MAKING A DIFFERENCE

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS LEARNERS
FOREWORD

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is proud of its continuing and substantial contribution to improving learning outcomes for Indigenous Australians.¹ This contribution has included research, policy analysis, program evaluation, professional development, and the development of assessment tools and other resources. Our work has helped inform policy and practice.

Our research covers the early years of learning, lifelong learning, school education, higher education, transition to work and workforce development, health and wellbeing. It has been used to improve student engagement and academic performance, support teaching practice, inform policy development and decision making, support parents and carers, help mental health practitioners, engage communities, bring about systemic change, develop high quality awards programs and contribute to the growing evidence base in Indigenous education.

We have worked with Indigenous students, teachers, principals, support staff, parents and carers, community members, researchers and educators in urban, regional, rural and remote locations in Australia.

The purpose of this publication is to highlight and share some of the findings from the research and other projects ACER has undertaken in the area of Indigenous education.

Geoff Masters
Chief Executive, ACER

¹ The word ‘Indigenous’ is used in this publication to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
IMPROVING LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS

Taking a strengths-based approach

Much government policy language, and many of the instruments that test children’s performance, are grounded in a deficit model which focuses on the ‘gaps’ in Indigenous children’s learning rather than on the learning that already exists. However, a recent ACER study shows the importance of cultural knowledge and identity in the development of resilience, which in turn can be a protective factor facilitating school readiness.

ACER’s paper, which argues for a strengths-based approach towards Indigenous children starting school, was written in collaboration with a small team in the Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and is based on analysis of information from Footprints in Time: The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) and a review of the literature on resilience (Armstrong et al. 2012). The FaHCSIA team manages the LSIC project.

The study confirms that family support, strong cultural identity, good health, positive self-identity and engaging in shared activities such as storytelling, are likely to lead to resilience in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The review found that resilience is critical for successful transitions from home to school, as Indigenous children who possess the resilience attributes of social competence, autonomy, mastery, optimism and problem-solving skills are better able to adapt and learn. Additionally, the responses of LSIC parents and carers show the critical importance of family, and connections to land and culture in developing resilient children.

This ACER study is an important addition to existing research. New approaches that draw on resilience research are offering positive strategies for helping children make a successful transition from home learning to formal learning.

Working ‘two ways’

Other research undertaken by ACER confirms the importance of recognising and building on the strengths of Indigenous families. In 2012, ACER evaluated the fourth year of the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust Early Childhood Development program. During extensive consultations, ACER researchers learned from Warlpiri parents and carers about the practices that help make their ‘little kids grow strong’ and the qualities of an effective early childhood program for their children. These findings are being used to shape the next stage of the project.

The consultations were co-facilitated by local community members in places of their choosing and the evaluation findings were shared subsequently with communities. The discussions highlighted the importance of a ‘two ways’ approach to early years learning with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working side by side in each community to deliver playgroups and créches for children and families. The consultations also showed the critical importance of having mutually respectful and equal relationships in terms of research processes and protocols.

ACER’s publication Two Way Teaching and Learning: Toward culturally reflective and relevant education (Purdie et al. 2011) confirms the need for genuinely collaborative ways of working between mainstream and Indigenous cultures, schools and communities, if the underlying issues that impact on children’s educational outcomes are to be addressed effectively. The book consists of contributions from a range of well-respected researchers, educators and Indigenous community members.

Supporting early years learning in creative ways

ACER’s report on how television can be used to improve learning opportunities for Indigenous children (Lonsdale 2011) has been used as the basis for an innovative and ambitious project to develop a high quality television program aimed at Indigenous children aged three to six years. ACER has partnered with the Australian Children’s Television Foundation and the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care to develop this program.

The report shows how educational television programs can support children’s school readiness by building literacy and numeracy skills, cultural awareness, self-esteem and appropriate behaviours. Overseas studies indicate that educational television programs aimed at Indigenous preschool children can help raise awareness of language and cultural identity. Research shows that Indigenous ways of learning, grounded in connectedness to culture and community, are fundamental to quality early learning and care for Indigenous children.

ACER and its partners are currently seeking funding to develop a pilot episode of educationally sound and culturally appropriate content for young Indigenous children.
Improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students

ACER has made, and continues to make, a substantial contribution to research aimed at improving literacy and numeracy achievement for Indigenous students. Currently, ACER is evaluating the Closing the Gap – Expansion of intensive literacy and numeracy programs initiative for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The Closing the Gap programs build on existing successful approaches to teaching and learning literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students and are intended to provide an evidence base of innovative and effective approaches. ACER’s evaluation will be completed in 2013 but our research into the characteristics of effective literacy and numeracy practices for Indigenous children extends back many years.

