Telephone: 07 3900 6000
Reference:

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Via email:

Dear Committee Secretary

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (the Commission) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs' Inquiry into responses to racism (the Inquiry).

Attached are the speeches from young people at the Commission's Youth Summit (2024 to 2026). They share the lived experiences, perspectives and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people across Queensland.

While these speeches were not developed specifically for the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, they provide a powerful and unfiltered account of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people experience racism, discrimination and cultural exclusion in contemporary Australia

Across the speeches, young people describe:

- the impact of racism on identity, belonging and wellbeing, including experiences of exclusion within education and care systems
- the ongoing effects of cultural disconnection, including loss of language, connection to Country and access to Elders
- the intersection of racism with other forms of marginalisation, including disability and involvement in the child protection system
- the importance of culturally safe systems that actively recognise, respect and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, culture and leadership.

The speeches also set out clear solutions, including strengthening cultural capability within systems, increasing representation and leadership opportunities for First Nations peoples, improving access to cultural supports, and ensuring young people are meaningfully involved in decisions that affect their lives.

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These accounts highlight that racism is not only experienced at an individual level but is also embedded in systems and structures that shape young people's access to identity, culture and opportunity.

The Commission is committed to elevating the voices of children and young people, particularly those whose experiences are often underrepresented in policy and reform processes. We respectfully submit these speeches to support the Committee's understanding of the lived experience of racism and its impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

Should the Committee require further information or wish to engage directly with young people, we would be pleased to assist.

If you would like to discuss this matter further, please don't hesitate to contact me directly on XXX or via email at XXX.

Yours sincerely

Luke Twyford
Principal Commissioner
Queensland Family and Child Commission

April 2026

Youth Summit Speeches

2024–26

Youth Summit 2025

All 2025 speaker videos can be found here: https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/children-and-families/youth/summit/2025

They told me I wasn't – but I am

Kynesha, Emerald, 22 years old

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land we gather on today, the Turrbal and Jagera people. I pay my respects to Elders past, present, and I extend my respect to any First Nations people here today. This always was and will always be Aboriginal land. Good afternoon. My name is Kynesha Pope and I'm a proud Aboriginal young woman.

This is my story. I'm 22-years-old and I was diagnosed with a disability at a young age, which has posed challenges at times, however it fuels my courage and passion to strive for more in life. I have a deep love for arts and craft and enjoy engaging in creative activity that seeks to inspire change.

I was removed from my family the day that I was born and placed into a foster care with a non-Indigenous carer. When I was taken from my family, I was also taken from my Country and my culture. I did not know what my totem was. I did not know my own Country. I did not know we had traditional dances and I did not know about our song lines.

I did not know who my own mob was. I grew up being told I was not Aboriginal even though I knew I was. I never felt that I had a place to belong and always felt that a piece of my heart was missing. But I didn't know where to look because I didn't know what I was looking for. The missing piece in my heart was my home on my Country.

But I don't even know where my Country was because Child Safety kept that information for me. When I think back on it, it reminds me of the Stolen Generation because I was taken as a baby and had my cultural identity erased. I was not allowed to go to any cultural activities or programs because Child Safety kept telling me I was not Aboriginal.

When I was in high school there was a cultural support teacher that asked me if I was Aboriginal. She was the first person to ever ask me and believe me when I said yes. She recognised my last name and tried to bring me into the Deadly Choices program, that my school had, but Child Safety said I was not Aboriginal.

We had to fight hard to be allowed to participate in my own culture. That wasn't the only barrier for me. I was in a special education unit at school, so my school told me that since I was in special education I was not allowed to go to the Deadly Choices program. This made me feel very emotional and disheartened.

I lost the little trust in a system that I still had. I felt discriminated by not only Child Safety but the Education Department throughout primary school and most of high school. I felt like I was being discriminated against because my skin was too light to be Aboriginal and then again because of my disability.

Both things I can't change, so I felt powerless. I was very sad because in my heart I knew I was Aboriginal and I was so close to finally being able to participate in my culture, but instead I had to watch other kids go and enjoy my culture and watch from the sidelines. It was only once I exited care and became an adult that Child Safety finally told me I was Aboriginal.

