

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association

ISSN: 2475-0158 (Print) 2475-0166 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ualj21

Building a Foundation for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia: Insights from the 2024 National Dialogue Session

Kirsten Thorpe & Lauren Booker

To cite this article: Kirsten Thorpe & Lauren Booker (2026) Building a Foundation for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia: Insights from the 2024 National Dialogue Session, Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association, 75:2, 340-353, DOI: 10.1080/24750158.2026.2654738

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2026.2654738

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 19 Apr 2026.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 588

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ualj21

JOURNAL OF THE AUSTRALIAN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION ASSOCIATION
2026, VOL. 75, NO. 2, 340–353
https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2026.2654738

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Building a Foundation for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia: Insights from the 2024 National Dialogue Session

Kirsten Thorpe and Lauren Booker

Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, Broadway, NSW, Australia

ABSTRACT

Indigenous Librarianship represents a vital yet underdeveloped field in Australia, requiring urgent development as the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) formally recognises Indigenous contexts within its professional framework and government policy increasingly acknowledges Indigenous data rights as national priorities. Drawing on Burns, Doyle, Joseph, and Krebs' (2009) foundational definition of Indigenous Librarianship as a field that unites library practice with Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies, this paper sets an agenda for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia. Drawing on international Indigenous librarianship scholarship and Australian policy frameworks, we conducted thematic analysis of discussions from the '*Libraries and their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges*' dialogue session hosted by ALIA on 15 October 2024. Our findings identified two priority areas: Indigenous Librarianship and Leadership, and Indigenous representation in library collections, systems and services. We argue that establishing a strong foundation for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia requires structural change within institutions and meaningful partnership with Indigenous communities in advancing their aspirations for sovereignty over Indigenous cultural heritage. We propose two purposeful acts: collaborative research to define Indigenous Librarianship in the Australian context, and the establishment of recognised qualifications and career pathways to support Indigenous-led practice that advances self-determination while connecting to international Indigenous librarianship movements.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 July 2025
Accepted 30 March 2026

KEYWORDS
Indigenous Librarianship; Indigenous knowledge systems

Reflexive Positioning Statement

As we (Kirsten and Lauren) write this paper, we acknowledge our positioning as researchers within the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education & Research at the University of Technology Sydney (Jumbunna Research).

CONTACT Kirsten Thorpe Kirsten.Thorpe@uts.edu.au Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Our work in Critical Indigenous Archival Studies and Indigenous Data Sovereignty across Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) shapes how we approach the development of Indigenous Librarianship in Australia. This work is urgent for us; it is grounded in our understanding of obligations to Country and our commitment to Indigenous community self-determination. It is also informed by our lived experiences navigating colonial institutions as Indigenous GLAM practitioners and scholars. Our focus is on advancing Indigenous self-determination through archive and information practices. This work requires both critical analysis of existing structures and active creation of Indigenous-led alternatives.

Our research gives us particular insights into the gaps, challenges, and possibilities for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia. We know the colonial load that Indigenous GLAM workers carry and the transformative potential when libraries genuinely centre Indigenous leadership and sovereignty. In this context, we acknowledge other Indigenous GLAM scholars and workers for their knowledge, leadership, and sustained commitment to Indigenous self-determination in libraries and archives.

Introduction

The movement towards defining Indigenous Librarianship in Australia builds on international Indigenous librarianship scholarship and advocacy that have been developing since the late 1990s, connecting with global networks such as the International Indigenous Librarians Forum (IILF), established in 1999, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Indigenous Matters Special Interest Group, created in 2008 (Roy, 2015; Valeho-Novikoff et al., 2016). The Australian context draws from, but also contributes to, this international discourse while addressing the unique colonial history and contemporary policy landscape of Australia.

This paper, written by the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research (University of Technology Sydney), draws on and extends the publicly available *Libraries and their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges: Insight Report* (Thorpe & Booker, 2024). Here we explore the foundations for establishing Indigenous librarianship in Australia through deeper thematic analysis of the dialogue sessions that informed that report. Through analysis of discussions from 34 breakout groups involving library professionals across Australia, we identified Indigenous Librarianship and Leadership as the sector's top priority for action. We outline the field of Indigenous librarianship and examine areas of library practice that support Indigenous sovereignty over information resources and the development of culturally appropriate data, information, and records management principles aligned with community priorities.

