# 5 Governance, leadership and culture

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| Strategic areas for action |
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Effective governance and leadership, and recognition of cultures, are essential to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These influence most indicators in the framework that underpin this Report (chapter 2).

Governance refers to the way the members of a group or community organise themselves. It is useful to think of governance as being about how people choose to collectively organise to ‘manage their own affairs, share power and responsibilities, decide for themselves what kind of society they want for their future, and implement those decisions’ (The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute nd).

Central to the development of strong governance is leadership, and there are specific cultural aspects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership. Cultures include the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and peoples, each with distinct cultural norms, law, language and identity that are dynamic in nature.

The following indicators are included in the ‘Governance, leadership and culture’ strategic area.

* Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peopleand their cultures (section 5.1) — building mutual respect and stronger relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians is important for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing, as well as truth telling about the history of colonisation.
* Participation in decision-making by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (section 5.2) — and through representatives chosen by them, is a critical component of self‑determination for all people that is articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
* Engagement of services (section 5.3) — encompasses both service accessibility (taking into account barriers to access) and appropriate service delivery (including recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives in designing and delivering programs).
* Case studies in governance (section 5.4) — emphasises the importance of culture as an essential determinant of good governance, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people sharing decision-making with governments.
* Indigenous languages revitalisation and maintenance (section 5.5) — language is an important aspect of culture and wellbeing for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
* Indigenous cultural studies (section 5.6) — can benefit both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (contributing to improved academic outcomes) and non-Indigenous people (helping to promote understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and build respect for them and their cultures).
* Participation in community activities (section 5.7) — art and ceremony are significant markers of cultural strength, and evidence shows that a range of sport and community activities can foster self‑esteem, social interaction and the development of skills and teamwork, leading to physical and mental health, and wellbeing.
* Access to traditional lands and waters (section 5.8) — enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to practise and maintain their knowledge of ceremonies, rituals and history. Connection to traditional lands may also lead to other social and economic benefits (see section 9.2 *Indigenous owned or controlled land and business*).

The Steering Committee acknowledges the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. While there has been general endorsement of the cultural indicators in this report, they may not reflect the aspirations of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Attachment tables for this chapter are identified in references throughout this chapter by an ‘A’ suffix (for example, ‘table 5A.2.1’). These tables can be found on the web page (www.pc.gov.au/oid2020).

### References

The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute nd, *Understanding Governance*, https://toolkit.aigi.com.au/ toolkit/1-0-understanding-governance (accessed 26 May 2020).

## 5.1 Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures[[1]](#footnote-1)

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| Box 5.1.1 Key messages |
| * Building mutual respect and a stronger relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians is important for improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. * Mutual respect is enhanced by knowledge and pride in cultures and history. * Large proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults (more than 70 per cent) rated their knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories as high and continued to feel personally proud of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. * Comparatively, fewer in the general community rated their knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories as high (about 40 per cent), and fewer felt personally proud of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, but the proportions that did have increased since 2014. * Positive relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians are enhanced by increasing trust and reducing prejudice. * Less than half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults perceived high levels of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians in 2018. Still fewer in the general community thought the same. * More than half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults perceived other Australians had high level of prejudice towards them. This proportion was slightly lower than in 2014. * Almost one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over reported feeling unfairly treated in the previous 12 months due to their Indigenous status in 2018‑19. * Experiences of prejudice can lead to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people avoiding certain situations, which can lead to further disadvantage. Fourteen per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over reported avoiding situations due to past discrimination in 2018-19. The most common situations were avoiding going to work or applying for a job, and avoiding members of the public. * Many programs and initiatives are in place to build mutual respect and stronger relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. But more is needed to address some of the attitudes, as well as behaviour and actions, in the general community toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. * Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have identified truth telling about the history of colonisation and the experiences and consequences of intergenerational trauma that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced, as key to improving their wellbeing. |
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| Box 5.1.2 Measures of valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures |
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| There are five main measures for this indicator, linked to concepts of mutual respect and progress on a stronger relationship.  Mutual respect   * *Knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures* — the proportion of people rating their level of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as ‘high’ * *Recognition of the contributions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make to Australia*— reported using two proxy measures: * Pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures — the proportion of people who agree that they are personally proud of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures * Importance of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culturesand histories[[2]](#footnote-2) — the proportion of people who agree it is important that all Australians know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and the histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people   Progress on a stronger relationship   * *Level of trust* — the proportion of people rating their perceptions of the level of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the general community as ‘high’ * *Level of prejudice* — the proportion of people rating their perceptions of the level of prejudice between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the general community as ‘low’. * *Discrimination due to Indigenous status* — the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who feel they were treated unfairly (*excluding* those who responded they did not know if they’d been treated unfairly) due to their Indigenous status, in the previous 12 months.   Data are from two primary sources. The first four measures report data from Reconciliation Australia’s Australian Reconciliation Barometer for people aged 18 years or over with the most recent data for 2018 (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and general community[[3]](#footnote-3)).[[4]](#footnote-4)  The fifth measure reports data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS), with the most recent available data for 2018‑19 (all jurisdictions: Indigenous; remoteness). |
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Culture is critical to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Salmon et al. 2019). Culture and wellbeing are intertwined — they have a reciprocal and cyclical relationship. The knowledge and practice of cultures are significant sources of strength and resilience (The Lowitja Institute 2020), and as strength and resilience grows so can the knowledge and practice of culture.

Culture enhances the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people most significantly when it is valued. Valuing culture is not just the knowledge and practice of culture by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but the respect for those cultures among the wider community. This respect includes understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are from diverse nations and cultures, each with its own distinct cultural norms, law, language and identity (AHRC 2013a).

Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures — including among the wider community and governments — is a key contributor to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing. Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures underpin race relations, equality and equity, institutional integrity, unity, and historical acceptance (Reconciliation Australia 2019). Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Australian governments have committed to embed and practice meaningful cultural safety within their institutions and agencies (Australian Government and Coalition of Peaks 2020).

These features of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are linked with the concept of mutual respect. As the level of knowledge and understanding of the cultures and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increases, more Australians will share in the pride that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel for their histories and cultures (RA 2013). Furthermore, as other Australians increasingly accept key facts about Australia’s past treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s respect for other Australians may also increase.

Strong relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and all Australians are built on this respect, and they also require trust and ongoing truth telling about our shared history (Referendum Council 2017).

### Knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories is high for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and while lower for other Australians it has increased over time

Almost three-quarters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rate their knowledge about the cultures and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as ‘high’ (about 72 per cent for cultures and 73 per cent for histories) (table 5A.1.1).

In the general community, significantly fewer rate their knowledge as ‘high’ (about 37 per cent for cultures and 43 per cent for histories). Even though the proportions in the general community are lower, the proportions of people that rate their knowledge as ‘high’ have increased (figure 5.1.1).

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| Figure 5.1.1 Perceptions of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, general community**a** |
| |  | | --- | | Figure 5.1.1 Perceptions of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, general community  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | |
| a See table 5A.1.1 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: Reconciliation Australia (unpublished) Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2014 and 2018; table 5A.1.1. |
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### Knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories is important for many Australians …

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, like all Australians, contribute in every area of public, social, economic and community life, including the arts, media, academia, politics, sport and business[[5]](#footnote-5).

The majority of Australians feel it is important for all Australians to know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories. For both cultures and histories, more than nine out of ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people considered it important in 2018 (92 per cent for both), both statistically similar to 2014. For the general community the proportions were lower (84 per cent and 86 per cent for cultures and histories respectively), but have increasedsince 2014 (80 per cent and 83 per cent respectively) (table 5A.1.3).

### … but personal pride in these cultures is somewhat lower for the general community, though it has increased

Large proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to feel personally proud of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The majority in the general community also indicate pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures — but the proportion remains more than 20 percentage points below the proportion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In 2018, more than eight out of ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported feeling personally proud (87 per cent), compared with about six out of ten people in the general community (62 per cent). The proportion for the general community has increased since 2014 (from 57 per cent) (table 5A.1.5).

Stronger relationships along with mutual respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non‑Indigenous people are a virtuous circle, where stronger relationships lead to mutual respect, and mutual respect leads to stronger relationships. These concepts are broadly revealed in levels of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians and in prejudice and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are — in turn — reflected in attitudes, and in behaviours and actions toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Levels of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians are perceived to be low, and these perceptions are lower for the general community than for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. More specifically, in 2018, less than half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people perceived high levels of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. Still fewer in the general community (about two in 10) thought the same (table 5A.1.7). These results are not statistically different to those in 2014.

### Perceptions of prejudice towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain at high levels, but there have been small improvements

Prejudice takes the form of unfavourable opinion or attitudes toward individuals who belong to a particular group. High levels of prejudice reflect low levels of understanding about one another (RA 2013). In a systematic review of the impact of racism on the school experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Moodie, Maxwell and Rudolph (2019) found it to be harmful, wide-reaching and lifelong.

In 2018, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were asked about the level of prejudice toward them, more than half (55 per cent) perceived that other Australians held a ‘fairly high’ or ‘very high’ level of prejudice toward them. Around three in 10 reported they didn’t know, and the remaining 17 per cent perceived that other Australians held a ‘fairly low’ or ‘very low’ level of prejudice toward them (table 5A.1.9).

A slightly lower proportion of the general community perceived that there was a ‘fairly high’ or ‘very high’ level of prejudice against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (about 49 per cent) (table 5A.1.9).

Since 2014, perceptions by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of both low and high levels of prejudice have decreased, with a correspondingly higher proportion reporting ‘don’t know’ (whether there is prejudice). For the general community, the only change over time has been a decrease in the perception of low levels of prejudice and corresponding increase in ‘don’t know’ (whether there is prejudice). There is no information on why increasing proportions of people are selecting ‘don’t know’ or what this may mean.

### Almost one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults reported feeling unfairly treated due to their Indigenous status …

Racial discrimination occurs when a person is treated less favourably than another person in a similar situation, because of their race. The Australian Government has a legal obligation to promote equality and prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, as set out under the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (AHRC 2013b).

In 2018-19, almost one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over (23 per cent) reported they felt treated unfairly due to their Indigenous status in the last 12 months. The most common experience of discrimination or unfair treatment was hearing racial comments/jokes, followed by: being ignored or served last while accessing services or buying something; being called names, teased or sworn at; or not being trusted (table 5A.1.11).

Discrimination experiences are wide ranging. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia in 2018‑19, about one-quarter reported that their most recent experiences of unfair treatment were from members of the public and about one in five experiences occurred when applying for work or while at work (table 5A.1.15).

### … and 14 per cent reported avoiding situations due to past discrimination

These experiences of unfair treatment sometimes lead to avoidance response, which — in turn — can lead to further disadvantage. In 2018-19, 14 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over reported avoiding situations due to past discrimination. Of the situations avoided, the most common were avoiding applying for work or going to a job, and avoiding members of the public (figure 5.1.2).

| Figure 5.1.2 Situations avoided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over, due to past unfair treatment, 2019**a** |
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| | Figure 5.1.2 Situations avoided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over, due to past unfair treatment, 2019  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| a See table 5A.1.23 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source:* ABS (unpublished) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2018-19; table 5A.1.23. |
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### How can mutual respect and stronger relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians continue to be built?

