

Evaluation of the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program: Final Report

National Indigenous Australians Agency

3 April 2025

This artwork, by Nouser Selina Swan Nungurrayi, a proud Kija, Ngardi-Jaru Woman from Halls Creek in WA, is inspired by the theme "We, Wit, Wisdom". The three circles connect we, wit and wisdom side by side, with the connecting lines signifying the transcending and flexible ways in which we work. Reflecting traditional songlines, the artwork represents courage, connection, celebrations, ceremonies and healing.

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Nous Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, who maintain their culture, country and spiritual connection to the land, sea and community.

This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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Glossary

Key terms	Definition
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander/First Nations Australians	<p>An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as such and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.¹</p> <p>This report uses the term ‘First Nations’ to refer to “people who have identified themselves or have been identified by a representative (for example, their parent or guardian), as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin.”²</p>
Black cladding	<p>“The practice of a non-Indigenous business entity or individual taking unfair advantage of an Indigenous business entity or individual for the purpose of gaining access to otherwise inaccessible Indigenous procurement policies or contracts.”³</p>
Capital	<p>“Wealth in the form of money or other assets owned by a person or organisation, or available for a purpose such as starting a company or investing.”⁴</p>
Cultural capability	<p>“Cultural capability refers to the skills, knowledge, behaviours and systems that are required to plan, support, improve and deliver services in a culturally respectful and appropriate manner.”⁵</p>
Indigenous business/First Nations business	<p>Businesses that are owned and managed by individuals who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The Australian Government defines an Indigenous business as “any business that is 50 per cent or more Indigenous owned.”⁶</p> <p>We note that definitions of what constitutes an Indigenous business vary. Some definitions of an Indigenous or First Nations business require 50 per cent First Nations ownership, while other certifications require at least 51 per cent ownership and have additional requirements including that enterprises must be at least 51 per cent or more Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander owned, managed and controlled.⁷</p>
Indigenous Business Sector Strategy (IBSS)	<p>The IBSS is a ten-year plan developed in partnership between the Australian Government and First Nations Australians to support the growth and development of Indigenous businesses. The Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program is one of the initiatives under the IBSS.⁸</p>

¹ Australian Law Reform Commission, “[Legal Definitions of Aboriginality](#)”, accessed 23 July 2024.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, “[Profile of First Nations people](#)”, accessed 23 July 2024.

³ Supply Nation 2020, [What is black cladding?](#), accessed 23 July 2024, p.1.

⁴ Hodgson, Geoffrey M. “What Is Capital? Economists and Sociologists Have Changed Its Meaning: Should It Be Changed Back?” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2014, pp. 1063–86.

⁵ Queensland Government, “[Cultural Capability](#)”, accessed 23 July 2024.

⁶ National Indigenous Australians Agency, “[Indigenous Procurement Policy Overview](#)”, accessed 12 August 2024.

⁷ Supply Nation and the Australian Government define an Indigenous business as at least 50% owned by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, and these are the businesses that are eligible under the Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP). However, Supply Nation certified suppliers must be a minimum of 51% owned, managed and controlled.

Supply Nation, “[FAQs – Indigenous business](#)”, accessed 24 July 2024.

⁸ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, [The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy 2018 – 2028](#) (2018), accessed 20 July 2024.

Key terms	Definition
<p>Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs)</p>	<p>Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs) include the Australian Government Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) and state-based Aboriginal Procurement Policies (APPs).</p> <p>The Indigenous Procurement Policy is an Australian Government initiative established in 2015 that mandates a minimum percentage of Australian Government procurement contracts will be awarded to Indigenous-owned businesses.⁹</p> <p>APPs include the state-based government procurement policies of Western Australia, South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland which intend to significantly increase the rate of purchasing from First Nations businesses by mandating targets for the award of contracts to Aboriginal businesses.¹⁰</p>
<p>Joint venture</p>	<p>“A commercial arrangement between two or more parties to undertake a specific business project or opportunity.”¹¹</p>

⁹ National Indigenous Australians Agency, [Indigenous Procurement Policy \(IPP\) Reform](#), (2023), accessed 20 July 2024.

¹⁰ Government of Western Australia, [“General Procurement Direction 2021/08 - Aboriginal Procurement Policy”](#), accessed 20 July 2024; NSW Government, [“Aboriginal Procurement Policy”](#), accessed 20 July 2024.

¹¹ Thomson Reuters, [“Joint Ventures Made Simple: Everything You Need to Know”](#), accessed 23 July 2024.

1 Executive summary

This report presents Nous Group's (Nous) evaluation of the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program (the hubs program). Nous was commissioned by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (the NIAA) to conduct an independent process and outcomes evaluation of the hubs program, to understand whether the program is appropriately supporting First Nations businesses to start up and grow.

The evaluation was conducted from October 2023 to December 2024. This report showcases the key findings from the evaluation, triangulated from analysis of:

- interviews with a range of stakeholders, including hub clients – First Nations people who access support through the hubs program - hub staff, partners, government representatives and community representatives
- results from a survey completed by hub clients
- hub contracts, performance reports and other documentation provided by the NIAA and hub providers to the Nous evaluation team (the evaluation team)
- quantitative analysis of the program's funding data and client numbers to support the value for money assessment.

The hubs program was introduced by the Australian Government in 2018 under the Indigenous Business Sector Strategy (IBSS), to fill a gap identified in business support services for First Nations people.¹²

Under the program to date, the NIAA has established four business hubs (the hubs) across Australia, comprising a total investment of \$54.3 million by the Australian Government over seven years. These hubs are intended to be 'one-stop shops' assisting First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs to access support and navigate a complex ecosystem of business support services.

This evaluation report provides recommendations in relation to:



- the program's continuation
- service delivery at the hubs
- monitoring and reporting
- governance and sustainability
- ecosystem collaboration.

1.1 Findings against Key Evaluation Questions

The research was guided by Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) that span five categories, shown in Figure 1 below. The KEQs were developed by the NIAA with some minor input from the evaluation team. The findings in this report are also structured by the KEQs.

¹² National Indigenous Australians Agency, Indigenous Business Sector Strategy, (2017), 11.

Figure 1 | Key Evaluation Questions

CATEGORY	KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS
 1. Appropriateness of the hubs program model	1.1 How appropriate is the hubs program model in meeting the needs of its target groups including the First Nations business sector? 1.2 How appropriate is the hubs program model in responding to challenges and changes that currently shape the operating environment in which First Nations entrepreneurs do business? 1.3 How appropriate is the hubs program model in complementing other initiatives?
 2. Strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative program model	2.1 How well does the hubs program model represent a strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative model? 2.2 Does the program model encourage collaboration between users at hub sites?
 3. Program outcomes	3.1 To what extent have the expected outcomes of the program been achieved? 3.2 To what extent has the hubs program contributed to the Closing the Gap targets?
 4. Program implementation	4.1 What is working well or less well and why? 4.2 What are the enablers/barriers to the effective implementation and delivery of the program? 4.3 What can be done differently to maximise the achievement of any beneficial outcomes and reduce any negative impacts?
 5. Achievement of value for money	5.1 Is the hubs program on track to support the achievement of value for money, i.e., is the program economical, efficient, effective, equitable and ethical? 5.2 Is the program achieving value for money from the perspective of the hub clients?

