



Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

NIAA Submission

In response to Productivity Commission Issues Paper 'Developing a whole-of-government Indigenous Evaluation Strategy', June 2019

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy project.

The 2017-18 Budget provided \$50 million over four years to strengthen evaluation of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) and to establish an Indigenous Policy Research Fund. In 2018 the Indigenous Affairs Group of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet developed the IAS Evaluation Framework. This Framework was developed in consultation with Indigenous stakeholders and experts in evaluation and research. The Framework is available at: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/indigenous-advancement-strategy-evaluation-framework>.

The IAS Evaluation Framework aims to ensure evaluations of programs and policies advanced by the NIAA are high quality, ethical, inclusive and focused on improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians. In this submission the NIAA draws on work already underway as a result of implementing the IAS Evaluation Framework to provide examples of putting best practice principles into action and articulating lessons learned.

The objective of the IAS Evaluation Framework is to ensure that evaluation is high quality, ethical, inclusive and focused on improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians. We consider that improving the lives of Indigenous Australians is the most important objective for any evaluation framework. We are using the IAS Evaluation Framework to drive improvements in the following three areas:

Collaboration: how our approach to evaluation reflects a strong commitment to working with Indigenous Australians.


- Developing the core values central to the IAS Evaluation Framework.
- Establishing an Indigenous Evaluation Committee.
- Funding for the Better Evaluation website.
- The role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the Closing the Gap partnership.

Capability: our journey so far and the significant improvements those who commission, participate in, or produce evaluations can make.

- Evaluation capacity building.
- Data for evaluation.
- Ethics and evaluation design.

Knowledge: how the NIAA aims to support better use of the knowledge produced by evaluations and how we operationalise our commitment to transparency and accountability.

- Generating transferable knowledge which can be used more broadly.

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- Deciding what knowledge needs to be produced.
 - Transparency through publishing evaluations.

Our framework is an example of how core values and best practice principles can be applied to guide a consistent approach to evaluation activity.

Many of the challenges we face in improving the quality and use of evaluation are evident in international evaluation literature (Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; McDonald et al. 2013; Labin, 2014). At NIAA we see an opportunity to demonstrate the unique strengths inherent to the people with whom we work. We continue to learn, innovate, and aspire towards best practice in evaluation.

Collaboration

The IAS Evaluation Framework aims to foster Indigenous leadership in evaluation, and bring diverse perspectives into evaluation processes to ensure the relevance, credibility and usefulness of evaluation findings. We promote the involvement of Indigenous Australian evaluators in conducting evaluation, particularly using participatory methods to grow our mutual understanding. We also promote the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the commissioning and designing of evaluations so findings are relevant to decision-makers in communities as well as governments.

Developing a shared understanding of evaluation while also valuing diverse perspectives is not a straight-forward task. An Indigenous evaluation framework will need to acknowledge the great diversity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples, communities and cultures. A one-size-fits-all approach to evaluation is unlikely to yield high quality, ethical and inclusive evaluations. The following are the ways we are trying to meet this challenge.


Core values of the IAS Evaluation Framework

All too often evaluation questions (and therefore findings) are framed by the deficit discourse (Fogarty et al., 2018). Our approach to evaluation reflects a strong commitment to working with Indigenous Australians.

In developing the IAS Evaluation Framework we listened to ideas and suggestions from Indigenous Australians who have experience in evaluation. One of these was to have a set of core values to recognise the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and cultures. The core values stipulate evaluations need to test the extent to which IAS programs and activities:

- build on strengths to make a positive contribution to the lives of current and future generations of Indigenous Australians;
- are designed and delivered in collaboration with Indigenous Australians, ensuring diverse voices are heard and respected; and
- demonstrate cultural respect towards Indigenous Australians.

Core values provide a consistent reference point for assessing 'appropriateness'. They also enable decision-makers to better understand and determine the merit, worth and significance of policies and programs across the whole of the IAS (for more information on the role of 'values' in doing high quality



evaluation see Davidson, 2005). The core values of the IAS Evaluation Framework also form the foundation for the best practice principles we use.

Asking evaluation questions using a set of core values enables an evaluative judgement to be made about the merit, worth, or significance (Davidson, 2005) of a policy or program from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The intersection between mainstream services and Indigenous specific-services is an important consideration in developing a whole-of-government evaluation framework. There are lessons to be learned from evaluating Indigenous specific services which can be applied to evaluation of targeted and mainstream policies, programs and services, and vice versa. For example, evaluation of Indigenous specific initiatives under the IAS will be strengthened by consideration of the broader context of policies and programs common to all Australians, such as the tax system or access to hospitals.

