RTO Guide: Engaging First Nations communities, staff and students

A practical guide for RTOs to support First Nations participation

Disclaimer

Artwork story

This artwork is a story that incorporates the project First Nations Engagement in the Transition to Net Zero. It represents the various pathways First Nations people might take to find their feet in a secure workforce.

Each step of the way – from starting out, to becoming successful and eventually guiding the younger generations – is a journey in itself.

Firstly, people will hear about a job and decide if it is right for them. If this is the path they'd like to take, the next step of this journey is getting skilled up and landing the job. Once the job is secured, they will settle in and ultimately grow and thrive, in order to eventually teach new ones coming through.

Each pathway and section of the design has plenty of community symbols. This represents the support of those who are encouraging and helping to build confidence for these First Nations peoples.

About the artist – Kirralee Costelloe

My name is Kirralee Costelloe, and I am a proud Mandandanji / Noonuccal Woman who was born and raised in Rockhampton, Queensland. My art journey started about 7 years ago when I decided to carry on my Elder's legacy of painting and create my own, for my people, for my family and for myself. I thrive when I'm meeting new people in my community and having the opportunities to teach them about my story, while also creating art for them in many different ways.

Contents

Introduction

The Australian Government is working to accelerate the development of clean energy and the skills and capabilities needed to support Australia's transition to net zero. As part of this, increasing participation of First Nations peoples in the decarbonisation workforce has been identified as a priority.

To inform this work, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations engaged Ninti One Limited to research the opportunities and barriers for First Nations people in accessing training and employment in the decarbonisation workforce. This research also assessed existing cultural safety measures and identified practical opportunities to create safer, more supportive environments for First Nations learners and workers.

Ninti's research involved extensive engagement with First Nations peoples, organisations, employers, training providers and government stakeholders, with more than 100 consultations conducted nationally.

The project findings are designed to inform the development of tools and resources that will help industry, training providers and government better support participation of First Nations people in Australia's future decarbonisation workforce. This guide also supports the objective identified in the Australian Government First Nations Clean Energy Strategy 2024-30 (the Strategy) to grow the clean energy workforce, including the priority actions to:

- Coordinate First Nations clean energy workforce development
- Improve First Nations workforce readiness
- Develop a First Nations clean energy job guide.

The Strategy was developed through engagement with more than 1,200 people across Australia, including First Nations peoples, industry, government and non-government organisations.

About this guide

First Nations peoples have always held deep knowledge, leadership and responsibility for Country and continue to shape the communities, environments and knowledge systems in which RTOs operate today. Embedding cultural safety across education and training is essential to building a sector that is relevant, capable and accountable to the needs of all learners now and into the future.

For RTOs, this work spans both education and employment. As educators, RTOs create learning environments where First Nations learners can thrive in classrooms, on Country, in the workplace and in community. As employers, RTOs have a responsibility to support First Nations staff, trainers and assessors to grow, lead and influence the organisation from within.

Cultural safety enables First Nations learners and staff to participate, succeed and lead with confidence. When embedded across systems and relationships, it strengthens outcomes, deepens community trust, and reinforces the quality and credibility of the training sector.

This guide offers practical, targeted advice to support RTOs to embed cultural safety across all parts of their organisation from training delivery and learner support to workforce development and governance. It is designed to support meaningful, sustained change building environments where First Nations people are respected, supported and positioned to lead, and where cultural safety is reflected in everyday practice and decision-making.

First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing

The foundations

First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing reflect deeply interconnected systems of knowledge, identity, and responsibility grounded in Country and passed through generations. They reflect how First Nations peoples live with Country, relate to others, and carry forward cultural responsibilities over generations. These are not abstract ideas, they form the very identity of First Nations peoples. For RTOs, they offer a critical frame for rethinking the systems that shape learning and work and can guide structural and relational design in all aspects of the environments and systems in which RTOs operate. They can also provide a new way forward for creating culturally safe learning and working environments for all learners and staff, not only First Nations staff.

Ways of knowing

Ways of being

Ways of doing

Key concepts, and how these intersect with education, training and workforce

Why it matters

RTOs operate in diverse settings from classrooms and campuses to on-Country learning, workplace-based training and community-delivered programs. First Nations learners and staff bring their whole selves into these spaces including their histories, relationships, responsibilities and ways of engaging with knowledge, people and place.

Creating culturally safe RTO environments means recognising that First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing are not separate from training or work they shape how people learn, teach, lead and contribute. These ways influence how knowledge is shared, how decisions are made, how support is offered, and how responsibility is carried. This means approaching learning relationally valuing different ways of knowing and allowing learners to shape their experience, not just participate in it. It means creating workforce cultures where First Nations staff and trainers can lead with integrity, being recognised for the knowledge they carry, and being empowered to work in ways that align with who they are not just what the system expects. When these ways are understood and embraced, they enable more inclusive, dynamic and accountable environments for learners and staff.