1.1.1 Appropriateness of the hubs program model

How appropriate is the hubs program model in meeting the needs of its target groups, including the First Nations business sector?

The hubs program model is largely appropriate and is meeting many of the needs of First Nations businesses across the business lifecycle. The evaluation findings highlight that the needs of First Nations businesspeople identified by the IBSS are ongoing, including the need for a one-stop shop for businesspeople to receive culturally appropriate business advice and access a short-term office space. The findings show that the hubs program is meeting a range of client needs but could better respond to other needs: in the survey of hub clients, 76 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *The hubs' services meet my needs as a business owner.*

Key findings from interview and survey data include:

- A strength of the program is the hands-on, one-on-one business support staff model. The majority of hub clients interviewed recounted highly positive experiences of accessing support from the hubs' business support staff, and they appreciated the fact that that the support was personal and tailored. Business support services appear to be especially successful in assisting newer business owners to clarify

their ideas and undertake early activities such as writing business plans or applying for small business grants.

- The 'one-stop shop' aspect of the hubs model is valued and needed. The hubs are providing an important referral service, acting as a first point of contact to support clients to navigate the ecosystem of supports.
- The hubs program model is less appropriate for supporting more established business owners. Some hub clients who had been operating their businesses for multiple years shared that the hubs have provided them with needed support, while others shared that the hub service is not especially valuable to them. This is a critique of both the program model's design and its implementation. With respect to the model, most capability building initiatives (such as workshops) for more mature businesses to learn how to scale and grow sustainably are offered infrequently and on an ad hoc basis. In terms of implementation, some clients and partners suggested that the hubs' business support staff need deeper expertise and personal business experience in order to provide valuable support to businesses.
- The hubs do not directly address one of the most significant challenges affecting growth in the First Nations business sector: access to finance. However, the hubs program is not designed or funded to meet this need. Instead, the hubs play an important capability-building and referral role that supports First Nations businesses to increase their opportunities to access capital. The hubs refer their clients to a range of partner organisations that do provide direct access to finance, such as Indigenous Business Australia (IBA), First Australians Capital, Many Rivers and commercial banks.
- The program model has been designed so most hubs are anchored in areas with high First Nations population density, but this approach is less appropriate for business owners based in regional areas. Some regionally-based clients found the hubs difficult to access, citing the high costs and inconvenience of travelling large distances to the hubs. There are limitations in the program's ability to bridge this gap with digital service delivery – many regional areas experience connectivity challenges, and clients and staff reported that face-to-face support is especially important for First Nations people. As the demand for First Nations-specific business support services in regional areas grows, this is a limitation of the model that the hubs are working to overcome through greater regional outreach.

How appropriate is the hubs program model in responding to challenges and changes that currently shape the operating environment in which First Nations entrepreneurs do business?

Since the inception of the hubs program in 2018, several shifts and external shocks have affected the Australian economy and business landscape that First Nations businesspeople operate within. These include COVID-19, inflation and the increased cost of doing business, increased international demand for First Nations products and services, the establishment of Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs), and the increased opportunities as well as the sometimes problematic joint venture arrangements these policies have facilitated. First Nations people also face ongoing challenges associated with their location in regional and rural areas, challenges accessing capital and low levels of intergenerational wealth.

The hubs appear to be dynamic in responding to many of these challenges and changes, including by:

- Increasing the provision of digital support in response to COVID-19 and supporting businesses to create a digital presence through website design or marketing support
- providing free support and covering the costs of some services provided by external providers
- supporting clients to respond to tenders and hosting workshops for government and industry partners to discuss opportunities with clients
- supporting clients involved in problematic joint venture arrangements.

There is an opportunity for the hubs to provide greater capability-building support for more mature businesses to grow, scale and enter export markets as well as access the finance needed to do so.

Most hubs reported that their contracts with the NIAA and key performance indicators (KPIs) allow for needed flexibility in service delivery and tailoring of services to meet local needs. They felt that the KPIs provide direction and the autonomy to adapt to emerging needs.

How appropriate is the hubs program model in complementing other initiatives?

The hubs fill an important gap in the ecosystem of First Nations-specific business supports because the service they provide is a unique combination of six key elements. Hub services:

1. are free
2. are culturally appropriate and safe, and delivered mostly by First Nations people
3. are high-touch, tailored, and involve one-on-one mentoring
4. offer a front door or referral service to help clients navigate the complex web of business support services available
5. enable networking so clients can meet buyers and other First Nations businesses
6. are delivered by local providers who cultivate a community between hub clients.

The business service ecosystem is comprised of a range of diverse providers including First Nations-specific services and mainstream services accessed by First Nations people. The evaluation found that while other organisations offer services with some the six features, the combination of these features in the hubs program model enables the hubs to play a unique role in the ecosystem of business supports that is valued by First Nations businesspeople accessing their services.

The hubs also have established working relationships with other organisations, which enables them to refer clients to other services and collaborate to provide clients with more comprehensive supports. Some relationships appear to be strong and beneficial to clients. In other cases, there are opportunities to further strengthen and broaden relationships.

1.1.2 Strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative program model

What strategies are the hubs using to ensure the program model is strengths-based, respectful and culturally appropriate?

All hubs employ a majority of First Nations staff members; 78 per cent of the 40 hub staff members across the program identify as First Nations. Clients interviewed and surveyed during the evaluation suggested this is fundamental to the cultural safety of the program, so that they feel understood as a First Nations person in business and to ensure that the program aligns with the interests of First Nations people. Clients also emphasised that staff ways of working that are welcoming, strengths-based and prioritise genuine relationship-building are key to supporting their cultural safety. Other aspects of the model that support cultural appropriateness include First Nations artwork, artefacts and visual design featured in the hubs, and that all the hubs have First Nations people in leadership positions (75% of Hub Managers are First Nations Australians). Data from survey and interviews largely supported the finding that clients view the hubs as a trusted, culturally appropriate service.

Does the hubs program model encourage collaboration between users at hub sites?

The hubs' office spaces and events create connection and community between hub clients. The hubs engage in a range of formal initiatives to bring clients together while providing a space where hub clients

can connect informally. Interview and survey findings show that clients value the communities fostered by the hubs. Several respondents also reported that some connections have led to positive business outcomes such as joint ventures between clients or clients procuring needed services from each other. The hubs have also developed collaborative relationships with some of their more experienced clients, drawing on their expertise to advise other clients on specific issues or host joint workshops at the hubs. However, hubs in less accessible locations are not as effective at providing regular networking and collaboration opportunities.

1.1.3 Program outcomes

To what extent have the expected outcomes of the program been achieved?

The evaluation found that the hubs are effectively achieving the following program requirements and outcomes:

- Providing a single point of contact for First Nations people to access business supports and be referred to other First Nations-specific and mainstream services.
- Supporting the development of collaborative partnerships between hub clients.
- Delivering culturally appropriate services.
- Collaborating across the business support ecosystem to provide required support to clients.
- Collaborating with industry and government partners on joint programs and efforts to enhance First Nations procurement.
- Contributing to a circular First Nations economy by connecting First Nations businesses to each other for services. The hubs facilitate this through informal referrals and internal registers or panels of their clients.
- Supporting their clients to grow their businesses through capability development, connection to buyers and guidance through tendering or procurement processes. Many clients described that hub support has enabled them to win work, grow their business and in some cases, employ other First Nations people.

