

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement

Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in evaluation

This fact sheet is intended for members of the Family and Child Evaluation Community of Practice. It identifies some key considerations for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in evaluation and provides some additional resources for readers to access.

It is based on an Australasian Evaluation Society lunchtime session about applying an Indigenous lens to evaluation and complements discussions from previous Community of Practice sessions.

This fact sheet draws from these sessions as well as guidelines for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Why engagement is important

Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the evaluation of programs is essential, particularly for programs designed or intended for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This will help evaluators develop an understanding of the program and context in which it is implemented and ensure that cultural nuances and protocols are captured.

Ideally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be involved at all stages of the evaluation.

Cultural protocols, processes and considerations are embedded through local knowledge, which requires a focus on building relationships and trust with the community. This can be time consuming and resource intensive.

The process for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in evaluation will depend on the individual evaluation project, and the value of engagement to the community.

There is no definitive approach suitable for all evaluation projects or for all communities, the need to adopt culturally respectful practice, ensure community leadership, and provide value for community are well-documented as 'best-practice' approaches for engagement.

As such, this document presents some broad themes identified across multiple engagement guidelines and practice resources. It also identifies resources where readers can access more information or examples of evaluation projects.

Engagement tips

1. Understand and respect local context

- Each community is unique. Understanding and respecting the unique characteristics of different communities is important. This includes acknowledging and involving Traditional Owners, as well as Elders and community leaders, during meetings or events.
- Meeting with an appropriate community member or representative to provide a cultural induction is highly recommended before engaging participants. This will provide insight into local cultural protocols, community history, appropriate behaviours, past community experiences of evaluation and key people or organisations to seek to speak with. You should seek advice on who the appropriate community member would be.

2. Use appropriate approaches

- Engagement plans should reflect and respect local protocols. This may include adapting language or data collection tools better suited to the community.
- Some commonly used methods, measures and outcomes may not be appropriate for evaluating programs aimed at Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities. A narrative approach ensures that stories and perspectives can be shared and gathered in a meaningful way.
- Consultation should be open and non-judgemental.
- Evaluators should be flexible with timeframes, processes and approaches to respond to the local context.
- Engagement approaches and measures should be discussed and tested with the community.

3. Seek community input

- Evaluators need to be mindful of their own values and how these may impact perceptions of program success. It is essential to involve community members in interpreting and reporting data or to provide feedback on findings.
- Evaluators should involve the community in designing the evaluation, including the tools and definitions of success, with feedback about how input was embedded.



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4. Act ethically

- Evaluations should seek to contribute to the wellbeing of communities.
- Evaluators should seek informed consent from participants and actively seek to ensure their wellbeing. In addition, evaluators may need to familiarise themselves with other protocols, including respect for knowledge and intellectual property, as well as protocols concerning filming or photography on country and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It may be useful to seek advice on ethics processes from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or someone experienced in Indigenous research.
- [The National Health and Medical Research Council's Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders](#) also provides some guidance.

Resources

The following resources provide further information and best practice guides for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders in evaluation:

The Fred Hollows Foundation. [A cultural protocol for evaluation.](#)

Tips to ensure that evaluation activities are undertaken with appropriate respect for and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Muir, S. & Dean, A. (2017). [Evaluating the outcomes of programs for Indigenous families and communities.](#)

Outlines common issues or challenges when planning an evaluation of a program targeting Indigenous people and highlights the need to adequately plan evaluations and ensure meaningful participation of Indigenous people.

National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (2016). [Indigenous approaches to program evaluation.](#)

Identifies principles of evaluation and ethical guidelines for engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Price-Robertson, R. & McDonald, M. (2011). [Working with Indigenous children, families and communities: lessons from practice.](#)

General engagement tips drawn from lessons from delivery of support services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Scougall, J (2006). [Reconciling tensions between principles and practice in Indigenous evaluation.](#) Evaluation Journal of Australasia, 6(2), pp.49-55.

Describes the tensions between evaluation principles and what often occurs in practice when evaluating in an Indigenous context. The author reflects on these tensions in the context of the national evaluation of the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

The Lowitja Institute (2011). [Researching Indigenous Health: A practical guide for researchers.](#)

This guide offers information, advice and strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research at various aspects of the research process, from deciding on scope and principles to disseminating information.

Examples

The following list provides examples of evaluations which have engaged with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander stakeholders:

Campbell, S., McCalman, J., Redman-MacLaren, M., Canuto, K., Vine, K., Sewter, J. & McDonald, M. (2018). [Implementing the Baby One Program: A qualitative evaluation of family-centred child health promotion in remote Australian Aboriginal communities.](#)

Charles Darwin University. (2017) [Whole of Community Engagement \(WCE\) Initiative Final Report: Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme \(HEPPP\).](#)

Healing Foundation (2015). [Our Men Our Healing: Evaluation Report.](#)

Menzies School of Health Research & Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation (2016). [Opening Doors: Evaluation of Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation's Chronic Disease Strategy.](#)

Menzies School of Health Research (2013). [Remote Alcohol and Other Drugs Workforce Program Evaluation.](#)

Social Ventures Australia Consulting & Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa (2017). [The Martu Leadership Program: Evaluation of a pilot program using the Social Return on Investment methodology.](#)

Western Sydney University (2018). [Youth Koori Court: Review of Parramatta pilot project.](#)

Winangali & Ipsos (2017). [Evaluation: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family-Led Decision Making trial.](#)