Many programs, initiatives and stories mark the continuing journey in developing mutual respect and contribute to improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example, partnership agreements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and governments can foster collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. 2020).

But more is needed to address some of the attitudes, as well as behavioursandactions, in the general community toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Uluru Statement from the Heart includes a call for a Makarrata Commission which has, as one of its functions, to supervise truth telling about the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Referendum Council 2017). Telling the truth about the history of colonisation and the experiences and consequences of the intergenerational trauma to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been subjected is a key aspect in improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Reconciliation Australia 2018).

### Future directions in data

The Steering Committee has identified ‘recognition of the contributions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make to Australia’ as a key measure. However, there is no currently available data source for this measure.

### References

Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. 2020, Partnership Agreement - Our Commitment, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., www.aecg.nsw.edu.au/about/partnership-agreement/ (accessed 29 June 2020).

AHRC (Australian Human Rights Commission) 2013a, Ensuring the Ongoing Survival of the Oldest Living Culture in the World, Paper No. 4, The Declaration Dialogue Series, Sydney.

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Moodie, N., Maxwell, J. and Rudolph, S. 2019, ‘The impact of racism on the schooling experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: A systematic review’, The Australian Educational Researcher, vol. 46, pp. 273–295.

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Reconciliation Australia 2018, Truth-telling About the Past, the Present and the Future, Media Statement, 10 October 2018.

Referendum Council 2017, Uluru Statement from the Heart, https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement (accessed 29 June 2020).

Salmon, M., Doery, K., Dance, P., Chapman, J., Gilbert, R., Williams, R. and Lovett, R. 2019, Defining the Indefinable: Descriptors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Cultures and their Links to Health and Wellbeing, Research School of Population Health, The Australian National University, Canberra.

The Lowitja Institute 2020, We Nurture Our Culture for Our Future, and Our Culture Nurtures Us - Closing the Gap, A report prepared for the Close the Gap Steering Committee, Canberra.

## 5.2 Participation in decision-making[[6]](#footnote-6)

| Box 5.2.1 Key messages |
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| * Participation in decision-making is one way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have identified that they can exercise self-determination. * There are no data available on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who wanted to participate in decision-making and felt they could. * Available data on the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people shows they remain underrepresented in the Parliament of Australia and in all State and Territory parliaments (as a proportion of all people eligible to stand). As of May 2020, parity across all nine jurisdictions would be achieved with 15 additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parliamentarians. * In 2014-15, about one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people felt they were mostly able to have a say within the community on important issues. Proportions were slightly higher in very remote areas and for older people. * Advisory bodies can play an important role where the views of multiple stakeholder groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, should be taken into account. But Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are calling for new approaches to decision‑making processes, and in particular for shared decision-making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. |
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| Box 5.2.2 Measures of participation in decision making |
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| There are two main measures for this indicator:   * *Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who wanted to participate in decision making and felt they could*. There is currently no data source available for this measure. * *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the Parliament of Australia and in State and Territory parliaments* — the proportion of federal, state and territory parliamentarians who have identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, compared with the proportion of the Australian population eligible to stand for parliament. Data are sourced from parliamentary libraries, the ABS and the Australian Electoral Commission, with the most recent data for 2020.   There is also one proxy measure for this indicator, *Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who felt able to have a say within their community* — the proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over who felt they were able to have a say within their community on issues that were important to them. Data are sourced from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), with the most recent available data for 2014‑15 (all jurisdictions; remoteness; age). |
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Self-determination is a collective right that entitles a group of people to have control over their lives and to be treated with respect. It is recognised as a right of all people in the Charter of the United Nations, and is also articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Australia is a party (UN 1945, 2007). Under the UN Declaration (article 18) Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters that affect them through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, and also to have their own decision-making institutions (UN 2007).

In a survey of perspectives on the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (conducted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner in 2012), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identified that some of the ways they can exercise self‑determination — including participation in decision-making — are by having their own representative bodies, and their own schools, justice systems and health systems, through being subject to their own laws, and by establishing their own government or sovereign state (AHRC 2012b).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being part of decision-making is important. The State of Reconciliation in Australia report notes the need to ‘ … truly value and recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s right to self‑determination — to participate in and make decisions about their social, cultural and economic development …’ (Reconciliation Australia 2016, p.67). Formal partnerships and shared decision-making, including building and strengthening structures to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to do this, is one of the priority reform areas in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Australian Government and Coalition of Peaks 2020)*.*

Governance arrangements determine who participates in decision-making, how decisions are made and enforced, and who is held accountable (see section 5.4 *Case studies in governance*). Broadly speaking, participation in decision-making can be thought of as falling into one of two categories — external participation or internal participation.

* External participation (the focus of this section) includes participation in electoral politics (parliamentary representation), participation in parliamentary processes, and direct participation in the broader governance environment (for example, through agreement making).
* Internal participation includes — in this context — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance, legal systems, institutions and internal decision-making structures and processes (UN Expert Mechanism 2011, 2010, cited in AHRC 2012).

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain underrepresented in the Parliament of Australia and in all State and Territory parliaments

The role of parliaments is to represent the people and ensure that public policy is informed by those whose lives it impacts (Power 2012). Over the last few decades there has been increasing acceptance that the quality of democracy should in part be measured by the representation of various groups — while simultaneously acknowledging that parliamentarians of a particular group do not necessarily represent the interests of that group in the way that group might expect (Maddison 2010).

In some jurisdictions the proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parliamentarians have increased, but in others they have decreased. As of 30 June 2019, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in the Parliament of Australia was two per cent, up from one per cent in 2014, with increased proportions in Queensland and SA (both from a base of nil representation). However, on the flipside, the proportion in the ACT has decreased — now with nil representation. Representation in other jurisdictions is the same as in 2014 (tables 5A.2.7 and 5A.2.9).

Across all jurisdictions, representation remains disproportionately low given the eligible population. As of May 2020, achieving (or exceeding) proportional parity with the population eligible to stand would require 15 additional representatives across all jurisdictions (table 5.2.1).

| Table 5.2.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in parliaments as of May 2020, relative to representation in the eligible population**a** |
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| |  | NSW | Vic | Qld | WA | SA | Tas | ACT | NT | Cwlth. | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of parliament (no.) | 1 | – | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | – | 5 | 5 | | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members as % of all members (%) | 1 | – | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | – | 20 | 2 | | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population as % of population (%) | 3 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 31 | 3 | | Number of additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members required to reach parity with eligible population (no.) | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | |
| a See table 5A.2.7 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: Unpublished data (2020) State, territory and Australian Governments; ABS (2019) *Estimates and projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,* 2006 to 2031, Cat no. 3238.0; AEC (2018) *Size of the electoral roll and enrolment rate as at 31 December 2018*; table 5A.2.7. |
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### About one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people felt they were mostly able to have a say within the community on important issues — this varied by remoteness and age

The extent to which people feel that they have a say on important community issues is a proxy for personal autonomy — control over decisions that affect them, and a feeling that their ideas and input are valued by the community.

Nationally in 2014-15, around one-quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over felt they were able to have a say within the community on important issues all or most of the time (table 5A.2.1). This is similar to the 2008 (table 5A.2.2).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The proportion who felt they could have a say was higher in remote areas (29 per cent) than in non-remote areas (25 per cent) in 2014-15 (table 5A.2.3). These results are not statistically different from 2008 (table 5A.2.4).

Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were more likely than younger people to indicate they were able to have their say within the community on issues that were important to them all or most of the time. In 2014-15, proportions were higher for those aged 35 years and over than for those aged 15–24 years (table 5A.2.5). The pattern was similar in 2008 (table 5A.2.6).

This discrepancy may in part be explained by the role of Elders in decision-making in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (AIFS 2014; McIntyre 2001).

### How can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participate more in decision-making?

A number of initiatives seek to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in decision-making. The Indigenous Electoral Participation Program established in 2010, and the agreement between the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Bodies and Australian governments to share decision making on Closing the Gap, are two such initiatives. More recently, the Uluru Statement from the Heart called for the establishment of a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement making between governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (AEC 2010; COAG and Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations 2019; Commonwealth of Australia 2017).

Case studies of existing governance arrangements that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s participation in decision-making alongside governments are provided in section 5.4 *Case studies in governance*.

### Advisory bodies can be useful where government decisions affect different groups in the community

Which governance arrangements are most suitable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will depend on the policy aims and the specific context. Advisory bodies — though they do not have decision-making authority over government policy — play an important role where government decisions affect the whole community, and where the views of multiple stakeholder groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, should be taken into account.

Two case studies included in this section describe arrangements where Aboriginal people in Western Australia provide advice to governments on policies and programs that affect their communities and people (boxes 5.2.3–5.2.4). These advisory bodies provide examples of governance features that enable Aboriginal people to guide governments toward better policies and programs.

| Box 5.2.3 The Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia |
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| The Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia (AACWA) — comprising Western Australian Aboriginal leaders — provides advice to the Western Australian Government and to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on matters relating to the interests of Aboriginal people. Including on policy matters that apply to the broader Western Australia community.  Its charter is to work as ‘equal partners with the Western Australian Government in pursuit of Aboriginal equality, wellbeing and recognition’ (Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia nd). One of the priorities that the AACWA has an active role in is developing and implementing a strategy for Aboriginal empowerment (Department of the Premier and Cabinet 2019).  How do Aboriginal people choose their representatives, and how are those representatives supported to ensure that cultural frameworks can be applied?  Members of the AACWA are senior Aboriginal people in the community, chosen by and from Aboriginal people living in Western Australia (Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia nd). Members are appointed from diverse regions and organisation types, with a range of expertise (Government of Western Australia 2019).  The Western Australian Government provides the AACWA with secretariat support, which includes managing and administering its day-to-day operations.  Flexibility and responsiveness to cultural requirements is enabled through the AACWA’s ability to determine its own meeting procedures (subject to the approval of the Minister). Specifically, the AACWA enables the relevant regional members to lead and guide deliberations on matters that primarily affect their region and/or community. The AACWA’s functions, membership, mutual accountabilities, roles and responsibilities (including values and principles that guide them), structure and processes are defined within several documents including its Terms of Reference, and the AACWA Charter that has been developed by members of the AACWA in partnership with the Western Australian Government. |
| *Source*: Aboriginal Advisory Council of Western Australia (nd, nd), Department of the Premier and Cabinet (2019), Government of Western Australia (2019). |
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| Box 5.2.4 Western Australian Aboriginal advisory groups |
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| In addition to the AACWA (box 5.2.3), Western Australia has a number of Aboriginal advisory groups that provide advice on broad policy, or on a range of specific policy areas. For example:   * Museum — the Western Australia Museum Aboriginal Advisory Committee advises the Museum on issues relating to the care and management of collections, education and public programs that have Aboriginal content or are of particular interest to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is also a Working Group to advise on content and information relating to Whadjuk people, and community liaison officers in the regions who engage their own communities about cultural material, stories and programs delivered in the Museum. * Police — 11 Aboriginal leaders from across Western Australia meet quarterly with senior executives from the Western Australia Police Force, to provide and discuss Aboriginal cultural perspectives on existing programs and contemporary issues that affect Aboriginal people in Western Australia. * Water and Environment — the Aboriginal Water and Environment Advisory Group provides advice on policy, programs and legislation, and helps identify where local Aboriginal groups can develop partnerships with governments for regional projects.   In Western Australia, advisory groups made up of Aboriginal people have also been established in areas that manage large government infrastructure to facilitate economic development opportunities for Aboriginal people.  One good example is the Main Roads Aboriginal Advisory Group (AAG), which comprises Aboriginal business representatives alongside senior executives of Main Roads Western Australia. The purpose of the AAG is to inform and support the implementation of Aboriginal employment and participation, to assist in guiding Aboriginal business development, and to raise awareness of initiatives that encourage employment. The desired outcomes, how they are implemented and assessed, the roles and responsibilities and mutual accountabilities are defined within several policies and frameworks including the Aboriginal Engagement and Participation Framework and Policy, and AAG Terms of Reference.  A key feature of the AAG is that Aboriginal people have a say in choosing who represents them on this group. The AAG assesses, shortlists and selects members from an initial selection of candidates, chosen in the first instance by the Main Roads senior advisor for Aboriginal engagement, based on their skills and/or experience in Aboriginal business and engagement as well as their region of origin. |
| *Source*: Main Roads Western Australia (2019); WA Department of the Premier and Cabinet (unpublished). |
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### Future directions in data

Though the significance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s participation in decision-making is recognised (Gardiner-Garden 2010), there are inadequate data sources for this indicator.

