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## The Interplay Project's response to the Productivity Commission on the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

The Interplay Project appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's (Commission) draft *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, and strongly supports its foregrounding and centring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives, priorities and knowledges throughout the whole evaluation process and lifecycle. Interplay is also pleased that the Commission has extended the proposed Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (Strategy) beyond Indigenous-specific policies and programs, acknowledging the significance of the whole-of-government Strategy and mainstream programs and policies in affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

Interplay offers some points for reflection and consideration, particularly around how community involvement in evaluation will be embedded throughout all stages of the evaluation process and some concern about the extent to which the principle of transparency will actually be applied through the Strategy. Our response outlines how Interplay addresses these concerns.

The response contains the following sections:

- An introduction to Interplay
- An overview of some of the practices that Interplay uses to enact our values
- Some brief comments about evaluation practice in Australia focusing on the disconnect between community involvement in evaluation and resulting policy impacts
- Suggestions for effective Indigenous governance of evaluations under the Strategy
- Some critical comments about how the principle of transparency is applied in the draft Strategy
- Some recommendations for the design of the Evaluation Clearinghouse
- A case study of Interplay's evaluation work
- A summary version of Interplay's Cultural Data Protocols

## The Interplay Project: our background

The Interplay Project is a diverse team working with communities, government, not-for-profit organisations and other partners to collaboratively evaluate for impact. Our vision is for all people to be empowered to experience optimal wellbeing from the safety and strength of their own culture. We work towards this by collaboratively building science around different ways of knowing and being. Building on our wellbeing research, we now support communities and partners to incorporate community-defined values and measures of success into evaluation practice.

The Interplay Wellbeing Framework and indicators were developed from the ground up over 6 years in Aboriginal communities in remote Australia, through a collaboration between Ninti One Foundation, the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Flinders University as part of the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation. Our research found that community values such as knowledge of the land, the strength of family connections, culture, language, empowerment and resilience are key to understanding and measuring wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Consistent with the Commission's Guiding Principles and theory of change for the Strategy as outlined in Figure One (Productivity Commission 2020:11), Interplay places Indigenous peoples, values, knowledges and perspectives at the centre of our work.

## Different approaches for enacting Interplay's values

Some of the key approaches adopted by Interplay to put our values into practice include: our use of well-being indicators in ongoing evaluation work; applying our 'Shared Space' model for collaboration and co-design; creating a 'Story of Change' which brings a community lense into theory of change; socialising findings; and building evaluation capabilities with both communities and partners.

### **a. Community informed indicators**

Interplay's evaluations continue to use and build on well-being indicators which have been developed with, informed and validated by Aboriginal communities during our well-being research phase and ongoing work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. These well-being indicators reflect and capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples values and definitions of what outcomes look like and how these should be measured. In our continued work developing these indicators we apply an assessment of quality using criteria which considers aspects such as community definitions, comparability and translatability.

### **b. Interplay Shared Space model**

At Interplay, we use a 'Shared Space' way of working together, bringing community stakeholders into the design process so programs are designed and evaluated based on shared measures of success. All partners in the shared space model collaborate at every

level and at every stage. Importantly, our shared space model allows for sense-making across all partners, thereby supporting shared decision-making and action-taking.

We harness the value that can be achieved in improving outcomes and achieving the desired program impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by involving program beneficiaries in the design, implementation and review process. The Circles of Care Yarrabah Case Study provided (page 8) outlines how the shared space model not only facilitates respectful and meaningful collaboration but also can build evaluation capability.

#### **c. Interplay Story of Change (a community informed Theory of Change)**

In order to anchor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives, knowledges and cultures in our approach to Indigenous evaluations, we begin with capturing these worldviews and applying these into a Theory of Change, which we refer to as a *Story of Change*. This process can build from existing program logics or theories of change, which are typically developed by and from the perspective of program funding bodies and program owners rather than from the grassroots community perspective. Interplay's Story of Change provides a practical approach to centre and value Indigenous perspectives into articulating what communities see are steps that lead to effective change and how such change and outcomes should best be measured.

#### **d. Socialisation of findings - going beyond a report**

We prioritise ensuring our communications are relevant and contextualised for the different partners in our shared space by adapting our communications and socialising evaluation findings in order to ensure these are accessible to each group. Examples of how we have done this have included translating findings into local languages, providing feedback loops through yarning circles, hosting local community events, and using multimedia such as short documentary videos capturing stories and learnings from the grassroots community level.

