Australian Government

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Closing the gap
clearinghouse

ANNUAL REPORT

2009–10

Preface

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has made a range of commitments to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians and in particular provide for a better future for Indigenous children. These commitments have re-focussed the efforts of everyone working for a better future for Australia's Indigenous people.

The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse was established as part of these commitments to bring together evidence-based research on what works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage within the seven building blocks laid out by COAG. Efforts to achieve the Closing the Gap targets all depend on access to timely, high quality and useable evidence within the building blocks of early childhood, schooling, health, economic participation, healthy homes, safe communities and governance and leadership.

Improving the development and uptake of relevant research into government policy making processes is an international challenge. As an intermediary body linking researchers and policy makers dealing with the complex issues of Indigenous disadvantage, the Clearinghouse is at the leading edge of these efforts.

This report outlines our first year of operation and the significant achievements accomplished in that time. By building on these attainments and refining the products and services we offer to our stakeholders and users, the Clearinghouse aims to continue its important contribution to Closing the Gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Emeritus Professor Meredith Edwards

Chair, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Board
May 2011

About the Clearinghouse

The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse was established by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to bring together evidence-based research on overcoming disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. It collects, systematically analyses and synthesises this evidence to reach conclusions about what works. It adds value by translating research findings into a format applicable for the needs of decision-makers and policy analysts.

Achievements Year 1

In its first year of operation the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse developed a range of evidence-based products, which have been available online since October 2009.

- **The Assessed Collection**—298 pieces of research, mainly program evaluations, were assessed and findings were summarised to build this Collection.
- **Issues papers and resource sheets**—two issues papers (on schooling) and six resource sheets (on schooling, health, economic participation and safe communities) were produced. These products analyse and synthesise available evidence for easy reference.
- **The Research and Evaluation Register**—an online list of research and evaluation projects across Australia that are relevant to improving Indigenous outcomes and to the COAG building blocks. Recent government research and evaluation activities were mainly in the health building block category (210 items), followed by schooling (98) and safe communities (93).

The Clearinghouse also includes:

- **an online General Collection**—5,000 items arranged by the seven COAG building blocks and including research material relevant to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage
- **website links** to other clearinghouses and information services, and to material available through other databases and catalogues
- **a help desk service**.

Key learnings

Key learnings from Year 1 have been summarised in the Clearinghouse publication *What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage 2009–10: key learnings and gaps in the evidence,* and more details can be found in the publication.

The paper identified overarching themes for successful programs in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. These findings were very similar to views of Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders, community development principles, 'common sense' approaches, and are consistent with the service delivery principles for programs and services for Indigenous Australians set out in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.

The important contribution provided by the Clearinghouse was the rigour and impartiality through which available data was considered. The convergence between 'real world experience', government principles for action and the technical assessment provided by the Clearinghouse builds confidence that emerging themes provide a solid basis for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

What works

- **Community involvement and engagement.** For example, key success factors in Indigenous community-based alcohol and substance-abuse programs were strong leadership, strong community–member engagement, appropriate infrastructure and use of a paid workforce to ensure long-term sustainability.

- **Adequate resourcing and planned and comprehensive interventions.** For example, a systematic approach with appropriate funding arrests the escalating epidemic of end-stage kidney failure, reduces suffering for Indigenous people and saves resources. A strong sense of community ownership and control is a key element in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

- **Respect for language and culture.** For example, capacity building of Indigenous families and respect for culture and different learning style were considered to be important for engaging Indigenous families in school readiness programs.

- **Working together through partnerships, networks and shared leadership.** For example, an Aboriginal-driven program increased knowledge about nutrition, exercise, obesity and chronic diseases, including diabetes. The educational component, participation of local Indigenous people in the program and committed partnerships with the organisations involved were important to the program's success.

- **Development of social capital.** For example, the Communities for Children initiative, under the Australian Government's former strategy (the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–2009) highlighted the importance of a collaborative approach to maternal and child health, child-friendly communities, early learning and care, supporting families and parents, and working together in partnership.

- **Recognising underlying social determinants.** For example, data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children demonstrated that financial disadvantage was one factor among other variables that may affect school readiness and progress for young children.

- **Commitment to doing projects with, not for, Indigenous people.** For example, the evaluation of the NSW Count Me In Too Indigenous numeracy program found that contextual learning was successful and critical, professional development for teachers was essential, effective relationships were vital and Aboriginal community buy-in was also essential for ongoing success.

