



AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER STUDIES

**AIATSIS – An incubator for Indigenous Researchers?
Lessons from the Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowship Program**

*Commissioned Discussion Piece for the
Review of Indigenous Higher Education Access and Outcomes*

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Introduction

In considering the effectiveness of measures to improve higher education access and outcomes for Indigenous people, the Review Committee has identified the critical support role that has, and could, be played by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Specifically, the Committee has requested AIATSIS to provide a paper on higher degree researcher training and development of Indigenous researchers that focuses on how AIATSIS contributes to researcher training.

AIATSIS is viewed by the Committee as an incubator for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and it is useful in this Review to consider the possible learnings for the university sector from our programs. In addition the Committee has asked for critical comment on how this Review can best approach the building of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researcher capacity and what can be learnt about the challenges in developing Indigenous research capacity (including training, grant rounds, recruiting Indigenous researchers and barriers to employment).

As background, this paper examines the broad role of AIATSIS within the Research and Innovation sector and its support role within the Higher Education sector. The paper will examine the standards applied by AIATSIS in relation to our own research activities and our Research Grants program to foster Indigenous research involvement. The bulk of the paper provides a detailed analysis of the Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowship Program, which has emerged over the past six years as a vital incubator for Indigenous researchers. In particular this program has played a small but critical role in transitioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into research careers and supporting completions of Higher Degrees by Research (HDR). The paper will reflect on the rationale and needs analysis that led to the introduction of the program, the structure of the program, the key learnings from its administration and the outcomes achieved.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

AIATSIS was established as a Research Institute in 1964 with a sole focus on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies'.¹ Our functions under the AIATSIS Act include many aspects of research, including: conducting and encouraging research, publishing research, training researchers, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, promoting Indigenous studies and a general understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and maintaining a collection of cultural materials. While this may seem like a dispersed set of functions, these activities maintain their relevance to the different ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples engage with research, whether they are:

- embarking on their own family history,
- understanding the history, language and cultural heritage of their community,
- undertaking a degree or completing a PhD,

Given of our membership structure, we have been recently recognised alongside the 'learned academies', such as the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of the Humanities as a measure of esteem within the research sector.⁵ Indigenous Researchers could build on this network, using AIATSIS as a hub, to coordinate and collaborate across Universities and institutions.

AIATSIS has also impacted on the experience of research by Indigenous communities. Through our grant program and our Guidelines for ethical research, AIATSIS has led the way in defining ethical research in Indigenous studies. Increasingly we have also had an influence through direct engagement with the Australian Research Council (ARC) and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) to improve the quantum of research investment in Indigenous researchers and Indigenous research and the way research is funded and conducted through our Research Grants scheme.

The role of AIATSIS in the development of Indigenous researchers

The Statement of Expectations from The Hon Kim Carr recognises our role as a national leader of research excellence in Indigenous studies, as a hub for activity in this area, fostering national and international networks and community knowledge transfer. The Minister also expects AIATSIS to promote careers in research and also provide a career path for researchers, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

AIATSIS has played an important role in the development of Indigenous researchers in Australia. Many of Australia's most prominent Indigenous academics have been involved in the AIATSIS Council and Research Advisory Committee.

As an example that illustrates how AIATSIS can become a touchstone for Indigenous research careers, our current Deputy Chairperson, Professor John Maynard, has reflected on the formative role played by AIATSIS in his involvement in research. From first encountering AIATSIS in seeking information about his own family history, Professor Maynard applied for an AIATSIS Research Grant and then went on to complete his PhD and published his first book through AIATSIS' Aboriginal Studies Press. Supporting this 'life cycle' of research engagement is the unique contribution of AIATSIS to Indigenous research development when access to education remains disproportionately limited for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Professor Maynard became a member of AIATSIS and subsequently became involved in the governance of the Institute.

The AIATSIS Research Grants Program

For over 40 years AIATSIS has fostered and facilitated research and supported researcher training through our Research Grants Program. The Grants program has established benchmarks for Research in Indigenous studies through its funding criteria and contractual obligations, as well as through its ethics processes. The AIATSIS Grants program differs from other competitive research grants program in the following key ways:

We also note the low levels of mobility among Indigenous academics that often make it difficult to take advantage of career and study opportunities. All of these factors directly impacted on AIATSIS in our recruitment and retention of Indigenous research staff.

Recognising the need in the sector

The needs that have been evident to us have now been identified by sectoral analysis. In December 2008, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation's report on *Building Australia's Research Capacity* recommended, amongst other things, that 'the Australian Government implement appropriate measures to encourage the recruitment of Indigenous, regional and rural Australians to higher degrees by research'.⁸ Similarly, the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, acknowledged the disparity in participation and retention of Indigenous students and identified, among its strategic goals, a national system that supports access to higher education for students from traditionally under-represented groups such as Indigenous students and those from rural and remote areas and low SES backgrounds.⁹

The Bradley Review also acknowledged that 'Indigenous involvement in higher education is not only about student participation and the employment of Indigenous staff. It is also about what is valued as knowledge in the academy'.¹⁰ To this end, the Cutler Review of the innovation system in 2008 recognised that the role of AIATSIS should be 'broadened and strengthened in recognition of the special importance of preserving indigenous collections and the unique value of indigenous traditional knowledge and practices within Australia's innovation system'.¹¹ The government response to the Cutler review highlighted the need for investment in Australia's Indigenous research capacity and skill base and the important role of Australia's publicly funded research organisations.¹²

The Government's *Research Workforce Strategy* identified the need for a specific plan to increase Indigenous participation in Australia's research workforce.¹³ To this end, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy was developed. IHEAC has repeatedly drawn attention to the gross under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in University employment. The disparity among research intensive employment is even greater, requiring an increase of six times the current level.¹⁴

Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowships Program

It was in the context of the under-representation of Indigenous peoples in the research sector that AIATSIS developed the Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowships (IVRF) program. The aim of this program is to support Indigenous researchers to visit AIATSIS for short periods to undertake research. Applicants for this program are people with experiences and backgrounds who wish to contribute to knowledge about Indigenous societies and inform public policy, or who are considering moving into a research career. The objectives of the program are to:

Structure of the Program

The program provides an opportunity for Indigenous researchers to undertake a period of residency in Canberra to conduct their research full-time, access national collections of research materials (e.g. AIATSIS, National Library and National Archives, National Museum, Australian National University) and to engage with policy makers.

The Fellowships are advertised as a 'bulk round'; that is there are multiple appointments from a single recruitment process. In our experience, this increases confidence among applicants that may not otherwise apply for a single vacancy.

Successful applicants are paid at Lecturer level A or B equivalent, taking into account their work experience over and above their academic qualifications. They are also supplied with relocation allowance, including travel and accommodation where necessary to facilitate the short term stay. They each have access to a research fund of up to \$8,000 per researcher per annum to support their research.

Each Fellowship participant enters into an individual program of research suited to their current level of experience and professional career priorities. Researchers are encouraged to give presentations and publish materials during their time at AIATSIS.

The program is focused on providing infrastructure and support for the completion of projects. The Fellows receive academic supervision and mentoring from more experienced academic staff within the Research Program as well as support from an Indigenous coordinator who is responsible for pastoral care and mentoring.

The program is designed to support rather than compete with University programs and supervision. Where IVRFs are enrolled at a University, AIATSIS supervision is focused on coaching and skills development in project management, writing and the art of getting through a PhD. This requires a partnership with the University and supervisor.

I can focus exclusively on finishing my doctorate and where I am going to go as an academic or my career aspirations when I become Dr Cooms! ... AIATSIS has helped me work out how to be an academic.

Val Cooms

Outcomes

Since the introduction of this funding, AIATSIS has engaged 25 Indigenous researchers over the six years of the program for various periods to undertake a range of research including mental health, education, entrepreneurship, housing, Commonwealth/State relations, chronic disease, artistic expression, among other topics.

The program has attracted a variety of people but three key catchments have emerged:

- Late term, part-time PhD candidates who have struggled to complete;

commitment to community based research and personal cultural obligations. There is not the same justification required or isolation that can be experienced by Indigenous staff within faculties. The multi-disciplinary nature of AIATSIS also aids the interdisciplinary approach that many Indigenous researchers develop. This has resulted in research collaborations across a range of disciplines in areas of critical study such as identity and representation, or wellbeing as well as applied to policy issues such as housing and justice.

The Indigenous coordinator position proved invaluable in ensuring that the cultural and social needs of those moving to Canberra were covered. This position proved most successful when the coordinator was also completing a PhD under the program.

The existence of a substantial cohort (up to 10 IVRFs at any one time) has proved invaluable in creating a supportive and productive environment for completion of projects. The emergence of cohorts of IVRFs and existing staff around particular subject areas, such as education or artistic expression, has also increased the team environment and support structures within the program.

AIATSIS introduced its thinking and learning to the Australian Research Council (ARC), during their review of the Discovery Indigenous Researcher Development program (DIRD). This led to changes to the DIRD program to introduce Indigenous Research Fellowships at the postdoctoral level. The Indigenous Fellowships are now also available at senior academic levels.¹⁵

Issues

1. *Limited mobility*

A significant number of applicants or interested individuals have expressed a desire to complete the Fellowship from their home base. However, with the limited funds available, to provide fellowships primarily on this basis would undermine some of the key purposes and outcomes of the program by reducing the impact of a concentrated period of research in a supportive environment. For AIATSIS, our Research Grants program provides an alternative that can be taken up without needing to spend time at AIATSIS. Nevertheless, this aspect of the demand for the program is unmet. We have had some success with hybrid arrangements where fellows complete a significant part of the fellowship at AIATSIS while returning home at intervals. This can be particularly important where postgraduate supervisors are based at the home institution.

2. *Ongoing employment, career pathways*

The IVRF Program was originally conceived as a short term researcher development program. However fellows under this program have provided additional strength to AIATSIS in key areas of education, health and the arts that would otherwise be absent. Fellows under the program have also expressed interest in continuing employment with AIATSIS after their fellowships to continue the research intensive experience. However we have no

Vignette #2

Lyndsay Urquhart, a young Aboriginal woman from the New South Wales South Coast, completed her degree at University of Technology Sydney in 2007 and took up international internships. She undertook a 3 month IVRF to explore ethical relationship between Aboriginal people and the cosmetics and aromatics industries.

Coming to AIATSIS was a dream for me. I got support from many of the older women at AIATSIS. I left a much stronger person and stronger in my identity as an Aboriginal person

Lyndsay decided not to pursue a higher degree immediately although it is now in her long term plan. She is now a research officer with the Rural and Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) where she is part of team that funds and administers a competitive grants program.

Key Learnings from the IVRF program

1. A large return on a small investment

The IVRF Program, by any standard, is a 'boutique' program. The limited investment is highly targeted to deliver significant outcomes and thereby provide outstanding value for money. With the chronic under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the research workforce, further investment could achieve exponential beneficial result if targeted and designed appropriately.

2. A culturally inclusive environment

AIATSIS provides a unique research environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, both in its sole focus on Indigenous issues and the high percentage of Indigenous staff and governing bodies of the organisations. Indigenist methodologies, community based projects, community accountability, ethical research and publishing practices are the norm rather than the exception. All staff are required to demonstrate a high level of cultural competence.

3. The value of a cohort

The importance of having a critical mass of Indigenous researchers in situ can not be underestimated, both in terms of the personal support structure but also in terms of developing thinking and improving personal expectations for success. In particular, current

The number of IVRFs who have arrived with a history of poor supervision and under-developed research skills has been concerning. We have adopted a coaching and mentoring approach based on project management/research planning, research and writing skills, and thesis completion.

7. Demand and capacity for research career participation

The level of interest in the program has revealed the depth of potential for the development of an Indigenous research workforce. The number of quality appointable candidates would not diminish if this program were doubled immediately. Again, the interest from the IVRFs for ongoing research careers remains an unmet demand.

Vignette #3:

Valerie Cooms sought out an IVRF after completing five years as the CEO of a Native Title Representative Body. Valerie's PhD in History has been languishing half finished for that period. The pressure of turning down high paying administrative positions to complete her PhD was exacerbated by her grand-parenting duties and her community responsibilities. The mature wage offered under the program made the decision to re-engage and complete her PhD that much more manageable.

If you want serious Indigenous research, you have to pay for it. It's good that AIATSIS has realised this through the Indigenous Researchers' Fund. I had to wait until my kids had grown up before I could afford to do the research and study I am doing now. Unless there are more Indigenous people writing and publishing, there's not a lot for other scholars to hang their theory on.'

Conclusions

The funding for the IVRF program has provided an opportunity for AIATSIS to support Indigenous research that it would not otherwise have had resources to in the past. It has proved an exciting opportunity for AIATSIS to encourage Indigenous research (both community and academic) and subsequently enhance the skills of Indigenous researchers and introduce new entrants to the research workforce.

Overall, the IVRF program has been an opportunity to implement a successful Indigenous program that has a direct success in supporting PhD completions and substantial research projects. The program has proved life changing for many of the participants.

¹ The membership criteria for AIATSIS are contained in the *AIATSIS Rules* and are based on a significant contribution to Indigenous Studies or to the Indigenous community.

² Australian Government, Budget 2011-12, Portfolio Budget Statements: Innovation Industry Science and Research, in \$000: AIATSIS 13,172; AIMS 30,883; ANSTO 165,579; CSIRO 720,415. Available at <http://www.innovation.gov.au/AboutUs/FinancialInformationandLegislation/BudgetInformation/Pages/default.aspx> accessed 20 August 2011

³ Macroeconomics 2009, p.7. The report revealed that over the six years to 2009, the research budgets of major government research agencies have increased on average by 4.7 percent. AIATSIS has had growth of only 1.5 percent. In real terms our appropriation for research has decreased by 6 percent. Funding per researcher has also declined by almost 1% while growing significantly across other government research agencies (e.g. ANSTO 7.28%; AIMS 5.28%; cf CSIRO - 0.7%). Following this report, AIATSIS was the only agency in the portfolio not to have received any part of the \$5.7 billion package for the higher education and innovation sector in the 2009-10 Budget.

⁴ The current staffing of the Research program exceeds 40 Equivalent Full Time staff. AIATSIS research is currently funded by more than 60% externally generated research funding. The majority of funding is from government sources.

⁵ The inaugural Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies conference held in 1961 resulted in the passing of the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Act 1964* (Cth) which was repealed and replaced by the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Act 1989* (Cth) (AIATSIS Act). The AIATSIS Act sets out the functions and governance of AIATSIS, including an independent governing Council.

⁶ In the 1970's around 24% of total AIATSIS funding was allocated to grants. This figure fell to 9.3% by the late 1980's, at which time the Council decided that 7.5% of the total AIATSIS budget should be allocated to grants.

⁷ The 2009 and 2010 rounds were nearly 80 per cent university administered applications.

⁸ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation. 2008. *Building Australia's Research Capacity: Report of the Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities*, Rec. 26, available at <<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/isi/research/report.htm>> accessed 20 August 2011.

⁹ Australian Government. 2008. *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report (The Bradley Review)*, pp. 3-4. See also Rec. 30. Available at <<http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/ReviewofAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>> accessed 20 August 2011.

¹⁰ Australian Government. 2008. *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report (The Bradley Review)*, p. 32. Available at <<http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/ReviewofAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>> accessed 20 August 2011.

¹¹ Terry Cutler. 2008. *Venturous Australia – Building Strength in Innovation: Review of the national innovation system (The Cutler Review)*. Rec. 7.13. Available at <<http://www.innovation.gov.au/Innovation/Policy/Pages/ReviewoftheNationalInnovationSystem.aspx>> accessed 20 August 2011.

¹² Australian Government. 2008. *Innovation Agenda*, Priority 2 and Priority 1, respectively.

¹³ *Research Skills for an Innovative Future: a research workforce strategy to cover the decade to 2020 and beyond* (19 April 2011), Priority 7.3.

¹⁴ Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC). 2011. *National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy*, pp.8ff. Available at <<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/HigherEducation/Programs/IHEAC/Pages/Home.aspx#nihews>> accessed 20 August 2011.

¹⁵ The Minister announced the IVRF and the ARC initiatives in a joint press release.

will profile and promote greater participation from researchers across the program and external research partners in this particular area of research.

The organisational structure that has been adopted will allow the natural emergence of teams or units, based on the NTRU model. We have identified the benefits of small teams of two or three researchers in being able to increase productivity and attract interest and funding (for example in health and language) in comparison to the traditional isolated single research fellow structure of the past. The Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowships have allowed new coalitions to emerge in education, history, and arts and literature. This has resulted in new external partnerships including the Blackwords/Austlitt partnership on Indigenous literature.

¹⁶ The two research programs are each headed by a Program Director at Associate Professor/Professorial level.