As is true of the wider community, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want to participate in decision-making. The Steering Committee has identified as a key measure for this indicator the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who wanted to participate in decision-making *and* felt they could. No currently available data source incorporates the aspect of choice in participation — some data are available on whether people participated, but not on whether any lack of participation was voluntary or caused by some barrier. The development and collection of data to inform this indicator would help to measure Australia’s progress in meeting domestic expectations and international human rights obligations.

Australia has over 560 local councils responsible for managing its regions and districts, yet there is little publicly available information on the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councillors. Information on levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in local government would be a valuable addition to future reports.

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5.3 Engagement of services[[8]](#footnote-8)

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| Box 5.3.1 Key messages |
| * Access to culturally safe and effective services is critical to improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. * In 2014‑15, around one in four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had problems accessing one or more services in the previous 12 months, and this increased by remoteness. * The most common reason for problems with access in non‑remote areas was waiting time/not available in time (11 per cent), and in remote areas no services (18 per cent). * Communication barriers affect access to services. Over one‑third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language as their main language indicated they had experienced communication difficulties accessing services in 2014-15. This could be reduced by greater use of language interpreters, though sometimes accessing professional interpreters is difficult due to their limited numbers. * The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who leave hospital against medical advice or discharge themselves at their own risk is higher than for non-Indigenous people (in 2018-19, two per cent compared to one per cent). This may indicate that hospital services are not as responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and more is required to address this issue. |
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| Box 5.3.2 Measures of engagement with services |
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| There are three main measures for this indicator.   * *Problems accessing services* is defined as the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over who reported having problems accessing services. Barriers to access include transport/distance, cost, number of services, and waiting time. Data are sourced from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), with the most recent available data for 2014‑15 (national; all jurisdictions; remoteness). * *Difficulties communicating with service providers* is defined as the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over whose main language was an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language who reported having difficulties communicating with service providers. Data are sourced from the NATSISS, with the most recent available data for 2014‑15 (national: sex; age groups; remoteness). * *Took own leave from hospital* is defined as the proportion of hospitalisations where patients leave hospital or self-discharge prior to commencing or completing treatment, which may be against medical advice[[9]](#footnote-9). Data are sourced from the AIHW National Hospital Morbidity Database, with the most recent available data for 2018‑19 (all jurisdictions: remoteness; sex). |
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As with all Australians, access to effective services, including health and community services, is important for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Poor access can compound the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Access to, and use of, culturally safe and affordable primary health care services is one of the keys to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s health status (AIHW 2019a). Access to primary health care is covered in section 8.1 *Access to primary health care*.

For services to be effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, services need to be:

* accessible — limiting barriers to access, such as affordability of services and the adequate provision of, or geographic proximity to, services
* appropriate — services that are culturally safe and competent, tailored to unique contexts, and communicating effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. Good communication is important for providing safe, high-quality health care (Ralph et al. 2017).

Building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and transforming government organisations to better respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — including embedding and practicing cultural safety in services — are two of the priority reform areas in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Australian Government and Coalition of Peaks 2020).

### Although there have been improvements over time, one in four Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults have problems accessing services

In 2014‑15, among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over, 24 per cent reported that they had problems accessing one or more services in the previous 12 months, down from about 30 per cent in 2008 (tables 5A.3.1‑2). The largest decrease was in the proportion who had trouble accessing dental services (from 20 per cent in 2008 to 8 per cent in 2014‑15) (tables 5A.3.1‑2). In 2014-15, those in remote areas[[10]](#footnote-10) were more likely to indicate problems accessing one or more services in the previous 12 months, compared with those in non‑remote areas (about 33 per cent and 22 per cent, respectively) (table 5A.3.3).

### While barriers to accessing services differ for remote and non-remote areas, commonly cited barriers are lack of services or issues with timeliness

The top three barriers to accessing services differed for remote and non‑remote areas, but across areas the lack of services (none or not enough) and a long wait time/not available at the time required were both cited (figure 5.3.1).

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have difficulties accessing a particular service or the service does not adapt to meet their needs, the consequences can be immediate and acute, and/or long term. One example is access to birth registration services. Among the possible barriers to access in Australia are complex forms and requirements, cost, lack of awareness and inadequate support (Robinson et al. 2013). Failure to register a birth and obtain a birth certificate can make it difficult for a child to be enrolled in school, and to obtain a driver’s licence, passport or tax file number in future. It can also create difficulties in accessing other government services ((eds) Castan and Gerber 2015; Orenstein 2009; Services Australia 2019). Estimates put the level of under-registration at less than 4 per cent for the total population, but there are no estimates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Lanyon and John 2015)[[11]](#footnote-11).

The availability of transport and the distance to/from services is particularly relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas (figure 5.3.1), where there are generally fewer services available and/or fewer specialist services (for example, health care services) (AIHW 2019b).

There is evidence to suggest that a lack of cultural awareness or racism on the part of service providers are some of the cultural barriers that may reduce use of services (NMHC 2012; PC 2011; Reilly et al 2008; Scrimgeour and Scrimgeour 2008; Zubrick et al 2010). In 2014‑15, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who reported services were not culturally appropriate or they were treated badly or discriminated against was about 3 per cent (table 5A.3.2).

| Figure 5.3.1 Selected types of barriers to accessing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over, by remoteness areas, 2014‑15**a,b** |
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| | Figure 5.3.1 Selected types of barriers to accessing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over, by remoteness areas, 2014-15  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| a Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals around each proportion. b See table 5A.3.3 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats.  *Source*: ABS (unpublished) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014‑15; table 5A.3.3. |
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### Communication with service providers can be difficult for people whose main language is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language

This is a partial measure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reporting difficulties communicating with service providers, as data are only available for those whose main language is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote areas were more likely to speak an Indigenous language as their main language (44 per cent of males and 39 per cent of females) than those living in non‑remote areas (1 per cent of males and 3 per cent of females) (table 5A.3.6).

In 2014-15, of the 11 cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that spoke an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as their main language, over one‑third (38 per cent) reported that they had experienced communication difficulties when accessing services (table 5A.3.5). This is an increase from about one‑quarter in 2008 and 2002 (28 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively) (table 5A.3.5).

One way that service providers can address cultural barriers in delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is by using language interpreters to improve communication between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and staff (Commonwealth Ombudsman 2011; HoRSCoATSIA 2012). However, service providers often find it difficult to access interpreters for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and dialects (Commonwealth Ombudsman 2011). Although, short introductions to interpreting in several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are available from the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters, no known tertiary institutions offers accredited courses (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020).

Because of the limited number of translating professionals, services providers sometimes call on speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages from local communities who also have good English skills (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020).

### The proportion of people who take own leave from hospital is higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than other Australians

Taking own leave from hospital (self-discharge, and against medical advice) provides an indirect measure of how responsive hospital services are to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients’ needs. Significantly, people who take own leave from hospital are more likely to present again at emergency departments and have higher death rates (AHMAC 2017).

The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who take own leave is higher than for non‑Indigenous people (table 5A.3.7). In 2018-19, the proportion of hospitalisations where patients took own leave was 2 per cent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, compared with 1 per cent for non‑Indigenous people. Over time though, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who take own leave has decreased. Between 2010‑11 and 2018-19, the proportion who took own leave decreased from 2.5 per cent to 2.1 per cent, while for non‑Indigenous people it increased slightly (from 0.4 per cent to 0.5 per cent) (table 5A.3.7).

Remoteness is a factor. In the period 2016–2018, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who took own leave was highest in remote and very remote areas (3 per cent). Likewise, the proportion of non-Indigenous people who took own leave was highest in remote and very remote areas (1 per cent) (table 5A.3.9)[[12]](#footnote-12).

There are no available data describing why people take own leave. Several studies note that improved health care or health care experience is needed to prevent people at high risk — including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — from taking their own leave (for example, Katzenellenbogen et al. 2013; Tavella & and others 2016). Einsiedel and colleagues concluded that improving cultural safety may be key to addressing this issue (Einsiedel et al. 2013).

Addressing communication barriers is one way forward. One example is through greater use of language interpreters — including through engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in local communities, but uptake of language interpreter services may not increase if there are other barriers still in place (Ralph et al. 2017).

### Future directions in data

Data about communication with service providers are limited both in frequency and content. Data are only collected every six years from the ABS NATSISS, with the most recent in 2014-15.

* More frequent reporting (including in the NATSIHS to provide data on a three-yearly basis) would be useful to provide more relevant data.
* The 2008 and 2014‑15 surveys only included questions about communication problems with service providers for people who spoke an Indigenous language as their main language. Data on communication problems for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would be helpful because communication problems are not limited to those whose main language is an Indigenous language.

Data for monitoring cultural safety in the health system — particularly as a barrier to access, are limited (AIHW 2019a). Further data on reasons for people leaving hospital against medical advice or discharging themselves would be helpful.

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## 5.4 Case studies in governance[[13]](#footnote-13)

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| Box 5.4.1 Key messages |
| * Effective governance is essential to achieve improved wellbeing for all people as it enables a community to collectively organise itself to reach its objectives. * To improve wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, governance arrangements: * must be effective in both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and governments * should empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve the things that matter to them. * Governance arrangements that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve the things that matter to them, ensure they are able to participate in shared decision‑making alongside Australian governments. Case studies in this section highlight that this works best when structures, rules and laws: * provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with decision-making authority * promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural frameworks, processes, context and time frames * recognise power inequalities, and share power, through mechanisms that are transparent * ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can choose their representatives, and these representatives have the resources and support that they need * define desired outcomes, the steps to achieving them and the roles and responsibilities of participants, along with their mutual accountabilities. * Formal agreements between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments are a key feature of these case studies. These agreements often have common elements that promote equitable treatment, but are flexible enough to respond to local or regional differences. |
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Governance is about how a group of people organise themselves collectively to achieve the things that matter to them.

