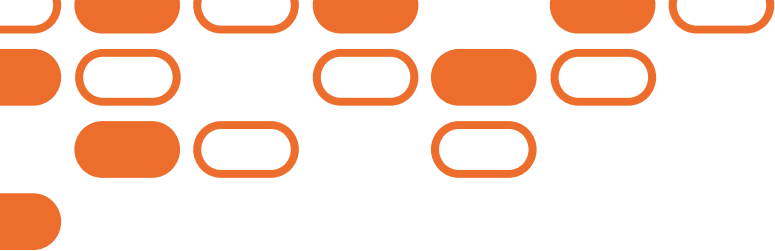


2024

Mitcham Council's Reconciliation Action Plan 'widens the gap'

Paul Mabarrack





This publication is authorised by Close the Gap Research Committee. All content and supporting resources are the intellectual property of Close the Gap Research and may not be replicated or reproduced without express consent. These works are protected by intellectual property and copyright laws. All rights are reserved.

www.closesthegapresearch.org.au

© 2024

Introduction

Mitcham Council in the Adelaide Hills and southern suburbs of Adelaide covers some of Adelaide's most affluent suburbs.

A mere 0.4 per cent of the population identify as Indigenous and have similar levels of education, housing, and wealth as other South Australians.

The most comprehensive description of the City of Mitcham's [Reconciliation Action Plan](#) has just been released. It contains information that has not been publicised through the usual council channels.

I was astonished, for example, at the extensive Kurna language programmes for children. Other residents who read council communications, including council minutes and reports, have reported a similar reaction.

Naturally, the report wants to present a complete description of a successful RAP. Yet my reaction was that the full extent of the council's commitment to a radical political agenda had been disclosed publicly for the first time.

Therefore, it warrants a careful analysis, which should be made available to residents so that they are fully aware of the direction their council is taking.

The council has allocated \$50,000 for the first stage of its RAP. A large number of staff—eleven executives are listed—will devote significant time to the plan. No doubt, further funds and resources will be allocated. Once the first stage is completed, the council commits to a further RAP, then two more.

More than \$200,000 may be spent. We may need help extricating the complete and detailed costs from the council.

Commentary on this RAP focuses on six themes:

- Community involvement
- Language
- Art
- Colebrook Home
- Early conflict in Mitcham
- Ceremonies
- Widening the gap.



Community involvement

Costs aside, the most disturbing part of the council's plan is the role envisaged for the community.

The council sees ratepayers as instruments of the council's influence and commitment:

Reconciliation Action Plan

Action:

Promote reconciliation through our sphere of influence.

Deliverable:

Communicate our commitment to reconciliation to our community.

The council had previously passed a motion that vowed to 'embed Indigenous culture in council and community.' This is the heart of the RAP. It is a strategic, deliberate campaign to change the culture of the council and the community.

The elites decide how the rest should act and think, and they start with the children. By contrast, the adjoining council, The City of Marion, with stronger ties to Kurna heritage, did seek input from its wider community for its [RAP](#).

Mitcham Council and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders are at the core of this RAP; residents are not. Indigenous people in need of a 'closing the gap' are not.

Reconciliation Action Plan

Action:

Establish and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and organisations.

This RAP is the vehicle for achieving the aim of embedding Indigenous culture in the council and community.

The fact that it has come this far is testimony to the determination of a core group of elected members working in concert with crucial council executives. Some active community groups give the council 'cover', an air of legitimacy, and an aura of community support.

This support is thin, as demonstrated when the council voted to give one of these groups \$40,000 to support the Yes campaign in the 2023 failed Voice referendum.

A local, national and international media drubbing ensued, which forced the council to backtrack.

Language

Thousands of children have been affected by the council's aim of 'embedding' Indigenous culture in the community.

Here are some extracts of what has happened so far:

Reconciliation Action Plan

Deliverable:

Establish Kurna language classes through our libraries & community centres.

Progress / comment:

- We have added Kurna language books for children to the Library.
- Pasadena CC staff and class attendees are practicing speaking Kurna language at the centre.
- Every week at Pasadena CC outdoor messy play, we sing the Kurna song [and] we sing an acknowledgment in song.

