



AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions

**Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External
Territories**



Terms of Reference

The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories will inquire into and report on the range of innovative strategies that Canberra's national institutions are using to maintain viability and relevance to sustainably grow their profile, visitor numbers, and revenue, including:

1. creating a strong brand and online presence;
2. experimenting with new forms of public engagement and audience participation;
3. conducting outreach outside of Canberra;
4. cultivating private sector support;
5. developing other income streams; and
6. ensuring the appropriateness of governance structures; and

Any other relevant matter the Committee wishes to examine, including the process for establishing new institutions.

Recommendations

AIATSIS recommends the Commonwealth Government work with the Institute to develop the following projects and transform AIATSIS from the nation's best kept secret to an outward facing, publicly engaged, national institute speaking powerfully about the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our national narrative:

- **Knowledge and Discovery centre** – a state-of-the-art technological hub for people to learn about and interact with the AIATSIS collection.
- **Extend digital reach and exhibition capacity** – a physical and digital expansion to enhance reach and accessibility.
- **National Resting Place** – AIATSIS to be the custodian of our ancestors with a place where people gather for reflection, education, and learning.
- **National Centre of Excellence** - a national forum for dialogue and for people to encounter and be transformed by the culture and story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Introduction

The forerunner of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) was an Interim Council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) established by the Menzies Government in 1961 and founded as a permanent Institute in 1964 under the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Act 1964*.

AIATSIS was formed under the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Act 1989* and is established as an Australian Government Corporate Commonwealth Entity under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*.

The AIATSIS Act was amended in 2016 to update our governance for the twenty-first century and affirm the ongoing importance of AIATSIS' unique role in ensuring Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, heritage and culture is part of our national story, now and in the future. The amendments preserve the principle of Indigenous leadership through an Indigenous majority on the AIATSIS Council, which is essential for our custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage.

The 2016 amendments further revised and introduced new functions to recognise the significant value, domestically and internationally, of the AIATSIS collection through the development, preservation, understanding and sharing of this priceless and unparalleled collection. The new functions also confirmed the role of AIATSIS as an adviser to the Commonwealth Government on the situation and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage, and as a leader in research, ethical practice and the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural collections.

The AIATSIS vision is a world in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and cultures are recognised, respected, celebrated, and valued. To achieve this AIATSIS:

1. Tells the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia;
2. Creates opportunities for people to encounter, engage with and be transformed by that story;
3. Supports and facilitates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural resurgence; and
4. Shapes our national narrative.

AIATSIS is a unique institution with a unique combination of activities: a research institute, collecting agency, archive, part-museum and part-gallery, as well as an essential part of Australia's national knowledge and research infrastructure. AIATSIS maintains deep relationships across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, built on a long history of research engagement and an unparalleled collection, resulting in a unique place for interaction, shared learning and building national cultural capital. An ongoing challenge is to make the Institute's work accessible to, and understood by, a broader audience.

AIATSIS has grown and transformed since its establishment in 1964. At that time, the mission was to 'record language, song, art, material culture, ceremonial life and social structure before those traditions perish in the face of European ways'. AIAS was established as a quasi-learned academy, with a mission and structure that informed a very different sort of organisation and collection to that of the traditional 'national cultural institution'.

Summary

For most of its life AIATSIS has served the academic and research community, and the collection was largely built by academics and researchers for other academics and researchers. This legacy is reflected in the premises that were purpose built in 1998 (opened in 2001), which provide for archival storage, a reading room and office space for AIATSIS staff. Historically there has been no emphasis on any large scale exhibition or visitor program.

AIATSIS is undergoing a transformation, forging ahead in new directions, and laying the foundations for long-term sustainability. We are endeavouring to increase reach, especially to Indigenous communities, through digital, online and physical exhibitions, community visits program, community research grants and other initiatives.

However, AIATSIS faces significant challenges in the short to long term. While our facility on the Acton Peninsula was purpose-built, as we transform into an outward facing institution, our facility is no longer fit for purpose. Exhibition space is highly restricted, and the facility is lacking in appropriate space as a national forum for people to encounter and be transformed by the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. With enhanced infrastructure and resources, AIATSIS will expand its reach and increase accessibility further, and provide a multimedia and interactive exhibition space.

