Independent Members of the Indigenous Evaluation Council
National Indigenous Australians Agency

Distinguished Professor Maggie Walter (Chair)
Dr Fiona Cram
Dr Anthony Dillon
Dr Wendy Jarvie

10 July 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission on the recently released *Draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* and the accompanying Draft *A guide to Evaluation Under the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy.* Our discussion also includes reference to the *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy Productivity Commission Draft Background Paper*, where appropriate.

We make this submission as the non-agency members of the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) Indigenous Evaluation Committee (IEC) (formerly the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Indigenous Evaluation Committee). This Committee has been in operation since 2018. Our purpose is to offer independent expert advice to strengthen the quality, credibility and influence of the evaluations of policies and programs affecting Indigenous Australians led by the Agency. We bring this experience to our commentary.

The NIAA IEC strongly supports the ambition of the Draft Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (IES). We echo the IES argument that the within-Department embedding of rigorous and appropriately developed evaluation processes is essential if Indigenous policy and programs in Australia are to deliver better outcomes. We see these better outcomes as dual direction: for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities who are the focus of these policies and programs and for the agencies who design and deliver them. The NIAA IEC also supports the strategic direction of the EIS.

The two key documents, the Draft IES and Draft Guide to Evaluation present a comprehensive, balanced and achievable plan through the articulation of their guiding principles - that evaluations be credible, useful, ethical and transparent. The information in the longer draft background report is very comprehensive, with the shorter draft guide and draft strategy reports providing a condensed and accessible account of the thinking of the Productivity Commission. The central tenet of the Draft IES, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people perspectives, priorities and knowledges must be at the centre of the evaluation of policies and programs, is particularly welcomed. The efficacy of the IES is bound to this tenet. However, we suggest that it ought to be clearly acknowledged within the documents that there is no one single Indigenous perspective, and that these perspectives, as well as priorities can vary within locations. A diversity of Indigenous voices, at all stages, including interpretation of the results, will add robustness and rigour.

In the following section we provide commentary on specific aspects of the primary documents that raised questions for members on matters of clarification or aspects that may require more consideration in the final Strategy and Guide.

1. *Need to Prioritise IES Agency Actions*

   The actions and principles proposed including Indigenous collaboration and partnership, and governance of Indigenous evaluations, will require a major change in the behaviour and processes of government departments and agencies. These changes in behaviour and process alongside the establishment of the support structures, the Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation and the Indigenous Evaluation Council, will require significant investment in time and funding. However, as noted in the IES documents, the Australian Public Service (APS), in general, has weak evaluation cultures and Indigenous evaluation expertise. Agencies would require significant increases in their investment in evaluation practices and evaluation skills. The imperative for such investment is occurring at a time of increasing budgetary pressure. We therefore suggest that it would be useful if the final document indicated a priority list of actions. For example, the Productivity Commission could suggest that over the next 12 months:

   a) All agencies to commit to adopting the principles of Indigenous evaluation laid out in the Draft IES;

   b) All agencies to invest in building up the evaluation capabilities of Indigenous staff through training and recruitment to agreed levels;

   c) The Department of Finance evaluation area formally adopt and promote the principles of the IES and make it a core business commitment to support the roll out of the Indigenous evaluation strategy;

   d) The Productivity Commission to prepare and present in an appropriate senior forum, an annual report to document the adoption of practices and principles across the Australian Public Service departments and agencies.

2. *Additional Guidance on Evaluation Governance*

   We also suggest that additional guidance for the governance of evaluation in departments and agencies will be required. While the Draft IES is detailed in its recommendations for governance arrangements for the APS as a whole, through the Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation and the Indigenous Evaluation Council, there is currently no guidance given to departments and agencies in these areas. It would be helpful if the IES require that Agencies set up similar processes within agencies – e.g. each department or agency to adopt a set of IES aligned Indigenous evaluation principles and to establish an internal Indigenous Evaluation Council, which can oversee their delivery of Indigenous evaluation of their programs and policies and their commitment to Indigenous evaluators.