How these intersect with education, training and workforce

Concept	Definition	Application to training, education and workforce
Ways of knowing	How interconnected systems of knowledge are grounded in Country, shaped by observation, story, lived experience, and relationships across generations.	Informs holistic, place-based approaches to learning and working that values diverse knowledge systems and recognises multiple ways of understanding, sharing and applying skills and information. It challenges narrow definitions of expertise and brings together different forms of knowledge and experience. While Western systems often separate knowledge into silos, First Nations ways of knowing are integrated, relational and cyclical grounded in connection across people, place, practice and purpose.
Ways of being	Understanding of self, shaped through kinship, spirituality, collective identity, and deep relationality with people and Country.	Informs how people engage, lead and carry responsibility across learning and workplace settings. Supports approaches that are relational, grounded in collective identity, and attuned to spiritual, cultural and community obligations. For RTOs, this has implications for how learners connect and participate, how staff relate to one another, and how leadership and responsibility are understood – often through relationships and care, rather than hierarchy or formal roles.
Ways of doing	The practice of responsibility through protocol, ceremony, obligation, and action tied to place, role, and relationships.	Shapes how responsibility, respect and collaboration are enacted in both learning and workplace settings. Supports approaches that are process-oriented, relational and grounded in collective responsibility -rather than strictly task-based or hierarchical. In training environments, this can mean learning through doing, co-creating knowledge, prioritising relationships and trust in delivery, and adapting structure to fit context. It influences how people work together, share leadership, and support each other to carry out responsibilities in culturally grounded ways.

Culturally safe spaces: teaching, learning and team culture

What is it?

Cultural safety is creating environments – across services, workplaces, and communities – where First Nations people feel safe, respected, and free from any assault, challenge, or denial of their identity and experiences. It extends beyond cultural awareness, focusing on shared respect, shared meaning, and shared knowledge.

Why is it important?

It promotes environments where people can learn, live, and work together with dignity and true listening. Culturally safe spaces empower marginalised voices, support self-determination, and help to dismantle systemic barriers such as unconscious bias, racism, and discrimination.

What does it look like?

Cultural safety is created through a combination of enabling structural conditions and intentional, individual actions. It is embedded in how an organisation is designed, resourced and led and expressed in how people teach, learn, work, and relate to each other every day.

What are the benefits?

Culturally safe spaces provide the following benefits for both students and staff:

- Higher levels of engagement and productivity
- Lower attrition and higher completion rates for study/training
- Improved recruitment and retention of diverse talent
- Better class/team cohesion and innovation

In RTOs, learning environments are also workplaces. The same people often teach, supervise and support others within a single setting. When cultural safety is absent in one space, it affects the other. The experience of learners and staff is interconnected – and both are shaped by how team culture, delivery practice and organisational systems align.

Actions

Enabling condition and everyday practice:

Flexibility	Timetables, delivery models and supervision structures are designed to accommodate cultural obligations, trauma-aware pacing and collective needs without requiring personal disclosure or individual negotiation.
Shared expectations and protocols	Teams have a shared understanding of what cultural safety looks like in action. Expectations are modelled, discussed and revisited. Breaches are addressed through safe and supported pathways and relational accountability practices, not silence.
Culturally responsive delivery practices	Educators share knowledge with appropriate recognition and respect to local knowledge systems, group dynamics and different ways of learning. Facilitation styles blend yarning, storytelling, observation and hands-on practice not just lecture-style content delivery.
Culturally safe environments (physical and virtual)	Spaces reflect and respect First Nations identity, presence and practice. Learning environments are warm, relational and locally grounded whether on campus, online or on Country.
Relational leadership and team culture	Teams prioritise care, trust and reflective practice. Supervisors lead with relational accountability, not just task oversight. Power is shared in decision-making, and relationships are maintained through transparency, responsiveness and respect.
Visible and valued cultural leadership	First Nations people are present and respected in roles across teaching, leadership and design. Cultural knowledge is treated as expertise resourced, upheld and embedded structurally.
Collective responsibility	Cultural safety is maintained by everyone. Staff understand their role in upholding safety, addressing harm and adapting practice. The burden does not fall to First Nations staff to lead or correct alone.

Organisational leadership and governance

What is it?

Cultural safety in governance and organisation is structurally embedded, visible in leadership, funded in budgets, and reinforced in decision-making processes.

Why is it important?

Embedding cultural safety at the governance level means First Nations people influence how the organisation operates not just how it engages. It means non-First Nations leaders understand cultural safety as their responsibility, not a delegated function. It also means cultural safety is tracked, reviewed and funded like any other core business priority with measures, oversight and consequence.

What does it look like?

Cultural safety in governance and organisation has strong First Nations reference groups and conducts regular reviews of cultural safety. RTOs include First Nations people in governance roles and engage in reflective conversations.

What are the benefits?