Each hub has taken a different approach to increasing their regional outreach, but resource constraints limit their ability to meet demand for services from regionally based clients. The evaluation found that when the hubs offered ongoing, in-person support this appeared to be more effective than business support staff travelling periodically to regional areas.

The hubs' key performance indicators (KPIs) and reporting requirements are outputs, rather than outcomes focused. As such, quantitative outcomes analysis could not be performed for this evaluation. Recommendation 6 details how the NIAA and the hubs can enhance and streamline the hubs' key performance indicators to better measure the outcomes and impacts of the program.

To what extent has the hubs program contributed to the Closing the Gap targets?

Qualitative data indicates that the hubs program has contributed to increased economic empowerment and participation among First Nations people, supporting the achievement of Target 8 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The program aligns with Priority Reforms One and Three, emphasising shared decision making between the NIAA and the hubs, as well as improving the way government organisations work with First Nations businesses, thereby fostering a supportive environment for First Nations business growth and employment. By supporting clients to start and expand their businesses, the program contributes directly to Target 8: stronger economic participation. It is also likely that the program has contributed to Target 7: youth are engaged in employment, as some business owners reporting being able to employ other First Nations people after receiving support from the hubs. However, the hubs'

contribution to these outcomes could be better quantified with more comprehensive data collection on clients' economic progress.

1.1.4 Program implementation at the hubs

What is working well or less well and why?

The hubs program is effectively connecting First Nations businesses to potential buyers through referrals and networking events, playing a central role in assisting clients to navigate the business support ecosystem and providing free, culturally safe services. Additionally, the growth of hub services into regional areas has expanded the reach of the hubs' support. Clients value well-qualified and passionate hub staff, particularly business support staff with relevant experience. However, some hubs face challenges in hiring staff with necessary business skills.

Clients across the program appreciated the informal connections enabled through physical hubs. However, the physical layouts of some hub offices could be improved to enhance accessibility and cultural safety. There are mixed views on ideal locations, with some clients favouring city-centric hub offices, while others suggested that more suburban or regional areas would enhance accessibility.

Ensuring a baseline skill-level for business support staff across the program and optimising hub layouts were identified as areas for further improvement.

What are the enablers/barriers to the effective implementation and delivery of the program?

Collaboration with other service providers enables the hubs to avoid duplicating services and enhance support for First Nations businesses. The hubs regularly meet with organisations such as Many Rivers, Supply Nation and First Australians Capital to clarify roles and identify service gaps, aiding the coordination of support across the business service ecosystem.

Conversely, resource constraints and short funding cycles pose barriers to implementation. Constrained staffing levels mean that some hubs are unable to provide intensive business coaching and must refer clients to other organisations for services that they would like to offer internally. Additionally, short-term funding cycles hinder long-term strategic planning and retention of skilled staff, as the hubs can only offer short-term employment contracts, making it challenging to attract experienced First Nations staff members with the necessary business skills. There is a need for the hubs to be supported by a longer-term funding commitment and a need to diversify the hubs' funding sources to enhance the sustainability of the program and reduce their reliance on the Australian Government.

The different operating models adopted by the hubs can act as either an enabler or a barrier in different contexts. In some cases, hubs reported that their governance structures and reporting arrangements are challenging due to bureaucratic approval processes with government and limited advocacy strength. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits the Australian Government to support governance arrangements that deliver greater community control and empowerment for First Nations people. Longer-term, diversified funding and appropriate transition of the hubs towards greater community control will help the Australian Government to demonstrate a commitment to supporting the First Nations business sector and will increase client confidence in the longevity of the program.

1.1.5 Achievement of value for money

Is the program economical, efficient, effective, equitable and ethical?

The hubs program constitutes a total investment by the Australian government of \$54.3 million, between 1 July 2018 and 1 January 2026. For the purposes of the value for money analysis we have only considered the

funding provided to November 2024. At the time of the evaluation (November 2024), the Government had provided a total of \$45.9 million in funding to the hubs program, which has supported 1,931 clients since its inception. This is an average investment of \$23,800 per client.

Data limitations constrained the evaluation team's ability to quantify the outcomes and impacts of the program. Additionally, the uniqueness of the hubs program model meant that it was not possible to meaningfully compare the cost of the program to other similar services.

The evaluation found that the hubs program delivers value to a range of stakeholders through providing needed support to enhance the First Nations business sector and through its contribution to the achievement of Closing the Gap targets. The program also appears to be delivering increasing value over time as client numbers grow (by an average of 46 per cent per year between 2020 and 2024), with average per client costs reducing by 14 per cent per year to date. The evaluation identified further opportunities for the program to be delivered more efficiently. In the long-term, the program should explore opportunities to enhance financial sustainability and will need to evolve alongside the growth of the First Nations business sector.

Is the program achieving value for money from the perspective of the hub clients?

The evaluation findings reflect existing research in demonstrating that many First Nations people operating a business define success in terms of the positive economic and social outcomes they can deliver to their community in addition to financial outcomes. This is important to recognise when considering the value for money from the perspective of hub clients.

Overall, the hubs program is delivering value from the perspective of hub clients by providing free, culturally safe services that meet the needs of First Nations business owners. While there are clear opportunities to enhance service delivery, most hub clients who participated in the evaluation expressed strong support and gratitude for the program.

1.2 Evaluation recommendations

This evaluation seeks to support the NIAA to make decisions about the continuation of the hubs program and its ongoing improvement. This report also includes recommendations to support policy decisions in relation to better integrating services and addressing ongoing gaps in support for First Nations businesspeople.

A summary of the recommendations in this report is outlined in Figure 2 below. Further detail on each recommendation is provided in Section 5.

Figure 2 | Summary of recommendations



2 Introduction

Nous Group (Nous) has conducted this independent process and outcomes evaluation to understand the design, implementation and outcomes of the hubs program to date, to consider whether it is fit for purpose in its current form and in response to changing conditions, and to provide recommendations for its future delivery.¹³ This evaluation thus supports the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to understand the progress of the hubs program and its delivery across four core hub locations: Adelaide, Darwin, Perth and Sydney. By answering the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs), this report offers insights into the needs of the hubs' target groups, gaps in the ecosystem of business supports and the extent to which the hubs meet First Nations businesses' needs.

Since the initiation of the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs Program (the 'hubs program' or 'the program'), there have been notable shifts affecting the environment in which First Nations businesses operate. These shifts include COVID-19, increasing digitalisation, high costs of living and increasing demand for First Nations goods and services.

The evaluation team worked closely with the NIAA's Business and Economic Policy and Strategic Insight branches to design the evaluation and access and contextualise relevant information, while maintaining independence in the development of findings and recommendations.

