

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluations informing policy and practice: What do we know and where do we need to go

Position Paper

Dr Summer Finlay, Dr Bobby Maher and Dr Anna Temby





ISBN: 978-1-922885-20-3

© Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

First published in June 2026

This work is published and disseminated by Lowitja Institute, Australia's national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health research institute.

This work is copyrighted. It may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes, or by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations, subject to an acknowledgment of the source and no commercial use or sale. Reproduction for other purposes or by other organisations requires the written permission of the copyright holder.

A PDF version of this document can be obtained from: <https://lowitja.org.au>

DOI: 10.48455/7n75-es45

LOWITJA INSTITUTE

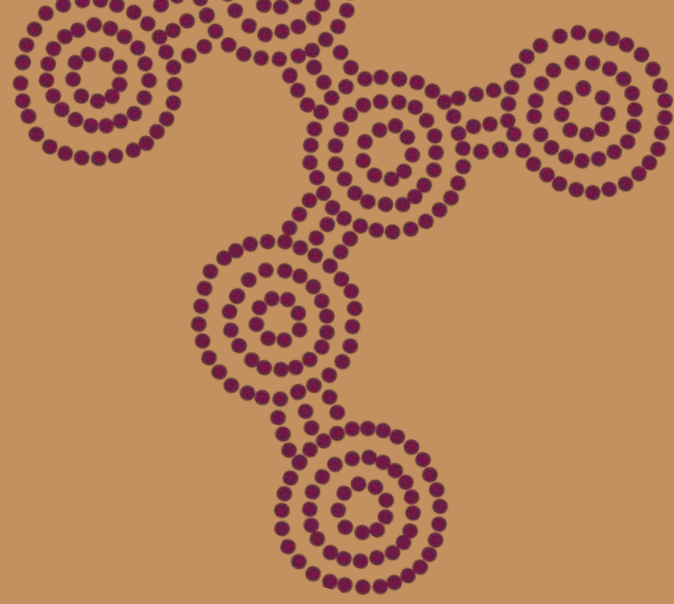
PO Box 1524, Collingwood
Victoria 3066 Australia
E: admin@lowitja.org.au
W: www.lowitja.org.au

AUTHORS: Dr Summer Finlay (Associate Professor, Indigenous Health, University of Wollongong), Dr Bobby Maher (Research Fellow, Yandhura Walani Centre, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University), and Dr Anna Temby, Research Fellow, University of Wollongong.

RECOMMENDED CITATION: Finlay, S.M., Maher, B., & Temby, A. 2026, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Evaluations, Informing Policy and Practice: What do we know and where do we need to go*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

Graphic design: Mazart Communications

Photography: Dhungala, Yorta Yorta Country, captured by Safiah Rind (Badimaya Yamatji)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

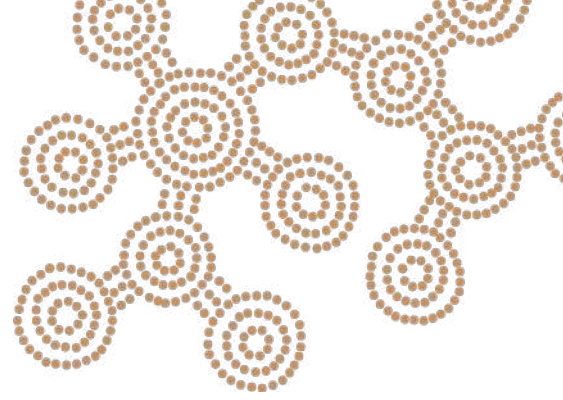
We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands in which the planning, writing, communicating, analysing, and writing of this paper were undertaken by the project team and contributors. The authors pay respects to their Elders past, present, and future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OF CONTRIBUTORS

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributors to this work, including the generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose knowledges has been passed down with care and respect to today's generations, who will in turn pass it on.

ICIP NOTICE

This publication contains Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. All rights reserved. Dealing with any part of this knowledge for any purpose not authorised by the custodians may breach the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth) and customary law.



About the authors and their role

Dr Summer May Finlay

Associate Professor Summer May Finlay (CSCA, BSSC, GC-EDHE, MPHA, PhD) is a Yorta Yorta woman, mother of two, and a respected Indigenous public health scholar and sector leader. She brings more than 20 years of experience across the tertiary sector, government, and Indigenous organisations, with a career defined by Indigenous-led research, policy influence, and system-level reform. She is an Associate Professor of Indigenous Health and Director of the Ngarruwan Ngadju Research Centre at the University of Wollongong, where she leads high-impact, community-driven research grounded in Indigenous Standpoint and sovereignty. She holds senior leadership roles Chair of Thirrili, Editor of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Co-Chair of the World Federation of Public Health Associations Indigenous Working Group, and a Board Director of Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia.

Dr Bobby Maher

Bobby is an Aboriginal woman (Yamatji, Noongar and Kija) whose work spans Indigenous methodologies, qualitative and quantitative epidemiological research, psychometric validation, and community-based participatory research. Her doctoral research focused on developing Indigenous-led approaches to evaluation in Australia, particularly within health, social, and wellbeing programs. She brings expertise in advancing Indigenist evaluation practices and in curriculum development related to Indigenist evaluation and Indigenous Data Sovereignty (ID-SOV). Bobby is a member of the Australian Indigenous Data Sovereignty collective, Maia nayri Wingara, and the Global Indigenous Data Alliance. She has extensive experience in implementing Indigenous Data Governance and has published widely on ID-SOV practices in the Australian context. Bobby has also collaborated with international Indigenous colleagues on ID-SOV initiatives, including co-developing and facilitating a Masterclass at the 2024 International Indigenous Research Conference in Aotearoa, and contributing to the planning of the 2025 Global Indigenous Data Sovereignty Conference held in Canberra.

Dr Anna Temby

Anna is an interdisciplinary health and humanities researcher and Research Fellow at the University of Wollongong. Her PhD in History from the University of Queensland examined the intersections of governmentality, institutionalism, and the wellbeing of marginalised urban populations. At UOW, Anna contributes to a wide range of research relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Wellbeing policy and practice. Her broader research interests include the legacies of historical systems in modern-day public health and wellbeing policy, inter-generational determinants of health equity, and the role of lived experience data in public health and wellbeing research. Anna has extensive experience in qualitative data analysis, and an interest in accessible research translation and communication.

Contents



02	Executive summary
03	Recommendations
04	Background
05	Program and policy evaluation Evaluations and Policy Evaluation types
07	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluations Indigenous evaluation approaches
09	The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
10	Challenges and recommendations
10	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in commissioning
12	Incorporation of Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles
12	Improved transparency in evaluation process and outcomes
13	Increased accessibility of evaluation reports
14	Implementation of Indigenous-led evaluation frameworks Nгаа-bi-nya framework Impact Yarns
16	Improved evaluation capability within the Australian Public Service
17	Acknowledge and overcome the politicisation of Indigenous programs and policies
18	Conclusion
19	Summary of evaluation frameworks
23	References



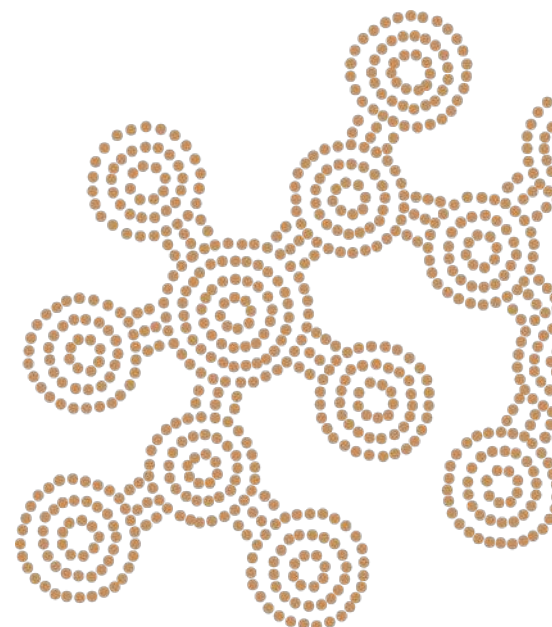
Executive summary

Are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluations informing policy and practice?

