

# Productivity Commission Indigenous Evaluation Strategy Project

## Oral Submission

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**Submission provided by:** Office of Indigenous Education and Engagement (OIEE) (RMIT University)

This is an oral submission to the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy project. The information contained therein was provided by phone by the organisation for Commission staff to assist in documenting in written form. The submitter has agreed that this is a correct reflection of their views and has approved it for publication on the Productivity Commission website.

### About the Office of Indigenous Education and Engagement

1. The Office of Indigenous Education and Engagement<sup>1</sup> (OIEE) is headed by Professor Mark McMillan, Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Education and Engagement). Its work covers two streams: Education (student services, advancement of Indigenous academic spaces, and various other aspects related to education) and Engagement.
2. The Engagement team is led by Stacey Campton as Director, with Catherine Bevan-Jones as Senior Advisor. The team's core remit is to develop and implement a strategy for reconciliation and Indigenous-specific activities for RMIT and its associated entities; their work also entails considering how the implementation of that strategy may affect RMIT's interactions with external stakeholders.

### *How is reconciliation envisaged at RMIT?<sup>2</sup>*

3. RMIT's approach to reconciliation focuses on the question of how non-Indigenous people understand, appreciate and are educated about their responsibilities and accountabilities with regard to living and working on Aboriginal country, and what that means for RMIT as an organisation.
4. As a consequence, a significant amount of the Engagement team's work involves providing professional development and continuing education for RMIT's cohort of 4000-plus non-Indigenous staff. The goal of this education is for the University's non-Indigenous staff to recognise and operate within a sovereign relationship with the Indigenous people of the country on which the University operates.
5. RMIT's reconciliation framework is thus not premised on Indigenous-specific numbers and targets. Rather, it revolves around how non-Indigenous people relate to Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/governance-and-management/organisation-structure/education-portfolio/indigenous-education-and-engagement>

<sup>2</sup> For context, it should be noted that RMIT'S Reconciliation Plan has evolved quite significantly over time, and as such is no longer aligned to Reconciliation Australia's (RA's) framework. While the first version of RMIT's Reconciliation Plan (released in 2016) followed the RA framework, the RMIT team found in the course of developing the second version that the RA template did not offer a sufficient degree of flexibility to incorporate the particular needs of different types and structures of organisations. For this reason RMIT developed their own framework, which is based around the same broad concepts as the RA framework but shows a few key differences.

people, based on RMIT's Act<sup>3</sup> and several other principle documents (including *Dhumbah Goorowa*, the Reconciliation Plan 2019-2020; Strategic Plan *Ready for Life and Work* to 2020; Education Plan to 2020; Research and Innovation Directions to 2020; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Plan 2016-2020; and Bundyi Girri – Shared Futures). These documents must fit together to improve the environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people study, live and work.

6. In early 2019, the University launched a 'Bundjil Statement', drafted in consultation with RMIT's Elder in Residence, N'Arwee't Carolyn Briggs.<sup>4</sup> This Statement reiterates the 'Law of Bundjil' (a commitment to place) and articulates how RMIT as a university accepts that commitment. It provides the underpinning context for how people should live, work and study on country at RMIT, via inclusion in all the University's binding governance policies. The Bundjil Statement also frames the University's current review of its Code of Conduct.

### *Components of reconciliation activities*

7. All RMIT staff undertake cultural awareness training as an initial step when they first join the University. Multiple reasons underpin this decision:
  - Twenty per cent of the University's staff are from another country. Without a background of growing up in Australia, it is unlikely that they will understand the breadth and complexity of issues and potential conversations in the area of Indigenous affairs. This is especially the case given that most media coverage in Australia tends to be overwhelmingly negative about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Moreover, accessible educational materials in this space tend to cover the whole of Australia and the entire 240-plus-year history of European contact very generally; new arrivals will have little opportunity to understand the specific country they are on. The OIEE aims to provide more detail of the local (and Victorian) context, such that staff can learn about the country and the space that they actually live and work in.
  - A significant portion of our Australian staff also did not receive an education in the true history of our country at school, particularly if they are second-generation Australian and their parents thus did not have the knowledge base to teach them about it. Nowadays, children do tend to study this history in some detail, but this is a relatively recent development.
  - Even the education that children currently receive in this area only goes part of the way towards what is needed: for the most part, it is simply an history of events, and it continues to put the focus on Indigenous people. As mentioned above, the approach at RMIT is to encourage reflexivity and a deeper consideration of how cultural context affects one's learning, teaching, leadership and social relationships: shifting the focus to *non*-Indigenous people and their roles and responsibilities. Doing so enables us to help today's children take the next steps towards a deeper understanding when they reach university. We aim to help ensure that every person in Victoria is ready to be in a mutually-beneficial relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It creates a universal employee value proposition that doesn't really have an equivalent.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/rmiota2010444/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/vic/consol_act/rmiota2010444/)