Indigenous Evaluation Committee

Our approach to evaluation reflects a strong commitment to transparency and rigor. An Indigenous Evaluation Committee (Committee) was established as part of the IAS evaluation framework. The Committee helps strengthen the quality, credibility, and influence of the evaluation of policies and programs now led by the NIAA. Additionally, the Committee provides strategic and technical advice, and quality assurance. It is modelled on the Independent Evaluation Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. An important factor in the appointment of members was to ensure a majority of representatives are Indigenous Australians who also have expertise in conducting evaluations through an 'Indigenous lens'.


The NIAA draws on the expertise of Committee members to mature our practice and to ensure that evaluations are relevant, robust, credible and appropriate. Information about the Indigenous Evaluation Committee is available at: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/evaluations-and-evidence/indigenous-evaluation-committee>.

Better evaluation website

The NIAA can help foster a shared understanding of the evaluation of programs and policies that affect Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders that goes beyond the agency's work.

The NIAA aims to embed Indigenous perspectives at all stages of evaluation design and conduct. In order to develop easily available public resource material on Indigenous evaluation, we have provided funding to support the extension of the *BetterEvaluation* website. Public materials are being provided through a page on the Better Evaluation website dedicated to Indigenous evaluation. The page aims to raise the profile of the opportunities and challenges for doing high-quality and culturally responsive evaluation with Indigenous communities or people. This material will not only be used by NIAA; it will also assist in building an inclusive, culturally aware approach to evaluation in other organisations.

Advice provided by *BetterEvaluation* is available at <https://www.betterevaluation.org/>. By providing this material in the public domain via the *BetterEvaluation* website, we seek to ensure all people and organisations participating in evaluation can access similar resources to develop a stronger shared



understanding of evaluation approaches suited to Indigenous contexts. This includes building community perspectives into the purpose of the evaluation, for example by setting a benchmark for 'what success looks like'. It also suggests community participation in evaluation should continue through analysis, interpretation of results and developing recommendations. Importantly, it asks evaluators to also consider how an evaluation report can equip communities to advocate for themselves.

BetterEvaluation has demonstrated a culturally sensitive approach to curating and co-creating material for this website, which includes the review of appropriate case examples.

We recognise agencies will need to develop their own approach to evaluation to suit the needs of their particular policy area. We also recognise agencies are at different stages of maturity in developing frameworks and undertaking evaluation. A challenge we all need to be aware of is that there may be key ingredients missing to support, enable, and resource evaluations.

Closing the Gap: the role of M&E in partnership

Closing the Gap Refresh aims to prioritise efforts to drive intergenerational change by increasing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to reach their full potential through leading the lives they value. The draft refreshed framework has a strong focus on early investment and a life course approach. This recognises that safe environments, health and wellbeing and education have profound impacts on an individual's socio-economic outcomes later in life. This was reflected in the draft targets landed in December 2018 COAG.

The Refresh agenda provides an overarching policy framework for prioritising government efforts and investment for Indigenous Australians. COAG agreed to form a genuine formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to finalise the Closing the Gap Refresh in December 2018.


On 22 March 2019, a formal Partnership agreement on Closing the Gap, between COAG and the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) came into effect. The Partnership recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must play an integral part in making the decisions affecting their lives. The Partnership will embed shared decision making into the design, implementation and monitoring of the Closing the Gap framework.

One important emphasis from the Partnership is how the future review and monitoring of the Refresh's progress will inform policy making in improving Closing the Gap outcomes. Evaluating programs and policies are likely to play a more prominent role in the Closing the Gap Refresh. The *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* led by the Productivity Commission is an important step forward. The final framework and approach from the Productivity Commission's *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* can play an important role in guiding and informing future review and evaluation of the Closing the Gap Refresh.

Consideration needs to be given towards strategic alignment of a whole-of-government Indigenous evaluation strategy with the Closing the Gap Refresh targets. This alignment needs to occur prior to deciding on evaluation topics and methods.

Capability

Significant improvements in evaluation capability and capacity are needed. This is what the IAS Evaluation Framework refers to as 'building a culture of evaluative thinking'. The ANAO recently undertook a performance audit titled 'Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs'. The ANAO found "implementation and management of the IAS evaluation framework is partially effective.



Management oversight arrangements are developing, and evaluation advice provided to program area staff has been relevant and high quality. The department has not developed a reliable methodology for measuring outcomes of the framework and its evaluation procedures are still being developed" (2019, p.8). The audit is available on the ANAO website at: <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/evaluating-indigenous-programs>. To monitor our organisational change journey towards an agency which routinely undertakes evaluation and uses evidence from evaluations to inform decision making, the NIAA employs an evaluation maturity model. This can be found in Appendix 3 of the ANAO audit report.