This report demonstrates that the evidence generated through the evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs is rarely used to inform genuine policy and practice shifts across Australia.

Despite an increase in the number of evaluations in recent years, significant gaps remain in the evaluation and cultural capability of evaluation commissioners, the transparency of evaluation processes, and the implementation of established frameworks and guidelines. Commissioning processes and the subsequent evaluations are often not designed or led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which diminishes their relevance and impact for communities. The lack of transparency constrains the evidence base for policy transformation and undermines public scrutiny of policy decisions informed by evaluations. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance are often lacking throughout the evaluation lifecycle, limiting the quality and usability of findings for communities and policymakers alike.

To overcome these current barriers, there is a vital need for evaluations designed by or with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and for their sustained involvement throughout the evaluation lifecycle. More rigorous impact and outcome evaluations must be undertaken to generate useful evidence to inform policy decisions. Addressing these issues is essential to ensure that evaluations contribute meaningful evidence to inform more effective policy and practice, ultimately supporting better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.





Recommendations

Delivering on the ambitions of Closing the Gap requires evaluations that are not only methodologically robust but also credible, culturally grounded, and capable of informing real policy and funding decisions.

To achieve this, a more intentional and accountable approach is needed from policymakers, commissioning bodies, and governments. Central to this is embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, governance, and perspectives across all stages of evaluation, from commissioning through to the translation of findings into policy and practice. Strengthening evaluation literacy among commissioners and decision-makers is also critical to enable informed interpretation and use of evidence. Finally, transparency and accountability must be prioritised through the public release of evaluation reports, ensuring findings are accessible and can drive shared learning, improved practice, and better health and wellbeing outcomes for communities.

- Evaluations and how they are used to inform policy need to be transparent and accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be included at all stages of the commissioning of evaluations involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to ensure effective evaluations that generate evidence to inform policy and practice.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance must be evident across all stages of an evaluation – from commissioning to decisions about how the findings can inform policy and practice.
- Indigenous Data Sovereignty needs to be built into each evaluation to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges frame evaluations.
- Evaluation literacy among commissioning bodies and policymakers needs to be improved to enable them to interpret and use evaluation findings effectively.
- Cultural capability among commissioning bodies needs to be improved to ensure that they include and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledges and perspectives.
- All evaluations that are planned, underway, or completed should be made publicly available to increase transparency.
- All evaluation reports should be made publicly available to hold funders, such as governments, to account and enable all stakeholders to benefit from their findings.



Background

The Closing the Gap framework serves as Australia's national strategy for improving health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Coalition of Peaks 2020).

It is underpinned by Priority Reforms that emphasise shared decision-making, strengthening the community controlled sector, transforming government systems, and improving access to data. The Framework also includes 17 targets that focus on the social determinants of health. Central to progressing these reforms is the need for robust, culturally informed evaluation to track outcomes and ensure policies and programs are effective and responsive to community priorities (Productivity Commission 2019).

However, policy and program funding decisions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing are shaped by a complex interplay of political, institutional, and funding factors. Often these policy and program decisions are made based on limited information and lacking the evidence available to meaningfully inform them (Stewart & Jarvie 2015; Watego et al. 2024). While evaluations are commonly positioned as a key mechanism for generating evidence to inform policy and investment decisions, their actual influence on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy in Australia remains uncertain. In practice, funding decisions are rarely determined solely, or even primarily, by evaluation findings (McCausland 2019; Stewart & Jarvie 2015). Instead, they are mediated through government priorities,

electoral cycles, departmental processes, accountability requirements, and broader political influences (Kehoe 2022).

Improving health, social, and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples requires evaluation approaches that are responsive to their priorities, knowledge systems, and governance. Historically, it has often been assumed that interventions effective in non-Indigenous populations will also be effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations (Maher 2026). Consequently, many evaluations continue to be shaped by settler-colonial perspectives that privilege narrow outcome measures, externally determined methodologies, and funder-driven priorities, rather than aligning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and community-defined notions of success (Finlay et al. 2023; Malezer 2013; McCausland 2019; Taylor 2003; Watego et al. 2024). Emerging evidence demonstrates that these approaches are philosophically and methodologically misaligned with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing (Productivity Commission 2020a; Maher et al. 2026; Taylor 2003). Feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities

consistently highlights the need for evaluation approaches that strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making throughout the evaluation process (Malezer 2013; Watego et al. 2024).

Program and policy evaluation

Evaluation can be defined as ‘the systematic assessment of an object’s merit, worth, probity, feasibility, safety, significance, and/or equity’ (Stufflebeam & Coryn 2014). While there is some crossover between research and evaluations, there is a clear distinction between the two disciplines; where research aims to generate knowledge and theory, evaluations, through the use of tools and frameworks, should work to support practical outcomes, such as policy and program development, refinement, and improvement (Patton 2008).

Evaluations occur for multiple, sometimes competing, purposes. Often, they are commissioned to meet the accountability requirements of governments, parliaments, and funding bodies, rather than to support learning and improvement, or to understand what is genuinely working and why (Finlay et al. 2023). In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, this raises critical questions about who evaluations are for, who benefits from them, and how their findings are used. Monitoring and evaluation systems within government, designed to track performance against predefined indicators, privilege narrow definitions of success that do not align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conceptions of wellbeing or community priorities. The choice of data, indicators, and frameworks, therefore, plays a powerful role in shaping both

how outcomes are measured and how program effectiveness is interpreted. With this comes risks in using a potentially poor evaluation’s assessment of program or policy effectiveness in decision-making.

Evaluations and policy

Significant barriers exist to the effective use of evaluations in policy settings. Although governments routinely commission evaluations, there is limited transparency regarding the extent to which findings are systematically reviewed, synthesised, or used to inform future investment decisions. Opportunities for the use of evaluation evidence are often hampered by highly politicised policy environments, limited organisational learning, and inflexible ways of working that ultimately challenge the use of evaluation findings (Stewart & Jarvie 2015). In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy contexts, this results in an inability to transform systems to allow for the embedding of Indigenous ways of working and leadership, tensions between public service norms and community-led approaches, and timeframes that are poorly aligned with relationship building. There is also little evidence of systematic processes within agencies to reflect on evaluation findings or promote learning across programs, a gap that the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, detailed below, explicitly seeks to address through capability building (Productivity Commission 2020a). Inter-agency competition and political party priorities further shape which evaluations are valued, how findings are interpreted, and whether they are acted upon (Stewart & Jarvie 2015).

Evaluation frameworks also influence how evidence informs policy and funding deliberations. Where success is defined primarily through short-term, quantifiable outcomes, evaluations may

inadequately capture longer-term impacts, system change, or relational and cultural outcomes that are critical in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health contexts. A culturally inappropriate evaluation limits the usefulness of its findings for informing funding cycles, particularly when decision-makers operate within tight timeframes

or under political pressure to demonstrate quick results (Finlay et al. 2025a). These forms of authorising environments also determine the types of evaluations undertaken, which may not always reflect the most suitable approach to the program or policy being evaluated.

Evaluation types

Evaluation types vary depending on the questions being asked and the intended purpose.

Formative evaluations which occur throughout the life of a policy or program, enable interventions and program improvements through a continuous quality improvement process. Formative evaluations are often either process or outcome evaluations.

Process evaluations seek to understand or map program or policy implementation (Al Daccache & Bardus 2020).

Outcome evaluations are used to determine whether the intended outcomes are being achieved in the short- to medium-term by assessing changes in participants' knowledge, skills, behaviour, or conditions.

