Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

Submission to the Productivity Commission

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Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and young people in Australia.

Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education.

Our mission is founded on the belief that every child and young person deserves a chance. The mission guides every element of our work, including program development and delivery, research, advocacy and fundraising.

The Smith Family delivers programs in each state and territory in Australia, in over 90 communities, including many regional communities.

In 2017-18, The Smith Family supported more than 170,000 disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its education-focussed programs. Around 20,000 of these children and adults are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

We are supporting 48,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people nationally on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* educational scholarship. One in five students on the *Learning for Life* program is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

We have a unique longitudinal dataset of young people participating on *Learning for Life*. It includes demographic, administrative and outcomes data. We are tracking the school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study of all young people on the program. We are analysing this data in a systematic way in order to: assess the effectiveness of the program; refine the program based on this analysis; and contribute to building the Australian educational evidence base.

Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes this review and the opportunity to provide a submission. This submission has been prepared with input and advice from The Smith Family's Advisory Group on Issues Concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Advisory Group)[1]. The Advisory Group provides invaluable support and advice on organisational culture and operations, including how to better deliver programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We share the Commission's concern there have not been significant improvements in a range of key outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over many years and believe that a comprehensive Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (IES) will contribute to better understanding what programs/policies are or aren't working, for whom and why. This in turn will support the allocation of funding to initiatives that contribute to better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We see two principle virtues in the development of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy:
- Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in evaluation and decision-making around policies and programs that affect them, will make an important contribution to self-determination.
- Providing a coordinated approach to data collection and evaluation will form a comprehensive framework for knowledge upon which improved program development and policy making can rest.

Self-determination

An Indigenous Evaluation Strategy must rest on the principle of self-determination and be explicitly situated within the rights and principles of Indigenous peoples outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Australia is a signatory. This principle implies the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people fully participating in the development, implementation and management of programs and policies that affect them, including the development of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy and evaluation activities which flow from it.

A genuine partnership between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, evaluators and government agencies will help to meet these requirements and contribute to improved program and policy design and decision making.

Comprehensive framework

Australian governments have invested enormous resources in policy making for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and there are many policies and programs that provide services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in communities across Australia. However, there is no comprehensive approach to evaluation that coordinate and direct activity across Commonwealth Government agencies (nor state/territory, local government or civil society

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[1] A list of Advisory Group members is at Appendix A.

initiatives). The development of the IES provides an opportunity to build a comprehensive framework that can address these issues and to ensure that valuable resources are directed where they should be.

Specifically, our submission outlines the following:

1. Self-determination should be the key underpinning principle of the IES.
2. A principles-based framework is essential.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be involved in each step of the evaluation process.
4. Building genuine relationships between evaluators and local communities over time is critical.
5. The cultural capability of evaluators is critical.
6. Evaluations must produce something that it useful for those participating in the evaluation as well as for the commissioning Agency.
7. There may in some cases be tensions in reporting evaluation findings.
8. The IES should provide an overarching framework for current data collection and for knowledge gaps
9. The IES should aim to improve outcomes and contribute to the evidence base
10. Both targeted and mainstream programs should be included in the IES
11. The IES will need to acknowledge complexity and diversity in program delivery and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities
12. Planning for evaluation should take place early in the development of policies and programs.

These points are outlined further below.

1.   Self-determination is a key underpinning principle

Self-determination is a key underpinning principle of the IES. We agree with the Issues Paper that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Australia is a signatory, provides the foundational context for developing the IES. All components of the IES should support the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by providing an opportunity to increase the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in policies and programs that affect them.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples know best how to build a better life for themselves.[2] Governments remain responsible and accountable for assisting and investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in order that they thrive. However, governments, as well as civil society and business, must follow the lead of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and provide necessary support and enabling environment as they take ownership of their individual and collective futures, as described in The Uluru Statement from the Heart:

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[2] Sarra, Chris, 'Strong and Smart: investing in Indigenous children', Sambell Oration 2018, Melbourne, 11 April 2018; Sarra, Chris, 'Aboriginal people are exceptional. When we can all acknowledge that, the gap will close', The Guardian, 12 February 2015.

'When we [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples] 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.'[3]

2.   A principles-based framework is essential

A principles-based framework is an essential component of an IES, and vital to ensuring that the implications of self-determination are given full life in evaluation activities. A key principle of the framework needs to be an acknowledgement of the significant diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's circumstances and experiences across Australia. As such, it is impossible for a single methodological approach to address all of the possible settings in which evaluations would occur. The Framework must be broad enough to incorporate the very diverse contexts in which programs and policies impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occur.

