ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES TRUST

Five-Year Research Agenda

2023-2028

Aboriginal Languages Trust
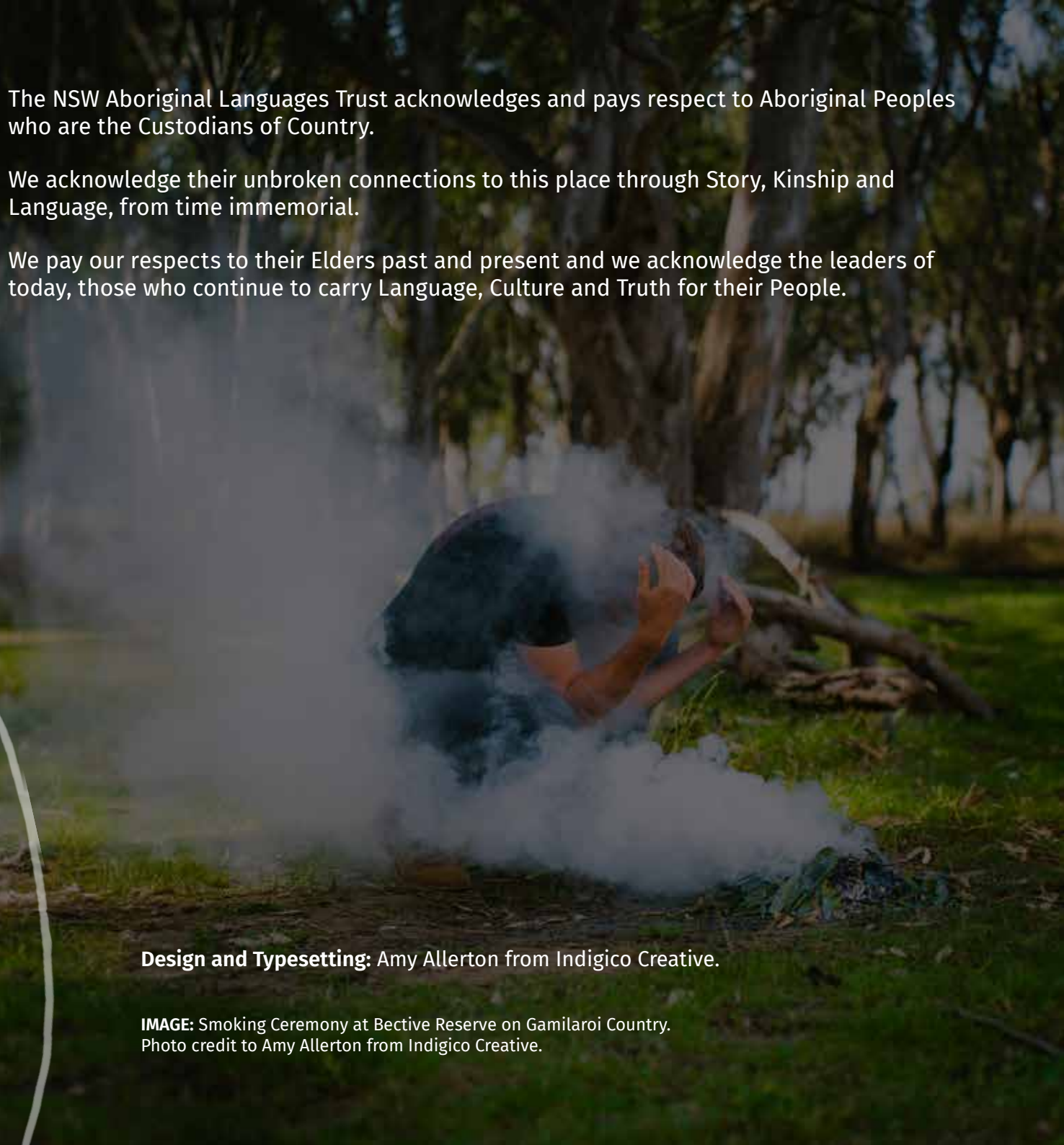
NSW GOVERNMENT

Acknowledgement of Country

The NSW Aboriginal Languages Trust acknowledges and pays respect to Aboriginal Peoples who are the Custodians of Country.

We acknowledge their unbroken connections to this place through Story, Kinship and Language, from time immemorial.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and we acknowledge the leaders of today, those who continue to carry Language, Culture and Truth for their People.

