Submission in response to the draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

From: Keryn Hassall, Aptavit, Brisbane, August 2020

As an evaluator with an interest in organisational processes and practice change, I have many years of experience reviewing documents written to change work practices within and between organisations. I have seen many failures, and I am concerned that this Indigenous Evaluation Strategy will be another failure.

This draft Strategy is intended as a central government intervention into a dynamic and complex area of multiple agencies, policies, programs, services, organisations, places, and people. Each of which is connected to a history of polices, programs, organisations and experiences. If the government wants the Strategy to generate the change it wishes to see in this dynamic space, it will need to be 'fit-for-purpose'[1], designed to work effectively to generate change and implemented in a way that supports the intent of the Strategy and leads toward the stated objective.

> "The objective of the Indigenous Evaluation 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.**"

This submission is based on a brief formative evaluation of the draft Strategy and Guide to Evaluation, in order to assess whether the Strategy has the potential to achieve the stated objective, and to identify the changes that are needed to allow the Strategy to be effective.

Evaluation method

Evaluation is a systematic process to make decisions about the value (merit, worth, or significance) of a program, policy, or other form of social intervention (Scriven, 1995). A formative evaluation focuses on the design of a social intervention, the causal processes needed for the goals to be achieved (theory of change) and the ways in which the implementation can achieve those changes (theory of action).

Michael Scriven, a philosopher of science and evaluation theorist, established the general logic for evaluation (Fournier, 1995; Scriven, 1995), based on establishing criteria of merit and assessing the extent to which the appropriate standards are met for each criterion, drawn together in an evaluative synthesis.

In usual practice, an evaluation such as this would be done in consultation with the relevant policy designers, implementation team and external stakeholders, to negotiate the criteria and standards and review the evaluative synthesis (Davidson, 2014). Given the submission process, this evaluation relies on criteria and standards drawn from submissions made in the first consultation round, relevant literature, and my professional knowledge of success factors for social interventions aiming to drive practice change.

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[1] The draft Strategy identifies fitness-for-purpose as the focus of the 5-year review of the Strategy (action 12, p. 29), and this is also a critical success factor for the initial implementation of the Strategy.

Criteria of merit used for this evaluation

This submission evaluates the draft Strategy, Guide to Evaluation and proposed implementation approach in terms of two primary criteria – feasibility and legitimacy – as both are essential to the success of the Strategy. Within each criterion a number of standards, or essential characteristics, are necessary for the Strategy to be implemented effectively and achieve its objective. A full formative evaluation would cover a wider range of criteria, but this submission focuses on just the criteria and characteristics that are essential, without which the Strategy is likely to fail.

Feasibility – is the strategy designed to achieve the stated objective?

Legitimacy – to what extent is this document a legitimate representation of (a) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and (b) evaluation theory and knowledge? The focus is on ensuring the Strategy is seen as legitimate by two key stakeholder groups – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, and the evaluation profession – as the success of the Strategy will depend on the active participation of each group.

Assessment against the evaluation criteria

Feasibility – is the Strategy designed to achieve the stated objective?

Essential standards for the feasibility criterion are the characteristics needed for the Strategy to function as more than a document, in order to generate the intended changes and achieve the overall objective.

1. **Is the principles-based approach built on a sound theory of principles and how principles can be used to guide changes in practice in a distributed system?**

   The draft Strategy and Background Paper show no evidence of an underlying theory of what principles are[2] and how principles-guided practice can be successfully achieved. The Background paper (p. 20) describes the function of principles as "framing what should occur (reflecting good practice) and how the quality of an evaluation will be assessed".

   Setting out the role of principles, the draft Strategy quotes (on page 8) from the submission by Associate Professor Chelsea Bond and others from the University of Queensland and Inala Wangarra, as endorsing the Commission's plan for a principles-based approach. However the Commission quoted selectively from a section which is included in full below (text in italics was quoted in the Strategy).

   > "Well-defined principles guide decisions and actions, and can be used to evaluate programs and organisations operating under these principles. Developing principles that can be used for effective program management requires a reflective process with stakeholders, to negotiate principles worded in a way that can guide programs and evaluation. **Referring to something as a principle doesn't make it a principle or a useful guide for policy, programs or evaluation** (Patton, 2018).