Significantly, Australia does not have a national resting place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's ancestors' remains. AIATSIS as an Indigenous-led national institution for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage would be a culturally appropriate institution to provide a meaningful home for a national resting place. This would offer a place where people would gather for reflection, for education, and for learning. It would be a place for the individual and a place for all.

The Acton facility houses five vaults which are at or near capacity. With an ever growing collection, this is a critical issue. The collections team is currently securing off-site storage. This comes at a cost premium and produces inefficiency in our work. Nonetheless, environment-controlled storage is a requirement to safeguard and protect the collection to accepted standards, which will no longer be possible in our available vaults. In the long term AIATSIS will require a significant expansion of vault space on the Acton site or elsewhere.

Australia is at the cusp of a cultural resurgence, a growing self-awareness that will see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' stories, histories and cultures take their rightful place, intrinsic to the national narrative. After more than fifty years, AIATSIS stands as a testament not to the disappearance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but to the living and vibrant history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Today, AIATSIS is sharing the story of self-agency, success beyond survival, and tremendous resilience.

1. Creating a strong brand and online presence

AIATSIS has often been referred to as Australia's best kept secret, with the AIATSIS Council and Executive keen to transform the Institute into a place of significance for the nation and internationally.

They (AIATSIS stakeholders) viewed AIATSIS as a very credible organisation with high ethical standards and a good record with accomplishing research. However this same audience also saw AIATSIS as being run by academics and being very 'Canberra orientated'.

Audiences who are familiar with AIATSIS, view the brand as being an extremely trustworthy, credible and reliable source of information. Audiences less familiar do not have this association but place these values as extremely important when looking for information.

(Insights from *AIATSIS Digital Activation Research & Insights Report*, Tank, February, 2015)

AIATSIS' 50th anniversary in 2014 was used as a catalyst to rebrand and modernise our presence, building effort with particular focus online, given the Institute's national focus though with limited resources.

Online exhibitions

Stakeholder engagement historically has focussed on Indigenous communities and peoples and academics. However, AIATSIS is evolving into a public-facing institution, which requires an engaging and intuitive online presence.

This has led to a focus on enhancing online exhibitions. The enhanced online exhibitions are long-form storytelling, allowing in-depth exploration of topics of public interest and currency, growing public access to our collections.

The introduction of specialist curatorial staff increased the capacity of AIATSIS to produce high-quality online exhibitions, with focus on unearthing and highlighting items from the AIATSIS Collections. AIATSIS launched a new website in 2015 which has attracted over 4 million unique page views in three years, and over 300,000 unique page views to the online exhibitions. This illustrates a strong appetite in the community for access to Indigenous Australian culture and heritage.

The online exhibition 'My voice for my country', launched prior to the 2016 federal election, showcases a selection of electoral education, information and promotional materials held in the AIATSIS Collection. The materials chart changing official approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the electoral process over half a century. They also form a powerful record of the evolving engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's democratic system.

More recently, the 'Day of Mourning - 26th January 1938 online exhibition' was refreshed by the curatorial team ahead of the 80th anniversary of the event. The enhanced exhibition, featuring a number of digitised resources from the AIATSIS Collection, was refreshed not only because of the significant anniversary, but also our website visitor analytics identified high visitor rates.

Enabling public access to the AIATSIS Collection is a strategic priority for the Institute requiring long-term investment.

Greater access to the collection

In 2016 the rollout of a new collections access platform began. This new system allows greater discoverability and more data management options, and supports practice improvements in line with digital services standards. The new platform will be extended to provide access to language materials, art and artefacts in our Collections.

The platform means the pictorial collection is also accessible to Indigenous communities who provide invaluable metadata and information on the collections – which will also improve access in the long term. It will also provide the infrastructure for future online exhibitions. Our online outreach ensures physical exhibitions will engage those who cannot visit Canberra, with stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia, a key consideration when identifying new potential exhibitions.

AIATSIS continues to explore and develop strategic and ethical improvements to the release of its collection online and to its increased discoverability through national and international aggregators such as Trove, HuNI and WorldCat.

