cohorts 1 and 2 who had completed the program between 8 and 20 months ago. In line with CisL's organisational Theory of Change, the changes Alumni reported show increases in cultural wellbeing; deepening connection to culture, Country and community; and advocacy and influence on issues that affect them. Many of these changes are also having flow-on effects to others in Fellow's circles and beyond, which demonstrates the broader impact of the program.

Caleb

They/them
Fullaship Cohort: 1, 2022
Mob: Meriam, Torres Strait Islands of Mer (Murray) and Erub (Darnley)
Age at start of program: 26

Caleb shared a story which shows how developing confidence in themselves with wellbeing support from the program has led to them advocating for and mentoring other queer young Blackfellas. They said; *"I feel much more confident as a person, especially in doing drag. I had a bit of confidence, but could have been more confident in who I am and what I'm doing as a queer blackfella, a non-binary person. I value the change because I feel like much more of a holistic kind of person now than I was. I was a small bit lost. I want to bring more blackfellas into drag…step into mentorship stuff for the young queer blackfellas in the scene and I got a whole bunch of money to do that over the next two years."*

Anna-Rita

She/her
Fullaship Cohort: 2, 2023
Mob: Kulkalgal People of Central Torres Strait
Age at start of program: 27

Anna-Rita is from the Central Torres Strait and she explained how the program helped her strengthen connections and grow confidence. She said; *"Meeting the Fullaship family and Culture is Life has been the most impactful for me. I grew up in community all my life. Meeting new people and making connections haven't always been my strength due to language barrier and social skills. Before starting the Fullaship program, I was at a point in my life where I did not have a sense of direction. I knew if I joined it would shape my mind and be good for my social and emotional wellbeing, as I was at a very dark place in my life. The connections and relationships I've created along this journey have been the best moments of my life because each and every one of you influenced in uplifting my self-esteem, and made me strong and realised my worth as a black woman."*

Shaylem

She/her
Fullaship Cohort: 2, 2023
Mob: Ngarrindjeri
Age at start of program: 25

Shaylem works in the child protection and youth justice sector. She told a story about Fullaship prompting the realisation that she was not content working in a system that doesn't serve her community. She said; *"Reflecting on my work within a system that I don't think should exist. [I] had been in my comfort zone…Sometimes I feel like I'm more of an observer of my life than an active participant. I've realised if I want something I really need to do it myself. Wanting more for myself and my community. I've been a lot more considerate in what I'm doing to ensure it all leads somewhere."* Her experience shows a greater feeling of control over her life and hope for the future.

Manny

He/him
Fullaship Cohort: 1, 2022
Mob: Kalkadoon, Pitta Pitta & Bundjalung
Age at start of program: 24

Manny told the story of visiting Wadjemup (Rottnest Island) on his first Fullaship Intensive, under the guidance of TO, Uncle Len Collard. He said; *"he shifted our perception of visiting massacre sites. We were all…a bit scared to go over to Wadjemup, knowing it was the largest Aboriginal men's prison in the country and a lot of them are actually buried there. But Uncle Len framed that, you know we can go to cemeteries and ANZAC memorials and we can honour those who have passed. We as blakfellas should also be going to, with the right intention, our massacre sites safely and with the intent of actually honouring them."* This prompted him to see his connection with his own Country differently, he said: *"It actually helped me yarn with my dad about Battle Mountain back in Mount Isa and us visiting Battle Mountain one day and yeah, so that really shifted how I view going to these different culturally significant areas. Which was…really impactful to me."*