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[2] i.e., what qualifies something to be a principle, as distinct from a concept or slogan, and how to determine ones that are helpful from ones that are not.

The power of principles for policy development, program delivery and evaluation is that they are adaptable to different contexts. While predefined structures and contracted outcomes appear tractable to high-level management, they are not meaningful or effective at the local level. *Principles allow both the local-level experts and high-level abstract managers to have a shared understanding of how 'good' can be judged. Thus, principles can be framed in a way that can guide decisions, operations and evaluation across all levels*, including: i) policy development, program design, and program management; ii) program operations (from contracting and funding, to delivery and reporting); and iii) evaluation design and practice — including how to recognise when the agreed principles are being followed, and how to effect two-way reporting on alignment with principles." (Bond et al., 2019)

The draft Strategy, in the section on guiding principles (pages 8-19), provides a half-page overview of the rationale for each "principle" followed by a list of statements of preferred practices relating to evaluation. The purpose and significance of these statements is not made clear, but the introduction to the section on guiding principles (page 8) states that "[t]he guiding principles for the Strategy set out what high-quality practice looks like and what agencies should consider when undertaking evaluations".

Therefore it appears that the Commission has identified a list of preferred practices relating to evaluation, sorted these into four thematic headings – credible, useful, ethical, transparent – adjectives commonly used in government evaluation guides, and labelled these as principles for the purpose of this Strategy. This is in contrast to the overarching principle and table of statements (table 1, p. 11) which appear to have been developed in response to the submissions to this inquiry. The Strategy appears to rely on the idea of principles as a "magic concept" (Carey & Malbon, 2018; Pollitt & Hupe, 2011), rather than constructing principles as a plausible means to generate change.

Effectively, the draft Strategy uses the concept of principles, but it has not operationalised this concept, which appears to be a critical failure point for the draft Strategy.

Suggestions for developing appropriate principles for the Strategy

An effective principles-based strategy would have the following characteristics:

    (a) a sound theory of what principles are, and how principles can be used to guide changes in practice

    (b) principles (not just adjectives) that are carefully selected to function as guiding principles and which define the scope of the new ways of working

    (c) explanation of each principle in a way that is descriptive and action-guiding, allowing readers of the Strategy to make an informed judgement about how to enact each principle in their situation.

Referring to something as a principle doesn't make it a principle or a useful guide for policy, program management or evaluation. Development of principles for practice requires reflective analysis, and is much more than a statement of "what good looks like".

If the Commission wishes to develop principles-based guidance in the final Strategy, this could be done through convening a reflective process to develop principles with informed stakeholders from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the evaluation profession. Once the general principles are selected, these can be articulated as guiding principles, in negotiation with these stakeholders.

Writing a formal statement of a guiding principle is hard to do well. A useful approach is the GUIDE framework for developing operational principles (Patton, 2018).

Guiding – provides direction, with active verbs, is sufficiently prescriptive to guide thinking and action, and distinguishable from other principles

Useful – for making choices and decisions, is interpretable and actionable

Inspirational – justifying why the principle matters and what can be achieved by following the principle

Developmental – adaptable for different circumstances and supporting ongoing improvement

Evaluable – it is possible to document and judge whether the principle is being followed, and to judge what results from following the principle. [3]

Some examples of guiding principles formed using the GUIDE framework

These are two of the nine principles developed by a youth homelessness service:

- Harm reduction: Contain the effects of risky behaviour in the short term and seek to reduce its effects in the long term.
- Positive youth development: Provide opportunities for youth to build a sense of competency, usefulness, belonging, and power. (Patton, 2018, p. 18)

As well as articulating the guiding principles in an appropriate way, the final Strategy and Guide will require more detailed guidance on how to operationalise each principle, beyond the simple list of preferred practices in the current draft. This will need to describe the existing practices that agencies must cease, and provide advice on how organisations can transition to operating in a way that is consistent with each principle. There are examples, such as the new AIATSIS Code of Ethics, that show how principles-based guidance can be written to provide guidance for action that is both detailed and adaptive.