- **Creative collaboration that builds bridges between public agencies and the community and coordination between communities, non-government and government to prevent duplication of effort.** For example, a collaborative project between health and education workers at a primary public school in South Australia (The Wadu Wellness project), in which a number of children were screened, has resulted in follow-up and support for children for hearing problems and dental treatment, and social and emotional support.

- **Understanding that issues are complex and contextual.** For example, frequent house moves, neighbourhood conflict, functionality of housing amenities and high rental costs were found to have an impact on children's schooling.

What doesn't work

- **'One size fits all' approaches.** For example, residential treatment for alcohol and other drugs dependency is generally not more effective than non-residential treatment. However, evidence indicates that residential treatment is more effective for clients with more severe deterioration, less social stability and high relapse risk. As these are characteristics of many Indigenous clients, residential treatment may be most appropriate.

- **Lack of collaboration and poor access to services.** For example, successful interventions require the integration of health services to provide continuity of care, community involvement and local leadership in health-care delivery and culturally appropriate mainstream services. These steps help to ensure the suitability and availability of services, which can thereby improve access by Indigenous Australians.

- **External authorities imposing change and reporting requirements.** For example, a review of evidence from seven rigorously evaluated programs that linked school attendance with welfare payments in the United States found that sanction-only programs have a negligible effect on attendance, but that case management was the most critical variable.

- **Interventions without local Indigenous community control and culturally appropriate adaptation.** For example, evidence indicated external imposition of 'local dry area bans' (where consumption of alcohol is prohibited within a set distance of licensed premises) was ineffective and only served to move the site of public drinking, often to areas where the risk of harm was greater.

- **Short-term, one-off funding, piecemeal interventions, provision of services in isolation and failure to develop Indigenous capacity to provide services.** For example, a one-off health assessment with community feedback and an increase in health service use was unlikely to produce long-term health benefits and improvements. An ongoing focus on community development and sustained population health intervention are needed.

Gaps in the evidence

Analysis of the Clearinghouse resources indicated that there was a lack of high-quality quantitative research in both the Australian and the Indigenous contexts. Many of the Australian Indigenous studies were descriptive, while many of the quantitative studies did not include comparison groups that would enable the impact of programs or strategies on Indigenous disadvantage to be determined.

Research relating to the entire Australian population, and overseas research, was also examined and its possible application to Indigenous communities considered. For some interventions, there was evidence of programs and strategies that work for these populations and therefore have the potential to address Indigenous disadvantage.

The gaps in the evidence should not impede the needed program development and implementation. In some cases, such as use of alcohol and other drugs, there was ample evidence to show what can be done to reduce harm. In others, where data gaps are more significant, the importance of ongoing learning loops is significantly increased. Such ongoing learning should be based on development and negotiation of shared objectives with target communities and a commitment to long-term funding certainty. Environments of funding certainty and trust promote implementation processes that expect 'teething problems', promote innovation and experimentation, learn from both setbacks and achievements and are adaptive enough to integrate learnings quickly.

Progress towards Clearinghouse objectives

The Clearinghouse operations have focused on achieving the five objectives outlined in the work plan. This section outlines the progress towards these objectives and implications for key stakeholders.

Build a cumulative evidence base for what works to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage

The Clearinghouse provides a unique collection of evidence for policy makers and researchers. The Assessed Collection includes summaries of the key findings of each item, as well as an assessment of the quality or rigour of the evidence, and the implications of the research for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

