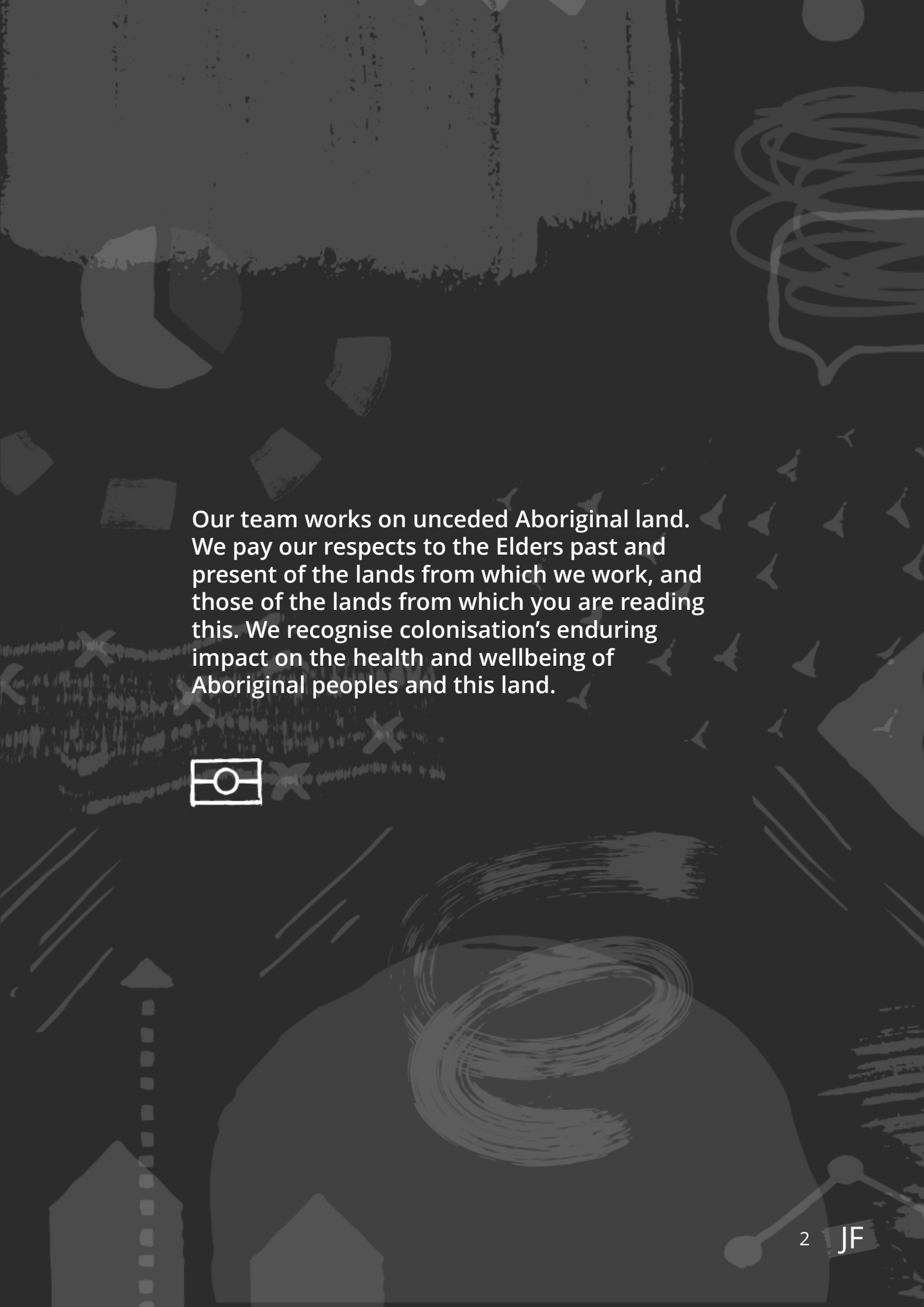


Summary report

With You Project

Trauma-informed, rights-based legal assistance

Evaluation 2025



Our team works on unceded Aboriginal land. We pay our respects to the Elders past and present of the lands from which we work, and those of the lands from which you are reading this. We recognise colonisation's enduring impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples and this land.



What is the With You project?

The With You project is a national initiative that seeks to support the Australian legal assistance sector to embed trauma-informed, rights-based practice in service provision. The With You Project is funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department. It has been delivered by Legal Aid NSW, on behalf of National Legal Aid. The With You Project delivered training to lawyers, allied professionals and legal support staff in Community Legal Centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Legal Aid Commissions.