In 2000, ACER and a team of Indigenous consultants initiated a longitudinal research project with a group of Indigenous students in 13 schools across Australia during the early years of schooling. Phase 1 of the Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Surveys for Indigenous Students (ILLANS) monitored the English literacy and numeracy achievements of this cohort from school entry until Year 3 (Frigo et al. 2003). Phase 2 of the ILLANS project followed students through Years 3 to 6 of primary school (2003 to 2006) (Purdie et al. 2011). While the study showed growth in English literacy and numeracy skills across time and showed that the rate of development for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was similar, it also showed that the gap in average achievement that is evident at the beginning of Year 3 remains relatively consistent to the final year of primary school. However, the ILLANS study also showed great variability across schools, with many Indigenous students achieving as well as or better than the average performance of all students, thus highlighting the importance of being able to isolate critical school-level factors that support Indigenous children to achieve highly.

Some enabling factors identified in the study included teaching that builds on students’ strengths and adapts to their different learning styles, having strong links between schools and Indigenous communities, promoting student attendance, and developing and maintaining a school culture in which Indigenous students feel included and supported to learn.

Improving numeracy

ACER has undertaken a range of projects aimed at improving numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students. For one such project ACER was commissioned by DEEWR (then called the Department of Education, Science and Training), on behalf of the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee Senior Officials Working Party on Indigenous Education, to investigate the numeracy abilities of young Indigenous children upon entry to school (Purdie and Frigo 2005). The purpose of the study was to inform government policy and programs aimed at improving numeracy outcomes for Indigenous children.

The report questioned existing interpretations and assessment of spatial abilities, such as the use of pen-and-paper tests, to measure the spatial ability of Indigenous children. A key finding was that numeracy definitions, their operationalisation and assessment methods did not sufficiently take into account the anecdotal literature about Indigenous ways of learning and alternative ways of using and showing numeracy subskills. The authors concluded that curriculum writers and test developers need to better understand the importance of cultural factors in mathematical interpretations and enactments, and develop numeracy programs and assessment tools that take these into account.

An earlier ACER review of research into numeracy development and Indigenous primary school students in New South Wales (Frigo 1999) also showed the importance of developing culturally appropriate and contextually relevant content for numeracy resources. The review found that language plays a central role in mathematics classrooms and that knowledge of ‘mathematical English’ is critical if Indigenous children whose first language is not standard Australian English are successfully to learn and apply Western mathematical concepts. The purpose of the review was to provide a theoretical framework that would inform the development of numeracy materials to support teachers of Aboriginal children in New South Wales primary schools.

Building on this earlier review of the literature on numeracy programs, Frigo and Simpson (2001) focused on the critical issues related to the acquisition and ongoing development of numeracy skills among Indigenous students, including the issue of English literacy; the need to consult with Indigenous educators at all stages of the syllabus development and evaluation; and the need to explicitly encourage schools and teachers to develop partnerships with local Indigenous communities and families. The report and its recommendations subsequently informed revision of the NSW Years K–10 Mathematics syllabus for the NSW Board of Studies.

Improving literacy

ACER’s evaluation of the Aboriginal Literacy Strategy (ALS) for the Western Australian Department of Education (Purdie et al. 2009) was aimed at identifying positive outcomes, factors inhibiting progress and ways of improving the effectiveness of the ALS. The ALS approach involves structured, daily literacy sessions and the explicit teaching of phonics. The effectiveness of daily literacy sessions was found to depend to a large extent on the professional learning and ongoing support provided to teachers. The authors identified several major areas of action to strengthen the literacy and language skills of Aboriginal students in remote locations, including the provision of coherent, coordinated, state-wide support for the ongoing implementation of the ALS and the delivery of professional development that would ensure ongoing recognition of the English as a Second Language or English as a Second Dialect (ESL/ESD) backgrounds of students in remote locations and practice based on sound ESL/ESD principles.

The report made a number of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the ALS. ACER’s evaluation of the University of Canberra’s Scaffolding Literacy Program for Indigenous Students (Cresswell et al. 2002) also showed the importance of structured and culturally appropriate approaches to learning literacy. The report found the scaffolding approach to be an effective means of improving the literacy skills of Indigenous students, with
the students in the program achieving ‘at a much higher level than if they had followed the normal course of events in pursuing literacy skills’.

