SNAICC Genuine Partnership Project Self-Audit Report

Introduction

On 13 February 2020, SNAICC launched the online partnership self-audit reporting tool, inviting all organisations involved in partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous organisations to support children and families to complete a voluntary audit of their partnerships using SNAICC's new online partnership audit tool. The tool was launched via email to all organisations that had previously registered their interest in SNAICC's partnership work, as well as via SNAICC's e-bulletin and social media platforms. The tool provides a framework for measuring progress towards achieving genuine partnership goals and is designed to enable organisations to reflect on their partnership strengths and areas for development. Although the tool will be permanently available on SNAICC's website, organisations interested to be involved in SNAICC's partnership facilitation workshops were required to complete the tool by 10 March 2020.

The voluntary audit was completed by 19 partnerships, representing a mixture of organisations in urban, regional and remote settings. Although the introduction section to the audit tool encourages organisations to either complete the tool together as a partnership or complete it separately and then discuss the answers together, 17 of the 19 organisations that completed the tool were non-Indigenous organisations. It is unknown whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations were involved in the process for these 17 responses. When drawing conclusions from the responses, it is important to bear in mind that results represent only 19 partnerships – and therefore a relatively small representation of the total number of partnerships in existence across Australia – and that they may primarily represent the views of the non-Indigenous organisations.

In total, there are 45 questions in the audit tool, comprising 39 numerical-response style questions and 6 open short-answer style questions. The questions are broken down into three phases: establishing the partnership, sustaining the partnership, and reviewing the partnership, with 13 numerical-response style questions and two open short-answer style questions in each phase. Each question within these phases also correlates to four partnership domains: relationships; capacity-building; cultural competence; and process, governance and accountability. Upon completion of the tool, the respondents receive a total score against each of the three partnership phases, and four partnership domains, to assist them in identifying the precise areas that they may be excelling in or that require particular attention.

Response summary

The average response out of five was highest for phase one 'establishing the partnership' questions, and then fell off at phase two 'sustaining the partnership' and continued this downward trajectory for phase three 'reviewing the partnership'. This indicates that initial interest, motivation and engagement in establishing a genuine partnership between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations is strong; however, as time goes on, less attention and effort is placed on process elements and the work required to maintain a genuine partnership. Similarly, 'process, governance and accountability' received the lowest average score across the four partnership domains – lower than 'relationships' and 'capacity building'. 'Cultural competence' received the highest average response across the domains, suggesting that respondents placed a high value on developing this in partnerships. However, as noted above, 89% of the organisations that completed the audit tool were non-Indigenous, and it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the strength of cultural competence development without knowing if the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners on cultural competence are reflected.

Table 1 Summary data: average responses to questions aligned to the partnership phases and domains (score out of 5)

	Establishing the partnership	Sustaining the partnership	Reviewing the partnership	Overall average
Cultural competence	4.14	3.89	2.97	3.67
Relationships	4.00	3.26	2.67	3.31
Capacity building	4.04	3.76	2.96	3.58
Process, governance and accountability	3.69	3.21	2.60	3.17
Overall average	3.97	3.53	2.80	

Phase 1 – establishing the partnership

The average response to questions relating to the 'establishing the partnership' phase was very high at 4 out of 5. The responses to the open questions about strengths and challenges in this phase indicate that partners commonly had an initial shared vision, common goals and commitment from both partners to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The respondents describe key strengths of the partnership establishment phase as including an "acknowledgment and mutual respect of each other's strengths" as well as a "collaborative and constructive mindset to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families" and "honesty and understanding". The question that received the highest average response in this phase was 'the vision for the partnership aims to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities', with a score of 4.61.

Conversely, the question that received the lowest average response in this phase was 'partners have identified opportunities for building local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisational, workforce and community capacity', with a score of 3.61. This is concerning when viewed alongside the lack of processes and funding to support capacity building reported in other phases, because we know that building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and community capacity is vital in achieving long-term sustainable quality, cultural safety and results in services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The open question responses in this phase also describe the key challenges faced by organisations in establishing the partnership. The length of time it has taken organisations to "build trust", to "finalise agreements" and to "get work done" were noted as challenges, as was "the difficulty in getting community buy-in", communication between staff of both organisations, and "instability of staffing and points of contact".

Phase 2 – sustaining the partnership

The average response to all questions for the 'sustaining the partnership' phase was 3.51 out of 5. The open short-answer question responses in this phase show that the key strengths in sustaining the partnership for organisations included a "genuine commitment to the partnership", to "building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation" and to "recognising the cultural expertise of the Indigenous organisation". Organisations also referred to the "maintenance of an MOU", "establishing a base at the premise of the Aboriginal partner", "regular and honest communication and collaboration" and "consistency in staff and management" as key strengths in maintaining the partnership. The highest response to a question in this phase was 'the partnership provides culturally safe and appropriate support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families', with a score of 4.61 out of 5.

When discussing the challenges involved in sustaining the partnership, organisations noted "the geographical distance and finding the time to facilitate face-to-face meetings", situations of "business decisions not aligning to partnership aspirations" and a "lack of ongoing funding to sustain the partnership" resulting in the inability to commit to meaningful long-term planning. One of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisations that completed the audit notes that a key challenge it faces in sustaining the partnership is ensuring their partner organisation is committed to the practice of doing "*with* and not *for*". Concerningly, the question that received the lowest average response in this phase was 'partners negotiate and seek agreement on decisions made and have established effective dispute resolution procedures that are fair', with a score of 2.78 out of 5. This is worrying because a lack of fair agreement and negotiation process can serve to reinforce the power imbalance that often exists between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. The lack of fair agreement and negotiation processes are likely a result of the lack of well-established governance processes, coupled with a lack of genuine understanding and consistent communication between partners.