3. *An Independent Council for Indigenous Evaluation (CIE) versus an Influential CIE*

   We appreciate the need to balance independent oversight with ensuring that evaluation findings influence policy and programs. This is a critical facet of effective operation, but also a site of significant tension. The risk is that the very independence of a CIE may operate to remove it from a position of influence within the APS; out of sight and out of mind. Conversely, a CIE that retains close and influential links to the APS might find that its independence is compromised. Finding a position for the CIE that is both independent

and influential is critically important, but getting this balance right also has implications for the longevity of the IES and its infrastructure. These governance arrangements, and the IES principles and behaviours to be implemented, need to be sustained over the longer term. We therefore support the proposal that the OIE and the Council be located in an independent but also influential agency such as the Productivity Commission. We further suggest that members of the Council be appointed through a collaborative process involving the Council of Peaks, Productivity Commission and the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

4. *Embedding the Influence of the CIE and OIE*
   We suggest that formalised links between the CIE and OIE and its key constituencies be established. To ensure the CIE and OIE are fully informed of:

   - Government Priorities: We suggest a formal process of engagement with senior public servants be mandated, e.g. through 6 monthly meetings with the Secretaries Board, and annually with Cabinet. There would need to be a process of regularly engaging with the Chairs of Department/Agency IECs as well.

   - Indigenous Priorities: We suggest a formal process of engagement (6 monthly and as needed) with Indigenous community and organisational bodies such as the Coalition of the Peaks, Empowered Communities, the Indigenous Voice to Government etc.

5. *Informing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities and Organisations*
   We understand the Draft IES and the Draft Guidelines are written primarily for Departments and agencies in charge of commissioning program or policy evaluations. They are unlikely, however, to be accessible to community audiences. We recommend thought be given to how best to inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations about what their role will be and what opportunities the IES provides for them to engage with evaluations, their finding and their recommendations. We also suggest that it will be important that communities and organisations should be given guidance about what they should expect from evaluation practice that is, with and for, them. One approach would be to develop rubrics in the Strategy document about what poor, acceptable and good practice looks like for each principle.

6. *Evaluation Methodology*
   We noted a sense of linear inquiry flows that permeates the documents that could be disrupted by, for example, signalling that a logic model (p. 20, background) is not developed then put to one side but is a living representation of a program that is revisited throughout an evaluation cycle. We suggest that it be clearly articulated that a logic model or theory of change is the theory that the collection and analysis of evaluation data is testing, so it may come out looking quite different than the one at the beginning of the evaluation. We also noted a seeming reluctance of those authoring the background document to take a more theory-based approach to causality (p. 29-30), whereby evaluation is seen as being about both theory and data and therefore many methods hold the potential to demonstrate causality.

   We had some concern that the shorter documents privilege certain methodological approaches. For example, developmental evaluation is mentioned in the background report but not in the guide or strategy. We also felt that there was a greater need to stress

the need for evaluation of programs and initiatives that are innovative and reasonably agile, and this need will require agencies to very carefully align the most appropriate evaluation methodology with the purpose of that evaluation for policy and feedback. Care needs to be taken that an evaluation methodological orthodoxy is avoided.

7. *Importance of Definition of Concepts and Terms*
   Both the IES and the Guide to Evaluation under the IES make frequent use of concepts such as the development of genuine, formal partnerships being at the heart of these documents. Like many words, 'engagement' and 'partnership' are culturally embedded and will likely have different conceptualisations and operationalisation for those commissioning and/or undertaking the evaluations than those with whom the evaluations are being conducted. It is important therefore that the documentation stress that the appropriate meanings and enactments of such terms are not what evaluators think they are but what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples see them as being.

8. *Clarifying Examples*
   In the draft background document report we felt that there was a lack of clarity about whether the evaluations showcased were examples of good practice according to the principles outlined. It may be useful to be more explicit about the selection of these examples and what principles they demonstrate.

9. *Requirement for Ethical Review*
   We caution against the idea that the use of existing or de-identified data will require lesser ethical review. As demonstrated in the growing literature in Australia and elsewhere on the problematics of Indigenous data, especially in relation to Open Data, there remains a strong potential for existing data and findings to be used in ways that adversely impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Moreover, ethical review processes require a substantial investment in time and effort and the risk is that departments and agencies may be tempted to design their evaluations to avoid such reviews if possible. This could have a detrimental effect on evaluation quality.

In summary, the NIAA IEC consider that the Draft IES, if adopted by the Australian government, would be an important step forward in the improving the lives of Indigenous Australians. Please contact us at   if you require further clarification of any aspect of our submission.

Distinguished Professor Maggie Walter _
Signed on behalf of the Indigenous Evaluation Committee, National Indigenous Australians Agency

Dr Fiona Cram _____

Dr Anthony Dillon _____

Dr Wendy Jarvie _____