In addition, the Clearinghouse's issues papers and resource sheets review the overall breadth of evidence on a particular topic, and discuss the applicability of specific policies and or programs to Indigenous contexts. In the first year the Clearinghouse published four papers in the schooling building block, two in the health building block, and one each in the economic participation and safe communities building blocks. These issues papers and resource sheets contribute to the evidence base by summarising what works and what doesn't work, and what is unknown.
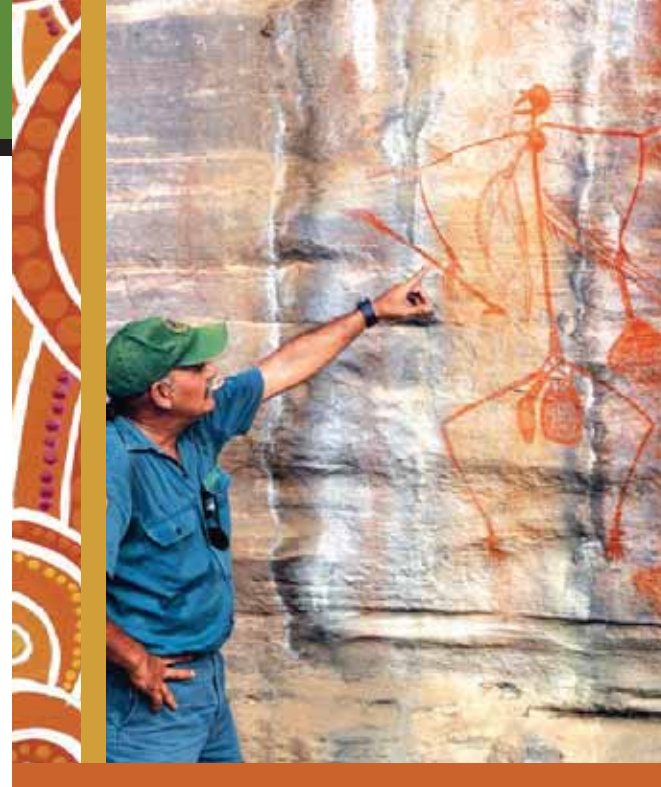
Improve access by policy makers, service providers, and the general public to the evidence on best practice and success factors to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage

The Clearinghouse provides access to evidence-based material on what works through:

- a website with a searchable and catalogued repository of research and evaluation material
- helpdesk facilities to assist users
- links to the relevant websites of other clearinghouses and information services, and to material available through other databases and catalogues.

The Clearinghouse takes a strategic approach to identifying and engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. To continue building stakeholder relationships, presentations have been held in each jurisdiction, to key Australian government departments with responsibilities most relevant to the COAG targets, to a range of non-government organisations, and at conferences and workshops. Quarterly e-newsletters are produced to keep users up to date with Clearinghouse activities, such as recent releases of resource sheets and issues papers, upcoming events and news feeds. The number of subscriptions to the free e-newsletter continue to grow.

Rigorously assess the evidence for policies and interventions aimed at closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage

The evidence included in the Assessed Collection has been systematically reviewed by subject specialists, using a tool developed in consultation with the Clearinghouse Board and Scientific Reference Group. The website displays the results of these assessments, including summaries of key findings and ratings on the effectiveness of the particular activity or program.

The evidence on addressing Indigenous disadvantage is also rigorously assessed for the preparation of issues papers and resource sheets. Authors of the papers undertake in-depth analysis of the evidence on a particular topic and summarise the findings on what works, what doesn't work, and where there are evidence gaps.

Improve the coordination of research and evaluation efforts across Australia

The Clearinghouse maintains an online register of Australian research and evaluation projects which are currently in progress or which have been completed in the past 3 years. The register contains projects relevant to the seven COAG building blocks and includes those that directly relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well as studies involving non-Indigenous Australians. The register began in December 2009 and is regularly updated.

Contributions for the register have been sought from government departments and agencies responsible for Indigenous affairs or implementing action items under the COAG Closing the Gap Reform Agenda; the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and AusTender, and research and community based organisations.

A strategy for identifying and engaging with a wide range of stakeholders was implemented. Presentations were held in each jurisdiction and to key Australian Government departments with responsibilities most relevant to the COAG targets. Presentations were also made at a range of non-government forums, such as the What Works Advisory Committee (education focus) the Commonwealth's Executive Coordination Forum on Indigenous Affairs, and the Canberra Evaluation Forum.

The Clearinghouse team also makes regular presentations at conferences and workshops. Quarterly e-newsletters are produced to keep users up to date with Clearinghouse activities, such as recent releases of resource sheets and issues papers, upcoming events and news feeds. The e-newsletters also feature resources in the Assessed Collection to highlight findings concerning programs, strategies or activities that have the potential to help overcome Indigenous disadvantage. The number of subscriptions to the free e-newsletter continue to grow.

Identify learnings and gaps in the available evidence on what works to close the gaps in Indigenous disadvantage

The Clearinghouse is required to produce an annual paper summarising the evidence it holds, showing both what is known and gaps in research. The first annual paper will be published in May 2011. The paper provides information for policy makers and service providers, and will be submitted to high-level policy forums to guide governments in future research and evaluation priorities.

Publications

The Clearinghouse produced the following publications for Year 1. The issues papers and resource sheets were prepared by subject experts commissioned by the Clearinghouse. These publications can all be accessed online through the Clearinghouse publications page: **www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap/publications/index.cfm**.