Fewer than 300 residents of Mitcham, a city of 68,000, identify as Indigenous. The Kurna language is not spoken in any homes in the City of Mitcham and perhaps in fewer than half a dozen homes in the state.

The council has undertaken a widespread, planned, below-the-radar social change programme for children.

The goal is to propagate the acceptance of an idealised, fantasy notion of an old culture among the young through unquestioning rote learning of words and songs.

The usual other baubles of indoctrination accompany this: play, finger painting, music, costumes, various 'aunts' and 'uncles', and a range of First Nations toys in the Toy Library.



Art

The City of Mitcham engaged a Kurna artist to create a 'unique' artwork as part of its *Reflect RAP*.¹

This commission originated when Mitcham Council persuaded a reluctant Kurna corporation to 'bestow' a Kurna name for its new library.

The council had already chosen the name before any community consultation and was in a bit of a fix. The art commission was part of the negotiated package to get the name approved well before the council had formally decided on the RAP.²

This commissioned artwork is explained:

Reconciliation Action Plan

The artwork is a cultural map of the City of Mitcham geographical area and illustrates many of its culturally significant flora, fauna, people, and places. The design represents the deep Kurna cultural connection to Country, and a thriving culture which will exist for all time.

The commissioned artwork bears no resemblance to any remaining Kurna art.

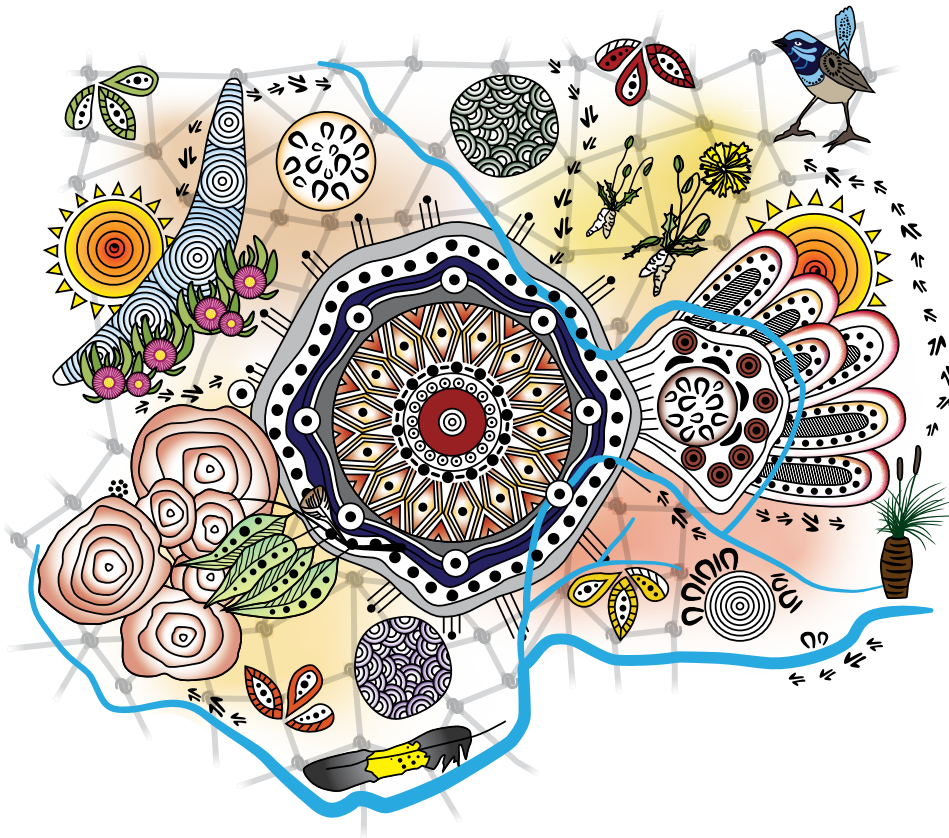
This is not surprising, given the early demise of Kurna tribal life. The piece is quite different from authentic, traditional Kurna artistic expression. It has elements of Western desert art.

