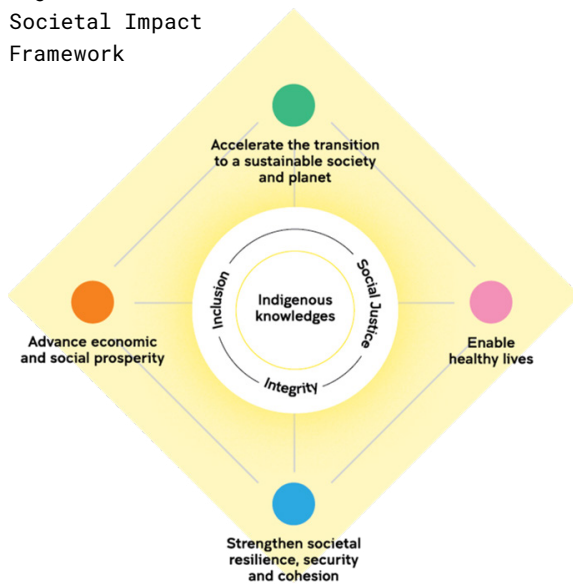


**UNSW
Societal Impact
Framework
Case study**

Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership with the Dharriwaa Elders Group

Introduction

Figure 1. The UNSW Societal Impact Framework



The UNSW Societal Impact Framework

Embedded at the core of the *UNSW Strategy: Progress for All*, the Societal Impact Framework (SIF) seeks to elevate and understand the extent to which we are contributing to societal, cultural, economic and environmental impact (Figure 1). The SIF invites us to concentrate our efforts in four Impact Focus Areas that reflect currently pressing societal issues and challenges of public concern:

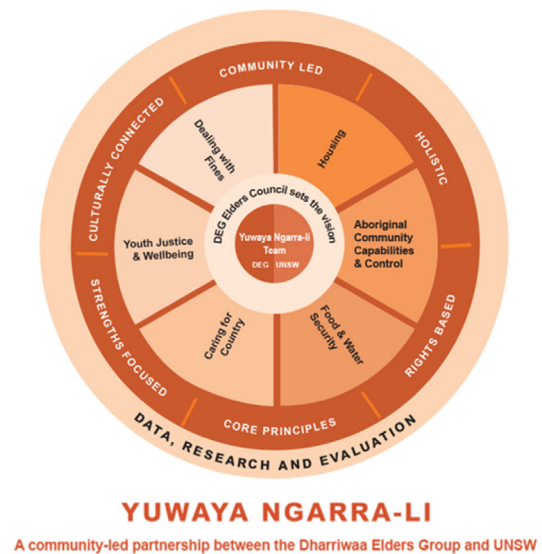
- Accelerating the transition to a sustainable society and planet.
- Advancing economic and social prosperity.
- Enabling healthy lives.
- Strengthening societal resilience, security and cohesion.

At its core, the SIF commits us to embed Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, being and doing in our activities to improve society across all Impact Focus Areas. The Framework also embeds the cross-cutting themes of inclusion, integrity, and social justice to guide our work.

The SIF supports better understanding of the ways in which we contribute to positive societal impact through innovative research, transformative education, meaningful engagement and values-led operations and governance (Impact Pathways). Exploring and evidencing our progress towards impact through these core university activities will help us to demonstrate and improve how we contribute to positive change for society and the environment.

This case study explores areas of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership with the Dharriwaa Elders Group through the lens of the SIF, demonstrating both the program's societal, cultural and economic impact and its institutional strategic alignment.

Figure 2. Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership approach



Yuwaya Ngarra-li (YN) partnership with the Dharriwaa Elders Group, Division of Societal Impact, Equity & Engagement

Following collaboration on a criminology research study from 2011-2015, the Dharriwaa Elders Group invited UNSW researchers to work with them longer-term on their vision for change in Walgett:

The Dharriwaa Elders will lead a collaboration with UNSW and other supporters to grow our individual and community strengths and assets. We aim to restore a robust belonging to thriving families, community and Country, while making our place in the nation and sharing our learning with other communities.

Over the past ten years, YN has grown into a multidisciplinary, whole-of-university partnership involving academic and professional staff and students working on issues of priority for the Walgett community, guided by cultural protocols.