The Scaffolding Literacy Program’s intensive and structured teacher support enabled students with lower literacy skills to read the same texts as their more highly skilled peers. The model is underpinned by a positive rather than a deficit view of children’s potential progress.

The study, which was funded by the Australian Government’s School Languages Program, provided a snapshot of existing programs catering for Indigenous language education in schools across Australia. A key finding was that learning an Indigenous language can enhance a range of social and academic outcomes for all students. The report, which was released by the then Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, made key recommendations designed to improve the sustainability and quality of Indigenous languages programs delivered in Australian schools. The Australian Government has since invested heavily in supporting languages education, including Indigenous languages education, in Australian schools.

Supporting the learning of Indigenous languages

A study conducted by ACER for DEEWR found that more than 16,000 Indigenous students and 13,000 non-Indigenous students located in 260 Australian schools were involved in an Indigenous language program and that more than 80 different Indigenous languages were being taught in schools throughout Australia (Purdie et al. 2008).

The study found that participation in the program’s professional development increased teachers’ understanding of more appropriate strategies for teaching literacy to Indigenous children. While the scaffolding program is no longer in operation, the principles of high expectations, structure and intensive literacy support for Indigenous students which were found to be effective in the original program have formed the basis for subsequent accelerated literacy programs, such as the National Accelerated Literacy Program.

Assessing computer technology in improving learning

ACER has undertaken several evaluations of programs which use computer technology to improve learning for Indigenous students. The One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) program is designed to support the learning of children in poor and developing countries. A 2009 ACER review of the literature on the impact of the OLPC program found very few robust evaluations had been done of this program (Nugroho and Lonsdale 2009). ACER has since reviewed the literature periodically and has found that the knowledge base is steadily expanding with more evaluations of OLPC deployments and one-on-one computing in general being conducted.

ACER evaluated an Australian OLPC pilot in three remote schools (Lonsdale 2010; Milgate 2010). The aim of the evaluation was to identify the extent to which laptops were contributing to improving Indigenous students’ attendance in the trial schools and enhancing teaching and learning. ACER’s findings came at an early stage in the trial when the program was experiencing some technical difficulties. While it was too early to show a direct connection between the use of laptops and improved student outcomes, ACER found anecdotal evidence of increased student engagement and achievement, mainly in classes where teachers were comfortable with the technology and able to exploit its potential.

ACER also evaluated a pilot OLPC program in the Solomon Islands. The Solomon Islands was the first country to design an evaluation framework for the OLPC program in the Pacific Region. In 2009, ACER was commissioned by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development to review the impact of the program in three remote schools in Marovo Lagoon (Lonsdale and Wilkinson 2010). Interviews were conducted with students, parents, teachers and community members in Solomon Islands Pidgin and English. ACER found that the laptops were making a positive difference for students and teachers. The evaluation helped inform the Ministry’s decisions about the expansion of the project, the approach taken, the project’s sustainability and the level of financial and technical support needed.

Measuring the achievement of Indigenous secondary school students

In addition to reporting national and international education findings, tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) also enable ACER to undertake specific analyses of the achievement of Indigenous Australian children in relation to their non-Indigenous peers.

Analyses of the 2003 TIMSS data, for example, show considerable differences in the level of Indigenous and non-Indigenous student achievement in mathematics and science, and that only a low proportion of Indigenous Australian students were reaching TIMSS international benchmarks (Thomson et al. 2006).

PISA monitors the performance of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy. A 2009 ACER analysis of the achievements of Indigenous students in PISA 2000, 2003 and 2006 found that they were over-represented at the lower levels of proficiency in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, and under-represented at the higher levels (De Bortoli and Thomson 2009).
Increasing Indigenous student engagement

The national Sporting Chance Program uses sport and recreation as a ‘hook’ to encourage improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students. ACER evaluated the program in 2011, including reviewing the literature on student engagement and developing a set of performance indicators to help measure outcomes for Indigenous students (Lonsdale et al. 2011).

An important source of information about the impact of the program came from students to a survey asking for their views. Students described what they had learned, what they liked most about Sporting Academies or engagement had made to their lives. Year 11 and 12 students indicated their future study and career aspirations. For these students, school represented a safe and engaging environment where they could feel culturally strong. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, particularly in relation to student attitudes to school, self-identity, and sense of pride in being Indigenous and their self-

The four key elements associated with student engagement highlighted in the evaluation were positive self-identity; sense of belonging; participation; and attendance.