They took my nieces away and during their removal they went back into our records and told me that I am a Wakka Wakka. When I spoke to the CSO and told her that she was doing the same thing that Child Safety did to me when I was young, she cried and said she doesn't want a third generation of my family to go into the system.

It should not have taken until I was an adult and was watching my baby nieces being take it away to finally learn who my mob was. My nieces are home now, where they belong. They say it takes a village to raise a child. So I think all the adults and system responsible for the care and education of children should be educated on the history of my people.

My village failed me because they didn't understand the impact of what they were doing to me. All children, regardless of cultural backgrounds, should learn about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture at school. More knowledge means more understanding and less racism and discrimination.

We could have Aboriginal music lessons at school run by Elders or other First Nations people, and more Aboriginal staff in schools to support teachers and students. I missed out on having the adults of my family teach me about my culture. I needed the adults around me to care enough and know enough to help me keep my identity whole. Because during the time in care, I never felt whole and complete.

I now go to Central Queensland Indigenous Development, known as CQID, women's group, to learn more about who I am and my history. CQID are helping me reconnect to my culture and are supporting me on the journey to discover who I am. Because of CQID and my own determination, I am proud to stand here today and tell everyone that I'm a powerful and brave Wakka Wakka woman that will keep sharing my story because I never want another child to feel the way I did. Thank you.

Climate crisis: A perspective from the Torres Strait Islands

Rhea, Tingalpa, 23 years old

Everyday I have the privilege and blessing of walking amongst, healing, growing and learning on Quandamooka Country. I'm a proud Zenadth Kes woman, from Saibai Island in the Western Torres Straits. I am a descendent of the Ait Koedal Clan. I also am a proud Punjabi Indian, and therefore belong and am grounded in two rich, beautiful motherlands.

I'm a social worker and human services practitioner and my purpose within my path is to become an Indigenous sociologist, paving the path of systemic reform and sociological decolonisation for my Peoples. Apart from being an academic, I'm an environmental justice activist and poet and work hard to infuse my learnings in all dimensions towards the greater cause of social justice.

I often describe the complexities of being a native person on Country as simultaneously beautiful and deeply painful, for every day I am both privileged and humbled for beauty I am able to witness and experience, while navigating the grief of loss. I've always known and identified myself as being a minority within a minority, being Zenadth Kes. In today's world, it's a harrowing experience to be an Ailan blackfulla due to the many political, social, climatic, economic, psychological and emotional landscapes that clash, having a detrimental impact on one's identity. In my reality as a First Nations person, I live with the fact that my island is sinking, my traditional land is sinking in front of a society that chooses to do nothing about it. There is only so much I can say that truly translates to how this makes me feel. I live the anticipated loss of my traditional ways of being, doing and knowing going extinct and being historical erased, everything that fundamentally creates my identity is at stake, I cannot help but yearn for my kin to come.

Like all other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young peoples, I am racing against time to break my intergenerational cycles of trauma in order to be strong enough and healed enough to persevere in this reality of the world. I am challenged, as a black woman, as Islander, as Indian, as a young person, as a descendent, as survivor, as a social worker and I choose to remain steadfast, despite my trials and tribulations.

Majority of my time spent in life at the moment goes towards learning my mother tongues – Kalaw Kawaw Ya, Hindi and Punjabi, for when I speak in my languages, I am instantly rejuvenated by my roots. I am busy working hard to manage the code-switching between being true to myself and my identity while also walking the whitefella way, to contribute towards systemic reform.

I have been culturally mentored to ensure that the dismissal of my traditional language, discourse, context, and philosophy within mainstream society does not diminish the strength or prosperity of my spirit.

Within my healing and learning journey, I choose to take control of how my advocacy is understood because my Peoples and I are the experts of our own knowledge systems. This part of history will be written by us, as Indigenous Peoples, not shaped by dominant Western ideologies and colonial narratives.

And while I fight to keep my homeland above water, to keep my culture alive, and to keep my identity intact, I ask Queensland to reflect - what does it truly mean to stand with young people like me? What does it mean to stand with the Torres Strait?

Because I will stand for my Country, whether I am supported or not… and that is my power. I ask Queenslanders to open their hearts and share this responsibility because that's what our shared humanity looks like to me.