<sup>4</sup> Bundjil/Bunjil is the Wurundjeri term for the wedge-tailed eagle, the centrepiece of some important Dreaming stories for several Kulin nations

8. Consequently, RMIT has developed its own tailored in-house training for non-Indigenous staff. This training takes staff through key concepts of our reconciliation framework – such as sovereignty and self-determination – and asks staff to situate themselves as non-Indigenous people *within* that framework, in order for them think about their individual relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the sovereign people of this land, and how that plays out in their lives and work.
  - Ideally, this kick-starts an ongoing process of staff asking themselves regularly how they should understand, communicate and lead the development of those relationships. The initial structured education should encourage staff to continue following their own journey of learning. Doing this both as individuals and as an organisation helps to deepen all parties’ understanding of the issues at play.
9. Other aspects of RMIT’s reconciliation activities include:
  - opportunities to be involved in various reconciliation initiatives, events and committees, and an attendant community of practice
  - the development of a staff cultural intelligence framework (including: how staff members can build specific cultural intelligence objectives into their work plans; how to showcase cultural intelligence in one’s work; the measurement of cultural intelligence through a staff survey);
  - the development of a framework to include Indigenous perspectives in course curricula, so that all teaching staff will be required to think systematically about how Indigenous aspects present in their curricula (note that ‘Indigenising’ course content by adding some Indigenous history or language is not the same as truly incorporating Indigenous *perspectives*); and
  - evaluation of these transformations of our people and curriculum.

*What we have learned from the reconciliation journey at RMIT so far*

10. **Universities in Australia are white, western constructs ...:** Conventional Western ways of knowing are deeply ingrained into the University system, and can take a long time to change. The process of staff undertaking a cultural intelligence journey will sometimes be interrupted by pressure to revert to the Western way of thinking.
  - Relatedly, there can be pressure to achieve particular milestones quickly. For some things, this is possible – after all, the OIEE has achieved significant change in just four years of existence. Some other goals, however, involve a much slower burn and a longer-term mindset; this can create some friction when the institutional leadership expects frequent reporting of tangible progress (for example, quarterly reporting where annual would be more appropriate).
  - The inclination to follow established Western ways of doing things is also reflected in an external expectation that the OIEE will simply be able to replicate strategies and frameworks from elsewhere in the world. We have previously been asked which existing ‘model’ we will use to achieve our goals, and where that model might have been proven to succeed. But in truth, reconciliation is not yet done particularly well anywhere in the world. Moreover, while some parts of the world have made more progress than others, each country’s context is unique – and this is doubly so for Australia. To a certain extent, we are working in uncharted waters.
  - Consequently, there is an element of improvisation to our work. The absence of successful frameworks and techniques available ‘off the shelf’ means that the only option is to formulate a plan from scratch, give it our best efforts, and adjust it over time in response to how we see it working. This iterative process requires regular

checkpoints in order for us to have something to evaluate and to compare our progress against our goals.

- Of course, there exists a certain risk aversion to the concept of us improvising as we go along. But it presents a fairly significant opportunity to be creative and innovative, and to do things differently in order to make the world a better place.

11. **... so reconciliation as a value for the University is a differentiator:** Many people have good intentions regarding the cultural impact or cultural safety of their work or education, but don't know what steps they should take to realise those intentions. RMIT's reconciliation activities create opportunities for people to put their intentions into practice and learn from the process. If those activities are done well, people will want to come and work at RMIT because of its strong values around reconciliation. In future, the plan is for aspiring RMIT staff to be required to demonstrate a reconciliation agenda (what they know about, and what they have done towards, reconciliation) in their application to the University.

