

Productivity Commission inquiry: Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

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Executive Summary

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into the development of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

About Social Ventures Australia (SVA)

SVA is a not-for-profit organisation that works with partners towards an Australia where all people and communities thrive. We believe that this will be achieved when all Australians are empowered, have a voice in decisions that impact them, have a sense of belonging and experience social inclusion. SVA believes that belonging for all Australians requires, and is enabled through, specific recognition and respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge and cultures. We acknowledge and support the expression of self-determination that is outlined in the Uluru Statement of the Heart.

SVA is not a traditional service delivery organisation. We work at the intersection of the government, social purpose and business sectors. We provide advice on strategy and evaluation, funding and make investments in partner organisations to significantly increase their social impact.

Context for this submission

In making this submission we acknowledge that self-determination, as set out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), is the foundational driver of better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We understand that self-determination requires that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have autonomy, self-governance, voice and participation in all elements of government policy, program and service design.

As a non-Indigenous organisation, we aim to share our perspective in this submission as a contribution to thinking and debate. This perspective is informed by the recommendations and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations with whom we have worked as evaluators. However we believe that, consistent with the principles of self-determination, the views and perspectives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations must be prioritised in this inquiry and should drive outcomes from this review.

SVA's experience relevant to this submission

In making this submission we are drawing on a range of experience including:

1. **Over 150 consulting engagements:** SVA Consulting a specialist consulting practice that has completed over 1000 engagements in the past 12 years, working with a diverse range of partners across the for-purpose sector including government agencies, private funders, peak bodies and service providers to improve organisational effectiveness and to help those organisations better understand and monitor the impact of their policies and programs. More than 150 of our engagements have been undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, commissioned by both service providers and government agencies.
2. **The incubation of an Australian education evidence institute:** As part of SVA's internal venture portfolio, a key initiative has been the incubation of an education evidence intermediary – Evidence for Learning (E4L) – in partnership with the Commonwealth Bank of Australia and the UK Education Endowment Foundation. The objective of a national education evidence intermediary is to build, share and use evidence to improve learning outcomes in Australian schools.

Recommendations

The recommendations have been grouped in the following categories:

- Evaluations and the evidence ecosystem
- Principles to inform an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
- Practices to inform successful implementation of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples determining what works

Evaluations and the evidence ecosystem

1. Greater government investment in evidence generation is required to address the significant gaps in evidence underpinning government policy and programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Both policy and programs specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (e.g. those administered through the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)) and mainstream policies and programs need to be considered and in scope. In allocating the limited resources available for evaluation and evidence generation consideration needs to be given to prioritising what is evaluated. Criteria for consideration could include:
 - a. The priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies and organisations
 - b. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people impacted
 - c. The scale of public investment
 - d. The existing evidence base, particularly policies and programs with limited to no evidence underpinning their approach
2. An effective evaluation strategy needs to consider the utility of evaluations within a broader evidence cycle that incorporates monitoring, measuring, evaluation and management. We support the broad definition of evaluation identified by the Productivity Commission and recommend that there is continued focus within an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy on this broader evidence cycle.
3. Delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires a sophisticated and informed understanding on the appropriate measures and indicators of success. This is only possible with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples voice and participation in the design of, and decision making on, indicators of success. Specific emphasis is required to ensure that culture and cultural practices are understood by governments to be integral to informing better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
4. Government departments and agencies that administer policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should publish a comprehensive table of all the relevant programs that they deliver with an assessment of the existing evidence base, a link to evaluations and a quality rating of the evidence, along with a plan to improve the evidence base, particularly where there are significant gaps.
5. An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy could consider mechanisms for improving the quality, rigour and appropriateness of methodologies used in the evaluation of policies and programs

affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such as an “evaluation of evaluations” to better determine best practice.

Principles to inform an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

6. The principles underpinning an evaluation strategy must place the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have control and power over their own lives at the centre. Based on our observations, and the recommendations made by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations we have worked with as evaluators, we have identified a core set of principles to consider:
 - **Self-determination:** We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to self-determination must inform all aspects of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. We understand that a critical component of self-determination is data sovereignty, defined as “the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data”.¹ This means that attention needs to be paid both to what information and evidence is collected, as well as the lens through which the evidence is interpreted and understood.
 - **Cultural capability:** We recognise that best practice evaluation methods prioritise the involvement of the communities who are affected. In the context of evaluations, cultural capability relates to the evaluation methods, the people conducting the evaluation, the scope of stakeholders engaged and the use of interpreters and translators.
 - **High-quality:** We recognise that an emphasis on high quality, appropriate and rigorous evaluation methods and approaches are critical to generating evidence and data that accurately captures the experiences, aspirations and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
 - **Transparency:** We recognise that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to self-determination to be recognised in evaluation practice it is critical that there is transparency from governments and evaluation commissioners on evidence, evaluation outcomes, data and program outcomes.
 - **Adaptive learning:** We recognise that for evaluations to have utility they need to be understood as one component in a broader evidence cycle that incorporates monitoring, measuring, evaluation and management.

Practices to inform successful implementation of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

7. Evaluation commissioners (those who commission and pay for evaluations, whether government, private funders or service delivery agencies) should assess evaluators (organisations who conduct evaluations in response to commissioning organisations’ requirements) for tenders based on their ability to meet criteria specific to these principles. This includes demonstration of how engagements recognise and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ rights to self-determination through genuine participatory and culturally appropriate methods
8. All programs commissioned by government need to consider adequate scoping and resourcing of evaluations, with a specific emphasis on the cost required to adopt evaluation methods that will appropriately adhere to the principles of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

¹ The University of Arizona, Native Nations Institute on Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance

9. Evaluation strategies have critical value when they are designed before the commissioning and commencement of a program, or within a very proximate timeframe of the commencement of a program. This enables the necessary data to be collected through appropriate planning and program design. The value of designing evaluation strategies diminishes the longer a program has been running, and consideration needs to be given to the relevance of evaluation strategies at this point, in place of conducting a baseline evaluation.
10. Investment is required to build and develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community researcher workforce, with specific consideration for the capacity for procurement policies to be levers for increasing employment pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
11. As recommended by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), it is critical to embed an evaluative culture within government departments and agencies. This requires an investment in building a culture of evaluative thinking across multiple departments and agencies. This includes investment in appropriate evidence infrastructure that enables greater access and transparency to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of policy and program decision making.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples determining what works