Youth Summit 2026

All speaker videos will be uploaded here: https://www.qfcc.qld.gov.au/children-and-families/youth/summit/2026

Strengthening identity through education

Charli, Thursday Island, 19 years old

Tonight, I want to share something a little different—not a story that is entirely positive, but one grounded in hope. It is a story about learning who I am, standing firm in my identity, and finding belonging in places that, at first, did not seem made for me. My name is Charli, and I am a proud Aboriginal woman. I stand here today to speak about the need for stronger transitional support for First Nations students entering new education systems.

My mob is from Minjerribah—North Stradbroke Island—and I come from the Nughie and Noonuccal tribes. Although I am Aboriginal, I was raised in the Torres Strait, and that has played a significant role in shaping who I am. For four years, I lived on Moa Island in Kubin Village before moving to Thursday Island so that my little brother and I could attend school while my parents continued their work.

While I remain deeply connected to my mob from Minjerribah, growing up in the Torres Strait taught me so much. I learned the language, the culture, and the stories. Those experiences grounded me in values of respect, belonging, and community. And today, no matter where I go, I carry my home and my Country with me. But like many young First Nations people, my story has been shaped by moving between cultures and places—between islands, education systems, and cities. From a young age, I understood what it felt like to live between two worlds, and how easily identity can be questioned or misunderstood when you do not fit neatly into one box.

I always thought I would attend my local high school and stay close to home with family and friends. But my parents saw something bigger for me. They encouraged me to apply for boarding school scholarships down south. I never thought I would get in—but to my surprise, I was fortunate enough to receive a Yalari scholarship. I still remember arriving at St Margaret's for the first time. I was absolutely petrified, like many of us are when we start something new. The school was huge. The buildings felt unfamiliar. Everyone seemed so confident and polished.

The first thing I noticed was how out of place I felt. People asked where I was from and why I spoke the way I did. Some said I had an accent. Others made comments about how I looked. At just twelve years old, I heard things like, "You don't look Aboriginal," "You're too white," or "What percentage are you?"

At times, I felt like I did not belong there.

At that age, you just want to fit in—but those words cut deep. Because my connection to culture, to mob, and to my Country has never been about how I look. It is about who I am. But when you are twelve, and the world around you is not yet ready to listen or learn, it can make you doubt yourself.

When I first arrived, there were only a handful of us First Nations girls. We quickly realised that our culture was not visible. There was very little support for us. Our culture was not recognised or celebrated. There were no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander flags. No NAIDOC Week. No Reconciliation Week. Not even an Acknowledgment of Country at assemblies.

So, my best friend and I—just two Year 7 girls—decided to do something about it. We approached the school administration and asked for change. We asked for Acknowledgment of Country at every assembly, Welcome to Country at important events, and opportunities to celebrate and share our cultures.

We were fortunate to have teachers who listened. Teachers who recognised the gaps—not only in understanding, but in belonging—and helped us work toward change. They encouraged us to speak up, to lead, and to create space for others to feel proud of where they came from. It was not always perfect, and we did not always feel welcomed, but things improved because people were willing to listen and walk alongside us.

But that is not the reality for many other schools.

Over time, more First Nations students joined our efforts. Together, we built something stronger—a school community that celebrated all cultures. By the time I graduated, we had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance groups, cultural events each term, leadership opportunities, and gatherings where our families could proudly represent our culture.

Academically, however, the transition was still confronting. Many of us arrived realising we were behind, and catching up required significant effort. It meant hours of study after school, tutoring sessions, and constant determination.

It was mentally and emotionally exhausting. There were nights when I wished I could be home—back by the ocean, surrounded by my family—but I was terrified of disappointing them by failing. Many of us scholarship students carried that same pressure: the need to prove that we belonged in those classrooms, and that we were worthy of the opportunities we had been given.

But over time, education gave me something powerful. It gave me confidence—the courage to leave home and pursue something bigger than I ever imagined. It showed me that knowledge can be both grounding and liberating. Most importantly, it taught me that I did not have to change who I was to succeed. I simply had to believe that who I was, was enough.

Those years taught me resilience, but they also gave me empathy—empathy for every young person trying to find their place in spaces that were not built with them in mind.

That is the kind of education I want to help create. The kind I stand here speaking about today—an education grounded in respect, safety, and cultural pride. One where support exists for First Nations students so that no young person feels alone in navigating unfamiliar systems. One where every student knows that who they are will always be enough.