Trauma-informed practice is an evidence-based approach and practice to resist harm, promote trust and safety when working with clients, based on the assumption that most, if not all, clients have experienced trauma. The approach is focused on understanding and responding to the impact of trauma. It extends beyond being kind and compassionate and on implementing a practice approach underpinned by the principles of safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, choice and diversity.

Building on a co-design process in 2023, the With You team undertook extensive national consultations with the legal assistance sector to design the project's key components:



5 eLearning modules



Trauma-Informed Organisational Toolkit, a guide on all aspects of trauma-informed, rights-based legal service design and delivery



Facilitated training, co-facilitated by a lived experience facilitator
26 in-person sessions
3 pilot online facilitated sessions



Executive workshops and self-audit tool conducted with Legal Aid Commissions and other organisations in the legal assistance sector



Project initiatives including a Community of Practice for professionals in the legal sector, a supervision pilot in the ACT, and development of induction packages



Why was With You implemented?

The prevalence of trauma amongst clients of the legal assistance sector is uncontested, particularly at the point where they need legal assistance. A lawyer who can recognise and respond to trauma can deliver an effective legal service, without causing further harm, and lessen the impact of vicarious trauma.

When the With You project commenced in 2023, baseline understanding of trauma-informed practice was predominantly very low across the legal assistance sector. The project was also implemented in a context with limited understanding of co-design and lived experience-led design processes, and an environment of limited collaboration across the legal assistance sector nationally.

Participants in the evaluation identified a clear ongoing need for a project like With You to implement trauma-informed practice in the legal assistance sector. Barriers to trauma-informed practice in the sector include:

- the adversarial nature of legal practice
- the inherently traumatic nature of the justice system
- the lack of time and resourcing in the legal assistance sector.

Implementing long-term systemic change in the legal assistance sector is challenging and requires ongoing intentional sector-wide collaboration, resourcing and focus.

“The way lawyers are trained to think and work is very much in a system of power. The court system is really hierarchical and complicated, and there isn’t a strong tradition of putting clients or people at the centre, let alone understanding a trauma-informed approach.”

- Legal Aid Commission executive representative

The Evaluation approach

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach drawing on:

- eLearning data and in-person training feedback
- 43 qualitative interviews with training participants, Legal Aid Commission executives, project stakeholders, the Project Board and With You team
- other project data and documentation.

Full details on the evaluation approach are available in the Technical Report.

What has been the impact of With You?

Overall, the With You project has had a substantial impact on those in the legal assistance sector, at both an individual and organisational level. The components of the project have combined to address the capability and motivation of individual practitioners to implement trauma-informed practices, while also working with legal assistance organisations to value and enable this practice.

An important focus of the With You project has been recognising that practitioners cannot achieve change on their own – they must be working in enabling and supportive environments. Involving senior leadership in this process has been an important part of achieving organisational change, and has allowed the project to achieve more change than would have occurred had the focus been solely on practice training.

This level of impact is particularly impressive given the sector's starting point, the limited timeframe of the project, and the relatively low resourcing and staffing available for the project.

Practitioners in the legal assistance sector report they:

- think differently about trauma and how it impacts themselves, their clients and what they might previously have interpreted as 'rude' or 'aggressive' behaviour
- better recognise the impact of vicarious trauma in their own practice and better support their colleagues
- implement the principles of trauma-informed practice in client interactions giving clients choice and control, while supporting them to make appropriate legal decisions
- better respond to distress, creating safe and empathetic environments for clients
- have the confidence to create trauma-informed environments within their service and the legal assistance sector more broadly

Organisations in the legal assistance sector report they:

- have developed a shared cross-sectoral and organisational-level language around trauma-informed practice
- Implemented trauma-informed practice improvement, including induction programs, additional training, and management conversations around creating supportive workplaces

"Once our organisation did the training, it became more commonplace to talk about trauma-informed practice... Once you understand it, it pops into your head."

- eLearning participant

How has With You achieved change?

The project's success is underpinned by its collaborative approach, and relationships built within the legal assistance sector. Lived experience expertise has been meaningfully interwoven and prioritised throughout the project. The partnerships that were built through the project have ensured the project resources and training have been high quality, practical and well-tailored to the legal assistance context. Working with sector organisations has also encouraged uptake and engagement with the project.

