

# Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

**Productivity Commission**

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## Introduction

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UQ has won more national teaching awards than any other Australian university. This commitment to quality teaching empowers our 52,000 current students, who study across UQ's three campuses, to create positive change for society.

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The [Centre for Policy Futures](#) positions the University as a key source of ideas and insights on the policy priorities that matter to Australia and the Pacific through robust, rigorous and timely research, and sustained policy engagement.

This submission represents the opinions of the contributing authors listed in this document. It does not necessarily represent an official position of The University of Queensland.

## Summary and recommendations

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's review into Indigenous Evaluation Strategies.

The review is timely and necessary, as outlined in the issues paper. The convergence of high Government expenditure, limited gains in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and the ongoing political debate about Indigenous voice and recognition makes this an opportune time to consider the ways in which evaluations of programs, attached to Indigenous policy imperatives, play a role in improving outcomes overall for First Nations Australians.

The recommendations provided in this submission are connected to our work as researchers, who often grapple with similar issues and tensions outlined in the issues paper. The issues paper states that less than 10% of all Indigenous programs are evaluated and yet the Government has allocated 5.1 billion dollars over the next four years until 2021-22 on an Indigenous advancement strategy. Spending that level of funding with such a limited evidence base to draw from program and policy successes, failures, enablers and blockers, is failing Indigenous peoples, and indeed, all Australians. However, the process of evaluation should not further burden Indigenous peoples accessing services.

The recommendations provided are based on decades of Indigenous scholarship in particular but also underpinned by the many relevant principles outlined in the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations, 2007)<sup>i</sup>, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* (AIATSIS, 2012)<sup>ii</sup> and the National Health and Medical Research Council *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders* (NHMRC, 2018)<sup>iii</sup>.

Recommendations outlined in this document are:

- i) Indigenous voices, agency, community, leadership and partnership, is key in any Indigenous evaluation reform.
- ii) Indigenous young people (aged 25 years or younger) make up over half of the Indigenous population<sup>iv</sup>. The voices and perspectives of Indigenous young people are important in this reform. They are the future.
- iii) Any evaluation reform must incorporate principles outlined in key ethical frameworks and any party undertaking evaluations with Indigenous peoples and communities should complete an ethics process to ensure Indigenous peoples and communities are not subject to unethical collection of data.
- iv) Australia has a unique challenge with relation to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. Developing a framework that allows for contextualising and training of local people to be involved in evaluation of program is vital. Local people are the experts in their communities and are best placed to evaluate the success of a program or policy.

## Recommendations

**i. Indigenous voices, agency, community, leadership and partnership, is key in any Indigenous evaluation reform**

Indigenous voices and inclusion in policy making and decision making in Australia was the impetus for the development of the Uluru Statement from the Heart<sup>v</sup>. It is well documented that the impact of colonisation and subsequent Government policies have resulted in a lack of Indigenous agency or voice in policy and program development. Scholars have for decades identified the impact of exclusion of Indigenous peoples in the conceptualising, development, research and evaluation of Indigenous policy and programs<sup>vi</sup>.

Not only does the research emphasise the importance of Indigenous voices, it also outlines the importance of providing Indigenous leadership and governance opportunities throughout the entire process<sup>vii</sup>. Evaluation processes that value, recognise and respect the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait is a key feature of this recommendation.

Practical strategies that can be implemented include:

- Establishment of local governance steering committees nationally to recognise the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which incorporates local Indigenous governance models and is part of an accountability measure for Government funded programs. These committees would need appropriate resourcing and members would need to be remunerated for their time and expertise. There would also need to be mechanisms to ensure diversity of representation on the committees.
- Invest in large scale and longitudinal research by Indigenous scholars to develop an evidence base that is Indigenous led and process driven. Despite a large body of research emphasising the importance of including Indigenous voices in processes such as evaluation of policy and programs, there is limited evaluative scholarship to draw from that is broad enough to incorporate the breadth of programmatic focus and diversity of Indigenous communities. This investment is needed to ensure evaluative frameworks are underpinned by Indigenous leadership, scholarly rigour, an evidence base and robust critique that occurs through peer review processes.
- Effective evaluation of programs and policies do not sit in a vacuum – overall reform on policy development that includes diverse Indigenous peoples and voices is necessary. This requires a whole of Government approach to implementing systemic reform that is premised on the inclusion of diverse Indigenous voices in all aspects of program and policy development.