The desert art differs from the Mitcham Council commissioned piece in that 'Aboriginal artists abstracted their paintings to disguise the sacred designs so the real meanings could not be understood by Westerners.'

The description for the RAP piece seems to illustrate quite the opposite.

Mitcham Council supports an art venture that seems to imitate the art expressions of desert artists yet stresses literal representations.

It has no connection to the old Kurna culture displayed in the SA Museum. In its foray into Indigenous art, the Council has demeaned Indigenous culture.



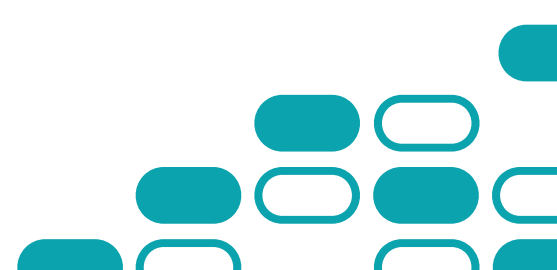
Artwork commissioned by Mitcham Council



Kurna shield, Museum of SA



Western desert art, unattributed



Colebrook Home

Reconciliation Action Plan

Action:

Promote truth telling and share the stories of Colebrook Reconciliation Park with the community.

The Blackwood Reconciliation Group places great importance on the site of Colebrook Home in Eden Hills.

They are an influential group within the Mitcham Council area for advocating Indigenous causes.

The current Mayor of Mitcham, Heather Holmes-Ross, sits on their committee. Other elected members of the council have also been active with them in an executive capacity.

To this group, Mitcham Council unsuccessfully tried to allocate \$40,000 to fight for the Yes case in the Voice referendum.

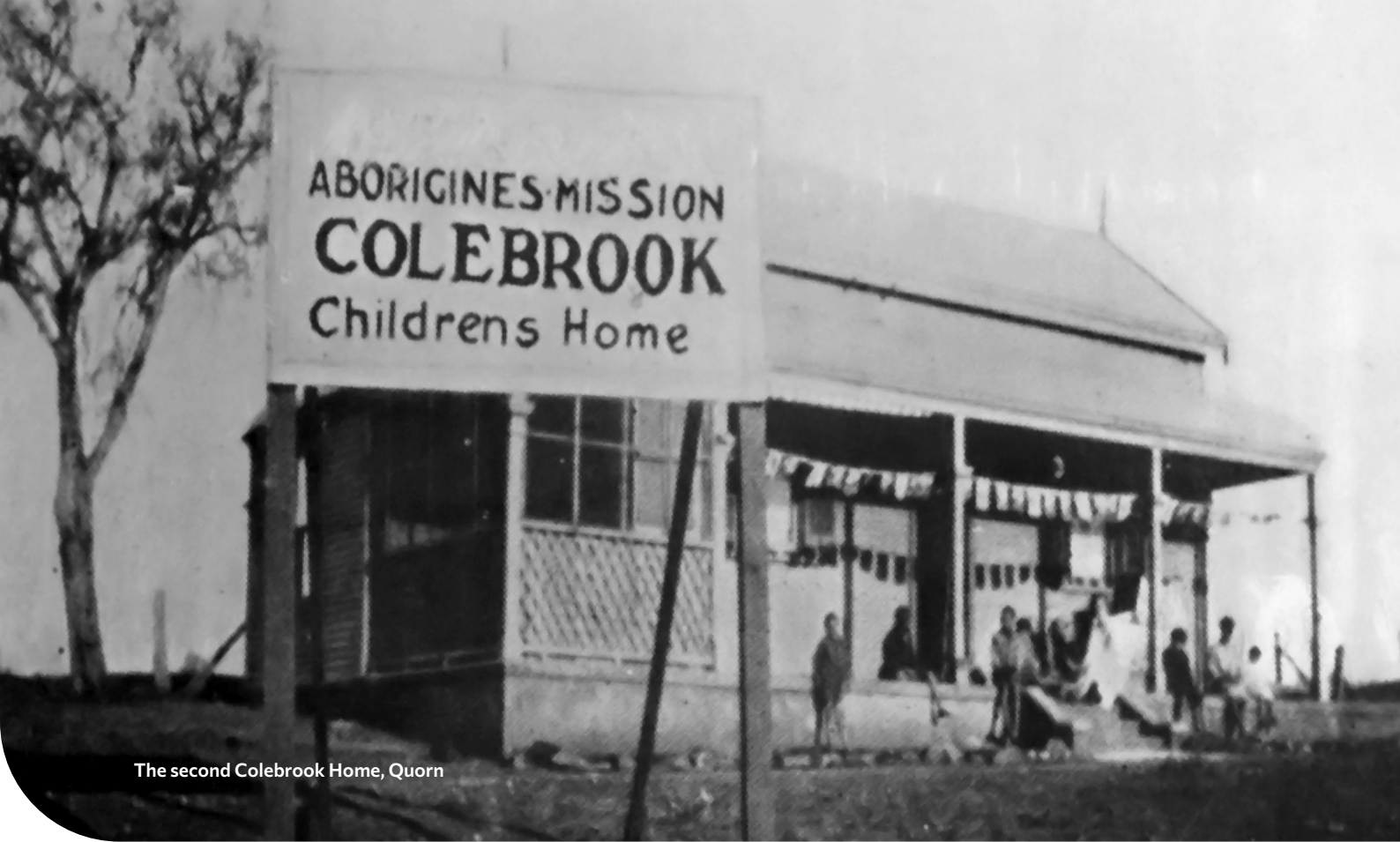
Colebrook Home's history [on their webpage](#) points out that early missionaries, Sisters Rutter and Hyde dedicated their lives to the well-being of their young charges.

