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Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and engagement with child and family services

1. Introduction

SNAICC welcomes the Australian Government's focus on outcomes for our children and families. However, for this government priority to be realised at a service provider level, there must be high level policy directives consistent with the findings of community and evidence-based studies, many of which detail best practice in working with and for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities. As identified by the 2010 *Growing them strong together Report* and Anderson and Wild (2007, p. 50), there is a need for a different approach - a 'radical change to the way government and non-government organisations consult, engage with and support Aboriginal people'.

The aim of this paper is to consider current engagement levels with services, and outline some of ways in which universal services can support and improve service provision to our children and families. More broadly, this paper supports the research agenda under Outcome 5 'Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities' of the Council of Australian Government's *Protecting children is everyone's business: National framework for protecting Australia's children 2009-2020* (the 'National Child Protection Framework').

In SNAICC's view, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community controlled services are the most effective and appropriate means for engaging and supporting our children, families and communities. SNAICC's (2010a) *Towards Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander access and engagement: overcoming barriers to child and family services* outlined the barriers to our children and families both accessing and engaging with services. Two crucial aspects of engagement include cultural engagement and holistic responsiveness to a community's needs, both of which are derived from local Aboriginal staff, voluntary workers (such as carers) and management. An appropriately resourced community-based and controlled model, such as the ideal AICCA, can overcome barriers to access and engagement with services.

Recognising there are several varying factors that mean our children and families may access non-Aboriginal services, all services must however, be able to provide competent, quality support. This paper considers but two key means for improving the service delivery of non-Aboriginal services: working within a cultural competency framework and engaging in effective partnerships.

2. Service delivery context

a. Universal services and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child and family services

The *National Child Protection Framework* prioritises universal support available for all families (Council of Australian Governments, 2007, p. 7), or the 'services that seek to benefit families by improving their ability to care for children and to strengthen family relationships' (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2000, p. xi). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002, p.17) recognises the contribution family support services provide to the 'social capital' of safe, and supportive, families and communities.

'Universal' child and family services, by definition, seek to provide support for all families. Our child and family sector recognise the need for universal services to work towards cultural proficiency and improving engagement with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families (SNAICC 2008a&b; Briskman 2003). However, the success of such services in accessing and engaging our families rests on incorporating aspects of service provision previously discussed by SNAICC (2010a), and other approaches discussed later in this paper, such as adopting a cultural competency framework and strong, sustainable partnerships with Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

In SNAICC's experience, our families identify a clear distinction between an Aboriginal community controlled service provider and a non-Aboriginal universal service (SNAICC 2011a), even if both services provide similar programs and are primarily designed or designated to support our communities (Flaxman, Muir & Oprea 2009). This distinction rests on the design, development and delivery of services provided by an Aboriginal community controlled organisation. These features of a community-based, and controlled, organisation overcome many of the identified barriers to service access and engagement (SNAICC 2010a; SNAICC 2011b) and provide multiple benefits to children, families and communities (Higgins and Butler 2007).

It is also worth noting that the demand for the specialist nature of many of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child and family services cannot be met by universal services. Thus, the aim of Outcome 5 of the *National Child Protection Framework's* to 'provide culturally appropriate care and support' remains unrealised. For example, where the removal of a child is required, the involvement of an appropriate Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family support service is necessary to provide culturally appropriate advice and community connections to ensure both the best placement for the child in compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle across all Australian jurisdictions (Libesman 2008, p. 341). This expertise is also recognised by the *National Out of Home Care Standards* (2010), where Standard 3 requires the participation of our communities in the placement of our children. Likewise, the expertise required for family reunification services for our families – including a nuanced, respectful understanding of local community and family structures, a relationship of trust and a professional, culturally proficient approach – can only be provided by Aboriginal services.

It is also important to note that these services often work from a holistic, 'one-stop shop' model (see case studies below: SNAICC 2011a; 2011b), which aims to maximise benefits, minimise stress and provide continuity of care. Families are then provided with intensive case management support from one service, ranging from primary through to

tertiary programs (SNAICC 2011a, 2011b). In effect, these services are based on the recognition that 'human development is realised within a family and community environment in which individuals are firmly embedded' (Altman, Biddle & Hunter 2008, p.16).