12. Based on ongoing conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies, we recommend that the Productivity Commission consider the role of an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled national evidence intermediary. Purpose, functions and initiatives could include:
 - a. Principles for culturally competent evaluation, data and evidence collection and generation (in line with existing principles and ethics protocols)
 - b. Defining success measures and indicators
 - c. Holding government, private funders and service providers to account for the achievement of better outcomes
 - d. Developing accountability models for the way funders engage and invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
 - e. Developing basic partnership principles for working with Indigenous organisations and communities
 - f. Building an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled clearing house of what works
 - g. Developing a community navigation tool providing a voice to communities and enabling them to promote their strengths
 - h. Building a holistic, community defined library of outcomes and measures to guide funders, service providers and researchers
 - i. Establishing greater connectivity between communities to share resources and develop a culture of learning
 - j. Identifying gaps in the existing research and evidence base, coordinating (and potentially funding) research to fill the gaps
 - k. Building evaluation capability within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to catalyse further Indigenous led evaluation.

Part 1: SVA's experience in conducting and advising on evaluation of policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

SVA Consulting is a specialist consulting practice that partners with stakeholders across the for-purpose sector to strengthen their ability to achieve positive social, cultural and economic outcomes.

Since the Consulting team was established 12 years ago, we have completed over 1000 engagements. We work with government agencies, private funders, peak bodies and service providers to improve organisational effectiveness and to help those organisations better understand and monitor the impact of their policies and programs.

More than 150 of our engagements have been undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, commissioned by both **service providers** and **government agencies**, across Australia.

Our work with **service providers** – including Aboriginal community-controlled organisations – has typically involved supporting these organisations with 'outcomes management'. The term 'outcomes management' refers to the broad process of using outcomes measurement to inform better decision making. We typically work with service providers to develop an improved understanding of the outcomes that they achieve and to develop frameworks, systems and processes which enable those organisations to monitor the achievement of intended outcomes and manage their operations accordingly.

Examples of this work with service providers include:

- A long-term partnership with **Karnyaninpa Jukururpa (KJ)**, a Martu organisation based in the East Pilbara, supporting them to understand, measure and value the outcomes delivered for Martu through their on-country programs (in both 2011 and 2014), using the Social Return on Investment methodology, and supporting them to establish an outcomes management framework (in 2016). The 2014 Evaluative SROI Report can be accessed [on the SVA website](#).
- On-going support for the **Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)** to develop an organisation-wide outcomes framework and associated outcomes management system, helping them to measure (among other things) the impact of a new culturally-embedded therapeutic model. We worked with VACCA to develop the business case and work plan for a major change management project to implement outcomes management and continue to work closely with VACCA on its implementation.
- Development of an outcomes framework in partnership with the **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS)**, in order to:
 - articulate the priority outcomes that NATSILS seek to deliver for the communities they represent;
 - inform the existing, outputs focussed reporting framework of the Attorney-General's Department; and
 - support the evaluator of the Indigenous Legal Assistance Program (ILAP) in understanding the value of the ILAP.

Our work with **government agencies** has typically involved either:

- advisory support for the development of evaluation strategies, or dynamic outcomes management processes; and
- engagement as an external, independent party to conduct an evaluation or review of a program.

While we refer to both ‘outcomes management’ and ‘evaluation’ in this submission to distinguish between these different processes, we think it is critical that the Productivity Commission’s evaluation framework encompasses both concepts as critical elements of the evidence cycle, consistent with the Commission’s broad definition of ‘evaluation’.²

Our understanding of the evidence cycle is outlined below:

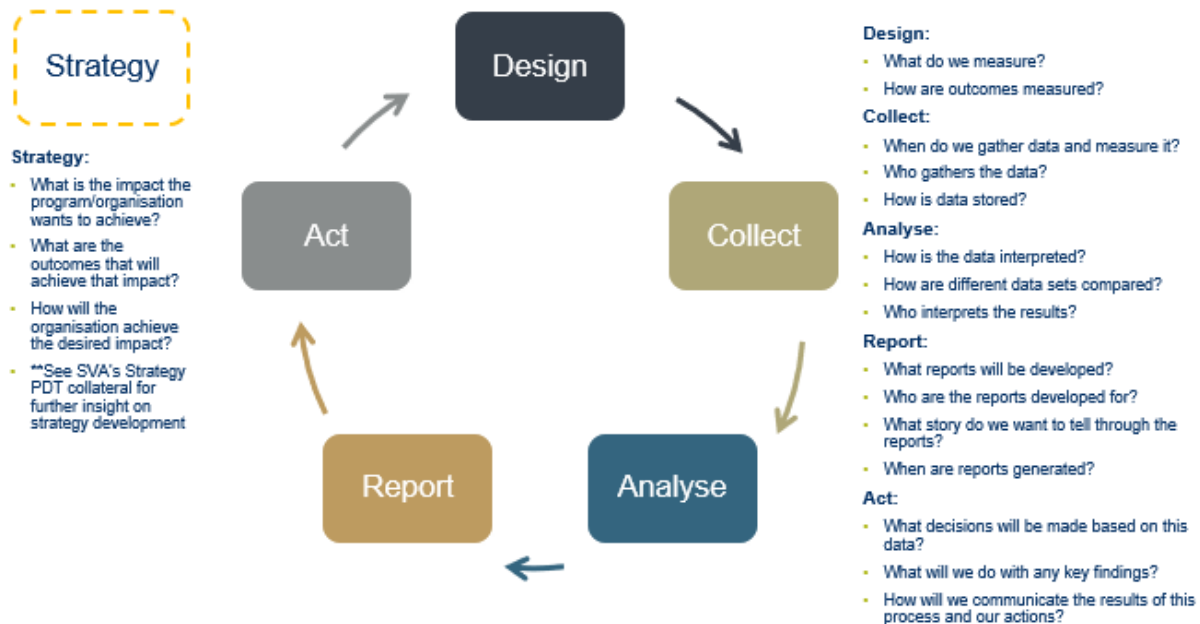


Figure 1: SVA Consulting evidence cycle

Our independent evaluations and reviews have typically used theory-based, mixed methods approaches. We aim to incorporate elements of realist evaluation where appropriate to account for the importance of context in working with different language groups across urban, regional and remote contexts. We recognise the importance of drawing on participatory techniques at all stages of the evaluative process. This perspective on the most appropriate methods of evaluating policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reflects a belief that there is limited, high-quality evidence of what works. But a choice of appropriate methods is also context specific and depends on the purpose, audience and necessary rigour.