Cultural safety in governance and organisation results in:

- Stronger governance and decision-making, resulting in policies and practices that are more responsive to community needs
- Greater transparency and trust, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the organisation
- Better organisational performance and compliance, leading to higher quality training and better compliance with regulatory standards

Image supplied by Envision Energy, QLD

Actions

System lever and what this looks like in practice:

Executive accountability	Executive and senior leaders are responsible for cultural safety outcomes. Cultural safety is linked to organisational performance measures not only in inclusion metrics but in funding, planning, and delivery outcomes.
Integrated governance structures	First Nations leadership is embedded into mainstream governance and decision-making mechanisms not diluted as an advisory or consultative process. This may include co-chairing of key decision-making bodies, First Nations leadership in executive forums, and joint authority over training, delivery and workforce priorities.
Cultural safety in organisational strategy	Strategic and operational plans define cultural safety goals with specific, measurable objectives and these are embedded across departments, not siloed to diversity and inclusion teams. Progress is reviewed at board or executive level and tied to specific and regular organisational reporting and metrics for success.
Decision-making protocols	All major organisational decisions are subject to cultural safety impact analysis especially those affecting training design, staffing, community engagement and delivery models. Cultural risks are identified and reviewed as part of operational and financial risks.
Investment and budget setting	Budgets allocate specific and recurring funding for cultural safety including staff roles, partnerships, leadership pathways, cultural capability, evaluation, and systems redesign. Unfunded commitments are treated as structural risks.
Reporting and transparency	Progress is tracked and communicated internally and externally including to First Nations partners and community. Accountability mechanisms are in place for follow-through, with consequences for failure to act.

Building cultural capability

What is it?

Cultural competency refers to the knowledge, behaviours and attitudes that enable non-Indigenous staff to work respectfully and effectively with First Nations people. It includes understanding historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation, appreciating cultural differences and strengths, and reflecting on one's own biases, assumptions and power.

Why is it important?

Cultural capability enables respectful and reflective conversation, recognising that learning is ongoing and relational. It also protects First Nations staff from being expected to lead cultural learning unless they choose to.

What does it look like?

Building cultural capability involves locally relevant learning that is ongoing and layered – moving from awareness to reflection, action, and accountability. Cultural capability is resourced, scheduled, and delivered by, or in partnership with, Traditional Owners and local First Nations people and organisations.

For RTOs, building cultural capability means supporting both staff and learners to develop the awareness, confidence and skill to engage in First Nations contexts – in classrooms, workplaces and the spaces between. It must be embedded across professional development, supervision, training delivery and learner outcomes, and supported by systems that expect growth, not perfection.

What are the benefits?

Cultural competence in an organisation can result in:
- Better learning and work environments that fosters safe and supportive spaces for First Nations people
- Staff trained in cultural capability communicate more effectively across cultures, leading to stronger teamwork and higher productivity
- Cultural competence prepares learners for a multicultural workforce and helps RTOs align their training with employer expectations and industry standards

Actions

How to build, strengthen, sustain and measure cultural capability

Cultural capability is developed through a staged and supported process not a single intervention. The steps below outline how RTOs can embed capability across staff and learner experiences, from building foundations to sustained practice and accountability across training and workplace settings.

Laying the foundation: Setting expectations from the start

Cultural capability is embedded into position descriptions, learner handbooks, contracts and policies with role-specific expectations for staff and learners

Capability expectations are introduced early through induction, orientation and onboarding, not as standalone training

Learners are supported to understand local cultural protocols and respectful workplace conduct, particularly in placement or community-based settings

Educators model culturally safe behaviour from the outset in supervision, facilitation, language and relationships

Strengthening through exposure and practice

Learning and development is structured, sequenced and role-relevant for both staff and learners

Cultural capability is embedded into training delivery: not only as content, but through method, tone, rhythm and relational practice

Staff apply learning in supervision, facilitation, feedback and community engagement

Learners build capability through reflective tasks, case studies, group dialogue, and placements with guidance and follow-up

Industry and community partners are engaged in capability-building not only as placement hosts or workshop facilitators, but as co-educators, cultural mentors and sources of contextual knowledge

Actions

Sustaining through systems and accountability

Capability is grown through ongoing supervision, mentoring, peer learning and team reflection not just as one-off training

Cultural safety is embedded into professional development plans and learning outcomes including for learners preparing to transition into community-facing settings

Systems support progression – staff are expected to improve over time, and learners are scaffolded to grow in confidence and cultural integrity

Cultural responsibilities, emotional labour and personal experience are acknowledged as part of what people bring into learning and work. These are made visible and supported through open dialogue, not left unspoken or unevenly carried

Measuring what matters

Capability is measured by application, not attendance through feedback, observed practice and reflective dialogue

Supervision includes cultural capability as a standing item with space for staff to reflect and be held accountable

Learners are invited to reflect on and provide feedback about how cultural safety shows up in training and placements and invited to provide feedback on how it could be improved

Progress is tracked and reviewed over time with qualitative input from First Nations learners, staff and partners, not just as a tick box exercise

Evaluation considers both staff and learner systems – recognising that cultural capability must transfer across roles, settings and pathways, not remain isolated to the training environment

Creating inclusive entry pathways

What is it?