Increasing Indigenous student attendance and retention

In 2010, ACER reviewed the literature on Indigenous students’ attendance and retention (Purdie and Buckley 2010). Despite some improvements in recent years, there still remains a large gap between attendance and retention rates for Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers.

ACER’s report confirmed the complex and contextual nature of the reasons for this non-attendance and non-completion. A key finding from the study was the lack of high quality evaluations of approaches to this problem. Research shows the short- and long-term risks that are associated with regular absence from school, yet there are few publicly available evaluations that offer credible evidence of targets or key outcomes being achieved. Of the approaches that have been shown to be effective, a common feature appears to be a high level of engagement with parents and community based organisations.

One of the paper’s recommendations was that any new programs or strategies for improvement should build in monitoring and evaluation components.
Supporting Successful Post-School Transitions

Improving Year 12 and post-school pathways for Indigenous students

One of the targets adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians was to halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.

In 2011, ACER prepared a report for the COAG Reform Council which analysed performance data relating to Year 12 or Certificate II attainment of Indigenous young people and reviewed the literature on existing programs for Indigenous students and other related policy initiatives (Ainley et al. 2011). One of the aims of the study was to assist COAG to better understand variations across jurisdictions.

ACER’s quantitative analyses of data found that while there was an increase in the apparent retention rate of Indigenous students from the first year of secondary school over the period 1995 to 2009, the corresponding rate for non-Indigenous students also increased. If these rates of change were to continue, the COAG targets for Year 12 in 2020 would not be met.

The analysis also found that while numbers of Indigenous enrolments in vocational education and training (VET) had increased at rates higher than those for non-Indigenous persons, this increase did not fully compensate for the lower apparent retention rates and consequent attainment of Year 12 experienced by Indigenous school students. Additionally, the courses for which Indigenous young people were enrolled were at lower certificate levels.

These findings are consistent with earlier findings from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). ACER’s analysis of LSAY data based on the 1995 and 1998 cohorts of Year 9 students showed that while most Year 9 Indigenous students had a positive perception of school and of themselves, and aspired to complete Year 12 they were less likely to complete Year 12 than their non-Indigenous peers, although they participated in VET at about the same rate (Rothman et al. 2005). The LSAY data also showed that by the age of 22, Indigenous young people were engaged in full-time work to a similar extent as their non-Indigenous peers but were less likely to be in full-time study or part-time work that could provide a stepping stone to ongoing involvement in the labour market. Overall, the proportion of young Indigenous people who were not working was higher than for non-Indigenous young people from the same cohorts.

Because studies such as LSAY follow young people over time they can provide insights into the educational and life experiences of successive cohorts of young people that might not be available from other research.

Improving transition outcomes for Indigenous young people

In 2009, ACER prepared a report for the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development to identify the key success factors associated with programs that have improved transition outcomes for Indigenous young people (Brown et al 2009). ACER found that implementation of a successful transitions program would require a coordinated effort using a whole-of-government approach characterised by cross-agency collaboration and close contact with the local community. It would also need monitoring and reporting against target outcomes. This kind of monitoring would help bring about continuous improvement and enable an evidence base to be built to help future policy and program development. ACER’s findings and recommendations were ultimately incorporated into Mouda Warrin Groo: Pathways to a better economic future, a report of the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Development Group (2010).

The findings were consistent with an earlier review conducted by ACER, which was commissioned by the Task Force on School to Work Transition for Indigenous Australians in the then Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Long et al. 1998). This report consisted of a literature review (which focused on issues relevant to work transition for Indigenous young people and effective solutions) and statistical analysis (which examined the participation rates of young Indigenous people in schooling, post-school education, training and employment, as well as the nature and extent of school-to-work pathways which are being followed).

The report confirmed that Indigenous young people experience multiple disadvantage at each transition point. It was also found that even when educational attainment was the same for Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people in similar geographic locations, employment opportunities for Indigenous youth were poorer than for their non-Indigenous counterparts.

The project was aimed at identifying the main issues being faced by Indigenous youth in the transition from school to work and considering ways in which programs and policies could be enhanced to help overcome the barriers to education and employment.

Improving employment outcomes

In 2006 ACER reviewed the literature to identify the barriers to, and successful drivers of, workforce participation for Indigenous Victorians (Purdie et al 2006). The report was prepared for the State Services Authority to support the development of policy in this area.

The main barriers were found to be lack of engagement with Indigenous communities; low levels of formal education and training; discrimination; and geographic location. The report urged the development of a coherent policy framework; collaborative interactions with Indigenous individuals, organisations and communities and with public and private sector bodies; and high levels of sustained and committed action to bring about change. The report helped inform subsequent strategic direction in Victoria.

More recently, ACER also provided advice regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of entry level employment initiatives proposed in Karretta Yirrambi: An employer toolkit to help grow Aboriginal employment in your organisation, a framework developed by the Victorian Government to increase Aboriginal participation in the Victorian public sector.

Improving higher education outcomes

In 2011, an expert panel chaired by Professor Larissa Behrendt (Professor of Law and Indigenous Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney), undertook a review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for DEEWR. The panel examined how higher education outcomes among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contribute to nation building and the reduction of Indigenous disadvantage.

ACER was commissioned to prepare a background research paper that would contribute to the panel’s considerations (ACER 2011b). The paper identified some of the themes that have emerged in the growing global discourse on Indigenous education in the higher education sector, including Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy; Indigenous studies; and Indigenous research and methodologies.

Other themes to surface in the literature review and information collected by ACER from universities related to the level and quality of support for Indigenous students and staff; cross-cultural issues to do with teaching, research and researchers; access for rural and remote students; issues to do with enrolment and retention; leadership; success for Indigenous students; and careers, professional focus areas and working in Indigenous communities.

As part of the same review ACER also supported the work of the Review Secretariat team by summarising and analysing the 77 submissions that were received.

Because studies such as LSAY follow young people over time they can provide insights into the educational and life experiences of successive cohorts of young people that might not be available from other research.
IMPROVING HEALTH AND WELLBEING OUTCOMES

In addition to its strong focus on improving outcomes for Indigenous learners, ACER has also worked on projects aimed at improving health-related outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

In conjunction with the Kulunga Research Network (Telethon Institute for Child Health Research), and with funding from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, ACER has developed a key resource for health professionals and students training to be mental health workers: Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice (Purdie et al. 2010).

This comprehensive practical resource is underpinned by a set of principles which recognise that the concept of health needs to be viewed holistically; land is central to the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians; self-determination is central to the provision of services; past experiences of trauma and loss have impacted on cultural wellbeing over generations; family and kinship are central to wellbeing; a variety of cultures, languages, kinships and tribes exist among Indigenous Australians; and the strengths, endurance and creativity of Indigenous Australians need to be recognised.

By examining the historical, social, cultural and policy contexts which have helped shape the mental wellbeing of Indigenous Australians, the book provides a context in which mental health issues can be better understood by practitioners.

Another significant health-related resource which ACER has co-developed is Shoulder to Shoulder: Information for Aboriginal families who have a child or young person with a disability. As part of the NSW Government’s Stronger Together: A new direction for disability services in NSW 2006-2016 strategic approach, ACER and Gavin Jones Communications were commissioned to develop a booklet to support Aboriginal families who have a child or young person with a disability.

‘Disability’ here is defined as a medical, physical or intellectual condition that hinders children from performing everyday activities without some type of help. The booklet provides information about organisations that can help Aboriginal families. The resource also includes the stories of some Aboriginal families and their experiences of caring for a child with a disability.

ACER has also reviewed programs in Indigenous health. For example, ACER conducted an evaluation of the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services (CARHDS). The review found that CARHDS was providing an excellent service within the limits of its existing capacity and funding. It was found that increased support would enable CARHDS’ contribution to the goal of improving Indigenous health in remote communities in the Northern Territory to be expanded. Two sets of recommendations were made: one set for the CARHDS organisation for internal consideration and one set for the Northern Territory Government regarding some of the issues that had been identified. The review helped inform CARHDS strategic planning.

CONTRIBUTING TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In addition to the research reports, publications and resources developed for teachers and other educators, ACER has also held a very successful annual conference on the theme of Indigenous Education: Pathways to success (ACER 2011a).

The conference brought together experts in Indigenous cultures, education, early childhood health and government policy, with the aim of working together to support Indigenous learning. Presentations highlighted the conditions, contexts, curriculum, pedagogy and practices that have helped contribute to successful pathways for Indigenous students. Conference presenters and keynote speakers explored the issues, and shared research findings and strategies that have been effective.

SUPPORTING RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS ACHIEVEMENT

The prestigious Deadly Awards celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s outstanding achievements in a range of fields, including sport, the arts and work with communities.

In 2011, ACER reviewed the Deadly Awards’ nomination and voting system on behalf of Vibe Australia (Lonsdale et al. 2011). As part of the review ACER examined a range of national and international Indigenous award systems and conducted telephone interviews with key Indigenous Australians with knowledge of the Deadly Awards. The purpose of the consultations was to identify what was already working well and which aspects of the Deadly Awards might be improved. ACER provided Vibe Australia with a robust and transparent nomination and voting system that could be implemented in a cost effective way.

Deadly Vibe is a magazine which aims to improve Indigenous students’ academic and social outcomes, including literacy and numeracy learning, self-esteem and self-concept, regular school attendance and retention, career and employment opportunities, and healthy lifestyles. In 2004, ACER’s evaluation of the program found that the magazine was remarkably successful, with strong appeal to students in urban, regional and remote locations (Purdie et al. 2004). Evidence from teachers and students confirmed the efficacy of the magazine in terms of its positive impact on students’ attitudes, knowledge and achievement in the areas of literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention, career aspirations, health and Indigenous culture.

Vibe Alive is a two-day festival for students of all cultures and backgrounds. The festival aims to help connect Indigenous students with appropriate role models through music, sport, dance and art. ACER was commissioned to survey teachers at the conclusion of each event to gauge the impact and level of awareness of the Vibe Alive key messages (Purdie 2009). Teachers reported that attending the festival was likely to ‘help students learn more about traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures’, ‘promote healthy lifestyles’, and encourage students to believe in their own abilities and become more aware of future training and career opportunities.

ACER’s positive findings were included in a Vibe Alive factsheet designed to celebrate Indigenous cultures.
Much of ACER’s work in Indigenous education involves providing strategic advice to systems and jurisdictions. Many of the projects already referred to have helped inform decision-making, curriculum and program development, and approaches to assessment.

In 2012, ACER was commissioned by the Productivity Commission, on behalf of the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, to conduct a review of the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: key indicators (OID) report (ACER 2012). ACER conducted extensive consultations with governments, Indigenous organisations and research bodies, using a mix of face-to-face meetings and forums, telephone interviews and surveys. ACER also undertook a benchmarking comparison between the OID report and other similar publications.

Key strengths of the OID report were seen to be the breadth of the information provided, disaggregation of data, time series analyses, clear identification of progress towards reaching targets, information around successful initiatives, and provision of information at different levels of detail and in different formats (text/ commentator/ charts and tables; hard and soft copy) to meet the needs of a variety of users.

The most commonly identified limitations were around the reporting of data, the need for greater analysis of the interconnections and linkages between indicators, and the need for a more strengths-based approach in the reporting of Indigenous experience. The report, with recommendations, was released in August 2012 for consideration by the Steering Committee.

A different kind of evaluation, which also occurred within the broader context of the Commonwealth Government’s Closing the Gap initiative, was undertaken by ACER in 2011 as part of an evaluation of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) (Rothman et al. 2011). ACER was commissioned to evaluate the impact of the ‘Enhancing Education’ measure of the NTER.

ACER’s evaluation found that while considerable resources had been invested in new school buildings, teacher support programs, early childhood programs, school nutrition programs and new teacher housing, it was too early to see the effects of these initiatives on student outcomes. The report found some evidence of improvement in National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy results for Year 3 students in the NTER schools, but the majority of students in the NTER schools were still not meeting national minimum standards in reading, writing and numeracy. There was also no observable improvement in school attendance. The report on educational impact concluded that successful initiatives introduced as part of the NTER needed to become mainstream by being integrated with other initiatives in the Northern Territory.

In 2011 ACER was commissioned to develop some ideas and questions to support the NSW Ministerial Taskforce for Aboriginal Affairs government consultation with Aboriginal communities and other stakeholders. ACER contributed to one of three Community Discussion Papers prepared by the Taskforce. The purpose of the paper was to invite feedback that would contribute to the development of an Aboriginal affairs strategy for NSW in the wake of reports from the NSW Auditor General and NSW Ombudsman which showed that existing approaches were not delivering the improvements needed.

The conclusions drawn in the NSW reports reflect an ongoing issue in Indigenous education. In 2004, ACER reviewed current policy and research into Indigenous education outcomes to identify why Indigenous disadvantage persists despite extensive government and community effort and resources. The review found that while there had been some improvement in educational outcomes for Indigenous learners, equitable outcomes were still not being achieved.

The authors called for a national research agenda into Indigenous education outcomes and for different kinds of research methodologies to be used, including formal inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and research.

Since the report was written, Commonwealth and state governments have continued to develop and implement policies aimed at improving outcomes for Indigenous students. While there is some evidence of progress, the core findings from ACER’s 2004 study are still relevant today.
REFERENCES