With 'Impact' being one of Interplay's core values, we demonstrate impact by creating space to bring program and policy funders, beneficiaries, and other partners together to shape the evaluation design. This includes a collaborative effort to identify how evidence from an evaluation can best be presented and shared in ways which are fit-for-purpose and tailored to specific audiences needs. We go beyond just writing an evaluation report or simply sharing evaluation findings. Instead we strive to 'socialise' our research and evaluation findings, in ways that best suit community and partner needs. We have showcased and launched findings with special community events in collaboration with communities, provided targeted policy debriefings, and developed innovative interactive data visualisation tools that are able to be used and accessed by both communities and partners time and time again for a lasting impact.

#### **e. Capability building essential to effective and influential evaluation**

The Interplay Project acknowledges the unique expertise and value-add that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as researchers and evaluators offer to achieving quality evaluations with methodological rigour that is also culturally responsive. Over the years we

have worked with many local community researchers, and in doing so, have provided on the job training and mentoring (for example, in survey design and data collection).

It is to be commended that the Commission has captured capability building considerations throughout the entire evaluation process within the Strategy. The success of the Strategy in meeting its objectives will rely on an investment in Indigenous-led and Indigenous-centred evaluation capability development across government and the evaluation sector.

We also acknowledge the importance for non-Indigenous evaluators to build their capability in culturally safe and responsive practice. Capability building beyond evaluation specific expertise is necessary. Effective communication, engagement, the ability to facilitate diverse views and ability to centre the community voice in co-design approaches are just some of the basic requirements. There is a need to invest in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluator workforce and create leadership opportunities that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to drive and influence evaluation practice.

## The disconnect between community involvement, evaluations and policy impacts

We are pleased to see the draft Strategy draws attention to how commissioning evaluations needs to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives, knowledges and cultures (Productivity Commission 2020:15). We second this importance from the initial evaluation stages as critical in achieving improvement in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Without this, there is a risk of evaluation co-design being arbitrary and flawed if evaluation design parameters are pre-determined without giving regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives in the scoping and design.

Too often, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities volunteer and invest an incredible amount of time and effort contributing to government consultations, research and evaluations without meaningful reciprocity being established for the communication of findings, outcomes and policy impacts. At the Interplay Project we address this by collaboratively building into our evaluation processes from the outset a transparent plan which captures an understanding of evaluation needs, priorities and participation benefits for all partners involved in the shared space. The Circles of Care Yarrabah Case Study we've provided points to how we have valued and responded to local community needs and priorities by incorporating evaluation capability strengthening into the evaluation project and also tailoring how data can be collected, reported and accessed in a meaningful and useful way.

## Indigenous governance and Indigenous evaluation

In considering Indigenous governance arrangements to support the Strategy's implementation we highlight that whilst national governance arrangements, such as the proposed establishment of an Indigenous Evaluation Council, have a role in leadership and accountability oversight for the Strategy's success, evaluation practice must also be respectful of the diversity amongst and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples, communities and cultures. The Strategy should also raise the importance of valuing and respecting local Indigenous governance and leadership groups in which evaluations are taking place. This includes a need for evaluators to give respectful regard to the local contexts in which an evaluation takes place and to ensure local cultural protocols are adhered to as part of centering the perspectives, priorities and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' in the evaluation.

We note that the draft Strategy points to potential evaluation priorities based on the Closing the Gap draft policy priorities (which have been developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations). As acknowledged in the recently released National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to close the gap, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must determine, drive and own the desired outcomes, alongside all governments. With this shift in approach, we highlight that in evaluation practice it is important for evaluation commissioners to have flexibility in determining evaluation scope and priorities within each evaluation, to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the opportunity to influence, determine and drive how evaluations will be undertaken so that community priorities are also taken into account.

Such flexibility in determining the scope and priority of each evaluation is an essential means for incorporating equity considerations throughout the evaluation process. Following, Peersman and Rogers it will be important to consider whose values are taken into account when determining evaluation criteria, standards and synthesis and whether 'success' must entail an overall improvement or a reduction in equity gaps (Peersman, G. & Rogers, P. 2016). Ultimately, attention must be paid to the critical question of weighing benefits and harms, both in terms of their distribution and in terms of their impacts.

## Four Guiding Principles: unclear & insufficient transparency

The grounding of the four Guiding Principles in the overarching Principle of centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities is to be lauded, but questions must be asked about the extent to which the transparency principle will be applied and facilitated. Ideally, the transparency principle in the Strategy could further reciprocity in the form of learning, accountability and capability building.

The draft report refers to the importance of publishing evaluation reports in order to allow a broad range of stakeholders to learn from the insights from evaluation. This is a good first step, but more is required in order to facilitate comparative and integrated learning from evaluations of multiple programs and policies across multiple locations and at multiple levels of analysis.

In addition to the useful elements of 'Transparent evaluation in practice', laid out on page 19 of the draft Strategy, publishing the terms of reference agreed between the commissioning Agency and the evaluation consultancy would demonstrate commitment to transparency and accountability. Transparency should also include a commitment to timely publication of reports, including methodological and design aspects, formative and summative, interim and final reports.

The section on transparency refers to the clear documentation of methods, data, ethical practices and the limitations of an evaluation and its results. These are important elements of beneficial evaluation practice, but they are merely the first steps of a commitment to enacting transparency in order to achieve the shared goal of improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The requirement for clear documentation should be the preparatory basis for equitable and fair sharing of data.

There is much good work being done on reconciling and integrating the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty with the FAIR Data Principles, which are a set of guiding principles in order to make data findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable. One key example of this is the Global Indigenous Data Alliances' CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance, which are an important development in recognising the importance of data to the advancement of Indigenous self-determination.

The draft Strategy adopting a whole-of-government approach inclusive of mainstream policies and programs is a tacit acknowledgement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' wellbeing is affected by a broad range of policies and programs, at multiple levels of jurisdiction and action. This underpins the necessary connection between the whole-of-government approach, accountability and the importance of sharing evaluation data.

## Interplay's Cultural Data Protocols and Indigenous Data Sovereignty: suggestions for extending the role of the Evaluation Clearinghouse

Interplay has developed Cultural Data Protocols to define the relevant principles and to inform its approach to working with Community Leaders, Elders, and Traditional Owners on the ethical collection and use of its research and evaluation data. This encompasses questions of Data Sovereignty, Governance, Management, Access and Use as well as ensuring that the analysis, interpretation and translation of all data is consistent with and beneficial to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing.

The work of the Global Indigenous Data Alliance and the relevant Working and Interest Groups of the Research Data Alliance is consistent with Interplay's approach in developing its Cultural Data Protocols and it must be emphasised that this work is essential to and should be embedded within the Strategy, both as a set of principles and as concomitant institutional structures.

Transparency in all aspects of evaluation practice and reporting will contribute directly to the credibility, usefulness and ethicality of evaluations conducted in accordance with the Strategy. The sharing of data will facilitate continuous quality improvement of all stages of evaluation practice as well as creating opportunities for the aggregation, synthesis and integration of evaluation findings. It is imperative that evaluations continue to be useful and that usefulness be determined by and beneficial for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' wellbeing. The importance of sharing evaluation data is reinforced by it being

established as one of the Priority Reform Areas in the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

Some of the institutional and organisational architecture that are required in order to facilitate these types of work include evaluation and data repositories that are established and governed consistently with the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty. This must be complemented by initiatives and resourcing in developing statistical literacy and capabilities at the community level.

There are repositories that specialise in the curation and storage of qualitative data, such as the Qualitative Data Repository hosted out of Syracuse University, which provides the infrastructure and training for managing data and in handling sensitive data. Similarly, initiatives such as Dataverse provide the infrastructure for organisations to host data in nested structures with permissions that are determined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' and communities' requirements. There is the opportunity for varying levels of control and governance over data and datasets within an Indigenous Evaluation Dataverse, meaning that the ongoing usefulness of evaluations may sit with Community rather than with non-community commissioning agencies.

The call for the establishment of an Evaluation Clearinghouse is to be supported, but it must be complemented by other institutional developments in data governance, documentation, management, storage, curation, governance, access and use. These steps are essential to truly building capability and a culture of evaluation. Given that the importance of ongoing usefulness and access of evaluation data may determine whether the Evaluation Clearinghouse should simply sit within an existing independent statutory authority, or whether it should also be designed in line with open-source frameworks and principles. Some of these considerations may be relevant to the long-term accessibility and usability of outputs associated with the Strategy.

## **A Case Study of Interplay's evaluation approach: Circles of Care Yarrabah**

Community-led organisation, Circles of Care Yarrabah, is a service that helps local families and schools work together to achieve positive outcomes for children's learning and wellbeing.

Circles of Care Yarrabah wanted to develop their services to better reflect the cultural needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people they work with. The Interplay Project has been working with community leaders to co-design a 'Story of Change' and evaluation methodology using the Interplay wellbeing framework and validated community well-being indicators to measure things that the community cared about.

Two-way learning is one of Interplay's core values and in this project we're bringing the community along the evaluation journey from the outset, with a two-way sharing and learning processes that has involved us collaboratively selecting indicators to build into our technology platform, to create a mobile survey app tailored for the Circles of Care clients and partners.

Continuously updated evaluation data is able to be analysed and shown visually on an Interplay Map that keeps the community and funders on the same page, informing their collective decision-making about how to create impact and support continuous quality improvements in their program.