

IECM Submission to the Productivity Commission's draft review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Introduction

This submission is provided on behalf of all Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) members. It reflects our longstanding views on the importance of governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples working together as equals to support our children to thrive in their education. We support the recommendations presented in the Productivity Commission's draft report for the Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the Review) and reiterate that the onus is on governments to transform how they work in line with the Priority Reforms. The recommendations offer valuable insights and a clear pathway of tangible actions towards positive change and delivery must be underpinned by the Priority Reforms.

We were pleased to meet with Commissioner's on the Review on 14 June 2023. This submission reaffirms and builds on those discussions, highlighting the expectations on government to 'look, listen and learn' when working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also builds on our submissions to the Productivity Commission's (PC) Review of the National School Reform Agreement^{1,2} (NSRA), to the Northern Territory's Secondary Education Review³ and to the Expert Panel of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System⁴.

We welcome the acknowledgement by the Productivity Commission of the 'fatigue and burden'⁵ on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources when continually called on by governments to provide advice, often advice that we have repeatedly provided over the last 40 years. When we are given space to have a say we are often not given sufficient time, acknowledgement, or resources to do so effectively. Notwithstanding this, we acknowledge positive engagement with recent processes, and we thank the Productivity Commission for their engagement and reflection of our concerns in their draft report to date and welcome the opportunity to provide further input.

Finally, we are pleased to share with the Productivity Commission that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Corporation (NATSIEC) has been incorporated with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC). It has been a four-year journey for NATSIEC to reach this status and we celebrate the formal establishment of a national Indigenous education peak body. This is not the end of our journey as we still grapple with governments hearing our call to fundamentally change how they look, listen and learn with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and commit to true transformation.

¹ IECM, 2022, *Initial submission (Sub 52)*, https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/344544/sub052-school-agreement.pdf

² IECM, 2022, *Supplementary submission (Sub DR125)*, https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/349206/subdr125-school-agreement.pdf

³ IECM, 2023, <https://haveyoursay.nt.gov.au/86304/widgets/414273/documents/266292>

⁴ IECM, 2023, <https://haveyoursay.nt.gov.au/86304/widgets/414273/documents/266292>

⁵ PC, 2023, *Draft Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, www.pc.gov.au/%2Finquiries%2Fcurrent%2Fclosing-the-gap-review%2Fdraft%2Fclosing-the-gap-review-draft.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

Look, listen and learn

We affirm the Productivity Commission's stark finding that governments have not yet grasped the nature or magnitude of change required to meet the commitments they have made under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the Agreement). We call on governments to enact true partnership in education — engage genuinely, early, and often; build trusting relationships; and invest in these appropriately to maximise potential for impact. These calls reflect our continuous feedback to government at all levels. The incorporation of NATSIEC as a peak body is to be celebrated, however, this should not be considered a job well done in meeting Priority Reform One of the Agreement; it is the start of the next chapter, not an end point. We must maintain momentum and ask government to prioritise how we continue to build on this partnership and strengthen the relationship between the Commonwealth and NATSIEC. There is much work to be done to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and histories are valued and embedded in education. We want to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in an educational environment that is culturally safe and responsive, fosters strengths-based and high expectations approaches, and is underpinned by partnership and shared decision-making that counters the history of power imbalance. This includes local school-community partnerships, which involve students, families and community, as well as jurisdictional and regional partnerships with Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs).

We are frustrated with the revolving door of government officials where the success of partnerships relies on the intent of the parties. We carry the burden of having the same conversations for 40 years with government officials coming and going. We implore governments to embed systemic reform in how they approach partnerships. We call for consistent approaches to be embedded across all sectors of government at every level. We are expected to meet government timeframes and expectations, yet the same expectations to be cognisant of our timeframes and protocols are not placed on government. We often see the best intent of government to work in partnership, however, external pressures and unrealistic timeframes that do not embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches see governments valuing their own knowledge over our knowledges. This creates a disconnect between intent and action. To work in genuine partnership with shared decision-making takes time, understanding and a willingness to do things differently.

Look, listen and learn: Look at the shared vision and how to work with us, listen to the knowledge of the people that have the lived experience, learn from your mistakes to transform so the next generation can succeed.

