

## Evaluation of the Stronger, Smarter Realities program

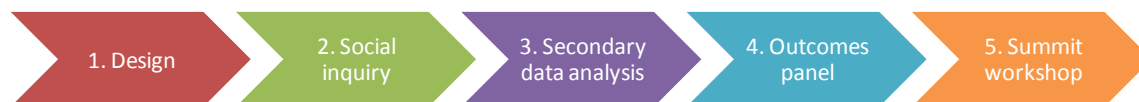
### Jess Dart and the Stronger Smarter Institute

In Australia there is a big disparity between educational outcomes for Indigenous children compared to non-Indigenous children, and in the last 8 years educational outcomes have been either stable or declining.<sup>1</sup> While Indigenous children have been staying longer at school, too many Indigenous students leave school without a formal Year 12 qualification. Nationally, the proportion of Indigenous students who achieved a Year 12 Certificate (as a proportion of students who were enrolled in Year 11 in the previous year), has decreased from 51% in 2001 to 46% in 2006. During that period the proportion of non-Indigenous students increased from 80% to 86% and the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes has widened.

This case is about a participatory evaluation of the first phase of the Australian “Stronger Smarter Realities Program” (SSR) which ran from 2006 to the end of 2008. This project was about creating systematic and transferable change by arming Australian educators with the belief, skills and capacity to make profound changes to the learning outcomes of Indigenous children. Over 3 years, the project aimed to engage principals, teachers and Indigenous community leaders from 240 schools with high Indigenous student populations, and support them to transform their schools in such a way to deliver dramatically improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students. The program is based on the premise that this can be achieved by providing a supportive educational environment, by providing excellent teachers and by having high expectations.

The program is delivered by the Stronger Smarter Institute (formerly Indigenous Education Leadership Institute (IELI)), Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. It was funded jointly by two donors: the Sidney Myer Fund and the Telstra Foundation. The project has two streams: the Principal Leadership Program and Teacher Leadership and Community Leadership Program. This evaluation was primarily concerned with the Principal Leadership Program. The evaluation was completed in 2009 at the end of the first phase of the project by external consultants using a participatory approach. It was guided by two key questions i) to what extent has the SSR project contributed to excellence in Indigenous education in participating schools? And ii) to what extent did the SSR project influence the overall Indigenous education agenda?

The evaluation was both summative and formative in nature and largely focused on outcomes. It was summative in that it was conducted at the end of the first phase of the program and was required by the program funders. It was formative in that it was intended to influence the next phase and scaling up of the program. The evaluation used the “Collaborative Outcomes Reporting Technique” developed by Jess Dart. This is a mixed method approach that involved key stakeholders in a number of process steps.



Firstly, a design workshop was held where the theory of change was clarified and evaluation questions developed. This was conducted with program team members and key stakeholders in a participatory

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<sup>1</sup> National Report on Indigenous Education, 2006 DEEWR

manner. Social inquiry included over 50 semi-structured interviews incorporating the Most Significant Change technique and 3 case studies from Indigenous communities. The data trawl involved collection and analysis of secondary documents and quantitative data on student outcomes from 10 schools.

The quantitative data, case studies and qualitative summaries were used as evidence to feed into an 'outcomes panel' with Indigenous educators who examined the data and created statements about: the extent to which the outcomes had been achieved; the plausible contribution of the program to these outcomes and the quality of the data. The panel were selected as they were highly respected, had no vested interest in the program and had an excellent knowledge of Indigenous education policy and practice. The process culminated in an evaluation summit workshop that saw key stakeholders and staff deliberating over qualitative and quantitative data and creating recommendations. The consultants' role was collection and synthesized data and facilitation of the sensemaking process with recommendations created by workshop participants.

While the quantitative data was limited in scope, the evaluation was noteworthy as it managed to capture some of the less tangible outcomes concerning 'breakthrough learning' and raised expectations for Indigenous children. The program itself has been very successful and is being scaled-up and delivered on a national scale. This evaluation has been highly influential as evidenced by all the recommendations been successfully implemented, and one Philanthropic funder stating that the evaluation was well-balanced and gave them confidence to provide further funding for the program.

### **Values and Quality**

This evaluation was based on the premise that the values of the Indigenous panel members, program staff and key stakeholders were of highest priority. Funders' views were not considered. The evaluators attempted to "bracket off" their opinions and instead presented a series of data summaries to panel and summit participants for them to analyse and interpret. The evaluators felt they were not the right people to make judgements concerning the effectiveness of a program.

Values were surfaced and debated throughout the evaluation process. The theory of change created a 'normative model' for how program staff viewed the program and this was used as the organising construct for the evaluation. Program staff debated and helped create the evaluation questions. Quotations and data were presented in a non-homogenised manner to panel and summit participants. Vignettes were analysed using the most significant change approach and the reasons for their selection were documented. Participants debated the value and significance of data sources and came to agreement on the key findings of the evaluation. Dot voting was used to determine how different participants rated each issue and outcome. Participant analysis and judgements were used to frame the evaluation report in terms of how findings were grouped, and the recommendations came from the workshops.

The focus on quality was largely associated with *process quality*: ethical conduct; culturally appropriate methods; ownership of the evaluation process; ensuring that the evaluation provided credible but useful recommendations to inform the next phase of the program. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Data was analysed in participatory ways and by the consultants using thematic coding. A weakness of the evaluation was the quantitative data; the data sets were patchy and the sample was limited. It proved extremely difficult to acquire this data from schools. One of the recommendations of the program was to create a more robust quantitative monitoring system, for the second phase of the program.

While the program was not overly complex, the program outcomes and process were somewhat emergent, intangible and hard to measure. The “Collaborative Outcomes Reporting approach” has been successfully used with programs with higher degrees of complexity – often with no clear outcomes defined at the onset of the program. It is widely used for evaluating biodiversity conservation programs.