A principles-based framework allows both for:

- The flexible application of different approaches and methods as appropriate to local contexts, and
- An explicit statement of the values and principles that underpin evaluations, which will guide their conduct.

There are a number of existing documents that provide guidance to the principles that should guide evaluation and research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and hence be incorporated in the IES. These include the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' (AIATSIS) *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*[4] and the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NMHRC) documents *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders*[5] and *Keeping research on track II*[6].

The Smith Family's Reconciliation Action Plan[7] includes the guiding principles that underpin our approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see Appendix B). These could inform the development of the IES with a key principle being that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have expert knowledge, skills and abilities that should be used at every stage of the evaluation process.

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[3] Referendum Council, Uluru Statement from the Heart, 26 May 2017

[4] Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*, AIATSIS, 2012, https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/research-and-guides/ethics/gerais.pdf

[5] National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities*, NHMRC, 2018, https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/ethical-conduct-research-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-and-communities

[6] NHMRC, *Keeping research on track II*, NHMRC, 2018, https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/keeping-research-track-ii

[7] The Smith Family, *Reconciliation Action Plan July 2017-June 2020*, The Smith Family, 2017, https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/~/media/files/programs/reconciliation-action-plan/the-smith-family-reconciliation-action-plan-2017-2020.ashx

3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be involved in each step of the evaluation process

The principle of self-determination demands the full involvement in each stop of the development and implementation of the IES.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should have the opportunity to be involved in each step of the evaluation process, including the selection of evaluators, initial budget discussions, design (including setting the outcomes areas of interest to the evaluation and appropriate methodologies for the local community), analysis and interpretation of data. This involvement should be appropriately acknowledged and rewarded. Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are involved in all parts of the evaluation process they should be acknowledged as authors in any published materials, not just acknowledgement as participants.

The IES should seek to address a range of problems which have been observed over many years These include:
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people not being involved as genuine partners in evaluations which have focused on government objectives and priorities at the expense of those of local community members[8]
- Inaccurately reflecting the views of people who were consulted[9]
- Using Western research methodologies, approaches and values which have caused great harm to Indigenous people and communities at least in part by 'proving' their inferiority using scientific method.[10]

As well as fulfilling the requirements of the principle of self-determination, the full participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in evaluations has many practical benefits, including improved program effectiveness and greater perceived legitimacy.[11] Central to any quality evaluation, whether it be with Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people, is understanding the context in which a policy or program is being implemented. The knowledge of local community members is central to ensuring that evaluations are nuanced and targeted to local circumstances, both in their development, analysis of findings and subsequent recommendations.

There are a range of participatory approaches to evaluation that support the continuous involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in evaluations that affect them. Participatory action approaches to evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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[8] Productivity Commission, *Better Indigenous Policies: The Role of Evaluation, Roundtable Proceedings*, Productivity Commission, 2013, https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/better-indigenous-policies/better-indigenous-policies.pdf

[9] Productivity Commission, 2013, ibid

[10] Katz, Ilan, Newton, BJ, Bates, Shona, Raven, Margaret, *Evaluation theories and approaches; Relevance for Aboriginal contexts*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW, 2016, https://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/pdfs/research-and-evaluation/Evaluation%20theories%20and%20approaches%20-%20relevance%20for%20Aboriginal%20contexts.pdf

[11] Productivity Commission, 2013, op. cit., p.9

communities 'strengthen community ownership and sustainability of the intervention as well as fostering participation and cooperation in evaluations', and as an empowering process.[12]

Within a participatory framework, use of mixed research methods including qualitative and quantitative techniques and a range of data sources is likely to 'produce complementary strengths and reduce methodological weaknesses … and provide a stronger evidence base for conclusions about outcomes.'[13] An evaluation of The Smith Family's *Girls @ the Centre* program highlights the value of a participatory approach which includes both quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Box 1. Participatory and mix-methods approaches

Girls at the Centre: **A participatory evaluation with mixed methodology**

Girls at the Centre is a program that supports girls to stay in high school. It was initially co-designed by The Smith Family and Alice Springs community members in 2008. The program was designed with the support of a Community Reference Group, which provided program design and implementation advice and championed the program. Although *Girls at the Centre* was originally conceived as focusing on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, consultation with Aboriginal community members during the design phase of the program, recommended making it an inclusive program that was also available to other girls in the school.

