

Driving “a vehicle for reconciliation” through proactive repatriation and provenance research

CENTRALISING PROACTIVE REPATRIATION AND PROVENANCE RESEARCH

The University of Queensland (UQ) has reaffirmed and centralised its dedication to the provenance research and repatriation of Australian Indigenous Ancestral Remains and significant cultural heritage materials that are currently under the institution’s care. This commitment stems from a recognition of the historical injustices inflicted upon Indigenous peoples and a firm belief in the ethical imperative to right these wrongs.

This work, with structured oversight by the Office of the Provost, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement), and the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), has led to UQ’s **Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains and Significant Cultural Objects Policy** with Repatriation Guidelines, one of the first of its kind from a Queensland university. The development of these frameworks signifies an important milestone in UQ’s ongoing commitment to ethical stewardship and reconciliation.

CATALYSING CHANGE THROUGH REPATRIATION LEADERSHIP

In late 2021, UQ Repatriation Manager, Madalyn Grant was appointed to complete the task of auditing and provenancing various materials of cultural significance belonging to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to begin repatriating where appropriate and welcome.

Until this appointment, some of these materials were without internal policies or frameworks to guide repatriation processes. To date, over 30 collections – ranging from single stones, skeletal remains, tissue samples, rock formations, bark paintings, and even a Bora Ring – have been reported in detail under the care of UQ, with the aim to begin collaborating with community, and repatriating some of these materials as early as 2024.

“Repatriation is incredibly powerful; not simply as a transfer of ‘goods,’ but as a material acknowledgement of fault and a tangible promise to do better,” Madalyn Grant said.

IDENTIFYING CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND RETURN TO COUNTRY

For this acknowledgment to take place, UQ is centralising a proactive repatriation endeavour. Firstly, by identifying what is in the care of the institution and engaging in provenance research, and then approaching communities of origin to offer to return their cultural heritage.

Madalyn Grant said proactive and unconditional repatriation is “a *vehicle for reconciliation*” by helping to build respect and reciprocity between UQ, as an ethical institution, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as the authority of their cultural knowledge.

Repatriation also provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples greater access to research institutions, so that they may shape conversations around what research looks like going forward. It works to decenter the institution as “keeper” and “knowledge maker” and acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the active participants, leaders, and owners of their histories.

Repatriation Manager, Madalyn Grant noted that while the return is important, “the relationships that are built as a result of repatriation are just as important.”

UQ strives to cultivate lasting relationships grounded in mutual respect and understanding. However, for this to take place the knowledge and decision-making must be handed over to the rightful owners.

Repatriation is incredibly powerful; not simply as a transfer of ‘goods,’ but as a material acknowledgement of fault and a tangible promise to do better.

MADALYN GRANT

**CENTRALISING EFFORTS:
DEVELOPING POLICY
AND FRAMEWORKS**

To continue repatriation and relationship-building efforts, UQ recognises its responsibility to ensure lasting change by establishing robust policies and frameworks that not only guide current initiatives but also lay the groundwork for sustained engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

By formalising these procedures through an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains and Significant Cultural Objects Policy, the university commits to fostering an environment of accountability and transparency in its cultural heritage management practices and while meeting international repatriation standards. The development of this policy was guided by the Office of the Provost in partnership with the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement), and the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research).

This policy and its implementation represent a pivotal step forward in aligning institutional values with tangible action. With input from stakeholders and communities of origin, this policy will assist in navigating complex repatriation processes while upholding the principles of respect, reciprocity, and cultural sensitivity. As collections are identified for repatriation, these frameworks will ensure that each step is undertaken with meticulous care and in consultation with Indigenous voices, thereby strengthening the bonds of trust and collaboration between UQ and the communities it serves.

● ●
The relationships that are built as a result of repatriation are just as important [as the return].

MADALYN GRANT

**CULTIVATING SUSTAINABLE
RELATIONSHIPS FOR CULTURAL
HEALING AND EMPOWERMENT**

As UQ embarks on its journey of proactive repatriation and provenance research, it does so with a deep commitment to fostering respect, reciprocity, and cultural ownership.

This commitment underscores the institution's recognition of past injustices and its dedication to rectifying them through meaningful action.

Due to UQ senior executive leadership, Indigenous leadership, and UQ's Repatriation Manager, significant strides have been made in identifying and acknowledging the cultural significance of materials held within the university's care. From the stones to the ancestral remains, each item represents a thread in the rich tapestry of Indigenous heritage, deserving of reverence and restoration to its rightful place.

Ultimately, the repatriation of these materials is a clear demonstration of respect and cultural repair with quantifiable and visible results. Yet, beyond the physical act of repatriation lies a more profound journey towards reconciliation.

By engaging in proactive and unconditional repatriation, UQ not only acknowledges historical injustices but also endeavours to forge enduring relationships built on mutual respect and understanding. This approach transcends mere restitution; it serves as a catalyst for cultural healing and empowerment within Indigenous communities.

Central to this process is the development of comprehensive policies and frameworks that guide and sustain repatriation efforts. With the implementation of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains and Significant Cultural Objects Policy, UQ solidifies its commitment to upholding Indigenous rights and values in perpetuity.

In essence, UQ's proactive approach to repatriation is not merely a gesture of goodwill; it is in part UQ's commitment to addressing some of the practices of the past.