Summative evaluations are conducted upon completion of a policy or program to assess whether the intended outcomes have been achieved, typically using impact and outcome evaluation frameworks.

Impact evaluations seek to determine whether the program or policy had an impact that would not have occurred otherwise (Treasury n.d.). Like outcome evaluations, impact evaluations consider the long-term, broad impact of the program or policy by identifying intended and unintended effects, whether positive or negative.



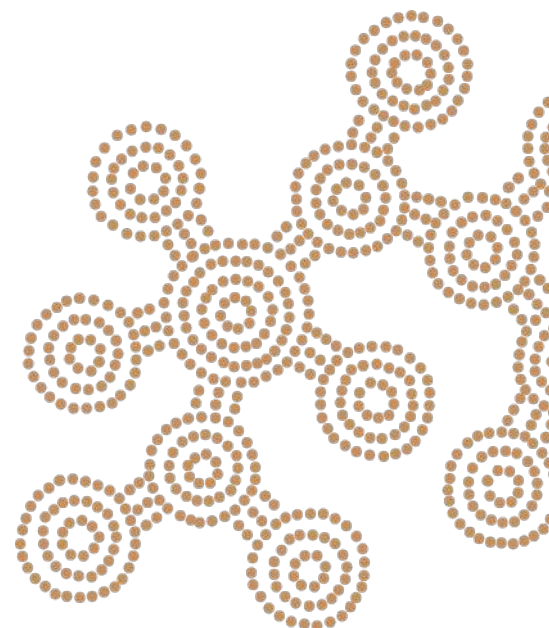
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluations

Historically, evaluations relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been criticised for privileging Western epistemologies and failing to produce meaningful improvements in outcomes. Evaluations were often conducted without meaningful engagement with communities, resulting in findings that lacked local relevance and legitimacy (Finlay et al. 2025a; Kelaher et al. 2018; Parter et al. 2019). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation research has undergone substantial transformation in recent decades, moving from externally imposed, deficit-focused approaches towards models grounded in Indigenous self-determination, community leadership, and cultural integrity. While evaluation is a critical mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of policies and programs, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, it must also address historical power imbalances and ensure direct benefits to communities (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) 2020; Productivity Commission 2020a).

Only a small proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs in Australia are formally evaluated (Hudson 2017). Among those that are, many lack methodological rigour and ultimately do not inform policy decisions. The indeterminate quality of evaluations contributes to a broader lack of transparency about their influence and use. At best, this minimises the potential for community benefit and evidence-based policy decisions. At worst, evaluations that identify serious program deficiencies go unaddressed, further undermining accountability and eroding trust in the evaluation process. This diminishing trust creates barriers to future evaluations, even

if more culturally appropriate frameworks are adopted. The lack of transparency surrounding evaluations and their use also makes it difficult to determine whether they are being conducted ethically.

Ethical practice is foundational to evaluation research, and several guidelines exist to inform ethical research practice in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)'s *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders* emphasises that research must be safe, respectful, responsible, and beneficial to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (NHMRC 2018). The NHMRC guidelines also outline core values that guide ethical practice: reciprocity, respect, equity, responsibility, cultural continuity, and integrity (NHMRC 2018). Similarly, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* prioritises self-determination, Indigenous leadership, impact and value, and accountability (AIATSIS 2020).



Indigenous evaluation approaches

These ethical principles are reflected in Indigenous-centred commissioning and evaluation frameworks, which emphasise the importance of genuine partnership, benefit-sharing, and the translation of findings into action. Community leadership is central, with Indigenous-led and co-designed evaluation models recognised as best practice (Finlay et al. 2025a, 2025b; Kelaher et al. 2018). Cultural safety is essential, requiring evaluators to recognise and prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledge systems, and to create environments of respect and empowerment. Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing highlight relationality and connection to Country, which shape evaluation methodologies (NHMRC 2018). Methodologically, evaluation research must balance rigour with cultural appropriateness. Mixed-method approaches are common, combining quantitative and qualitative data; however, participatory and qualitative approaches are particularly important for capturing community perspectives (Lokuge et al. 2017).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evaluation represents a paradigm shift towards ethical, culturally grounded, and community-driven approaches. These approaches prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, leadership, and knowledge systems, and ensure that evaluation contributes to meaningful outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Culbong et al. 2024; McMahon et al. 2024; Vine et al. 2023; Wright et al. 2021). Despite recent progress, challenges remain, including limited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in some evaluations, gaps in reporting, and ongoing power imbalances. Strengthening Indigenous evaluation capacity and embedding Indigenous governance are key to the quality and utility of an evaluation (Productivity Commission 2020a; Finlay et al. 2025b). The importance of prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and strengths to improve the quality of Indigenous evaluations was an impetus for developing the *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* (IES) (Productivity Commission 2020a).

While evaluation is a critical mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of policies and programs, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, it must also address historical power imbalances and ensure direct benefits to communities (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2020; Productivity Commission 2020a).

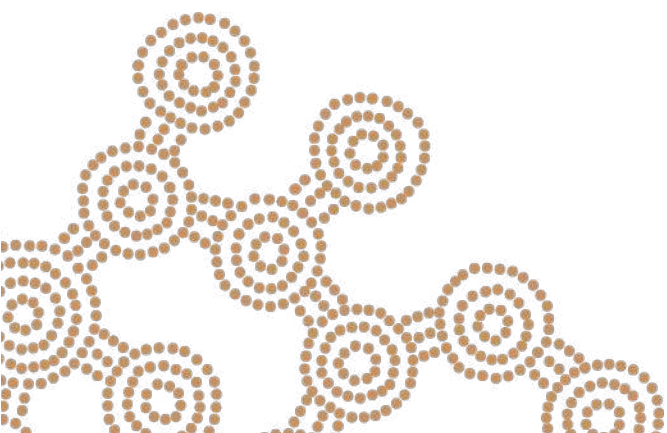
The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

The IES is a whole-of-government framework that applies to all government agencies to ensure the production of high-quality, relevant evaluations that improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The development of the IES by the Australian Productivity Commission reflects longstanding concerns about the limited availability and use of evidence to inform Indigenous policy and practice (Productivity Commission 2020a). The Productivity Commission highlighted persistent gaps in high-quality, culturally appropriate evaluations and weaknesses in evaluation capability across the Australian Public Service (APS), particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs. The IES was intended to address these issues by strengthening a whole-of-government approach to evaluation practice, embedding learning, and increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in evaluation design and governance.

The Strategy sets out a new approach to evaluating policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, aimed at improving the quality and usefulness of evaluation. It puts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at its centre. It emphasises the importance of drawing on the perspectives, priorities and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when deciding what to evaluate and how to conduct an evaluation (Productivity Commission 2020a)

At the heart of the strategy is the expectation that evaluations should reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and that the quality and efficacy of evaluations are improved through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance. This reflects a growing consensus that effective evaluation must be grounded in the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Productivity Commission 2020a; Finlay et al. 2025b; Kelaher et al. 2018).

To support the implementation of the IES, the Productivity Commission developed a progression pathway that provides a practical framework for assessing and strengthening evaluation practice across government. The pathway translates the principles of the IES into a staged continuum from unsatisfactory to leading practice across five core domains: centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, building credible evaluation practices, improving the usefulness of evaluation, strengthening ethical practice, and enhancing transparency. It is designed to support agencies in reflecting on their current approaches, identifying gaps, and progressively embedding more rigorous, culturally responsive, and accountable evaluation systems. Importantly, the progression pathway reinforces that improvement is not only technical but relational and structural, requiring deeper partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, stronger capability across the public service, and sustained commitment to learning and accountability. In doing so, it extends the IES by providing a clear mechanism for implementation, enabling agencies to move beyond aspiration toward demonstrable change in how evaluations are designed, conducted, and used (Productivity Commission 2020b).