Collaborative projects aim to improve wellbeing and reduce Aboriginal children and young people's contact with the criminal justice system, address fine debt, improve food and water security and care for Country, and build Aboriginal community capabilities and control.

THE CHALLENGE

The criminalisation and incarceration of Aboriginal children and young people

Sixty percent of children and young people in custody in NSW are Indigenous

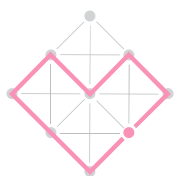
UNSW research led by Associate Professor Ruth McCausland has identified the factors associated with contact with the criminal justice system as the 'social determinants of justice'. These include having been in out-of-home care, experiencing poor education, homelessness, unsupported mental health and disability, being Indigenous, living in a disadvantaged location and having early police contact.¹ They are driven by systemic factors including institutional racism and poverty. These 'causes of the causes' of criminalisation and incarceration are critical to address to reduce the harms and costs of youth incarceration.

Aboriginal children and young people experience specific criminalisation in remote communities with high numbers of police, like Walgett in north-west NSW.²

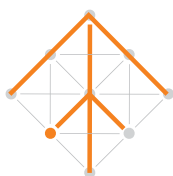
Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) are best placed to lead alternative responses. However, despite government commitments under Closing the Gap, there has not been the necessary shift in power and resources to ACCOs to enable this.

Criminalisation and incarceration of children does not make our communities safer long-term. Yet government policies and funding focused on youth justice are heavily influenced by inflammatory public debates and often prioritise punitive, police-led responses, rather than being informed by the evidence and long-term investment in holistic, community-led responses.

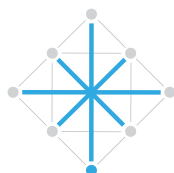
IMPACT FOCUS AREAS



Enabling healthy lives



Advancing economic and social prosperity



Strengthening societal resilience, security, and cohesion

Our vision is that Aboriginal children and young people in Walgett can learn, work, be safe, supported and thrive within a robust sense of belonging to their families, community, culture and country.

Photo: Dharriwaa Elders Group's vision for children and young people, 2018

OUR CONTRIBUTION

Community-led, holistic and systemic response

Over the past decade, Yuwaya Ngarra-li has grown into a nationally and internationally recognised example of how community-led governance, rigorous evidence, and long-term collaboration grounded in trust can drive meaningful policy, systems and community change.

The partnership contributes to change in three primary ways:

1. strengthens advocacy, policy development and public engagement through community-led research translation
2. mobilises cross-sector networks for system-level change
3. progresses community-centred outcomes.

Led by the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG)'s vision and priorities, between 2020 and 2025, the partnership contributed to 585 identifiable outcomes. These include the creation of employment pathways for local Aboriginal staff, the reduction of more than \$500,000 in fine debt, and improved access to safe drinking water. Central to these outcomes is a governance model in service of shared decision-making and local authority. The DEG and UNSW co-developed principles and protocols that embed Elders' leadership across all projects.

The Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership has made particularly impactful contributions to reducing the criminalisation of children. Led by the DEG, Yuwaya Ngarra-li has developed the community-led Bulaarr Bagay Warruwi Burranba-li-gu 'Two River Pathway to Change' youth diversion model, enabled by long-term funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation.^{3, 4, 5, 6} The model includes working directly with children, young people and their families and other ACCOs in Walgett and has contributed to hundreds of outcomes, as well as addressing the systemic drivers of criminalisation. It was one of only two Australian case studies featured in the Australian Human Rights Commission report, *Evidence-based approaches to child justice*.



10-year
partnership
with DEG



580+
Community
outcomes
from 2020-25

PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

Leading research, innovation and knowledge translation



Photo: DEG's Loretta Weatherall and UNSW's Andrea Hadaway giving evidence at the NSW Select Committee Inquiry into Youth Justice

Government policy and priorities are informed by UNSW research

Government and organisations seek and use UNSW research and expertise while developing and debating policy and priorities

Yuwaya Ngarra-li's research, evidence and expertise has been growing in influence over the past 10 years. The team have been invited to give evidence to Commonwealth and NSW government inquiries, received over 70 policy citations, undertaken government commissioned research, and been showcased nationally and internationally for their community-led solutions to some of Australia's most pressing problems.