Design and Typesetting: Amy Allerton from Indigico Creative.

IMAGE: Smoking Ceremony at Bective Reserve on Gamilaroi Country.
Photo credit to Amy Allerton from Indigico Creative.

Artwork

'The Voice of Country' by Gumbaynggirr and Bundjalung artist, Amy Allerton

At the beginning of creation, the land gave birth to Language, a living force, spreading out far and wide, connecting us to our creator, our Ancestors, our Country and our Culture. The voice of Country speaks to us through the water, the earth, the stars and the spirits of those past, present and future. The winds of Language travel through each tribe and Nation, it is diverse and yet it is one, bringing strength, Knowledge and healing. "The Voice of Country" tells the intertwined story of Identity and sovereignty.

It represents the foundation of Language which is ingrained in Culture, Community and Country across NSW, and speaks of the unyielding resilience of the world's oldest living Culture. It shows the inseparable nature of the physical, intellectual and spiritual manifestations of Language that shape the identity of Aboriginal peoples, and connects them to each other and the land. "The Voice of Country" is an invitation for all peoples to come together in partnership to share in the dawn of a new, enriched and thriving future, where Language is heard, people are seen, connection is strengthened and Culture is celebrated.

Contents

About the Aboriginal Languages Trust

The Aboriginal Languages Trust ("the Trust") is an Aboriginal-led New South Wales ("NSW") Government agency established under the *Aboriginal Languages Act 2017* ("the Act") to provide a focused, coordinated, and sustained effort in relation to Aboriginal Languages activities at local, regional and State levels.

The functions of the Trust are defined in the Act. They include:
- promoting Language activity
- identifying priorities for Language activity
- managing the funding of, and investment in Language activity
- promoting education and employment opportunities in Language activities
- promoting the wider use and appreciation of Aboriginal Languages

The Trust is also the lead NSW State Government agency for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Target 16: By 2031, there is a sustained increase in number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages being spoken.

In 2022, the Trust launched its inaugural five-year Strategic Plan, which was developed following consultation with around 400 stakeholders, 81% of which identified as Aboriginal. The Strategic Plan outlines the Trust's vision and purpose:

All NSW Aboriginal Languages are strong and healthy.

We aid in the growth and nurturing of NSW Aboriginal Languages by responding to the aspirations of Communities and participating in their self-determining work to reclaim and reawaken their Languages.

What is a Research Agenda?

'Research is not just something that's out there: it's something that you're building for yourself and for your community' (Shawn Wilson, 2001, p. 179)[1]

Simply put, a Research Agenda is a series of intentional, planned research activities that build towards addressing a research goal over several years.

The Trust has an important role to play in collecting data, researching and promoting evidence in relation to Aboriginal Languages in NSW to support Aboriginal Communities as they undertake their self-determining Language work. It's not just about the "what" our research is focused on, but also the "how". We must unlock research so that it has tangible benefits for and practical uses for Aboriginal Communities.

At the same time, there is a great need to research and showcase the existing knowledge about Language revitalisation in NSW in terms of progress, successes, and achievements to date. There is a great depth of knowledge held within Communities and there is benefit in sharing this knowledge so that others can learn and grow.

The Trust has the opportunity to demonstrate leading practice in research and evaluation, including the use of Aboriginal and Indigenous research methodologies, and through our commitment to principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Our goal is to resource and inform growth in the Aboriginal Languages of NSW.

[1] Wilson, S. (2001). What is an Indigenous research methodology? Canadian Journal of Native Education, 25(2), pp. 175–179.

Research Agenda at a Glance

Our research goal: To resource and inform growth in the Aboriginal Languages of NSW.

Our research goal will be achieved through:

- Advocating for the rights of Language groups and Communities;
- Supporting NSW Language Communities to own and lead their own research;
- Increasing investment, engagement and Community leadership in research;
- Increasing the resources available to support Language work in NSW;
- Creating a keeping place for Language policy thinking and research.

Our Principles:

- Research responds to Community needs;
- Communities are the experts and their knowledge is valued;
- Current and future Aboriginal Language researchers are supported and elevated;
- Community access to, knowledge of and capability in research is strengthened;
- Research is 'translated' and accessible for all stakeholders;
- Aboriginal research methods are centred and prioritised;
- Research upholds Communities' Language rights.