Read the full River Reflections report

Education Case Studies

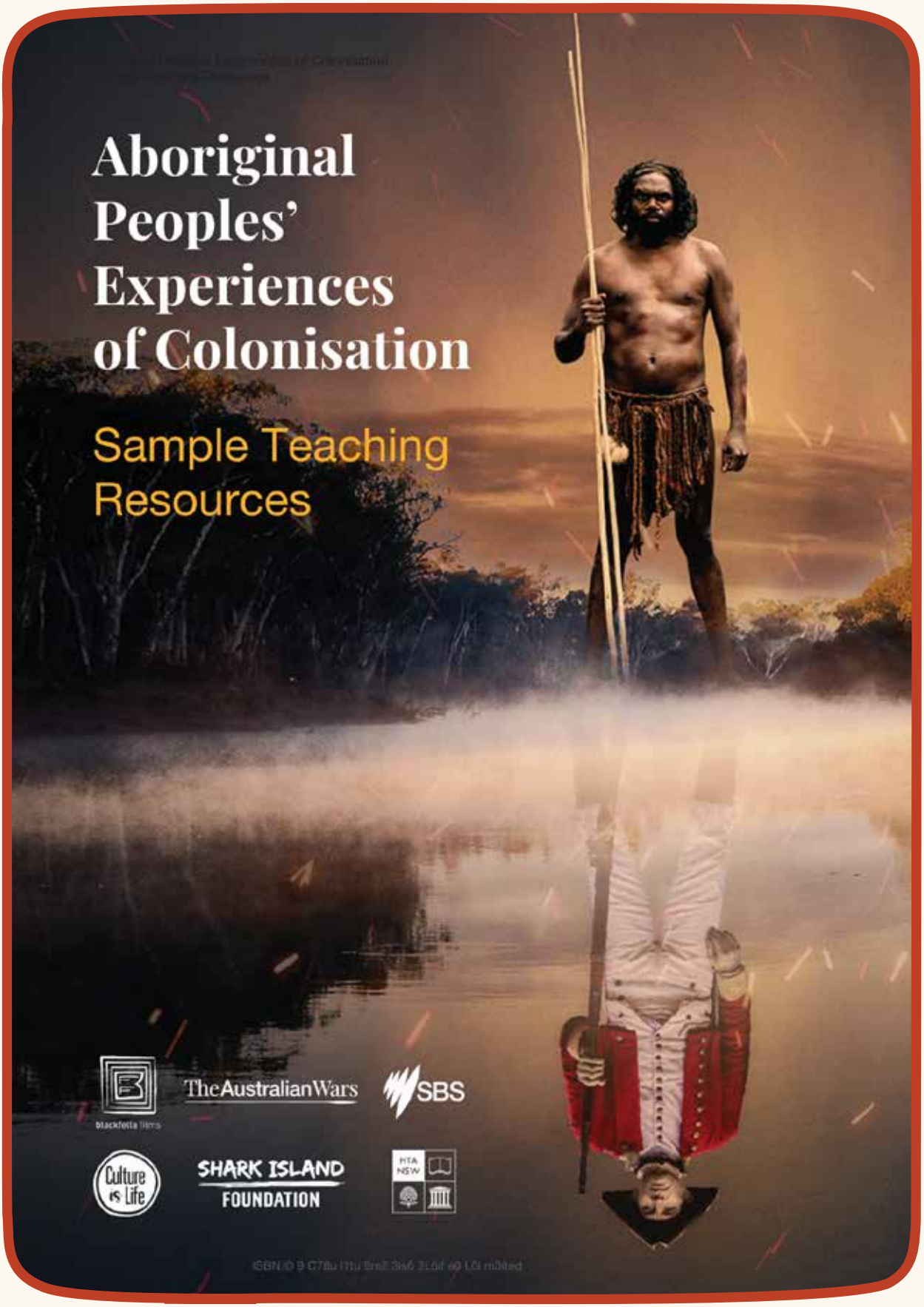
As a way to dig deeper into the impacts of the three-year Education Campaign for *The Australian Wars*, Culture is Life interviewed key partners and educators. The six case studies that emerged reflect the campaign's success in promoting collective responsibility for truth telling as well as the power of the series and curriculum resources to motivate the teaching of Frontier Wars history in Australian schools.

Sharing Responsibility for our Collective History

One of our key partners during 2025 shared their reflections about collaboration across different skill sets and stand-points as demonstrating collective responsibility for teaching Frontier Wars history in Australian schools. As an example for teachers, this collaboration addresses reluctance and boosts confidence.