- While there is inevitably some blowback against this process, it is important that people are not forced to participate, but rather encouraged to do so because it's the right thing to do. And RMIT provides many opportunities to have supported, casual, non-judgemental conversations (with senior Indigenous staff) about the rationale underpinning our reconciliation framework and activities.
- Overall, evaluation of our reconciliation activities has shown hugely positive results. Most importantly, the RMIT staff survey indicates that significant progress has been made on staff cultural intelligence. This reflects a core tenet of change management: regardless of how policies or rules are amended or how many exciting and innovative programs might be run, staff capabilities and ways of doing things need to see permanent improvement in order for the lessons from those programs to stick.

12. **There are challenges, but they are manageable:** We have encountered some questions about the purpose and vision of our work – for example, 'how long are we going to be doing this Indigenous stuff?' or 'why do we need to continue with these Indigenous aspects in our ways of working?'. And there are some staff from older generations, or from the more traditional 'hard science' backgrounds, that have no education or awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and what reconciliation means for their discipline or work, so can be reluctant to come on board. This does not stem from arrogance – often their disciplines would not allow them to know these things.

- In these circumstances, it is important that the leadership – the Vice-Chancellor and the Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Education and Engagement) – ensure that we have the voice and the visibility to present our case. We have spent significant time preparing an evaluation and reporting framework that can provide a more structured reflection of our reconciliation activities' effectiveness, and which allows us to present that evidence to stakeholders like the Council.
- This challenge is also being addressed through professional development (as discussed above), and through recruitment. Changing the institutional culture is a slow process, and we are moving toward a recruitment process that places specific weight on the demonstration of reconciliation values.

## General Comments on an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

### *Policy (co-)design*

13. For governments, co-design at all levels of policy development, implementation and evaluation is important if we are to move toward the desired 'working with' Indigenous communities rather than the traditional 'doing to'. (This extends to internal government processes. In the experience of one of this submission's authors in the Australian Public Service (over 20 years), it was extremely rare to see non-Indigenous colleagues seek the advice of, or check how things might work with, their Indigenous colleagues.)
14. However, some New Policy Proposal processes inhibit the co-design of programs and policies. For example, the requirement for confidentiality when New Policy Proposals are developed and included in submissions for the Cabinet's consideration make it tricky to move beyond consultation towards co-design.<sup>5</sup> Moving beyond consultation alone will present some challenges for governments, not just around incorporating diverse views from the Indigenous community (discussed in more detail below), but also in terms of *not* burdening First Nations peoples with the sole responsibility of making the policy work. Consequently, including (as far as possible) elements of participation and control for First Nations peoples in evaluation will be key.
15. There are examples of successfully co-designed evaluation strategies and frameworks, and the Productivity Commission should engage with Indigenous organisations to learn from these. One such example is the evaluation framework used by Children's Ground, a non-profit organisation that develops and implements place-based community development work in communities with high levels of child and youth poverty.
16. While there is often broad agreement between stakeholders at the level of policy objectives (in terms of a policy's desired outcomes), the *implementation* of the policy is often less than ideal. More effort needs to be placed on evaluating 'what works' in terms of effective implementation procedures – not just the impact at the end. Relatedly, evaluation is often referenced so briefly at inception that it becomes an add-on down the track, and the involvement of those affected is often more about ticking boxes and meeting procurement targets. Sadly this is often the case for programs that are targeted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and even more so for the mainstream programs that need to be able to do the bulk of the work.

### *Evaluation principles and processes*

17. Evaluation is handled in myriad ways across governments and agencies. Perhaps some clear articulation of responsibilities is needed. Relatedly, every effort should be made to build the strengths of *existing* structures to better evaluate – especially so that implementation leads to the desired impact/outcomes for First Nations peoples. For example, the issues paper does not currently mention the role of the Australian National Audit Office – however, they have an important role in evaluating the implementation of policies and programs through performance audits. How do they make efforts to ensure cultural capability and safety in their audits? Do they seek to include Indigenous voices and knowledges?
18. In terms of commissioning new evaluations, more use could be made of procurement arrangements that are explicitly designed to build evaluative capacity (not only of those

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to the Cabinet Handbook to get a better handle on the processes of getting a New Policy Proposal up (<https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/government/cabinet-handbook>).

procuring evaluation services, but also of the First Nations people involved in evaluations), and to strengthen the cultural capability of evaluators.