Whenever I doubted myself, I thought about my parents and the sacrifices they made. I thought about my little brother and the example I wanted to set for him. And I thought about my Elders—those who fought so that young people like me could have opportunities our ancestors were once denied. Those thoughts gave me strength when I wanted to give up.

I believe an important step forward is creating transitional programs specifically for First Nations students entering boarding schools or beginning university. These programs could connect younger students from home communities with First Nations students who have already navigated these systems and endured the challenges that come with leaving home.

Through mentorship, they can share honest experiences, practical advice, and guidance about what it takes to adjust and succeed. Learning from those who have already walked that path can make the transition far less isolating, while showing young people that they can pursue opportunity without leaving their identity behind.

By sharing my story, I hope to highlight why we must build education systems where identity and culture are respected, protected, and celebrated. We cannot continue asking our young people to hide parts of themselves in order to succeed.

When education is grounded in cultural understanding, it becomes more than learning. It becomes healing. It becomes empowerment. And it creates a pathway for the next generation—so they can walk proudly in both worlds, knowing that they belong in every one of them. Thank you.

The disconnection of Indigenous Youth and their Cultural Identity

Kane, Ipswich, 16 years old

Kapu moegibathaynga, ngai ina Kane, ngai Mabaigalayg, ngai au pamle. Good morning/good afternoon, all, my name is Kane, I am a proud Mabuiag Island man from the Torres Strait with connection to the Au family, located in the western island groups. Before I begin, I would like to pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather today, the Yuggera and Turrbal peoples. I would like to further extend that respect to all first nations people present today.

Today, I am here to discuss the importance of country to First Nations people, and how return to country today is a pivotal point in life that all mob must have the right to experience. For those of you who don't see it, there are still lasting impacts from colonisation 240 years ago, one of those impacts being displacement of First Nations people from their traditional land, which occurred during the stolen generations. Which I could discuss for well, generations, but that's for next time. Right now, let's talk about what I mean exactly by "displacement", when you hear the word displacement, you might think moving something from one place to another, which wouldn't be wrong, but when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hear that word we think, "loss of language, disconnection to culture, lack of belonging". You'll see why this is relevant shortly, just bear with me.

Last year in September, my right to return to country, was fulfilled. We arranged the flights, and before you knew it, we touched down at home. It's hard to describe, but the second I stepped onto the islands, I immediately felt a connection. A connection that runs deeper than just pride, or love of my culture, one that runs deep within my roots, like the roots of the trees that run deep within the islands themselves.

While I was on the islands, I learned my grandmother's tongue, and my people's dances. I got to experience what life was like for my people every day. This was something that truly changed who I was when I returned to Brisbane.

I found a new strength behind my culture, a new driving force that led me to get up here today, and share this part of my story, so that other young mob out there can get the right to return to their ancestral home.

You may be wondering, Kane how is any of this relevant to the displacement of First Nations people? Well, if you ask me, it is all relevant to displacement of my people because, as someone growing up in Brisbane a long way away from their traditional land, you might still have pride in your culture, and find comfort through it, but nothing compares to the sense of belonging you feel when you can wake up knowing you stand where your ancestors have once stood, you breathe the air your ancestors have once breathed, it changes you, for the better.

They say you can't change the past, but what if we could correct it? Obviously, we can't just travel back in time to fix the mistakes that were made, but what if we could change the way we approach the future. The future of this country, and the relationships between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people rely on reconciliation.

What must be corrected is the displacement that I spoke of before, and the effects that it had on my people will follow. What I am asking for is nothing less than a right that has been withheld from us for too long. I am seeking to create an organisation funded by the governing bodies, that would be partnered with local community-controlled organisations. By establishing such a structure, we would be able to empower local mobs to make genuine connections with First Nations peoples, allowing them to truly embody their cultural ties, by doing that we are not just going on a trip, but a self-journey that reflects who we are and where we could go. So, what I leave you with today is a quote from Uncle Gabriel Bani, "a life without culture, is a life without life".

To speak in many tongues

Takeisha, Brisbane, 23 years old

Bin Bee Karri.
In my Ghungalu language, that means *good day.*

My name is Takeisha. I am 23 years old and a proud Ghungalu, Jarowair, Kamilaroi and Wakka Wakka woman.