Governance arrangements are the processes, relationships, institutions and structures that, amongst other things, enable the group to make decisions about:

* group membership and identity (who is the ‘self’ in their governance)
* authority within the group, and over what
* agreed rules to ensure authority is exercised properly and decision-makers are held accountable
* how decisions are enforced
* how rights and interests with others are negotiated
* arrangements that best enable them to achieve their goals (Hunt et al. 2008).

Effective governance arrangements to achieve improved wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to apply in multiple settings, including as they relate to:

* the functioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations — referred to here as ‘Indigenous governance’. Many successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations contribute to improving the social and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ORIC 2013)
* support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s self‑determination through participation in decision-making *alongside* Australian governments — referred to here as ‘governance for shared decision-making’, and which is particularly important to ‘drive real change on the ground’ (CGRIS 2011)
* the functioning of governments as an enabler of wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — referred to here as ‘government governance’. This is a key area that affects Indigenous governance (Hunt and Smith 2007) and capacity for shared decision‑making. This requires governments to organise themselves so that they operate in an enabling (and not hindering) way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

This section provides case studies demonstrating ‘Indigenous governance’ and ‘governance for shared decision-making’ (that is, the first two examples of governance described above). While ‘government governance’ is relevant within the context of shared decision-making, it is not the subject of case studies in this report, but is a key area for development.

### What are the features of ‘good governance’?

Features of good governance for a group are those that are the most effective in facilitating the achievement of the things that matter to that group. While different governance arrangements may apply across settings, there are common principles or features that contribute to good governance. Encouraging the development of these features is the key to strengthening governance so that a group can achieve its objectives (box 5.4.2).

| Box 5.4.2 Features of good governance |
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| Drawing on the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development (HPAIED nd), the Indigenous Community Governance Project (Hunt et al. 2008) and early discussions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, and governments, the Steering Committee identified six features of good governance.[[14]](#footnote-14) These features are interdependent, and relevant to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, and governments themselves.   * Governing institutions that inspire confidence and support — this is achieved through the way governance is created and leaders are chosen. * Leadership that influences group members to attain group or organisational goals. * Processes in place that ensure self-determination — that is, processes provide group members with the right and ability to determine their own priorities and design their own instruments of governance, within broad governing institutions. * Capacity requirements are met — that is, having the capabilities (such as knowledge and skills) to get the things that matter done. Often capacity building is necessary. * A cultural match between the governing structures wanted and communities’ cultures — this means respecting cultural differences within different communities and working towards common ground for setting up mutually-agreed governance structures. * Resources that are needed are available — that is, the economic, cultural, social and natural resources needed to achieve what matters (for example, information technology) are available. |
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### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations with good governance arrangements are successful in achieving their objectives …

In the context of this Report, Indigenous governance refers to ‘contemporary Indigenous governance’ as described by the (then) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner who stated it as the ‘more recent melding of our traditional governance with the requirement to effectively respond to the wider governance environment’ (AHRC 2012).

This section provides case studies of Indigenous governance from the 2018 Indigenous Governance Awards, created by Reconciliation Australia in partnership with the BHP Foundation and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute. The Awards are open to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations incorporated under legislation, and seek governance arrangements that demonstrate innovation, effectiveness, self-determination, sustainability and cultural legitimacy (Reconciliation Australia 2020e).

The case studies presented here are three winners (boxes 5.4.3–5.4.5) and one highly commended finalist (box 5.4.6) from the 2018 awards. These case studies provide examples of Indigenous governance that have the features of ‘good governance’ and show that organisations with these features are successful in achieving their objectives.

| Box 5.4.3 Institute for Urban Indigenous Health 2018 Joint Winners Category A: Incorporated organisations |
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| The Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH) was founded in 2009, by four Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services in South East Queensland. The IUIH is the backbone organisation that helps Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services to work together to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health needs in a systematic way.  The IUIH has strengthened community self-determination and developed an entrepreneurial business model for how primary care is delivered, and intersects with the broader health system. IUIH has improved the access to culturally safe health care and the health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people in South East Queensland. |
| *Source*: Reconciliation Australia (2020b). |
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| Box 5.4.4 Nyamba Buru Yawuru 2018 Joint Winners Category A:  Incorporated organisations |
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| Nyamba Buru Yawuru (NBY) is a not-for-profit company owned by the Yawuru native title holders in Broome, Western Australia. NBY invests and manages the assets of the Yawuru community, to develop the economic foundation for the sustainability, cultural and social growth of the Yawuru people.  The Yawuru cultural principle ‘making Mabu Liyan real for all, always’ underpins the interconnectedness between the individual and their Country, cultures and community[[15]](#footnote-15). This interconnectedness strengthens Yawuru’s commitments to both its communal native title rights and its goal to succeed in a competitive global economy. |
| *Source*: Reconciliation Australia (2020c). |
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| Box 5.4.5 Warlpiri Education and Training Trust 2018 Winners Category B: Non-incorporated projects and initiatives |
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| The Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT) was established in 2005. The WETT invests gold mining royalty income to improve the education and training outcomes in four (Warlpiri‑speaking) communities of the Tanami Desert (Yuendumu, Lajamanu, Willowra and Nyirrpi — all located in the Northern Territory).  The WETT develops and supports bilingual and bicultural education, and lifelong learning programs that support the Warlpiri people’s educational priorities. Their vision is for Warlpiri people to be strong in their knowledge of culture, Country and language. The WETT want Warlpiri people to be strong role models for future generations, and to stand up for their communities. |
| *Source*: Reconciliation Australia (2020d). |
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| Box 5.4.6 Alekarenge Community Development Working Group 2018 Highly commended Category B: Non-Incorporated projects and initiatives |
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| Traditional Owners and residents in Alekarenge, a community located 400 kilometres north of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, work together to make decisions about the investment of the community’s leasing and compensation income.  Working Group members plan and implement projects that benefit the community, particularly young people. Their initiative puts Aboriginal people in Alekarenge in control of their own resources. |
| *Source*: Reconciliation Australia (2020a). |
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### … but shared decision-making alongside governments is also required, recognising the differential power held by governments and knowledge held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to effect change

Shared decision-making by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people alongside governments is essential to close the gap in life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people (COAG and Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations 2019). Shared decision‑making arrangements in this context recognise that:

* governments hold resources, powers and responsibilities, and are accountable to the broader community
* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are those for whom the decisions are designed to serve and are the most invested in seeing success, and have both the local and cultural knowledge to ensure the decisions are suited to their particular context.

Governance arrangements where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make decisions alongside Australian governments share common features (box 5.4.7).

| Box 5.4.7 Features of good governance in shared decision-making |
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| Governance arrangements where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make decisions alongside Australian governments include structures, rules and laws that:   * provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with decision-making authority, and ensure a deliberative and negotiated process, not just information giving or consultation * promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural frameworks, processes, context and time frames; with government as facilitators/enablers/partners * recognise power inequalities, and share power, through mechanisms that are transparent — for example, contracts or agreements, and agreed conflict resolution processes * ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can choose their representatives, and these representatives have the resources and support (including information) that they need to negotiate on an equal footing * define desired outcomes, the steps to achieving them and the roles and responsibilities of participants, along with their mutual accountabilities. |
| *Source*:Steering Committee adaptation of principles in Hunt (2013). |
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Four case studies are included in this section that demonstrate some of the different ways that governance arrangements can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision making with governments in relation to policies and practices that affect them. Each of the case studies highlight some (rather than all) features of good governance. Considered as a whole, these case studies provide examples of structures, rules and/or laws that address all of the features of good governance for shared decision-making.

The first three case studies involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations and initiatives where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations share decision‑making.

* The Buthera Agreement between the Narungga Nation and the South Australian Government demonstrates the Narungga Nation’s decision-making authority and the transparent mechanisms that support their sharing power with government (box 5.4.8).
* The Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap was agreed in March 2019 between the Australian Government, State and Territory governments, the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (the Coalition of Peaks) and the Australian Local Government Association. It formalises the decision of the former Council of Australian Governments in December 2018 to develop and agree the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives. It promotes partnership and shared decision-making between Australian governments and the Coalition of Peaks, and outlines the mechanisms that support partnership and shared decision-making (box 5.4.9).

| Box 5.4.8 Buthera Agreement between the Narungga Nation and the South Australian Government |
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| The Buthera Agreement aims to facilitate projects important to the Narungga Nation  The Buthera Agreement (the Agreement) facilitates economic development and access to service outcomes that are important to Narungga peoples’ wellbeing, which includes enjoying a sustainable economy and maintaining culture. The name of the Agreement has cultural significance, representing:  … our Narungga dreaming, the foundation of our creation. Dreaming of Buthera, a giant man demonstrating his strength, resilience and passion towards his people. This emanates into who we are today as Narungga descendants, and a nation rich in passion, pride, culture and traditions.  Signed in February 2018, the Agreement supports the Narungga Nation Aboriginal Corporation (NNAC) to collaborate with South Australian Government agencies on agreed place-based projects undertaken on Guuranda land (Yorke Peninsula). Projects relating to the areas of health, education, cultural studies, child protection and justice fall under two schedules: Economic Enterprises and Employment; and Social Services. Achievements to date include significant steps in relation to a boat-landing facility on Wardang Island, traditional fishing, and reviving the Narungga language.  The Buthera Agreement provides the Narungga Nation with decision‑making authority and facilitates power sharing with Government  At the heart of the Agreement is the promotion of a respectful and constructive relationship between the South Australian Government and the Narungga Nation. The Agreement itself is an outcome of a negotiated process between the Narungga Nation and the Government.  It commits Government agencies to work with the Narungga people to design and deliver government services, and for both parties to meet and negotiate in good faith. Importantly, the Buthera Agreement includes financial support to assist the NNAC to develop governance arrangements and bolster executive capability so the Narungga Nation can engage and collaborate on an equal footing with Government in pursuit of the outcomes.  Accountability requirements for implementation, monitoring and review are applied to both parties and include development of annual progress reports on achievements agreed to by both the NNAC and the Government. The Agreement also contains a requirement for the parties to come together following development of the annual progress report to discuss progress, share information and jointly develop strategies to resolve any identified barriers.  A further mechanism for tracking progress exists through the Agreement’s inclusion in the South Australian Government’s Aboriginal Affairs Action Plan 2019-2020, which provides six-monthly publicly-available progress updates.  Dispute resolution processes are available in the event the parties cannot reach agreement, including referral of the dispute to Chief Executives, senior stakeholders of the NNAC and the Government. Public statements about the Agreement or its implementation are only made where the parties have reached agreement beforehand. |
| *Source*: Crown Solicitor (2018), Government of South Australia (2020), Kingston(2018). |
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| Box 5.4.9 The Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap |
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| Under the Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Coalition of Peaks and Australian governments work together to improve the lives of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people  The Partnership Agreement sets up structures to facilitate shared decision-making between the Australian governments and the Coalition of Peaks in relation to the Closing the Gap policy and programs, taking account the power imbalances. The Coalition of Peaks is comprised of over fifty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, with members of each organisation electing or appointing a representative who is accountable to those members. The Coalition of Peaks formed as an act of self‑determination, to work in partnership with governments to finalise the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap and achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.  The new National Agreement embeds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s expertise, ownership and responsibility in shaping Closing the Gap policy and programs, and achieving the outcomes. It gives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a much greater say in how programs and services are delivered to them, in their ‘own places’ and on their own ‘traditional lands’.  Under the Partnership Agreement, the parties commit to open and transparent negotiation and shared decision-making by consensus  A Joint Ministerial Council has been formed with the Coalition of Peak representatives, which is the first time a Ministerial Council has included non‑government representatives. The Coalition of Peaks Convener and NACCHO Chief Executive Officer, Patricia Turner, noted:  This is the first time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations have had an equal voice at the table on Closing the Gap …  Under its Terms of Reference, the Joint Council is co-chaired by one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative and one Ministerial representative, and includes equal representation from the Coalition of Peaks and governments. Decisions made by the Joint Council are by consensus.  The new National Agreement came into effect on 27 July 2020, following Joint Council endorsement, and signatures by the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers, Lead Convener of the Coalition of Peaks and President of the Australian Local Government Association. The effectiveness of the Partnership Agreement is evidenced in the National Agreement, which  is built around what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say is needed to help close the gap in life outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non‑Indigenous people in Australia. |
| *Source*: Australian Government (2020), COAG and Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (2019), Joint Council on Closing the Gap (2019), NACCHO (2019). |
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* The joint process for decision-making between Indigenous‑led Empowered Communities and the Australian Government about funding and services is a demonstration of the empowering partnership that can be achieved between government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to increase the productivity of government resources on the ground. Each Empowered Communities region drives changes needed across three key policy agendas — Empowerment, Productivity and Closing the Gap between the outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people at the local level (box 5.4.10).