Four Priority Research Areas

1. Setting a Strong Foundation

- Impact of Aboriginal Language Use and Revival
- Developing the Language Data Baseline in NSW
- Language Teaching Techniques
- NSW Language Map

2. Sharing Community Expertise

- Language Engineering
- Community Engagement in Language Learning and Revival
- Language Teaching as an Integrated Practice

3. Improving Access

- Aboriginal Community Language Centres
- Access to Country for Language Learning and Teaching
- Access to Archives

4. Influencing Policy

- First Nations Language Education
- Languages Workforce Sector
- Investment in Languages
- Language Use Guidelines
- Place-naming and Removal of Offensive Placenames
- Aboriginal Language Connection to Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability

Background

Research has happened here on this land we now call NSW from time immemorial, long before non-Aboriginal people arrived. The Aboriginal Peoples of this land have always collected, analysed and shared information - and because of their deep knowledge, their Cultures have endured and survived.

In more recent times, Western research methods have dominated how research is conducted with Aboriginal Peoples and Communities, bringing with it many ethical concerns. Too often research conducted by outsiders has been used to disempower and control Aboriginal Peoples; their data used to justify government programs or progress the careers of academic staff, with little to no benefit for the Community themselves, or worse - where research and data has been used in way that has had damaging impacts for Communities.

In 2021, the Trust undertook extensive consultation with Aboriginal Communities and Language stakeholders across NSW on its Strategic Plan. This consultation process highlighted Community concerns about their Language sovereignty when it comes to research.

"Previously, research conducted in Communities has traditionally been held by the institutions and Community don't get the rights."
(Illawarra South East Yarn Up Participant)

Community members expressed their concerns about Language research being held by institutions, of non-Aboriginal researchers being celebrated as the 'experts' on Languages, and of the outputs of Language research being academic rather than Community focused. Regional YarnUp participants told us that they expect research to be conducted in Communities with Aboriginal researchers, that the research itself should be Community-focused and should build research capacity within those Communities.

In developing this Research Agenda, the Trust listened carefully to the voices that contributed to the Trust's Strategic Plan. Not all Aboriginal Community members used the term 'research' in their feedback, but they talked about what they wanted and needed to know, so that they could continue their crucial Language work with the best information and resources available to assist them. We drew on the lived experiences of Language workers and practitioners about their own Language revitalisation journeys. We also looked locally, nationally, and internationally at emerging priorities in First Nations Language revitalisation.

In doing this work, the Trust acknowledges that Aboriginal Communities hold in-depth knowledge about their Languages, Cultures and Countries, and this expertise must be valued and amplified in research.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this Research Agenda is to resource and inform growth for Aboriginal Languages of NSW.

This is achieved through:
- Advocating for the rights of Language Groups and Communities;
- Supporting NSW Language Communities to own and lead their own research;
- Increasing investment, engagement and Community leadership in research;
- Increasing the resources available to support Language work in NSW;
- Creating a keeping place for Language policy thinking and research.

IMAGE: Community research design workshop June 2022. Photo credit to Brooke Cuy, Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation. L-R Casey Reid, Aunty Julie Carey, Jarwin Carey, Aunty Leanne Fisher, Rebecca Wilson, Kara Barker.

Principles

These principles **guide our research work** and **set the standard for the Trust**. They work hand-in-hand with the Trust's Principles for Respecting Aboriginal Community Data (see Appendix A).

a. **Research responds to Community needs.**
The projects identified in this Research Agenda all respond to what NSW Aboriginal Communities have told us, through widespread and ongoing consultation, are important to them. Where possible research will be co-designed and Community-led to ensure research outputs meet Community needs.

b. **Communities are the experts, and their knowledge is valued.**
No one knows Communities like those Communities themselves, and no one knows Languages like the Communities they come from. We will be guided by the expertise of those who are actively working with Languages.

c. **Current and future Aboriginal Language researchers are supported and elevated.**
We will work with Aboriginal Language researchers, teachers, linguists, and practitioners on our research projects to help elevate their voices and accelerate their careers. We will also invest in up-and-coming Aboriginal Language researchers to ensure we have a talented researcher pipeline for the future.

d. **Community access to, knowledge of and capability in research is strengthened.**
Inclusivity is integral to our research, so that any Community can pick up our research and use it for their benefit. Where we undertake research within a Community, we aim to grow their research capability so that they have the skills they need to undertake or participate in research work in the future.