19. There will be difficulties in developing a strategy that can accommodate changing government priorities (as governments change, so do their priorities and points of emphasis) – as such, while the strategy needs to be a living document, the principles need to be robust enough to withstand the vagaries of political cycles.
20. There are a number of past reviews and evaluations performed by Indigenous people with common findings about the fundamentals of working in a collaborative and strengths-based way (including the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the Little Children are Sacred report). The Productivity Commission will need to think through how these common fundamentals can influence the development of a strategy, as well as the outcomes of programs and policies.
21. The issues paper seeks views about how evaluation can better incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and voices, and about how Indigenous and Western approaches can be successfully integrated/combined. It might be necessary to acknowledge that sometimes Indigenous views may differ – the most benefit may come, therefore, from articulating the differences in views and considering how to respond to each perspective accordingly. This may include differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges and voices; and/or diversity of views within Indigenous knowledges and voices. For example, the final result of an evaluation might look something like a Senate Committee report where dissenting views are explicitly detailed. The range of views presented should be able to sit side-by-side without the majority view swallowing up minority opinions. Incorporating differing views upfront is preferable to allowing dissenters to respond afterwards, as this means any response to the evaluation should take account of all perspectives.
22. Finally, while it is promising to see the consideration of the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, overall the issues paper still reflects dominant Western terms, definitions and methodologies for the most part. In failing to capture specific Indigenous logics or meanings in any detail, this ‘vocabulary’ is likely to be exclusionary for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in that it does not speak to their understandings of the key concepts and methodologies involved. At RMIT, we are increasingly conscious of this tendency to use the dominant terminological and conceptual frameworks, and are working to balance those with Indigenous (and other) ways of describing, defining and understanding.

#### *From cultural capability to cultural intelligence*

23. It is important for both evaluators and commissioners of evaluation (and government agency staff more broadly) to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and this should certainly be a major aspect of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. However, there is an issue of appropriate terminology, in that ‘capability’ implies an endpoint: a level of knowledge/understanding about Indigenous cultures that is ‘complete’ or ‘finished’ (in a way, reducing Indigenous cultural learning to a ‘tick the box’ exercise). This is not possible; you cannot ever be *completely* cognisant of, or capable in, someone else’s culture, because you were not born into it.
24. For this exact reason, RMIT has in recent years shifted away from ‘cultural capability’ or ‘cultural competence’ training, towards a model of ‘cultural intelligence’ in professional development (as discussed in paragraph 7 above). Cultural *intelligence* does not imply an endpoint, or a one-way flow of information to the non-Indigenous learner; rather, it is

a continuous, lifelong process that applies to all aspects of a person's life, and encourages non-Indigenous people to actively think about their perspectives and roles in forming relationships with Indigenous people.

25. We therefore suggest that, in terms of educating evaluators and the public service about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, a cultural intelligence model would be of more use than a requirement for cultural capability. However, the implementation of continuous cultural learning requires a very strong leadership component (at RMIT, this has been championed by Vice-Chancellor Martin Bean, who has worked extensively with the senior management team to build the reconciliation ethos into all of the University's activities). The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy will need visible leadership, not just from central agencies, but an entire network of reconciliation champions across portfolios.

#### *Evaluation priorities*

26. Mainstream programs are rarely assessed on their ability to deliver to the minority as well as the majority. If governments are looking to prioritise evaluation to achieve a better future for our First Nations peoples, then they need to think about the implications of the Indigenous population profile in combination with the policy evidence base. Specifically, the fact that roughly 2/3 of Indigenous people in Australia are under the age of 35 years – and the wealth of evidence indicating that early action (e.g. in health and education) has the most impact on a person's physical, social and emotional wellbeing – should be pivotal in answering the question of 'what do we need to evaluate to have the best impact?'

#### **Comments on Specific Questions from the Issues Paper**

*What objectives should a strategy for evaluating policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seek to achieve? (p. 4)*

27. Noting that the Issues Paper establishes the overriding objective of the strategy being to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the experience of developing RMIT's reconciliation framework suggests to us that First Nations peoples' sovereignty needs to be the core foundation to the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy's development. This means that the development of the Strategy needs to be led, or co-led, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

*To what extent are the evaluation practices of Australian Government agencies consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples? How could practices be improved in this respect? (p. 4)*

28. Until the Australian Government formally acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' sovereignty, and actively supports the self-determination of Australia's First Nations, the evaluation activities of government agencies *cannot* ever be consistent with the UNDRIP.

