

Submission to the Productivity Commission regarding the proposed Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

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Introduction

I am a researcher currently working on the evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Islander programs. My contribution is to highlight the issues that have emerged from research and conversations regarding Indigenous evaluation over the years.

Emerging Issues

Within the Indigenous evaluation literature and conversations, a number of critiques have emerged addressing the nature, scope, processes and outcomes of predominantly non-Indigenous led and government commissioned evaluation programs. These critiques include that;

- i) evaluations are not embedded in program design and planning but introduced well into program implementation;
- ii) evaluations overemphasise the accounting of tax payer funds at the expense of hearing the voice of those living the experiences of poor emotional and physical wellbeing, and impacted by service delivery (Curran & Taylor-Barnett, 2019);
- iii) program performance is not framed as outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities but focus on deficits and problems (Muir & Dean, 2017);
- iv) evaluations fail to account for the complex challenges' families face (e.g. social disadvantage and intergenerational trauma) (Day & Francesco, 2013);
- v) organizations providing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rarely have an internal monitoring and evaluation budget (Hudson, 2017);
- vi) there is lack of acknowledgement and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ways of knowing and doing, and beliefs and values often resulting in a government misunderstanding of the constituencies of success or program performance during evaluation (Hudson, 2017; Muir & Dean, 2017; Tilbury, 2002);
- vii) there is limited consultation of Indigenous people during evaluation designs, particularly the determination of what should be evaluated, evaluation questions, evaluation tools and associated performance measures, the use and accessibility of evaluation results, and the selection of evaluators (Tilbury, 2004); and
- viii) Indigenous programs are being designed, implemented and evaluated by non-Indigenous practitioners and researchers using culturally insensitive approaches and methodologies (Bowman & Dodge-Francis, 2018; Curran & Taylor-Barnett, 2019).

Lessons can be drawn from the principles and guidelines for research of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs. These ethical considerations and guidelines have been developed at a Federal and State levels and by other governmental and nongovernmental research organizations (e.g. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, National Health and Medical Research Council). Common themes emerging from these principles and guidelines emphasise the need to promote;

- cultural sensitivity in the design, implementation and evaluation of programs,
- high level of indigenous ownership and control of programs and their evaluation, including research or evaluation design, data ownership, the interpretation, publication and use of research or evaluation results,
- partnerships and collaboration in research and evaluation of programs,
- accounting and/or consideration of the impacts of colonisation and the associated legacy of past trauma and intergenerational trauma, and past and current racism; and
- accrual of net benefits of research and evaluations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Discussion and recommendations.

Indigenous programs are diverse within and across sectors and therefore the nature and scope of services and outcomes. Furthermore, it should be recognized that program/system level and service/local level indicators serve different evaluation objectives. This suggest the need to;

- i) separate system/policy evaluation/program evaluation frameworks with localized evaluation framework with the later focusing more on family outcomes at local level. This means that service providers will be required to develop their own logic models that describe specific outputs for each service, the anticipated outcomes and performance measures to assist with tailored evaluations that are more useful for service improvements, and ultimately program improvements.
- ii) provide an internal evaluation budget for each service provider to support localized evaluation processes which are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- iii) consult Indigenous people during the development of program/system performance indicators.

There is need to genuinely engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in evaluation planning and designing. Evaluations are often considered to be an external activity mostly implemented by government departments or consultancies engaged by the government. However, Indigenous people's involvement in evaluations is critical not only to ensure co-designing, self-determination and culturally appropriate evaluations, but also as a relationship building exercise to enhance trust amongst stakeholders. Furthermore, consultation during the design can provide a mechanism to jointly establish a common understanding of what can be evaluated and how it can be evaluated from the outset of the program. There is therefore need for engagement strategies that specify the nature and scope of engagement, purpose of engagement, output/outcomes of engagement, the timing of engagement (at what stage/s in the program lifecycle should engagement occur and for what purposes) and who should be involved in the engagement.

It is also recommended that evaluation frameworks are embedded in program design so that evaluations are not left at the end of programs. Embedding monitoring and evaluation during program design also allow structured learning during implementation or over time. This point emphasizes the need to support internal monitoring and evaluation so that evaluations are not exclusively external. Internal evaluations may also generate data that can feed into the external evaluation. External evaluations that are not informed or supported by internal evaluations are

sometimes interpreted as targeting the existence of service providers by establishing reason to cut funding. This often cause anxiety amongst service providers when an evaluation is announced.

The timing of engagement of Indigenous people is of paramount importance (Bowman & Dodge-Francis 2018). It recommended that the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should ideally occur at program design during which an evaluation strategy and plan are jointly developed. At the stage of program design; process, outcome and impact indicators will be jointly determined by the relevant Government Department and the Indigenous people, leadership, researchers and/or organizations. In the event that an evaluation is not built into the program design, the engagement process will need to start during the evaluation design itself to determine culturally appropriate evaluation questions, methods, indicators and have a common understanding of constituencies of success.

It is recommended that evaluations are conducted by personnel that are culturally competent and have awareness of the complex issues Indigenous people face. It is also important that evaluators are familiar with ethical conduct when evaluating Indigenous program. A number of such guidelines are available particularly within the health sector. It is therefore important for government to invest resources to build competences in this regard.

While the development of service specific performance measures provides more useful evaluation processes and outcomes particularly at a local level, the cost of meeting the obligation of such an evaluation process may be limiting. One approach would be to jointly develop broader and overarching evaluation framework/s for common outputs and associated outcomes. This suggest the need to conceptually link the diverse services to inform the development of broader and overarching performance measures. The challenge though is finding evidence base to support the conceptual linkages. However, linking services provides an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organizations and leadership to jointly determine what should be measured to reflect client needs and the importance of culture, family connections and connections to country.

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