The With You project team built in data collection and evaluation throughout project delivery aligned to the Kirkpatrick model**, which proposes that change from training is only possible where participants have a positive reaction to training, learning something, change their behaviour, and practise in an environment that supports impact and results. The findings of the With You evaluation align to this model.

Results

Most organisations reported organisational-level implementation of trauma-informed initiatives

Behaviour

Most participants reported positive intention to act after training
Most participants reported changes in behaviour and practice

Learning

61% reported better ability to collaborate to mitigate re-traumatisation
60% reported more confidence responding to client distress
60% reported they better understood clients' mental health
54% reported better understanding of the impacts of trauma
45% reported better ability to recognise client distress from trauma*

Reaction

6,100 hours of training was delivered through the project
2,000+ people were engaged
Great training satisfaction (NPS = 66.5 for in-person; 55.7 for eLearning)

"I have been working in this field for decades and it is honestly rare for me to encounter any training that offers a new approach. This gave me multiple ideas and I am thinking about how to incorporate it into two major human rights services we provide in the justice system."

- eLearning participant

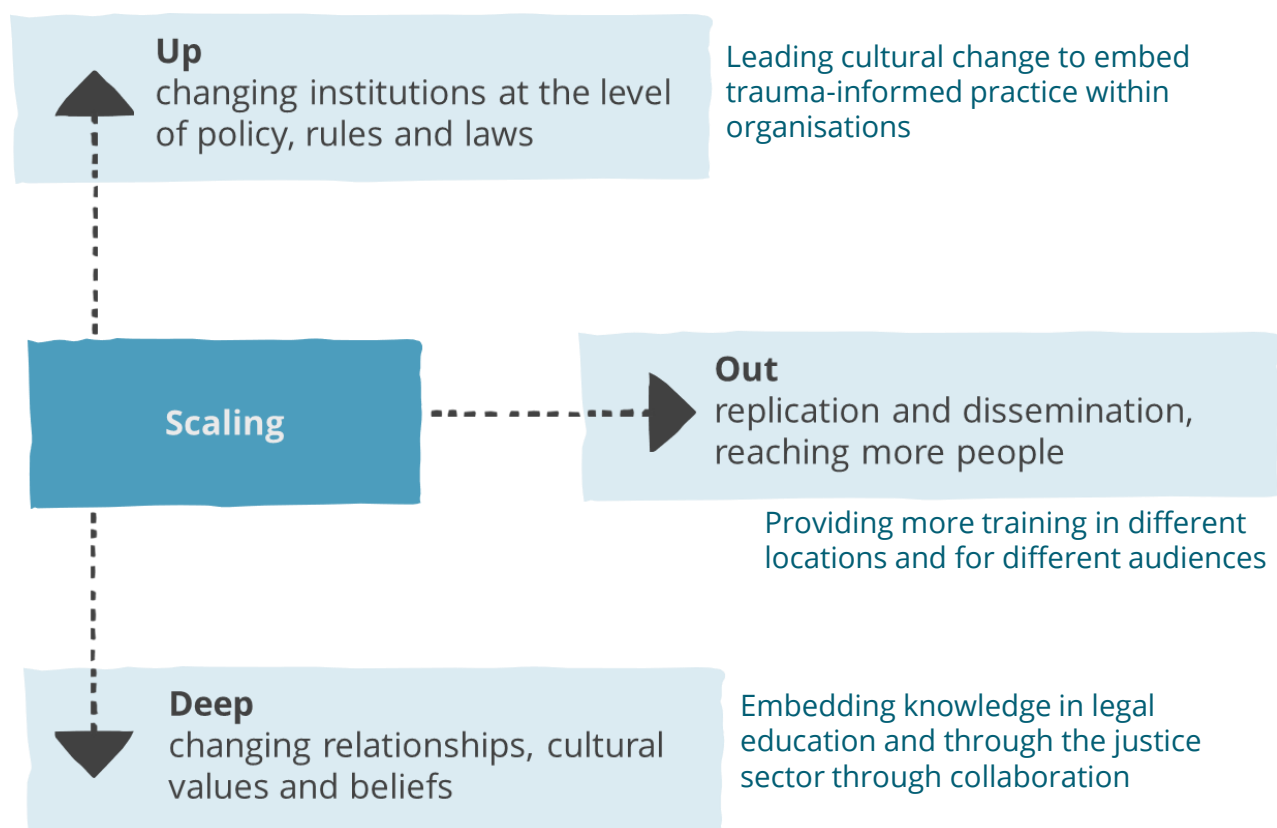
*Percentage improvements reflect high baseline understandings of trauma among respondents

** Kirkpatrick (2015). Accessed from: www.kirkpatrickpartners.com

Where to next for the With You project?