Challenges and recommendations

The challenges identified in this paper can be understood through the progression domains outlined in the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (IES), particularly in relation to centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, building credible evaluation practices, improving usefulness, strengthening ethical practice, and enhancing transparency.

The IES marked a significant shift in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation practice by introducing a framework that centres Indigenous perspectives, priorities and knowledges. However, these vital practice changes and their potential influence on the efficacy and utility of evaluations are undermined if shortcomings in the transparency, monitoring, and reporting of evaluations persist. When uptake of frameworks, such as the IES, cannot be assessed, it is impossible to determine both their potential benefits and any gaps that might require addressing.

To improve the utility of evaluations in catalysing meaningful change, several considerations are needed when commissioning or undertaking evaluations involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some of these considerations are specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as Indigenous leadership, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evaluation frameworks, and awareness of the political nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, programs, and policies. Others are crucial to conducting good evaluations across the board, such as

transparency in evaluation processes, the accessibility of evaluation reports, and evaluation capability within the Australian Public Service. Crucially, these significant influences on evaluation quality must be considered throughout the full life of an evaluation, from its commissioning and conduct to post-evaluation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in commissioning

It is well understood that Indigenous leadership and engagement in policy, program, and evaluation development result in better outcomes for Indigenous people (Bowman et al. 2015; Finlay et al. 2025a; Moewaka Barnes 2013; Thorpe et al. 2016). The role of commissioners and the commissioning processes underpinning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program evaluations, however, has received relatively little scholarly attention. Recent research has provided a crucial evidence base for examining the downstream impacts of commissioning practices on evaluation

utility and quality, and the vital importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and engagement in effective program evaluation (Finlay et al. 2025a, 2025b).

A scoping review of literature on government and non-government Indigenous evaluation commissioning identified five key commissioning models, categorised by their adherence to the principles of self-determination, power, respect, reciprocity, and cultural safety (Finlay et al. 2025a). The five models – Indigenous-led, delegative, co-design, participatory, and top-down – represent a spectrum of positive practice aligned with these principles, with the Indigenous-led, delegative, and co-design models identified as good practice. The real-world applicability of these models and their strengths and weaknesses were tested through a series of qualitative interviews with stakeholders across the evaluation commissioning spectrum (commissioners, evaluators, and service providers) and case studies of recently evaluated programs.

While the interviews reinforced the five commissioning models identified, they also demonstrated the elasticity of commissioning practices across the model spectrum. The commissioning of a single program evaluation can vary across the tenets of each model at various stages of the commissioning process, from evaluation conception to reporting (Finlay et al. 2025b). Commissioner capability, in both evaluations and cultural safety, emerged as a crucial influence on the consistency and alignment of evaluations with the good practice models. Commissioners lacking both cultural and evaluation capabilities are more likely to under-resource evaluations in terms of both the time and budget required to undertake them in culturally safe ways. Crucially, they are also unable to evaluate the cultural capability of evaluators responding to a request for quotes (RFQ) (Finlay et al. 2025b). The interviews also demonstrated that

poor commissioner capability led to the incorrect labelling of evaluation methodologies. For example, the misuse of terms such as ‘co-design’ to describe evaluation frameworks that were better aligned with participatory models emerged as a common experience among participants.

Significantly, many commissioners were unaware of the limitations and restrictions they were inadvertently constructing through their lack of understanding of culturally safe evaluations. For example, time was consistently raised as a barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement in the commissioning of evaluations. Commissioners' narrow timeframes for responding to an RFQ or for conducting an evaluation limited evaluators' ability to take the time to build and sustain long-lasting, trusting relationships that would enable them to work collaboratively with communities. Collaboration is key to understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives on how an evaluation should be conducted to ensure it reflects the program it was intended to evaluate and is culturally safe.

The knowledge gaps among commissioners and their potential ramifications demonstrate why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership throughout the life of an evaluation is vital to its utility for both commissioning bodies and communities. The lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, embedded early in evaluation processes, minimises the benefit to commissioners, funders, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and also damages relationships and entrenches mistrust. This highlights a disconnect between current commissioning practices and the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (IES) progression pathway, which emphasises Indigenous leadership across all stages of an evaluation as a marker of leading practice.

Incorporation of Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles

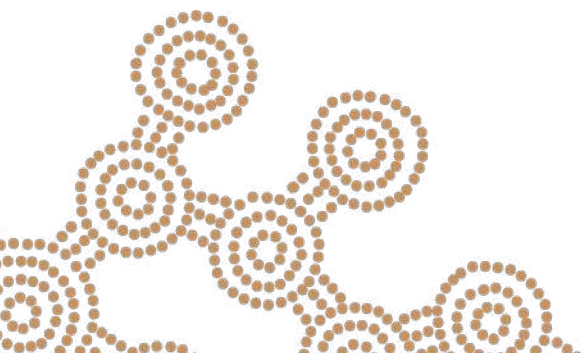
Indigenous Data Sovereignty (ID-SOV) is a global movement that recognises Indigenous communities' ownership, leadership, and governance of data relating to them. At its core, Indigenous people have the right to decide what's been collected, who manages it, how it's collected, and how the data is used and reused (Lowitja Institute 2024). Without Indigenous authority and data governance structures, evaluation processes risk reinforcing deficit narratives and continuing colonial patterns of knowledge production against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Lovett et al. 2020b). Importantly, Indigenous data is required for evaluations to be undertaken. This requires that data, including baseline data, are relevant and align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities and aspirations for health and wellbeing (Lovett et al. 2020a; Yap & Yu 2016).

ID-SOV is a critical component of both ethical evaluation practice and the centring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, particularly regarding control over data collection, ownership, access, and use. This closely aligns with the Closing the Gap Priority Reform on access to data, which emphasises the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having authority over data that relates to them and their communities. The commissioning models described above align with ID-SOV and the IES progression pathways, yet have not been fully realised by government and non-government bodies in the commissioning and conduct of evaluations.

Improved transparency in the evaluation process and outcomes

The lack of transparency in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation processes, including commissioning and reporting of findings, remains a significant issue within Australian policy and research contexts. Despite increasing recognition of the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and culturally appropriate methodologies, evaluation practices often continue to reflect top-down, externally controlled systems that marginalise Indigenous perspectives and obscure decision-making processes (Finlay et al. 2025b). Additionally, final reports are often not publicly released or are only available in highly technical formats that are difficult for communities to interpret and use.

A key issue is the limited transparency surrounding how evaluation criteria are developed and applied. Many evaluations are designed by government agencies or external consultants with minimal involvement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities (Finlay et al. 2025a, 2025b). This results in frameworks that reflect bureaucratic priorities rather than community-defined indicators of success. Top-down bureaucratic reporting frameworks impose external measures that undermine Indigenous Knowledge Systems and obscure the process by which conclusions are reached (Watego et al. 2024). The Productivity Commission's IES (2020) acknowledges this issue, emphasising that evaluations must centre Indigenous perspectives, priorities, and knowledge systems to improve both transparency and outcomes.



The lack of transparency in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation processes reflects deeper structural inequalities in governance, knowledge production, and accountability. Addressing this issue requires a fundamental shift towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led commissioning of evaluations and evaluation, improved accessibility of reports, and strengthened Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Only through these changes can evaluation processes support meaningful, culturally appropriate outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Increased accessibility of evaluation reports

A lack of detailed reporting on evaluation processes further compromises transparency. Indigenous Data Sovereignty literature highlights that data relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is frequently restricted and controlled by government agencies, rather than being accessible to the communities themselves (Taylor & Kukutai 2016; Walter 2018). A lack of access to evaluation reports reinforces existing power imbalances, limiting communities' ability to engage with, critique, or benefit from evaluations that directly affect them. For those that are available, they often do not clearly explain the commissioning processes, how the data was collected, how communities were engaged, or how findings were interpreted. A scoping review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluations found that a significant proportion failed to provide sufficient detail on community engagement, limiting the ability to assess their cultural appropriateness or methodological validity (Vine et al. 2023). This lack of clarity limits opportunities for shared learning and hinders the development of best-practice approaches.