2. **Is the Strategy and implementation designed with a plausible causal path to the intended objective?**

The draft Background Paper and Guide to Evaluation provide advice on the benefits of program theory or theory of change for developing an effective program and an informative evaluation. However, the Strategy and supporting documents do not provide any theory of change for this Strategy despite its intended role as a change-making intervention in a dynamic social context.

In the Strategy, figure 1 (page 7) sets out a high-level causal sequence from the Strategy as the Instrument of change, to the intermediate outcome of 'better policies and programs', then the ultimate outcome of 'better lives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'.

Effectively, the Strategy is intended to build the capability of government (policymakers and agencies) to design and deliver appropriate policies and programs, leading to the wellbeing of

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[3] The GUIDE framework was developed for community service organisations, as the basis for principles-guided program management and evaluation. While the general advice in the GUIDE framework is relevant to the Commission, you may need to read chapters 1, 2, 6 and 21 of the book to form a customised approach to principles for this Strategy.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Evaluation is just the initial change in a sequence to build capability and eventually improve outcomes.

The implicit theory of change could therefore be represented as:

Strategy → better quality evaluations → more relevant evaluation evidence → better quality decisions → better policies and programs → better lives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

A key step in evaluation when working with theory of change and program logic diagrams is to examine the assumptions behind each arrow connecting the intervention to the sequence of intended outcomes. A sound program theory "needs to include an explanation of how the program's activities contribute to the results, not simply a list of activities followed by the results, with no explanation of how these are linked, apart from a mysterious arrow" (Funnell & Rogers, 2011, p. 31). Unexamined assumptions are often the source of failure of an intervention.

The Strategy and Guide focus closely on the initial outcome, better quality evaluations, which may also go some way to the intermediate outcome, more relevant evaluation evidence, but there is no consideration of how the provision of evaluation evidence would lead to better quality decisions.

Just last week, the Australian Council of Attorneys-General refused to raise the age of criminal responsibility above ten, despite the considerable evidence of the harm of this policy to young people who are criminalised. This and many similar examples suggest there is no reason to assume that better quality decisions or better policies and programs can be achieved automagically through the provision of high quality evaluation evidence.

This lack of a plausible theory of change connecting the actions with the intended outcome is a critical failure point for the Strategy.

Suggestions for developing the Strategy to enable the outcome to be achieved

When developing the final Strategy, the Commission will need to expand the Strategy and Guide to add actions targeted to the later stages in the outcomes sequence, and develop feasible implementation arrangements for these critical actions, if the Strategy is to reach the objective.

Developing a clearer concept of evidence will be one important step when building a sound theory of change linking the Strategy with the objective. Within government agencies, the term 'evidence' appears to be used to label two quite different information needs, often leading to confusion.

- Information about effective interventions, which can be used to inform development of policies and programs – often framed as the question of 'what works' to address a particular social concern.
- Information about program and service delivery, the people who are participants in (or subject to) the program or service, and the immediate effects of activities within these programs and services – often framed as 'we need to know what is happening'.

These two types of 'evidence' are generated by very different processes, and used in different ways. If the Strategy is intended to both facilitate the creation of useful evidence, and the use of this evidence, the Strategy's theory of change will require a clear concept of evidence and how

evidence from evaluations can and would be used to improve decision-making (Cartwright & Hardie, 2012).

Legitimacy – will the Strategy be seen as legitimate by key stakeholders?

Implementation of the Strategy relies on the active participation of two key stakeholder groups – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, and the evaluation profession. Both groups must consider the Strategy and its components to be legitimate. To what extent is this document a legitimate representation of (a) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and (b) evaluation theory and knowledge?

Essential standards for this criterion are the characteristics needed in the Strategy document and implementation guidance, for the Strategy to be considered legitimate.

3. **Does the Strategy demonstrate respect for the capability and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Indigenous-led organisations?**

Ideally, this Strategy would be designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to judge the quality and effectiveness of government policy, programs and services, and to hold the government to account. However the draft is clearly designed to serve the purposes of government. For the Strategy to be legitimate in its stated intent to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it will need to drive change in the orientation of government research and evaluation practices.

A number of submissions noted the longstanding problem of the 'deficit narrative', of government viewing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as deficient and subject to improvement through policies and programs. This does not appear to be adequately addressed in the Strategy, Guide or proposed implementation approach.