The majority of our government work in relation to policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been for the Indigenous Affairs Group within the **Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C)**, now the National Indigenous Australians Agency, between 2014 and 2019. It is important to recognise the context in which this work has been carried out, described in detail in the Auditor General’s recent report, *Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs*³, Report No. 47, 2018-19. That report describes (among other things):

- delays associated with adopting and implementing a formal evaluation framework;
- increased commissioning activity in the past two years following establishment of Program 2.6 under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy for evaluation and research; and

² The Productivity Commission states in its Issues Paper that ‘evaluation’ refers to ‘the systematic process of collecting and analysing information to enable an assessment of an activity, project, policy or program’. Productivity Commission (2019), *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy: Productivity Commission Issues Paper*.

³ Auditor-General Report No.47, 2018–19, *Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs*.

- an evolving culture of evaluative thinking within the Indigenous Affairs Group.

Our work with PM&C has included:

- Development of eight 'evaluation strategies' in relation to:
 - Three measures under the Northern Australia White Paper: PBC Capacity Building; Land Tenure Reform Pilots and Township Leasing and Land Administration (managed by the Land Branch);
 - The Capacity Building for Indigenous Rangers program (managed by the Environment Branch);
 - The Time to Work Employment Strategy (managed by the Employment Branch); and
 - Three Indigenous Employment Programmes: Tailored Assistance Employment Grants, Vocational Training and Employment Centres and Employment Parity Initiatives (managed by the Employment Branch).
- Coordinating a national co-design group of 15 PM&C funded organisations to develop a shared outcomes framework for the Indigenous Land and Sea Management sector; and
- Conducting comparative baseline analyses of five Indigenous Protected Areas using the Social Return on Investment methodology.

Some of this work has been made public and shared widely, both through the PM&C website and other sources. The output of other engagements has not been made public by PM&C.

Recommendations: Evaluations and the evidence ecosystem

1. Greater government investment in evidence generation is required to address the significant gaps in evidence underpinning government policy and programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Both policy and programs specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (e.g. those administered through the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)) and mainstream policies and programs need to be considered and in scope. In allocating the limited resources available for evaluation and evidence generation consideration needs to be given to prioritising what is evaluated. Criteria for consideration could include:
 - e. The priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies and organisations
 - f. The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people impacted
 - g. The scale of public investment
 - h. The existing evidence base, particularly policies and programs with limited to no evidence underpinning their approach
2. An effective evaluation strategy needs to consider the utility of evaluations within a broader evidence cycle that incorporates monitoring, measuring, evaluation and management. We support the broad definition of evaluation identified by the Productivity Commission and recommend that there is continued focus within an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy on this broader evidence cycle.
3. Delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires a sophisticated and informed understanding on the appropriate measures and indicators of success. This is only possible with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples voice and participation in the design of, and decision making on, indicators of success. Specific emphasis is required to ensure that culture and cultural practices are understood by

governments to be integral to informing better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

4. Government departments and agencies that administer policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should publish a comprehensive table of all the relevant programs that they deliver with an assessment of the existing evidence base, a link to evaluations and a quality rating of the evidence, along with a plan to improve the evidence base, particularly where there are significant gaps.
5. An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy could consider mechanisms for improving the quality, rigour and appropriateness of methodologies used in the evaluation of policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, such as an “evaluation of evaluations” to better determine best practice.

Part 2: A working set of evaluation principles

The Productivity Commission Issues Paper on the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy⁴ has identified the principles adopted by respected Australian and international agencies with evaluation expertise. The Commission has acknowledged – appropriately – that ‘general evaluation principles’ do not provide sufficient guidance when evaluating policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and it further identifies principles that have been developed in that context.

There is a high degree of consistency in the principles canvassed by the Commission in the Issues Paper. Several themes are reinforced by multiple organisations and are closely aligned with our thinking about the principles upon which a whole-of-government evaluation strategy might be based.

The principles that resonate most with our observations and which we think would offer a solid platform on which the Commission could base its whole of government framework are as follows:

1. Self-determination

As identified by the Productivity Commission self-determination has different meanings for different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, however it is broadly understood to encompass notions of choice, control, respect, freedom and empowerment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to self-determination must underpin and inform all aspects of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. Because evaluation is about values, it matters exactly who defines what is ‘valuable’, ‘good’ or ‘successful’. If evaluation is going to support better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, then they need to take the lead role in defining these terms.

We understand that a critical component of self-determination is data sovereignty, defined as “the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data”.⁵ This means that attention needs to be paid both to what information and evidence is collected, as well as the lens through which the evidence is interpreted and understood.

2. Cultural capability

Best practice evaluation methods prioritise the involvement of the communities who are affected.

We understand cultural capability to be demonstrated in evaluation practice through: the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in designing and leading and evaluations; the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as evaluators, community researchers and cultural brokers; the engagement of interpreters; the identification of an appropriate group of stakeholders for engagement in the evaluation; the adoption of appropriate evaluation methods; the preparation of plain English and bilingual information and materials as required; and the allocation of adequate resourcing and budget allocation to account for the all of the above practices. For evaluations to adhere to this principle it is essential that evaluation commissioners allocate appropriate resourcing to evaluations. This principle acknowledges that if you’re not collecting data in a culturally capable manner then the data you are collecting will be poor quality and of little value.

⁴ Productivity Commission (2019), *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy: Productivity Commission Issues Paper* pp. 24-36.

⁵ The University of Arizona, Native Nations Institute on Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance

Conducting better evaluations means defining good practice and standards of rigour in evaluations. Evaluation approaches need to identify culturally appropriate ways of working that capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge and ways of working. It also matters how evaluators go about collecting data from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The data collection methods used – how people are consulted, how much time is spent visiting communities and when, the languages and methods used and who is consulted – are all factors that influence the quality of data, and the potential for evaluation to support community capacity and self-determination.

3. High-quality

Quality and rigour must be a priority in how evaluations are commissioned as it will determine the utility of the evidence which is relevant not only to ensure evaluation conclusions are complete, but also that they do not draw inaccurate and incomplete conclusions. Historically the generation of evidence that informs policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been lacking in quality and rigour.