Underpinning these policy contributions lies Yuwaya Ngarra-li's production of more than 40 co-authored publications including community reports, briefing papers, policy papers, and peer-reviewed articles and chapters, drawing on the collaborative work between the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) and UNSW that aims to improve lives in Walgett and influence government policy and priorities. UNSW staff have also supported the DEG to make more than 20 submissions to government inquiries and to give evidence on diverse topics including youth justice, community safety, food and water security, the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, and National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Yuwaya Ngarra-li's work has had 72 policy citations or mentions:

- The NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety interim report into Community safety in regional and rural communities in 2026 cited the DEGs submission in recommending that the Government prioritise funding to ACCOs to deliver targeted early interventions to children and families.
- The Standing Council of Attorneys-General in 2023 highlighted the partnership as an example of an alternative response model for criminalised children that incorporates social and emotional wellbeing.
- The Law Enforcement Conduct Commission Monitoring Report on the NSW Police Force Aboriginal Strategic Direction 2018-2023 spotlighted Walgett fines and the work of DEG to evidence the need for systemic reform in police practice.



70+
policy citations
& mentions



"The outcomes of the partnership tell a story of the deepening local and broader impact of Yuwaya Ngarra-li and represent significant progress towards Yuwaya Ngarra-li's long-term goals."

—

Dominique Bigras, Paul Ramsay Foundation's then Head of Justice and Safety, 2023

The DEG with support from UNSW became influential on the national policy landscape for its advocacy and contribution to providing community-led solutions to some of Australia's most pressing challenges.

Examples include:

- Yuwaya Ngarra-li Food and Water for Life program profiled for the United Nations Food Systems Summit on Walgett community-led solutions.
- NSW Government drawing on YN's research on community use of linked administrative data to improve access for small communities in the operationalisation of Indigenous Data Governance.
- NSW Treasury highlighting Yuwaya Ngarra-li's work on improving government contracting and procurement in its 2021-22 Indigenous Expenditure Report.

UNSW researchers have also undertaken systemically-focused research that furthers the DEG's vision for change, including:

- the Therapeutic Pathways for Children project commissioned by the Aboriginal Legal Service and NSW Department of Communities & Justice⁷ that led to \$13.4m committed for new programs in the 2025 NSW Budget
- an Australian Public Policy Institute grant on Addressing the Social Determinants of Justice for Criminalised Children.

The UNSW Yuwaya Ngarra-li team also facilitates and contributes to webinars, workshops and targeted stakeholder meetings to engage influential government actors and socialise research findings. Topics include self-determination and building ACCO capabilities and control, improving government contracting and procurement, addressing fine debt, and community-led research on government administrative data and Indigenous Data Governance.

PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

Meaningful engagement and strengthened partnerships

Positive contribution to society achieved with and for communities and partners

Community-led governance, reciprocal relationships and long-term collaboration contributes to measurable social, cultural and institutional impact

The Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership contributed to 585 identifiable outcomes from 2020 to 2025.⁸ Outcomes were defined as actions by or changes for individuals, organisations, groups or institutions influenced by Yuwaya Ngarra-li, collected over time from government and other organisational publications, research, media, meeting records, staff reflections and internal logs.⁹ Outcomes included:

- employment pathways created for 13 local Aboriginal staff through sustained philanthropic and government investment, including three Gamilaraay women now part of the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) leadership team
- over \$500,000 in fine debt reduced through the Dealing with Fines program, improving financial wellbeing and reducing barriers for community members
- improved access to safe drinking water through distribution of more than 35,000 litres via the Gali kiosk, the only public source of filtered drinking water in Walgett.

Networks of multisector partners are mobilised to address complex societal issues

While the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership began with collaboration on a criminology research study, it was clear from the outset that the Elders' vision for change required a systems-focused and multidisciplinary response. In Walgett, this has involved collaboration with other ACCOs along with government and non-government agencies through the Walgett Holistic Working Group, Walgett Wellbeing Collaboration and location-based reporting pilot with Revenue NSW, along with state-wide ACCOs and regional and national networks. At UNSW, it has involved academic and professional staff and students from various Faculties and Divisions collaborating on community priorities, led by the DEG. It has also involved deep long-term collaboration with the Paul Ramsay Foundation which has resourced Yuwaya Ngarra-li's work in Walgett since 2018.