Issues papers

School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students. Issues paper no.1 by Nola Purdie and Sarah Buckley, September 2010

School readiness: what does it mean for Indigenous children, families, schools and communities? Issues paper no. 2 by Sue Dockett, Bob Perry, Emma Kearney, December 2010

Resource sheets

Community development approaches to safety and wellbeing of Indigenous children. Resource sheet no. 1 by Daryl J. Higgins, June 2010

Pathways for Indigenous school leavers to undertake training or gain employment. Resource sheet no. 2 by Boyd H. Hunter, June 2010

Reducing alcohol and other drug related harm. Resource sheet no. 3 by Dennis Gray and Edward Wilkes, December 2010

Anti-tobacco programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Resource sheet no. 4 by Rowena Ivers, January 2011

Teacher and school leader quality and sustainability. Resource sheet no. 5 by Bill Mulford, January 2011

Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students. Resource sheet no. 6 by Sue Helme and Stephen Lamb, January 2011.

Annual paper

What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage: key learnings and gaps in the evidence 2009–10 by Dr Fadwa Al-Yaman and Dr Daryl Higgins.

Structure and governance

The Clearinghouse Board

The Clearinghouse Board provides strategic directions and oversees the operations of the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse to ensure that it meets COAG's priorities for closing the gap. It ensures:

- the annual work plan covers these priorities
- the identified priority areas that inform the Clearinghouse's work relate to the needs of policy makers
- a commitment to rigorous standards for evidence.

The Board approves key strategic documents such as the annual work plan and the standards for assessing evidence-based material, as recommended by the Clearinghouse Scientific Reference Group. It provides advice on other documents, such as the Communication Strategy.

The Clearinghouse provides secretariat services to the Board, and papers are prepared in consultation with the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). There were three meetings of the Board in the first year of operations.

Clearinghouse Board members

Chair

- Emeritus Professor Meredith Edwards, University of Canberra

Academic advisors

- Associate Professor Karen Martin, School of Education, Southern Cross University
- Professor John Taylor, Centre for Aboriginal Economic and Policy Research, The Australian National University

Representatives from state and territory governments, representing all jurisdictions

- Ms Caralee McLiesh, New South Wales Treasury
- Mr Ron Weatherall, Department of Communities, Queensland

Representatives from the Australian Government

- Mr Matthew James, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- Ms Jo Wood, Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations

AIHW and AIFS (ex-officio)

- Dr Fadwa Al-Yaman, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
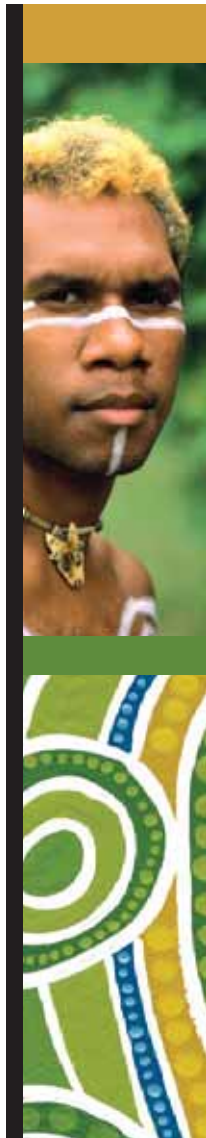- Dr Daryl Higgins, Australian Institute of Family Studies

Strategic input provided by the Board

The following is a summary of strategic input that has been provided by the Board during the first 12 months of the Clearinghouse.

- Endorsed the work plan for 2009–10, and agreed that research that looks at traumatised individuals and communities should be added to the criteria for selecting items for assessment.

- Endorsed the process (including tools) adopted by the Clearinghouse to assess the evidence base of resources included in the Assessed Collection.

- Agreed on topics for the first set of issues papers and resource sheets to be produced in Year 1.

- Agreed that involvement of Indigenous people and Indigenous perspectives in the development of issues papers and resource sheets should be encouraged, but not prescribed, to ensure that comprehensive critical feedback is received and Indigenous insights are provided. The Board recommended that when commissioning authors for the papers, potential authors are to be advised that they should include Indigenous perspectives, and to collaborate with or involve Indigenous researchers to meet this objective.

- Endorsed proposed strategies to ensure evidence assessments are closely aligned to policy needs and a strategy for communication between government policy makers and the Clearinghouse. To date, FaHCSIA has consulted with the jurisdictions through their representative on the COAG Working Group on Indigenous Reform (WGIR). The Board has reviewed options for consultation with policy bodies and agreed that the Commonwealth, represented by FaHCSIA, will provide updates to the

Commonwealth's Executive Coordination Forum on Indigenous Affairs (ECFIA) and WGIR on the evidence for what works and copies of reports as they are produced. A communication strategy for other government policy forums has also been developed for implementation in 2011.