Capability, as an area of focus in the IAS Evaluation Framework, relates to a larger system wide change where evaluation is embedded into policy and program design, and continues throughout delivery and implementation. It requires organisations to embrace a learning orientation in delivery of policies and programs, whilst striking a balance with compliance and accountability requirements. Both government and non-government organisations, who are funding recipients, stand to benefit from capability development in evaluation.

Evaluation Capacity Building

Agencies may be at different stages of maturity in undertaking evaluations and developing evaluation capability. The Productivity Commission may want to consider including several goals in its strategy, such as building capability in the Australian Public Service as well as more widely in the sector. Increasing demand for, and use of, high quality evaluation is also important. Whatever the goals and principles the whole-of-government Indigenous Evaluation Strategy contains, NIAA suggests it may benefit from a Theory of Change to make explicit the causal linkages between its activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts.

The IAS Evaluation Framework uses a Theory of Change for the development of a mature evaluation system, including the assumptions that:


- Setting and promoting standards through the Best Practice Principles will improve the quality of evaluation;
- Better quality evaluation will be more useful to policy development and decision making; and
- Leadership at many levels of the Department can influence staff attitudes and behaviours in undertaking evaluation.

Data for evaluation

The IAS evaluation framework places considerable emphasis on the collection of relevant data and putting in place the systems needed to safely collect and store that data

Indigenous data is a broad concept, and includes data ranging from a single item in a mainstream survey to community-collected and owned data. This data is currently governed through a number of arrangements, including legislation, agreements, guidelines and policies.

The governance arrangements most commonly drawn on in NIAA include protocols such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (GERAIS), and expert panels or other advisory arrangements established in response to the needs of a specific evaluation or research project. These arrangements are invaluable



tools for the improvement of Indigenous data practices and enable Indigenous perspectives to feature more prominently in conversations concerning the use of Indigenous data. Such arrangements support and prioritise the ethical use of Indigenous data in government initiatives.

The effectiveness of governance arrangements will in part be determined by the extent to which they acknowledge the data they are dealing with is 'Indigenous', and the potential impact of this on the lives of those represented in the datasets. Additionally, the effectiveness of governance arrangements will increasingly be determined by their ability to respond to a general shift towards opening up, linking and sharing data.

Good governance of Indigenous data enables the collection and availability of data relevant to the priorities of Indigenous peoples and communities. A crucial component of good data governance is the active involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in making decisions concerning the management of Indigenous data.

In response to calls for improvement in the management of Indigenous data, NIAA is developing a whole-of-government Indigenous Data Strategy. The Strategy will be guided by Indigenous leaders who are experienced in the use of Indigenous data. It will seek to make improvements to the way governments collect, manage and use Indigenous data, with a view to more effectively meeting the data needs of Indigenous communities and organisations.

Ethics and evaluation design


It is important to differentiate between research methods and methodology (Walter & Andersen, 2013, p.10). Methodology goes beyond a research method to consider, from a researcher's standpoint, the ways in which data is collected, analysed and interpreted and the conceptual framework which sits behind this (Walter, 2010). In effect this means there is no singular method, rather there is a reframing of the questions asked throughout an evaluation.

Evaluation designs are improved by integrating methodology with ethical guidelines, such as those produced by AIATSIS. By recognising methodology includes three elements (method, conceptual framework, and standpoint) we can consider how to integrate ethical principles into evaluation design, rather than treat them as a separate task, or as an after-thought. NIAA welcomes the recent update to the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies, as this will better assist evaluators in shaping ethical evaluation design so both the conceptual framework and standpoint can guide the choice of methods appropriate to the purpose of an evaluation study.

As a commissioner of evaluations, the NIAA recognises a need to engage with ethical guidelines beyond mere compliance. To support our strengthened approach to ethical evaluation practice, NIAA has engaged AIATSIS to provide advice on ethics as well as tailored training packages for NIAA staff to learn how ethics informs evaluation design and research methodology. The contract with AIATSIS provides:

- Review of ethics applications by the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee (noting ethics review may also be sought from other registered Human Research Ethics Committees);
- Advice to policy and program areas on ethics clearance processes and requirements; and
- Coaching to support policy and program areas' capabilities to consider how they might apply ethical considerations at the design phase of an evaluation.

Public Officers who visit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to evaluate government programs should undertake cultural security training as a minimum requirement to have an



understanding of Indigenous peoples, cultures and histories and an understanding of culturally safe practice. The NIAA is developing a new cultural competency program, Footprints, which will focus on continuous personal and professional learning and growth. Footprints articulates a minimum professional standard of cultural learning practice for all NIAA staff to improve cultural capability and ensure excellence and safety when engaging with staff and stakeholders.