| Box 5.4.10 Empowered Communities and joint decision making |
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| What is the Empowered Communities approach?  Empowered Communities is an Indigenous-led movement that aims to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take control of their own lives and futures. It establishes a partnership with the Australian Government that enables joint decision-making to better target resources going into the Empowered Communities regions to close the gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people. There are currently nine regions across Australia.  The vision for Empowered Communities is straightforward:  We want for our children the same opportunities and choices other Australians expect for their children. We want them to succeed in mainstream Australia, achieving educational success, prospering in the economy and living long, healthy lives. We want them to retain their distinct cultures, languages and identities as peoples and to be recognised as Indigenous Australians (Empowered Communities 2018b).  Leaders in the regions where it has been adopted, describe the keys to the approach in terms of its partnerships and collaboration across stakeholders:  Empowered Communities seeks to create a genuine and balanced partnership between Indigenous organisations, government and corporate Australia, where everybody is working together on a level playing field and towards a shared strategy. — Andrea Mason, former CEO, NPY Women’s Council  The strength of Empowered Communities is the collaboration; it has its own legacy of empowerment that will live on way beyond any formal process. — Fiona Jose, CEO, Cape York Partnership.  This way of working is reflected in the joint decision‑making process implemented in a number of regions.  [We] look forward to continuously working closely with our local health and native title organisations to create real and genuine change for the betterment of our people. Our seat at the table will ensure our people and our region is at the heart of decision making. — Corey McLennan, Chair, Far West Aboriginal Community Leaders Group.  EC recommendations to the Australian Government have a 75 per cent weighting on decisions about funded activities under Indigenous Advancement Strategy, shifting power to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the ground.  To facilitate effective decision-making, Empowered Communities governance arrangements include local boards and other regional partnership arrangements that strengthen capability, and enable ongoing input from the broader Indigenous community to the region’s empowerment and development agenda.  Joint decision-making frameworks create a more level playing field, enabling local communities to have their say  Effective joint decision-making frameworks are critical. The frameworks are themselves a product of joint decision-making by Empowered Communities leaders and the Australian Government, and underpin the process for shared decision-making. They are:   * adaptable to different circumstances across the regions — each region has its own tailored framework to support its particular needs |
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| Box 5.4.10 (continued) |
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| * used to support Empowered Communities making decisions jointly with the Australian Government about grants for funding and investment.   Joint decision-making frameworks are developed to ensure that policies, funding and services coming into the region align with the regional development agenda (defined by the local Aboriginal leaders and community), and comprise three tests:   * the empowerment test — is it consistent with empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? * the development test — is it supported by international evidence for development? * the productivity test — is it the most productive use of resources?   Funding or investment proposals are assessed against the tests by a community panel or other mechanism for broader community input. The joint decision-making process is regularly reviewed and adjusted to make sure it remains effective, practical and appropriate. The Empowered Communities regions have directly influenced over $40 million of Australian Government funding since December 2017, and decided on priorities for their communities including to cease or redirect program funding where programs are duplicated or not effective. Below is an example of joint decision-making in action.  An empowered community of Inner Sydney  Established in 2013, the Inner Sydney Empowered Communities region (ISEC) comprises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of Redfern and La Perouse (Empowered Communities 2017). The ISEC provides a platform for these communities to unite to design and direct tailored solutions for their communities’ needs (Empowered Communities 2018c).  In their first years, ISEC achievements included: building community relationships; coordinating community leadership and developing their regional vision for change; identifying and endorsing their first priorities; and formally setting up their secretariat (‘backbone’) function (Empowered Communities 2017).  More recently, ISEC have made and implemented joint funding decisions — aligned with their regional priorities — tailored to local needs and resulting in changes to the local service mix.  Significantly, ISEC decided jointly with its Australian Government partner to cease funding for a program that duplicated other services in their region. This funding was then quarantined for their region and made available for re-direction to priorities identified in their regional development plan. Key to ISEC’s achievement was ISEC bringing community knowledge to their decisions, facilitating deep insights into the impacts of existing service provision on local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users and their families.  ISEC used this funding to implement a program where leaders identified a significant community need. This program was a community designed and driven, culturally appropriate family mentoring service that appoints family mentors from within the kinship system to work with parents to restore their family within 12–18 months. The expected outcomes of the program will be to reduce the number of children in out-of-home care, dependency on social programs including housing, and antisocial behaviours in the future. ISEC has worked closely with key stakeholders, such as the NSW Government, to support the delivery of the program. |
| *Source*:Empowered Communities (2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2020, nd); Inner Sydney Empowered Communities (nd). |
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The fourth case study features the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances’ (NCARA) work with the NSW Government to facilitate local decision-making in NSW, and highlights the transparent mechanisms that support power sharing, clear roles and responsibilities and mutual accountabilities (box 5.4.11). However, it is important to note that unlike the three case studies above, the NCARA work with the NSW Government is led by the NSW Government.

| Box 5.4.11 The local decision-making model in NSW |
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| The local decision-making model in NSW — currently operating in ten regions — is underpinned by the principle of self-determination for Aboriginal people. It seeks to shift the power balance from government towards Aboriginal communities by devolving responsibility for certain decisions to Aboriginal regional alliances. Where parties agree, this can extend to control of some funding for services. Over time, the regional alliances will take on more responsibilities from government as the capacity of these alliances grows.   * Initially, the local decision-making model supports regional Aboriginal communities to participate in decision-making about services, including their design, planning and delivery. * As capacity is developed and regional alliances become stronger, devolution of decisions, funding and accountability proceeds through three stages of delegation: advisory; planning; and implementation. The objective is for alliances that aspire to, to evolve into full boards of management for a range of government services, providing the opportunity for Aboriginal communities to co-design and deliver services.   What governance arrangements support the local decision making model?  Local decision-making supports Aboriginal communities to establish regional alliances of Aboriginal organisations, the membership of which must be agreed by Aboriginal communities in each Alliance region. There is a strong emphasis on community-led governance.  The local decision-making initiative began in late 2013, with several local decision-making regions added since then as Aboriginal communities stepped forward to participate. The regional alliances are generally comprised of a cross-section of Aboriginal organisations and/or individuals, and negotiate on behalf of the Aboriginal communities in their region (Aboriginal Affairs NSW nd).  Decision-making is formalised through the negotiation of agreements (Accords). Accord negotiations begin with a regional alliance presenting a statement of claim to the government, which outlines their key requests and aspirations. The agreed Accords consist of a series of negotiated outcomes or commitments against which both the NSW Government and the Aboriginal Regional Alliances may be held accountable. Accords are signed by the NSW Government with the regional alliance.  The NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances (NCARA) operates as an overarching body and provides a point of coordination and collaboration for the participating regions. The NCARA was formed by Aboriginal Regional Alliances, and is comprised of nominated representatives from each alliance and presents a united voice to government, with a statewide Accord negotiated between the NCARA and the NSW Government. |
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| Box 5.4.11 (continued) |
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| * The Accord between the NCARA and the NSW Government includes their agreed priorities, and specifies the dispute resolution and loss of faith process, as well as governance arrangements and structure, including that all parties commit to meeting on a regular basis (Aboriginal Affairs NSW nd, 2019). Government involvement is guided by a Premier’s Memorandum that requests that all agencies participate in good faith. * Regional level Accords include agreed commitments between the regional alliance and the NSW Government (and its agencies). For example, the Accord for the Murdi Paaki region includes details relating to policy areas such as affordable housing, economic development, and education, including actions, roles and responsibilities and timeframes. It also includes support to strengthen the governance capacity of the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly, including support for communication and information sharing, policy development, training and management capability (Aboriginal Affairs NSW 2015).   In its 2018 report, NCARA stated the local decision-making model was broadly heading in the right direction, though recognised that it is a ‘work in progress’. Through the evaluation process, stakeholders offered a range of suggestions for improvement, including allowing time for negotiations while ensuring negotiations adhere to the agreed timeline. |
| *Source*: Aboriginal Affairs NSW (2015, 2019, nd, nd, nd), Katz et al. (2016), NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Regional Alliances (2018), Smyth and Katz. (2018), Ombudsman NSW (2019). |
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### And governments also need effective governance so that they are enabling and not hindering the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Effective governance to ensure governments are enabling and not hindering the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people includes coordination within and across governments and their departments and agencies. It also includes building capability and knowledge to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

More stable policy environments, responsiveness to local contexts, improved coordination among government agencies and reduced duplication of services, and learning from evidence drawn from reliable evaluations are among the many ways that governments can respond to enable improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Henry 2007; Howse cited in Hunt 2013; Moran 2016; Phillips-Brown, Reddel & Gleeson 2013).

Accountability through evaluation is an important part of effective governance. Several major reports have identified the lack of robust evaluations of government programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and encouraged a much greater investment in evaluation (Australian Government 2010; Productivity Commission 2013, 2015).

Evaluation can provide answers on the effectiveness of programs and policies, but the evidence needs to be credible and useful. The Australian Government recently commissioned the PC to develop an evaluation strategy for Australian Government policies and programs affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The final report was handed to the Australian Government in October 2020 (PC 2020).

Case studies featuring examples of effective ‘government governance’ — a necessary precondition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in shared decision‑making with governments and for Indigenous governance — will be an important addition for future reporting on governance.

### Future directions in data

For groups to be able to make informed decisions they need access to reliable data — both in relation to knowing what exists, and how to use it. Further, they need to be able to make decisions in relation to collection and reporting of data.