There are many further examples where Aboriginal expertise is required in order to achieve positive outcomes for our children and families. In SNAICC's view, the community capacity building, community-driven authority and expertise provided by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child and family services cannot be replicated by non-Aboriginal services. The sector should be characterised by our families having appropriate and real choice of services that are able to meet their needs. Broadly, this requires sustainable, adequate funding and infrastructure for our existing services, and ongoing planning to match the anticipated demand for all services.

b. Levels of access and engagement with child and family services

A key strategy under Outcome 5 of the *National Child Protection Framework* is listed as the expansion of access to both 'Indigenous and mainstream services for families and children' (FaHCSIA 2010, p. 66). As recognised by the 2010 Annual Report on the progress under this outcome, there is limited data on the 'ratio of Indigenous out of home care placement through mainstream or Indigenous services' (FaHCSIA 2010, p. 67). Likewise, there is a lack of comprehensive and comparable data to measure levels of access and engagements with child and family services.

The challenges for data collection on child protection policies and programs across jurisdictions is well recognised (Productivity Commission 2011, p.15.9). The level of resources and planning required to undertake a comprehensive and nuanced national review of the levels of engagement with all services, both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and universal, is recognised by the current data collection work of the *National Child Protection Framework's* working groups and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (Productivity Commission 2011, p.15.6, 15.16). For example, the holistic service delivery model of many Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child and family services also means that a clear overview of engagement with specific functions of a service is difficult to ascertain without individual case studies. Services such as the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agencies (AICCA) and the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) may include a range of primary services through to tertiary services (SNAICC 2008b and Auditor-General 2011). While there is data informing some aspects of services, such as levels of placement in accordance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles (Productivity Commission 2011, p. 15.16), this data is also reliant on factors that are out of a service's direct control, including, but not limited to:

- methods of data reporting and collection varying by jurisdiction;
- the availability of suitable Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander carers;
- varying understanding and application of the principle;
- a lack of consistent monitoring and recording of changes in carer arrangements or provision and application of cultural care plans;
- the challenges of identifying Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status; and
- the challenges and limitations of matching various data sets (for example, population estimates from 2006 against annual child protection reports, budget expenditure and policy framework reporting).

Perhaps for these and other reasons, a national picture of child and family services in regular contact with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and families has not been determined by any recent study, although the depth and breadth of the broader sector can be gauged from numerous sources, such as the 2009 report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth - which provided a comprehensive 'stocktake' of child and family services systems by jurisdiction.

However, this is qualified by Flaxman, Muir & Oprea (2009 p. xi) who find that the existence of a service, even if designated to provide services to the local Aboriginal community, does not mean that it will be successfully accessed or engaged with by our children and families. Consequently, the numbers of services, and even the reported contact with services, does not provide a complete picture of either the levels of engagement or effectiveness, nor satisfaction experienced by our families.

What is known is that the *Closing the Gap* policy framework has generated an increased focus on the current and projected demands on the services supporting our children and families. Alongside population growth projections, high fertility rates and the age structure of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander population (Biddle & Taylor 2009), it has become increasingly clear that the child and family welfare sector supports a significant proportion of our children and families, and is likely to see further demand.

As recognised by Outcome 5 of the *National Child Protection Framework*, there is a significant and persistent overrepresentation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system. At 30 June 2010, there were 11,468 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care, representing an increase of 9%, or an additional 1,000 children, from 2008-9. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011; Australian Institute of Family Studies 2011). In effect, the child and family welfare system is supporting Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children on care and protection orders at a rate nine times that of other children. This rate has only grown since the initial collation of this data by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 1990 (2011, p. 43; Australian Institute of Family Studies 2011). It is also observed that these statistics do not capture the underreporting of incidents that would warrant care and protection orders (Anderson & Wild 2007).

Statistics also indicate low national levels of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander access to family support services, ranging from primary services through to intensive family support services (Flaxman, Muir & Oprea 2009). Alongside these low levels of access, Altman, Biddle and Hunter acknowledge the intergenerational nature of many of the issues that these services seek to address, requiring policies with a 'long term focus ... at several levels' (Altman, Biddle & Hunter 2008, p.16)

Consequently, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive analysis of the levels of engagement with universal and Aboriginal services. However, the following is a brief overview of access and engagement within programs delivered by two Aboriginal child and family services in the jurisdictions of New South Wales and Western Australia, as well as relevant available data.

3. Case Study: Coffs Harbour, New South Wales

a. Sector Snapshot

New South Wales has a population of approximately 62,940 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and youth between 0-17 (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2011). The overrepresentation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in contact with the New South Wales child and family welfare system is clear, with the rate of our children on substantiated orders between the ages of 0-17 at 52.6 (per 1000 children), as compared to non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children at the rate of 6 (per 1000 children) (Productivity Commission 2011, Table 15A.8). At 30 June 2010, the out of home care system in New South Wales was supporting 7,786 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children (Productivity Commission 2011, Table 15A.19). Between 31 August 2009 and 31 August 2010, there were 26,588 investigations, of which 7,828 were substantiated (Productivity Commission 2011, Table 15A.5) - which represent a decrease in the same numbers from 2008-9. The Productivity Commission also reported that the real expenditure of New South Wales per child across the child protection and out of home care system was \$219.09 (Table 15A.1)