Knowledge

Transparency of evaluation effort and knowledge produced

To further ensure transparency, the NIAA publishes its Annual Evaluation Work Plan which covers completed evaluations, evaluations currently underway and recently agreed evaluations expected to commence in the year following publication. It also includes activities underway in preparation for future evaluations —such as evaluation strategies. The work plan is endorsed by the Indigenous Evaluation Committee and approved by the NIAA Executive Board.

Evaluation strategies guide the design of and determine the feasibility of future evaluations. Other enabling activities seek to build the capability of Indigenous organisations to undertake high-quality evaluations for policies and programs supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These projects are included in the Work Plan in order to enable the conduct of good quality evaluation.

Sharing evaluations helps inform design, delivery and decision-making. Under the IAS Evaluation Framework, all evaluation reports or summaries are to be made publicly available. In cases where ethical confidentiality concerns or commercial in confidence requirements trigger a restricted release, summaries of the findings will be published in lieu of a full report.

Under the IAS Evaluation Framework, the NIAA makes clear its commitment to share evaluation results with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation participants. This is consistent with research ethics requirements, and supports evaluation use by communities. Providing community reports before the public release of a main report recognises the importance of ongoing engagement with community. It provides an opportunity for communities to ask questions about the findings.

Producing generalisable and transferable knowledge

NIAA encourages a broad based approach to undertaking evaluations, which draws upon a range of evaluation traditions. Under the IAS Evaluation Framework, NIAA bases the choice of evaluation methods on a range of factors including the specific evaluation question(s) and body of existing evidence (Deaton and Cartwright 2018:1); and the need to integrate Indigenous community values, knowledge and perspectives to ensure findings are useful, credible and helpful (Grey et al, 2016).

In some contexts, randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are ascribed special status as the optimal method for rigorous impact evaluation. As a consequence, RCTs are widely perceived as more reliable and credible than other empirical methods for conducting research and evaluations (Deaton and Cartwright, 2018). RCTs require adherence to specific protocols during program implementation, which limits their applicability and feasibility. However, there are a range of alternative methods for evaluating program impacts, including quasi-experimental and theory-based approaches. In determining which approach to use, we consider expert advice on the strengths and weakness of different experimental and non-experimental approaches. We also promote the use of mixed methods to ensure adequate coverage of Indigenous perspectives and to generate findings relevant and useful to both Indigenous communities and government. The NIAA also recognises place-based approaches and co-design of policies and programs require evaluation design that is adaptive and addresses complexity.



What should be produced?

Knowledge translation and utilisation is an essential component of an evaluation strategy. Knowledge generated by evaluations should translate across topics, locations, and policy eras, and provide the evidence base for improvements to policy and program design.

There is significant diversity across policy areas that will need to be considered in developing a whole-of-government strategy for evaluating policies and programs affecting indigenous Australians. As such, the framework that underpins this strategy should be broad enough to be applied to mainstream government programs and have at its core the objective to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians

It is important to allow space for tailoring evaluation methodologies developed through the strategy to the specifics of the policies and programs being evaluated. It is unlikely a one-size-fits-all approach will work to generate meaningful, relevant and useful findings for Indigenous communities as well as government.

The role of NIAA encompasses a number of major government initiatives including the IAS, the Indigenous Procurement Policy, Housing National Partnerships, the Community Development Program, and the Closing the Gap strategy.

Most of the evaluation work undertaken to-date has focused on the impact of the IAS, which covers a diverse range of social, economic and environmental investments which aim to improve outcomes for Indigenous people. Evaluations of individual programs funded under the IAS have faced many of the challenges common in evaluations of small and large-scale social programs tackling persistent, multi-dimensional problems:

- They may be delivered in diverse ways across regions; while many of the evaluation methods commonly used are often better suited to assessing the effect of one clearly defined and uniformly implemented policy intervention or lever;
- Stakeholders may have different views of the value of the program or policy and how it should be measured or assessed. High quality evaluation incorporates Indigenous perspectives in refining knowledge about outcomes and in broader framing of the definitions of program success;
- Establishing attribution is often challenging, because the scale of IAS investment is small relative to other mainstream investments in a policy area;
- Determining impact is also constrained by the complexity of the policy environment. In these contexts, it is difficult to separate the effects of one program from the influences of a range of other factors which can affect an outcome.
- The pace of change poses challenges for traditional evaluation cycles, with policy reforms often implemented before the full effects of an initial policy intervention can be observed. Our approach has been to plan evaluation phases for each new phase of reforms; and build in early interim reports to provide timely feedback on implementation and early impacts. \

To effectively use knowledge, a culture of evaluative thinking within, and across organisations, is required.



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