2.1 Program overview

The hubs program represents a significant investment by the Australian Government, with \$54.3m committed from 2018 to 2026. It aims to further the achievement of Target 8 under the Australian Government's commitment to the Closing the Gap agreement, which strives to achieve "strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities."¹⁴ The program was established in 2018 and was based on consultations with First Nations businesspeople. The hubs program was developed to meet the need for improved, culturally appropriate and tailored business supports for First Nations entrepreneurs. To date, four hubs have been established in Perth, Western Sydney, Adelaide and the Northern Territory (in the Northern Territory there are physical hub offices in Darwin and Alice Springs).

The Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program is a key initiative under the Indigenous Business Sector Strategy (IBSS).¹⁵ The IBSS is a ten-year plan that was developed in partnership between the Australian Government and First Nations Australians to support the growth and development of Indigenous businesses.¹⁶ The IBSS defines its success as:

- "a growing and thriving sector that has the support and ability to succeed at all business levels
- a renewed culture of entrepreneurship flourishing in all corners of the country, and a pipeline of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and youth entering business
- an increasing pride and demand for Indigenous supplied and produced goods and services, which drives economic development, security and wealth for Indigenous communities."¹⁷

¹³ Evaluation of the hubs program was intended to take place on an annual basis, but the plan was disrupted as result of challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁴ National Indigenous Australians Agency, "[Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities](#)", accessed 1 August 2024.

¹⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, [The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy 2018 – 2028](#) (2018), accessed 20 July 2024.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6

As an initiative under the broader IBSS strategy, the hubs are intended to be:

- 'one-stop shops' that act as a single point of contact for hub clients to access appropriate business advice and be connected with existing business support services
- delivered in close collaboration with state and territory governments to strengthen the experience of First Nation clients, and
- centred around anchor hubs in capital cities that provide clients with short-term meeting spaces and offices.¹⁸

The program's primary target groups are:

- First Nations entrepreneurs in hub regions who want to start a business
- First Nations business owners in hub regions at all stages of the business life cycle
- industry and government partners seeking to better employ, procure and partner with First Nations people and businesses.¹⁹

The evaluation recognises that there are multiple definitions of a First Nations or Indigenous business (see the Glossary). However, as the hubs provide services to all First Nations businesspeople seeking support, it was unnecessary for the evaluation to subscribe to one definition for a First Nations business. In other words, it was within the evaluation's scope to consider how the hubs are supporting any First Nations person seeking services through the program, regardless of their business ownership arrangements (for example, sole traders, joint ventures, partnerships etc.).

The IBSS lists a range of supports the hubs could provide to clients, spanning:

- incubation and start up support
- marketing
- connections to capital
- advice for First Nations business owners looking at entering into joint ventures
- links to relevant networks
- culturally safe spaces for women to seek tailored business advice
- referrals to other relevant mainstream business support programs or initiatives.²⁰

The hub providers operate under contracts with the NIAA which set out objectives and key performance indicators. The four hubs' contracts, objectives and key performance indicators differ but broadly align with the objectives of the IBSS. An example of how they differ is that not every hub is contracted to deliver services in regional areas or employment support. This reflects how the program as a whole has matured over time and has applied learnings from the hubs that were established earlier.

All hubs are expected to provide:

- a 'one-stop shop' (or single point of contact) for First Nations businesses owners or entrepreneurs to access business support or advice, and
- short-term office space for First Nations businesses,

¹⁸ National Indigenous Australians Agency, [Indigenous Business Sector Strategy](#) (2017), 11.

¹⁹ Hub contracts.

²⁰ NIAA, [Indigenous Business Sector Strategy](#) 2, accessed 10 July 2024.

while connecting them with:

- existing mainstream and First Nations-specific business support and services
- corporate entities and employers seeking to engage First Nations businesses in their supply chain and/or employ First Nations Australians.²¹

The hubs network includes:

- Yarpa Hub in Western Sydney, operated by the NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC) and launched in 2018. Yarpa Hub was established under the Western Sydney City Deal with the aim of supporting hub clients to benefit from the infrastructure opportunities resulting from the City Deal as well as the Western Sydney Infrastructure Plan and the development associated with the Western Sydney International (Nancy-Bird Walton) Airport.²² Although intentionally located in the service area of the Western Sydney City Deal, Yarpa is intended to be a resource for First Nations people across New South Wales.
- Waalitj Hub (previously known as 'Wirra Hub') in Perth. This hub is operated by the Waalitj Foundation (previously the 'Wirrpanda Foundation') and was launched in 2020. Waalitj Hub was established under the IBSS, and also as part of the Australian Government's commitment to the Perth City Deal. Waalitj Hub sits within the broader Waalitj Foundation, a not-for-profit established by the West Coast Eagles football club.
- The Circle – First Nations Entrepreneur Hub in Adelaide. This hub is operated by the South Australian Government and is predominantly funded by the Australian Government as outlined under the Adelaide City Deal. It was launched in 2021. Of note, The Circle was originally set up to be a Project Hub under the IBSS to offer targeted, wrap-around support for First Nations businesses looking to tender for opportunities associated with major infrastructure projects.²³ As a smaller Project Hub, The Circle received less funding than the other hubs; however, it has since become part of the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs Program.
- The Northern Territory Indigenous Business and Employment Hub (the NT hub). This hub has offices based in Darwin and Alice Springs.²⁴ These offices are operated by the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network (NTIBN). The Darwin hub office was launched in April 2023 and the Alice Springs hub office opened shortly afterwards. Under the funding agreement agreed between the Australian Government and NTIBN, it is intended that the NT hub will open offices in Tennant Creek and Katherine in the future.

2.2 Terminology in this report

The four hubs use different terminology to describe staff roles and the clients that they service. For example, some hubs distinguish between 'members' and 'clients'. For clarity we have defined the following terms:

- **Hub client:** an individual who accesses free support from one or more of the Indigenous business hubs.
- **Hub member:** an individual who has paid for certification through the hub provider and may access services through the hub that are available to clients or members only.
- **Business support staff:** a hub staff member who works one-on-one with hub clients to provide business support services and/or coaching. Note: Hubs have different individual terms for this role, including Indigenous Enterprise Consultant (IEC), Business Coach, and Business Development Officer (BDO). For

²¹ Evaluation Statement of Requirement, 17 May 2023.

²² Yarpa Hub contract

²³ National Indigenous Australians Agency, *Indigenous Business Sector Strategy* (2017), 9.

²⁴ However, the Northern Territory Indigenous Business and Employment Hub is not outlined in the Darwin City Deal.

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the sake of clarity and to support de-identification of the evaluation's respondents, the term 'business support staff' is used to refer to all of these roles.

- **Hub manager:** the hub's Chief Executive Officer or General Manager responsible for their hub's strategic direction and leadership of hub staff.
- **Hub partner:** an organisation or business that engages in a partnership with a hub for one or more of the following reasons:
 - to provide joint services to hub clients
 - to receive services from the hubs that will support the partner to better engage with and/or provide services for First Nations people.
- **Community stakeholder:** an individual or organisation who acts as a representative of the First Nations business community. This includes Indigenous chambers of commerce and other peak bodies, individuals or organisations that support and advocate for First Nations people.

3 Methodology overview

3.1 Theory of change and program logic

The evaluation was informed by a theory of change and guided by a program logic model. The theory of change underpinning the hubs program is shown below in Figure 3. The theory of change outlines at a high level the change that is expected to be delivered by the hubs program and the hypotheses underpinning how that change will occur.

