

Overview

Indigenous Australians are lobbying for environmental research to take a rights-based approach that: improves economic opportunities; confers greater authority over the stewardship of Country; delivers equity in managing Country; emboldens control to integrate knowledge systems; values and promotes culture; and recognises Indigenous self-determination.

The National Indigenous Environment Research Network (NIERN) offers a solution which supports the rights-based approach driven by Indigenous Australians through the establishment of a community of practice guided by Indigenous researchers and Indigenous Knowledge holders.

This project envisages NIERN as an Indigenous-led solution to the self-determination of Indigenous environmental research priorities. By exploring the purpose and membership model that would support the network, and a business structure to sustain operations.

Elicitation of Indigenous Knowledge

A range of collaborative research methods were employed throughout this project, and where possible, Indigenous-led methods were the foundation, to ensure mutual benefits were achieved for all participants. Figure 1 outlines the methods used by the Indigenous researchers at each stage of the project to collect and analyse data.

The project was grounded in four key principles that empower Indigenous peoples to drive positive outcomes for biodiversity and people on Country:

1. to benefit the Indigenous community
2. to be undertaken for and with the Indigenous community, in line with their aspirations, needs and interests
3. to promote Indigenous cultural values
4. to be emancipatory

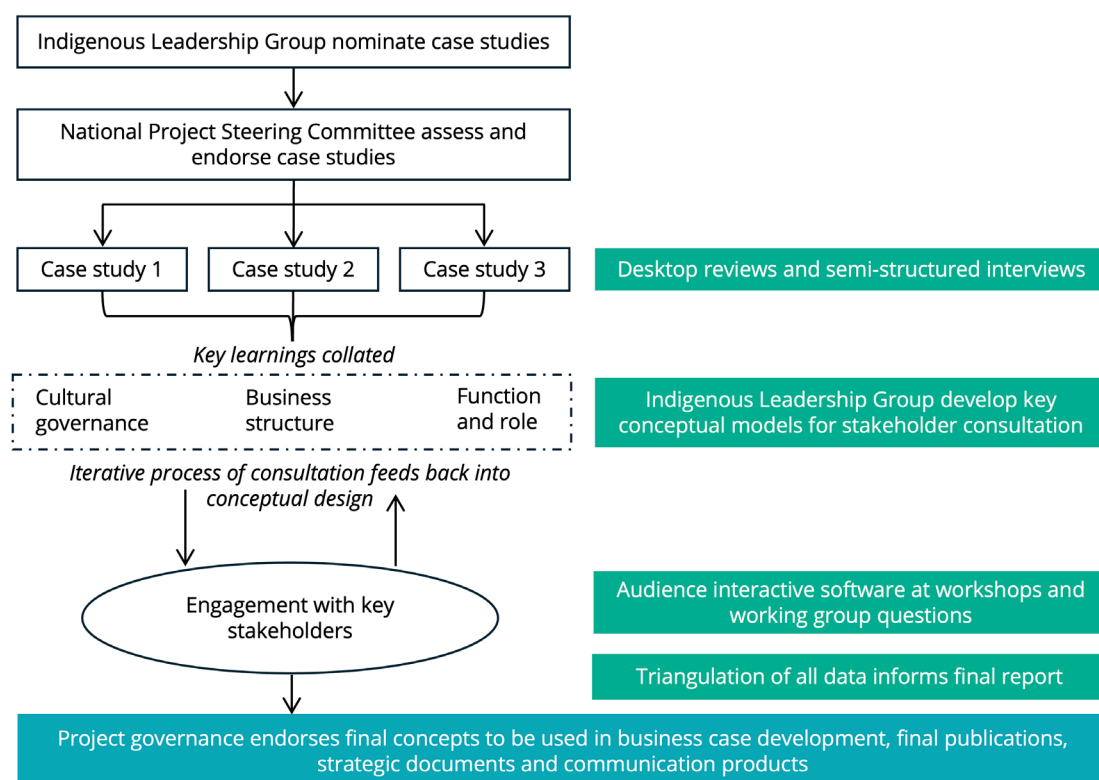


Figure 1: Outline of methods used at each stage of the NIERN project to guide discussions and inform decisions.

Triangulation

The data analysis from multiple sources (Figure 2) – primary quantitative and qualitative data collected, secondary data from other sources, and existing data – was brought together through a triangulation process to combine and consolidate the results. This allowed the project team to formulate findings, consolidate conclusions and identify opportunities to inform the establishment of NIERN.