Evaluation practice has often failed to consider the appropriateness of methods to ensure that evaluations capture the complexity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experiences. As noted above if data and evidence is not collected in a culturally capable manner than the data that is collected will be poor quality. There are other drivers of poor quality data and evidence – the primary consideration from evaluation commissioners being the allocation of an inadequate resourcing. An inadequate budget means that evaluation commissioners are pre-determining that a poor-quality piece of work will be produced.

Commissioners need to ensure a higher standard of rigour in future evaluations, which includes identification of, and fidelity to, appropriate methods

4. Transparency

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples right to self-determination to be recognised in evaluation practice it is critical that there is transparency from governments on evidence, evaluations, evaluation outcomes, data and outcomes. We recognise that there is both a lack of evidence underpinning the majority of government funded programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and a lack of transparency over which programs are backed by evidence and/or evaluations.

5. Adaptive learning

Evaluations have little utility in and of themselves – they are only one component in a broader evidence cycle that incorporates monitoring, measuring, evaluation and management.

Greater emphasis is required on monitoring and outcomes management to build cultures of reflective practice and adaptive learning. Evaluation also has greater potential to build knowledge about solutions if it shifts to focus on existing strengths, opportunities and resources that policies and programs can build on.

For true adaptive learning to be occurring, reflective processes should involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly those working for funded providers and peaks (and service users where possible), so that evaluation outcomes and recommendations are not solely interpreted and implemented by non-Indigenous people.

These principles reflect our best understanding of what is required in the evaluation of policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This perspective is informed by the recommendations and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations with whom we have worked as evaluators.

They are relevant to commissioners – in setting the parameters of an evaluation and often controlling how information is shared and used – and evaluators in their execution of evaluations.

We refer to these principles later in our submission, including as an organising frame for our observations in Part 3.

Recommendation: Principles to inform an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

1. The principles underpinning an evaluation strategy must place the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have control and power over their own lives at the centre. Based on our observations, and the recommendations made by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations we have worked with as evaluators, we have identified a core set of principles to consider:
 - **Self-determination:** We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to self-determination must inform all aspects of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. We understand that a critical component of self-determination is data sovereignty, defined as “the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data”.⁶ This means that attention needs to be paid both to what information and evidence is collected, as well as the lens through which the evidence is interpreted and understood.
 - **Cultural capability:** We recognise that best practice evaluation methods prioritise the involvement of the communities who are affected. In the context of evaluations, cultural capability relates to the evaluation methods, the people conducting the evaluation, the scope of stakeholders engaged and the use of interpreters and translators.
 - **High-quality:** We recognise that an emphasis on high quality, appropriate and rigorous evaluation methods and approaches are critical to generating evidence and data that accurately captures the experiences, aspirations and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
 - **Transparency:** We recognise that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to self-determination to be recognised in evaluation practice it is critical that there is transparency from governments on evidence, evaluation outcomes, data and program outcomes.
 - **Adaptive learning:** We recognise that for evaluations to have utility they need to be understood as one component in a broader evidence cycle that incorporates monitoring, measuring, evaluation and management.

⁶ The University of Arizona, Native Nations Institute on Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance

Part 3: SVA's observations in conducting and advising on evaluation of policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

In compiling a set of observations about Australian evaluation practice specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we have referred to the different roles and responsibilities of evaluation “commissioners” and “evaluators”. By “evaluation commissioners”, we mean those who commission and pay for evaluations, whether government, private funders or service delivery agencies. By “evaluators”, we mean organisations who conduct evaluations in response to commissioning organisations’ requirements. Our observations in relation to evaluators include an element of self-reflection about how we at SVA – as an evaluator – could improve our practice.

We have prepared a synthesised set of observations from our experience in conducting, and advising on, evaluation of policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our observations are drawn from the collective experience of a range of staff who have worked on a diverse set of engagements over the past 12 years, as well as conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners with whom we have worked.

Our observations are structured with reference to the proposed principles we have identified in Part 2. While the primary focus of the Productivity Commission’s project is on *evaluation*, our observations extend to and highlight the importance of supporting *outcomes management* processes, as described in Part 1.

Self-determination

In our experience evaluation as a practice does not have a good track record of recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to self-determination.

In our experience it is government that holds control over the evaluation agenda – what gets evaluated, why programs get evaluated, and who conducts the evaluations. More than this, the measures and indicators for success are determined by the objectives and priorities of government as outlined in their policy agenda. Programs and policies are frequently assessed by their capacity to meet targets specific to governments interest – cost, implementation and quantitative performance indicators of organisations’ capability to deliver a program objective.

In the Australian policy context, particularly at a federal level, evaluations can be utilised by governments as a key mechanism for making and justifying decisions about policy priorities, and in turn where public investment in programs and services is directed. In contrast there are a significant number of policy priorities which lack any evidence base or data behind their approach, with the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) reporting in 2019 that the evaluation framework for the Australian Government’s \$5bn Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) had no reliable method for measuring long-term outcomes, a full five years after the IAS was established.⁷

The report found due to the significant gaps in evidence driven by a low number of evaluations, only seven per cent of the programs being delivered under this strategy had evidence to support that they were achieving “mostly positive results against stated objectives”.⁸

⁷ Auditor-General Report No.47, 2018–19, [Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs](#).

⁸ Auditor-General Report No.47, 2018–19, [Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs](#), p.24.

For many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations we have worked with data sovereignty is critical to realising self-determination. Data sovereignty is the idea that data are subject to the laws and governance structures within the nation it is collected. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities this means that data should be subject to the laws and governance structures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations or as articulated by the University of Arizona “Indigenous data sovereignty is the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data”.⁹

Currently the Federal Government is the owner of most outcomes data. This data has been built up over time and includes data that is obtained through grant acquittal requirements. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations have been given little opportunity to contribute to decision making on what data should be collected and why. As a result, data collected has had a deficit focus, or what Professor Maggie Walter calls ‘5D Data’: difference, disparity, disadvantage, dysfunction and deprivation.¹⁰

Within this landscape there are significant structural barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to self-determination to be recognised in evaluation practice.

