

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR PRIMARY CARE &  
AGEING**  
August 2020

# **Submission - Indigenous Evaluation Strategy Draft**

Feedback

## **ABOUT AIPCA**

The Australian Institute for Primary Care & Ageing (AIPCA) is a dedicated research, evaluation and consultancy organisation at La Trobe University. Through research, evaluation, consultancy and educational activities AIPCA advances knowledge and promotes quality improvement and consumer-driven, evidence-based practice in all areas of primary health, community health and aged care. Our goal is to make a significant, positive and enduring impact on the way health and community care is delivered and accessed. We provide independent research, expert advice and practical resources to help build better health systems and services. Our work is characterised by a collaborative multidisciplinary perspective underpinned by an evidence-based approach. We take pride in providing creative ideas and thinking as well as practical and relevant outcomes. We work with a range of government and not for profit organisations.

Understanding the impact of programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well as a deeper understanding of which programs work for specific communities and in specific circumstances can add value in informing decisions about policy and program development. AIPCA supports the direction of the draft strategy. We support the need for genuine and authentic engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in program development and evaluation. Our feedback below focuses on practical aspects of the strategy to ensure a sound and valuable evaluation process.

### **Evaluators as experts**

Evaluators bring a range of specialised expertise in understanding the value of programs and policies. Our experience has shown that funders may be guided by the need to demonstrate activity against funding without a sound and detailed understanding of which evaluation methods and approaches may be the most useful. This can lead to approaches to market that do not accurately describe what is required.

Without expert input into the most appropriate evaluation approach and parameters for approaches to market, the evaluation requirements may constrain what is offered and delivered, potentially resulting in a lack of scope or ability to uncover key issues which would add value to the policy cycle. Evaluators can play a key role in shaping or recommending appropriate evaluation requirements as well as assisting in implementing evaluation findings. In some instances, commissioning agencies have selected a provider on the basis of their response to criteria that need to be revised dramatically once the evaluator has gained more detailed information. The strategy could consider how evaluators could be drawn upon in scoping the evaluation approach.

In addition, government staff have reported to us that their internal capacity to follow through with evaluation recommendations or implementation is often constrained as resources are not allocated as part of the overall evaluation activity. There are various points in the evaluation process that can create change and improvement which should be factored into the resources provided for the evaluation. This is particularly important when the focus is on process evaluation and is highlighted through the “developmental evaluation” approach.

### **Building on best practice**

The background paper references a lack of sound evaluation work in engaging the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community with evaluation focusing on ‘compliance rather than impact’. We feel that this does not ring true for many health evaluations that have demonstrated a useful approach in engagement in

the evaluation process. Targeted approaches for some areas of government or industry (more than others) may be required to improve skills. The focus on compliance may also be related to the point made above about understanding the methods and approaches that could be used in evaluating programs. An exploration of recent best practice could be part of the work of setting up the Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation (OIPE).

### **Flexibility in the evaluation process**

We have found that flexibility and agility in the evaluation process is essential in working with communities, funders and providers in achieving the overall objective of understanding the program's value. While it is useful to identify the stages in an evaluation cycle and the appropriate methodologies, the ability to create and maintain useful and reciprocal relationships is critical in building trust in the evaluation process. Referencing the ways in which evaluators can work beyond standard methodologies and incorporating aspects outside the program model could be helpful.

### **The Distinction between Research and Evaluation**

The Strategy appears to be aimed at agencies who conduct evaluations, without recognising that a lot of evidence that is consistent with the definition of evaluation comes from applied research. In practice, there is a poorly defined relationship between research and evaluation. For example, in health services research a program's impact is often determined to further build evidence about what is effective. This work adds value and can be useful in decision making. We believe that the differences between research and evaluation, or the rationale and boundaries of evaluation relative to research that underpin the Strategy should be articulated. This is important in the context of the emphasis on quality and methodological rigour.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has developed guidelines on conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/ethical-conduct-research-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-and-communities>). This has not been referenced in the draft Strategy. This suggests that there is a distinction being made between research and evaluation, a distinction that is not clear cut in practice.

### **Range of Evaluation Methods**

Considering a broader range of evaluation methods could bring greater value to government when understanding how programs operate. For example, Developmental Evaluations can be useful when piloting new programs or in the early phases of program delivery to support. Emerging findings and considerations can better support funders and providers and build capacity. Often evaluation requirements are scoped as 'outcome evaluation' and still require demonstration of the program 'after the fact'. This can be limiting if capacity building, improvement in practice and knowledge is required.

## Co-Design

The Strategy references the need to incorporate the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into evaluations. We feel that direct involvement is often valuable in providing a perspective that is not otherwise observed. Co-design is a method that requires further definition and unpacking the full range of approaches that could be adopted. Some co-design approaches are not appropriate on the given resources and may result in a superficial consultation that may not add value.

It is important to acknowledge that co-design is a multi-faceted exercise requiring specialist skills and the building of relationships. It often takes time and can be resource intensive. The products of the co-design process should be considered within the evaluation cycle. That is, the rationale and the specific ways in which the co-design process will inform the evaluation and implementation of the findings should be articulated. We believe that there is a responsibility to act on feedback provided in the co-design process. If the process is too broad and issues cannot be addressed within the evaluation or any subsequent improvements, stakeholders may feel that their views were not heard or validated.

On the other hand, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups can be overwhelmed with the number of requests to participate in consultation. This also need to be addressed. Each evaluation project should determine the type and level of input required.

The Strategy and Guide could make it clear that a comprehensive co-design approach is not suitable or appropriate in all instances. It would be more sensible to think about each evaluation being required to *think through opportunities for engagement and to justify the approach they take*. Justification for a limited approach to engagement may relate to the scope of the project, the available budget, and the potential for community to influence direction and decision. That is – undertaking a co-design process without actually ceding any power is not really co-design; but ceding power can lead to outcomes that agencies might find difficult to accept. Being aware of how plausible and genuine a comprehensive co-design approach is prior to commissioning an evaluation is likely to be beneficial to all.

## Ethics Processes and Governance

The process of gaining approval to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including ethics and other processes) should be streamlined and acknowledge the principles of the Strategy.

Too often evaluators and researchers exclude vulnerable groups because they want to avoid restrictions and delays that can be associated with ethics approval processes. Requirements to have explicit ethics approval to gather data from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be misinterpreted to mean that they should be excluded if approval is not sought for their inclusion. This in effect can disempower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as their views cannot be heard or validated when they are part of a population.

While evaluators should have input into whether or not to seek ethics approval, the funder should also understand these requirements. It would be useful to articulate the standard of ethics review e.g. NHMRC registered human research ethics committee or local ethics advisory committees. Working with these committees on relevant standards for ethical engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be helpful.

## **Transparency**

Some evaluations, particular those that are confidential or relate to developmental evaluation may not be published and shared. There is an important balance between encouraging evaluation and honest uptake and participation and scrutiny over the findings. If there is a requirement that all reports are publicly available, it may discourage frank reporting and create two levels of reporting. This would end up making public information superficial and reduce the contribution it could make to developing public policy.

## **Government wide evaluation priorities**

The 'government wide priority areas' are very broad and run the risk of creating siloes. In the health area Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often don't conceptualise their health and wellbeing against these areas. We often see impacts from one government area carrying over into another e.g. low income, housing and health. Government should reflect the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people perceive social and emotional wellbeing and also have internal mechanisms for joint working across these areas.