**ii. Indigenous young people (aged 25 years or younger) make up over half of the Indigenous population. The voices and perspectives of Indigenous young people are important in this reform. They are the future.**

Indigenous young people under the age of 25 years make up over half of the total Indigenous population. Yet, there are very limited platforms for their voices to be heard. At the Garma Festival this year (2019), 65 Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people developed a follow up to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, calling for the Prime Minister and Education Ministers to involve young people in decisions made about them. They delivered ‘the Imagination Declaration’, a challenge to the Prime Minister and Education Ministers to involve Indigenous young people in policies that affect them and their futures. Below is a direct excerpt from the declaration:

*With 60,000 years of genius and imagination in our hearts and minds, we can be one of the groups of people that transform the future of life on Earth, for the good of us all.*

*We can design the solutions that lift islands up in the face of rising seas, we can work on creative agricultural solutions that are in sync with our natural habitat, we can re-engineer schooling, we can invent new jobs and technologies, and we can unite around kindness.*

*We are not the problem, we are the solution<sup>viii</sup>.*

A recent analysis undertaken by Shay & Sarra (under review) of studies that explore the topic of identity with Indigenous young people in the fields of education and health revealed that only fourteen studies included explicit data from Indigenous young people. What this analysis revealed was that even in research that investigates issues about Indigenous young people don’t necessarily include their voices, perspectives or experiences. This is problematic because over half of the Indigenous population are under the age of 25 years and their insights, solutions and aspirations are vital in finding solutions to complex issues that persist.

The Imagination Declaration and findings from a three-year study recently completed (funded by the Lowitja Institute) on Indigenous youth identity, health and wellbeing in diverse school settings revealed that Indigenous young people are eager to be engaged and be part of discussions about their futures<sup>ix</sup>. There are many ways that Indigenous young people can be part of evaluation strategies.

Practical strategies that can be implemented include:

- Develop a youth centred program within the new Indigenous evaluation framework to ensure there are specific mechanisms for Indigenous young people to be involved in all aspects of policy and program evaluation.
- Implementation of school-based traineeships nationally, specifically for Indigenous young people to be trained in evaluative skills and encourage interest in program development and evaluation as a career pathways

**iii. Any evaluation reform must incorporate principles outlined in key ethical frameworks and any party undertaking evaluations with Indigenous peoples and communities should complete an ethics process to ensure Indigenous peoples and communities are not subject to unethical collection of data**

Guidelines and standards to conduct ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been established by NHMRC Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research (2003) and, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (2012). Key principles in these documents provide an ethical framework for parties undertaking evaluations with Indigenous peoples and communities. The key principles are: spirit and integrity; reciprocity; respect; equality; responsibility; survival and protection. These principles, align with Indigenous ways of being, doing and knowing and have been put in place to ensure that Indigenous people and communities are not subject to unethical data collection.

The methodology of the evaluation should meet the needs of each project and community and also adhere to ethical guidelines and Indigenous research methodologies. While an overarching framework can exist, we highlight the need for each program to ensure the evaluation meets the needs and standards of each Indigenous community. This methodology should be part of an ethics process as both formative and summative data will potentially be collected to determine the success of the project.

We caution having an evaluation team separate to the program team, for example an external body that has no relationship or understanding of the program or the communities where the program is being undertaken. The evaluation team should be part of the project from the outset or established within the initial stages of the project. Reasons for this include the potential for evaluation team members having limited cultural context and protocol/ethics training.

Other challenges faced with ethical protocols is ensuring the anonymity of people and communities. While this is important for each individual, there are also cases where this can disempower communities in sharing success stories or challenges. We recognise that this needs to be a discussion with each individual and community, and a local governance evaluation group could play a role in determining this.