Evaluation commissioners also engage high number of non-Indigenous individuals, companies and organisations as evaluators. For the majority of those engaged the capacity to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to self-determination is limited by the lack of expertise and content knowledge, and particularly evident in the insufficient numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff or partners.

As a non-Indigenous evaluator SVA has been on a journey of evolving our practice to build our capability. This is also an area where we recognise a need to continue to reflect on and improve our own practices.

In our experience an evaluation can be designed, conducted and delivered with little to no participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the decision-making processes.

In contrast best practice approaches that we are aware of through our partners include the Yawuru Wellbeing Survey,¹¹ which sets out measures of “success” as defined by Yawuru people.

Cultural capability

In our experience there is a low level of cultural capability in the practice and approach of evaluation commissioners and evaluators. This is an observation we make of others, but also of our own practice.

We know that best practice evaluation methods prioritise the involvement of the communities who are affected. As outlined in the principles we describe above, cultural capability is central to ensuring that evaluations are accurately reflecting and capturing the complexity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ experiences in relation to a specific program or service.

High-quality

In our experience the quality and rigour of evaluation practice is often inadequate.

⁹ The University of Arizona, Native Nations Institute on Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance

¹⁰ The voice of Indigenous data: beyond the markers of disadvantage, *croakey*, April 2018

¹¹ Further information available: <https://www.curtin.edu.au/local/docs/bcec-community-wellbeing-from-the-ground-up-a-yawuru-example.pdf>

We have observed gaps in knowledge and expertise from evaluation commissioners when considering the scope and methods required for an evaluation to produce a high quality and rigorous product. As outlined above, when you're not collecting data in a culturally capable manner then the data you are collecting will be of a poor quality. For evaluation commissioners the greatest demonstration of driving poor quality evaluation outcomes is the lack of consideration for the budget required. An inadequate budget means that evaluation commissioners are pre-determining that a poor-quality piece of work will be produced.

We have also observed a lack of capacity within the public service to effectively manage programs to outcomes or to commission appropriate and complimentary external evaluation. This is evident where evaluation is treated as a technical discipline, as opposed to being a component within the skill set required to effectively manage programs.

Conducting better evaluations means defining good practice and standards of rigour in evaluations. Evaluation approaches need to identify culturally appropriate ways of working that capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge and ways of working. It also matters how evaluators go about collecting data from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The data collection methods used – how people are consulted, how much time is spent visiting communities and when, the languages and methods used and who is consulted – are all factors that influence the quality of data, and the potential for evaluation to support community capacity and self-determination. Another key consideration for evaluation commissioners is to co-design evaluation methodologies and approaches with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This should include what data will be collected, how to minimise the burden of data collection, and how to maximise the usefulness of the evaluation for the organisation.

Another component of quality in evaluation practice is the adoption of appropriate methods. We have been engaged to conduct evaluation strategies on programs that have been in operation for some time. The value in an evaluation strategy comes when it is initiated at the start, before a program is commissioned. Evaluation strategies are part of appropriate planning, but in our experience we have been engaged to deliver evaluation strategies of programs that are part way through a program delivery. In these instances, it's important for evaluation commissioners to consider whether an evaluation strategy is an appropriate step in the process, or whether a more efficient approach would be to develop a plan as part of the initial phase of a baseline evaluation.

Transparency

In our experience the lack of transparency around evidence, evaluations, evaluation outcomes, data and outcomes are significant barriers to achieving better outcomes from policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also drives against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples right to self-determination, particularly in relation to aspirations for greater control and agency over data.

We have observed repeated instances of evaluations not being made public, as was also identified by the ANAO,¹² which in some instances has related to the outcomes of an evaluation being "politically inconvenient". The reluctance to publicly release the outcomes signals a lack of willingness to conduct truly independent evaluations which can inform learning and development on policy agendas. It also represents a use of public resources in the generation of evidence that is not then being made available for public use. Low levels of transparency also indicate a potential risk for evaluation commissioners to be signalling to evaluators that success in winning engagements is driven by past practice in generating palatable conclusions.

¹² Auditor-General Report No.47, 2018–19, [*Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs*](#).

We also note the significant lack of evidence base behind the majority of government funded programs, but little transparency about which programs are informed by evidence and/or evaluations.

As described above, there is also very little transparency from governments on the data and evidence that they collect. This prevents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations from using data and evaluations for reflection, learning and improvement – rather than just for compliance and funding acquittals.

Adaptive learning

In our experience even where high quality evaluations exist, their utility is significantly hindered by the lack of capacity by decision makers to interpret and adopt the findings, particularly reflected through shifting practice and behaviour.

We have observed governments placing a narrow focus on evaluations and evaluations strategies as a moment in time activity. There is frequently insufficient focus on how governments might be better managing programs, using data to adapt and improve service delivery on an ongoing basis. In our experience governments repeatedly treat evaluation as an outcome rather than a process.

It has also been our experience that evaluation strategies and outcomes frameworks are developed but then not invested in or implemented. We have observed a tendency to not follow through or commit to ongoing adaptive learning that is part of a healthy evidence cycle. Greater emphasis is required on monitoring and outcomes management to build cultures of reflective practice and adaptive learning. Evaluation also has greater potential to build knowledge about solutions if it shifts to focus on existing strengths, opportunities and resources that policies and programs can build on.

For true adaptive learning to be occurring, reflective processes should involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly those working for funded providers and peaks (and service users where possible), so that evaluation outcomes and recommendations are not solely interpreted and implemented by non-Indigenous people.

Case studies

Below we have set out two case studies from our experience conducting evaluations in Australia and in New Zealand that we think illustrate examples of the good practice against the principles we have described above.

Case Study: Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ) Martu Leadership Program (MLP)

The Martu Leadership Program (MLP) is a program of Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (KJ) and World Vision Australia (WVA) that aims to equip young Martu men and women with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to shape a new future for Martu people. This involves doing coursework on company law, the legal system, government and finance; attending meetings and giving presentations to conferences, companies and government; and study trips around the country.

SVA Consulting's role was to conduct an evaluation of the MLP – to understand, measure, value and articulate what changes the MLP had achieved for Martu people and others – so that KJ and WVA could demonstrate this impact to government and funders, in order to allow the program to continue beyond its pilot phase.

We used the Social Return on Investment (SROI) method which involved designing a theory of change that identified the MLP’s outcomes and included analysing program records, reflections and feedback, and interviewing program participants. This helped us to understand, measure and value the most important changes that the MLP had created for both Martu and other stakeholders – including government and the legal system.

