

## Submission to the Consultation on the Accord Interim Report<sup>1</sup>

**Bronwyn Fredericks, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, James Ward, and Brendan Hokowhitu**  
**Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre for Indigenous Futures**  
**The University of Queensland**  
**August 2023**

In July 2022 the Productivity Commission released the second Annual Data Compilation Report<sup>2</sup> which was updated in February 2023. This report tracks progress and the efficacy of the government's response to the reforms and milestones set out in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap<sup>3</sup>.

This Agreement was signed between the Collation of the Peaks and the Australian Government in 2020 in good faith of developing new partnerships that would lead to the closure of the disparate outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples which have persisted since colonisation.

While the report cautions that the data analysed is within its infancy – with its terms of references, methodologies, datasets, and definitions still being modified – it nonetheless provides an indication of whether the government has made meaningful attempts to deliver on its commitment to develop partnerships that listens, responds to, and empowers Indigenous communities.

The report documents progress in response to the four Priority Reforms and 17 Socioeconomic areas that make up the National Closing the Gap Agreement. The Priority Reforms correspond to the structural and policy mechanisms needed to support new partnerships between governments, service providers and communities and the 17 indicators largely reflect efforts to improve the daily lived experiences of Indigenous peoples.

The four priority reforms aim to:

1. Develop formal partnerships and shared decision making between all levels of governments and Indigenous peoples.
2. Build the community-controlled sector.
3. Transform government organisations.
4. Share access to data and information at a regional level.

The 17 socioeconomic outcomes outlined in the *Annual Data Compilation Report (2022)* have mixed results. Whilst improvements can be seen in some areas, these are counterbalanced by disturbing regressions.

---

<sup>1</sup> This submission has been published at <https://www.croakey.org/indigenous-led-and-controlled-research-is-pivotal-to-closing-the-gap/>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government: Productivity Commission 2022. *Closing the Gap: Annual Data Compilation Report July 2022*, Canberra, Productivity Commission. <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/annual-data-report> [Accessed 29 July 2022].

<sup>3</sup> Coalition of Peaks. 2020. *New National Agreement on Closing the Gap* [Online]. Available: <https://coalitionofpeaks.org.au/new-national-agreement-on-closing-the-gap/> [Accessed 28 July 2020].

For example, there is slight improvement of the number of children held in detention with indicators pointing towards reaching the goal of an (albeit minimal) 30 percent reduction. This, however, is coupled with the reality that the number of children in out of home care has increased.

Access to land for cultural business and wellbeing is on track to meet its target of a 15 percent increase, yet access to sea country is lagging. In the field of education, preschool enrolments have improved by 20 percentage points since 2016 but this is counterbalanced with a regression of the developmental aptitude of students entering school.

Trends in health and wellbeing also show that whilst healthy birthweights of newborns have increased, life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is not on track to meet parity, and suicide rates have increased.<sup>4</sup>

*What is missing?*

And while the Closing the Gap has been a strategy since 2007, with a refreshed approach occurring in 2020, we really need to question what is missing in the mix.

The recent Commonwealth Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (2023) reveals that a range of opportunities have been overlooked, including an investment in Indigenous research scholarships and an expansion of funded programs and initiatives for specific research focused on Closing the Gap. This is a gap.

Indigenous PhD graduates are now tracking at more than 500 nationally and span faculties, professions, disciplines, and methods and occupy unique positions in the academy. Considerable efforts are underway to improve this, however, much more could be done.

Indigenous scholars bring to the academy and their work Indigenous sciences blended with western based methods, as well as a genuine intent to translate research to policies that are intended to redress our collective futures.<sup>5</sup> The research being conducted by many Indigenous scholars offers insights that are unattainable by their non-Indigenous counterparts, for they may be grounded in relationality<sup>6</sup>, and provide firsthand accounts of the pervasiveness of colonisation and the ongoing ripples that impact on our lives.

Yet Indigenous scholars are largely underrepresented in the Coalition of Peaks and in agenda setting and measurement guidance for Closing the Gap. This surely has to change.

While reports such as the *Annual Data Compilation Report* are useful in opening dialogue pertaining to government accountability, they alone cannot produce the right comprehensive data as well as longitudinal evidence needed to create systemic change.

*Holistic approaches are needed.*

---

<sup>4</sup> Dudgeon, P., Kelly, K. & Walker, R. 2010. Closing the gaps in and through Indigenous health research: Guidelines, processes and practices. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 81-91.

<sup>5</sup> nirakn. 2022 (2013). *Home - National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network* [Online]. Available: <https://www.nirakn.edu.au/> [Accessed 1 August 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Moreton-Robinson, A. 2013. Towards an Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28, 331-347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2013.876664>

Indigenous-led and controlled research, that adopts a transdisciplinary approach, Indigenous paradigms, and western methods, and that holistically addresses socioeconomic outcomes and their social determinants, must lie central to “Closing the Gap.”

To develop accurate measurements that gauge socioeconomic improvement, the *Annual Data Compilation Report* states that further work is needed to identify:

indicators using data that better capture Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s perspectives – that is, investigating what community controlled data sets are available that could replace, supplement and/or enhance existing datasets that are predominately government controlled.

Developing such measurements will require qualitative and quantitative Indigenous research methods across disciplines, that incorporates translation frameworks that embody Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, to gain the best results in research for Indigenous peoples that address national priorities. We need mechanisms that enable longitudinal qualitative studies, which can offer deeper insights than quantitative data which continue to describe what social problems exist but not how they are produced, or the actions and solutions required.

Indigenous research provides the evidence needed to evaluate existing community-controlled datasets and determine what reforms are needed and where. Independent assessment from Indigenous-led and controlled research hubs, centres of excellence, and institutes are imperative to triangulate data and provide empirical community-based examples that are translatable to effective government policies.

Addressing a single “gap” in siloes or in isolation will not lead to improved outcomes. Coordinated and collaborative approaches that evaluate the interconnections of outcomes across health and wellbeing, education and economies, and law and justice are needed. Indigenous-led research has access to data and knowledge of how best to attain it in culturally safe and empowering ways, for groups that are currently overlooked, such as children with disability in out of home care.

In fact, the report acknowledges that “for eight of the targets under the 17 socioeconomic outcome areas, no new data are available since the baseline year.” The report further states that more data is needed on the “supporting indicators” which “provide information on the drivers of the outcomes and other contextual factors” of socioeconomic outcomes. However, what these “supporting indicators” are not clearly defined.

Indigenous research is foundational to understanding and developing new indicators. The gap in datasets speaks to the need for more centralised research institutes that are led and controlled by Indigenous scholars to undertake the research and develop new indicators, instruments, and measures.

Supporting and financing Indigenous-led research and scholarship is essential to providing the knowledge and evidence required to develop models and frameworks of evaluations upon which the new approach to Closing the Gap depends, and programs and initiatives which work to Close the Gap and improve the outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In essence, Indigenous-led and controlled research is pivotal to “closing the gap”.