– Leigh Ridgeway, A/g President, NSW AECG

We also call on state and territory governments to ensure commensurate and enduring financial support is provided to enable an IECB in every jurisdiction and to continue to grow this partnership in all jurisdictions (including those with an existing IECB). IECB's have unparalleled experience in working to address the wide range of complex challenges and issues affecting successful education and training outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Formal partnerships are a standard we should all strive to, but we must not lose the value of diversity in partnerships at all levels and formality and the role they play in reducing the power imbalance experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In education, we welcome partnerships at school and regional levels that complements the required formal partnerships with IECBs and

NATSIEC at state and national levels. The formality of these will vary from community to community, but we strongly emphasise that strong relationships are key to breaking down prejudices, building trust and enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to be embedded in decision-making.

We have seen a history of educational reviews work in silos, ticking the box on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'consultation' without any genuine commitment to embed First Nations practice. We are in a period of significant education reform with reviews occurring across early childhood to higher education. This is complemented by significant focus on the commitments and progress of governments under Closing the Gap. Together, these provide an important opportunity that we must collectively capitalise on. We call for greater accountability in effective partnerships and shared decision-making under these reforms. This must go beyond engagement in the reviews themselves, and include partnership in implementation of the outcomes.

Glow in the dark transparency

We concur with the findings in the draft report that demonstrates how Priority Reforms do not interact with or contribute to socio-economic outcomes. There is a lack of transparency and accountability across funding, data, partnerships, and how governments are transforming to meet the Priority Reforms under the Agreement.

The government actions under the Agreement are vast, leading to, as the Productivity Commission has indicated, a 'siloes outcomes domain' and wasted government effort with tick and flick approaches prioritised as they are more easily achievable. We concur with the Productivity Commission's findings that annual reporting brings little attention to actions not being delivered or at risk of failure with narratives of success being favoured. Enhanced structural guidelines for governments, including through Implementation Plans and Annual Reporting, will bolster tracking of progress against the Closing the Gap actions and Priority Reforms. This will provide the flexibility to make timely course corrections when objectives are not being met. Similarly, these documents must be developed in partnership. We must have honest and open dialogue about progress and direction, or we risk "glossy documents" perpetuating the failures of the first 15 years of Closing the Gap. Our people do not have time to waste the opportunity of the National Agreement.

As we have said for many years, 'Aboriginal education funding used to glow in the dark'. This was a key element of the funding transparency and accountability of previous arrangements, such as initiatives under the *Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000* (IETA), alongside our direct engagement with both Commonwealth and state governments. The opacity of current funding arrangements was called out by the Productivity Commission in their review of the National School Reform Agreement in 2022, and transparency and accountability is a key term of reference for the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. This focus in reviews is a welcome response to our continual calls for improvement, but we must move to action.

We had tripartite meetings of Commonwealth and state governments, together with IECBs. These Strategic Directions Meetings (SDM) as part of the Supplementary Recurrent Assistance (SRA) program enabled us to collectively assess progress and prioritise action. This jurisdictional engagement enacted the Priority Reforms before they were even a commitment. Unfortunately, in a bid to mainstream this supplementary support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, by government incorporating the funding into general recurrent school funding arrangements at the time, they transferred the funding but not the accountability and partnership arrangements. These must go together. We have seen that more funding alone is insufficient to realise the success in

educational outcomes we all aspire to. Accountability should not be seen as a burden or pure compliance, rather as an opportunity to ensure all interested parties can feel assured that everything is being done to ensure our future generations are secure, thrive and our culture is celebrated.

The Productivity Commission's call to government to enact true transformation is welcomed. The Gap is widening because governments fail to understand the gravity of change needed to embed cultural knowledge and nurture structural reform. Already mentioned, the constant churn of government officials relies on the intent of individual parties. Governments need to embed systemic and structural responses that persist beyond individual officials and must start being held accountable consistently across all levels with their transformation progress understood and adhered to collectively.

Two-way accountability

We welcome the growth in the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) Sector under Priority Reform 2 of the Agreement however, we continue to see power imbalances in governments' approach to contracting ACCOs. Common practice is still to award grants to organisations who partner with an Indigenous organisation to tick cultural capability boxes, through a sub-contracting arrangement. This does little to sustainably build the ACCO sector, as the funding relationship with the ACCO is secondary to the delivery of the grants. This creates a power dynamic between the two organisations, sending the message that the capacity building of the non-Indigenous organisation is prioritised over the ACCO. Governments could consider flipping these arrangements, by engaging the ACCO or Indigenous organisation with the demonstrated cultural capability, to partner with a relevant non-Indigenous organisation if further capacity is required. To have a greater say in the way services and outcomes are designed, contracts are negotiated and funding is secured will ensure culturally safe programs are designed to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to thrive.