In this space AIATSIS works in a dual authorising environment for management of the rights to the material regarding its publication, use and reuse. Not only must such online publication adhere to legal copyright and intellectual property rights, but also Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights are given due ethical consideration, supporting Indigenous peoples - the knowledge holders - rights to self-determination in respect of use and reuse of collection materials. This is resource intensive work which requires deep engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

Since the rebranding and online modernisation project started in 2014, additional work is required to support ongoing developments in the presentation of AIATSIS' collection, research and publications. This work will require commitment and investment to strengthen our outreach through AIATSIS' physical space and sustainably grow.

2. Experimenting with new forms of public engagement and audience participation

AIATSIS has implemented a number of initiatives to create new forms of public engagement and audience participation.

In 2016 AIATSIS revitalised its presence on Acton Peninsula to welcome visitors into the building and create opportunities for engagement, interaction and learning. The result was the installation of custom-designed displays, touchscreen stations and an immersion room in the AIATSIS foyer. This was a proof-of-concept exercise into creating an interactive exhibition space for the Institute. The redesigned foyer now provides a fitting welcome to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people visiting AIATSIS, and an engaging and enriching stop for other visitors, including the many who pass the front door on their way to the National Museum of Australia. Nonetheless, AIATSIS lacks an engaging public space for the public to experience Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, to learn and be transformed.

The most recent installation in the foyer, the Singing the Train exhibition, is the culmination of a major collaboration across all areas of AIATSIS and with the Nyamal community from the Pilbara region of Western Australia. The exhibition is inspired by a song recorded in the 1960s and deposited in, and cared for as part of the AIATSIS Collection. It follows the story of the song's journey home and consequent impact on the community. The project involved trips to the Pilbara to re-visit the old train tracks and collect oral histories of people who experienced the train, or knew the song. AIATSIS supported two young Pilbara artists to travel to Canberra to work with the design team to create the exhibition, which includes illustrations of the artists' interpretation of the train song journey. As custodians of the items and knowledge held in the AIATSIS Collection, community participation and interpretation of their own history and culture is a cornerstone of this exhibition.



Above: Singing the Train project participants with AIATSIS Research and Client Access Services staff at the Singing the Train exhibition in the AIATSIS foyer, Canberra.

However, the public exhibition space available to AIATSIS remains a foyer. The Institute is exploring options and opportunities for a larger public space to provide high quality, informative, and innovative encounters and learning experiences, as well as through greater reach and enhanced it would be a place for the individual and a place for all.

Collaborations

AIATSIS seeks partnership with likeminded organisations to assist in public engagement activities. In 2017, AIATSIS partnered with the ABC and National and State Libraries Australasia to develop the Right Wrongs digital exhibition. This interactive website commemorates the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and the 25th Anniversary of the High Court of Australia's Mabo decision. It documents the environment and steps leading up to the 1967 Referendum, the events surrounding the referendum, and perspectives on what has happened in the fifty years since. It was launched by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, at Parliament House during Reconciliation Week 2017. Community-generated content, exploring the impact of the referendum, contributes Indigenous perspectives on Australia's history and culture.

Public engagement through education

An Indigenous perspective of our national story is at the heart of the AIATSIS mission. The Core Cultural Learning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia online foundation course was created to address a need for an authoritative cultural competency course for the public sector. Core is an innovative online course developed to strengthen cultural capability. It is designed to be informative, interactive and to create a greater awareness of the vast history and cultural heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. By October 2016 Core was available to every Commonwealth agency.

Partnering with Community

AIATSIS collaborated with the Wadeye Community on the Kanamekek-Yile Ngala Museum's video collection which was deposited in June 2016. After digitising the collection, the community were provided with digital copies; they are providing detailed descriptions of the materials, greatly increasing the meaning of each item and its discoverability. Most importantly, this process provided the community with direct control over the descriptions, any possible sensitivities contained in the materials, and means they can set appropriate access and use conditions on the collection. Repatriated digital copies are now shown in community in places such as aged care facilities and public meeting spaces, refreshing community memory and helping maintain ongoing connections with language and culture.

3. Conducting outreach outside of Canberra

AIATSIS has a strong history of ethical community engagement and collection to develop events and projects. Guided by the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies (GERAIS) our outreach projects emphasise collaboration and community benefit.