Further, the question as to whether adequate time and resources are allocated to support and sustain the partnership scored lowly with an average response of 2.94. This low resource allocation result, combined with the fairly low score of 3.17 in response to the question as to whether resources are shared or transferred between partners, raises a concern that partnerships may exist in principle, but the allocation of resources needed to put them into practice is often not taking place.

Phase 3 – reviewing the partnership

The average response to all questions in the 'reviewing the partnership' phase was very low, at 2.75 out of 5. In this phase organisations mentioned some of the key strengths in reviewing the partnership were "engagement with and receiving input from community", "reviewing the partnership with fresh eyes through an external evaluation", and "establishing an Aboriginal governance body for Aboriginal evaluation of the partnership". The question that received the highest average response in this phase (with a score of 3.11 out of 5) was 'the partnership supports monitoring and evaluation capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations'.

The short-answer responses to the key challenges in the reviewing the partnership phase generally acknowledge that this is the weakest phase. Comments included that "we still have a long way to go", that "reviewing is done informally", and that "an immediate review process needs to happen". Organisations noted the lack of time and money invested "to develop the necessary actions for the partnership to grow and strengthen" and to build and commit to solid and sustainable evaluation processes. It is therefore unsurprising that the question that received the lowest average response in this phase (with a score of 2.11 out of 5) was 'a broader program evaluation of the partnership work and relationship occurs or is scheduled to occur regularly (at least every three years)'.

Key partnership domains

Table 2 Average responses to a sample of questions relating to the four partnership domains

CULTURAL COMPETENCE *Overall average: 4.28*		RELATIONSHIPS *Overall average: 3.35*	
1. Partners consult the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and shape partnership work around community identified needs and priorities	3.94	1. Partners negotiate and agree on measures of success for the partnership work	2.78
2. Partners actively seek and support each other to learn about and understand local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture	4.39	2. Partners demonstrate long-term commitment to support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community (not only project or time-limited commitment)	4.17
3. Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners value cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partner	4.50	3. Joint planning processes allow for engagement between staff to plan and enact partnership priorities	3.11
PROCESS, GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY *Overall average: 2.96*		CAPACITY BUILDING *Overall average: 3.67*	
1. Partnership agreements (formal or informal) reflect a strong relationship and a fair negotiation	3.67	1. Each partner participates in the design, monitoring and reviewing processes	2.61
2. Adequate time and resources are allocated to support and sustain the partnership relationship	2.94	2. Partners have identified opportunities for building local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisational, workforce and community capacity	3.61
Regular audits/reviews are conducted to monitor partnership progress and identify issues	2.28	3. Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partners commit to transfer service management to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in line with capacity growth	3.44

Many of the indications that the audit provides regarding progress on the different partnership domains have been reflected in the discussion above. Further emphasising the consistent theme of lower scores beyond the establishment phase of partnerships and limited progress to embed partnerships, the partnership domain 'process, governance and accountability' received the lowest average score across the domains, at 3.08 out of 5. The 'relationships' domain received an average score of 3.47 out of 5, 'capacity-building' received an average score of 3.67, and 'cultural competence' received the highest average score at 3.73. Notably, the organisation that recorded the lowest average score for the 18 'cultural competence' questions was one of the two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations that completed the audit – with a very low average of 2. Although it is only one organisation and therefore inappropriate to draw final conclusions from the response, the low scores recorded serve as a reminder that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are critical to understanding whether the partnership is functioning in a genuinely culturally competent way.

Conclusion

Results of the audit process provide encouraging signs that there is high enthusiasm and strong initial commitment in the establishment of partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous services. Genuine and respectful partnerships are necessary in order to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with access to the service supports that they require to ensure their children can thrive. However, it is a concern that results suggest that as the partnerships progress, the level of commitment to the partnership from the organisations appears to drop off, and various complexities and challenges result in a loss of momentum and less output than may have once been envisioned. This aligns with the negative experience that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had of tokenistic relationships labelled as 'partnerships', and which has led to a belief that some non-Indigenous organisations may use partnership to 'tick boxes'

of cultural competence and community engagement, without a deeper commitment to sustainable relationships or local community empowerment.[1]

Despite this, the audit responses reveal a clear eagerness and willingness on the part of the non-Indigenous organisations to do a better job in developing their partnerships. This correlates with the responses received from the 106 organisations that completed the partnership survey analysis in mid 2019, during the initial phase of this project. Those respondents expressed a very high level of interest in engaging in partnerships and an acknowledgement of their importance. The upcoming partnership facilitation workshops can play a vital role in providing organisations the additional support they require to ensure their partnerships can flourish in the long-term, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families receive access to the quality and culturally safe supports they require.

Although partnership facilitation workshops will be tailored to the requirements of each partnership, the audit responses highlight common issues to be addressed in the facilitation work. This includes responding to questions such as:

- After the initial enthusiasm and goodwill of partnering together, how can you sustain your partnership?
- What resources can be mobilised from within the partnership to build cultural, organisational and partnership capacity, and what further external resources and supports are needed?
- How do you build governance structures that work for both partners when both partners might have different needs, expectations, internal governance and decision-making structures?
- What processes can support shared evaluation and reflection on the progress of the partnership, so that the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous partners are reflected in reviews and planning to improve partnership work and outcomes?

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[1] SNAICC. [2020]. *Creating Change Through Partnerships.* Melbourne.