The United Australia Mission established the home near Oodnadatta, then moved to Quorn, and finally, to Eden Hills, within the Mitcham Council area. They ran it from 1927 until 1952.

After that, it became state-run. The SA government's torment over the right policies for its Indigenous peoples and their offspring is a long and complex business. Governments, good and wise, and others less so, wrestled with the seemingly unsolvable problem of what is best for Indigenous peoples.



The third Colebrook Home, Eden Hills



The second Colebrook Home, Quorn

Much effort was expended, and the way forward was never clear. Just as it is not today, in 2024.

The first children to come under the care of the UAM at Colebrook were the daughters of a white stockman and an Aboriginal mother, who were in a long-term relationship. Neither of them was able to care for the kids during a time of drought and hardship, so the father took the kids to the United Australia Mission at Oodnadatta. It was an act of Christian mercy to take the children in, to save their lives, not an evil act of state intervention.

Most of the children came from the north. There were some others, most notably Bruce Trevorrow, a Ngarrindjeri man. Now deceased, he is the only member of the 'stolen generation' to have successfully won damages against a government for illegal removal from his parents.

It is unlikely Kurna children would have been removed from their tribal families who historically roamed through the Mitcham area because

they had largely been subsumed into the white population and other tribal groups well before Colebrook opened its doors at Eden Hills in 1943.

Over the 45 years that Colebrook operated, 350 children passed through its doors, an average intake of about eight per year.

In 2020, there were more than 1,360 Aboriginal children, aged 0-17, in care away from their parents in SA in one year.³

Colebrook Home has been a focus for reconciliation advocates in the Mitcham district, particularly around the Blackwood area, and remains so. It has been a political rallying point and a generally sincere place of remembrance.

Those who focus on the 'stolen generations' might want to consider how well we are doing today with Aboriginal children who are not with their parents.⁴ It puts the Colebrook saga into perspective.



Early conflict in Mitcham

Reconciliation Action Plan

Action:

Increase understanding, value and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories, knowledge and rights through cultural learning.

The latest historical survey of all South Australian conflicts and incidents, published in the [SA Frontier Map](#), does not list a single incident within the City of Mitcham's boundaries.

The Kurna ranged over 7,000 sq km and numbered about 300 when the colony of SA was established in 1836. The City of Mitcham is spread over about 74 sq km, with only one minor and seasonal watercourse.