Culturally safe engagement processes build trust from the start. They value lived experience, support flexibility, and remove unnecessary barriers to study or employment. They also recognise that long histories of exclusion, discrimination and underrepresentation shape how First Nations peoples experience shared spaces today.

Why is it important?

Respectful engagement is foundational for building trust and long-term partnerships between RTOs and First Nations communities. Trust is essential for effective collaboration, mutual understanding, and the co-creation of meaningful training and employment pathways.

What does it look like?

Respectfully engaging potential First Nations students and staff includes honest and transparent communication about what is negotiable and what supports are available. Providing feedback to potential students and staff that encourage future engagement. And ensuring culturally safe processes for joining an RTO as a student or staff member.

What are the benefits?

Culturally safe engagement processes can result in:

- First Nations staff that bring their full selves into roles where they can lead, innovate and contribute meaningfully
- Employers who invest in culturally safe onboarding consistently report stronger relationships, better communication, and improved retention outcomes
- Reduced early attrition

Actions: Students

Entry is a defining moment in the learner and workforce journey. It is the first formal interaction a First Nations person has with an RTO as a potential learner or staff member. It shapes whether they see a place for themselves in the organisation, whether they feel genuinely welcome, and whether the systems they navigate are transparent, adaptive and supportive.

Strengthening enrolment pathways for First Nations learners

Design multiple pathways into training including community-based enrolment, pre-course preparation programs, recognition of prior learning, and direct outreach

Provide verbal, supported and relationship-based options alongside standard online or form-based enrolment processes

Partner with ACCOs, schools and local organisations to co-deliver information sessions, pathway planning support and pre-enrolment preparation

Remove unnecessary prerequisites or assumed institutional knowledge and ensure information is accessible, localised and strengths-based

Ensure cultural support roles are visible from first contact, not introduced after enrolment is complete

Track where First Nations learners are disengaging and respond with targeted redesign, not generic retention strategies

Actions: Students

Onboarding First Nations learners

Provide a structured and welcoming induction process that includes a mix of cultural orientation, learning expectations, wellbeing support, and time to connect with others

Introduce First Nations staff, Elders or support roles early as relational points of contact, not add-ons to the curriculum

Include opportunities for peer connection and cohort-building early such as yarning circles, shared learning introductions, or informal meet and greets

Deliver information in multiple formats (e.g. yarning, visuals, plain English) and ensure key systems (e.g. timetables, assessments, supports) are clearly explained

Make space for learners to share their own goals, questions and community connections allowing the RTO to respond, not assume

Avoid overwhelming learners with administrative detail upfront and instead set expectations on what is to come and stagger information in line with when it is needed, building in time to revisit information over a longer period

Provide accessible orientation to systems, policies, and people reducing assumptions of prior institutional experience or knowledge

Actions: Staff

Strengthening recruitment pathways for First Nations staff

Design multiple pathways into the workforce including traineeships, mentoring pathways, secondments, and community-informed recruitment initiatives

Offer multiple ways to engage from formal applications to yarns before applying, alternative assessment formats, and practical demonstrations

Promote roles through networks that First Nations professionals already trust, not just mainstream platforms

Structure selection processes that recognise community leadership, cultural knowledge and lived experience as legitimate strengths

Include First Nations leaders in decision-making not just on interview panels, but in shaping how recruitment systems and processes operate

Track where First Nations learners are disengaging and respond with targeted redesign, not generic retention strategies

Build relationships before recruiting

Connect with local communities, schools, TAFEs or VET providers in advance of hiring rounds

Where possible, co-design roles or entry pathways with community partners or ACCOs

Host info sessions in community settings to explain roles, support the application process and build trust

Advertise through community networks

Use plain language and include a short, values-based description of your organisation's commitment to cultural safety

Promote roles through First Nations platforms (e.g. Koori Mail, Indigenous employment services, ACCO newsletters, Facebook groups) and share job ads with local community organisations and partners — not just job boards

Actions: Staff

Recruitment

Design roles that are flexible and strengths-based

Remove unnecessary qualification requirements where cultural knowledge or experience is relevant

Create space for cultural leave, part-time roles or seasonal/project-based roles

Recognise non-traditional skillsets such as community leadership, land-care experience or cultural knowledge

Where appropriate, use identified positions for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants, following relevant legal guidelines

Make assessment processes culturally safe

Allow phone or video applications if written forms are a barrier

Offer support people in interviews or onboarding conversations

Share questions in advance, and allow storytelling or practical examples as valid responses

Include at least one First Nations person in selection or assessment, where possible

Respect diverse communication styles – do not equate silence or indirectness with disengagement

Ensure background checks (e.g. criminal history) are applied with awareness of systemic issues such as over-policing, racial profiling, and disproportionate incarceration of First Nations peoples

Actions: Staff

Onboarding First Nations staff

Ensure cultural safety is addressed explicitly including expectations for how staff will be supported and how they are expected to contribute

Provide a tailored induction that covers both the role and the organisational culture, including cultural protocols, relationships, and systems of care

Connect new staff with mentors, peer networks or other First Nations colleagues early with time allocated for relational connection, not just training

Clarify the scope of the role, including what is not expected (e.g. carrying cultural safety for the organisation)

Provide accessible orientation to systems, policies, and people reducing assumptions of prior institutional experience or knowledge

Supporting First Nations students and staff

What is it?