An independent evaluation of *Girls at the Centre* was conducted by Associate Professor Tess Lea and Associate Professor Catherine Driscoll from the University of Sydney in 2011-2012, and assessed both program implementation and program outcomes.[14] Participatory evaluation techniques were used to foster ownership, partnership and participation in the evaluation, including involving key stakeholders in designing the evaluation framework and exploring the evaluation findings.   These key stakeholders included girls participating in the program, parents/carers, program and school staff, and community members who had been involved in the design of the program.

The evaluation used a mixed methodology which included a focused literature review; consultations with key stakeholders on program documentation, logic and impact pathways; field work observations; qualitative interviews with program participants, parents, teachers, school leaders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander liaison staff, policy officers from government agencies and other organisations, and community leaders; analysis of quantitative data; and exploratory case studies to identify critical success factors.

The use of these complementary methods and the exploration of findings in conjunction with key stakeholders enabled the researchers to test and draw conclusions about a wide range of

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[12] Mikhailovich, K, Morrison, P, Arabena, K, 'Evaluating Australian Indigenous community health promotion initiatives: A selective review' in *Rural and Remote Health*, 7:746 (online), pp.13-14

[13] Mikhailovich et al, ibid, p. 14

[14] Lea, Tess, Driscoll, Catherine, *Evaluation of The Smith Family's Girls at the Centre Program*, University of Sydney, 2012, http://www.learningemergence.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Lea-2012-Evaluation-of-Smith-Family-Girls-inthe-Middle-UoS.pdf

implementation and outcome factors. Since the evaluation in 2011-12, ongoing data monitoring has continued to establish evidence for the educational and personal outcomes achieved by program participants, including in school attendance and achievement and the development of life goals and skills.[15]

The *Girls at the Centre* evaluation also identified some limitations that have helped improve The Smith Family's evaluation practices. This includes a strong recognition of the importance of building long-term relationships between evaluators and the community members who will be involved in the evaluation.

Girls at the Centre is now being run in Wagga Wagga NSW and Morwell Victoria.

4.   Building genuine relationships over time is critical

The development of genuine relationships between evaluators and the community is a necessary precondition for the participation of community members and the conduct of successful evaluations. Community members will not engage in evaluations if they do not perceive that evaluators are respectful and want to be useful to their community.[16]

Building relationships to ensure a genuine partnership in evaluations takes time, [17] and this needs to be anticipated and made an accepted and necessary part of practice in evaluations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This will have implications for budget and timeframes.

5.   The cultural capability of evaluators is critical

Evaluators need to have cultural capability and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, knowledges, history and values – in particular those of the local communities with which they will be working.   The AIATSIS *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Studies*[18] identify the need to respect, protect and maintain Indigenous Knowledge, practices and innovation, and a range of steps that should be taken in order to apply this principle when undertaking research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Culturally appropriate and culturally competent evaluation methodologies should be integrated into the evaluation strategy. This may include, for example, yarning methodologies, or other methods that are discussed with the community and agreed to be culturally appropriate by community members.

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[15] The Smith Family, *Improving educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Girls*, The Smith Family, 2014, https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/~/media/files/research/reports/improving-educational-outcomes-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-girls.ashx?la=en

[16] Rawsthorne, Margot, de Pree, Alison, 'Are we welcome here? Building trust through community based research' in Kovir, Agnes, Franger, Gaby (eds), *University and Society: Interdependencies and Exchange*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham UK and Northampton, MA, USA, 2019

[17] Mikhailovich et al, op. cit., p.14, Rawsthorne & de Pree, op. cit.

[18] AIATSIS, op. cit., Principle 5

Consideration should also be given to Indigenous Standpoint Theory in the development of the IES. This is an approach to knowledge production that can be used to navigate the 'cultural interface' of different domains of knowledge (Indigenous Knowledge[19] and Western knowledge).[20] In critically assessing the standpoints of those involved in the research, it offers a way of understanding how culture, socioeconomic status, privilege and other factors impact on how knowledge is developed through the research process. Among other implications, it requires researchers to reflect on their own role and power in the research process and the assumptions that they bring when conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It also requires researchers to take seriously the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to develop their own research questions, identify their own research priorities, and to facilitate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control over the research process.[21]

6. Evaluations must be useful for those participating in the evaluation as well as for the commissioning Agency

There is an underpinning principle of all research that it must 'do no harm' and should benefit the people who are involved in it. More specifically, the research outputs that emerge from an evaluation need to be appropriate and beneficial for the local community. This is particularly important for research and evaluation involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Evaluations must produce something that is useful for those participating in the evaluation (individuals, families, communities, and organisations) as well as for the commissioning Agency. In addition to providing reports to the Agency, other outputs which are valued by participants in the evaluation should be produced and distributed. The AIATSIS Guidelines note that 'Among the tangible benefits that a community should be able to expect from a research project is the provision of research results in a form that is useful and accessible.'[22] The type of outputs can be identified with participants.