Figure 3 | Theory of change underpinning the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program



The evaluation team also used a program logic model which expands on this theory of change to guide the evaluation. It is included in Figure 19 in Appendix B. The program logic clarifies the program's inputs, outputs, activities and intended outcomes, based on those defined by the IBSS. It has been used to

understand how the program’s activities were intended to achieve the desired outcomes. The program logic model was developed in consultation with the hubs and NIAA staff and updated following consultation.

3.2 Key Evaluation Questions

Five categories of Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) were used to guide the data collection and analysis and structure the presentation of findings in this report. These are set out in Figure 4 below. The KEQs were designed by the NIAA national office and regional office staff; informed by community feedback the NIAA has received, staff site visits to the hubs and observations about the program since 2018. The KEQs were also tested with the Evaluation Advisory Group established for this evaluation (see Section 3.5.2 below), and the Nous evaluation team provided minor input into their development. The Evaluation Plan, delivered by Nous in November 2024, details the approach and methodology to answering the KEQs. It includes the Evaluation Data Matrix, which steps out the data sources, collection methods and analysis procedures that would be used to answer each KEQ.

Figure 4 | Key Evaluation Questions

CATEGORY	KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS
 <p>1. Appropriateness of the hubs program model</p>	<p>1.1 How appropriate is the hubs program model in meeting the needs of its target groups including the First Nations business sector?</p> <p>1.2 How appropriate is the hubs program model in responding to challenges and changes that currently shape the operating environment in which First Nations entrepreneurs do business?</p> <p>1.3 How appropriate is the hubs program model in complementing other initiatives?</p>
 <p>2. Strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative program model</p>	<p>2.1 How well does the hubs program model represent a strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative model?</p> <p>2.2 Does the program model encourage collaboration between users at hub sites?</p>
 <p>3. Program outcomes</p>	<p>3.1 To what extent have the expected outcomes of the program been achieved?</p> <p>3.2 To what extent has the hubs program contributed to the Closing the Gap targets?</p>
 <p>4. Program implementation</p>	<p>4.1 What is working well or less well and why?</p> <p>4.2 What are the enablers/barriers to the effective implementation and delivery of the program?</p> <p>4.3 What can be done differently to maximise the achievement of any beneficial outcomes and reduce any negative impacts?</p>
 <p>5. Achievement of value for money</p>	<p>5.1 Is the hubs program on track to support the achievement of value for money, i.e., is the program economical, efficient, effective, equitable and ethical?</p> <p>5.2 Is the program achieving value for money from the perspective of the hub clients?</p>

3.3 Data sources and data collection

The evaluation used mixed methods, triangulating quantitative and qualitative data from a survey of hub clients, interviews, and program documentation. This approach enabled a robust and comprehensive assessment of the program's design, implementation and outcomes. A detailed data collection and engagement approach was developed as part of the Evaluation Plan, which set out the number of respondents, format of interviews and purpose of engagement with each stakeholder group. Appendix A provides further detail on the evaluation's approach to the recruitment of interview and survey respondents, developed as part of the Evaluation Plan.

The evaluation team completed 115 interviews with 124 respondents. The evaluation team conducted interviews virtually and in person across each hub site. Interviews were also conducted with stakeholders from Queensland to understand the experiences of First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs in a location without a hub. Across the program, the evaluation team conducted:

- **36 interviews with 38 hub clients**
- **32 interviews with 33 hub staff members.**
- **13 interviews with 14 individuals from hub partner organisations.**
- **Four interviews with four community stakeholders.** Community stakeholders included a cross section of individuals from peak bodies that represent the First Nations business sector, First Nations tertiary education institutions and prominent individuals in the First Nations business sector who have extensive experience working in First Nations business and on behalf of the First Nations business community. Community stakeholders have not been identified for privacy reasons.
- **Seven interviews with nine Australian Government and national industry²⁵ representatives.**
- **11 interviews with 13 state and territory government representatives,** including with NIAA regional office representatives.
- **12 interviews with 13 stakeholders from Queensland.** Interviews in Queensland were conducted to surface perspectives from stakeholders in a jurisdiction where there is a significant amount of First Nations business activity, but no Australian Government-funded Indigenous business hub. See Section 4.1.3 for the case study on Queensland. Interviewees from Queensland included First Nations business owners, community stakeholders, state government representatives and representatives from organisations who provide First Nations specific business support.

It is important to note that many stakeholders play multiple roles in the First Nations business support ecosystem and could therefore fit into several of the stakeholder categories the evaluation team has employed. For example, service providers and community stakeholders may be First Nations business owners and therefore speak from multiple perspectives.

Other data collected and research conducted to date includes:

- **A survey of hub clients.** 113 survey responses were collected from individual hub clients across all four hubs. The survey collected quantitative and qualitative data to answer the KEQs. The survey was distributed by the hubs to their clients via email, and posters promoting the survey were displayed in each hub office.
- **Desktop research:** this included background research on the First Nations business sector and a process of mapping programs that hub clients and First Nations business owners can access across the business support ecosystem. This mapping was undertaken to understand the supports and services available for

²⁵ Representatives from 'national industry' refer to peak bodies that represent First Nations and mainstream businesses at the national level.

First Nations businesspeople, and to help understand how well the hubs are coordinating with other services. The service mapping is included in Appendix C.

- **Review of key program documents:** this included hub contracts, performance reports and previous evaluations of individual hubs. This review was undertaken in the early stages of the evaluation, prior to site visits and development of research materials such as interview guides. This helped to inform the direction of the research and enabled the evaluation team to understand the hubs' contractual and reporting requirements. The evaluation team also used the hub contracts and performance reports to further understand how the hubs are meeting their contractual requirements and their progress over time in relation to their resourcing levels. Importantly, the client numbers in the performance reports and contract values informed the value for money analysis in Section 4.50.

3.4 Limitations of the evaluation

A number of limitations affected the data collection and analysis undertaken for the evaluation. It is important to understand these limitations when considering the findings and recommendations of this report.

These are:

- **Selection bias in recruitment of respondents may impact findings.** The evaluation largely relied on the hubs to provide referrals to clients and hub partners for evaluation interviews. Information about the survey and links to participate were also distributed by the hubs. In recruiting hub clients for interviews, the evaluation took a convenience sampling approach, approaching clients based on their willingness to participate and availability. It is possible that this recruitment strategy could have impacted the evaluation's findings by skewing participation towards stakeholders who were supporters of the hubs program.
- **The evaluation did not speak to First Nations businesspeople in the hubs jurisdictions who do not access hub services.** It was not within the evaluation's scope to interview business owners in hub locations who do not access the hubs, as Nous and the NIAA agreed that the evaluation would focus on respondents who could discuss their experience of the hubs. This limits the evaluation's capacity to provide an understanding of the barriers affecting access to the hubs, as well as reasons why First Nations businesspeople may choose not to access the hubs. However, the evaluation did conduct interviews with 'key informants', including community stakeholders and service providers that work with a large number of First Nations businesses, not all of which are hub clients.
- **Limited interview participation affected qualitative data collection.** The evaluation team understands that First Nations businesspeople are over-consulted, resulting in 'consultation fatigue' and a reluctance to participate in further engagement with research teams. The evaluation team spoke to 38 hub clients, slightly fewer than originally targeted (40–60). Additionally, the number of interviews were not evenly distributed across all hubs; the evaluation team interviewed between seven and 11 clients from each hub.
- **Some stakeholders did not provide input into the evaluation.** There were some key community stakeholders who have extensive experience in supporting First Nations business development who declined to participate in the evaluation. The evaluation team reached out to these stakeholders several times. There may be some gaps in findings due to the lack of participation of these targeted respondents.
- **Access to quantitative data was limited.** As discussed in Section 4.5, the hub key performance indicators (KPIs) are heavily outputs focused, which limits the measurement of program impact in a quantitative way. This means that the assessment of impact and value is largely limited to qualitative

analysis and does not provide a quantitative view of economic benefits achieved by the hubs program. For example, the evaluation was not able to observe any data related to the revenue or growth of hub clients' businesses.