Australian Government communication on evaluations and their reports varies significantly. The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) is responsible for the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy* (IAS), which seeks to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (NIAA 2026a). To ensure accountability for public funds and that programs deliver the intended outcomes, NIAA has developed the Indigenous Advancement Strategy Evaluation Framework, which sets out an evaluation approach. While not all programs funded under the IAS are evaluated, those that are can be found in the NIAA Evaluation Work Plan on the NIAA website (NIAA 2026b). The Evaluation Work Plan outlines planned, ongoing, and recently completed evaluations, with links to evaluation reports for the completed ones. For discontinued evaluations, brief explanations of why are provided, though details are minimal.

The Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE) supports the IES by providing guidance on evaluation activities and directing agencies to Lowitja Institute for culturally appropriate evaluation tools in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. To improve transparency and accessibility, the ACE also maintains an online library of past evaluation reports. At present, this library contains 22 reports published between 2008 and 2025, the majority of which are government-commissioned evaluations. Supporting this, a clearinghouse of evaluation reports has been established, containing NIAA evaluations and evaluation-related publications from 2017-18 onwards. Many of these reports have been referenced in previous and current IAS Evaluation Work Plans. The publication of these materials reflects the principles of the IAS Evaluation Framework, which emphasises high-quality, ethical, and inclusive evaluation practices focused on improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

The NIAA's work plan reflects a high level of transparency when compared to state and territory government departments of health. Like the NIAA, the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing is a significant funder of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, yet it lists only four completed evaluations on its website (Australian Department of Health 2026). State and territory governments have made evaluation reports available for some of their funded programs, though, unlike the NIAA and the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, they are not easy to locate. They are not listed on a single page and can only be found using the search function, making them difficult to locate. This lack of accessibility constrains accountability and limits an evaluation's ability to contribute to shared learning, both of which are central to improving evaluation usefulness.

Implementation of Indigenous-led evaluation frameworks

Emerging Indigenous-led evaluation frameworks provide pathways to improve the complex lack of transparency in evaluation processes. These frameworks position transparency not simply as openness, but as shared ownership of knowledge and decision-making throughout the evaluation process. Approaches such as the Ngaa-bi-nya framework (Williams 2018) and Impact Yarns (Trudgett et al. 2022) emphasise Indigenous leadership, relational accountability, and culturally grounded indicators of success.

Ngaa-bi-nya framework

The Ngaa-bi-nya framework (Williams 2018) is an Aboriginal-led evaluation approach grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Derived from the Wiradjuri language meaning 'to see' and 'to understand', it provides a holistic structure for assessing programs and policies affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The framework emphasises cultural integrity, community control, and the importance of relationality, challenging conventional Western evaluation methods that often overlook Indigenous perspectives (Williams 2018).

Ngaa-bi-nya is organised into four interconnected domains. Landscape considers the broader context, including the impacts of colonisation, social determinants, and community strengths. Resources focus on the allocation and governance of funding, workforce, and cultural capability, emphasising support for community-led initiatives. Ways of Working examines how programs are delivered, prioritising respectful partnerships, cultural safety, and meaningful engagement. Learnings address outcomes, highlighting the importance of community-defined success and continuous reflection.

Central to the framework is a strengths-based, decolonising approach that values Indigenous knowledge systems and prioritises Aboriginal voices in defining impact. By embedding these principles, Ngaa-bi-nya supports more ethical, culturally responsive evaluation practices that contribute to self-determination and improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



Impact Yarns

The Impact Yarns (Trudgett et al. 2022) is a conceptual framework for researching, evaluating, and designing First Nations programs, initiatives, and organisations. It is based on the principles of ID-SOV and is grounded in eight principles;

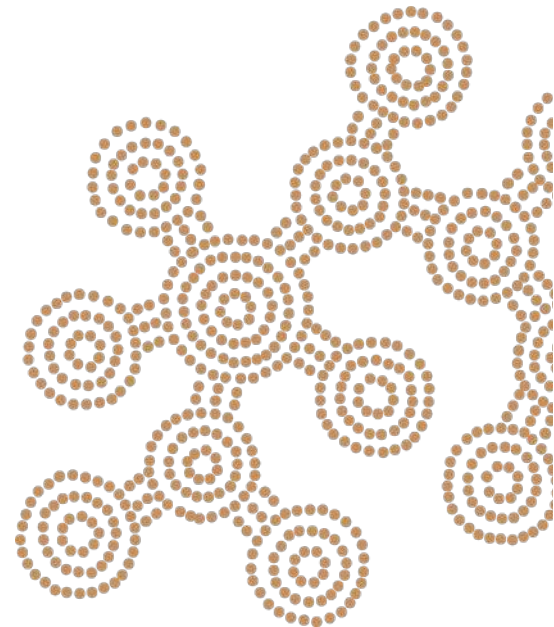
1. Ownership
2. Control
3. Custodianship
4. Accessibility
5. Accountability to First Nations people
6. Amplify the voice of the community
7. Relevant and reciprocal
8. Sustainability self-determining

Impact yarns occur across four phases:

1. **Co-design:** diverse Community members are engaged in co-design and training to develop a methodology for harvesting yarns.
2. **Training and harvesting yarns:** yarns are collected and prepared for sharing by making them concise and accessible to the whole community.
3. **Centring and amplifying moments:** diverse Community members review all the yarns, select the most impactful ones, and explain why.
4. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lens and thought leadership:** a collection of the most impactful yarns is interrogated to understand what the findings mean.

These emerging frameworks guide on improving practices not just in conducting evaluations, but across the entire evaluation process.

They provide critical evidence of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies and knowledges can be incorporated, and ultimately improve, processes that have emerged out of traditionally Western systems. The opportunities to incorporate these knowledge systems more broadly into evaluation processes depend on the capacity and capability of those working within the authorising environments that would allow and foster their uptake.



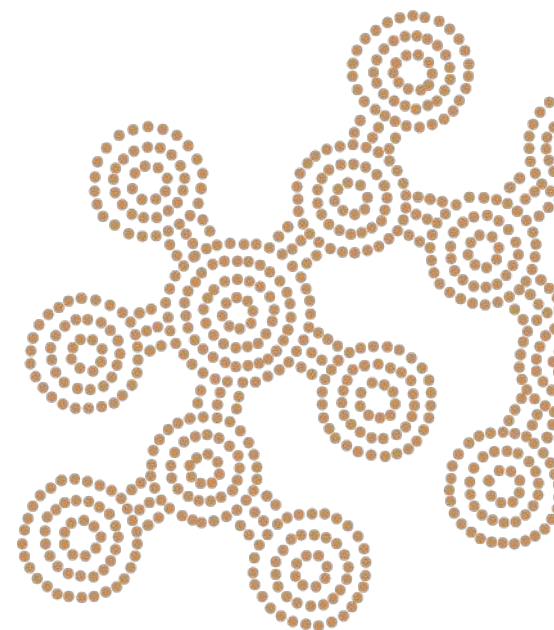
Improved evaluation capability within the Australian Public Service

The Australian Public Service (APS) serves as the central vehicle for decision-making across policy and program development and implementation. Research highlights that limitations in the APS's evaluation capabilities have significantly constrained policy learning, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy. The analysis of an attempted policy transformation trial undertaken by the Council of Australian Governments demonstrated that government-commissioned evaluations were not systematically used to inform policy due to a highly politicised environment, a lack of formal learning processes, and inter-agency competition that distorted findings (Stewart & Jarvie 2015). The study also revealed a misalignment between public service practices and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working, including insufficient time for relationship building and limited tolerance for Indigenous-led approaches. As a result, evaluation findings were rarely shared or taken up at the national level, undermining their value for improving policy and programs.

