
A Whole of Government Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

**NAIDOC event,
Institute of Public Administration Australia
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Romlie Mokak, Commissioner

Introduction

Today, I stand here on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. I am deeply grateful for the warmth and the generosity in allowing this country to be home for my family over the past 20 years. I honour your ancestors, your Elders and your young ones yet to come. I honour your sacred places and the wisdom and teachings held and shared in these places.

I aim to speak to two things today – NAIDOC and the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.

NAIDOC theme – Voice, Treaty, Truth

This year's NAIDOC brings into focus the theme of Voice, Treaty, Truth: Let's work together for a shared future. The NAIDOC theme, by definition, seeks for all Australians to work together to build our nation's future. Voice, Treaty, Truth puts forward a proposition – to the Australian people – about a shared future.

These three elements from the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* speak to the call by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have a greater say in their lives.

I quote:

When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish.

They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution....we seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard.

NAIDOC week is a time to commemorate, as well as a time to celebrate. It is a time to remember and honour those who have come before. To honour those who have worked tirelessly and endlessly for our benefit. NAIDOC week is a time to place our - Indigenous - knowledges, our cultures, our science, our strength, our achievements - at the centre.

NAIDOC invites you into this space – beyond raising flags, beyond exhibiting art, beyond consuming native foods. NAIDOC is not just about NAIDOC week. In fact the spirit of NAIDOC really is about what we do during those remaining weeks of the year.

25 years in policy

This week begins my 12th week at the Productivity Commission – it is still very much early days for me.

My road to the Commission has been travelled via community, state, Commonwealth and Indigenous organisations. From beginnings in the NSW public service 25 years ago as a junior policy officer in ageing and disability. To the Commonwealth Department of Health - working in Indigenous policy and program areas such as health inequality, substance use and financing.

For the past 14 years heading up national black organisations:

- nine as CEO of the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association
- the last five as head of the Lowitja Institute (Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research).

The learning over these years - that those who are most invested and most impacted must not be assigned to policy render. They must also be designers, architects, builders and evaluators for impact and change.

Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

The Productivity Commission has been asked to develop a whole-of-government evaluation strategy to be used by all Australian Government agencies, for policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The project will have three main components. The Commission has been asked to:

- establish a principles-based framework for the evaluation of policies and programs
- identify priorities for evaluation
- set out its approach for reviewing agencies' conduct of evaluations against the strategy.

The Commission has a broad remit to recommend changes to improve the use and conduct of evaluation in Australian Government agencies. This goes beyond guiding stakeholders during the commissioning and conduct of evaluations.

The evaluation strategy should also make recommendations on how evaluation and evidence-based decision making can be embedded into policy development and program delivery. The problems with existing evaluation practice that have motivated this project are not just that evaluations have been rarely or poorly conducted, but stem from the lack of influence of evaluation practice and results on policymaking.

It is clear that the value of evaluation will be limited in the absence of strong and sustainable mechanisms to feed evaluation findings, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, perspectives and priorities, into the policymaking process.

The evaluation strategy must cover both mainstream and Indigenous-specific policies and programs if it is to properly examine those that have most impact on, or potential benefit for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We will make recommendations on how evaluation efforts should be prioritised, both within agencies and across the Australian Government.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples perspectives on what policies and outcomes matter most will be vital when identifying priorities for evaluation.

Early insights

Our project is in its early stages:

- we will deliver a draft report in February next year
- and a final report to government in around 12 months from now.

However early discussions around the country have provided insights into the challenges we may face when developing the strategy, and the areas where the strategy can add the most value. The dearth of evaluation of policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been well-documented. It is clear that evaluation practice in Australian Government agencies varies considerably.

Existing evaluation efforts are often narrowly focused rather than systematic, and many agencies do not publish evaluation reports in a timely manner (if at all). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and voices have been largely absent from evaluation design and conduct. Even where there has been leadership and considerable resources devoted, experience shows that changing the evaluation culture in government agencies is hard.

The then Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (now National Indigenous Australian agency) and the Department of Health are two agencies that have made inroads

into better incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and priorities into their evaluation efforts.

Implementation matters, and considering likely implementation road blocks – such as capability and culture in agencies and service delivery organisations, data availability, and knowledge translation – will be a key considerations for the strategy.

We are also encountering many positive examples from outside government of how evaluation can be used to improve decision making and program implementation. We have much to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations – such as the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH) in South East Queensland.

IUIH has been active in commissioning and conducting research and evaluation to build the evidence base on what works, and demonstrate its impact to the community and government.

Last week, we published an issues paper, which outlines some of the key questions we'd like your help to answer.

These include:

- How can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, priorities and values be better integrated into policy and program evaluation?
- What principles should guide Australian Government agencies' evaluation efforts?
- What should be the priority policy areas for future Australian Government evaluation efforts?
- How can evaluation results be better used in policy and program design and implementation?
- What ongoing role should the Productivity Commission have in monitoring agencies' implementation of the strategy, and in evaluating policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more generally?

Further engagement

We are seeking submissions from interested parties between now and 23 August.

You can send us a written submission, make an oral submission or leave a brief comment on our website: www.pc.gov.au/indigenous-evaluation

In the second half of the year we will be engaging widely across Australia to inform the development of the strategy. We will travel to urban, regional and remote areas, to hear from individuals, groups and organisations.

We hope to hold a series of roundtable discussions on topics related to the evaluation strategy. This will be to draw on the experience and expertise of people and organisations

who have been involved in evaluation or have insights into how policy making and program implementation can be improved.

In closing

As NAIDOC's impact must surely go well beyond a single week in July.

So to a future Indigenous Evaluation Strategy must have value in a lasting way.

I invite each and every one of you to be an active part of the discussion, debate and design to make this a reality.