The Strategy has a central principle of "centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges", and states that this is "about recognising the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, knowledges and cultures". However neither the Strategy nor Guide describe how future evaluation practice will recognise these strengths, nor how future evaluations will move beyond the deficit narrative, and therefore the statement appears to be token.

The new AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (to be launched next month) provides one example of how to move beyond the deficit perspective. Indigenous self-determination is one of the four core principles, and this principle has shaped the rest of the document. "Best practice ethical research recognises and respects the principles of Indigenous self-determination which includes the right of Indigenous peoples to manage the access, collection and use of their information" (AIATSIS, 2020)

Failure to move beyond the deficit narrative, by recognising the capability and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and acknowledging the call for self-determination, means that the Strategy will perpetuate the 'epistemic injustice' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people not being able to be represented on their own terms. Epistemic injustice describes situations where people cannot be understood on their own terms, from their own perspective, and do not have authority over interpretations of their culture, identity, or experience (Anderson, 2012; Fricker, 2007). Professor Maggie Walter described this in her initial submission (#112):

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are treated as objects of data, and we have no say in what is collected, where and how it is collected, who uses it, and for what purposes, under what circumstances and what comes from it" (Walter, 2019) .

This is potentially both an ethical and legitimacy problem for the Strategy, as well as an epistemic problem, as the ongoing misrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reduces the quality of the knowledge gathered for use by government (Walter, 2018; Walter & Suina, 2019).

A strategy that seeks to improve wellbeing must also address the longstanding burden of research and evaluation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are subject to research at a higher rate than other Australians (Bainbridge et al., 2015). Indigenous-controlled organisations are also subject to greater scrutiny than other organisations funded by government, having to provide more detailed reporting and be subject to evaluations (submission #40).

While the background paper has a section on respondent burden and a page on Indigenous data sovereignty, these key issues are not carried through into the draft Strategy or Guide to Evaluation, apart from a few lines in the tables of preferred practices. **These are critical gaps in the draft Strategy.**

Suggestions for developing the Strategy to demonstrate respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations

For the final Strategy and Guide, the Commission should provide a clear explanation of how agencies can transition from a deficit framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, towards an approach based on respect for culture and capability, and how the potential burden of research and evaluation will be managed. This may involve funding organisations, and paying stakeholders, for their time involved in evaluation activities.

4. **Does the strategy demonstrate an understanding of the discipline of evaluation, its component theories and practice, and how these can be applied to support the intent of the Strategy?**

The Commission has wisely chosen the following definition of evaluation: "*[e]valuation is the systematic process of making a judgment about the merit or worth of a policy or program*". This is a more appropriate definition, drawn from the evaluation discipline (Scriven, 1995), than the definition in the original Issues Paper, from the Department of Finance.

While there are some references to evaluation literature and concepts in the draft Background Paper, the Strategy and Guide show little engagement with the discipline of evaluation and the relevant knowledge available in the evaluation literature. The Background Paper begins with a summary of evaluation practice in government, an unhelpful way for building an understanding of the evaluation discipline because what is labelled 'evaluation' in Australian government agencies is a blend of performance management practice with elements from the evaluation discipline.

The Strategy appears to be built on performance measurement concepts and practices derived from the management discipline, and associated assumptions about the power of data to change decisions. Much of the Guide to Evaluation reads like a 1990s 'Introduction to Research Methods' guide, as filtered by the cultural priorities of government economists. There have been major changes in the underlying philosophy of social science in recent decades (Cartwright &

Montuschi, 2014; Hassall et al., 2020), which have been reflected in evaluation theory and practice, and these are not visible in the Strategy and Guide.

The lack of engagement with the diverse literature of the evaluation discipline is a significant limitation. This will reduce the legitimacy of the Strategy for some members of the evaluation profession, but more importantly it will reduce the efficacy of the Strategy. There are conceptual issues that will be critical to the success of the Strategy, which are canvassed in the evaluation literature but are not reflected in the Strategy or Guide.

Suggestions for developing the Strategy by learning from contemporary evaluation literature

While the Commission does not have time to become familiar with the evaluation literature before preparing the final Strategy, there are some key sources which might be most useful to build an awareness of contemporary ideas in the evaluation discipline.