Abcare is the primary child and family service provider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the local government areas of Bellingen Shire Council, Coffs Harbour City Council and Grafton City Council. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data from 2006, there are approximately 913, 124 and 500 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children between the ages of 0-14 in the corresponding statistical Indigenous Areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006a-c).

b. Case study: Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre (Abcare)

<p>About</p>	<p>Established in 1987 as the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre, Abcare’s mission is to ‘provide a quality, informative and culturally appropriate service to the Aboriginal community’ (Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre 2010).</p> <p>It services three local government areas: Bellingen Shire Council, Coffs Harbour City Council and Grafton City Council.</p> <p>It fills the ‘absence of a mainstream service that provides the same package as Abcare – Abcare provides a one-stop case management point’ (SNAICC 2011a). The rationale for the one-stop model includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ not having to tell a ‘story’ twice ▪ simultaneous provision of support for more than one issues – whether it be health, education, housing (unlike single issue services) ▪ acting as a referral point if needed ▪ in line with the public health and preventative model (SNAICC 2011a). <p>Abcare identifies the top three factors encouraging Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander access as ‘confidentiality, cultural respect and professional respect’ (SNAICC 2011a). Crucially, Abcare noted that the ‘community knows they will receive these three things with Abcare – Abcare has their</p>
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	<p>trust and is sensitive to their issues. Mainstream organisations do not offer [all of] these things, and therefore the community is reluctant to engage.'</p> <p>Abcare was previously an AICCA. Following the federal review of AICCA's, management chose to move under program funding based on the need for a more flexible funding model, which allowed for Abcare to better respond to community needs in a holistic, but targeted, manner. For example, under the AICCA funding guidelines, the staff role was more of a 'community liaison' role, rather than a project and support role that could provide higher levels of support to families (SNAICC 2011a).</p>
Staff	<p>Commenced with two staff in 1987, now has full time equivalent of six staff (SNAICC 2011a). All staff work in family and carer support.</p> <p>All direct service delivery staff are Aboriginal, as experience and knowledge has shown that community is reluctant to engage with non-Aboriginal staff.</p> <p>If funding and resources were available, Abcare would seek to increase staff numbers.</p>
Service users	<p>All service users identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The breakdown of current service users is as follows (SNAICC 2011a):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Families: 80 b. Carers: 35 c. Children: 20 <p>These numbers also indicate the current capacity of the service.</p> <p>These numbers generally remain consistent, but these numbers do not take into account referrals or new clients moving into the Abcare service areas.</p>
Programs	<p>Summarised below is a brief description of programs and numbers of service users based on an interview with Abcare (SNAICC 2011a) and the Abcare 2010 Annual Report.</p> <p>Abcare is accredited with the New South Wales Children's Guardian for Out of Home Care (June 2010).</p> <p>Abcare observed that while all of Abcare's programs are currently at capacity, there is still considerable need in the community that cannot be met on current resources and funding levels (SNAICC 2011a).</p> <p>General family support programs, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Families NSW program</i> (17 families) • <i>Out of Home Care program and generalist program</i> (primary program) • <i>Supporting Aboriginal carers</i> • <i>Social Support/ Food Services program</i> (32 families) <p>Family reunification</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Families NSW and Out of Home Care</i> (5 families) <p>Family preservation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Families NSW and Out of Home Care</i> (10 families) <p>Family decision making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Families NSW</i> (17 families) <p>Child protection advocacy and advice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Abcare provides national, regional and local level representation on committees, community interest groups and networks</i> <p>Out of home care (35 households)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Carer support and focus groups</i> • <i>Family preservation</i> • <i>Out of home care</i> <p>Cultural support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Aboriginal networks, Aboriginal Interagency, community support groups</i>
Potential growth areas	<p>Abcare identified areas for new programs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family restoration • counselling • court support • education support.

4. Case Study: Western Australia

a. Sector Snapshot

Western Australia has a population of approximately 21,690 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children between the ages of 0-14 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006e). The overrepresentation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children in contact with the child and family welfare system is clear, with the rate of our children on substantiation orders between the ages of 0-17 at 20.7 (per 1000 children), as compared to non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children at the rate of 1.6 (per 1000 children) (Productivity Commission 2011, Table 15A.8).