The Indigenous Data Network (IDN) is an Indigenous-controlled network, based in the University of Melbourne, that aims to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with improved access to, use and oversight of, databases containing information about themselves and their ancestors (University of Melbourne 2019).

The focus of the IDN is on Indigenous data assets, but there are many other data assets that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may need to know and understand for the purposes of their own decision-making. Therefore, building capability and skills in data access is also important. One of the priority reforms in the new agreement on Closing the Gap agreed by Australian governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is “Ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to, and the capability to use, locally relevant data …” (NIAA 2020).

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5.5 Indigenous language revitalisation and maintenance[[16]](#footnote-16)

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| Box 5.5.1 Key messages |
| * Languages transmit cultural practices and beliefs, and strengthen a sense of identity and belonging. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are closely linked to culture and, ultimately, to wellbeing. * Far fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are spoken today than were spoken at the time of colonisation, in part due to policies that have banned or discouraged their use. * The need to revitalise and maintain languages is recognised, and this process is crucial to preserving and strengthening cultures and, ultimately, to wellbeing. * In 2014‑15, almost two in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported speaking at least some words in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, but most (nine in ten) spoke only English or a variety of English at home. * Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (aged 25 years or over) were more likely to speak an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language than younger people. But for the oldest age group (aged 55 years or over), this proportion has declined over time. * For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people learning an Indigenous language, most reported learning from a relative (over 60 per cent in 2014‑15). * Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have put significant effort into revitalise and maintain their languages. But this takes time, and requires investment of resources over the long term. |
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| Box 5.5.2 Measures of Indigenous language revitalisation and maintenance |
| There are two main measures for this indicator.   * *Indigenous language maintenance* is defined as the number and proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are Indigenous language speakers (national; age; geographic location [location as proxy for individual languages]). * *Indigenous language revitalisation* is defined as the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are *learning* an Indigenous language (national; by geographic location [location as proxy for individual languages]).   There are no up‑to‑date data for either of these measures. The main data source is the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), with the most recent available data for 2014‑15. |
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| Box 5.5.2 (continued) |
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| Limited supplementary data are available from the ABS Census and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS). These provide some data on the main language spoken at home, and where an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language is the main language at home their proficiency in English (see Appendix A).  Supplementary data are available from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) National Indigenous Languages Report[[17]](#footnote-17), with the most recent available data collected in 2019. |
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Languages transmit cultural practices and beliefs, and strengthen a sense of identity and belonging (DET 2009; McLeod, Verdon and Sturt 2015). Language also plays a meaningful role in promoting resilient communities (AHRC 2010).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are no exception, with these languages closely linked to the cultures, lands and laws, and ultimately wellbeing (Angelo et al. 2019; Dockery 2011; HoRSCoATSIA 2012; Larson et al. 2020; Sivak et al. 2019). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, speaking language has demonstrated benefits for individual wellbeing and health, particularly mental health (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages also provide significant social and economic benefits to their speakers, including income and employment opportunities. Speaking language is also beneficial in learning contexts — for example, employing teachers who speak the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language makes it more likely that children will be engaged at school (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020).

Importantly, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who do not speak an Indigenous language or are not actively engaged in language programs, language still holds great cultural significance (Marmion, Obata and Troy 2014).

In the 2016 Census, ten per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported speaking an Indigenous language at home (ABS 2017). In 2016, the five most widely reported language groups spoken at home were: Arnhem Land and Daly River Region (16 per cent), Torres Strait Island (12 per cent), Western Desert (11 per cent), Yolngu Matha (11 per cent), and Arandic (7 per cent) (ABS 2017).

Despite this, there is evidence that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are endangered (for example, Schnierer, Ellsmore and Schnierer 2011). More than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages including 800 dialectal varieties existed at the time of colonisation (AIATSIS nd). Far fewer languages are spoken today[[18]](#footnote-18), in part due to historical policies that banned or discouraged their use (Korff 2019; chapter 1, section 1.2). Adding to the complexity, are the many new languages, and new dialects of English, that have emerged since colonisation that are in dominant use in areas across Australia today (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020; O’Shannessy and Meakins 2016).

Revitalising and maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages is crucial to preserving and strengthening culture (Schnierer, Ellsmore & Schnierer 2011), and language reclamation may have psychological benefits (Sivak et al. 2019). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples includes the right to:

‘ … revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.’ (UN 2007)

Furthermore, research drawing on data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children shows that almost all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families want their children to learn an Indigenous language (DSS 2015). Results from the National Indigenous Languages Report indicate there are around 78 traditional languages no longer being passed on to children but which still have a number of elderly speakers (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020).

Revitalisation of language is also an important contributor for access to and engagement of services. Services that encompass Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages can address communication barriers and/or create a more culturally safe environment. Communication difficulties can magnify barriers to education (sections 4.5 *Year 1 to 10 attendance*, 4.8 *Post‑secondary education* and 7.2 *School engagement*), employment (section 4.7 *Employment*) and access to services (sections 5.3 *Engagement of services* and 8.1 *Access to primary health care*). And language can show continuity of culture and connection to Country — such as through the correlation of placenames with linguistic features, and providing evidence for native title claims (Henderson and Nash, reviewed by Haviland 2004).

### Almost two in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speak at least some words in an Indigenous language, but the vast majority speak English at home

In 2014‑15, about 16 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported speaking an Indigenous language, and a further 21 per cent reported speaking some words only (table 5A.5.5). But the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reported speaking only English at home (almost nine in ten) (table 5A.5.5).

Older age groups have a higher proportion of Indigenous language speakers. In 2014‑15, the proportion was around 20 per cent for people aged 25 years or over, compared to younger age groups (11 per cent for those aged 3–14 years, and 14 per cent for those aged   
15–24 years) (table 5A.5.5). This difference may be because younger people are still learning language, though the proportion reported as learning was considerably lower for 15–24 year olds compared to 3–14 year olds (seven per cent compared to 19 per cent)  
(table 5A.5.5).

However, for the oldest age group, the proportion of Indigenous language speakers has decreased. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 55 years or over reported as speaking an Indigenous language fell from 26 per cent in 2002 to 20 per cent in 2014‑15 (table 5A.5.11).

Across states and territories in 2014‑15, the NT had the highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speaking Indigenous languages (63 per cent), followed by SA and WA (both 21 per cent) and Queensland (16 per cent) (table 5A.5.1). People living in remote and very remote areas were more likely to speak an Indigenous language (50 per cent), than those living in non‑remote areas (7 per cent) (table 5A.5.3).

### Almost two in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people learned Indigenous languages from a relative in 2014-15

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people most often learn Indigenous languages from relatives. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2014‑15 reporting learning Indigenous languages, close to two‑thirds were learning from a relative (62 per cent); 28 per cent were learning from a learning institution and 23 per cent were learning from someone in the community (table 5A.5.9).[[19]](#footnote-19)

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (3–14 years), the proportion learning from relatives (61 per cent) was similar to other age groups, but there were differences in other categories with a higher proportion learning from school (40 per cent) and a lower proportion learning in the community (13 per cent) (table 5A.5.9).

### What can be done to further revitalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have put in significant effort into revitalising languages. Projects and frameworks aiming to maintain and revive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are being supported and implemented by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, language professionals, governments and community organisations in urban, regional and remote locations across Australia (Hobson 2010; HoRSCoATSIA 2012; Simpson, Disbray and O’Shannessy 2019).

The National Indigenous Language Report (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020) includes several key points in relation to maintaining and revitalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

* Training that is available for interpreters, translators, teachers and learners of languages is key to ensuring the maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and it also enhances the wellbeing and employability of their speakers.
* Certain activities can help create an environment that supports the ongoing use of speakers’ first language and foster language maintenance in the community. These include service delivery in language, using children’s first language as the medium of instruction at school, local broadcasting in language, and featuring traditional languages in media such as in popular music, and film and television. Documentation can also help maintain languages, for example by providing resources such as dictionaries, and safeguard knowledge for future generations.
* But many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are no longer being passed on to children. High level steps for renewing and reawakening traditional language — drawing from work across Australia — include identifying first words, developing a writing system and understanding of the grammar, community planning for developing skills in linguistics and language teaching, and developing resources.
* Language revival activities include community and business opportunities — such as in translating and interpreting, including in language‑based tourism — and local broadcasting.[[20]](#footnote-20)

But sufficient resources for revitalising Indigenous languages have not always been available, and more funding may be required to build on the successes to date (Lowe and Giacon 2019).

### Future directions in data

Data on the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are limited and infrequent, and they often do not recognise the complexity of language contexts or the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020). Consistent and comparable collections of data on learners and speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are important to enable meaningful analysis of change over time.

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5.6 Indigenous cultural studies[[21]](#footnote-21)

| Box 5.6.1 Key messages |
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| * Indigenous cultural studies at school, incorporating Indigenous cultural perspectives, can help to promote a greater understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures. * For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these studies may enhance identity and self‑esteem. For other students, they can lead to greater valuing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and may reduce racism within the school community. * These studies and perspectives, along with the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and adults in school, can create a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. * Education on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in schools appears to have been increasing. In 2014‑15, almost 70 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students aged 5–14 years were taught about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures at school, but for people aged 15 years or over the proportion decreased as age increased. * The most recent available data on the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are for 2013, and indicate that they were underrepresented in Australian schools. Data on teacher training shows that in 2017 about 2 per cent of students commencing and completing initial teacher education programs were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, representing little change from previous years. |
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| Box 5.6.2 Measures of Indigenous cultural studies |
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| There is no main measure for this indicator.  Information in this section comprises two supplementary measures:   * *Teaching Indigenous cultures* is defined as the proportion of people taught Indigenous cultures in school or as part of further studies (national; state and territory; remoteness; age). * *Indigenous employment in schools* is defined as the proportion of school staff who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.   Current data for the supplementary measures are unavailable. The main data source for *Teaching Indigenous cultures* is the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), with the most recent available data for 2014‑15. The main data source for *Indigenous employment in schools* is the national 2013 Staff in Australia’s Schools survey, with the most recent available data for 2013. |
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Indigenous cultural studies are important in building a greater understanding of, and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these studies may strengthen their identity and self‑esteem as they see their cultures reflected in the curriculum. For other students, these studies can lead to a valuing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and may reduce racism and discrimination within schools initially, and in the longer term within Australian society (AHRC 2013).

Related to this is that strong relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non‑Indigenous people require ongoing truth telling about our shared history (Referendum Council 2017). The vast majority of Australians — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non‑Indigenous people — feel it is important for all Australians to know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (Reconciliation Australia 2019). See section 5.1 *Valuing Indigenous Australians and their cultures* for more information.

Indigenous cultural studies in schools can contribute to safe, supportive and inclusive environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (NIAA 2020; Rahman 2009). Research indicates that the performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is better for those students in schools where cultural perspectives are incorporated into the school curriculum and culture (Munns, O’Rourke and Bodkin‑Andrews 2013). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures have recently been included in the Australian school curriculum as a cross‑curriculum priority, meaning it is not a separate or additional key learning area, but rather teachers are invited to integrate aspects into the way they teach key learning areas (ACARA 2020). In October 2019, ACARA released 95 elaborations of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people understood and applied scientific concepts in their daily life, to assist with the application of this cross‑curriculum priority (ACARA 2020). At this stage, there is no information available on the uptake of this cross‑curriculum priority in schools.