Culturally safe support extends beyond classroom adjustments or role induction. It includes the broader systems of care that respond to a person's whole experience – emotional, cultural, relational, practical – and ensure they are not navigating challenges alone. For First Nations learners and staff, these supports must be active, visible, and sustained across time and setting.

Why is it important?

Culturally safe spaces enable First Nations people to show up fully, contribute meaningfully, and lead when they choose to.

What does it look like?

Wraparound support is not a single role — it is a coordinated practice across people, teams and structures. It is built on trust, early relationships, and the understanding that barriers are not always visible, but systems can be designed to respond anyway.

What are the benefits?

Culturally safe and relevant support to students and staff can result in:

- Students that are more likely to remain engaged and successfully complete their studies.
- A greater proportion of Indigenous students enrolling in higher-level qualifications
- Growth and empowerment of local staff has a positive ripple effect, increasing community participation and engagement in broader services such as health, education, and local governance

Image supplied by Climate Action Schools

Actions

Culturally grounded systems of care

First Nations support roles are well-resourced, connected across teams, and empowered to work relationally not reduced to administrative liaison or stretched across an unmanageable workload

Community Elders, ACCOs and cultural mentors are engaged as partners in care with protocols for how and when they are involved, and resourced to do so

First Nations learners and staff have clear pathways to access cultural support and advocacy from first contact through to exit or transition with support offered in culturally safe, timely and consistent ways

Programs and teams allocate time for relationship-building, connection and cultural sharing recognising these as essential to creating environments where First Nations people feel seen, respected and supported

Cultural supervision and reflective spaces are available to First Nations staff navigating complex cultural and institutional responsibilities

Wellbeing, flexibility and practical supports

Supports address intersecting pressures including housing, transport, family obligations, financial insecurity, systemic racism and cultural load

Leave policies, scheduling and program pacing are designed to accommodate cultural obligations, Sorry Business and non-linear attendance patterns without stigma or penalty

Regular wellbeing checks are built into training delivery, placement oversight, supervision and team practice not left to crisis response

Access to culturally safe counselling or wellbeing services are clearly communicated, with accessible referral processes and support navigating them

Practical supports such as transport, IT access, study space or workplace equipment are offered proactively not assumed to be in place

Ensure support systems are adapted for location-specific challenges, including digital access, distance from services, and reduced face-to-face contact

Actions

Collective responsibility and continuity of care

Support is shared across the organisation not siloed within cultural or student services roles that lack power of influence over mainstream systems and processes

All staff understand the signs of disengagement and distress, and know how to respond with care and follow-up

Systems are in place to track who is receiving support, who is becoming disengaged, and what is being learned from patterns over time

When learners become staff or staff begin as students support continues through transition, with continuity in relationships and systems where possible

Feedback from First Nations people shapes how support systems evolve – including what's working, what's tokenistic, and what's missing entirely

Provide targeted support during work placements or on-the-job training, where learners may face unsafe environments or lack access to trusted contacts

Supporting progression and long-term opportunity

What is it?

Retention is not the end goal, it is a condition for the sustained development, progression and influence of First Nations learners and staff over time. This requires an organisational shift away from holding people in place and toward creating systems that enable people to move forward into further learning, leadership, employment and sector influence.

Why is it important?

Culturally appropriate and relevant support for retention and progress or promotion among First Nations students and staff is essential to long-term positive outcomes in terms of employment and opportunity.

What does it look like?

Progression must be made visible and achievable. For learners, this means more than completing a course it includes seeing how their training connects to future roles and being supported to take the next step. For staff, it means opportunities to grow skills, expand influence, and lead change not just remain in support or identified cultural positions.

What are the benefits?

Supporting progression and long-term opportunities can result in:

- High retention rates among students signal a supportive and effective learning environment, which enhances the RTOs reputation and attracts future enrolments
- Retaining staff and students reduces the significant costs associated with recruitment, onboarding, and training
- Stable student and staff populations allow RTOs to gather meaningful feedback, refine programs, and implement effective support services

Actions

Enabling learner progression

Designing and mapping multiple qualification pathways, including vertical progression (e.g. Cert II to Diploma) and lateral transitions (e.g. training to employment or movement across disciplines), with tailored guidance along the way

Embedding applied learning through placements, enterprise projects and community-partnered initiatives that build real-world skills, networks and confidence

Tracking and following up on learner journeys to understand whether systems are enabling meaningful outcomes and seeking feedback on how they can be adapted where they are not

Creating space to explore goals early through culturally safe conversations, mentoring, and exposure to diverse career journeys and futures and role models

Addressing structural and personal barriers to progression including financial hardship, limited access to bridging units, or placements that do not connect to future work

Supporting learners to transition confidently including interview preparation, licence support, workplace cultural safety planning and follow-up beyond graduation