- **Economic analysis was outside the scope of the evaluation.** The evaluation includes a value for money KEQ (see Section 4.5), which assesses the overall value of the program. However, it was outside the scope of the evaluation to conduct economic analysis, including a cost-benefit analysis, return on investment analysis or counterfactual. Consequently, the report provides a mostly qualitative assessment of the program's value.

3.5 Analytical approach

3.5.1 Analysis methods

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data to inform findings and recommendations. This included a combination of document review, interviews, surveys and site visits. Further information about Nous' methodology can be found in Appendix A.

Interview approach

All interviews were led by First Nations evaluation team members to elicit stakeholder views on issues relating to the KEQs. Interviews were semi-structured and adopted elements of Yarning Circles to encourage a free-flowing conversation to create a culturally safe environment for evaluation participants. However, most interviews were conducted with individual participants to ensure interviewees felt comfortable sharing open and honest perspectives about the hubs program. Further, this ensured First Nations business owners could freely discuss their business journey while having confidence that any commercial or personal information was kept confidential. A small number of group interviews were conducted in appropriate circumstances, such as when interviews were conducted with joint business owners or multiple representatives from one organisation.

Analysis methods

Both interviews and written surveys were conducted to provide complementary sources of data for the evaluation. Interviews enabled the evaluation team to build genuine rapport with participants and understand first-hand perspectives. Surveys supplemented the interviews by enabling the collection of quantitative data from a broader participant base and providing an opportunity for hub clients to share their views anonymously.

The evaluation team used thematic analysis techniques to analyse and triangulate the data captured through interviews, site visits, surveys and desktop review. This involved a hybrid of deductive (theory driven) and inductive (data-driven) thematic analysis. The KEQs and the program logic underpinned the deductive analysis. This approach allowed the evaluation team to test the pre-existing hypothesis. For example, the survey question: *To what extent do you agree with the statement "The hubs have supported my business to grow, resulting in benefits to my communities"* supported the evaluation team to understand the extent to which the hubs program is meeting the expected outcome, "more First Nations businesses are successful on their own terms". Both the interview and survey questions were aligned to the KEQs to enable triangulation and strengthen findings.

While the research was structured by KEQs, we ensured our approach was flexible enough to also allow for inductive analysis, such that themes and patterns could emerge organically from the data. Interviews were semi-structured and flexible, and the survey offered participants opportunities to share their views in free text responses. This enabled the evaluation team to discover unexpected insights, challenges and outcomes, and capture participants' lived experiences.

The evaluation team identified key themes reflected in the perspectives shared in interviews and surveys, including in the views shared by survey participants through free text survey responses. These themes were iterated and tested over the course of the data collection and analysis period. Findings across all data sources were synthesised to holistically answer each KEQ.

3.5.2 Ethical approach

The evaluation team sought and received approval from the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (REC-0278) to conduct the evaluation. The purpose of pursuing this approval was to ensure engagements with stakeholders were conducted in a culturally safe and appropriate manner, and in recognition of the self-determination and wellbeing of First Nations people. Key ethical risks and issues were identified in the Evaluation Plan and the ethics application and were actively managed throughout the evaluation.

First Nations leadership and oversight

The lead evaluator is a Guwa/Koa man, who was supported by an engagement lead, a Biripi man. All interviews were led by these evaluation team members and supported by non-Indigenous researchers.

The evaluation team engaged with an Evaluation Advisory Group (Advisory Group) throughout the evaluation to provide further leadership and oversight. This group brought together individuals with relevant expertise and experience in the First Nations business sector, cultural safety, the service system, program design, research and evaluation to provide advice on the evaluation of the program. The purpose of the Advisory Group was to provide strategic, expert and context-specific advice on the evaluation to ensure it is robust and high quality, with good evaluation design, conduct and reporting. The Advisory Group was predominantly comprised of First Nations members – four of the five members were First Nations Australians – who brought relevant expertise and experience from across the states and territories where the hubs are based. The NIAA sought advice from its regional offices to identify and select the appropriate individuals to support the evaluation through the Advisory Group.

The Advisory Group members were engaged at key stages throughout the evaluation. They provided:

- input on survey and interview questions
- insight into the challenges and operating environments affecting First Nations businesses in each of the hub locations ahead of the evaluation site visits
- feedback on the evaluation's findings and recommendations
- feedback on the accessibility and appropriateness of the evaluation's Summary Report.

Alignment to First Nations evaluation guidelines

The evaluation was designed and conducted to align with the AIATSIS Code of Ethics.²⁶ In addition, the evaluation was guided by the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy and the NIAA's Indigenous Advancement Strategy Evaluation Framework.²⁷ Both of these frameworks provide guidance on strengthening the quality of evaluations that involve First Nations people. The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy has an overarching principle of centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges. It also has other principles which aim to ensure evaluations are credible, useful, ethical and transparent.²⁸ The Indigenous Advancement Strategy Evaluation Framework is guided by best

²⁶ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*, (2020).

²⁷ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, (2020).

National Indigenous Australians Agency, *Indigenous Advancement Strategy: Evaluation Framework*, (2018).

²⁸ Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, (2020), pp. 8-19.

practice principles: relevant, robust, credible and appropriate. It is also underpinned by the following core values: respect, collaboration and build on strengths.²⁹

The evaluation embedded these principles and values to ensure a culturally safe experience for participants and to deliver benefits for First Nations stakeholders. Key examples of how these were embedded are listed below:

- As described above, the evaluation was First Nations led and sought regular advice from the Advisory Group to ensure First Nations perspectives were central in the evaluation.
- The evaluation compensated hub clients and community stakeholders who participated in interviews in recognition of their time and contribution to the evaluation.
- The evaluation report is being shared with key stakeholders who provided input into the evaluation so that findings are transparent and learnings can be used by the First Nations business sector. Survey and interview participants were able to opt in to receive the findings of the evaluation. Furthermore, a plain language Summary Report was also developed to distil key findings and is published on the NIAA's website alongside this report. The plain language summary was created to ensure that research findings would be readily accessible to evaluation participants and other key stakeholders.
- Recommendations as outlined in Section 5 were developed to be as practical as possible to inform the program's continuous improvement. The process for developing recommendations centred the perspectives and priorities of First Nations businesspeople as reflected in evidence received from evaluation participants, drawn from existing literature and provided by the Evaluation Advisory Group.