By listening to these stories of change in our interviews, analysing program data and reflections, and building on some of KJ’s own thinking, we came up with a way of understanding and describing the social impact the MLP was creating for its participants and the wider Martu community. This was expressed using five Martu wangka (language) words, represented as interconnected circles. This diagram below formed the central part of the MLP theory of change.

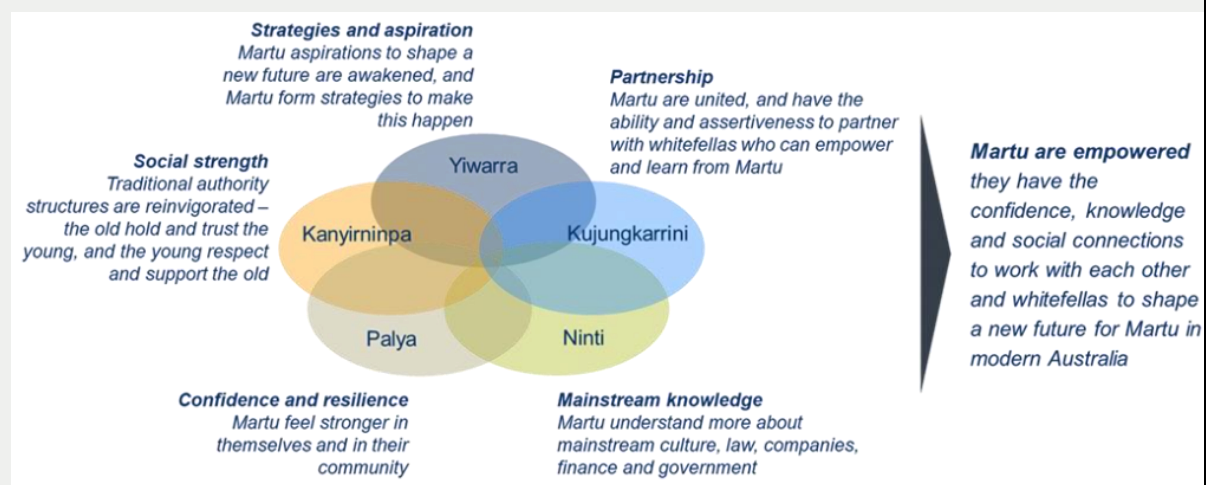


Figure 2: MLP theory of change expressed using five interconnected Martu wangka (language) words

As consultants, being able to synthesise and describe the MLP’s outcomes visually helped participants to see the program in a completely new way that resonated strongly with them. Although the intended audience for the evaluation report was government and funders, elements within in the report such as the theory of change diagram also helped Martu to better understand what they were doing in a new way. They have since adopted the diagram to explain the evolution of the program and how it is unfolding when presenting to stakeholders, funders and the broader Martu community.

Case Study: Te Whanau O Waipareira

Te Whānau O Waipareira (Waipareira) is one of New Zealand’s largest multi-sector Māori service providers. The organisation has more than \$10m in annual revenue and delivers around 50 government contracts across the health, education, social service and justice sectors. More importantly, it has a deep commitment to advancing Māori wellbeing and measuring what matters most for whanau, the Māori word for family.

Waipareira is paying close attention to both tikanga Māori (Māori culture) and organisational culture as it becomes one of New Zealand’s leading proponents of outcomes management. It has worked in close partnership with SVA to develop not only the strategy and systems to support outcomes management, but also the organisational culture that it sees as critical to making this happen.