Practical strategies that can be implemented include:

- Building in evaluation from the outset of a program in collaboration with end-users
- Create materials accessible to local communities (these could include materials in Indigenous languages) to inform communities on ethical guidelines and frameworks that were aimed at addressing poor practices
- Including research and ethics within school curriculum would be an innovative way of empowering young Indigenous people to understand ethical implications attached to accessing programs and evaluation and research activities in their communities

- V. Australia has a unique challenge with relation to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities. Developing a framework that allows for contextualising and training of local people to be involved in evaluation of program is vital. Local people are the experts in their communities and are best placed to evaluate the success of a program or policy.**

An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy needs to also be flexible, so that it can recognise the diversity of opinions Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold regarding policies and programs. To assure flexibility it is integral that Government agencies consult with local people regarding what success means to them, and what methodologies are the most appropriate to illustrate local understandings of successful programs and policies.

It is integral that the Productivity Commission actively engage with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design and development of all policies and programs that directly affect their communities. The premise of evaluations should be one of empowerment that measure local peoples' understanding of success. Such engagement is necessary to further enhance the self-determination of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia.

In evaluating policies and programs the Productivity Commission needs to acknowledge Indigenous-centric knowledges and values. Too often the Government emphasis on a Western paradigm, instead of an Indigenous paradigm, means that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not have control over the agenda of programs and evaluations that directly affect them. It is important that any evaluation of policies and programs directly affecting Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples employ local people to undertake the evaluation. Practical strategies that can be implemented include:

- **Engagement and leadership:** Enhance engagement and communication with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design, development, and evaluation of policies and programs that affect their communities, through free, prior and informed consent, providing opportunities for Indigenous peoples to lead this process.
- **Education and Training:** Resources should be set aside to train and educate local communities in evaluation methodologies and processes.
- **Flexibility:** Evaluation methodologies and processes should be flexible to accommodate for the diversity of opinions within and between Australian Indigenous peoples. To reflect the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander opinions Government agencies should employ an Indigenous-led response that utilises interviews, in addition to more standard survey methods.

Assuring that local people are the ones undertaking the evaluation is integral to empowering and the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, families, and communities.



The issues paper posed a number of questions throughout. This submission will respond to just one of the key questions: *Do you agree with the main components of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy suggested by the Commission? Should other components be included? If so, why?*

The issues paper outlined an intention for a framework underpinned by principles to be developed and applied to evaluation of Indigenous programs. This approach is understandable and, like the ethical guidelines outlined in our submission, principles can be effective – the problem is how they are applied. In a research context, researchers go through stringent and rigorous ethical processes to human research committees where they need to provide detailed information about the methodology, justification for its use, evidence of Indigenous engagement leadership (and many other principles outlined in the ethics guidelines). In using a principles based framework in evaluative strategies for Indigenous programs, the question is how will this then be honoured and applied? The commission outlines in the issues paper that it would not be economically viable to evaluate all programs, nor might it be necessary. It is recognised the evaluation strategies are an additional cost. Therefore, it is unlikely that beyond the development of the principles that there would be any way of knowing whether program evaluation is underpinned by these principles or that they are being applied.

What has always been a critical issue in relation to Indigenous expenditure is accountability. It was highlighted in the issues paper that only a small portion of the funds spent ostensibly aimed at addressing Indigenous disadvantage go to Indigenous community controlled organisations. Most of the funding goes to ‘mainstream’ organisations. There is an opportunity here if the Government won’t redirect the funds towards Indigenous community controlled organisations to hold these organisation to account with relation to the level of Indigenous leadership, employment, participation and evaluation of the effectiveness of programs aimed at addressing issues for Indigenous peoples. The components of the evaluation strategy as outlined in the issues paper do not address this issue. Evaluation of programs could at a very basic level include reporting of programs with mandatory targets for organisations receiving funding to deliver Indigenous programs. For example, an organisation that received Indigenous program funding should have at least one Indigenous person on their board. They should have specific targets on employment, development, and leadership opportunities for Indigenous people across the life of the project. These are some basic examples of what the research literature in education outlines as having an impact on Indigenous students.

## Contributing authors

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## Endnotes

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