Strengthening evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy requires more than increasing evaluation activity; it demands deliberate investment in culturally safe evaluation capability across the APS (McCausland 2019). This includes building skills to commission and conduct evaluations that are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander centred, establishing clear guidelines and professional development for evaluators and commissioners, enabling effective knowledge sharing, and resourcing genuine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, capacity, and control over evaluation. Taken together, this evidence underscores the need for targeted

capability-building in evaluation within the APS as a foundation for meaningful policy learning and improved outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy and programmes. Strengthening capability is also critical to improving the usefulness of evaluations, ensuring findings can be effectively interpreted and applied in policy and practice.

In response to these challenges, the Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE) established the Evaluation Profession in 2023 to strengthen evaluation practice across government. The initiative brings together practitioners committed to evidence-informed policy, supporting evaluative thinking across the policy cycle while promoting capability development, collaboration, and continuous improvement (Australian Centre for Evaluation, n.d). While not specifically focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluation, it presents an opportunity to further strengthen evaluation and cultural capability through targeted training and knowledge exchange, including greater use of existing toolkits, protocols, methodologies, and frameworks that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evaluation.



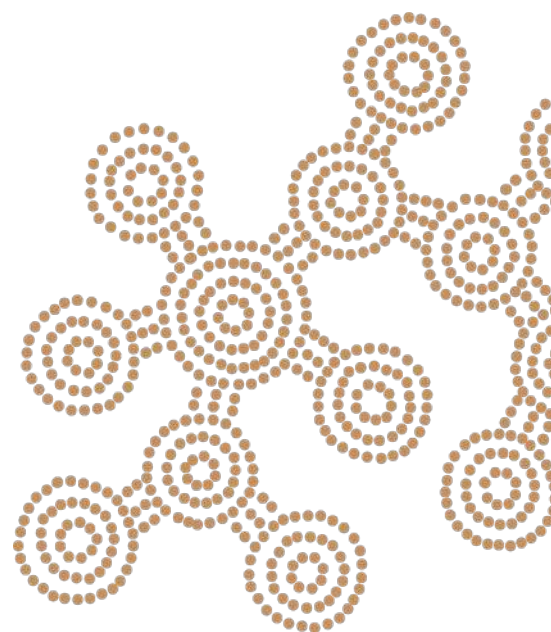
Acknowledge and overcome the politicisation of Indigenous programs and policies

A long history of the politicisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy and program development continues to distort the trajectory of their improvement (Aldrich et al. 2007; Moodie & Maddison 2023; Strakosch 2019). Policy and program decisions by politicians and public servants are still often based on ideological positions, or oppositions, or short-term electoral goals. This approach sidelines the potential for genuine and meaningful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and investment in policy and program development, resulting in paternalistic interventions that shift with every political or media cycle. Successive governments have employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policies as symbols of their ideological values rather than as evidence-based catalysts for change, leading to a constant legislative churn described as ‘policy hyper-activity’ and a resultant ‘structural paralysis’ (Moodie & Maddison 2023).

When the programs themselves are politicised, so too are their evaluations. Evaluations may be treated as a performative exercise, using findings selectively to justify pre-existing agendas, funding cuts, or expected outcomes. Without systematic, transparent frameworks to ensure that evaluation outcomes are made public and used to inform policy or funding decisions (Productivity Commission 2020a), evaluations will continue to be used only in politically convenient ways. The lack of transparency and oversight in program evaluations means that this manipulation of their outcomes can occur at the whole-of-government or department-wide level, but may also be

affected at a minute level by individual public servants or teams. Many of the risks of politicising evaluations would be minimised by the recommendations discussed throughout this paper.

Strong evaluation capability, including cultural capability, is essential for ensuring high-quality evaluations and producing valid findings. In practice, this involves embedding evaluative thinking, a form of critical reflection that integrates evaluative questioning into routine operations across an organisation. People within commissioning bodies should be equipped to design evaluations, gather and analyse data, and interpret and apply findings. Additionally, they must be able to effectively commission evaluations, including selecting suitable evaluators, oversee the evaluation process, and assess its overall quality. However, there is also a need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance to be included in these structures and processes.





Conclusion

Evaluations have long been positioned as critical tools for informing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy and program development; however, their actual influence on decision-making remains inconsistent and often limited.

While there has been a marked increase in evaluation activity, significant challenges persist in ensuring that evaluations generate meaningful, culturally relevant, and actionable evidence that leads to improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives. Central to these challenges are shortcomings in Indigenous leadership, transparency, evaluation capability, and the broader political contexts in which evaluations are commissioned and used.

Evaluations are most effective when they are grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being, and doing, and when they are led or co-designed by communities themselves. Embedding Indigenous governance and decision-making across all stages of the evaluation lifecycle is essential not only for improving methodological rigour and cultural safety, but also for ensuring that findings are trusted, relevant, and used. At the same time, strengthening evaluation capability within the Australian Public Service and among Commissioners is critical to improving the commissioning, interpretation, and application of evaluation findings.

Transparency and accessibility are equally fundamental. A lack of access to final reports reinforces existing power imbalances, limiting communities' ability to engage with, critique, or benefit from evaluations that directly affect them. Without publicly available and clearly communicated evaluation processes and findings, opportunities for accountability, shared learning, and community benefit are significantly diminished. Addressing these issues requires a systemic shift towards open evaluation practices and the operationalisation of Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles through Indigenous Data Governance. When considered against the *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* progression pathway, these challenges demonstrate that many evaluation practices remain at early or developing stages across key domains, particularly in relation to Indigenous leadership, transparency, and the use of evidence in decision-making. By prioritising Indigenous leadership, strengthening capability, and enhancing transparency, evaluations can move beyond performative exercises to become powerful instruments for advancing self-determination and improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Summary of evaluation frameworks

This section summarises the evaluation frameworks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health programs and policies. Some will be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific, others will be whole of population and will include implicitly or explicitly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

National

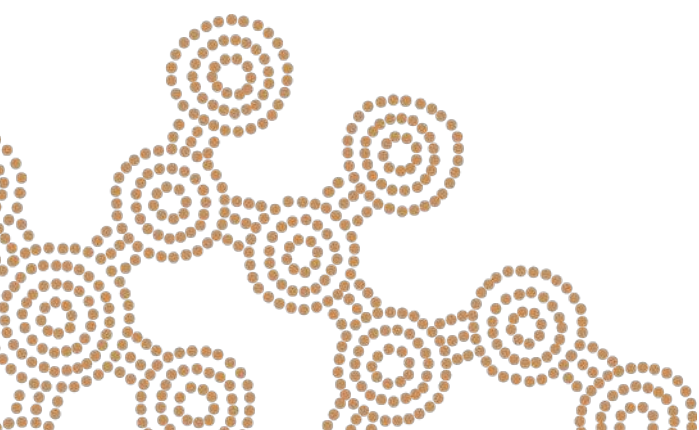
Name	Indigenous Advancement Strategy Evaluation Framework
Year	2018
Author	National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
Focus	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs in the Indigenous Advancement Strategy
Purpose	This Evaluation Framework is a guide to evaluating programs and activities under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), delivered by the NIAA.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance	<p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance is multilayered in the strategy. An independent external committee, the Indigenous Evaluation Committee, oversees the implementation of the Framework and endorses the Annual Evaluation Work Plan.</p> <p>The Framework also promotes the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and service providers in evaluation activities with a focus on co-design.</p>
How it is meant to be used to inform policy and program	Highlights that the best evaluation practice is to use the findings for policy and program design by funders and those funded. To achieve this requires robust methodology and analytical procedures.