At 30 June 2010, the out of home care system in Western Australia was supporting 1,436 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children (Productivity Commission 2011, Table 15A.19). Between 31 August 2009 and 31 August 2010, there were 1,622 investigations, of which 704 were substantiated (Productivity Commission 2011, Table 15A.5). This represents a decrease in the same numbers from 2008-9. The Productivity Commission also reported that the real expenditure of Western Australia per child across the child protection and out of home care system was \$114.24 (Productivity Commission 2011, Table 15A.1)

According to the Department of Child Protection's website (2011), there are 410 child and family services across Western Australia. For services listed as providing specific

support to Aboriginal families, the website identifies one Aboriginal foster agency listed, Yorganop (see case study below); the metrowide Indigenous Family Program provided by Centacare and the Family Abuse Intervention: Indigenous Healing Program, provided by Wirraka Maya Health Service Aboriginal Corporation.

b. Case study: Yorganop Association Incorporated

About	<p>Yorganop is located in West Perth, Western Australia.</p> <p>It was established in 1991 as recognised entity, meeting the service gap left by the closure of an AICCA in the early 1980s.</p> <p>Yorganop provides direct service delivery to the whole state of Western Australia, requiring significant travel and working in partnership with the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU) networks (SNAICC 2011b).</p> <p>Yorganop maintains strong links with the children and families it works with, noting ‘we continually have children who come back – we are like a big Yorganop family’ (SNAICC 2011b).</p>
Staff	<p>Commenced with 10 staff, and has grown to a full time equivalent of 21 staff.</p> <p>Nine of the current staff identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.</p> <p>If funding and resources were available, Yorganop would seek to increase staff numbers to meet the demand in the wider community.</p>
Service users	<p>All service users identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, noting that some carer’s partners may be non-Aboriginal.</p> <p>Yorganop is currently supporting 100 children on placement, which is the current capacity of the organisation. This number was raised from supporting 55 children several years ago, and is projected to increase.</p> <p>There are 40 families in the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander carer pool. While this number is stable, there is an ongoing assessment of new carers.</p>
Programs	<p>Intensive family support for children in care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Counselling, art therapy naturopathy</i> ○ <i>Family reunification, including a family reunification plan for all children created in consultation with the Department for Child Protection</i> <p>Child protection advocacy and advice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Advice to the Department for Child Protection - when Aboriginal children are referred to the Department, Yorganop assists with identifying family links and contacts.</i>

	<p>Out of home care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Support for foster carers, including, but not limited to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>orientation training, a pre requisite to becoming a carer that involves a focus on the impact of caring, understanding applicable legal obligations,</i> ▪ <i>ongoing training, comprising 10 modules of training that covers the Better Care, Better Services Standards and first aid, and generally completed within 1 year</i> ○ <i>Support for children in placement, including:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>education and supporting general academic progress,</i> ▪ <i>counselling, art therapy and naturopathy</i> ▪ <i>recreation and leisure</i> ▪ <i>health, including medication, dosages, medical appointments, monitoring the young person’s state of health (including mental health)</i> ▪ <i>identity and culture, ensuring social and family relationships are supported and strengthened, including awareness of social and family relationship currently experienced by the young person</i> ▪ <i>emotional & behavioural development</i> ▪ <i>safety, including the young person’s current safety concerns and needs, when the last safety plan was updated; any Critical Incident Reports and/or absconding accounts</i> <p>Community awareness and education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Yorganop is active in local, regional, state and national forums, including government and non-government sectors.</i>
<p>Potential growth areas</p>	<p>If funding and resources became available, potential areas for growth identified by Yorganop include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ increasing policy and research capacity ○ increasing its role and profile as a recognised entity.

5. Learning from what works

SNAICC (2010a) has detailed some of the literature outlining examples of practice and evidence-based research, showing how better resourced Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community controlled services are considered the most successful organisations for engaging our children and families. Importantly, community control promotes the sustainability of a service through ‘whole-of community involvement, utilisation of local knowledge, local resources and local personnel, and adopting a holistic approach to planning and development’ (Burchill, Higgins, Ramsamy and Taylor 2006, p. 59).

Developed in the Aboriginal sector in the 1970s (Briskman 2003), the holistic, community development model is aligned with the public health model approach of the Australian Government. In relation to the child and family welfare sector, one example of this model is discussed in SNAICC’s paper on the ideal Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

Agency (AICCA) service model, developed and endorsed by SNAICC membership in 2008 (2008b, Attachment C). The AICCA service model includes six elements of separate but linked and coordinated programs, including:

- family support and early intervention
- intensive family support
- child protection advocacy and advice
- out of home care
- community outreach services
- program and policy development (SNAICC 2008b).