This approach respects and values the contribution of participants to the evaluation project, and is an important aspect of community based research and other participatory approaches to evaluation which demand that research activities 'leave something with the community of value'.[23]

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[19] Indigenous Knowledge is broadly defined as accumulated knowledge encompassing spiritual relationships, relationships with the natural environment and the sustainable use of natural resources, and relationships between people reflected in language, narratives, social organisation, values, beliefs, and cultural laws and customs. Andrews Gavin, Daylight Cliff, Hunt Jeff et al, Aboriginal cultural heritage landscape mapping of coastal NSW, prepared for the Comprehensive Coastal Assessment by the NSW Department of Natural Resources, Sydney, NSW, 2006

[20] Nakata, Martin in Ardill, A 'Australian Sovereignty, Indigenous Standpoint Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory: First Peoples' sovereignties matter' in *Griffith Law Review*, 2013, https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/59998/91797_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[21] Ardill, ibid

[22] AIATSIS, op. cit., Principle 12

[23] Rawsthorne & de Pree, op. cit., p.145

7. Particular care must be taking in reporting evaluation findings

In some cases there may be tensions in reporting evaluation findings, particularly in the context of a deficit perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often taken by government agencies and policy. There is a need to balance transparency with respect for those who have participated in the program, been impacted by a policy and/or involved in the evaluation. The failure of programs is too often interpreted as a failure of the people they are designed to help. Evaluations must be understood as assessments of whether programs or policies are effective in working for people to support some change, and not an assessment of the people that programs/policies are targeting.

The Roundtable on evaluation of Indigenous policies held by the Productivity Commission in 2012 discussed the 'enormous cynicism' of evaluations among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in part because evaluation reports have been used to justify actions that did not reflect report recommendations, that there has been historical failure to communicate the results of evaluations and subsequent actions to the communities affected by the evaluation, and failure to implement recommendations flowing from evaluations.[24] Additionally, the misrepresentation of some research findings by the media or policy makers has sometimes been harmful to Aboriginal people and communities.[25] The development of the IES must work to avoid a repeat of these situations.

The AIATSIS Guidelines set out some ways in which these issues can be avoided. Principle 13 states that 'Plans should be made for managing use of, and access to, research results', and suggests that agreement on the ownership of results should be set out at the start of the research, reporting research results to the community before publication and before discussion with the media, and negotiating any discussion of the project in the media with the local community.[26] This approach in no way compromises the principles of transparency and integrity which are central to quality evaluation.

We strongly agree that research and evaluation results need to be discussed with community members prior to their publication, both because feedback from the community can help to confirm and strengthen findings, and because without this feedback, evaluation can equate to surveillance.

In addition, data sovereignty is an important issue and, as indicated in the AIATSIS guidelines, questions of intellectual property, data ownership, retention and access should all be negotiated at the start of research and evaluation projects.

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[24] Productivity Commission, 2013, op. cit., p.10

[25] Katz et al, op. cit.

[26] AIATSIS, op. cit., Principle 13

8. The IES should provide an overarching framework for current data collection and for knowledge gaps

There is a strong need for good data to assist in policy formation and decision making. The IES should provide an overarching framework for high quality data collection and analysis that is already taking place (for example through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Bureau of Statistics) as well as identifying gaps in our knowledge and understanding, including evaluations of individual programs and policies.[27]

A significant amount of data is already collected, but it tends to be fragmented, focused on Closing the Gap targets (important as they are) rather than more broadly informing policy and programs, highly aggregated, and of limited use to program evaluations.[28] We believe that the IES should be well-placed to address these issues and provide a comprehensive framework for the identification and management of data related to policies and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It should bring together the Closing the Gap targets as well as the various initiatives outlined in the Issues Paper[29] and beyond.