*Do you agree with the main components of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy suggested by the Commission? Should other components be included? If so, why?*

29. The main components suggested by the Productivity Commission in the Issues Paper are broadly appropriate. However, in terms of the institutional characteristics needed to promote the adaptation and success of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, it is critical

that government agencies develop not only an *evaluative* culture, but a *reconciliatory* culture, in the same way that RMIT embeds reconciliation into everything it does. Specifically, the focus of agencies' reconciliation frameworks needs to shift from measuring and relying on Indigenous people, towards non-Indigenous people understanding their roles and responsibilities in the reconciliation process. Without such a shift, there is a significant risk that policies and programs will remain in the traditional domain of 'doing things *to*' rather than 'working *with*' Indigenous people.

*What is the best way to address mainstream programs in the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy?*

30. As discussed above, RMIT strives to embed reconciliation principles into all of its activities as a matter of course. Reconciliation, and Indigenous sovereignty, are not concepts that can merely be sheeted home to specific 'Indigenous issues', nor tacked on as an afterthought. Governments would do well to follow this approach, potentially through developing an *overall* evaluation strategy for all agencies and all programs – not specifically Indigenous-related – with Indigenous components embedded in that strategy as mandatory considerations. In other words, all programs and policies should be assessed through a reconciliatory lens at some stage, whether or not they appear on the surface to 'affect' Indigenous people specifically.

*What lessons from major Australian Government programs impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be useful in developing an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy?*

31. The key lesson should be that evaluation must be designed into a program or policy throughout the entire process of its development. Moreover, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices need to be at the centre of the policy design process, *including* the design of the policy's evaluation plan. This is necessary to ensure that programs/policies are targeting outcomes that the (Indigenous) community actually prioritises as what they need, not merely what governments think they should have.

*What lessons can we learn from evaluation arrangements in overseas jurisdictions? Are there any particularly beneficial international models for the evaluation of policies and programs affecting indigenous people? What makes them effective?*

32. Taking a broader view of policy design as it pertains to Indigenous peoples (not specifically evaluation), several examples of beneficial Indigenous-Western knowledge exchanges in policymaking can be found in the work of Canadian applied ecologist, Dr Fikret Berkes.<sup>6</sup> Dr Berkes has worked extensively with Indigenous people in Canada, primarily in helping non-Indigenous policy makers to understand traditional Indigenous knowledge systems and bring those into a relationship of equality with Western knowledge systems.
33. Consequently, Indigenous ways of knowing (specifically around natural resource management and monitoring/tracking the impacts of human activity on particular environments) have been able to help drive policy around the preservation of those natural resources and the minimisation of anthropogenic impacts on both the natural environment and the Indigenous people of the land in question. Dr Berkes' work highlighted that Indigenous scientific knowledge can be equally as credible as that of Western science, but to understand this requires that policy makers step away from exclusively viewing the issue through the traditional Western scientific paradigm. (This

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/38410107\\_Fikret\\_Berkes](https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/38410107_Fikret_Berkes)



knowledge can be used not only in the *design* of policy, but also in the evaluation of its effectiveness.)

34. Dr Berkes has also carried out work in the field of Indigenous intellectual property, addressing the question of how to protect Indigenous ownership of the traditional knowledges that feed into policy design, so that knowledge is not simply 'extracted' from the Indigenous community unilaterally. Dr Berkes was also heavily involved in the production of the United Nations' and Global Environment Facility's *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, including as editor of the *Bridging Scales and Knowledge Systems* report (which similarly strove to answer the question of how we should bridge different ways of knowing between different cultures across the world).
35. Closer to home, Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson's works on Indigenous (Women's) Standpoint Theory<sup>7</sup> can help readers to develop an understanding of the importance of perspective on ways of knowing. This arises not only in terms of Indigenous people having particular ways of knowing/doing/being, but also because non-Indigenous perspectives create their own ways of knowing/doing/being, and there are many ways in which those might impact on relationships with – and behaviours towards – Indigenous people. The whole of RMIT's reconciliation work is grounded in Indigenous Standpoint Theory, and is also influenced by Professor Moreton-Robinson's writings on Indigenous sovereignty. Consultation with Professor Moreton-Robinson is recommended.

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**Stacey Campton**  
Director,  
Engagement

**Catherine Bevan-Jones**  
Senior Adviser,  
Engagement

**Karen Crockett**  
Project Coordinator,  
Evaluation and Reporting

**RMIT Office of Indigenous Education and Engagement**

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08164649.2013.876664>