We want to highlight to the Productivity Commission the significant workload placed on ACCO's and call for structural change. The practice of reallocating non-Indigenous services to ACCOs for delivery, without genuine engagement with ACCOs on delivery approach or what is needed in that community, mean these are designed to fail. ACCOs hold knowledge, expertise and specialist skills that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to thrive through culturally safe practices. The lifting and shifting of non-Indigenous services, or government designed programmatic responses, to ACCOs creates an environment where meeting these KPIs are prioritised over the delivery of genuine outcomes. ACCO's are not passive recipients of funding and hold the capability and cultural knowledge to engage the community and deliver results.

Further, there is an imbalance in accountability. The burden and over-expectation on ACCOs to continuously demonstrate accountability to governments (in multiple ways to multiple departments, without any recognition of the resource imbalance between ACCOs and government or attempt by governments to better integrate themselves) causes great strain on our organisations, with little recourse available to us when governments don't hold up their end. We call for this accountability to be a two-way street. What KPIs will governments be required to demonstrate, and how can this be delivered in line with Priority Reform 4. These are the considerations that will bring honesty and robustness to "glossy" Annual Reports.

Countering deficit thinking and embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strengths

The Closing the Gap Targets provide a necessary focus and accountability for governments in achieving these. However, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes reaching a

level equitable to our peers, these have an inherent deficit frame. More must be done to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success in education, and we should also do better to collectively celebrate successes and highlight areas of positive practice. This will complement the honesty required in Annual Reports, achieving a balance between celebrating examples of success and progress, with the overarching reality of progress and further action that is needed.

Further, too often the labelling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families as disadvantaged plays into a culture of deficit discourse and low expectations that stymie Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to thrive in their education. Our students are not the problem – the system is failing them. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities face a range of complex and compounding circumstances that impact their educational engagement and outcomes, they are not inherently disadvantaged by being Indigenous.

Governments must maintain a focus on Priority Reforms. In doing so, they should consider strengths-based high expectations approaches, as well as the nuance that is not able to be captured within the targets. That is, the nuance of responsibility on the rest of Australia to embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and histories, and to develop their cultural capability. Priority Reform 3 delves into this for governments in transforming their approaches, and cannot be simply about the business as usual of Reconciliation Action Plans. Further, within education there is a significant opportunity to support this growth as a nation. To embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in education delivery. Ensuring that all Australian students have an opportunity to learn about the depth, wealth and diversity of the oldest continuous living cultures in the world.

[Past commitments provide a guide to the solutions that need to be implemented now](#)

For too long, successful programs that deliver genuine outcomes and improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are at the mercy of individuals and successive governments. The impacts of these decisions cripple and undermine any progress made by these programs towards Closing the Gap and have a devastating impact on our communities and peoples. For example, the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program, the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI). ASSPA opened the school gates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, helped create an environment of cultural safety, and shifted the power imbalance to enable shared decision-making. ITAS provided targeted literacy and numeracy tuition support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. MATSI operationalised governments' policy commitment to supporting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. It provided an opportunity to better understand the factors impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people teaching, to capture the workforce data and associated challenges, and to support a range of targeted initiatives to improve the situation. Given that Closing the Gap targets relating to educational outcomes are at risk of not being met, the need for these initiatives remains strong to this day and are an example of successful programs implemented through holistic, integrated, culturally responsive approaches. Governments must work in partnership to consider contemporary responses that draw on the principles of initiatives such as these to deliver the same shared objectives within the current policy ecosystem, and in line with the Priority Reforms and commitments under the Agreement.

Lastly, we reaffirm the contemporary applicability of the 1989 AEP (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy). Developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, through the self-determining National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), the 1989 AEP emphasises the importance of culturally sensitive and inclusive education for First Nations students, recognising their

unique cultural identities and histories. It outlines 21 long term goals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, many of which are still relevant and yet to be achieved today.

Endorsement

This submission reflects our views and lived experiences as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an extensive and valued background and history in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education throughout Australia. We look forward to the release of the review's findings and to practical and meaningful change as we walk together to Close the Gap.

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Background

This submission is provided on behalf of all Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) members. The IECM is a forum established by the Australian Government Department of Education, bringing together representatives from state and territory Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs), or nominated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education stakeholders for those jurisdictions where IECBs no longer exist. The views contained herein reflect members' long-held views and positions on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs)

IECBs (sometimes also referred to as Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups/AECGs) have a long and continued engagement with the education sector. As a collective national group, the IECBs have unparalleled experience in working to address the wide range of complex challenges and issues affecting successful education and training outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For more than 40 years, IECBs have shared their expertise through advocating on local, state, and national education and training committees as well as, undertaking major education projects to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes.