

Independent Review of AIATSIS – Findings and Recommendations, June 2014

Findings	Recommendations
<i>Term of reference 1: AIATSIS current role and functions and future strategic directions, against its legislated objectives</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Act 1989 provides AIATSIS with the ability to undertake the functions considered important by its stakeholders.▪ Clarification of expectations by the responsible Minister, when undertaken, has proved helpful to AIATSIS in prioritising and targeting its activities.	<p><i>Recommendation: Establish clear expectations and priorities</i></p> <p>That the Australian Government:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Affirm and maintain AIATSIS role as the key national cultural research and collecting agency focused on preserving and raising awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities, knowledges and cultures.2. Coordinate whole-of-government priorities for AIATSIS through the established mechanism of a Statement of Expectations from the Minister for Education. The Statement should take a three year perspective, with AIATSIS to respond with a Statement of Intent.
<i>Term of reference 2: How AIATSIS meets the needs and expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and researchers and whether there is an unmet need</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Stakeholder expectations of AIATSIS vary, with few clear about all of its legislative functions or capabilities. Many stakeholders identified that AIATSIS is currently spread across many activity streams.▪ There are opportunities for AIATSIS to play an enhanced national leadership role by focusing its efforts on supporting and collaborating with other institutions and individuals involved in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.	<p><i>Recommendation: Communicate and engage with stakeholders</i></p> <p>That AIATSIS:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">3. Develop and implement a stakeholder and community engagement strategy to build awareness of AIATSIS role, priorities and programs among key stakeholders.

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Term of reference 3: AIATSIS role in supporting the Australian research sector, promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies and developing the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers

- The field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies is multi-disciplinary, complex and difficult to define.
- AIATSIS has been instrumental in building capabilities across the field of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies over the past fifty years, but there would be merit in it reconsidering how its services can best meet the requirements of the evolving research sector.

Recommendation:

That **AIATSIS:**

4. Research and prepare a report on the current state of play of Indigenous studies and research across the Australian higher education and research community, and review its strategy in that context.

Term of reference 4: The nature of its current relationships with universities and a framework for possible future roles in supporting researchers, higher degree by research students, research supervisors and career researchers in areas of Indigenous studies

- AIATSIS has played a key role in helping to develop a cohort of leading and influential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, but there remain significant unmet needs across the university sector to support students and early career researchers.
- AIATSIS provides a valuable collaborative role with universities through research partnership and networks, but the level of and nature of its current involvement is variable across universities.
- The relative roles and responsibilities between universities, the National Indigenous Researchers and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN) and AIATSIS in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have some overlap and require further clarification.

Recommendation:

That the **Department of Education:**

5. Work with AIATSIS, universities, NHMRC, ARC and NIRAKN to consider their roles and opportunities for effective collaboration.

That **AIATSIS:**

6. Promote more collaborative research involvement between AIATSIS and universities, including increasing the use of the AIATSIS cultural collection. Consider developing a funding case for establishing part-time Adjunct Chair positions within AIATSIS for leading university academics in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

Term of reference 5: The role of AIATSIS in maintaining and promoting the highest standards in ethical research with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous collections management

- AIATSIS has played a lead role in developing and supporting ethical research practice, and its Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies are respected nationally and internationally.
- There remains potential for wider application of the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous

Recommendation: Promote wider application of the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies

That the **Australian Government:**

7. Endorse the wider application of the AIATSIS

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Studies by publicly funded research agencies, universities and researchers.

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Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies, for example through the ARC Discovery Indigenous grants program and for research undertaken by the Australian Government agencies with or relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

That **AIATSIS**:

8. Work with universities and NIRA to encourage adoption of the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies as a standard for ethical research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies. Develop, and make available, guidance materials and support services for human research ethics committees and researchers in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies to support application of the Guidelines.

Term of reference 6: The impact and cost effectiveness of the AIATSIS managed grant program (and the Research Grants) and the Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowships employment program

▪ From 1964 until its suspension in 2012, the AIATSIS research grants program was an important enabler of research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, and played a key role in building the AIATSIS collection.

▪ Prior to its suspension, the limited proportion of grant funding able to be allocated relative to administration costs reduced the overall cost-effectiveness of the program.

▪ The suspension of the grants program continues to be felt strongly by community researchers/academics, who consider that there are few alternative avenues to attract small-scale research funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

▪ The Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowship (IVRF) program provides intensive supervisory and financial support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to complete their studies. While the reach and scope of the IVRF program is limited to a small proportion of the growing number of Aboriginal and

Recommendation: Identify community based research needs

That the **Australian Government**:

9. Consider whether current research grants in the major funding streams (ie ARC and NHMRC) are being made available, as appropriate, to community based research, and whether there is a role for AIATSIS in the prioritisation and distribution of funding to support community research.

Recommendation: Review the IVRF program

That **AIATSIS**:

10. Subject to funding, continue the IVRF program in the short term and review the ongoing need for the IVRF program relative to the other capacity building services across the tertiary education sector that should be supporting successful degree outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

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Torres Strait Islander students and early career researchers, it is nonetheless very successful and should be studied for the broader lessons it contains.