Importantly, this paper articulates what Indigenous Librarianship is not – challenging assumptions that it can be implemented within existing library structures and arguing instead for fundamental transformation grounded in Indigenous self-determination. We examine how Indigenous librarianship connects with the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and supports the fundamental Indigenous rights to self-determination, particularly in relation to the management and control of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural heritage.

This work is particularly significant as ALIA has formally recognised an Indigenous Professional Knowledge Domain of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Contexts'

within the *ALIA Skills, Knowledge and Ethics Framework for the Library and Information Services Workforce*. This development builds on the foundational work of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network (ATSILIRN), which has provided protocols for Indigenous engagement with libraries since 1995 and aligns with recent government recognition of Indigenous knowledges within Australia's National Science and Research priorities and the Productivity Commission's call for an Indigenous Data Bureau (Productivity Commission, 2024). These policy developments, combined with the growing influence of the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Carroll et al., 2020) and frameworks from the Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective, create opportunities for Australian libraries to contribute to the global movement for Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

This paper first defines Indigenous librarianship through international scholarship, then examines the Australian context and policy landscape before presenting findings from the 2024 Dialogue Session. We conclude by proposing a framework for establishing Indigenous librarianship as a distinct professional field in Australia.

Defining Indigenous Librarianship

> Indigenous librarianship unites the discipline of librarianship with Indigenous approaches to knowledge, theory, and research methodology … It has a developing bibliography and local, national, and international professional associations devoted to its growth … A focus of Indigenous librarianship is the provision of culturally relevant library and information collections and services by, for, and with Indigenous people. (Burns et al., 2009, p. 2330)

Burns et al. (2009) define Indigenous librarianship as a field that bridges library practice with Indigenous knowledge systems and methodologies. It encompasses a variety of practices that prioritise Indigenous voices, knowledge, and cultural contexts. Indigenous librarianship is described by Burns and colleagues as integrating conventional library disciplines with Indigenous approaches to knowledge, theory, and research methodology, centred on providing culturally relevant library services by, for, and with Indigenous peoples. They position Indigenous librarianship as grounded in the contemporary realities of Indigenous communities and their aspirations for self-governance and sovereignty, with practice occurring in settings ranging from small community libraries to specialised collections in large research institutions. They identify Indigenous librarianship as being vital for cultural and language revitalisation, self-determination, the exercise of rights, and a vehicle for Indigenous sovereignty in a field that continues to define itself through international discourse.

Building on the 2009 definition, Lee (2019) connects Indigenous librarianship with Indigenous research methodologies, explaining that both embody relational accountability and reciprocity as fundamental principles when conducting research with Indigenous communities, where relationships and trust-building are crucial to the research process. Writing from a First Nations (Canadian) context, Lee highlights how Indigenous librarianship respects traditional protocols and Indigenous ways of knowing, including the use of storytelling as methodology and the importance of long-term relationships with Indigenous communities. Additionally, Lee stresses that Indigenous librarianship is concerned with the ethical management of Indigenous knowledge, carefully considering who has access to data created in the research process and respecting Indigenous ownership of cultural information (Lee, 2019).

These methodological connections align with foundational Indigenous research paradigms articulated by scholars such as Smith (1999), whose seminal work, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, challenged Western research approaches, and Wilson (2008), who conceptualised Indigenous research as a ceremony, emphasising relational accountability and reciprocity as core principles. These methodological frameworks provide the theoretical foundation for Indigenous librarianship's approach to knowledge stewardship and community engagement.

The work of Burns and colleagues, and Lee, was further developed as part of the 2021 issue of the IFLA Journal on Indigenous librarianship. Edited by Stratton and Callison, the publication focused on Indigenous knowledge systems and their preservation in library contexts, with several authors contributing to discussions on how traditional knowledge can be appropriately documented, protected, and made accessible while respecting cultural protocols and principles of Indigenous ownership and control of information. In their introduction, Stratton and Callison noted:

> Indigenous people have distinct ways of knowing the world that are unique. Therefore, libraries and librarianship will be conceived differently when seen through the lens of an Indigenous world view and ways of knowing. (Stratton & Callison, 2021, p. 291)

The contributions featured in the edition highlighted innovative approaches and emerging practices in Indigenous librarianship. Particularly significant is Ulia Gosart's article *Indigenous librarianship: Theory, practices, and means of social action*, which maps the domain of Indigenous librarianship. Gosart conceptualises this field as 'a space to conduct a critical assessment of contemporary LIS ideas and practices, and also an opportunity to develop new practices informed by [I]ndigenous values and perspectives, and supporting indigenous patrons and scholars' (Gosart, 2021, p. 295).