- Endorsed communication links with high-level policy forums to ensure that there are formal mechanisms for jurisdictions and Australian government departments to consider the outputs of the Clearinghouse. The Board also agreed that FaHCSIA would coordinate the collection of policy views through cross government forums such as WGIR.

- Noted that, in considering topics for priorities for the second year of the Clearinghouse, the list of potential topics used for consultation are to be based on reforms in the National Partnership Agreements and National Agreements. However, members thought that the wording of these topics was too specific and priority areas needed to be broader to give the Clearinghouse team more scope to find items for the Assessed Collection and to commission resource sheets and issues papers. Therefore members suggested five broader areas based on the topics that had received most support from jurisdictions:

  – agreed to the following priority areas for the 2010–11 work plan

    1. Ensuring effective governance and leadership

    2. Addressing Indigenous mortality risk behaviours

    3. Encouraging service use and engagement

    4. Improving Indigenous participation in the labour force

    5. Improving literacy and numeracy outcomes.

  – agreed that the issues papers for 2010–11 focus on the last three priority areas listed above.

- Agreed that the focus for the Assessed Collection be extended to cover all the COAG building blocks, and that the priority areas are to be used to scope topic selection for Clearinghouse issues papers and resource sheets.

The Scientific Reference Group

The Scientific Reference Group provides technical advice to the Clearinghouse on operational matters. It comprises academic members with subject matter expertise relevant to the COAG targets, and representatives from the AIHW and AIFS. It met three times in 2009-10. SRG Members were selected based on expertise related to 2009–10 priority topics set by the WGIR's Evidence Base Sub-Group. Additional members were sought for 2011 to ensure coverage of the building blocks.

Members reviewed the proposed standards of evidence to be used for assessment and oversee their use; provided advice on priorities for future research and evaluation to inform the annual paper on gaps in the available evidence; advised on potential subject specialists to assist the Clearinghouse; and advised on technical content of papers.

Scientific Reference Group members

Chair

- Dr Fadwa Al-Yaman, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Deputy chair

- Dr Daryl Higgins, Australian Institute of Family Studies

Members

- Professor Judy Atkinson, Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples, Southern Cross University

- Dr Nola Purdie, Australian Council for Educational Research

- Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Yunggorendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research, Flinders University

- Dr Ching Choi, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

- Dr Ian Ring, Centre for Health Service Development, University of Wollongong

- Associate Professor Boyd Hunter, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University

- Professor Peter Phipps, Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney

- Dr Adam Tomison, Australian Institute of Criminology

- Ms Valerie Cooms, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Evaluation of the Clearinghouse

Under the National Partnership Agreement the Commonwealth is responsible for the evaluation and monitoring of the Clearinghouse project. There will be a two-stage evaluation of the Clearinghouse over its 5-year funding period. It will determine the effectiveness of the Clearinghouse in achieving the objectives, outcomes and outputs specified in the National Partnership Agreement.

FaHCSIA, on behalf of the Australian governments, has recently finalised the first stage of the evaluation. The second stage of the evaluation will be conducted in the fourth year of operation (around October 2012).

In addition the Clearinghouse conducted a user satisfaction survey in August and September 2010. The user satisfaction survey yielded 119 responses. Results of the survey indicated that 72% of respondents were 'satisfied' when they visited the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse website.

Future work

Over the next 12 months the Clearinghouse resources and processes will be further developed, including broadening the scope of the resources collected, and improving the usability of the resource sheets and issues papers.

Further work will also be undertaken on analysing the resources on the Research and Evaluation Register to help governments better coordinate and target their research and evaluation efforts.

Stakeholder consultations will continue to be an important part of ensuring effective links between the work of the Clearinghouse and the policy directions of governments. Held in association with the Clearinghouse Board and FaHCSIA, consultations will target key government agencies and policy forums, including:

- representatives from key Commonwealth, state and territory government departments
- the COAG Working Group on Indigenous Reform (WGIR)
- the Commonwealth's Executive Coordination Forum on Indigenous Affairs (ECFIA) and other interdepartmental and agency forums
- the Productivity Commission
- the inter-jurisdictional advisory group established to advise on the development of the Clearinghouse evaluation strategy.