Extending impact and opportunity through practice

Learners become staff, mentors or sector leaders through intentional hiring, succession planning and alumni engagement

Staff influence broader change through participation in industry working groups, cross-sector initiatives, and policy reform with support to step into those spaces

Community and industry partnerships are designed to grow First Nations leadership beyond meeting course requirements in ways that strengthen their broader work-readiness and practical skills

Development pathways strengthen both individual capability and the RTOs visibility, credibility and impact demonstrating what shared leadership looks like in action

Leadership and success are defined in partnership with First Nations people recognising multiple forms of contribution, growth and influence and that no one person will walk the same path

Actions

Growing and advancing First Nations staff

Developing tailored, supported progression pathways that reflect the strengths, goals and preferred leadership styles of individual staff with encouragement to plan for and apply to new opportunities

Ensuring these pathways are transparent, resourced, and responsive recognising that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to growth or success

Allocating funding and time for professional development including qualifications, conferences, governance opportunities, secondments and networking opportunities

Providing structured leadership development opportunities that increase skills, confidence, and influence with the option to lead within and beyond cultural portfolios

Embedding career development into performance review processes including opportunities that look beyond the current responsibilities and scope of their role to support with building future career progression

Promoting First Nations staff into roles that shape practice, policy and organisational direction not limiting opportunities to cultural or engagement-specific positions

Identifying and addressing internal barriers to progression including bias in recruitment, lack of acting opportunities, or over-reliance on informal support systems and proving an opportunity for First Nations staff to provide safe feedback on these barriers and their solutions

Partnerships

What is it?

Partnerships are powerful levers for shaping how cultural safety is upheld in practice. They determine who is engaged, who holds power and authority, how knowledge is valued, and how responsibility is shared. For RTOs, they are among the clearest signals of whether cultural safety is embedded structurally or limited to aspiration.

Why is it important?

Strong partnerships frameworks centre First Nations leadership and ensure training with cultural integrity. Weak or transactional practices can erode trust, extract knowledge without consent or accountability, and disconnect training from the communities it intends to serve.

What does it look like?

Embedding cultural safety means shifting from ad hoc relationships and compliance-based contracting to long-term, place-based partnerships.

What are the benefits?

Partnerships, that are sustained and matured over time, uphold shared power and responsibility resulting in better outcomes for learners, staff and the community at large.

Actions

A culturally safe partnership reflects:

|	
Cultural authority	Are the right people involved, and are their roles recognised?
Shared purpose	Is the relationship based on reciprocity, not extraction?
Long-term commitment	Is there investment in relationships beyond a project?
Power sharing	Are First Nations partners supported to lead, with real influence, resources and visibility?

Four-phase model for partnership engagement

- 1: Prepare
- 2: Initiate
- 3: Build
- 4: Maintain
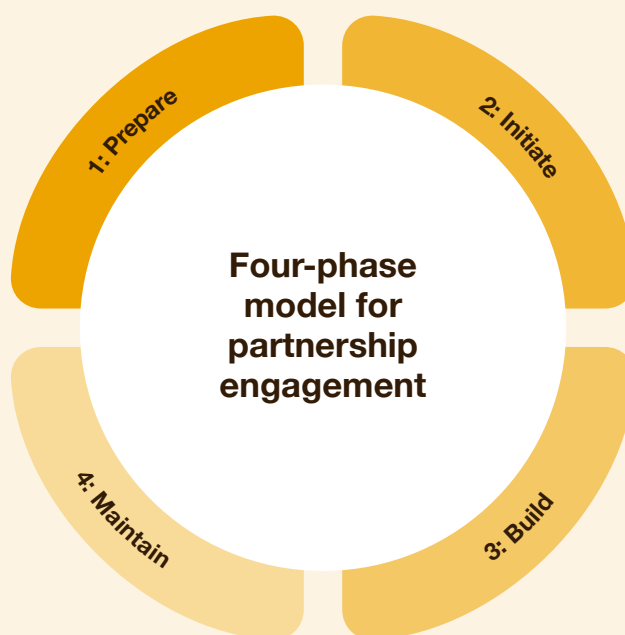
The four-phase model below outlines a structured, culturally grounded approach to building and sustaining partnerships. It reflects the need for time, reciprocity, and shared power – with cultural authority respected across all stages of engagement.

Phase	RTO responsibilities	What this enables
1. Prepare	Identify the Country you are operating on and who holds cultural authority. Understand the broader landscape – who needs to be involved, how they are currently engaged, and how your work can complement, not duplicate. Allocate time, budget and internal authority for relationship-building.	Signals respect before decisions are made. Avoids symbolic inclusion. Aligns internal systems to support and sustain consistent, long-term collaborations.
2. Initiate	Engage in alignment with local protocols and channels or through trusted intermediaries. Be clear about your purpose and limitations. Listen before proposing. Use respectful, plain language.	Creates conditions for trust. Centres local ways of relating. Shifts engagement from transactional to relational.
3. Build	Define shared goals and roles. Use clear and culturally responsive communication (e.g. yarning, site visits). Formalise arrangements where appropriate with shared decision-making and recognition clearly defined and upheld.	Embeds equity into delivery. Clarifies responsibility. Positions partners as co-leaders, not advisors.
4. Maintain	Keep relationships active beyond discrete program delivery. Create space for feedback, reflection and adaptation. Recognise contributions publicly and relationally. Revisit partnership terms, including roles, resources and purpose to monitor and improve outcomes.	Builds trust and sustainability beyond a single project. Normalises two-way accountability. Embeds relationships in systems, not individuals.