This landmark IFLA journal issue built upon the foundation established by the earlier IFLA publication Indigenous Notions of Ownership and Libraries, Archives and Museums (2016). Within that volume, Kauwela Valeho-Novikoff explored approaches to Indigenous librarianship in her article *Nā Kahu 'Ike Hawai'i: Stewards of Hawaiian Knowledge.* Valeho-Novikoff cites Loriene Roy and colleagues who noted that the international indigenous librarianship movement had been 'stirring since the late 1990s' (Valeho-Novikoff et al., 2016, p. 258).

Recent scholarship has continued to expand these theoretical foundations. The 2024 Library Trends special issue on Indigenous librarianship, guest edited by Ulia Gosart and Rachel Fu (Gosart & Fu, 2024), featured contemporary applications including Indigenous perspectives in library collections, language revitalisation efforts, and Native American students in library and information science education, demonstrating the field's continued evolution and practical implementation. This critical assessment extends to fundamental library practices such as knowledge organisation and classification. Littletree and Metoyer (2015) demonstrate how mainstream cataloguing and classification systems have historically failed to adequately represent Indigenous knowledge, arguing that Indigenous communities create, preserve, and organise knowledge within the context of community, ensuring the inclusion of Indigenous philosophies. Their work on the Mashantucket Pequot Thesaurus of American Indian Terminology illustrates how Indigenous perspectives can be incorporated into controlled vocabularies, challenging Western-centric approaches to knowledge organisation.

Indigenous librarianship also intersects with critical librarianship and Critical Race Theory frameworks that challenge the assumed neutrality of libraries and examine how institutional practices perpetuate colonial structures (Leung & López-McKnight, 2021). This critical lens is essential for understanding how Indigenous librarianship functions not merely as an addition to existing library practice but as a fundamental reimagining of library and information science.

Indigenous librarianship has experienced significant growth through international collaboration and advocacy efforts since the late 1990s. This global movement has created important spaces for dialogue about Indigenous interests in libraries, archives, and information services. A critical moment in this history was the establishment of IILF in 1999[1], which created the first dedicated space for Indigenous library professionals to connect across borders. Building on this momentum, IFLA formalised its commitment to Indigenous matters when previous President (2005-2007) Alex Byrne's Presidential Task Force led to the creation of the Special Interest Group (SIG) on Indigenous Matters in 2008[2], which held its inaugural meeting in 2009. Under the leadership of Loriene Roy, a Native American scholar of Indigenous librarianship who served as the first Convenor of the IFLA group, the field gained greater recognition. Roy documented the emerging literature and fostered opportunities for global collaboration on Indigenous priorities in libraries (Roy, 2015).

A key document developed by IFLA referenced in this article is Library Services to Indigenous Populations: Case Studies, developed by Roy and colleague Antonia Frydman. In the overview, Roy highlights the importance of the IFLA Indigenous Matters group in developing Indigenous librarianship internationally, particularly 'the discourse on Indigenous librarianship' (Roy & Frydman, 2013, p. 1). The publication concludes with a call to action, noting that the case studies provide 'a snapshot of the status of Indigenous librarianship in the early twenty-first century' with the hope that this work will inspire and support Indigenous people to advance the field for future generations (p.3).

The connections between IILF, the IFLA Indigenous Matters Group, and ATSILIRN have been in operation throughout this time. These connections have strengthened international conversations on Indigenous engagement with libraries. The IILF forum has been held twice in Australia – in Brisbane (2007) and Sydney (2017). ATSILIRN aims to connect and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in libraries and those servicing the information needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia. The momentum of this international movement was further demonstrated at the 2023 IILF in Hawai'i, which included Indigenous representation from Australia. This forum, held for the first time in the Kingdom of Hawai'i with the theme 'Ea: Indigenous Agency and Abundance', reinforced the global commitment to Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination in the principles of library and information science (Moniz et al., 2025). This commitment is central to the development of Indigenous librarianship in Australia.