Having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and support staff in schools can also contribute to a safe, supportive and inclusive environment. These teachers and staff can be positive role models for students, improve student engagement, and may be better able to understand and respond to the experiences that can marginalise students, and ‘bridge’ the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non‑Indigenous people in the school communities (Buckskin 2016; Guenther, Disbray and Osborne 2016; Purdie et al. 2011; Santoro et al. 2011; Santoro and Reid 2006).

However, Santoro and Reid (2006) noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers may be expected to know and teach all aspects of culture in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and are often also responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education issues from curriculum to pastoral care. These high expectations and increased workload often lead to ‘burn out’ and stress, and Santoro and Reid (2006) advocate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, particularly in the early stage of their careers, be provided with professional development and support. Further, having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and support staff in schools does not negate the need to ensure that other teachers and support staff build their skills and abilities to provide a culturally safe, supportive and inclusive environment (see sections 7.1 *Teacher quality* and 7.2 *School engagement*).

### More than half of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have experienced some teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in school

Schools vary in their social and geographical contexts and in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who attend them. Even so, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children often attend schools where they are the minority[[22]](#footnote-22). Educating all students (and local communities) in a way that acknowledges and incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures may have numerous benefits, including that it may prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students being marginalised (Munns and McFadden 2000 in Biddle 2010; Wilson 2016). Data on student learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are only available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; data on all students and schools are not available. There are also no known data on the quality of the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

More than half of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (aged 5–14 years) have had some education on Indigenous cultures in school. In 2014‑15, almost 70 per cent reported they had been taught about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures at school (table 5A.6.2).

Almost half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over have received education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in school or further education, but the proportions are smaller for older age groups. In 2014‑15, the proportion of those aged 15–24 years who had studied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in an education context was around 65 per cent, but for those aged 45 years or over it was less than 30 per cent (table 5A.6.2).

Across all age groups, there were no significant differences in these proportions between remote and non‑remote areas (table 5A.6.4).

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are underrepresented in Australian schools and teaching training programs

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are underrepresented in Australian schools. The most recent available data are for 2013 and show that nationally about two per cent of primary school teachers and leaders, and one per cent of secondary school teachers and leaders, identified as being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person — and that this was an increase on earlier years (table 5A.6.1) (McKenzie et al. 2014). In comparison, around 6 per cent of the national student population are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (table 5A.6.1).

Despite efforts to increase recruitment and retention[[23]](#footnote-23), the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people training to be teachers continues. In 2017, about 2 per cent of the students commencing, and 2 per cent of those completing, teacher training programs identified as being an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, representing little change compared to earlier data (AITSL 2015, 2017). Furthermore, retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student undergraduates are lower than average (AITSL 2017).

### Future directions in data

A lack of data prevents up‑to‑date analysis of the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in schools.

Data on the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people taught about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in schools or as part of further studies are only available every six years from the ABS NATSISS. More frequent data are desirable, as are comparable data for the non‑Indigenous population (or data on what proportion of Australian schools are teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures). For students who are being taught about Indigenous cultures in schools, data on the quantity of lessons, the content being taught and the quality of teaching of this material, is also desirable as this may vary between schools.

Information on the uptake and impact of this cross‑curriculum priority on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures would be useful to determine its in‑school contribution to student outcomes.

Nationally consistent and ongoing data are also needed on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in schools. The latest full data set is for 2013, and a part data collection was undertaken in 2015 (MATSITI 2017). The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership is currently developing the Australian Teacher Workforce Dataset (ATWD), but these data are not yet publicly available (AITSL 2020). Collecting good quality data on the Indigenous status of teachers as part of the ATWD would provide valuable information about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce in schools.

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5.7 Participation in community activities[[24]](#footnote-24)

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| Box 5.7.1 Key messages |
| * Involvement in community activities can lead to improvements in people’s long‑term health and physical and mental wellbeing, as well as improved social cohesion in communities. * Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s involvement in cultural activities has been shown to relate to a range of positive outcomes, and for children it is associated with positive emotions, cultural identity and aspirations. * In 2014‑15, about two in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 3 years or over had attended at least one cultural event or participated in at least one cultural activity in the last year. Attendance rates were similar across all age groups. * Available data also indicate that attendance at cultural events is higher in more remote areas. * Participation in sport and recreational activities has beneficial effects on individuals, and contributes to community cohesion. About two in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 3 years or over participated in sporting and physical recreation activities in 2014‑15. * Playing in, or training for, organised sport was more common for Australian children overall than for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and this pattern is observed across all remoteness areas other than major cities. * Little research was found on facilitators for, and barriers to, improving participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in community activities. More research may be necessary to address this gap, and would contribute to building effective strategies into program design. |
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| Box 5.7.2 Measures of participation in community activities |
| There are two main measures for this indicator.   * *Involvement in arts and cultural events and activities*, defined as the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over who participated in/attended an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, social or cultural activity. * *Participation in sport and recreational activities*, defined as the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over who participated in sporting and physical recreation activities.   Data are sourced from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS), with the most recent available data for 2014‑15 (all jurisdictions; age; remoteness).  (continued next page) |
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| Box 5.7.2 (continued) |
| Supplementary measures on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s and young people’s participation in organised sport and selected art and cultural activities are also presented. The most recent available data are from the 2014‑15 NATSISS for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the 2012 ABS Children’s Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities Survey (CPiCLAS) for all children (all jurisdictions: age; sex; remoteness). These data are for non‑overlapping periods but are comparable. |
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Involvement in community activities leads to improved health and better social connections. A diverse range of community activities may be beneficial, including sport, arts, cultural or other group activities.

For all Australian children and young people, participation in sport and cultural activities provides opportunities to develop physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively (The Smith Family 2013; Vella et al. 2015). And participation in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and other activities such as volunteer work and cultural activities can reduce risky behaviours by young people, such as smoking and drinking (Le 2013).

### Involvement in cultural events and activities has beneficial effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s wellbeing …

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s involvement in cultural activities is associated with a range of positive outcomes related to wellbeing. These include better mental health, and — to a lesser degree — increased happiness (Dockery 2011, 2019) along with social inclusion and cohesion (Ware 2014). They also include greater educational attainment and higher rates of employment (Dockery 2011, 2019).

International literature also shows an association between indigenous children’s participation in traditional activities and positive emotions, cultural identity, and higher aspirations (Smith, Findlay and Crompton 2010). And a strong sense of cultural identity is associated with resilience among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Young et al. 2017).

### …and about two in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had attended a cultural event at least once in 2014-15, similar to the proportion who had participated in at least one cultural activity

In 2014-15, about two in three (66 per cent) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 3 years or over reported attending one or more cultural events (such as ceremony, festival involving arts, craft, music or dance, or NAIDOC week activities) (table 5A.7.3). Available data (for those aged 15 years or over) shows that attendance had decreased from 68 per cent in 2002 to 63 per cent in 2014-15 (table 5A.7.1), and was higher in more remote areas (up to 86 per cent in very remote areas; table 5A.7.2).

The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in cultural activities (such as fishing, hunting, gathering wild plants/berries, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story telling) was similar to the proportion who attended cultural events. In 2014‑15, 70 per cent of 3–14 year olds and 65 per cent of people aged 15 years or over participated in cultural activities (table 5A.7.4).

While the participation rate was similar across age groups, the types of activities varied. Higher proportions of people aged 25 years or over wrote or told Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories, whereas higher proportions of people aged under 15 years made Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts/crafts or performed (table 5A.7.4). Across all age groups, the most commonly reported activity was fishing, with around half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reporting fishing in the last year (table 5A.7.4).

### Participation in sport and recreational activities also has beneficial effects…

Participation in sport and recreational activities can benefit people through its positive effect on physical fitness, but also through improved mental wellbeing and social interaction (Trainor et al. 2010; United Nations Sport for Development and Peace 2016). Sport and recreational activities can lead to better community bonds and cohesion (Cunningham and Beneforti 2005; Stronach, Maxwell and Taylor 2016), along with increased validation of — and connection to — culture (Ware & Meredith 2013).

Participation can also have other more indirect benefits, as it reduces unsupervised leisure time and may divert young people from inappropriate or antisocial behaviour (Le 2013; Ware & Meredith 2013). However, evidence suggests that its effects are inconsistent, and that the attributes of co‐participants in these activities may influence potential benefits (O’Donnell and Barber 2018).

Participation in sport and recreational activities may also contribute to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because of the ‘life skills’ associated with participation, such as teamwork, problem solving, resilience building, communication, social skills and responsibility (HoRSCoATSIA 2013). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ participation in sport is linked to pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities (Lonsdale et al. 2011).

Participation in sport and recreation goes beyond being a player or participant, to include being a coach, referee or committee member. Volunteering in these roles also provides opportunities to develop skills, self‑esteem and purpose, and improves community cohesion (Cunningham and Beneforti 2002; Dinan-Thompson, Sellwood and Carless 2008). Table 5A.7.3 provides details on the types of involvement Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had in sporting and other physical activities in 2014-15.

### … and two in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participated in sporting and physical recreation activities

Nationally in 2014‑15, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 3 years or over participating in sporting and physical recreation activities was 64 per cent, much like in 2008 (table 5A.7.3). Unlike cultural events, for people aged 15 years or over, participation increased from 49 to 59 per cent, and there was little difference in participation between living in remote and non‑remote areas (table 5A.7.2).

In 2014‑15, about half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (aged 5–14 years) spent time playing or training for organised sport outside school hours, and nearly three‑quarters had been physically active for at least one hour every day in the previous week (table 5A.7.7).

But participation in organised sport was lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children than for Australian children overall — and this pattern was observed across all remoteness areas except major cities, where there was not a statistically significant difference (figure 5.7.1).

### How can participation in community activities be increased for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Increasing participation in community activities including cultural activities, arts and organised sport can improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s wellbeing. While the interests and skills needed for individuals to engage in different activities vary[[25]](#footnote-25), barriers to participation that are external to individuals include:

* the availability of activities or access to facilities. In 2014‑15, among children in remote areas who had not participated in organised sport much, two in five reported that organised sport was not available (table 5A.7.9)
* the context of activities. For example, group, community, or family activities (rather than organised sport) may be desired forms of physical activity, with the environment they are conducted in being of high importance (Dahlberg et al. 2018)
* the cost of participation. Some sport and recreation activities that are too expensive can contribute to social exclusion (Ware and Meredith 2013). Costs can include fees, equipment, and travel, with travel often costing more in regional and remote areas. In 2014‑15, among children who had not participated in organised sport much, around one in five (though fewer in remote areas) reported that cost prevented them from participating more (table 5A.7.7).

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| Figure 5.7.1 Participation in organised sport in the last 12 months, children aged 5–14 years, 2014‑15**a** |
| Figure 5.7.1 Participation in organised sport in the last 12 months, children aged 5–14 years, 2014-15  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. |
| a See table 5A.7.9 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source:* ABS (unpublished) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014‑15, ABS (unpublished) Children’s Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities 2012; table 5A.7.9. |
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A further barrier to participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in community activities is a lack of cultural safety. One way this might be addressed is by including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the planning and implementation of sports and recreation programs (Ware and Meredith 2013). However, more research may be necessary to identify facilitators of, and barriers to, increasing participation in activities by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people — and to incorporate effective strategies, taking these facilitators and barriers into account, into future program design (Macniven et al. 2018; May et al. 2020).