Term of reference 7: The place of AIATSIS in conducting and facilitating research in Indigenous knowledge and community based research

- There is a general lack of awareness and understanding among stakeholders about the purpose, focus and priorities for AIATSIS research program.
- While there are many demands on AIATSIS to contribute to emerging areas of research, AIATSIS' collection provides it with a unique point of difference from other Australian research organisations.
- There is potential in the medium to long term for AIATSIS to play a stronger role in helping to guide or advise on national research priorities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

Recommendation: Undertake research that draws on or develops the AIATSIS cultural collection

That **AIATSIS:**

11. Develop and publicise strategic research directions informed by the continued use, targeted research, growth and development of its unique collection.

Term of reference 8: The promotional role of AIATSIS in encouraging a greater understanding in the general community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (including through the provision of information, publications and outreach activities)

- AIATSIS provides valued options and channels for disseminating research and publications that may not otherwise be published, although limited in scale and reach.
- Many stakeholders identified a need for AIATSIS to continue seeking cost effective ways to encourage understanding, in the general community, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies, including through preparing educational resources.
- Current AIATSIS community outreach activities are valued where they occur, but their extent and scope is limited largely by their relatively high cost.

Recommendation: Emphasise broad understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures

That **AIATSIS:**

12. More fully develop materials that strengthen online communications and identify community engagement opportunities to build general community understanding of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and knowledges. This may include collating, indexing, repackaging and presenting information about languages, cultures, histories and societies, drawing on materials held within the AIATSIS collection.

Recommendation: Review community outreach models

That **AIATSIS:**

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13. Consider models to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, for example through community access visits, sharing materials through local collections agencies or supporting community visits to AIATSIS. Develop detailed costing proposals where required (e.g. community visits).

Term of reference 9: AIATSIS role in preserving and disseminating information and knowledge about its cultural collection and how the collection can be best utilised and preserved including through digitisation

- The AIATSIS cultural collection is widely valued as critical to the preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledges and cultural materials.
- The resources currently applied to managing the AIATSIS collection are insufficient to promote the level of accessibility desired by users. Access is restricted by factors including AIATSIS Canberra location, limited library opening hours and sometimes lengthy document retrieval times.
- AIATSIS depositor and access protocols help to manage the cultural collection in ways that acknowledge the cultural significance of items, but can impact the perceived accessibility of the collection.

Recommendation: Expand access to the AIATSIS cultural collection

That **AIATSIS:**

14. Expand user access to the AIATSIS collection, through reducing waiting times, assisting collections navigation and extending the AIATSIS library hours. Undertake work to identify best practice, including international best practice, for the management and accessibility of research collections.

Term of reference 10: Strategies for the expansion, maintenance and management of the digitisation of the cultural resource collection in order to preserve it and make it available to Indigenous communities and individuals and students and researchers

- Digitisation is critical for the preservation of aging materials within the AIATSIS cultural collection. This requires continuation of intensive efforts to digitise high priority materials, and ongoing efforts to manage the digitisation of AIATSIS growing collection.
- Users expect that digitised materials will play a role in improving accessibility of the AIATSIS collection, including remote access.
- The expiry of digitisation funding presents a risk that

Recommendation: Continue and fast-track the digitisation program

That the **Australian Government:**

16. In the short term, continue funding digitisation of the cultural collection at current levels (\$3.2 million per annum) to address the most vulnerable materials, and seek from AIATSIS a more detailed analysis of the annual appropriations funding required for ongoing digitisation activities.

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some cultural materials and records will be lost or inaccessible to future generations.

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That **AIATSIS:**

17. Continue to identify and implement digitisation activities for the most vulnerable materials within the cultural collection. Determine the urgency, timing, needs and expected outcomes of digitisation and work with the Australian Government to establish an appropriate longer term annual appropriation for the task.

Term of reference 11: Whether current circumstances and demands warrant any changes in structure, governance and/or funding to equip AIATSIS to effectively undertake its mission

▪ AIATSIS has well-established corporate governance processes and practices to support its decision making and operations, but its committee structures need to adapt to match organisational priorities.

▪ AIATSIS membership represents the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies research community, though many members are unclear about the benefits of membership or opportunities for engagement.

▪ AIATSIS funding comprises a number of non-recurrent grants, from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet resulting in uncertainty regarding AIATSIS long term resource base.

▪ AIATSIS has faced increasing difficulty in delivering its current programs at expected levels of service within current funding.

▪ Monitoring of organisational outputs and outcomes in relation to investment is at a high level and limited, rendering it difficult to assess and communicate return on effort and to support additional funding for program investment.

Recommendation: Adapt committees and membership

That **AIATSIS:**

18. Review its Committee Structures and consider the ongoing need for the Native Title and Publishing Advisory Committees of Council.

19. Review AIATSIS membership composition with a view to increasing involvement by younger researchers and other parties with an interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

Recommendation: Attract additional or co-funding

That **AIATSIS:**

20. Establish a clear organisation strategy to meet statutory obligations within the context of changed technology and stakeholder requirements and identify any funding requirements for later government consideration.

21. Where appropriate, continue to investigate and implement mechanisms to attract additional funding through fee-for-service activities, partnerships and philanthropy.

Recommendation: Enhance performance monitoring

That **AIATSIS:**

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22. Identify and track a set of key performance indicators to measure and report on progress against organisational priorities, along with processes to elicit user feedback across AIATSIS service streams. This will further position AIATSIS for the pending *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability (PGPA) Act*, scheduled for introduction in July 2014.