This rich foundation of international scholarship, advocacy, and professional networks provides the theoretical and practical groundwork for developing Indigenous librarianship in Australia. While these international frameworks are essential, the Australian context with its unique colonial history, diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, and emerging policy frameworks around Indigenous Data Sovereignty-requires articulation of what Indigenous librarianship means specifically in Australia.

Setting the Context for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia

The relationship between libraries and Indigenous communities in Australia has been complex and often problematic, rooted in colonial paradigms that have systematically marginalised Indigenous knowledge systems (Thorpe, 2021). Traditionally, library practices have supported colonial structures through practices such as the extraction and categorisation of Indigenous cultural materials without community consent, the application of Western classification systems that misrepresent Indigenous knowledge organisation, and the exclusion of Indigenous voices from decision-making about their own cultural heritage (Nakata & Langton, 2005). However, there have been significant movements advocating for the recognition of Indigenous rights to information, leading libraries to reconsider their roles and responsibilities toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

Libraries across Australia have pursued this reconsideration in different ways depending on their institutional priorities. State libraries and collecting institutions have focused on connecting communities with historical collections, developing culturally responsive services, and engaging in digital repatriation initiatives. In contrast, academic libraries have focused on the attribution of Indigenous knowledges and support for Indigenous education and scholarship across various disciplinary fields. These different approaches reflect varying mandates, resources, and institutional responses that have formed historically around Indigenous peoples. While much discussion has centred on whether libraries should prioritise *decolonisation* or *Indigenisation* of their practices, there are common goals that libraries have established to address historical injustices and build meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Recent policy developments demonstrate growing national recognition of Indigenous data rights. The Productivity Commission's 2024 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap findings on Indigenous Data Sovereignty highlighted the need to establish an Indigenous Data Bureau to protect Indigenous rights to information (Productivity Commission, 2024). Organisations like the Lowitja Institute have also emphasised the critical need for Indigenous leadership in building an Indigenous data workforce capable of implementing these principles across sectors (Lowitja Institute, 2023). The Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective has been particularly influential in advancing principles that assert Indigenous peoples' rights to access, control, and govern data about their communities, peoples, lands, and resources. Their advocacy has established foundational principles that assert Indigenous authority to determine how Indigenous data is collected, used, and shared, thereby protecting collective interests and advancing self-determination (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). These principles directly challenge conventional library and information management practices by centring Indigenous governance systems and knowledge frameworks in data management approaches.

The ATSILIRN Protocols have provided a crucial framework for libraries engaging with Indigenous materials and communities since their development in 1995 (ATSILIRN, 1995). These protocols, along with frameworks such as the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Carroll et al., 2020), provide essential guidance for the library and information sectors. Australian libraries and information workers operate

at the intersection of data, records and information management, cultural heritage stewardship, and data governance, positioning the sector as a potential leader in implementing Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles.

While these frameworks provide a foundation for Indigenous librarianship in Australia, significant challenges remain in dismantling colonial practices and centring Indigenous sovereignty. Progress requires a focused effort to build theory and professional practice that honours Indigenous knowledge and organisational systems informed by Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Before examining Indigenous librarianship in the context of research, education and training, and professional practice, we will first analyse the discussions from the 2024 Dialogue Session on the intersections between Indigenous knowledges and libraries.

The 2024 Dialogue Session – Libraries and Their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges

The Dialogue Session: Libraries and their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges was held on 15 October 2024, bringing together library professionals from across Australia to discuss priorities for supporting Indigenous knowledges. Facilitated by the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub at the Jumbunna Research (University of Technology Sydney) in partnership with three peak library bodies: ALIA, the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), and National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA), the session involved panel presentations by First Nations library leaders followed by facilitated breakout sessions with 34 groups (including four dedicated First Nations rooms). Full details of the session methodology and comprehensive findings are available in the publicly accessible *Libraries and their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges: Insight Report* (Thorpe & Booker, 2024).

The dialogue session revealed Indigenous Librarianship and Leadership as the sector's top priority, alongside Indigenous representation in library collections, systems and

Table 1. Recommendations from 'Libraries and their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges' 2024 dialogue session hosted by ALIA.