The evaluation found a strong ongoing need for all components of the With You project, including online and face-to-face training, support for organisational leadership to understand and implement trauma-informed practice, and the piloting and implementation of trauma-informed workforce development initiatives.

The scale of change necessary requires careful consideration of the best approach to scale the impacts of the With You project within the available resourcing. There are opportunities to strengthen the impact of the With You project through improvements to the training package, organisational toolkit, and project initiatives.



Source: Moore, et al. (2015)

"Just making sure the project doesn't just end here. It keeps building and developing because I think whoever designed it, whoever got it all together, did absolutely fantastic work and it would be such a shame to just see it not get to go anywhere and not continue and not grow."

- eLearning participant

Recommendations

Strategic recommendations for the With You project

1. The With You project continues, requiring funding beyond June 2026.
2. The With You project should be funded to enable scaling 'out', 'up' and 'deep'. This will require additional resourcing in order to achieve systemic impact. For maximum impact, scaling should focus on:
 - a) scaling 'out' the training provision to provide more in-person training, in more locations, including by embracing a local training delivery model
 - b) scaling 'out' the training provision to provide more in-person and online tailored training packages for particular practice cohorts, and refresher trainings for those who have already completed it
 - c) scaling 'up' to engage leadership within the legal assistance sector in leading cultural change to embed trauma-informed practice
 - d) scaling 'deep' to embed trauma-informed knowledge and ideas earlier in legal degrees, legal practice and careers
 - e) scaling 'deep' to embed trauma-informed knowledge throughout the legal and justice sectors (including, but not limited to, private legal practice, and courts).
3. Should additional funding not become available, National Legal Aid should work with its stakeholders to identify:
 - a) an organisational home for the With You project materials and intellectual property to ensure it remains accessible to the sector
 - b) an organisational lead for ongoing advocacy to embed trauma-informed practice across the legal training and practice experience, including advocacy with and to: Legal Aid Commissions, legal assistance peaks, law societies, and the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department
 - c) priorities for achieving systemic impact with limited funding.

Recommendations for the With You project team

4. Clarify the purpose and focus of the With You project, with reference to:
 - a) the role of rights-based practice in the project
 - b) the focus on trauma-informed practice more broadly, or specifically for work with clients who experience complex mental health issues and/or suicidality.
5. Clarify the training pathways through the With You eLearning and facilitated training, including the pathways for completing eLearning modules, and if and how they complement facilitated training.
6. Strengthen the introduction to the training sessions to clarify training purpose, emphasise the likely presence of lived experience of trauma among participants, and ensure the training does not inadvertently reinforce stigma.
7. Provide clearer expectation-setting guidance for With You participants on what the eLearning and facilitated training will include, the perspective and nature of the training, and ways participants can extend their learning beyond the foundational knowledge provided through the With You project. .
8. Develop and provide refresher training for previous participants.
9. Clarify the purpose and format of the Community of Practice:
 - a) if resourcing is limited, reframe the Community of Practice as a seminar series with opportunity for community discussion.
 - b) where possible, implement tailored Communities of Practice for practitioners with common sector expertise to develop long-term connection and a safe space in which to share their practice reflections.
10. Refreshing the Organisational Readiness Toolkit and Legal Aid Commission workshopping process to support legal assistance organisations to own trauma-informed organisational change within their own structures and systems. Support from the With You project to achieve this should include:
 - a) introducing an action planning template (separate to the baseline questions), including a suggested planning process and prompts to assist organisations to rank ideas by importance, identify clear actions and articulate next steps before they leave the workshop
 - b) develop and disseminate case studies of trauma-informed practice at the organisational level, implemented as a result of the With You project to-date
 - c) encouraging Legal Aid Commission executives to own the audit process, by leading and recording the audit discussion (rather than the project team).
 - d) considering whether Legal Aid Commission action planning would be more frank and fruitful if held as an internal discussion, without With You project staff in the room
 - e) discussing supervision in more detail with the sector.
 - f) establish a Legal Aid Commission network where organisations can share their progress and learn from each other, emphasising that actions should be tailored to local context and resourcing.
11. Improving evaluation and data management processes for the evaluation to support consistency between this phase of the project and the next. Detailed technical recommendations on evaluation have been provided in the Technical Report.

Authors

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