

Centre for Evidence and Implementation submission to the Productivity Commission draft of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

About the Centre for Evidence and Implementation

The Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) is a global, not-for-profit evidence intermediary with a strong track record as a specialist expert in using evidence and implementation in practice and policy to improve outcomes and create positive impact in society. Established in Australia in late 2015, CEI comprises a multi-disciplinary team of implementation science research, policy and practice experts that work to:

- Make evidence accessible for those who need it
- Develop methods and processes to assist others to put the evidence into practice, and
- Trial, test and evaluate policies and programs to drive more effective decisions and deliver better outcomes.

CEI is currently leading a number of evaluations for government of whole of sector reforms that - while not specifically labelled as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs - exert significant impact on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities through their overrepresentation in the cohort affected by the reform. Our comments below reflect this experience. We thank the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy and commend the Commission on the work completed to date.

Change from the beginning: Government tendering of evaluation

Problems in the quality of evaluations of policy that affect the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occur right from the beginning in the planning and commissioning of evaluation by government departments. Once a request for tender has been released to the public for an evaluation the approach to working with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the types of methods that could be used has already been scoped - and in many cases - set in stone. In our experience, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or communities are rarely directly involved in the planning and budgeting for evaluation of significant reform, even if this group is (significantly) over-represented in the cohort affected by the policy. We strongly suggest the next draft of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy include specific reference and attention to:

- the design of evaluation tender specifications within government for programs likely to exert a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' role in participating in the design of evaluation tender specifications.

We also see an urgent need for realistic budgeting for the meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the design of methodology to evaluate whole of sector reforms that impact the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We note the draft strategy refers to an 'Indigenous Evaluation Threshold Assessment' which may provide a mechanism for this process - although we caution this mechanism must support meaningful engagement and participation, rather than 'box-ticking' if it is to be effective.

Maintaining change: Strengthening systems and sustainability

Good quality, useful evaluations not only increase accountability but also have the practical potential to strengthen systems. There is a global movement away from top-down initiatives tied to

short-term funding towards strengthening systems to promote sustainability. Too often, new programs supersede existing programs and systems, rather than using evaluations as a tool to facilitate changes to strengthen systems. Implementation science takes a system strengthening approach as it explicitly and iteratively links evaluation findings to practical improvements that are actionable at the local level. We have identified the following where this could be strengthened in the final Strategy:

- The principle ‘Useful’ (discussed on pgs. 14-15 of The Draft) highlights how evaluation findings should ‘feed into planning cycles’ and that ‘agencies should have processes that allow findings to be incorporated into policy and program changes’. The mechanisms to implement and incentivise this, however, are not explicitly discussed here, nor in the evaluation guide. We recommend this be included in the final Strategy.
- We have often noted how evaluations that result in equivocal findings can result in government instigating a complete change in the program, including a discontinuation or duplication of services. This can lead to poor trust in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.¹ For this reason, we recommend there also be an emphasis in the Strategy on knowledge dissemination and practical implementation changes as a result of the evaluation at the local level (and not just for knowledge translation across the sector; see Chapter 7 of the Background Paper).
- The evaluation guide provides an opportunity to operationalise many aspects of the draft guide and background paper. Chapter 4 is particularly relevant and highlights the utility of a knowledge dissemination plan and a plain English summary. Figure 2 also includes a step on incorporating evaluation findings into practice. However, the emphasis seems to be on *only* reporting evaluation findings publicly, rather than working with the program implementers in the community to create local solutions and embed practical monitoring and evaluation indicators into the local system, long-term. We recommend this step be included in the final Strategy.

In order to avoid evaluations conducted in silos, there should be an emphasis on how program evaluators can tailor findings to embed systematic improvements in services or ‘business as usual’. For example, if a positive outcome is found, discussions on how to embed or up-scale this element should be encouraged. A continuous quality improvement model for evaluation may be a vehicle to operationalise this; such that after a thorough evaluation is conducted, monitoring and evaluation tools can be embedded at the local level to collect data to inform system improvements longer-term. This also provides the opportunity for local ownership of programs. The role of evaluation in the sustainability of programs, although touched on across various parts of the Strategy, could be strengthened in the final iteration of the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

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¹ Staines, Z. & Moran, M. (2020). Complexity and hybrid effects in the delivery and evaluation of youth programmes in a remote Indigenous community. *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 79, 3-25.