Indigenous-focused workshops and expert roundtables (primary data)

The development of the NIERN project involved the active participation of Traditional Custodians, Indigenous land and sea managers, land and sea councils, Indigenous researchers and other expert stakeholders. Indigenous-focused workshops and expert roundtables sought consensus on the role and functions of NIERN, the membership model and supporting business functions.

Development of case studies (secondary data)

Case studies were developed to gather evidence for the business case utilising a desktop review and semi-structured interviews. The case studies highlighted successful Indigenous-led membership-based organisations, with findings informing the stages for the establishment of NIERN, setting realistic scalable strategic goals (local, regional, national) and formulating NIERN's roles and functions.

Indigenous-led governance (linked data)

The project implemented an Indigenous-led governance model, with an Indigenous Leadership Group (ILG) and Indigenous-led National Project Steering Committee (NPSC). Members of both groups were selected based on their expertise and experience in land and sea research.

The ILG and NPSC members promoted NIERN within communities, at conferences and at other Indigenous gatherings, communicating the findings, including place-based examples of Indigenous-led research and case studies of Indigenous governance in environmental research.

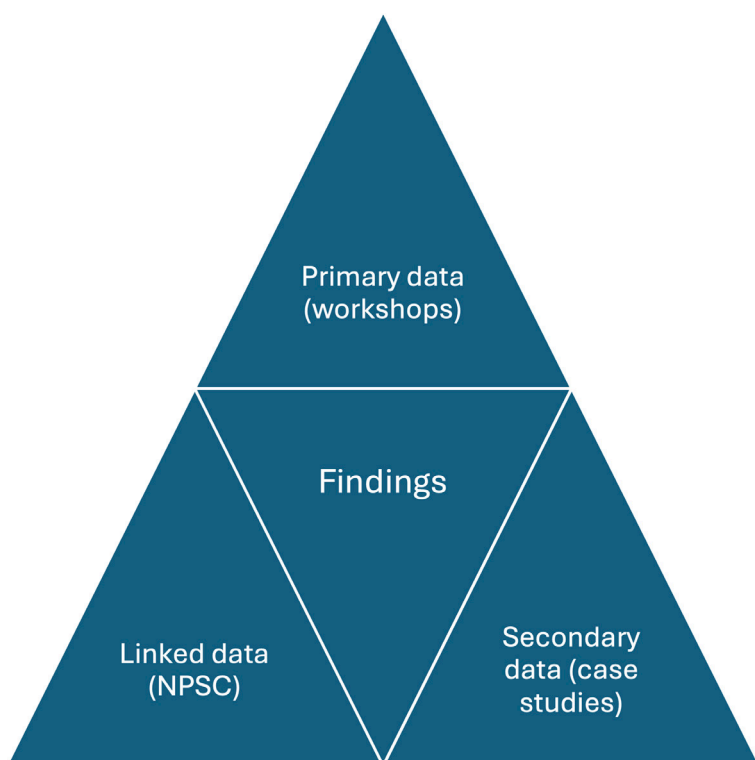


Figure 2: Triangulation of data sources.

The complete triangulation process resulted in four outputs:

1. NIERN strategic direction and purpose
2. NIERN membership model
3. Environmental research impact pathways for NIERN
4. NIERN business case

The study was carried out with approvals from Curtin University Human Research Ethics (approval HRE2024 -0108).

Key Findings

Over a 12-month period, 300 individuals were engaged at four Indigenous-focused workshops and four expert roundtables. Five case studies were also co-developed, and guidance was requested and obtained on 15 occasions from the ILG, NPSC and the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW).

From the outset, it is critically important to acknowledge that the engagement process determined that NIERN will not conduct research but rather provide wrap-around services to support both Indigenous research users and research providers taking part in environmental research activities. Figure 3 outlines the research pathway and the intersection with services proposed to be delivered by NIERN.

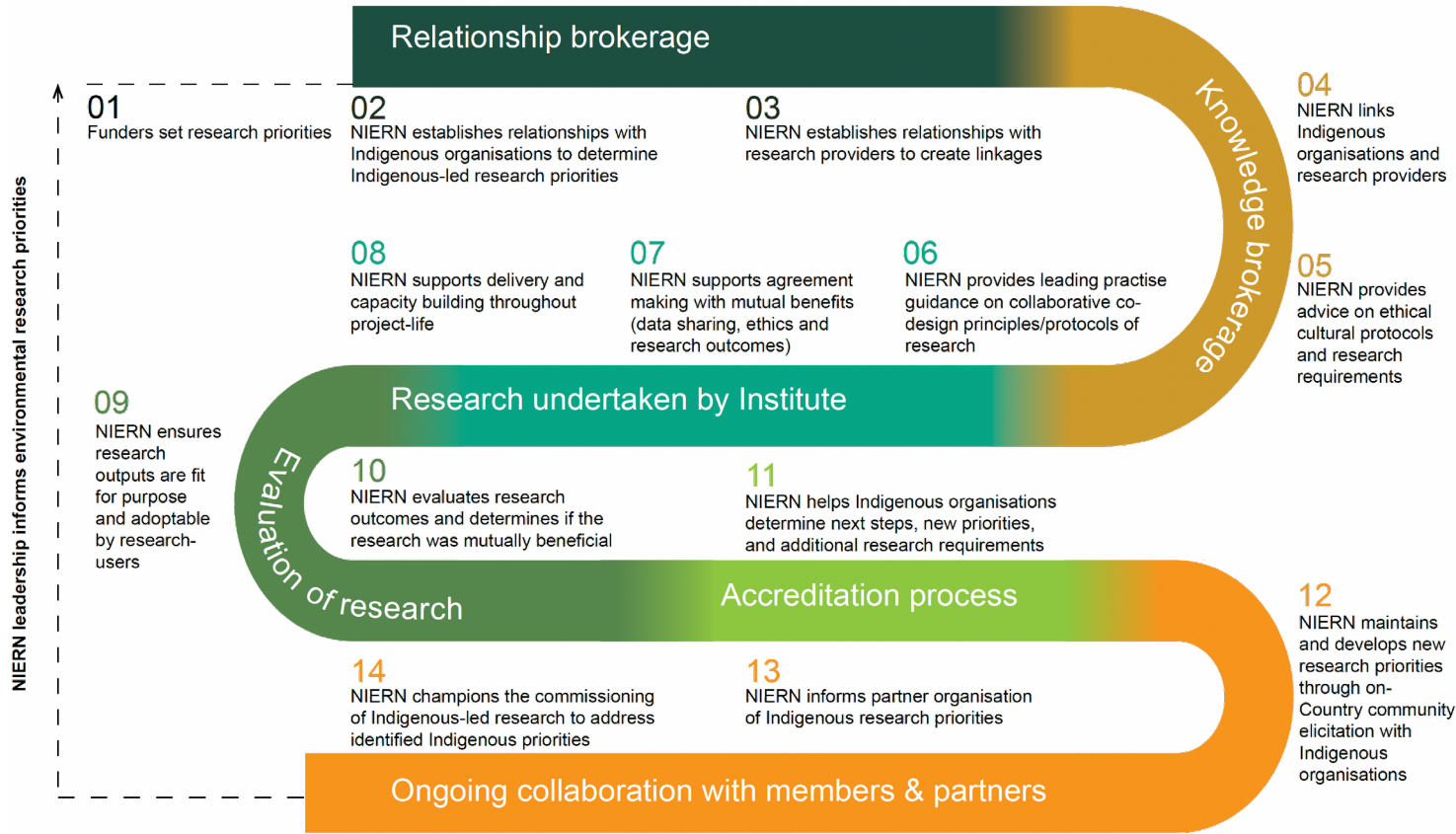


Figure 3: NIERN research wrap-around services and support.



NIERN's role, membership model and business functions were debated at 4 Indigenous-focused workshops.

1. NIERN strategic direction and purpose

The vision of NIERN is to enable and empower Indigenous Australians to participate in and benefit from the environmental research that occurs on their land and sea Country. This uplift in opportunity will be enabled through an active network of Indigenous organisations and researchers working together to ensure

Indigenous-led research priorities, methods and management practices are incorporated into research efforts to benefit Australia’s natural and cultural environment. Table 1 outlines the strategic direction for NIERN informed by Indigenous experts.

Focus Area	Leadership	Accountability	Capacity Building
Vision	Indigenous Knowledges and perspectives determine the direction and priorities for environmental research.	Culturally safe environmental research policies and practices protect and strengthen Indigenous rights and knowledge.	Increased two-way capacity in right-way science and Indigenous-led environmental research.
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Engage with Indigenous groups to establish national Indigenous research prioritiesActively participate in national dialogues to set environmental research agendaSet Standards for Indigenous-led environmental research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Create protocols and resources for Indigenous-led research and methodologiesProvide relationship and knowledge brokerage services for Indigenous groups and researchersDevelop evaluation frameworks for research to inform accreditation processes of researchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ensure there is equality in agreement makingSupport governance succession planningProvide training to improve the impact of researchChampion recognition of Indigenous Knowledge as a legitimate source of knowledge in research

Table 1: Strategic overview for NIERN in the first three years of establishment.



300 individuals were engaged in the workshops over a 12-month period.

2. NIERN membership model

A range of membership models was presented and discussed at the engagement sessions. Figure 4 demonstrates an endorsed membership pathway that will evolve with the business development model. This concept will allow for the self-organisation of members and the member-driven roles and functions of NIERN to be developed as the organisation matures.

For the membership pathway, the following definitions are used:

- The network: community of practice, where individuals (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) collaboratively participate in discussions, events and other opportunities.
- Members: legal members who form the leadership of NIERN – likely to be representatives from Indigenous-controlled organisations.

- Partners: affiliated organisations and institutions that support NIERN and benefit from the research – likely to be universities, governments and research organisations.

The membership model will have key mandatory requirements in its establishment that will be articulated in NIERN's governance documents. These requirements include:

- Supporting existing cultural governance models
- Accountability for members, partners and the network
- Tiered membership model
- Tiered sponsorship model for partners
- Cross networking
- Established governance structures to ensure independence when making decisions

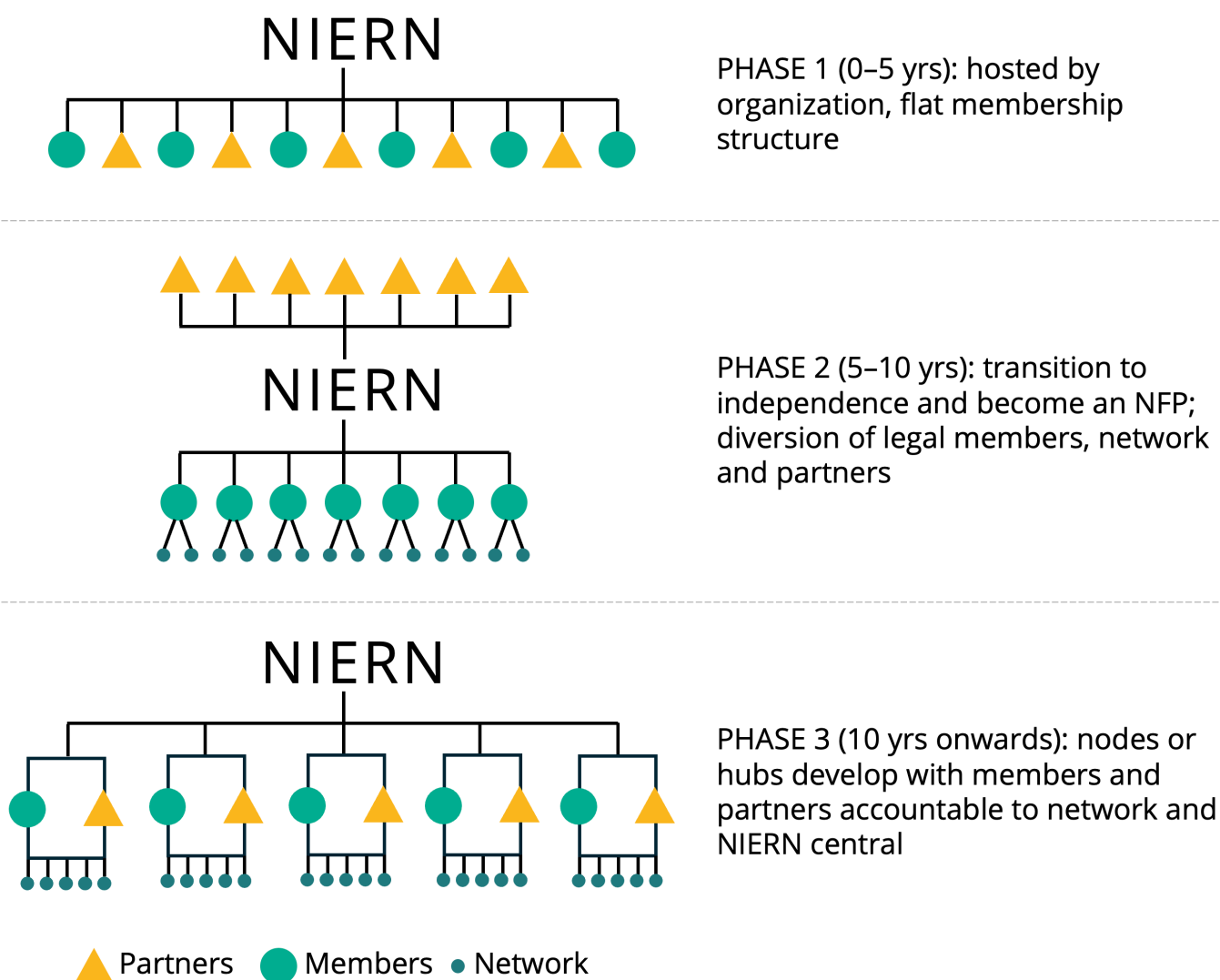


Figure 4: Proposed NIERN membership pathway over time.

3. Environmental research impact pathway for NIERN

Research services and wrap-around support will be delivered through four priority areas, which have been identified through Indigenous community elicitation:

- Land and sea management
- Climate change and adaptation
- Culturally Significant Entities
- Biocultural regional planning

4. NIERN business case

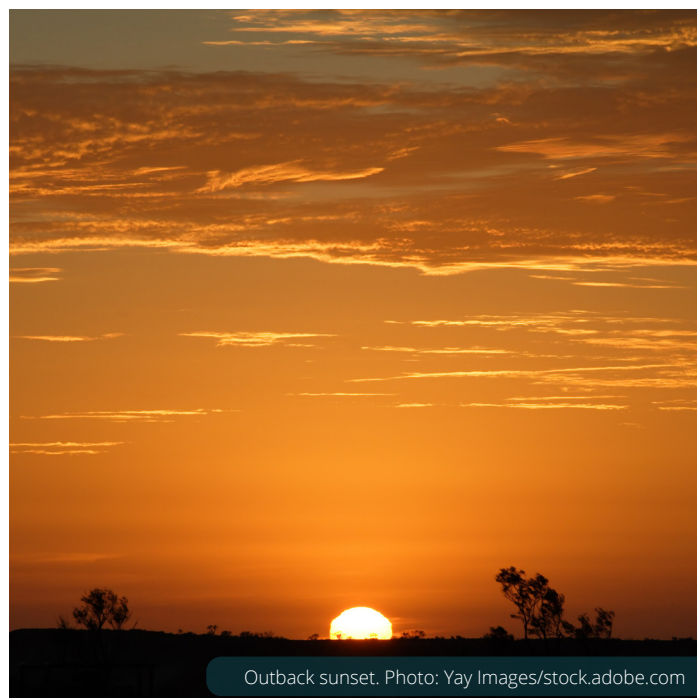
Budget projections for NIERN are estimated at approximately \$23.5 million to establish and operate for the first five years, or approximately \$4.7 million per annum.

Reflections for change

NIERN offers an Indigenous-led pathway to self-determination with support and recognition from governments, research providers, academic institutions, the corporate sector, and other non-government organisations. This will lead to a transformational change in how environmental research is conducted with Indigenous Australians.

Empowerment of Indigenous peoples in environmental research is possible if an all-of-system approach is taken. This approach must involve Indigenous people at all stages of the decision-making processes — from the development of research priorities to the design and delivery of methodologies, to the interpretation of findings, as well as the evaluation of outcomes and implementation of actions.

Investing in NIERN will support Indigenous cultural governance systems to promote rights-based approaches, unlock economic opportunities, foster greater authority over the stewardship of Country, deliver authority in managing Country, advocate for right-way science, and value culture.



Further information

The project is being led by Professor Stephen van Leeuwen and Dr Teagan Shields from Curtin University, with Barry Hunter and Leah Talbot from NAILSMA, and is supported with funding from the Australian Government under the National Environmental Science Program.

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