²⁹ National Indigenous Australians Agency, *Indigenous Advancement Strategy: Evaluation Framework*, (2018), pp. 6-7.

4 Findings

The findings in this section are based on triangulated analysis of survey responses from hub clients, interviews with respondents across all hub sites and Queensland, key program documentation and desktop research.

The description of evaluation findings in this section is organised to directly respond to the Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs).

4.1 Appropriateness of the hubs program model

This section explores findings against the following Key Evaluation Questions:



1. Appropriateness of the hubs program model: Key Evaluation Questions

- 1.1 How appropriate is the hubs program model in meeting the needs of its target groups including the First Nations business sector?
- 1.2 How appropriate is the hubs program model in responding to challenges and changes that currently shape the operating environment in which First Nations entrepreneurs do business?
- 1.3 How appropriate is the hubs program model in complementing other initiatives?

THE PROGRAM MODEL

The evaluation assessed whether the hubs program model, articulated by the program logic model in Section 4.1.1 below, is appropriate for meeting the needs of First Nations businesses and entrepreneurs. The IBSS outlines the 'one-stop shop' model for the hub program, stepped out in Section 2.1. As noted above, this represented a basic foundation for the program and informed the development of the program logic in consultation with the NIAA and the hubs.

The hubs program logic model offers a framework that identifies the short and long-term goals of the program and further outlines how the program aims to achieve these objectives.³⁰ Each of the four hubs is unique, but they have similar characteristics in the services they offer and the role they play in supporting First Nations businesses. The 'hubs program model' refers collectively to the four hubs and the nature of the support that is offered by the model's design, noting that each hub's model is tailored to its local context.

This evaluation is the first evaluation of the whole Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program, although two of the hubs have previously undergone individual evaluations. The evaluation findings highlight the importance of evaluating the program as a whole because they reveal common challenges experienced across the hubs which are attributable to the program model. For example, the program lacks the regional coverage to support First Nations people living and working outside metropolitan areas – this is discussed in detail in Section 4.3.1 below. The evaluation also verifies program assumptions: that there is a need for a dedicated, culturally appropriate, one-stop-shop business support service for First Nations businesspeople.

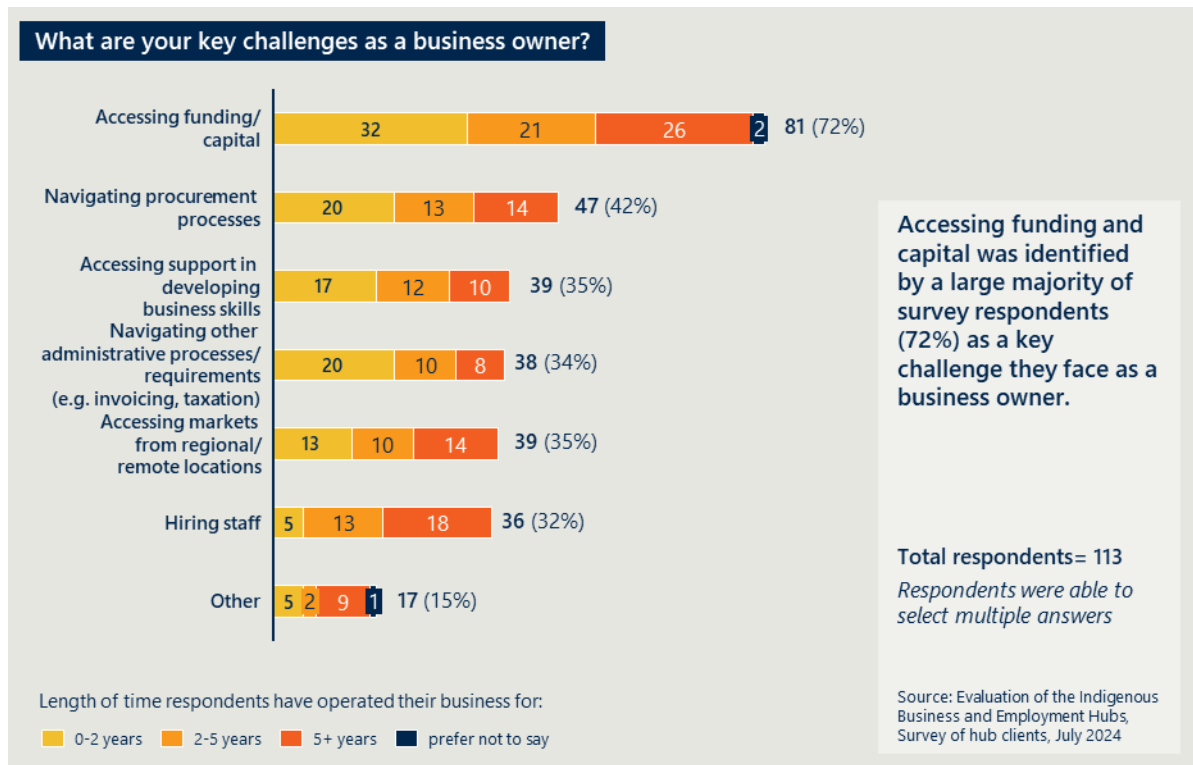
³⁰ Blesson, Elizabeth and Heather Zaveri. "Tip Sheet: A Practitioners Guide to Program Models", accessed 8 August 2024.

Importantly, this evaluation did not involve a comparative assessment of the four hubs against each other. The evaluation team and the NIAA agreed that a comparative evaluation of the hubs would be difficult given that all hubs had been operating for different lengths of time and were affected by different circumstances traceable to their location. However, the evaluation considered differences between models across hub sites where doing so yielded valuable insights at the program level. These are summarised in Appendix A, which centralises findings related to the optimal design and delivery of each aspect of the program model.

4.1.1 How appropriate is the hubs program model in meeting the needs of its target groups including the First Nations business sector?

The hubs' primary target groups are First Nations entrepreneurs in hub regions who want to start a business, First Nations business owners in hub regions at all stages of the business life cycle, and industry and government partners seeking to better employ, procure and partner with First Nations people and businesses.³¹ To answer this key evaluation question, the evaluation team first sought to determine what First Nations businesspeople identified as their most important needs. Figure 5 below shows the key needs clients identified through the survey.

Figure 5 | Survey results for: What are your key challenges as a business owner? Select all that apply



The key challenges selected by survey respondents aligned with what hub clients expressed in interviews. Accessing funding or capital was identified by a large majority of survey respondents (72 per cent) as the key challenge they face as business owners. The interviews confirmed this; most clients and other stakeholders interviewed emphasised that accessing business-related capital is the biggest challenge faced

³¹ Hub contracts

by First Nations entrepreneurs. However, it is not the role of the hubs program to provide direct access to capital. Challenges with access to capital are discussed below in this section.

While 72 per cent of survey respondents identified accessing capital as a challenge they face as business owners, a large percentage (42 per cent) also identified navigating procurement and other administrative processes as a key challenge. These challenges were also identified through hub client interviews.