Libraries and their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges Dialogue Session Recommendations
1. Develop a deeper understanding of Indigenous librarianship – from workplace roles and responsibilities to the research, education, and training needed to advance the field.
2. Create further sector-wide professional development pathways that centre Indigenous priorities and knowledge systems.
3. Deepen the understanding of what duties and responsibilities are visible in Indigenous-identified library role descriptions through a sector-wide review, and recommendations for common approaches to address colonial load, and to acknowledge invisible labour.
4. Develop strategies to address 'colonial load' through better support structures and resourcing.
5. Establish mechanisms to support Indigenous-led and community-driven initiatives that move beyond institutional priorities.
6. Create pathways to continue to support the inclusion of Indigenous language materials and cultural revitalisation efforts in libraries in collaboration with communities.
7. Strengthen awareness and implementation of UNDRIP principles across the library sector.
8. Continue library investment to make library spaces more welcoming through physical and operational changes.
9. Continue national collaborative efforts to support guidance on implementation of Indigenous protocols for the care of collections.
10. Strengthen sector-wide support for implementing Indigenous Data Sovereignty and CARE Principles, with practical guidance for libraries on application.

services. Participants identified ten key recommendations (Table 1), emphasising the need for deeper understanding of Indigenous librarianship across workplace roles, research, education, and training; strategies to address colonial load through better support structures and resourcing; and mechanisms to support Indigenous-led initiatives. Participants also recognised the critical importance of Indigenous protocols for libraries, archives and information services and identified significant gaps in current LIS curricula that hinder the development of culturally informed professional practice.

The discussions on Indigenous Librarianship and Leadership focused primarily on employment challenges and inadequate resourcing and support for Indigenous library positions, including leadership roles. There was particular concern about the disparity between role descriptions and remuneration for the complex leadership and change work required. Participants highlighted persistent challenges in recruiting for targeted or identified positions, as well as the retention of staff, noting that these issues had been ongoing and systemic. Recruitment and retention challenges were often linked to colonial load, emphasising the need for more robust support structures for Indigenous staff.

What we observed was a willingness to embrace and support Indigenous knowledges in their intersection with libraries while acknowledging that many people and institutions are at the beginning of this journey.

Our analysis revealed a tendency among library workers to focus on institutional priorities. Through the description of strengths, gaps, and future work, the lens was turned back on the status quo and current structures. At times, discussions lacked detail on how libraries could support Indigenous and community-led initiatives in the sector. We urge the sector to do more work to decentre institutions and achieve a better balance and consciously develop work that prioritises Indigenous-led practices. The consideration of libraries and their intersection with Indigenous knowledges requires a paradigm shift to support Indigenous-led and community-driven priorities.

Although the topic of Indigenous Librarianship and Leadership in libraries was the most prioritised topic area chosen by participants, the discussion primarily focused on creating Indigenous-identified roles within institutions and considering how they would be integrated into current library operational structures. Limited attention was given to Indigenous librarianship as a distinct profession, and conversations often focused on considerations of role descriptions and remuneration.

Building Foundations for Indigenous Librarianship in Australia

To build a meaningful practice of Indigenous librarianship in Australia, we need to start conceptualising what this looks like. This development must be led by Indigenous people who can identify the connections between managing Indigenous knowledges, applying Indigenous protocols, designing library spaces and establishing Indigenous library practices. From our preliminary work mapping Indigenous librarianship in Australia, we have identified these key elements as critical components in the field of work:

- Respect for Country and Indigenous Knowledge Systems
- Indigenous-led design of library buildings, spaces and services

- Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance
- Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights
- Reciprocal relationships and relational accountability
- Indigenous-led collection management and descriptive practices
- Cultural protocols and community information priorities
- Support for Indigenous social, emotional and cultural wellbeing

Central to these elements is the concept of relationality, which Littletree et al. (2020) identify as fundamental to Indigenous knowledge organisation practices. They argue that relationality connects living people, lands, objects, Ancestors, and future generations, and must be centred in any authentic approach to Indigenous librarianship practice.