AIATSIS is frequently approached for advice and assistance by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who wish to ensure long-term access to knowledge within their communities. In this way AIATSIS works across the nation through research projects, community collections, exhibitions and repatriation of digital copies of AIATSIS collection materials to communities. It provides leadership to other institutions in relation to ethical approaches to research, publishing and collecting practices.

Our Ngunawal language revitalisation project – commenced in 2014 – has supported the renewal of Ngunawal language use via research into the grammar, trial language classes at Fraser Primary School and active professional education (including advice to the Prime Minister and other territory and Commonwealth Government agencies on the Ngunawal language and its use in acknowledgements). These language revitalisation activities support cultural revitalisation within the Ngunawal community as well as cultural learning within the broader public more generally.

Community access

AIATSIS' work also supports access to the collections to support cultural revitalisation. Regular community visits of AIATSIS staff to a community, or supporting community visits to Canberra, is a way of reconnecting with individuals and groups who have material in the AIATSIS collection, as well as repatriating digital copies of collection material and engaging in two-way information sharing about collection items. Copies of collection material and information, for example, photographic captions, are provided to community members. Community members assisted AIATSIS with identification of people, place and content of collection information and when appropriate, advice about access restrictions.

While this work continues with communities visiting AIATSIS, in some cases with AIATSIS support, the richer experience of taking materials back to country has been constrained by resourcing. AIATSIS is exploring ways of sourcing additional resourcing to return materials and assist communities to create new recordings, as we are this year with the AIATSIS Foundation's supported Cape York Songlines project.

Preserve, Strengthen and Renew in Community Pilot project

AIATSIS has been running an 18 month pilot with the aim of exploring ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can gain greater control and authority over their information and archives as a part of the 'Preserve, Strengthen and Renew in Community' project. The project involved three case study partners, the Karajarri and Kiwirrkurra people with their representative organisations and partners, and Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre (WMPALC) in partnership with IBN Corp. Project activities involved the return of AIATSIS held

archival material to the communities, the recording of new materials as decided by project partners and the development of protocols for the ongoing management of existing AIATSIS material or newly recorded materials.

Evaluation interviews made clear that the ability to access and view old images and footage was vital to feel strong about culture and AIATSIS was viewed as a safe and trusted place for the storage of materials. Karajarri traditional owners have been able to close a 40 year gap between the oldest and the youngest knowledge holders with audio recordings held at the AIATSIS archive. Since engaging in the project, the Karajarri people have led revitalisation work that has also seen the reinvigorated cultural practices in neighbouring groups. The creation of a 'space' for this law to occur has contributed significantly to the cultural wellbeing and authority of the Karajarri people This is a small example of what can be achieved in a year with supported access to collections and archives.



Above: Senior Karajarri Cultural Advisor Mervyn Mulardy browsing the AIATSIS photographic database while visiting AIATSIS as part of the Preserve, Strengthen and Renew project.

AIATSIS Conferences

AIATSIS runs a series of public events each year, the two flagship events being the AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference (ANIRC) and National Native Title Conference (NTC). The conferences travel around the country, involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all aspects of their production and execution. Sponsorship is raised to keep registration costs down to ensure they are not cost prohibitive for delegates, but also to allow for fully sponsored spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to attend each year.

The AIATSIS National Indigenous Research Conference provides the opportunity for a diverse range of people to come together to discuss the current challenges and breakthroughs in Indigenous studies, research and the translation and application of research into practice. The conference has built a reputation for quality discussion and in depth examination of issues and attracts up to 500 local and international delegates.

The National Native Title Conference is heading into its nineteenth year in 2018. The conference seeks to highlight the challenges and opportunities of native title in the broader context of Indigenous peoples' aspirations for their lands and waters and their communities, and aims to promote public debate and foster knowledge acquisition and sharing between native title holders and other parties. The National Native Title Conference is the leading annual event for professional development for Native Title Representative Body and Service Provider (NTRB/NTSP) staff, government bodies, native title practitioners and academics. The conference has built a reputation for quality and continues to attract upwards of 800 delegates each year. The 2017 conference saw over 850 delegates throughout the three-day program, and over half of the delegates were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Outreach through family history engagement

The AIATSIS Family History programme assists Link Up organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people Australia-wide with research support, training and advice on Indigenous family research, significantly for families affected by the Stolen Generations. Our *Finding Your Family Website* is also a valuable form of outreach to our clients. The website provides accessible support to members of the public who are hoping to find out more about their Indigenous heritage and family history.