Additionally, in bringing together the whole suite of data collection and evaluation, the Productivity Commission should be cognisant that the IES is an opportunity to make sure that research and evaluation resources are being used to maximum impact. This includes rationalising data collection so that duplication is avoided, data quality is enhanced and data collection that not useful ceases. This will contribute to evaluation activities better realising their core purpose and result in more effective use of limited resources.

As an educational charity, The Smith Family's primary data collection focuses on measuring the educational and related outcomes of young people. As indicated earlier, The Smith Family has a strong focus on evaluation, and as part of that, a unique longitudinal data set which is tracking key educational and post-school outcomes of children and young people, including many from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Based on our experience, we make three specific recommendations:

1. Taking a strengths-based approach to measurement and evaluation
2. Choosing useful outcomes to measure, including adding a new educational outcome to the Closing the Gap targets
3. Introducing a Unique Student Identifier.

A strengths-based approach to measurement and evaluation

We recommend that the Productivity Commission consider framing the IES used positive and strengths-based language. Language is fundamentally important for discussing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy[30] and conducting research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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[27] Productivity Commission, 2013, op. cit.

[28] Productivity Commission, 2013, op. cit., p.3

[29] Productivity Commission, 2019, op. cit.

[30] Pearson, Luke, 'The Language of Blame, Responsibility and Accountability', Indigenous X, 1 April 2018.

people.[31] Our policy frameworks must reflect high expectations of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can achieve, and better embody strengths-based approaches. This includes the Closing the Gap targets and other areas of data, research and policy that are likely to fall under the IES.

In our submission to COAG on the Closing the Gap targets,[32] The Smith Family argued that a positive reframing of the CTG targets can still identify and measure respective gaps, but it can also offer an aspiration for government, business and civil society, in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to strive for more ambitious progress in closing the gaps.

Similarly, we believe that the IES should include components that consider prosperity and wellbeing, and move away from the deficit understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that too often characterises national discussions.

Choosing useful outcomes to measure

Choosing useful outcomes to measure is an important part of getting an evaluation strategy right. The Smith Family measures a small number of key outcomes which research has shown are related to lifelong wellbeing:

- School attendance
- School completion
- Post-school engagement in employment, education and training.

These outcomes were chosen because of their research, policy and practice relevance. Research shows the clear links between attendance, achievement, school completion and post-school participation in employment, education and training. These outcomes are important for the long-term economic and social wellbeing of young people.

In thinking about relevant outcomes for young people in Australia, we have argued previously and continue to believe that a new target regarding the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged between 16 - 24 years old engaged in study or work after secondary school should be added to the Closing the Gap targets.[33] The issue of post-school transitions is very important, and coordinated pathways are vital so that young people can enter the workforce or the tertiary education sector with motivation and confidence in their future.

The Smith Family's own research, using our unique longitudinal data set collected from students on the *Learning for Life* program, shows that attendance and achievement from as early as

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[31] Thurber, Katie, 'Indigenous health and 'the gap' would be better served by focusing on positives, not negatives', ABC News website, 24 April 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2019-04-24/indigenous-health-deficit-discourse-isnt-helping-close-gap/10944012

[32] The Smith Family, Submission to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet on the Closing the Gap Refresh, 2018, https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/~/media/files/research/policy-submissions/Submission%20to%20the%20Closing%20the%20Gap%20Refresh.ashx?la=en

[33] The Smith Family, Submission to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, op. cit.

primary school, predicts Year 12 completion and in turn, post-school outcomes, such as engagement in work or study.[34]

Only 41.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are fully engaged in education, training or work at age 24, compared with 74.4% for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.[35] The costs of not being in work or study are significant for young Australians and the nation as a whole. Average lifetime costs to the Australian community for each 24 year-old Australian who is not in full-time employment, education and/or training is conservatively estimated at more than $1.1 million.[36] The importance of improving post-school transitions will only increase as work continues to be impacted by the next wave of technological changes, and also becomes more casualised and insecure for young people.[37]

These statistics are the context and rationale for continuing the current CTG targets of Year 12 attainment and employment outcomes, as well as adding the additional target outlined above. The additional target would create the necessary link between the Year 12 attainment and employment outcomes targets.

Unique Student Identifier

The Smith Family's experience in implementing and evaluating the *Learning for Life* program demonstrates the value of a Unique Student Identifier (USI) (see Box 2 for details). It must be a core component of a national data collection and management framework such as the IES, in order that the IES can make a significant contribution to building the Australian educational evidence base.