Not surprisingly, Mitcham records little interaction between colonial settlers and the old tribes. Council areas like the City of Charles Sturt have a richer Kurna heritage, as documented by Gavin Malone and Karl Telfer in *Kurna Meyunna Cultural Mapping*⁵, because Kurna spent most of their time in their coastal areas.

Former Curator of Anthropology at the SA Museum Robert Edwards' description and illustration of the Kurna tribe contains wonderful colonial paintings depicting aboriginal scenes at Port Adelaide, the banks of the Torrens River

in the city itself, Rapid Bay, Second Valley, Port Noarlunga, Myponga, and the Coorong. He gets close to Mitcham with a Burnside scene. But mostly, the coast was where the food was, so coastal sites figure prominently in their old legends and stories.

Council may wish to re-imagine the real history of our council area, but plainly to any clear-headed scholar, there is little to see.

Lastly, this council withdrew traditional support for community Christmas carols because they were 'too Christian'.

It showed no understanding, value or recognition of Torres Strait Islander culture and remains blithely ignorant of the peoples who celebrate 'the coming of the light', which is a warm welcome by Torres Strait Islanders and some Aboriginal people of the Christian faith.

There is no truth in the council's knowledge of any of our indigenous cultures.

Ceremonies

Reconciliation Action Plan

Deliverable:

Demonstrate respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by observing cultural protocols.

Progress / comment:

- Acknowledgement of Country at all Council Meetings
- Welcome to Country at all major events, civic events, and citizenship ceremonies
- Cultural Respect & Safety Training ongoing.

A genuine respect for the old tribes of Adelaide would start with a history founded on truth rather than the sorts of stories that beguile this council.

Tribal life was often harsh, violent, and unpredictable. It was also resourceful, spiritual, and rich with family, clan and tribe connections.

There were tribal differences, some profound, and there were areas where the clash with white settlers was rough and violent, and others much less so.

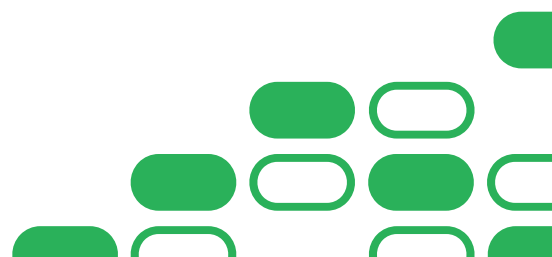
The cultural protocols listed in Mitcham's RAP are ideological chants, political demands, and fakes.

One version of Welcome to Country was to approach holding a leafed branch. Another involves hospitality from the women. The genuine welcome to the country is far from this Council's Ernie Dingo smoking ceremonies.

The acknowledgment of country misrepresented the realities of tribal conflict in pre-settlement times. The violence perpetuated by tribes on each other was widespread. The early days of white settlement in and around Adelaide witnessed continuing tribal violence, often halted by white intervention.

The council reaches out to various cultural training providers. One of their providers serves more than 70 clients and lists only one private organisation among them. Our government agencies and NGOs, funded by our taxes, provide the majority of work for various cultural training providers.

Council's involvement with the Indigenous industry creates a cocooned world where the elites reinforce each other's views of the world. Together, they create new cultural norms, which serve them both well. As the council does this, it drifts further away from the everyday residents it represents or should represent.



Widening the gap

Mitcham Council deliberately chooses not to involve its broader community in the complex reconciliation process.

Reconciliation Action Plan

Action:

Promote reconciliation through our sphere of influence.

Action:

Promote positive race relations through anti-discrimination strategies

While Australians wish to Close the Gap, this RAP by Mitcham Council has no such aim. It is not mentioned. Because closing the gap is not the objective of this RAP. The effect of Mitcham Council's RAP is to 'widen the gap'.

The Council widens the gap between a proper understanding of the nature of the old Kurna culture and the Council's make-believe version, which has more in common with 20th-century New Age hippies than ancient tribal warriors.

The council uses ceremony, language and myths to idealise and idolise a culture no longer with us.

They pay homage and respect to the politics of Indigenous groups that have only little support among their own (witness the poor turnout voting for the SA Voice. Some candidates were elected with fewer than ten votes), much less the Australian community.