Name	Indigenous Evaluation Strategy
Year	2020
Author	Productivity Commission
Focus	Programs funded by Australian Government agencies that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, i.e. the whole of the population, where there is an evaluation focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific programs.
Purpose	The objective of the Strategy is to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by having policy and program decisions informed by high-quality and relevant evaluation evidence.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance	Indigenous perspectives and knowledges are central to the Strategy, as reflected in governance arrangements. It further states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be engaged in deciding what to evaluate, how the evaluation should be conducted, and how the findings should be translated. How the governance arrangements should look and who make the final decisions are not included in the Framework.
How it is meant to be used to inform policy and program	<p>Through centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives and knowledge to inform the design of an evaluation underpinned by robust evaluation methodologies, driving more meaningful findings that will improve policy and program delivery.</p> <p>When evaluations are being designed, they need to be useful to a range of stakeholders, including governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities.</p> <p>Evaluation reports should be made publicly available unless there are privacy, cultural, or commercial sensitivities. In these circumstances, a summary report should be made available.</p>

Name	Evaluation Strategy 2023-2026
Year	2023
Author	Department of Health and Aged Care
Focus	All programs funded by Australian Government agencies
Purpose	The Strategy provides a framework to strengthen policy and program evaluation practice and culture, and to increase the use of evaluation evidence for decision-making, planning, and reporting. There is no specific mention of evaluations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policies or programs.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance	The Strategy makes no mention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance. It does state, however, that it is guided by the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy 2020, which implies that the governance arrangements detailed in this Strategy are to be applied in the Department of Health and Aged Care, now known as the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.
How it is meant to be used to inform policy and program	The strategy outlines several ways that the evaluation findings could be used to inform policy and programs, such as the value, risk, impact and the evidence base of the policy or program.

Name	Evaluation practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings: Code of Conduct
Link	Evaluation practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings
Year	2025
Author	Better Evaluation Knowledge
Focus	Anyone undertaking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluations
Purpose	The aim of the guide is for those conducting or managing evaluations in these settings to learn from these examples to improve the benefit of evaluation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance	Promotes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander control and Indigenous Data Sovereignty.
How it is meant to be used to inform policy and program	There is no explicit mention of how the Code of Conduct is intended to inform policy and practice.

Name	Lowitja Institute Evaluation Framework
Year	2018
Author	Lowitja Institute
Focus	Anyone undertaking evaluations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
Purpose	Lowitja Institute’s evaluation framework aims to enhance the evaluation of programs and policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with a focus on culturally safe practices and community benefits.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance	The framework emphasises the importance of culturally appropriate evaluation practices led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
How it is meant to be used to inform policy and program	The primary goal of Lowitja Institute’s evaluation framework is to ensure that evaluations lead to tangible benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. By focusing on culturally safe practices and community engagement, the framework aims to improve the effectiveness of health and social programs, ultimately contributing to better health outcomes and enhanced community wellbeing by informing policy and practice.



State/territory

Name	Northern Territory Government Program Evaluation Framework
Year	2022
Author	Northern Territory Government
Focus	Programs funded by Northern Territory Government agencies that include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, i.e. the whole of the population, where there is an evaluation focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific programs.
Purpose	Aims to improve transparency and accountability, and encourage better use of Territory Government funds.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance	The Framework makes no mention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance.
How it is meant to be used to inform policy and program	The Framework identifies that evaluation findings should inform decision-making, but it does not specify how this should occur or whose responsibilities it is.





References

Al Daccache, M., & Bardus, M. 2020, 'Process Evaluation', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Social Marketing, 1-4*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14449-4_155-1

Aldrich, R., Zwi, A. B., & Short, S. 2007, 'Advance Australia Fair: Social democratic and conservative politicians' discourses concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their health 1972–2001', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol.64, no.1: 125-137. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2006.08.034>

Australian Department of Health, Disability and Ageing 2026, *Evaluating our First Nations health programs*. Accessed 13 May 2026 from <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health/primary-care/evaluations>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2020. *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*. Canberra.

Bowman, N. R., Francis, Carolee D., & Tyndall, M. 2015, 'Culturally Responsive Indigenous Evaluation: A Practical Approach for Evaluating Indigenous Projects in Tribal Reservation Contexts', in S. Hood, R. Hopson, & H. Frierson (Eds.), *Continuing the Journey to Reposition Culture and Cultural Context in Evaluation Theory and Practice*, 335-359. Information Age Publishing.

Coalition of Peaks 2020, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

Culbong, T., McNamara, U. A., McNamara, A. I., Wilkes, U. P., Wilkes, A. S., Munro, A., Eades, A.-M., O'Connell, M., Fielder, J., & Wright, M. 2024, "Making Sure the Path Is Safe": A Case Study of the Influence of Aboriginal Elders on Non-Aboriginal Organisational Leadership', *Social Sciences (Basel)*, vol.13, no.4: 220. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13040220>

Australian Centre for Evaluation (n.d), Evaluation Profession. Australian Government Treasury. Accessed 14 May 2026 from: <https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/learn-and-connect/evaluation-profession>

Finlay, S. M., Boulton, A., Simpson, H., Fredericks, B., Roe, Y., Judd, J., Smith, J. A., Pender, J., & Cargo, M. 2023, 'A scoping review of commissioning practices used in the evaluation of Indigenous health and wellbeing programs: Protocol article', *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, vol.23, no.4: 220-242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X231200050>

Finlay, S. M., Judd, J., Smith, J. A., Simpson, H., Fredericks, B., Boulton, A., Roe, Y., Pender, J., Kerrigan, S., Temby, A., Opozda, M., & Cargo, M. 2025a, 'Commissioning stronger evaluations of Indigenous health and wellbeing programs: A scoping review of government and non-government Indigenous evaluation commissioning practices', *First Nations Health and Wellbeing – The Lowitja Journal*, vol.3, 100089-100089. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fnhi.2025.100089>

- Finlay, S. M., Boulton, A., Judd, J., Fredericks, B., Pender, J., Smith, J. A., Simpson, H., Roe, Y., Kerrigan, S., Temby, A., & Cargo, M. 2025b, "Activating Indigenous ways" – perceptions of how Australian Indigenous health and wellbeing program evaluations are commissioned and future recommendations', *International Journal for Equity in Health*, vol.24, no.1: 303-315. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-025-02675-0>
- Hudson, S. 2017, *Evaluation Indigenous Programs: A toolkit for change* (RR28). <https://www.cis.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/rr28.pdf>
- Kehoe, H., Schütze, H., Spurling, G., & Lovett, R. 2022, 'Development of a Decolonising Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Policy Analysis in Australia', *International indigenous Policy Journal*, vol.13, no.3: 1-26.
- Kelaher, M., Luke, J., Ferdinand, A., Chamravi, D., Ewen, S., & Paradies, Y. 2018, *Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*.
- Lokuge, K., Thurber, K., Calabria, B., Davis, M., McMahon, K., Sartor, L., Lovett, R., Guthrie, J., & Banks, E. 2017, 'Indigenous health program evaluation design and methods in Australia: a systematic review of the evidence', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol.41, no.5: 480-482. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12704>
- Lovett, R., Brinckley, M.-M., Phillips, B., Chapman, J., Thurber, K. A., Jones, R., Banks, E., Dunbar, T., Olsen, A., & Wenitong, M. 2020a, 'Marrathalpu mayingku ngiya kiyi. Minyawaa ngiyani yata punmalaka; wangaaypu kirrampili kara' [Ngiyampaa title]; 'In the beginning it was our people's law. What makes us well; to never be sick, Cohort profile of Mayi Kuwayu: The National Study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing' [English title], *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol.2020, no.2: 8-30.
- Lovett, R., Prehn, J., Williamson, B., Maher, B., Lee, V., Bodkin-Andrews, G., & Walter, M. 2020b, 'Knowledge and power: The tale of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol.2020, no.2: 3-7.
- Lowitja Institute and Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective 2024, *Taking Control of Our Data: A Discussion Paper on Indigenous Data Governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Communities*.
- Maher, B. 2026, *Moort danjoo kanyirninpa (relationality) and Boola kaadadjan doyntj doyntj baranginy (Indigenous knowledge exchange) as Collective Capability within Indigenist Evaluation in Australia*, PhD: Australian National University, Canberra.
- Maher, B., Guthrie, J., Cargo, M., Sturgiss, E., & Lovett, R. 2026, 'Collective Capability Within Indigenist Evaluation: Elements and a Definition', *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X251412507>
- Malezer, L. 2013, 'Challenges in evaluating Indigenous policy. Better Indigenous Policies: The Role of Evaluation', In Productivity Commission (Ed.), *Better Indigenous Policies: The Role of Evaluation*: 69-79. Productivity Commission. <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/better-indigenous-policies/better-indigenous-policies.pdf#page=75>
- McCausland, R. 2019, "'I'm sorry but I can't take a photo of someone's capacity being built": Reflections on evaluation of indigenous policy and programmes', *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, vol.19, no.2: 64-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X19848529>
- McMahon, M., Chisholm, M., Vogels, W., & Modderman, C. 2024, 'Aboriginal youth mentoring: A pathway to leadership', *AlterNative: an International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, vol.20, no.3: 388-396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801241250051>
- Moewaka Barnes, H. 2013, 'Better Indigenous policies: an Aotearoa New Zealand perspective on the role of evaluation', in *Better Indigenous policies: The role of evaluation*, 155-181. Australian Government Productivity Commission.