Evaluation-specific books

- *Utilization-focused evaluation*, by Michael Quinn Patton https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oce/utilization-focused-evaluation/book229324
- *Credible and actionable evidence: The foundations for rigorous and influential evaluations*, by Stewart Donaldson, Christina Christie, & Melvin Mark https://methods.sagepub.com/book/credible-and-actionable-evidence
- *Evaluation for an equitable society*, by Stewart Donaldson & Bob Picciotto https://www.infoagepub.com/products/Evaluation-for-an-Equitable-Society
- *Purposeful program theory: Effective use of theories of change and logic models,* by Sue Funnell & Patricia Rogers https://www.wiley.com/en-au/Purposeful+Program+Theory%3A+Effective+Use+of+Theories+of+Change+and+Logic+Models-p-9780470478578

Research methods books used by evaluators to engage with Indigenous knowledges

- *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*, by Linda Tuhiwai Smith https://www.zedbooks.net/shop/book/decolonizing-methodologies
- *Indigenous research methodologies*, by Bagele Chilisa https://au.sagepub.com/en-gb/oce/indigenous-research-methodologies/book241776

Philosophy of social science for research and evaluation practice

- *Philosophy of social science: A new introduction*, by Nancy Cartwright & Eleanora Montuschi https://global.oup.com/academic/product/philosophy-of-social-science-9780199645107

5. **Do the Strategy and implementation approach reflect the stated overarching principle of "centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges"?**

This central principle is a bold and commendable statement for the Commission to make. Achieving this principle in practice will require a major cultural change in how Australian government agencies engage with First Nations people. While this central principle is stated in the Strategy and Guide to Evaluation, there is no sign of this principle being reflected in the design of the Strategy, or integrated into the proposed Actions.

Lack of engagement with this issue is a critical gap in the draft Strategy.

Suggestions for developing the Strategy to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges

If the Strategy were to take this "central principle" seriously, the Strategy and Guide to Evaluation would include discussion of the different nature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges. Taking this principle seriously would require the Commission to recognise that the draft Strategy is written from a specific Western, technocratic viewpoint, and to make space in the Strategy for new and unfamiliar concepts of credibility, rigor, transparency, utility and ethics that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges.

For the Strategy to integrate this principle, it would explain the means by which this principle could be enacted, covering both the practice of engagement with communities as well as the means by which two paradigmatically different knowledges can be integrated in the evaluative synthesis. The conceptual work needed to take this principle seriously in evaluation practice has been a topic in the evaluation literature (and in the public administration, anthropology and international development literature) for a decade or more. The research methods books listed above will be of use to the Commission in addressing this deficiency in the draft Strategy, as well as the Indigenous evaluation references mentioned in the draft Background Paper.

Concluding reflections

On the surface, this Strategy appears to be a moderately-well formed technocratic attempt to address complex socio-political dilemmas. It looks, superficially, like a real Strategy.

But it fails in a number of critical ways:

1. The draft Strategy and Background Paper show no evidence of an underlying theory of what principles are and how principles-guided practice can be successfully achieved. The five items in the Strategy are not constructed as guiding principles and there is no reason to believe that this component of the Strategy could be effective in communicating the necessary changes to practice.

2. There is no plausible theory of change connecting the Strategy and actions with the stated objective, so there is no reason to believe that the objective can be achieved through implementing the Strategy in this draft form.

3. The draft Strategy does not demonstrate respect for the capability and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Indigenous-led organisations. It risks perpetuating the research and evaluation burden and deficit narrative, misrepresenting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and leading to lower quality knowledge from evaluations.

4. The draft Strategy shows limited understanding of the discipline of evaluation. This will reduce the efficacy of the Strategy, as there are conceptual issues critical to the success of the Strategy, which are canvassed in the evaluation literature but are not reflected in the Strategy or Guide.

5. The draft Strategy and Guide do not reflect the stated overarching principle of "centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges". Operationalising this principle will require a cultural change in how Australian government agencies and evaluators engage with First Nations people.

In the scope of this submission, it is not possible to provide solutions for the Commission to address these critical gaps. For each critical issue, I have provided suggestions for immediate steps the Commission can take, to enable the Commission to address these critical gaps in the design of the draft Strategy.

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