Box 2. Unique Student Identifiers

The case for a Unique Student Identifier: *Learning for Life*

Learning for Life is The Smith Family's largest program. It provides resources and support to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to help them complete school and move into post-school engagement in employment or further education. Close to one in five children on the *Learning for Life* program are from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

Each student on the *Learning for Life* program has a Unique Student Identifier which enables their individual progress to be tracked over time, even if they change schools or move interstate.

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[34] The Smith Family, *Attendance Lifts Achievement: Building the evidence base to improve student outcomes*, The Smith Family, Sydney, March 2018, https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/~/media/files/research/reports/education-outcomes-report-attendance-lifts-achievement.ashx?la=en

[35] Lamb, Stephen et al, Educational opportunity in Australia in 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out, Mitchell Institute, 26 October 2015.

[36] Lamb, Stephen and Huo, Shuyan, Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education, Mitchell Institute, June 2017

[37] See for instance, Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Australia's Future Workforce?, 16 June 2015; Foundations for Young Australians, The New Work Order: Ensuring young Australians have skills and experience for the jobs of the future, not the past, August 2015; O'Neill, Margot, 'Artificial intelligence and automation are coming, so what will we all do for work?', ABC News, 10 August 2017.

Demographic and outcomes data (school attendance, achievement, school completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study) are collected on all students and entered into a purpose-built database. This allows for systematic analysis of the progress and outcomes being achieved by both individual students and different groups of students, such as those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. This helps identify where and when additional student support or program refinements may be required – a core focus of quality and useful evaluations.[38]

As The Smith Family have argued previously, and as the Productivity Commission[39] and the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools[40] have also noted, a national system of unique student identifiers would have many benefits. A USI for all Australian students is core to providing nuanced and timely support to students and for understanding the impact of this support on their educational outcomes. A USI is particularly important for disadvantaged students, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many of whom experience high levels of mobility.[41]

9.   The IES should aim to improve outcomes and contribute to the evidence base

The Smith Family supports the development of an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. The aims of the strategy should focus on:

- Improving the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through ongoing learning and iteration, and
- Contributing to the evidence base of 'what works, for whom and in what circumstances' in supporting improved outcomes. It also should contribute to understanding the converse – what 'doesn't work'.

Large-scale investment from successive governments has not resulted in significant improvements in a range of key outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including Closing the Gap targets in health, education and employment.[42] The Smith Family believes this is unacceptable.

An IES should contribute to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through providing opportunities for ongoing learning and iteration, helping to direct efforts and funding to initiatives that are having a positive effect or refining these initiatives so they are more effective.

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[38] The Smith Family, *Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young Australians: The* Learning for Life *program*, The Smith Family, Sydney, 2016, https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/~/media/files/research/reports/research-disadvantaged-young-australians-learning-for-life.ashx?la=en

[39] Productivity Commission, *National education evidence base, Report no. 80,* Productivity Commission, Canberra

[40] Australian Government, *Through growth to achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, March 2018, https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/662684_tgta_accessible_final_0.pdf

[41] The Smith Family, *Attendance lifts achievement*, 2018, op. cit.

[42] Productivity Commission, 2019, op. cit., p.8

We know that there are some programs, practice and policies which are contributing to improvements in key outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We need to understand why these initiatives are effective, for whom and in what circumstances, in order that they can potentially be further expanded.

However, given the complexity of the policy and program landscape for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities, the results of individual program evaluations need to be considered in terms of the whole system architecture, as it is can be difficult to isolate the outcomes from any one program.[43]

10. Both targeted and universal programs should be included in the IES

The IES should incorporate programs and policies which are specifically targeted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as universal programs. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will from choice, or necessity, need to use universal programs. As noted in the Issues Paper, four in every five dollars spent by the Australian Government on service provision to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is through universal programs and services.[44] Such programs must be able to demonstrate their capacity to improve the life outcomes and circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and evaluations must help to understand why programs are and aren't achieving this.

11. The IES will need to acknowledge complexity and diversity in program delivery and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities

There is inherent complexity in developing an IES as it will need to be inclusive of national, state/territory, regional and local policy and program initiatives. Participants in the Productivity Commission's 2012 Roundtable acknowledged that evaluating the impact of specific programs can be challenging due to difficulties in isolating the impacts of a single program or policy in communities where many programs are competing. There is also a lack of basic information about the number of programs operating in communities.[45] The challenges of developing such a strategy do not however, outweigh the value and necessity of such a strategy.