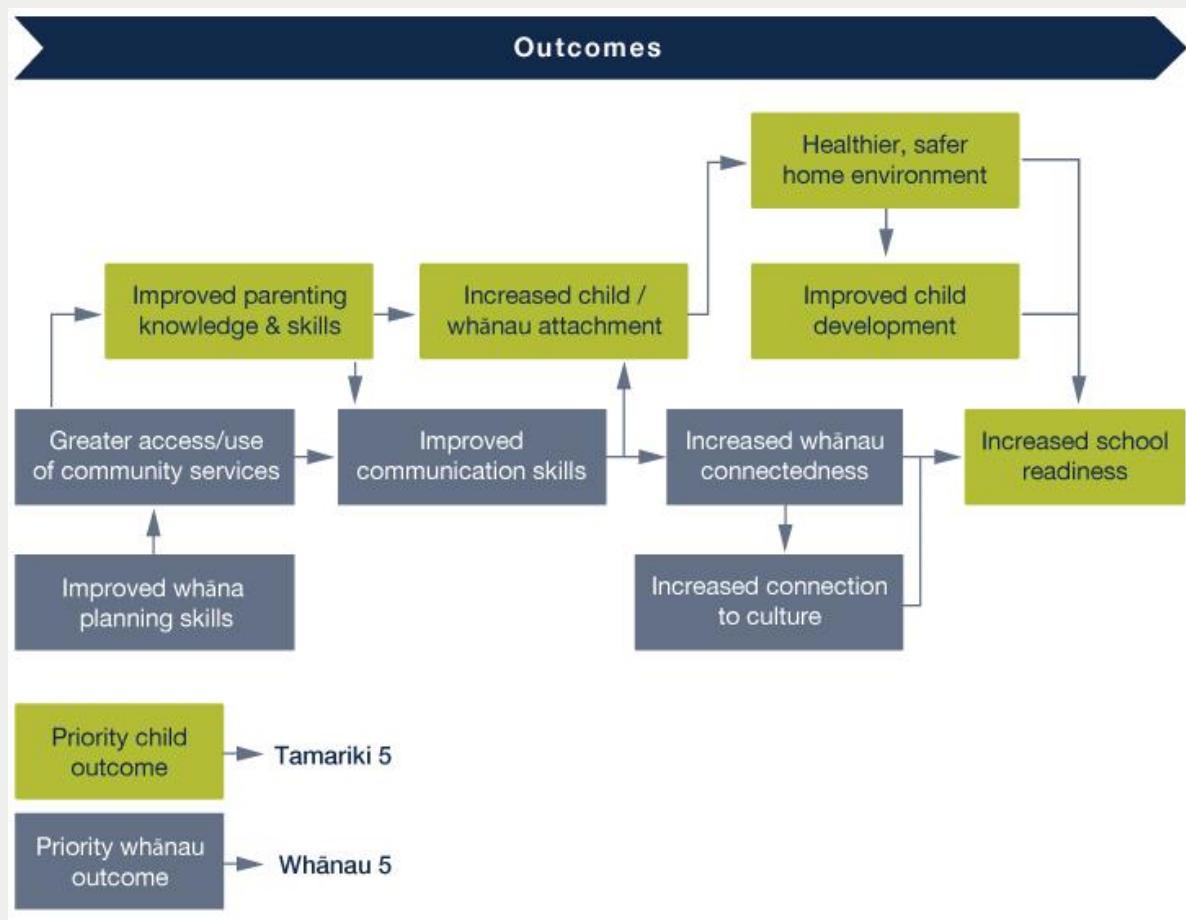


Figure 3: The 10 prioritised child outcomes

While Waipareira is a uniquely New Zealand organisation founded on Maori culture, there are still key lessons from its journey that have great relevance for organisations in Australia. For any large multi-sector service provider pursuing outcomes management – no matter the organisation and community served – there are three key insights:

1. Take a long-term perspective: Waipareira has a 25-year strategy, and a focus on generational change, and it has been willing to invest the time and resources in a long outcomes management journey. By taking a long term perspective, Waipareira have had to be transparent about what they are doing, and how they are doing it
2. Give organisational culture the attention it deserves: outcomes management is not just about having a strategy and designing a measurement system. Waipareira are doing this in

a distinctly Maori way, being true to their cultural heritage and also adapting to the 21st century context for Maori

3. Keep it simple: don't try and do everything at once; prioritise outcomes into a clear compelling narrative. This will allow for increasing levels of rigour in evaluations to be included, over time

Recommendations: Practices to inform successful implementation of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

1. Evaluation commissioners (those who commission and pay for evaluations, whether government, private funders or service delivery agencies) should assess evaluators (organisations who conduct evaluations in response to commissioning organisations' requirements) for tenders based on their ability to meet criteria specific to these principles. This includes demonstration of how engagements recognise and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to self-determination through genuine participatory and culturally appropriate methods
2. All programs commissioned by government need to consider adequate scoping and resourcing of evaluations, with a specific emphasis on the cost required to adopt evaluation methods that will appropriately adhere to the principles of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.
3. Evaluation strategies have critical value when they are designed before the commissioning and commencement of a program, or within a very proximate timeframe of the commencement of a program. This enables the necessary data to be collected through appropriate planning and program design. The value of designing evaluation strategies diminishes the longer a program has been running, and consideration needs to be given to the relevance of evaluation strategies at this point, in place of conducting a baseline evaluation.
4. Investment is required to build and develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community researcher workforce, with specific consideration for the capacity for procurement policies to be levers for increasing employment pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
5. As recommended by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), it is critical to embed an evaluative culture within government departments and agencies. This requires an investment in building a culture of evaluative thinking across multiple departments and agencies. This includes investment in appropriate evidence infrastructure that enables greater access and transparency to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of policy and program decision making.

Part 4: SVA's observations in incubating an Australian education evidence institute

Evidence for Learning (E4L) was created by SVA to help break the strong link between family income and student outcomes. As education is one of the key drivers to break the cycle of disadvantage, E4L wants every child to have the chance to make the best possible progress at school, regardless of their background.

In setting up Evidence for Learning, SVA was also seeking to fill a gap in the Australian education ecosystem and pilot a model of education evidence institute based on international best practice that is also tailored for the Australian federation.

E4L help's great practice to become common practice in education by building, sharing and supporting the use of evidence about 'what works' to lift learning outcomes. E4L's vision is an Australia where evidence-informed approaches improve learning for 5-18 year olds, so that all children, regardless of background, make the best possible progress. It focusses on empowering educators with the best available evidence so that they can improve their practice in the classroom.

E4L is actively sharing evidence about effective approaches in education by providing free, online summaries of global evidence through the Teaching & Learning Toolkit. It also supports the creation of new rigorous evidence via randomised controlled trials of programs in schools through its Learning Impact Fund. In order to drive the use of evidence, E4L is supporting schools to use evidence in their professional decision-making through the development of Australian practice guides and events like the Evidence Exchange.

E4L is active in identifying and driving better outcomes for children experiencing entrenched disadvantage through:

- running trials on programs in low SES contexts to better understand what makes the biggest difference to learning outcomes.
- highlighting different effects of the researched approaches on students in low SES contexts.
- privileging or subsidise low SES schools in our fee-based services.

E4L was established based on the following principles:

- Provide a platform for evidence sharing/collaboration between state and territory governments including coordination of a research agenda and cross-jurisdiction trials
- Complement not replace existing state structures – providing more or less support where needed
- Maintain an open, free, and regularly updated collation and synthesis of international education evidence for use by teachers, school leaders and policy makers alike
- Assess the strength and quality of evidence of existing and new programs
- Develop teaching and practice guides on high-impact interventions
- Commission (but not conduct) high quality research trials and translations in line with the research agenda
- Fund organisations working closely with schools to drive the effective use of well evidenced approaches.