e. **Research is 'translated' and accessible for all stakeholders.**
The outputs of our research will be meaningful and useful to the Communities they are there to support. More practical tools, fewer academic papers.

f. **Aboriginal research methods are centred and prioritised.**
To do quality research work, the way research is conducted must align with the values and protocols of those people the research is with and for. Where possible, we will use Aboriginal researchers and research methods in our work and promote them as best practice for research with Communities.

g. **Research upholds Communities' Language rights.**
Aboriginal Communities have the right to be self-determining in relation to their Language knowledge and data. This includes respect for Aboriginal Cultural and Intellectual Property, free, prior, and informed consent and benefit sharing for Language Communities.

Priority Research Areas

The Trust will focus its research efforts on two main types of research:

Research that benefits Language Practitioners and Communities

This research will produce practical tools to support Communities' Language work.

Thought leadership for evidence-based policy influence

This research will support the Trust to provide highly credible information and advice.

Our research agenda will be centred on four priority areas:

1. **Setting a Strong Foundation** - building a knowledge base to support the Trust's Strategic Plan.
2. **Sharing Community Expertise** - sharing the various forms of Language revitalisation expertise held by NSW Communities.
3. **Improving Access** - ensuring Communities have access to the tools and resources they need for their Language work.
4. **Influencing Policy** - bringing a solid evidence base and thought leadership to Languages policy.

The following pages outline the research topics that we will focus our efforts on under each of the four priority areas.
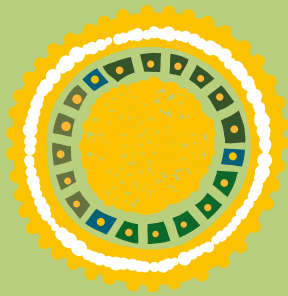
IMAGE: Gumbaynggirr Daari Steering Committee meeting October 2023

L-R Amanda Donovan, Britt Jacobsen, Tori Ann Donnelly, Ellie Buchanan, Uncle Alex Webb, Aunty Julie Carey.

1 Setting a strong foundation

Impact of Aboriginal Language Use and Revival

Our 2021 literature review identified several wellbeing, educational, economic, and other benefits of Language use and revival for Aboriginal people and Communities. In-Community research is now needed to showcase the positive impacts realised throughout NSW, including in particular groups such as Stolen Generations.

Developing the Language Data Baseline in NSW

This project will support and build the capabilities of opt-in pilot Communities, including establishing Measurement, Evaluation and Learning frameworks in each Community. This project will identify what 'strong and healthy Language' looks like for each Community and will measure the trajectory of NSW Languages at the local level.

Language Teaching Techniques

Aboriginal Language Communities around NSW are currently utilising a range of techniques and methods to teach Language. This project will provide an overview of the different Language teaching techniques used in revival contexts around the world and provide information about their use and success in different contexts.

NSW Language Map

Demographic information about the Aboriginal Languages of NSW.

IMAGE: Panel discussion at the Aboriginal Languages Trust Statewide Gathering 2022. L-R Rob Waters, Kaleesha Morris, Aunty Rhonda Ashby, Uncle Warren Forster, Warlpa Thompson.

2 Sharing Community Expertise

In addition to the research topics below, the Trust's Research Agenda holds space for emerging Community-identified research projects, especially those that work towards the future state of Aboriginal Language Communities determining their own research priorities and agendas.

Language Engineering

As Communities work to revive their Languages, many decisions need to be made along the way. Examples include whether the Community wants to create new words, and how they are created, and deciding how words should be spelled. This project will provide examples of how Language revitalisation decisions are made in different Communities, so that Communities can learn from each other.

Community Engagement in Language Learning and Revival

For NSW Aboriginal Languages to continue to grow, more Community members will need to take up Language learning and become engaged in Language work. Young people have reported that they are more likely to take up Language learning if their families are grounded in Culture. This project will investigate the current level of Language interest amongst Communities, including different age groups, the barriers to getting involved in Languages and the opportunities for Language workers to increase their reach within their Communities.

Language Teaching as an Integrated Practice

This project will provide examples of Language teaching and revitalisation methods that are integrated in other aspects of Cultural practice e.g. song, dance, bush tucker etc.

3 Improving Access

Aboriginal Community Language Centres

This project will support Communities to achieve their Languages aspirations by providing a better understanding of the options, benefits and challenges of Community-led Languages Centres based on an exploration of governance, operating and funding models.

Access to Country for Language Learning and Teaching

Access to Country is essential for Language teaching and learning as it deepens learners' engagement with and understanding of historical, current and ongoing connection to Country/Place and Culture. Learning on Country also contributes to good health outcomes, an overall sense of wellbeing, and can improve the relationship between the land, the environment and people. This project will explore barriers and identify opportunities for Communities to access Country.

Access to Archives

Aboriginal Communities need greater access to Language materials that are currently held by archiving institutions to progress their Language revival work. While doing this, attention needs to be drawn to the limitations of historical documents, taking into consideration who created them and the types of information documented, which was often done without consultation with Aboriginal Peoples. This project will examine the barriers to accessing archives and opportunities to increase access. It will look at Cultural safety for Aboriginal Communities and archive staff when working with archive materials. It will also consider the future state of Aboriginal Languages archives and what knowledge and resources Communities need to create their own archives.

IMAGE: Gathang Language Practitioner Jazlie Davis reviews Language archives.

4 Influencing Policy

First Nations Language Education

A longitudinal study looking at the impacts of the First Nations Language Education model in place in the Gumbaynggirr Community. This project will examine the benefits of this education model for children, families, teaching staff and the greater Community.

Languages Workforce Sector

A review of current state of the Language workforce sector in NSW and the change and growth required in the sector to accelerate Language revival work. This will include training and qualifications in Language work, career options and the need for Community-defined qualifications and a Language workers remuneration structure.

Investment in Languages

This project will provide an understanding of the funding sources for Languages projects in NSW, including federal, state, philanthropic and corporate funding, and the impact they are having. It will review historical investment in Aboriginal Languages in Australia, and how this has been concentrated in particular regions. This project will especially examine the impact of the Trust's investment in NSW Language activities, including where the funding is going, the types of projects supported and any improvements the Trust can make to the current funding structure to better support Language work.

Language Use Guidelines

Policy guidelines to inform the growing demand for use of Aboriginal Language by greater NSW. This will include considerations when planning a project that involves Aboriginal Languages, advice on procuring Language content and respectful use of Language.

Place-naming and Removal of Offensive Placenames

A review of current dual place-naming activities and work to remove offensive placenames throughout NSW. This project will produce practical guides for groups wishing to influence place-naming and engage with Aboriginal Communities on place-naming issues.

Aboriginal Language Connection to Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability

This project will examine, from a NSW perspective, how Language use and care for Country go hand-in-hand, the impacts of Language loss on biodiversity loss, and how traditional environmental knowledge is encoded in Language.

Appendix A:

Principles for respecting Aboriginal Community data

The Aboriginal Languages Trust acknowledges that Aboriginal Communities have the right to be self-determining in relation to their Language Knowledge and data. These Principles for respecting Aboriginal Community data guide all Language research and data work undertaken by the Trust.

These Principles were designed following a review of other research ethics guidelines and the Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance Principles, the Australian authority on Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

1. **The Trust recognises that strong and honest Community relationships are a prerequisite of all research projects. We will:**
   - Ensure adequate time is given to build mutual respect and trust before a project commences
   - Ensure research team members demonstrate cultural competence
   - Adhere to Community protocols and processes

2. **The Trust will ensure Aboriginal Community control of the creation, development, stewardship, analysis and dissemination of their data. We will:**
   - Ensure each project is Aboriginal Community led
   - Form agreements with Communities about ownership and use of their data

3. **The Trust upholds the right of Aboriginal Communities to data that safeguards and respects Communities' individual and collective interests. We will:**
   - Ensure the benefits of the research are valuable to each Community

   - Ensure data isn't reported in a way that is damaging to Communities
   - Centre the voice of Community

4. **The Trust seeks to ensure Aboriginal Community ownership of their data, and that data is available and accessible as determined by Community. We will:**
   - Recognise that Community knowledge, experience and Intellectual Property are economic assets that belong to Community
   - Provide the data in ways that are meaningful and relevant to Aboriginal Communities

5. **The Trust is accountable to Aboriginal Communities for the use of their data. We will:**
   - Ensure Aboriginal Community rights over the reporting and publication of data and results
   - Ensure Communities have an ongoing and leading role in the monitoring and implementation of research data

Contact Us

For more information and to connect, contact us at:

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