Although international scholarship provides foundational definitions of Indigenous librarianship, as outlined earlier in this paper, the work ahead must focus on articulating what Indigenous Librarianship means in the specific Australian context and establishing it as a recognised, distinct field of professional practice. While the dialogue sessions emphasised Indigenous librarianship and leadership, the discussions largely revolved around employment opportunities within existing institutional frameworks. Our research at Jumbunna, informed by international Indigenous-led scholarship and engagement with Indigenous GLAM practitioners, indicates that establishing Indigenous librarianship in Australia requires two intentional actions – *Articulating Indigenous Librarianship for the Australian Context* and *Establishing Indigenous Librarianship as a Distinct Profession.*

First, ***Articulating Indigenous Librarianship for the Australian Context*** – Working in partnership with Indigenous people, communities and library workers to research and collaboratively articulate what Indigenous librarianship means in Australia across theory and practice. Building on international foundations, this work addresses Australia's unique history, contemporary policy landscape, and the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Second, ***Establishing Indigenous Librarianship as a Distinct Profession*** – From these definitions, develop recognised courses and qualifications with clear competencies and career pathways to support Indigenous librarianship in Australian libraries.

This work must be Indigenous-led while also being integrated with the ALIA LIS Workforce Framework to ensure that Indigenous librarianship is recognised as a core professional competency. Critical to this integration is ensuring that the profession keeps abreast of Indigenous movements and policy developments, including obligations to implement Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance within library practice. This will require ongoing collaboration between Indigenous library workers, LIS educators, and professional associations to develop curricula, competencies, and career pathways that support Indigenous self-determination.

What Indigenous Librarianship *Is Not*

As we work toward a collaborative definition of Indigenous Librarianship in Australia, we offer these preliminary observations about what Indigenous Librarianship is not,

based on our research and conversations with Indigenous GLAM practitioners. We recognise these distinctions require further community discussion and refinement:

It is not about tokenistic efforts to include Indigenous people in libraries	It is not about a narrow focus on Indigenous employment
It is not a diversity and inclusion measure	It is not about using Indigenous staff to provide cultural competency training for non-Indigenous colleagues
It is not about allocating all Indigenous-related requests to Indigenous staff	It is not about non-Indigenous people deciding what is best for Indigenous collections
It is not about institutions decolonising their work	It is not about consultation with communities without meaningful change
It is not about adding Indigenous 'perspectives' alongside existing colonial library structures	It is not limited to NAIDOC week or other special events

Several key distinctions need clarification. First, while Indigenous librarianship can contribute to addressing systemic issues in libraries, it is not primarily a tool for institutional reform. The main purpose of Indigenous librarianship is to advance Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty over knowledge systems. Any systemic change in institutions may result from this work, but it is an outcome rather than the primary objective. It is essential to recognise that Indigenous librarianship prioritises Indigenous interests rather than institutional improvement.

Similarly, while Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) provides theoretical foundations for Indigenous librarianship, this does not mean Indigenous librarianship exists to help institutions decolonise their collections or services. Smith's work is about Indigenous peoples reclaiming research and knowledge production. Indigenous librarianship operationalises these principles through Indigenous-led practice, not through advising institutions on their decolonisation projects.

Understanding the difference between Indigenous librarianship and cultural competency training is also important. Building cultural competency skills primarily involves educating non-Indigenous staff about Indigenous cultures, histories and experiences. In contrast, Indigenous librarianship is a professional field grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and governance. While non-Indigenous library workers need to develop cultural competency, this institutional learning should not be confused with or substitute for Indigenous librarianship as a distinct field of professional practice.

Future Directions and Further Research

Establishing Indigenous librarianship as a distinct field in Australia requires coordinated research, policy development, and community engagement. Our proposed two-part framework, articulating Indigenous librarianship for the Australian context and establishing it as a distinct profession, opens several critical avenues for future work.

Research Priorities

First, it is essential to conduct collaborative research with Indigenous library workers, Indigenous communities and knowledge holders, and Indigenous cultural authorities, including those in the higher education sector. This research should aim to define

what Indigenous librarianship means across Australia's diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations.

This research needs to examine how Indigenous librarianship operates differently across a variety of library contexts, including community libraries, academic libraries, and state collecting institutions. It should also identify core principles that exist outside institutional settings. Critical questions include: How do Indigenous knowledge governance structures inform library practices? What competencies distinguish Indigenous librarianship from general library work? How can Indigenous librarianship support language revitalisation, cultural continuity, and community-led archives?

Second, research is needed on educational pathways and professional development. This includes examining whether current library and information science curricula adequately prepare practitioners for Indigenous librarianship work, what specialised qualifications or credentials should be developed, and how career pathways can support Indigenous library workers beyond narrowly defined 'Indigenous positions.'

Policy and Implementation

The timing for this work is critical. The Federal Government's 2024 inclusion of Indigenous knowledges within Australia's National Science and Research priorities, combined with the Productivity Commission's 2024 recommendation for an Indigenous Data Bureau, creates policy momentum for establishing Indigenous librarianship.

While recognising that policies are important, they are not enough on their own. To create meaningful change, we must address questions about funding and resources. Indigenous communities need the authority, capacity, and funding to shape their own priorities for library work, independent of institutional agendas.

This may involve creating dedicated funding mechanisms to support Indigenous-led library initiatives outside of mainstream institutional frameworks. Such models are already emerging, where communities are taking control of the resources needed for their own data infrastructure.

The integration of the ALIA LIS Workforce Framework offers both opportunities and challenges. While it is essential to recognise Indigenous librarianship as a core professional competency, it must be grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, ensuring that Indigenous peoples maintain authority over the field's development. Achieving this requires ongoing collaboration among Indigenous library workers, professional associations, and LIS educators.

Building on Established Foundations

Two decades ago, Nakata and Langton (2005) cautioned the library sector about the need to support Indigenous priorities. While progress has been made in moving people outside their comfort zones, the sector must now prioritise support for Indigenous librarianship and Indigenous leadership. This requires clearly defining what this specialised work entails and ensuring it genuinely serves Indigenous communities and knowledge systems.

Establishing Indigenous librarianship as a recognised field creates an opportunity to develop and enhance these essential skills. Without this specialised area of practice, Indigenous priorities will continue to be mediated and negotiated through non-Indigenous

frameworks. While it is important for the library sector to work towards cultural competency, Indigenous priorities should not have to wait behind the sector's and institutions' learning curves. The time has come to shift our focus, allowing Indigenous people to actively define their futures within the library and information landscapes.

Achieving this requires a significant change in our approach to work, including policy reforms and a change in our agendas. Indigenous communities should have the opportunity, resources, and authority to define their visions for library work rather than merely responding to initiatives established by institutions. As Indigenous priorities continue to gain national recognition through policy frameworks, libraries must transition to focus on support for Indigenous self-determination. The patience and generosity discussed in Langton and Nakata's 2005 publication *Indigenous Knowledges and Libraries* has created important foundations, but meaningful progress now demands recognising and supporting Indigenous leadership in defining what comes next. This means supporting Indigenous-led initiatives rather than asking Indigenous people to wait while the library sector and institutions catch up.

Conclusion

We see significant value in supporting Indigenous librarianship in Australia and have identified this as a priority for our future research agenda at Jumbunna Research. Building a strong foundation for Indigenous librarianship in Australia requires coordinated and strategic mobilisation of efforts to centre First Nations priorities. This approach will ensure that Indigenous knowledge systems, perspectives, and community needs guide the development of library services and collections.

The 2024 dialogue session highlighted that the Australian library sector values and supports Indigenous librarianship and leadership as a priority. The development of the field in Australia will require structural changes and a concerted effort to prioritise research and engagement in this area. The work ahead is connected to international movements in Indigenous librarianship, while responding to Australia's unique cultural and historical context. It aligns with broader national recognition of Indigenous data rights, as evidenced by recent government policy frameworks that acknowledge Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous Data Sovereignty as national priorities.

The formal recognition and development of Indigenous librarianship as a distinct field in Australia will significantly advance appropriate stewardship of Indigenous knowledges. However, this vision can only be realised through a sustained commitment to Indigenous-led initiatives, adequate resourcing, and genuine partnerships between Indigenous communities and the library sector.

Notes

1. The University of Hawaii has developed an *International Indigenous Librarians' Forum (IILF) Guide* which provides a comprehensive history of IILF and its themes: https://guides.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/iilf
2. In April 2015, the Professional Committee of the IFLA Governing Board made the decision to support the proposal to establish an Indigenous Matters Section. You can read more about this history here: https://www.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/indigenous-matters/publications/2015_ifla_im_section_info.pdf

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the First Nations library leaders and all participants who contributed to the dialogue session, and the Indigenous GLAM scholars and practitioners whose ongoing work informs this research.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The 2024 Dialogue Session: *Libraries and their Intersection with Indigenous Knowledges*, which provided the data for this paper, was made possible through funding by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), and National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA).

Notes on contributors

Professor Kirsten Thorpe (Worimi, Port Stephens) leads the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education & Research, University of Technology Sydney, and is a co-founder of the Indigenous Archives Collective. Kirsten's research focuses on Indigenous rights in archives and data, decolonising practices in the GLAM sector and the development of Living Indigenous Archives on Country.

Dr Lauren Booker is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Indigenous Archives and Data Stewardship Hub at Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education & Research, University of Technology Sydney and a member of the Indigenous Archives Collective. Lauren works in support of increased Indigenous Rights in records, including the Right to Know and the Right of Reply in archives. Her current work is focused on challenging institutional ownership of collections, DIY archiving and expanding the boundaries of collection care in archives.

ORCID

Kirsten Thorpe http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2844-168X
Lauren Booker http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0621-5278

References

ATSILIRN. (1995). *Aboriginal and torres strait islander library, information and resource network protocols*.

Burns, K., Doyle, A., Joseph, G., & Krebs, A. (2009). Indigenous librarianship. *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, *3*, 2330–2346.

Carroll, S. R., Garba, I., Figueroa-Rodríguez, O. L., Holbrook, J., Lovett, R., Materechera, S., Parsons, M., Raseroka, K., Rodriguez-Lonebear, D., Rowe, R., & Sara, R. (2020). The CARE principles for indigenous data governance. *Data Science Journal*, *19*, 43.

Gosart, U. (2021). Indigenous librarianship: Theory, practices, and means of social action. *IFLA Journal*, *47*(3), 293–304.

Gosart, U., & Fu, R. (2024). Indigenous librarianship [Special issue]. *Library Trends*, *72*(1), Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kukutai, T., & Taylor, J. (2016). *Indigenous data sovereignty: Toward an agenda*. ANU Press.

Lee, D. (2019). Research and indigenous librarianship in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *5*(May), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v5.29922

Leung, S. Y., & López-McKnight, J. R. eds. (2021). *Knowledge justice: Disrupting library and information studies through critical race theory*. MIT Press.

Littletree, S., Belarde-Lewis, M., & Duarte, M. (2020). Centering relationality: A conceptual model to advance indigenous knowledge organization practices. *Knowledge Organization*, *47*(5), 410–426.

Littletree, S., & Metoyer, C. A. (2015). Knowledge organization from an indigenous perspective: The Mashantucket Pequot Thesaurus of American Indian terminology project. *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, *53*(5-6), 640–657. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2015.1010113

Lowitja Institute. (2023). *Indigenous data sovereignty policy brief*. https://www.lowitja.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Indigenous-Data-Sovereignty-Policy-Brief.pdf.

Moniz, H., Shim, K., & Long, K. S. (2025). *Indigenous librarianship: Practices of Indigenous agency and abundance*. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/2ef1a453-e0bc-406a-913e-f041c440e770.

Nakata, M., & Langton, M. eds. (2005). *Australian indigenous knowledge and libraries*. UTS ePRESS. https://doi.org/10.5130/978-0-9802840-1-0.

Productivity Commission. (2024). *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. Australian Government Productivity Commission. https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report.

Roy, L. (2015). Indigenous cultural heritage preservation: A review essay with ideas for the future. *IFLA Journal*, *41*(3), 192–203.

Roy, L., & Frydman, A. (2013). Library services to indigenous populations: Case studies. https://www.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/indigenous-matters/publications/indigenous-librarianship-2013.pdf.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.

Stratton, J., & Callison, C. (2021). Introduction: Indigenous knowledge systems and preservation in library contexts. *IFLA Journal*, *47*(3), 291–292.

Thorpe, K. (2021). The dangers of libraries and archives for indigenous Australian workers: Investigating the question of indigenous cultural safety. *IFLA Journal*, *47*(3), 341–350. https://doi.org/10.1177/0340035220987574

Thorpe, K., & Booker, L. (2024). Libraries and their intersection with indigenous knowledges: Insight report. *Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research*, https://read.alia.org.au/libraries-and-their-intersection-indigenous-knowledges-insight-report.

Valeho-Novikoff, K., Roy, L., LeCheminant, G. A., & Callison, C. (2016). Nā Kahu 'Ike Hawai'i: Stewards of Hawaiian Knowledge. In C. Callison, L. Roy, & G. A. LeCheminant (Eds.), *Indigenous notions of ownership and libraries, archives and museums* (Vol. 166, pp. 257–272). De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110363234-020.

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.