Photo: UNSW and Dharriwaa Elders Group representatives on the Namoi River, 2025

Communities are equitable and complementary partners in co-designing, implementing, evaluating and sharing learnings

Community-led governance transforms partnership from consultation to shared decision-making and local authority

The DEG's invitation to UNSW to work in partnership on their vision for change was followed by two years of collaboration to develop core principles and protocols that underpin all aspects of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership. These principles and protocols ensure that community priorities and outcomes are at the centre of decision-making and guide the partnership's work.

These protocols include:

- all new collaborators participate in a cultural induction at UNSW and, an on-Country induction if they travel to Walgett
- a Research Protocol guides all projects, publications and presentations to ensure DEG leadership, input and approval¹⁰
- publications are co-authored by DEG and UNSW colleagues
- regular meetings between DEG and UNSW staff plus monthly reporting to the Elders Council ensure appropriate governance and accountability
- outcomes and learnings are identified through collaborative reflective practice and documentation.⁹

"We work with the community where changes requires them to push a little and we push back a little – like a bow saw. Sawing together shows our partnership. We give them tools to see their strengths and identify the resources and then work together."

–

Former speaker of the Elders Council, 2019

PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

Values-led operations, governance, infrastructure and systems



Photo: DEG's Vanessa Hickey and UNSW's Peta MacGillivray speaking about Yuwaya Ngarra-li's community led approach

Staff capacity for societal impact

Staff demonstrate capacity and capabilities to engage with and embed Indigenous knowledges in their research and practice in a meaningful way

There has been a marked increase in UNSW staff capacity to work in genuinely community-led ways since the partnership with the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG).

This capability has been enabled by:

- strong community leadership advancing the Elders' vision for change and holding partners to essential collaborative practices
- clearly articulated principles and protocols that guide all collaboration
- cultural inductions led by Aboriginal staff and Elders
- commitment of key academic and professional staff and students to learn and work differently
- UNSW's strategy *Progress for All* supporting community-led impact.

Through this process, UNSW staff have developed the ability to take on multiple, context-dependent roles, contributing not only disciplinary expertise (such as data analysis, mixed methods research and evaluation), but also to provide advice, coaching, resources and connections to broader networks where useful.⁹

Guided by the Elders' vision and focus on community-centred outcomes, this approach has also contributed to more traditional academic indicators of success including securing competitive research grants, publishing in international journals, awards for Masters projects, and contributing global case studies and to university impact rankings.

Importantly, staff are increasingly sharing what they have learned from working in partnership with the DEG to a range of audiences, including within the university and across Aboriginal Community-Controlled, for-purpose, government and philanthropic sectors, demonstrating both growing capability and a willingness to embed and extend these practices.

"[Our initiatives] have been called for by the Walgett Aboriginal Community for a long time, and now we can deliver... Connection and belonging for all parts of our community is what we're building We wouldn't be here today without all of the old people who have stood tall and proud in resistance and in cooperation where it was important for our future and our children's future."

—

Vanessa Hickey, Dharriwaa Elders Group, 2025

Future directions

Key lessons

Since the start of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership, a great deal has been learnt about what it takes to see the outcomes achieved for Aboriginal people in Walgett as well as at a place-based and systems level.^{11, 12} Key findings include the importance of:

- vision and shared values
- sustained and flexible philanthropic funding
- reflective practice
- working holistically across diverse policy domains
- local Aboriginal staff
- addressing ongoing racism and remoteness
- University capability to work in a community-led way.

Opportunities ahead

Yuwaya Ngarra-li is entering a new funding phase aligned with the Elders' vision of increasing Aboriginal community capability and control in Walgett. From July 2026, the Paul Ramsay Foundation will directly fund the DEG, with UNSW funding the university team.

Evidence of Yuwaya Ngarra-li's impact will continue to build, with the UNSW team supporting the DEG's programs and services, as well as undertaking research and evaluation aligned to community priorities. This includes analysis of an innovative new linked administrative dataset on Walgett children and young people that can inform and evaluate impact over the long-term.^{9, 13, 14} The team is also sharing insights from Yuwaya Ngarra-li more broadly, positioning it as an exemplar of impactful, community-engaged collaboration.

UNSW researchers involved in Yuwaya Ngarra-li are also extending their influence on policy to address the criminalisation of children, including through the Social Determinants of Justice Research Hub.

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For more information,
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