AIATSIS has continued to contribute to the national conversation regarding Stolen Generations by contributing to the Healing Foundation's "Bringing Them Home - 20 Years On" report, as well as participating in seminars and other forums on Indigenous peoples rights and records.

In addition to our current service, the Family History programme has sought funding to expand the team to include an Outreach officer to deliver a program of outreach and training. The focus would be on vulnerable communities, sector workers and other Indigenous care workers whose responsibilities would benefit from better understanding of Indigenous family history research.

4. Cultivating private sector support

The unique role of AIATSIS has not traditionally exposed the Institute to corporate partners or private funding. This is however a key role of the Foundation that will be explored to greater potential in the coming future.

The AIATSIS Foundation was established in April 2015 as a means to identify partners and raise funds from the private philanthropic and corporate sectors to support significant projects. These projects would not otherwise be supported in the context of our appropriation or our budget.

The first two projects supported by the Foundation were initiated in response to the critical need to preserve and record Indigenous languages and Songlines. AIATSIS firmly believes that current funding will not meet demonstrated need to preserve, maintain and revitalise Australian Indigenous languages. The loss of the oral learnings of language and song are considerable, so much so a campaign was

developed and named 'Before it's too late'. AIATSIS believes the preservation and promotion of language and song is critical to the cultural heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and as an essential historical artefact in documenting the longest continuous culture on the planet.

In the coming years, the AIATSIS Foundation will seek opportunities for partners and benefactors to assist in the acquisition of rare or significant pieces that may become available from time to time to complement the AIATSIS collection. Further, AIATSIS will seek support from partners to expand our research and scholarships programme and collaborate with a technology partner to develop innovative digital engagement spaces.

5. Developing other income streams

AIATSIS is committed to maintaining viability and relevance through sustainably growing revenue through developing alternative income streams. In October 2017, AIATSIS commissioned Apis Group to develop a Sustainability Plan to address long term organisational sustainability. The Sustainability Plan includes 16 recommendations for implementation over a six year period to achieve six sustainability outcomes. The Plan recommends that AIATSIS strives towards an outward focussed business culture, engaged with community, leveraging commercial opportunities.

In addition to the Sustainability Plan recommendations, AIATSIS services and products have been reviewed and costed to explore opportunities for generating additional revenue. In the 2018-19 financial year AIATSIS will develop an approach to trial new revenue initiatives to help build momentum, test market interest and support implementation. The agency will also seek out strategic partnerships to leverage mutual benefits and strengthen its collection storage and access framework to support the pursuit of promotional opportunities.

6. Ensuring the appropriateness of governance structures

AIATSIS is governed by a Council of nine members. The Council is responsible for ensuring proper and efficient performance across all AIATSIS functions and providing strategic direction for the organisation.

AIATSIS' Council make up is unique for a Commonwealth Corporate Entity as five (5) members are appointed for a four (4) year term by the Portfolio Minister and the other four (4) members are elected from the AIATSIS Membership base. A majority of Council must be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

AIATSIS currently has 635 members, 7 of whom have been members since 1964.

AIATSIS Members are assessed against the following criteria:

Significant (5 or more years) involvement in one or more of the following:

- i. Participation or employment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or cultural organisations;*
- ii. Research, teaching or study related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' culture and heritage; or*

- iii. *Participation, including employment, in activities related to the collection, management, preservation and custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' culture and heritage.*

Council recently undertook an internal review to strengthen their engagement with the current members and to extend and target engagement more broadly amongst stakeholder and the community by endorsing the creation of categories of membership (Life Members, AIATSIS Fellows, Members and AIATSIS Friends).

AIATSIS is also compliant under the *Public Governance Performance Accountability Act 2013* and has an Audit and Assurance Committee that meets quarterly and reports to Council.