Although the responsibilities of AICCAs may vary according to jurisdictions, the needs of communities and funding, their functions often include a range of programs. As a service model, the Crime and Misconduct Commission Inquiry found that ‘the AICCAs or equivalent community based bodies will need to play a pivotal role in the reformed system of child protection’, and particularly recognised the AICCAs’ as providing primary through to tertiary programs, that are sensitive to cultural factors and acceptable to the communities concerned (Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004).

The policy framework of a public health model and community development approach means that ‘it is not sufficient merely to give Indigenous agencies responsibility for child protection issues’ (Higgins 2010; Flaxman, Muir & Oprea 2009). Instead, at a regional service level, there must be a level of ‘integration’ between services, which may mean a need for appropriate referral pathways, complementary services, mutual engagement and commitment, and professional support. At the policy level there must be a consistent, deep understanding of the holistic, public health model - matched by flexible and adequate funding sources. For example, a funding model that requires the provision of a range of programs may unintentionally limit resources being channelled into a program for which there is community demand (SNAICC 2011a).

As previously discussed, there is a likelihood that the demand for child and family services will increase. This increase occurs alongside the recognised need to ‘improve child protection service delivery for Indigenous families and children’ under Strategy 5.3 of the *National Child Protection Framework* (FaHCSIA 2010, p. 121).

In SNAICC’s view, our children and families must be provided with an appropriate and real choice of services, both Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and universal, and these services must be equipped to provide culturally proficient, quality programs that meet the holistic needs of their clients. The programs need to expressly include preventative and early intervention support. Recognising that there are finite resources, which must ultimately be directed by communities’ needs, services should function to complement, not compete with, each other’s service delivery, with the aim to support a wide continuum of programs for our children and families. Programs should be underpinned by the promotion and encouragement of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child rearing values and practice.

To enable services to encourage Aboriginal access, engagement and support, there must be an examination of how the services can best move towards a functional, proficient level within the cultural competency framework (Flaxman, Muir & Oprea 2009).

a. Why is there a need to develop Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural competency in services?

A recurring reason why an initiative did not achieve its aims is a lack of meaningful consultation with the people it sought to support. Subsequently, there was a lost opportunity to support a community-identified need and solution. This failure is set alongside the recognition that ‘culturally safe environments for Indigenous peoples are rare, in any area of service delivery’ (Higgins 2010, p. 5). It is a concern attributed to all interests operating in the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander sectors, including government, non-government organisations and our organisations (Federal Court of Australia’s Indigenous Dispute Resolution & Conflict Management Case Study Project (AIDR) 2009, pp. xv, 13-31).

This underlines the need for all services to adopt and work within an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural competency framework. The literature asserts that individuals, organisations and policies that are less culturally competent have correspondingly lower levels of success in communicating and engaging with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and organisations (Grote 2008, p. 7). Importantly, there are also other drivers for incorporating cultural considerations into all elements of a service’s practice, including:

- increasing awareness of the ‘strengths, resilience and diversity of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities’ (SNAICC 2010, p. 86);
- increasing commitment and support for self determination;
- interest in sustainable partnerships;
- ‘peacemaking’ through the resolution of disputes (AIDR 2009); and
- legislative and policy directions requiring decision-makers to give Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures due consideration (VACCA 2010, p. 18; AIDR 2009).

b. What is a cultural competency framework?

‘Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.’ (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 1982).

Similar to UNESCO’s definition of culture, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency adopts a view of culture that is holistic and inseparable from an individual’s identity, behaviour, thoughts and way of life. This holistic approach requires any organisation or individual seeking to communicate and work with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people to obtain a level of understanding of their cultures. The comprehensive nature of cultural competency may often require a considerable shift for an organisation’s practice if it is to be more than a ‘tokenistic effort’ (VACCA 2010, p. 23).

Tong and Cross (1991, p. 12) describe cultural competency as ‘a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situation.’ Developed from earlier concepts such as ‘cultural safety’, ‘cultural awareness’, ‘cultural respect’ and ‘cultural security’ (Grote 2008, p. 11; VACCA 2010, p. 17), cultural competency represents an ongoing process, or scale of attitudes, behaviours and policies that range from what is described as culturally

destructive through to culturally proficient (VACCA 2010, p. 23). As a framework, Grote (2008, p. 5) observes that it is flexible and transferable across sectors.

This continuum is represented pictorially by VACCA (2010, p. 23) and sets out identifiers that indicate where a particular behaviour, attitude or policy sits. It captures 'culturally destructive' behaviour through to 'culturally proficient' behaviour. Similarly, the work by the Mentorship Circles Project (2011) reinforces cultural competence as a developmental process of improving relations, ranging from a point of 'disconnect and unknowing', which can be built upon by consultation through several stages to a point of 'cultural integrity', which is reached by relationships characterised by sophistication, respect, integrity and dignity.