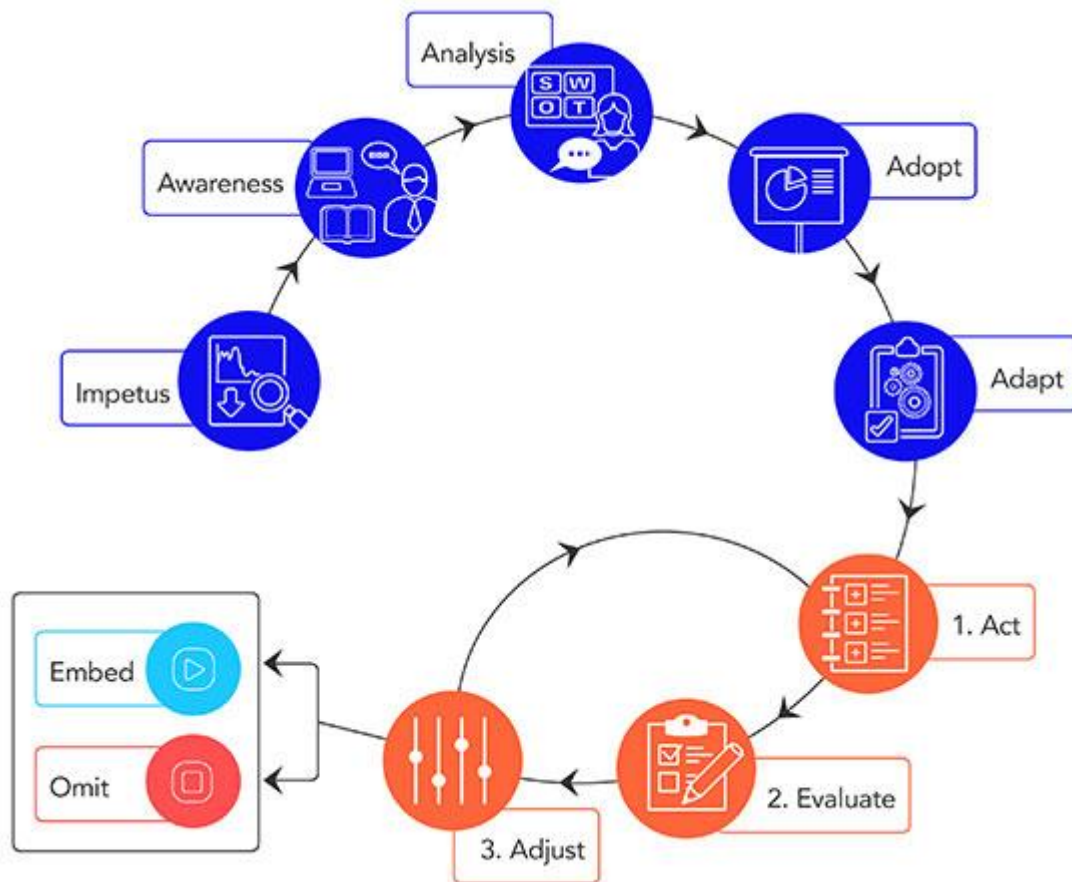


Figure 4: Evidence For Learning evidence cycle

Key components that have made E4L successful:

1. **Trust:** with a broader range of stakeholders. This has included transparency around processes and results. Maintaining rigour and high standards around evidence. And retaining independence.
2. **Utility:** usefulness of the work. Meeting the needs of a diverse audience. Ensuring that outputs are useful and able to accessed by different audiences (e.g. delivered via podcast rather than a factsheet). Emphasis on creating products that can be used and implemented straight away.

Critical design features for an institution to successfully deliver a national evidence capability:

1. **Independent** – must be independent of governments so there is no actual or perceived influence over the choice or conduct of evaluations and release of reports. This means its work can be relied upon and used by policy makers and educators in different jurisdictions and sectors. It must be able to choose the programs to evaluate within its governance structure. Independence is critical to the evidence being adopted by educators and leaders having confidence in the findings.
2. **Transparent** – must publish every finding in free and open forms for scrutiny; disclosure of results that show what hasn't worked are as important as results that show what has to create an active discussion of failures. It must also show the funding behind the research, the trial design and methods and the data underpinning any findings. This encourages confidence in the institution and valuable review and critique of the work.

3. **High Quality** – must have an evidence standard that is rigorous to ensure credibility and effective guidance. This includes features of relevance to developmental stage, appropriate quantitative measures and a ‘causation focus’ with an appropriate control or comparison group.
4. **Long-term** – must have sufficient funding size and period to allow for continued focus on mission (instead of on funding protection) and to signal to all actors in the sector that the cultural change to evidence-informed practice is valued.
5. **Efficient** – must separate evaluators from the commissioning body so that it is not a monopoly (build capacity across the sector) and can be competitive and focused on the end needs of frontline professionals.
6. **Responsive** – must be aware of state, territory and national governments, Catholic and independent sector priorities and agenda to ensure research and mobilisation efforts are aligned and relevant to their strategic priorities.
7. **Useable** – must generate resources in plain English formats with easy to understand measures of impact and cost. These resources must also include specific implementation support to ensure insights can become actions in schools. The resources will benefit if they are able to integrate easily into existing jurisdictional and sector frameworks and support tools.
8. **Able to leverage** – must be able to leverage government and system investment to encourage business and philanthropy to serve the national interest of a high-performing education system through further funding and support.
9. **Global** – must be integrated with international efforts to build a global education evidence base, to contribute to and learn from global efforts in the field, including adapting promising international findings into an Australian context and sharing Australian research with the global evidence base

SVA has also been at the forefront of efforts to create a permanent national education evidence institute, based on the Evidence for Learning model, to support all schools and teachers.

Through the National Schools Reform Agreement, the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have formally committed to creating a National Education Evidence Institute in 2020.

This follows recommendations to create a new education evidence body in the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence into Australian Schools chaired by Mr David Gonski¹³ and the Productivity Commission’s own recommendations in the Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base.¹⁴

SVA has been deeply involved in both inquiries through submissions and hearings and our experience with Evidence for Learning is reference in both of these reports.

SVA would be happy to provide further information about our experience of creating Evidence for Learning if it is of assistance to the Commission.

¹³ Gonski, D et al. (March 2018) *Through Growth to Achievement, Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* <https://www.education.gov.au/review-achieve-educational-excellence-australian-schools> Accessed September 2019

¹⁴ Productivity Commission 2016, National Education Evidence Base, Report no. 80, Canberra.

Recommendation: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples determining what works

Based on our experience establishing and incubating a national education evidence intermediary, and on ongoing conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies, we recommend that the Productivity Commission consider the role of an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled national evidence intermediary. Purpose, functions and initiatives could include:

- a. Principles for culturally competent evaluation, data and evidence collection and generation (in line with existing principles and ethics protocols)
- b. Defining success measures and indicators
- c. Holding government, private funders and service providers to account for the achievement of better outcomes
- d. Developing accountability models for the way funders engage and invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- e. Developing basic partnership principles for working with Indigenous organisations and communities
- f. Building an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled clearing house of what works
- g. Developing a community navigation tool providing a voice to communities and enabling them to promote their strengths
- h. Building a holistic, community defined library of outcomes and measures to guide funders, service providers and researchers
- i. Establishing greater connectivity between communities to share resources and develop a culture of learning
- j. Identifying gaps in the existing research and evidence base, coordinating (and potentially funding) research to fill the gaps
- k. Building evaluation capability within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to catalyse further Indigenous led evaluation.