



Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins Street East
MELBOURNE VIC 8003
www.pc.gov.au/Indigenous-Evaluation

28 August, 2019

Dear Chair,

**RE: SUBMISSION TO THE INDIGENOUS EVALUATION STRATEGY
GROUND UP TEAM, NORTHERN INSTITUTE, CDU**

We welcome the opportunity to provide this submission, and are keen to support the process of developing a whole of government Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

In recent years, the Ground Up team at the Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University (groundup.cdu.edu.au) has been fortunate to receive funding to undertake both research and service delivery simultaneously in remote Aboriginal townships of the Northern Territory. The combination of research and service delivery allows for collaborations in which services are designed, delivered and evaluated while learning from local elders and authorities and exploring the assumptions underlying our work.

Our work frequently involves developing place-based and site-specific M&E practices, and is:

- Carried out under the guidance of local Aboriginal Elders
- Developed through processes of collaborative design, with Elders, co-researchers and other authorities, as well as government, nongovernment and Aboriginal organisations
- Oriented around measures and principles of success emergent in processes of co-design
- Connected to the development of local Indigenous researcher capacity, and opportunities for recognition and employment of Indigenous researchers.

An example of previous work includes working collaboratively with the Northern Territory government and local Aboriginal Elders, researchers and community members to design processes for evaluating government engagement practices in several remote NT communities. Links below.

- Remote Engagement Coordination Indigenous Evaluation project website – <http://recier.cdu.edu.au>
- Remote Engagement Coordination Indigenous Evaluation Final Report – <http://recier.cdu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/RECIER-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>

This work proceeded via two related processes: (1) collaboratively developing and articulate what counts as good government engagement, (2) developing and co-designing means by which government engagement practices could be monitored and evaluated. Significant to this work was the understanding that appropriate M&E practices were not separate from the particular issue being monitored and evaluated. Also, that attending to differences (e.g. between government and community understandings) of the issue at hand, was a key factor in enabling M&E to produce meaningful improvement and change, rather than the default reproduction of ‘business as usual’.

Processes for monitoring and evaluating government engagement included:

- The development of local evaluation research teams
- Design of video monitoring techniques (accompanied by local interpretations of good or poor practice) allowing feedback in real time
- Development of networks of message exchange enabling iterative learning and translation of evaluation insights

These practices and processes are now being adapted and re-designed within the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the **NTG Local Decision Making Strategy**.

BEYOND ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

Our response to the issues paper concerns the need for collaborative co-design of evaluation approaches, which connect meaningfully with local issues and priorities, as well as practices of knowledge and governance within government and on the ground.

In our experience, a one-size fits all approach tends to reproduce problems they seek to solve, imposing ideas from elsewhere and displacing or invisibilising what is valued in the places where programs and services are delivered, and elements crucial to local (and therefore overall) program success.

Development of principles, methods and approaches for place and issue specific evaluation practices can be difficult to achieve on a broad scale, but there are useful methods being developed in collaboration with communities in the NT (see above).

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Evaluation research is often carried out in partnership with research organisations, and/or local consultants. In our experience, the quality and effectiveness of M&E is significantly increased when it involves skilled and well-supported local consultants.

Likewise, the character of the partnership negotiated with these consultants will have a significant effect on the value of evaluation research and outcomes achieved. Partnerships can be arranged in such ways that they produce an extension of top-down agendas on the ground. OR they can be developed in locally negotiated ways, so as to consider the character and design of data collection processes, means by which local consultants and other evaluation researchers or funders will engage

with each other, and the appropriate division of labour between different participating organisations and researchers.

Open negotiations around the character that partnerships will take are likely to enable economic savings around otherwise costly research processes, and are likely to produce better, and more robust, evaluation outcomes.

DIFFERENCES IN KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES

We've found that moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach can mean focussing not just on identified priorities for evaluation, but also on differences in knowledge practices – that is differences around what counts as data and/or evidence, and how these they may be collected.

Standard approaches to M&E often assume that there can be a clear and consistent understanding of what counts as data and/or evidence, and accompanying research processes. Within our work, we have found that there is frequently no consensus around what counts as evidence, and we frequently negotiate between quite differing understandings of good and correct processes for data collection.

However, these differences do not need to stifle or slow down M&E work.

When these differences are read as valuable and instructive, they become crucial elements within the M&E process. These differences provide openings by which mainstream Western assumptions about processes of doing M&E can mesh with local cultural and other priorities. This goes beyond focussing on Indigenous interests, to also include Indigenous ways of knowing, collaborating and supporting younger generations to configure research processes and feature within M&E design and implementation.

GENERATIVE OUTCOMES IN PLACE

When considering key principles of effective evaluation, the location of outcomes is significant. We have found that lists of protocols and best practice action may sound good and look to be effective, but often they are ensuring feedback is provided to government departments far removed from the communities whom the M&E work is supposed to serve.

Ensuring that there are generative outcomes that make sense and can be experienced in-place also ensures the maximal impact of M&E processes.

The significance of this commitment is two-fold. Firstly, concerning the manner in which M&E is recognised as requiring sensitive local knowledge and cross-cultural work in many situations, and as a potential employment and training opportunity for local partners. Recognising this can open the way for upskilling and increased levels of local employment, particularly in remote areas.

Secondly, concerning the manner in which department and program staff, as well as policy makers and advisors, are implicated in the work of M&E. M&E is only beneficial to the extent that actual program and system change can flow from feedback received. It is likely, that feedback (and forms of evidence and reporting practice) that are sensible to recipients of Indigenous programs and services, will not be easily understood or accommodated at higher levels of management. However, requiring a response from policy and program staff that can be felt and experienced on the ground would help to guide and orient responses, keeping them local and meaningful.

Details and examples of our research work, including other Monitoring and Evaluation projects can be found at <http://groundup.cdu.edu.au>.

If you have any further queries about this research or the approaches and comments detailed, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

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