While other literature does not detail the scale of behaviour to the same extent, several key principles of cultural competence can be articulated. These principles include:

- recognition and acknowledgement of the diversity of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, experiences and cultures;
- recognition of a commitment to self determination;
- recognition of the distinctive needs of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- recognition of the need for tailored provision of services, requiring partnerships with the community, and the building in of the local community's distinct needs such as geographical setting, language and socio-economic context;
- a self-awareness of an organisation's own culture and the way it informs views and practices; (VACCA 2010, pp. 23-37; Flaxman, Muir & Oprea 2009);
- a recognition that achieving cultural proficiency requires organisations to hold sensitivity and respect for cultural connectedness, understanding and relationships with our local organisations and communities; and
- an ongoing commitment to strong partnerships with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities

For services, encouraging a culture of promoting our child rearing practices and values may involve (but is not limited to):

- increasing the proportion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff, volunteers, consultants and advocates in a service;
- incorporating acknowledgment of our people, cultures and traditional ownership throughout the service, children's activities and the service's work policies;
- including cultural identity and language as part of the curriculum (Flaxman, Muir & Oprea 2009);
- supporting cultural and community activities and events;
- welcoming and involving kinship groups and extended families;
- building relationships and partnerships with the local community, including support for cultural planning, family support, meal programs, parent groups;
- cultural competency training; and
- cultural awareness training (SNAICC 2010b, pp. 86-87).

It should also be noted that the quality of this aspect of service provision relies heavily on individual staff who 'have the appropriate knowledge, skills, values and a long-term commitment to building trusting relationships and engaging with families' (Flaxman, Muir & Oprea 2009, p. viii).

Cultural competency is not a finite checklist process, rather it is 'a constant, ongoing process for non-Indigenous organisations and staff' (SNAICC 2010b, p. 86). The literature also recognises that moving towards 'cultural proficiency' requires the presence of enabling factors, including dedicated resources, a strong policy environment and committed organisational support (AIDR 2009).

The achievement of culturally competent practice involves significant organisational commitment to improved outcomes for our children and families (Grote 2008, p. 46). It means an investment of resources, a commitment from management and staff, and an honest desire to move towards cultural proficiency. VACCA's spectrum recognises that a movement towards cultural proficiency, which often follows symbolic change, is a process 'built over time, not overnight' (VACCA 2010, p. 23).

With this in mind, Grote (2008, pp. 44-45) notes the following benefits of adopting cultural competency as a framework:

- relevance of program material increases and retains our children and families as participants;
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander content creates 'discursive spaces at the interfaces of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems';
- involvement of our mentors and professionals may provide role models;
- universal organisations are better equipped, more competent and confident working with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander clientele.

However, there is a general warning against adopting the appearance of a cultural competency framework at the expense of actually enacting it (VACCA 2010, p. 23). There is also an important distinction between 'cultural competency' and 'competency-based training'. This highlights the need for further work on how a cultural competency framework may be integrated throughout service delivery, including training, service delivery agreements and all practice directions and standards. In order to best direct resources, SNAICC holds the view - supported by Outcome 5 of the *National Child Protection Framework* which states that 'to provide culturally appropriate responses [for our children], strategies under the National Framework must be based on partnerships between Indigenous families and communities, and between Indigenous agencies, mainstream service providers and governments' (FaHCSIA 2010, p. 66).

6. Partnerships with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community controlled services

SNAICC welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to partnerships that support the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander design, development and delivery of services for our people. As Hon Jenny Macklin MP (Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2009) observed, 'we want Indigenous peoples to be our partners in closing the gap. Indigenous peoples must have the opportunity to develop and drive solutions if we, as a nation are to achieve real, lasting change'.

In recognition of the above policy directive and the potential benefits of working with non-Aboriginal organisations, the following provides an overview of partnerships and agreement-making as a framework for effectively engaging with the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare sector. In SNAICC's view, this broad framework is equally applicable to our sector's partnerships government or non-government organisations. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an exhaustive list of

all considerations that must be present for effective partnerships with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations. SNAICC instead identifies this area as one that should be explored further with a focus on the child and family welfare sector.

a. Why partnerships?

In SNAICC's view, partnerships may provide a positive expression of its members' priorities of self-determination and capacity building. Partnerships are a forum where our communities may be 'consensual parties rather than subject to imposed administrative solutions' (SNAICC 2010c; Langton & Palmer 2004, p. 251). As Tehan, Palmer, Langton & Mazel (2006, p. 3) note, 'agreement-making provides a forum in which indigenous polities can negotiate their needs and aspirations, including fundamental issues of recognition, inclusions and economic opportunity'. At an international level, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007, arts. 4, 18, 19 and 23) clearly provides for Indigenous determination, development and administration of priorities, strategies and programs.

In part, this is reflected in the commitment to 're-setting the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (The Hon Jenny Macklin MP, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2009). The value of partnerships is also articulated in the Council of Australian Governments' *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (2011, p. A-20, Schedule D), and emphasised in the *National Child Protection Framework* (Council of Australian Governments 2009, p. 28).

This federal policy context provides formal recognition of the importance of 'partnerships' between Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations. In practice, these partnerships may be either formal or informal, ranging from legally binding agreements to a voluntary commitment to a particular arrangement (Agreements, Treaties and Negotiated Settlements Project 'ATNS' 2011). As of April 2011, over 130 Australian agreements with Aboriginal parties were identified as including a focus on children, with a majority of these agreements entered into over the previous decade (ATNS 2011). This is set within a broader Australian agreement-making trend, with over 1028 agreements with Aboriginal parties since 2001 (ATNS 2011).

Reasons for entering into partnerships for the child and family sector may include, but are not limited to:

- a cost effective approach to funding arrangements and sharing of resources;
- 'integration' of information sharing and collaboration (SNAICC 2005, p. 16; Higgins 2010, p. 6);
- product supply and subsidies (SNAICC 2011c);
- maximisation of access to service providers in regional and remote areas (2011a);
- in-kind support;
- community development, capacity and relationship building (SNAICC 2011c);
- development of infrastructure (Burchill, Higgins, Ramsamy & Taylor 2006); and
- the provision of funded positions, external support, mentoring or volunteers (SNAICC 2005; 2011c).

In SNAICC's view, partnerships provide an opportunity for positive engagement and building the capacity of all parties to deliver services to our children, families and communities. Clearly, this approach can be aligned with the *National Child Protection Framework's* aim to support community 'building activities in areas such as culture and

connectedness, strengthening families and communities in targeted areas where children are at risk and speaking up about abuse' (FaHCSIA 2010, p. 121).

However, while partnerships may be an appropriate vehicle to collaborate, share information and resources, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes for our children and families, partnerships with non-Aboriginal organisations requires the presence of particular enabling factors and guiding principles. As Taylor & Scambary (2005) observe, the existence of a partnership does not automatically indicate positive engagement, nor that the joint effort will improve conditions for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people (Also see Palmer, p. 252).

This view on partnerships is shared by the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2010), who noted that 'a consultation and negotiation framework that clearly outlines the practical steps necessary to achieve effective participation in decision-making [must be progressed] in Australia'.

In short, SNAICC views the design, development and delivery of partnerships by our services as a key to successful outcomes for our children and families. In the absence of this approach, even if paired with a genuine commitment to achieving more effective service delivery mechanisms, partnerships are unlikely to achieve either their aims or their full potential. Additionally, an unsuccessful partnership may compromise future working relationships with both communities and organisations (SNAICC 2011c).

On the other hand, there is also the possibility that partnerships will achieve outcomes extending beyond the initial goals of the partners, including 'contributing to the social and economic fabric of indigenous communities' (Tehan, Palmer, Langton & Mazel 2006, p. 3).

b. Principles for partnerships

There is considerable evidence outlining principles for agreement-making with Indigenous peoples both in Australia and comparable, postcolonial jurisdictions such as Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America. These agreements govern diverse areas, including, but not limited to, property title and tenure, resource ownership and distribution, intellectual property, social and environmental management, and the development of infrastructure (Agreements, Treaties and Negotiated Settlements Project 2011; Tehan, Palmer, Langton & Mazel 2006, p. 2). Importantly, partnerships that are considered 'effective' and 'successful' often cite similar features. These features include, but are not limited to:

- negotiation in good faith
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander interests are seen as parties to an agreement, and not merely as consultants
- investment in developing relationships of trust
- mutual goal setting
- sustainable funding support
- initiatives that are supported with timelines and benchmarks
- supportive leadership from stakeholders
- regular and open communication that is respectful and culturally appropriate.

Where these features are present, all parties are better placed to gauge the ongoing levels of consent and support for the partnership against the anticipated benefits of the partnership. O’Faicheallaigh (2004) stresses that this is best judged by what commitment an agreement requires of the parties, rather than the political support for the project. This approach assists with adjusting partnerships that either formally require little consent or support, or that may exert pressure on parties to enter into the agreement.

c. Negotiation of terms

The formalisation of a partnership may be an important consideration, particularly where considerable resource commitments are made to a joint endeavour. In recognition that the negotiation context (which comprises legal, financial, social, historical and cultural frameworks) is skewed in favour of non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander interests (Australian Human Rights Commission 2010, p. 2), a careful audit of the partnership context and the capacity of parties is required.