As we gather here today on the sacred lands of Magandjin, surrounded by its lush landscapes and connecting waterways, I acknowledge the traditional owners of this Country — the Yuggera, Jagera, Ugarapul and Tooroobool peoples. I pay my deepest respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

My whole life I have lived on the south side of Magandjin raised by a single mother as the eldest of six children. From an early age I felt a strong responsibility to support my family and share what I knew about our culture.

While I have always felt deeply connected to my culture in many ways, there has also been a part of me that felt uncertain — and at times, disconnected.

That part was language.

Growing up, I often felt out of place because of the limited traditional language I knew and the difficulty I had communicating in it. Whether that was due to growing up in an urban environment, the impacts of intergenerational trauma, or a combination of both, it often made me question my identity.

As someone who tends to observe the world around me, I noticed many other young people who had a strong understanding of their culture from both sides of their families. Naturally, I began to compare that to what I knew about my own culture — and at times it felt like it wasn't enough.

Those feelings became stronger during high school.

I was often the only First Nations student who would raise my hand to deliver the Acknowledgement of Country. Eventually I became what felt like the "poster child" for the school's diversity and inclusivity. But the reality was far more complex than that image suggested.

> It sometimes felt as though my presence was being used to represent something that wasn't fully understood. And in those moments, I questioned whether my voice was truly valued.

Yet navigating between my culture and my community became something I simply learned to do. It became a habit — something rarely spoken about but deeply felt.

Through school, youth groups, and community programs delivered by organisations like the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health, and Inala Wangarra, I began engaging in important conversations about culture, community, and the changes our young people want to see.

Those experiences led me to participate in youth summits and advisory groups where I could speak about the challenges many young First Nations people face — including the lack of access to traditional language.

During these moments, I met incredible people whose experiences mirrored my own.

Together, we shared stories.
We shared struggles.
And we shared ideas about how things could change.

Through programs like the Queensland Indigenous Youth Leadership Program, and events such as the Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conference 2025, I have had the opportunity to raise these concerns and contribute recommendations for meaningful change.

But my story is not unique.

Many young First Nations people across Australia share this same experience. And it raises an important question:

Why does traditional language matter so much?

Before colonisation, more than 250 Aboriginal languages and around 700 dialects were spoken across this continent. Each language carried its own stories, knowledge systems, and deep connections to Country.

But colonisation changed that.

Assimilation policies, displacement from traditional lands, and the forced removal of children during the Stolen Generations disrupted the passing of language from one generation to the next.

As English became dominant in schools, workplaces and public life, many First Nations communities lost opportunities to speak, practise and teach their ancestral languages.

But traditional language is more than just words.

It is knowledge. It is identity. It is connection.

Our languages carry the stories of our ancestors, the laws that guide our communities, and the knowledge of Country that has been held for tens of thousands of years.

Many words in our languages cannot be translated directly into English. They describe relationships with land, family, and spirituality that exist only within our cultures.

For many young First Nations people, language is deeply tied to who we are.

It strengthens our sense of belonging. It connects us to our Elders. It connects us to our ancestors.

And without that connection, many young people feel like something important is missing.

Reclaiming language is not only about preserving culture — it is also about strengthening wellbeing.

When young people are given the opportunity to learn their language, it builds confidence, pride, and a stronger sense of identity. It creates spaces where culture is not something to hide or question, but something to celebrate.

Today, only a small proportion of traditional Aboriginal languages are still spoken fluently. Yet communities, Elders, schools, and organisations across the country are working tirelessly to revitalise them.

Their work is not just about preservation.

It is about the future.

That is why I call on the Department of Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships and Multiculturalism to work with First Nations traditional owners through genuine community collaboration, engagement, and consultation to support First Nations peoples in navigating and reconnecting with their traditional languages.

I also call on the Department of Education to work alongside them to develop policies that promote cultural safety and wellbeing in schools — ensuring that young people feel supported, proud, and confident in their cultural identity.

Because when we reclaim language, we do more than remember words.

We reconnect generations.
We strengthen identity.
And we ensure that the voices of our ancestors continue to live on through the voices of our young people.

Thank you.