The council widens the gap among residents by taking those inclined to support Indigenous causes further away from the centre.

They start with the toddlers. They widen the gap between genuine respect for an old hunter-gatherer culture, based on scholarship, and a proper reading of history and their 're-imagined' culture.

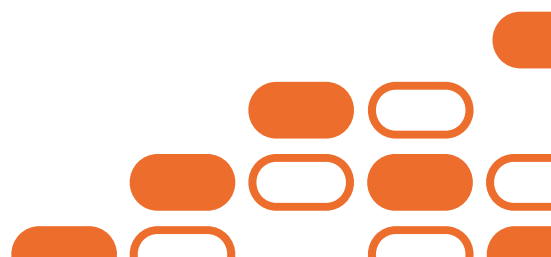
They widen the gap between privileged council executives, radical elected members, and those who might have a more measured and considered view.

In the meantime, those needing help to close their gap are lost in a haze of smoke, mirrors, distorted history, childlike songs, and virtue signalling vanity.

Translating Mitcham Council's RAP into English

The RAP language use requires a ready reckoner translator so everyday people can understand the language of the new elites:

TERM	TRANSLATION
First Nations	Indigenous tribes and clans. The Kurna numbered about 300 in 1836. That is not a nation. There is nothing wrong with being a tribe or clan.
Manager Community Connection	Spin doctor and focus group conjuror for the council.
South Australian Voice to Parliament	The SA government set it up after the national Voice referendum failed. Some elected members received six votes, but most Indigenous people in SA did not bother to vote.
Tiwu Kumangka	The name bestowed (proudly) on the new Blackwood Library after a pre-determined community consultation. Tiwu means "black cockatoo," and it mostly lives in Peramangk country (the hills), not Kurna country. Kumangka means gathering together, and was initially rejected by the Kurna corporation as unsuitable, for a number of reasons.
Best practice	Whatever elites, like council executives, decide.



Manager People and Culture (and sometimes, Standards)

The enforcer of the right culture, the correct behaviour, the right thinking, including the right pronouns.

Traditional owners

The previous wave of immigrants who found themselves on this land. Sometimes, they were first, but mostly in southern Australia, they were second, displacing earlier peoples. And, in the way of all humankind, they were, in turn, displaced by later arrivals.

Custodians of the sky, waterways and land

Hunter-gatherers who lightly populated the area around Adelaide moved on to fresh country very frequently when food became too scarce due to their own hunting and seasonal changes in native fruit and vegetables.

Non-custodians

Murray people, Narrandjeri, and other tribes muscled in on Kurna land to access Adelaide town life and white man's goods. This group also includes whites.

Aunty and Uncle

Honorary titles assumed by Indigenous people with vital cultural interests and used by sympathetic whites as a mark of respect. Often, the uncle and auntie are younger than most looking on, but kinship is complicated.

References

- 1 Council Report, Minutes of Full Council Meeting, July 9, 2024
- 2 Council Agenda January 2023, Recommendation 13
- 3 Snapshot of SA Aboriginal Children and Young People in Care and/or Detention from the Report on Government Services 2020
- 4 Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People South Australia. Holding on to Our Future 2024
- 5 Gavin Malone and Karl Telfer, Kurna Meyunna Cultural Mapping 2012





Close the Gap Research

Close the Gap Research (CtGR) is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to making a positive impact on the lives of Aboriginal people facing adversity. Our mission is to alleviate poverty, suffering, and hardship among Aboriginal communities in need.

Need. Not race.

CtGR will assess the efficacy of existing and proposed models for addressing the needs of Aboriginal people and work with partners to provide direct, impactful relief to those who really need it. We want to partner with program providers willing to publish proof of success in the following areas:

- School scholarships
- Employment in remote communities
- Prisoner rehabilitation







This publication is authorised by Close the Gap Research Committee. All content and supporting resources are the intellectual property of Close the Gap Research and may not be replicated or reproduced without express consent. These works are protected by intellectual property and copyright laws. All rights are reserved.

www.closesthegapresearch.org.au

© 2024