The literature points to key features of consultation and negotiation with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. As articulated by the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner (2011) and Tehan, Palmer, Langton & Mazel (2006), these features include:

- a meaningful and effective consultation process, incorporating:
 - an objective of obtaining informed consent of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people affected by the partnership
 - provision of all relevant information in an accessible manner
 - ongoing discussions throughout the process
 - coordinated consultation processes across government departments
 - consultation with all affected communities
 - financial, technical and other assistance for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander parties
- careful attention and understanding of the context of negotiation, ensuring the parties are not pressured into entering a partnership.

d. SNAICC’s Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy (2008)

SNAICC (2008a, p. 3, Appendix A) has developed a policy that outlines our membership’s views on the broad principles that inform ‘meaningful, respectful, consultative and equal working relationships at the local level between government agencies, non-government agencies and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander services and communities’.

Developed and endorsed by SNAICC’s National Executive, the policy focuses on the interaction between our organisations and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations in the child and family welfare sector, ranging from primary through to tertiary services. In SNAICC’s view, a commitment by the sector to this policy provides a good basis for partnerships to be developed. An example of a current partnership that has built on this policy approach is the Memorandum of Understanding between the New South Wales Department of Human Services, Community Services and the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (NSW), dated 17 March 2010.

e. Measuring outcomes of partnerships

The partnership approach must also be accompanied by ongoing evaluation of the substantive outcomes of agreements, and any evaluation must build in measurements against aims and outcomes identified by the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander parties. As O’Faircheallaigh (2004, p. 306) notes, while there are currently ‘no benchmarks or criteria for assessing the terms of negotiated agreements’, there are four basic ways in which outcomes may arise from a partnership:

- from the process of negotiation
- in the form of the content or provision of an agreement
- from realising provisions of an agreement
- broader impact of the agreement’s provisions.

O’Faircheallaigh goes on to argue that it is feasible to develop standard criteria for assessing individual aspects of agreements, acknowledging the impact of the context of the agreement. Through incorporating mutually-agreed review processes into partnerships, in SNAICC’s view, benefits include:

- our families and services will be better placed to evaluate whether the partnership is beneficial to their children and families;
- partnerships are more likely to incorporate flexibility and reflect needs and interest of the specific parties;
- parties are more likely to re-engage in a partnership that has been based on positive relationships and has had positive outcomes; and
- there is an ongoing contribution to an evidence base of best practice.

7. Recommendations

In SNAICC’s view, there are several key areas for future work raised by this paper. These are:

- a. Further modelling of best practice examples of service providers, including the AICCA model and universal services that have adopted a committed approach to cultural competency in partnership with our sector and communities.
- b. Provide ongoing additional or new funding and support to build the capacity of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child and family welfare agencies, with the focus on the provision of preventative programs.
- c. An in-depth, longitudinal case study on good practice partnerships between Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations and non-Aboriginal organisations in the child and family welfare sector.

SNAICC proposes that the Policy Paper # 4 required under the *National Secretariat Program Funding Agreement* will provide the basis for this longitudinal case study. Ideally, this focus would enable considerable discussion and reflection on:

- the negotiation and establishment of partnership examples;
- implementation and outcomes to date of the partnerships; and
- lessons learned from the partnerships.

- d. The establishment of a dedicated research project - examining national, regional and local levels of our families' engagement with child and family services, both universal and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- e. The ongoing incorporation of training informed by the cultural competency framework (VACCA 2010) into quality standards and service delivery agreements for all child and family services. This training must:
 - i. be delivered by and in partnership with local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations and community members;
 - ii. include cultural awareness and competency training;
 - iii. include training on the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle.

SNAICC would be happy to provide recommendations of suitable organisations and materials.

8. Conclusion

There is a clear, ongoing need for further work on the ways in which both universal and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander services can best engage and support our children and families, and the means by which to establish and monitor access and engagement. SNAICC recognises the need for universal services that provide culturally proficient service providers, whose programs are grounded in the principle of continual improvement. Importantly, families need appropriate, real support and choice— no one can be culturally proficient without a strong, well resourced, community controlled sector, which SNAICC believes may be facilitated by meaningful and well considered partnerships between our services and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Appendices:

Appendix A	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care 2008, <i>Service Development, Cultural Respect and Service Access Policy</i> , SNAICC, Melbourne.
Appendix B	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care 2010, <i>Working and Walking Together Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations</i> , SNAICC, Melbourne.
Appendix C	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care 2008, <i>SNAICC's Ideal AICCA Service Model 2008</i> , SNAICC, Melbourne.

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