"Working with the campaign team in open minded, productive ways. It can be a tricky space to enter in terms of Indigenous history. It's big, it's complicated, there's layers of challenge to it in terms of its cultural dimensions, but also there's political stuff around the schools. I've never once felt like an outsider in discussions. The film makers aren't pretending they know what happens in a classroom, the history teachers don't pretend that we know what it's like to make a film. We're sharing the burden in terms of teaching it and I think that's a really encouraging message to have. There's teachers who for whatever reason have never taught this stuff who are thinking, "Is it our place to be doing this?" ***Having Rachel saying let's all pick it up together and keep walking forward and keep this conversation alive speaks volumes to them. We're being invited into this conversation."***

The Australian Wars Director, Rachel Perkins (Kalkadoon & Arrente). Credit: Dylan River



New Year Eight NSW Resource.
Credit: Little Rocket

This is Our History, We Must Teach It

A senior history teacher from a Melbourne school shared her experience of attending the *The Australian Wars* Panel in March, using the series and her efforts to find more space in the curriculum to teach frontier wars history.

"I would say those three episodes changed the way I thought about Australian History and the way I teach Australian history. I can show my mother who started out with a very conservative perspective - they are a window into a completely different view and are so helpful. ***The first episode sent me down a rabbit hole to investigate my own Ancestors who were speared on the Hawkesbury so now I bring my own family history into it every time I teach it.*** *It's not even very confronting for me to teach it because that's what happened at the time! Your materials have been so important as a jumping off point. I spent two weeks in the holidays researching all this. I read a whole lot of books from your reading lists. If I hadn't seen The Australian Wars I would never have gone down this path. Every year I've taught this I thought that I had a reasonable understanding but the more I teach it, the more I realise I don't. There's not really a question about being comfortable or not comfortable. Every teacher in this school would be coming from this position of teaching what happened, teaching the facts."*

The Australian Wars episode one.
Credit: Joseph Mayers

The Australian Wars curriculum resources.
Credit: Culture is Life

The Australian Wars episode three.
Credit: Mark Ho

Looking Forward

Although we are a small team, Culture is Life operates with core values at the centre of everything we do, specifically focused on the dreams and SEWB of young mob. Evidence consistently shows that when First Nations people self-determine their futures, outcomes are both significant and sustainable. With a strong First Nations board supported by allies, Culture is Life's future sustainability is in a reassuring position. After ten years of evolution, we are sharpening our impact across SEWB, leadership, mentoring, and education to ensure that our vision of First Nations young people thriving, remains a reality. 2026 will be a year of securing long-term stability through a growth of the collaborative investment model.

The leadership of Aunty Stephanie Armstrong and Manny Williams together with young mob's perspectives ensures that we are building a more robust framework for the future. Longer-term commitments from funding partners will be vital in securing employment and program pathways that are led and co-designed by young people across the country.

Following a comprehensive review and in response to the evolving aspirations of our Alumni, the Fullaship program is being paused for 2026 while we take the time to digest four years of learning from young mob, to refresh our approach. This development is shaped by deep listening and strategic perspectives that will deepen our collective impact in the years ahead.

Our Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) work will also evolve through a co-design model and ensure data sovereignty principles apply to what we do. This work will be supported by a strong Theory of Change, built on an evidence base in priority areas for young people. This evidence includes lived experience, SEWB and the evaluation expertise of Caitlin Leahy, alongside the sector-specialist insights of our newly appointed board member, Dr. Clinton Schultz and other specialist advisors.

Moving forward we recognise that global climate shifts are also wellbeing issues. Strategies will include a focus on this as part of SEWB, acknowledging that the degradation of Country leads to 'solastalgia' (distress caused by environmental change). Culture is Life will prioritise sustainability and the diversification of income streams, while deepening our sector alliances to navigate this changing sector & environmental landscape.

We look forward to further ensuring the voice of young people guide our work through their lived experience and we will continue to maintain these practices from governance through to operational delivery.

Our work is proudly funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), Annamila First Nations Foundation and Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation.

Karrimurra (Florence Falls, NT) from Fullaship second Intensive, 2025.
Credit: Culture is Life

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