### Future directions in data

Data on involvement in arts, cultural events and activities and participation in sport and physical activity (levels of exercise undertaken for fitness, recreation and sport) are only available every six years from the ABS NATSISS. More frequent data are desirable, particularly for younger people. Including comparable questions in the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (the NATSIHS) would increase the frequency to three‑yearly, based on current survey cycles.

It is suggested that the categories for output of survey data on self-reported barriers to participating in organised sport be reviewed, given the large proportion of responses coded as ‘other’. Of particular interest is the proportion that distance and transport problems and a lack of equipment contribute to this figure.

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5.8 Access to traditional lands and waters[[26]](#footnote-26)

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| Box 5.8.1 Key messages |
| * Connection to Country — which includes connection to lands and waters — is integral to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. * Connection to traditional lands and ancestors extends beyond being physically present on traditional lands to include the knowledge, stories and resources of a particular area. * Almost three-quarters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults recognise their traditional lands, but more than half don’t live on them. In 2018‑19, among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults: * recognition was higher in remote areas than non-remote areas, and generally higher among older than younger people * almost half of those living in remote areas lived on their traditional lands, compared to almost one-quarter of those living in non‑remote areas * for those not living on traditional lands, around one in five visited less than once per year. * Identification with a clan, tribal or language group generally increases with remoteness. About 65 per cent identified with a clan, tribal or language group, with the proportion increasing to 89 per cent in very remote areas. * Given the importance of connection to Country for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, more information on how people identify with clan, tribal or language groups or recognise traditional lands is needed to facilitate building connection. |
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| Box 5.8.2 Measures of access to traditional lands and waters |
| There is one main measure for this indicator. *Recognition and access to traditional lands* is defined as the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 years or over who recognise areas as their homelands or traditional Country. Data are also reported on the proportion who lived on their traditional lands.  A supplementary measure on the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 years or over who identified with a clan, tribal or language group is also reported.  The most recent available data are from the 2018-19 ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) (national: age; remoteness), for people aged 18 years or over. Data for 2018-19 are comparable in scope to 2012‑13. Data for 1994 and 2004‑05 are only available for non‑remote areas. Data for 2002, 2008 and 2014-15 are reported on a broader age range, people aged 15 years or over (except in table 5A.8.9, which reports data by remoteness).  There are currently no data specifically on access to traditional waters. |
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Connection to Country is integral to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (AHMAC 2017; Larson et al. 2020)[[27]](#footnote-27). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people derive physical, spiritual, emotional and cultural benefits from connection to Country, including connection to lands (Burgess and Morrison 2007; Dockery 2011, 2019) and waters (Birckhead et al. 2011; O’Bryan 2012). The notion of Country is central to self‑identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Kingsley et al. 2013).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people recognise that people belong to the land and have responsibilities associated with their Country (Butler et al. 2019). Their conception of health and wellbeing prioritises the quality of people’s interactions with each other and with nature (Butler et al. 2019). For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, connection to Country is not limited to connection to their own traditional lands, but extends to the lands and waters of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For this reason, the wellness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reflects the wellness of Country, and maintenance of Country is important for maintenance of health (Bishop et al. 2012). Caring for Country is considered to be caring for oneself and one’s community (Kingsley et al. 2013), and is associated with cultural, economic and environmental benefits (Weir, Stacey and Youngetob 2011). Maintenance of Country is reflected in part by land management practices, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people land management is associated with a wide range of cultural and social benefits (Larson et al. 2020).

Though there are many recognised benefits from connection to Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, living on their traditional lands — that is, their own homelands or traditional Country — is not always possible or preferred. For people from remote or very remote regions of Australia, living on Country can mean reduced opportunities for education and employment, and restricted access to some services such as health. As a result, people from these communities may relocate to larger centres to access these opportunities and services (AHMAC 2015; AHRC 2010; AIHW 2014; Kerins 2010).

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live away from Country, for example to work in urban environments. But, the significance of Country is often present, and they still want to connect back to Country (Fredericks 2013; Kingsley et al. 2013). Given the link between connection to Country and health and wellbeing (Bishop et al. 2012; Ganesharajah 2009), moving away from Country  — when it is not an individual’s preference or options are limited  — may negatively affect the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander people (Dalley 2018).

Rights to lands and waters can provide security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in accessing them (see section 9.2 *Indigenous owned or controlled land and business*).

### Almost three‑quarters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults recognise their traditional lands …

Recognition of traditional lands is not restricted to those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live on their own traditional lands. In 2018‑19, among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 years or over, 74 per cent recognised their traditional lands, similar to 2012-13[[28]](#footnote-28) (tables 5A.8.2 and 5A.8.5). This compares with 74 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years or over who recognised their traditional lands in 2014-15, which is an increase from 70 per cent in 2002 (table 5A.8.3).

Recognition differs by geographical location and age group. In 2018-19:

* recognition was higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote areas (90 per cent) than among those living in non‑remote areas (about 70 per cent) (figure 5.8.1)
* the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people recognising traditional lands generally increased with age, from about 70 per cent for those aged 18–34 years to about 80 per cent for those aged 45–54 years — though the proportion for those aged 55 years or over was slightly lower at 77 per cent (table 5A.8.7).

### … but just over one-quarter live on their traditional lands, and for some who do not, visiting is infrequent

The likelihood of living on traditional lands also differs by geographical location. In 2018‑19, around 27 per cent of adults reported living on their traditional lands, with the proportion in remote areas twice that in non-remote areas (47 per cent and 23 per cent respectively) (figure 5.8.1).

For those who do not live on their traditional lands (47 per cent of adults nationally[[29]](#footnote-29)), most reported in response to survey questions that they could visit, but the frequency with which they did visit varied by geographical location. Of adults who reported being allowed to visit their traditional lands, the proportion visiting *at least* once per year was higher in remote areas than in non-remote areas (table 5A.8.4).

| Figure 5.8.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who identified with a clan, tribal or language group, recognised or lived on their traditional lands, by remoteness, 2018‑19**a** |
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| | Figure 5.8.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults who identified with a clan, tribal or language group, recognised or lived on their traditional lands, by remoteness, 2018-19  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| a See table 5A.8.4 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: ABS (unpublished) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2018­19; table 5A.8.4 |
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Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still maintain a strong connection to Country even if they live on traditional lands that belong to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or where large urban centres have grown on their Country in post‑settlement Australia (Fredericks 2013). Connection to Country can be maintained in different ways, one of which is visiting their traditional lands. So, where visiting does not or cannot occur this may negatively affect the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Salmon et al. 2019, pp. 5–8).

### Identification with a clan, tribal or language group generally increases with remoteness

Identification with a clan, tribal or language group is another important aspect of connection to Country (Fredericks 2013). In 2018‑19, about 65 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults identified with a clan, tribal or language group. In general, as remoteness increased, so did the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who identified with a clan, tribal or language group, from 61 per cent in non‑remote areas to 89 per cent in very remote areas (table 5A.8.4).

### Future directions in data

Data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identifying with a clan, tribal or language group and recognising and living on their traditional lands are provided every three years through the alternating ABS national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and health surveys.

Given the importance of connection to Country to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the collection of information on how people identify with clan, tribal or language group or recognise traditional lands could assist in developing culturally appropriate responses to facilitate building connection.

The collection of additional information about recognition and access to traditional waters would complement the qualitative information formerly published in the National Water Commission assessments (see National Water Commission 2014 for details).

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1. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term ‘histories’ used in the 2018 Reconciliation Australian Barometer report (from which the associated data are sourced) conveys the heterogeneity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s histories. Though earlier reports referred to history in the singular form, the data cross years are regarded as broadly comparable. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Reconciliation Australia advised that the general community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sample are weighted to be representative of the general community (in terms of age, gender and location) as per ABS 2016 Census data in 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Data prior to 2014 are included in the attachment tables for this section, but are not directly comparable with data for 2014 onwards and therefore not referenced in this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. No data are currently available for recognition of contributions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make to Australia (the Steering Committee’s preferred measure). The proxy measures used above are sourced from the Australian Reconciliation Barometer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The terms ‘have a say’ and ‘issues that are important to you’ were not defined in the survey, and respondents interpreted these terms based on their personal views (ABS 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In previous editions of this report this measure was titled *Discharge against medical advice*. There is no change to the computation of this measure. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Remote areas includes the ABS categories of ‘remote’ and ‘very remote’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. One WA study of births between 1980 and 2010, found that 18 per cent of mothers under the age of 16 years had unregistered births, and that unregistered births in WA were most strongly associated with young maternal age at first birth, remoteness, mothers whose own birth was unregistered, and no private hospital insurance (Gibberd, Simpson and Eades 2016). All these factors are likely to disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Disaggregation by remoteness area is based on the patient's usual residence, not the location of hospital. Rates represent the number of patients who took own leave for patients living in each remoteness area, divided by the total number of people living in that remoteness area. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Most of these features have been reported in the Report commencing with the 2007 edition, and developed since. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mabu liyan is a Yawuru concept that means ‘strong spirit’, ‘good feeling’ and ‘positive wellbeing’ (Jawun 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Information included in the National Indigenous Languages Report 2020 draws on information from a range of data and research, including the *pending* Third National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS3). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Data indicate that in 2007 around 145 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were spoken (with 18 considered strong), and in 2012 around 120 were spoken (with 13 considered strong) (Marmion, Obata and Troy 2014). More recently in 2018‑19, 123 languages were spoken (with 12 considered strong) (DITRDC, AIATSIS and ANU 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Proportions can sum to more than 100 per cent as a person learning from more than one source will be counted against each source. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For example, there are about 60 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander not-for-profit broadcasting, media and communications organisations in over 235 communities across Australia, producing media content in more than 25 languages (First Nations Media Australia 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make up around 6 per cent of all school students in Australia (table 5A.6.1). A 2016 report showed that 77 per cent of all schools with primary school students have at least one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student. This means that most schools have at least some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but few have a large number (and for about 70 per cent of those that do, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make up less than 10 per cent of the total student enrolment) (PC 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The five-year ‘More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative’ included partnerships and co-investment agreements with universities and other stakeholders to increase recruitment, retention and leadership in teacher training and in schools, and delivered its final report in September 2016 (Buckskin 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For example, in 2014-15, among children who had not participated in organised sport much, many reported they did not want to play (26 per cent, though fewer in very remote areas) (tables 5A.7.7 and 5A.7.9). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Mr Jason Glanville, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s understanding of Country is a holistic concept and encompasses lands, waters, and air, and is deeply interconnected with identity, spirituality, culture, people language, law and ceremony (Butler et al. 2019; Fredericks 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The ABS survey from which data in this report are sourced uses ‘homelands/traditional Country’ to mean areas of land to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have ancestral and/or cultural links. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. About 26 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults reported that they did not recognise traditional lands and therefore were not asked whether they lived on traditional lands (table 5A.8.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)