The IES will also need to acknowledge the diversity of characteristics, experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acknowledge that aggregate data may mask significantly different experiences, by for example, socioeconomic background, location and gender.

An evaluation framework and individual evaluation projects which fail to take this into account will make findings and recommendations that will not be applicable to many Aboriginal people and the programs that serve them.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities are heterogeneous and experience social, economic and cultural challenges differently. Yet current measurement

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[43] Productivity Commission, 2013, op. cit., p3
[44] Productivity Commission, 2019, op. cit., p.5
[45] Productivity Commission, 2013, op. cit.

practices – including the Closing the Gap targets - imply common issues for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons regardless of their geography or background. In reality, the contexts and outcomes differ when looking at the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in rural or remote areas compared to those living in metropolitan areas, as they do when looking across demographic variances such as age and gender.

It is critical that a more nuanced understanding of the nature of outcomes within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cohorts and within individual targets is built. To do this requires rethinking how best to capture, collate and analyse relevant data on the impact of program and service delivery. Successfully adding depth and detail to evaluation practices will help produce better-tailored services supported by a more sophisticated evidence base.

12. Planning for evaluation should take place early in the development of policies and programs

Early planning is essential for evaluations so as to focus the development of the intervention as well as helping to identify anticipated outcomes, with learnings captured in an ongoing way. It helps to ensure that appropriate data are collected from the outset to enable the most comprehensive and useful analysis. The earliest possible introduction of evaluators should also contribute to the development of trusting long-term relationships with communities.

Conclusion

There are many challenges in developing an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy. However, we believe that it represents an important opportunity to support the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, and to take a comprehensive approach to program and policy development and decision-making, with the goal of improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development of the strategy and in all evaluation activities that flow from it is essential.

The Smith Family thanks the Productivity Commission for the chance to contribute to this review and would be pleased to participate in future processes if we can be of assistance.

Appendix A. Members of The Smith Family's Advisory Group on Issues Concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

John Rawnsley (Chair) - NT

Professor Peter Ridoll - ACT

Pauline Brown - NSW

Leanne Smith – SA*

Jayde Geia - ACT

Teangi Brown – TAS

Todd Sculthorpe- TAS

Jesse King – QLD

Jodie Wyatt – WA

Wanda Wellington – VIC

Alara Hood – VIC

April Long – NSW

Jason Smith – NSW*

Dr Jeff Harmer AO – ACT**

Dr Lisa O'Brien – NSW*

Wendy Field – NSW*

Leonie Green – NSW*

* The Smith Family staff member

** The Smith Family Board member

Appendix B. Guiding principles

The following seven Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander guiding principles were first adopted within The Smith Family in 2008 and adapted in 2012:

1. Together we seek the involvement, advice and guidance of people with expertise and acknowledge their contribution. Wherever possible, we work on the evidence-based understanding that for sustainable improvement in educational achievement and wellbeing, working together with Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Elders, Respected and Recognised Leaders, Parents, Teachers and Community Leaders (among others) will be crucial.

2. Together we are working towards effective practice and will where ever possible follow agreed principles for investments and soft entry pathways that promote a sustainable and inclusive approach in the delivery and or design of services in urban, regional and remote locations.

3. Together we understand that achieving impact will take time to build trusting relationships. Together we adopt a 'whole of community' generational approach that focuses on building the developmental capacity of a place or community in a sustainable manner, that promotes respect and understanding for how ideas and concepts relate to Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems.

4. Together we adopt a strengths-based approach, appreciating that Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Australians have expert knowledges, skills and abilities; and the potential to develop other skills and capacity to address problems,[46] develop and design programs and deliver these.

5. Together we build trusting relationships, connecting people, resources and ideas. Within the spirit of working together and the power of possibilities in relationships we also aim to where ever possible work together to build the capacity of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander managed organisations and promote opportunities for Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander employment.

6. We are transparent and accountable in managing complex community-based systems of collaboration and action. Together our accountability for outcomes is to Elders, families, communities, supporters, school principals, staff, school councils and community leaders as well as to our corporate and government business partners and others.

7. As an evidence-based organisation we also incorporate appropriate evaluation processes to ensure that we have the highest standards of transparency and risk management in providing support together in our communities.

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[46] This means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and language are assets to build upon, rather than barriers to overcome.