Examples of what a culturally safe partnership could look like in different contexts

A

Land-management regional training program delivered in a regional area

An RTO delivering a Certificate II in Conservation and Ecosystem Management in a regional area partners with a local Aboriginal Ranger group and a nearby Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) to co-design and co-deliver the program.

The RTO:

> Works with Traditional Owners and local Elders from the outset to shape the structure, delivery method and content of the course

> Engages rangers as guest trainers and co-facilitators for key modules, recognising their expertise in land management and cultural practices

> Contracts the ACCO to deliver wraparound support, including mentoring, attendance follow-up and wellbeing support

> Ensures that cultural protocols — including flexibility for Sorry Business, use of local language, and on-Country learning — are built into the timetable and expectations

> Provides shared governance through a local advisory group that meets regularly and is compensated for its time

The result is a program that not only meets national competencies but is grounded in local knowledge, led by trusted people, and better suited to the needs and strengths of local First Nations learners.

B

Early childhood vocational training program delivered in an urban area

A metropolitan RTO delivering Certificate III and Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care establishes a partnership with a local First Nations-led early childhood centre and an First Nations-led professional development provider.

The RTO:

> Engages First Nations educators and Elders from the local area to review curriculum content for cultural relevance and bias

> Partners with the First Nations-led early childhood centre to provide work placement opportunities in a culturally safe environmentContracts the ACCO to deliver wraparound support, including mentoring, attendance follow-up and wellbeing support

> Brings in First Nations early childhood professionals to guest-facilitate training sessions on culturally responsive care, trauma-aware practice and relationships with families

> Contracts a local First Nations organisation to deliver cultural safety training for all early childhood trainers and assessors

> Establishes a formal agreement that ensures mutual benefit — including learner placements, staff development, and opportunities for the partner organisation to shape course design

This partnership supports stronger outcomes for First Nations learners by creating culturally safe placements, visible role models and training content that reflects their identity and community. It also strengthens the RTOs links to sector leaders, improves training quality, and demonstrates genuine commitment to reconciliation in practice.

Sustaining change

What is it?

Cultural safety cannot rely on strong individuals or short-term effort. It must be built into the systems, relationships and leadership practices that carry the work forward even as staff, programs and priorities shift. Sustaining change means moving beyond isolated initiatives toward embedded, organisation-wide change and accountability.

Why is it important?

Accountability is how we move from values to outcomes. Organisations that embed accountability into leadership, systems and culture are more likely to retain First Nations staff, build trusted partnerships, and deliver stronger, community grounded results.

What does it look like?

RTOs that sustain cultural safety treat it as a core condition of quality not a project, value statement or compliance item. They build it into decision-making, staff development, partnerships, planning cycles, and continuous improvement processes. They understand that cultural safety is dynamic and must be lived, revisited and renewed not assumed to stay in place once established.

A meaningful accountability approach balances numbers with narrative. While quantitative metrics are essential, they must be paired with qualitative insights that contextualise this data to reflect lived experience.

First Nations workforce participation
% of employees by location, role type, level, and business area

Retention and progression
Turnover rates, % of staff promoted, average tenure, exit survey themes

Learning and development
% of staff completing cultural training, integration of cultural capability into Professional development processes

Procurement and partnerships
Spend with First Nations businesses, types of relationships, employment outcomes supported

Staff experience and voice
Cultural safety survey data, anonymous feedback channels, yarning or storytelling sessions

Action on feedback
Track how feedback has informed changes to policies, tools or decisions

Actions

Embed accountability systemically

Establish a Cultural Safety Governance Group or subcommittee of the executive team

Assign accountability for cultural safety KPIs to specific leaders or departments

Conduct regular cultural audits or reviews of key processes (e.g. hiring, onboarding, complaints management)

Include cultural safety in annual performance reviews for managers and supervisors

Invite external First Nations advisors to participate in reviews, policy updates or evaluation processes

Develop a dashboard or reporting tool to track cultural indicators across the organisation

Create safe feedback mechanisms

To ensure First Nations staff and partners can raise concerns or make suggestions safely:

Provide anonymous or low-barrier mechanisms (e.g. surveys, pulse check-ins, suggestion boxes)

Create safe, facilitated feedback forums where mob can speak freely with appropriate support

Allow staff to give feedback in ways that reflect cultural communication norms not only written forms

Communicate how feedback will be used, and follow up with updates on changes made

Ensure cultural safety issues are not minimised or deprioritised when raised especially if discomfort arises

Actions

Transparency and shared responsibility

Reporting cultural safety progress and challenges in internal updates, processes such as RAP reports, engagement principles or sustainability statements

Including First Nations employment, retention and procurement goals in organisational KPIs and public commitments

Being honest when things fall short and outlining clear next steps for improvement

Sharing lessons learned with other organisations to support sector-wide change

Responsibility must also be distributed, not delegated. Cultural safety is not the job of a single First Nations employee, nor a network or RAP committee

What sustains cultural safety over time

Distributed responsibility

Cultural safety is built into roles, systems and leadership with responsibility held primarily by non-First Nations staff and internal systems not delegated to First Nations staff or community partners without influence or power over decision-making. Teams are clear on what they are responsible for and how they must contribute

Leadership continuity and support

Leaders understand their role in holding, resourcing and modelling cultural safety with succession planning and coaching in place to maintain momentum over time and in response to emerging needs

Investment in people and relationships

Long-term partnerships, peer networks, mentoring and community relationships are maintained and renewed not tied to one program or individual

Feedback that drives adaptation

First Nations feedback is built into evaluation, review and planning processes not just sought during issues. Change is visible, timely and meaningful

Cultural safety in organisational systems

Quality, risk, HR and planning systems all include cultural safety including tracking outcomes, resourcing commitments, and responding to harm

Ongoing learning culture

Staff at all levels are supported to learn, reflect and grow with space to revisit practice, ask questions and respond to shifting needs and contexts

Visible renewal

Cultural safety commitments, language and visual signals are updated regularly in partnership with community not left to become symbolic or outdated

Conclusion and next steps

Final reflections

Cultural safety is not achieved in a single program or policy it is sustained through relationships, structure and practice. For RTOs, this work sits at the heart of training delivery, workforce development and organisational leadership.

Across this guide, we have set out practical, system-focused actions to support First Nations learners and staff not only to participate, but to succeed, grow and lead. This includes culturally safe governance, inclusive enrolment and recruitment, responsive support, clear progression pathways, and structures that sustain change over time.

Cultural safety is a shared responsibility. It requires commitment across all roles – trainers, leaders, student support, admin teams, and industry partners. It also requires time, reflection and consistency. The work starts with what is within your control – and grows through accountability, feedback and continued relationship with First Nations learners, staff and communities.

Resources and support

To implement the actions in this guide, RTOs can draw on:

- **First Nations organisations and advisors** for guidance, review and community connection
- **Existing frameworks**, including Reconciliation Action Plans, Indigenous Procurement Policies, and cultural capability resources
- **Sector-specific partnerships**, such as First Nations employment networks, training hubs, and mentoring initiatives
- **Peer learning**, including cross-organisation networks, communities of practice and shared case studies

Where possible, prioritise First Nations-led providers and local relationships that support self-determination and place-based development.

Start where you are and take the next step

Organisations will begin this work from different points. Whether you are reviewing existing systems or building new ones, use this table to reflect on where your organisation is now and what meaningful action could look like next.

Action area	Getting started	Building momentum	Leading practice
Governance and leadership	Assign leadership responsibility for cultural safety across education, employment and governance functions	Embed cultural safety in strategic plans, workforce development, risk, compliance and quality frameworks	Formalise cultural governance structures, including First Nations leadership and cultural accountability mechanisms
Cultural capability	Deliver First Nations-led capability building tailored to local context and role function	Embed cultural capability into PD, induction, supervision, and team development	Evaluate capability outcomes over time and adjust training, systems and expectations in response
Learning and delivery environment	Identify key areas where delivery practices may be unsafe, inaccessible or culturally alienating	Adapt delivery to support relational learning, local cultural relevance, and flexibility for cultural obligations	Co-design delivery models with First Nations partners and embed cultural safety indicators into learning quality reviews
Inclusive entry pathways	Map where and how learners and staff are coming into the organisation and where barriers are showing up	Build culturally safe enrolment, outreach and recruitment systems with community relationships as the foundation	Co-design recruitment and enrolment pathways with First Nations stakeholders and monitor participation and outcomes
Retention and progression	Offer culturally safe support for learners and staff including mentoring, flexibility, and check-ins	Identify key transition points (e.g. placement, graduation, promotion) and embed progression pathways that are flexible and responsive to the needs of First Nations learners and staff	Resource and track learner and staff advancement including formal leadership development and career-building systems
Partnerships and co-delivery	Establish or reconnect with local ACCOs, cultural educators and employer hosts	Collaborate on program design, delivery and support services with First Nations partners	Formalise shared delivery, governance or mentoring arrangements with First Nations community partners
Feedback and accountability	Create safe, structured feedback processes for learners and staff	Report on cultural safety outcomes internally and externally and act visibly on what is raised	Embed cultural safety review into quality assurance cycles, board reporting and external stakeholder engagement

Tip: Choose one or two action areas to prioritise over the next 3–6 months. Focus on what is most visible, most urgent, or most likely to shift outcomes – and review progress regularly with input from First Nations learners, staff and partners.