

ANZSOG CASE PROGRAM – TEACHING NOTE

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Closing the Gap Refresh: Incorporating First Nations Voices in Policy Design

An ANZSOG Teaching Note by Dani Larkin & Harry Hobbs

Keywords: Close the Gap, Coalition of Peaks, Reconciliation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Partnership Agreement

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Summary

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments reached an agreement to work with Indigenous communities on 'Closing the Gap' in Indigenous disadvantage. Over the years, however, it became clear that the agreement was not working. In 2018, Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations agreed to 'refresh' the agreement. In 2019, the Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2019-2029 was formally signed. This case note explores how Aboriginal communities and Australian governments reframed Closing the Gap to improve upon its predecessor. It does so by drawing on the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involved in negotiations over the refresh.

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Learning objectives

The case offers several different teaching opportunities on a variety of topics, including public administration, Indigenous affairs, public policy, and law. The case will enable students to:

- Formulate a better understanding of what the Closing the Gap campaign is and why it is important to improving the overall health and wellbeing outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'
- Consider how Australia's federal structure and sharing of legislative powers can complicate effective design and delivery of Indigenous Affairs policies
- Examine why and how Australian governments are rethinking and reshaping their processes in order to meaningfully engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Course audience

The audience for this case study may include:

- Postgraduate students enrolled in a Masters (or other postgraduate course) in Indigenous affairs, public administration, law, government, and related areas.
- Final year undergraduate students in any of the above areas.
- Public sector employees working in Indigenous affairs

Suggested Teaching Approach

1	Question for class discussion	What does Closing the Gap mean? The Close the Gap campaign was launched in 2006 by Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner following his 2005 Social Justice Report. The 'gap' the 2005 Social Justice Report refers to are the differences in health, wellbeing and life expectancy between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Why is important to Close the Gap? What types of issues were the focus of the initial Close the Gap campaign? Students can consider past, and present closing the gap targets and discuss each target against the statistical data and health issues Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience. The material below can support that work. • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. 2005. Social Justice Report. • Calma, T. 2008. Essentials for Social Justice: Close the Gap. 11 June. https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/essentials-social-justice-close-gap • Prime Minister's Closing the Gap Report. 2020.
2	Question for class discussion and potential assignment topic	What went wrong with the Closing the Gap campaign/framework? The case note explains how the Closing the Gap framework focused attention on ameliorating Indigenous disadvantage. In the years following the signing of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, however, it became clear that the 'gap' in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' health and life outcomes had not been closed. What went wrong?

		Students can consider these questions in discussion groups or in a research assignment. The case note identifies three main issues that students can further investigate and contextualise in their discussion. The material below can support that work. • Auditor-General. 2019. Closing the Gap: Performance Audit. • Denny-Smith, G and Loosemore, M. 2020. Why We Aren't Closing the Gap: A Failure to Account for "Cultural Counterfactuals". The Conversation. 13 Feb https://theconversation.com/why-we-arent-closing-the-gap-a-failure-to-account-for-cultural-counterfactuals-129076 • Bond, C and Singh, D. 2020. More than a Refresh Required for Closing the Gap of Indigenous Health Inequality. Medical Journal of Australia, 212(5). • Dillon, M. 2021. The First Decade of Closing the Gap: What Went Wrong. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research: Discussion Paper 298
3	Question for class discussion	How did the design of the Closing the Gap refresh process differ from the initial Closing the Gap framework? In 2018, Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations agreed to 'refresh' the Closing the Gap agreement. Both parties understood that if the new framework was to succeed, changes were required. How was the refresh process designed differently? What steps were taken by the Coalition of Peaks and Australian governments to engage with each other? What new targets emerged out of this process? Students can explore how – and why – the Closing the Gap refresh process differed from the initial framework. The material below can support that work. • The Lowitja Institute. 2019. Our Choices Our Voices. Close the Gap Steering Committee. • Council of Australian Governments. 2018. COAG Statement on Closing the Gap. 12 December.
4	Question for class discussion	The <i>National Agreement on Closing the Gap</i> was signed in July 2020. How will this agreement change policy-making in Indigenous Affairs in Australia? The <i>National Agreement on Closing the Gap</i> was signed by representatives of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, the President of the Australian Local Government Association and the Coalition of Peaks in July 2020. The National Agreement has been described as 'a real turning point' and 'a new benchmark for our people and our relationship with governments'. Is this correct? Will the new Agreement change policy-making in Indigenous Affairs in Australia? If so, in what ways? Is there any risk that the Agreement is not legislated and relies on the commitment of all governments? • Dillon, M. 2020. A Steep Climb Ahead, But the Landscape Has Become Clearer for Closing the Gap. <i>Inside Story</i>. 8 September. https://insidestory.org.au/a-steep-climb-ahead-but-the-landscape-has-become-clearer-for-closing-the-gap/ • Mares, P. 2020. Closing the (Effectiveness) Gap. <i>Inside Story</i>. 2 July. https://insidestory.org.au/closing-the-effectiveness-gap/ • The Lowitja Institute. 2022. Transforming Power: Voices for Generational Change. Close the Gap Steering Committee.

5	Question for class discussion	How does Closing the Gap relate to the national debate on constitutional recognition and the Uluru Statement from the Heart? The 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart called for an Indigenous representative body to be put in the Constitution and a Makarrata Commission to be established by legislation to supervise a process of agreement-making and truth-telling. The Statement's proposals are deliberately sequenced: first Voice, then treaty and truth. A First Nations Voice is intended to function by providing institutional representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a two-way interactive dialogue process with the Government and Parliament (at all levels of governance) in the early stages of policy design and formulation. How can a First Nations Voice (National, Local and Regional) contribute to closing the gap and providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies affecting them? Students can discuss the potential opportunities a First Nations Voice could be involved with in contributing to the Closing the Gap campaign by increasing the involvement of First Nation's peoples in public policy making processes. Materials that may support that discussion include: • National Indigenous Australians Agency. 2021. Indigenous Voice Co-design Process: Final Report to the Australian Government. • Rigney, D, et al. 2022. Establishing a Voice to Parliament Could be an Opportunity for Indigenous Nation Building. Here's What that Means. <i>The Conversation</i>. 4 August. https://theconversation.com/establishing-a-voice-to-parliament-could-be-an-opportunity-for-indigenous-nation-building-heres-what-that-means-187534 • Larkin, D, and Galloway, K. 2021. Constitutionally entrenched Voice to Parliament: Representation and Good Governance. 46(3) <i>Alternative Law Journal</i> 193-198. • Larkin, D, et al. 2022. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Law Reform and the Return of the States. 41(1) <i>University of Queensland Law Journal</i> 35-58.
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Additional resources

Close the Gap Steering Committee. 2018. [A Ten Year Review: The Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset](#).

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2019. [Partnering with Indigenous Australians to Close the Gap](#). 27 March.

[Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap 2019-2029](#). 2018.

[National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#). 2020.

National Indigenous Australians Agency. 2021. [Closing the Gap Implementation Plan](#). 5 August.

Feedback on Teaching Note use

To assist with continual improvement, if you've used this Teaching Note, we'd greatly appreciate your feedback and suggestions for improvement. To do so, please email caselibrary@anzsog.edu.au with the name of the case and your comments. Many thanks in advance.

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