- Moodie, N., & Maddison, S. 2023, 'Introduction: Public Policy and Indigenous Futures', in N. Moodie & S. Maddison (Eds.), *Public Policy and Indigenous Futures*, 1-11. Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9319-0_1
- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 2018, *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders* (IND2).
- National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) 2026a, *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*, NIAA. Accessed 13 May 2026 from: <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/grants-and-funding/indigenous-advancement-strategy>
- National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) 2026b, *Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) Evaluation Work Plan*, NIAA. Accessed 13 May 2026 from <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/data-evaluation-and-research/indigenous-advancement-strategy-ias-evaluation-work-plan>
- Parter, C., Wilson, S., & Hartz, D. L. 2019, 'The Closing the Gap (CTG) Refresh: Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the CTG framework? How?', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol.43, no.1: 5-7. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12850>
- Patton, M. Q. 2008, *Utilization-focused evaluation* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Productivity Commission 2019, *Indigenous evaluation strategy: Productivity Commission Issues Paper*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Productivity Commission 2020a, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Productivity Commission 2020b, *A progression pathway for the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*. <https://assets.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-evaluation/strategy/indigenous-evaluation-progression-pathway.pdf>
- Stewart, J., & Jarvie, W. 2015, 'Haven't We Been This Way Before? Evaluation and the Impediments to Policy Learning', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol.74, no.2: 114-127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12140>
- Strakosch, E. 2019, 'The technical is political: settler colonialism and the Australian Indigenous policy system', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol.54, no.1: 114-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2018.1555230>
- Stufflebeam, D. L., & Coryn, C. L. S. 2014, *Evaluation theory, models, and applications* (Second ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Taylor, J., & Kukutai, T. 2016, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an Agenda* (1st ed.). Australian National University Press.
- Taylor, R. 2003, 'An Indigenous perspective on evaluations in the inter-cultural context: How far can one throw a Moree boomerang?', *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, vol.3, no.2: 44-52.
- Thorpe, A., Arabena, K., Sullivan, P., Silburn, K., & Rowley, K. 2016, *Engaging First Peoples: A Review of Government Engagement Methods for Developing Health Policy* (1921889489). Lowitja Institute.
- Treasury, T. (n.d.). Impact evaluation. Australian Government. Accessed 10 May from: <https://evaluation.treasury.gov.au/toolkit/impact-evaluation>
- Trudgett, S., Griffiths, K., Farnbach, S., & Shakeshaft, A. 2022, 'A framework for operationalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty in Australia: Results of a systematic literature review of published studies', *eClinicalMedicine*, vol.45, no.101302. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2022.101302>
- Vine, K., Benveniste, T., Ramanathan, S., Longman, J., Williams, M., Laycock, A., & Matthews, V. 2023, 'Culturally Informed Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Evaluations: A Scoping Review', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol.20, no.14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20146437>

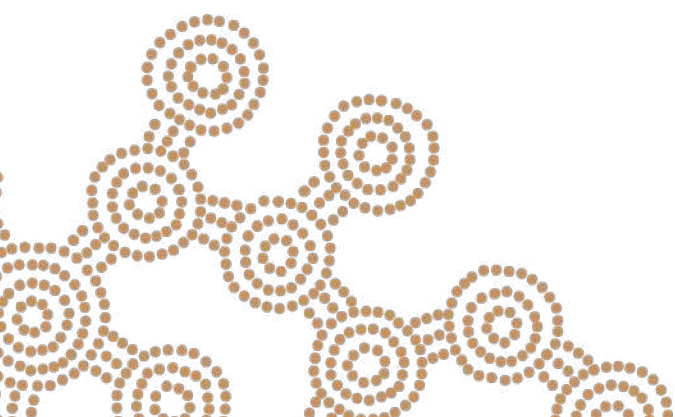
Walter, M. 2018, 'The voice of indigenous data: Beyond the markers of disadvantage', *Griffith Review*, vol.60: 256-263.

Watego, C., Brady, K., Hassall, K., Macoun, A., Mukandi, B., Singh, D., Staines, Z., Strakosch, E., Strakosch, E., Sullivan, P., & Lahn, J. 2024, 'Understanding and Transforming Indigenous Policy Evaluation', *Springer Nature Switzerland*, 275-291. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67733-5_16

Williams, M. 2018, 'Ngaabi-nya Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program evaluation framework', *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, vol.18, no.1: 6-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035719X18760141>

Wright, M., Getta, A., Green, A., Kickett, U., Kickett, A., McNamara, A., McNamara, U., Newman, A., Pell, A., Penny, A., Wilkes, U., Wilkes, A., Culbong, T., Taylor, K., Brown, A., Dudgeon, P., Pearson, G., Allsop, S., Lin, A., . . . O'Connell, M. 2021, 'Co-Designing Health Service Evaluation Tools That Foreground First Nation Worldviews for Better Mental Health and Wellbeing Outcomes', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol.18, no.16: 8555. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168555>

Yap, M., & Yu, E. 2016, 'Operationalising the capability approach: developing culturally relevant indicators of indigenous wellbeing – an Australian example', *Oxford Development Studies*, vol.44, no.3: 315-331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2016.1178223>





Australia's National
Institute for Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander
Health Research

CONTACT

PO Box 1524, Collingwood Victoria 3066 Australia

T: +61 3 8341 5555 | E: admin@lowitja.org.au | www.lowitja.org.au



[@the-lowitja-institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/lowitja-institute)



[@lowitja_institute](https://www.instagram.com/lowitja_institute)



[@lowitjainstitute](https://www.facebook.com/lowitjainstitute)

ABOUT LOWITJA INSTITUTE

Lowitja Institute is Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health research institute named in honour of its co-patron, the late Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG. It is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high-impact quality research, knowledge exchange and by supporting a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers. Established in January 2010, Lowitja Institute operates on key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact.

The history of Lowitja Institute dates back to 1997 when the first Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health was established. Since then, Lowitja Institute and the CRC organisations have led a substantial reform agenda in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research by working with communities, researchers and policymakers, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people setting the agenda and driving the outcomes.