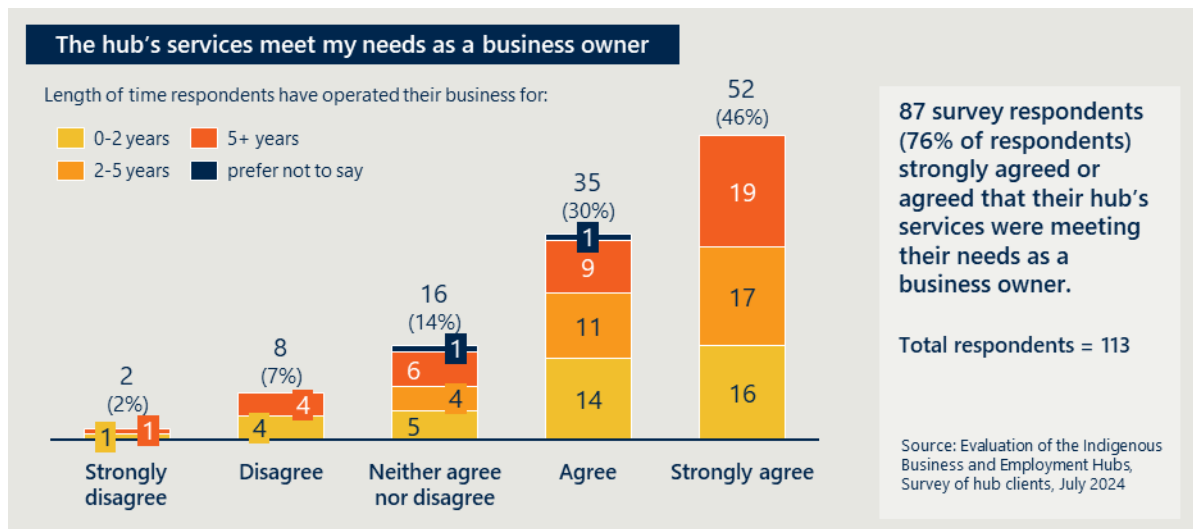
There is some variation in the challenges reported by owners of older businesses compared to owners of newer ones. Firstly, respondents who had operated their business from zero to two years were less likely to have faced challenges with hiring staff compared to owners of businesses established for two or more years. This is likely due to a higher proportion of more established business owners feeling ready or interested in hiring employees. Additionally, owners of newer businesses faced more challenges with navigating administrative processes and developing skills than business owners who had been in operation longer. This likely reflects a level of capability building over time as individuals gain experience with business processes.

Survey respondents who chose the 'other' option listed additional challenges, including marketing their business and using social media, networking with larger organisations, hiring staff with the right skillsets and training new staff.

The hubs are providing many required support services to First Nations businesses across the business lifecycle, especially for newer businesses

A large proportion of Hub clients who participated in this evaluation suggested that the hubs are meeting their needs and are playing an important role in helping clients who are operating newer businesses and start-ups. Figure 6 below shows that 76 per cent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The hub's services meet my needs as a business owner".

Figure 6 | Survey results for: The hub's services meet my needs as a business owner



The survey results also show that respondents' sentiments regarding the appropriateness of hub services were similar among clients across the business lifecycle: clients who had been operating their businesses for zero to two years, two to five years and over five years responded similarly to this question. This contrasts with the interview findings, wherein a few clients and other stakeholders suggested that some hubs staff do not have the depth of business skills to support more experienced business owners, or that hub services are catered more to supporting start-ups.

Clients who felt that the hubs' services do not meet their needs (23 per cent of survey respondents) suggested this was because:

- the hubs do not provide direct access to capital
- business support staff were sometimes unavailable or slow to respond
- some clients felt that business support staff did not have the skills to support more established business owners
- the hubs are less accessible to some regional communities.

Each of these reasons is discussed in further detail below.

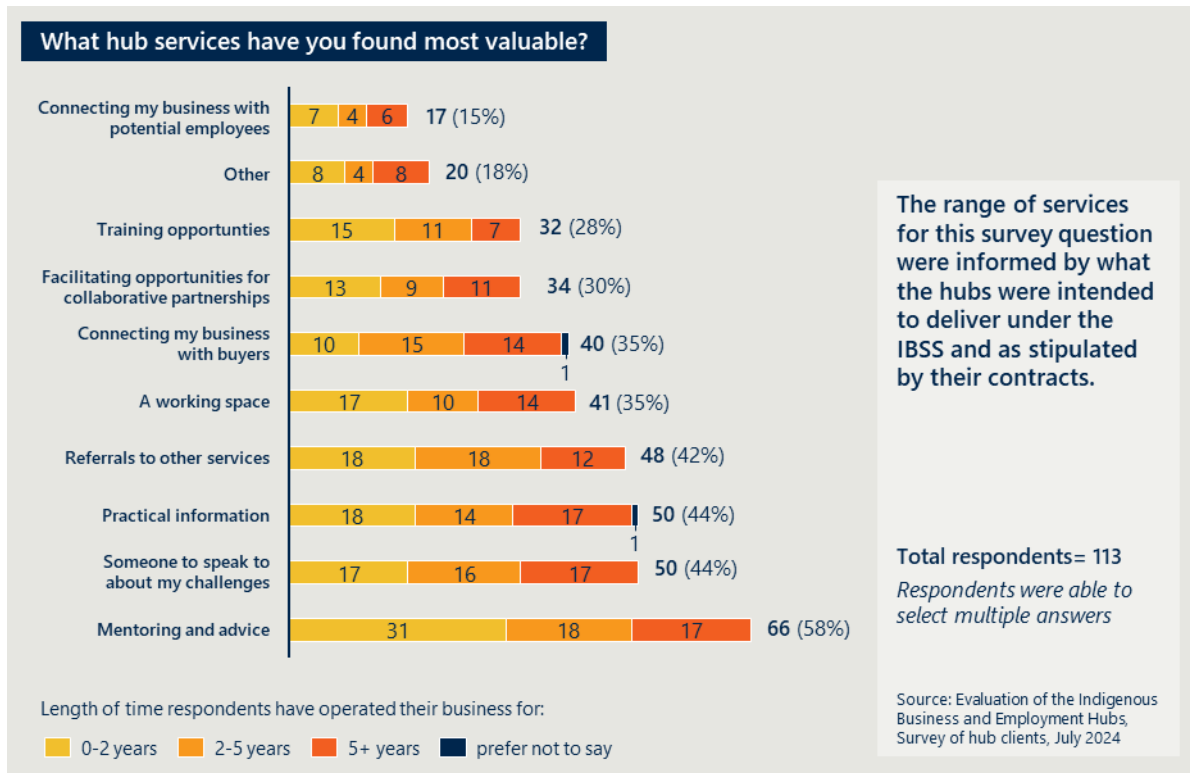
The hubs typically provide new business owners with assistance to clarify their business ideas and develop products to demonstrate their business offerings and capabilities, such as business plans and capability statements. Most clients interviewed found the one-on-one coaching and guidance they received from the hubs’ business support staff to be highly valuable. Clients described their gratitude for the staffs’ support throughout the interviews, with one client stating,

“The service I found most valuable was the coaches’ personal and direct communication. The added encouragement and having staff celebrate my achievements and be there with kindness and compassion on the not so good days has meant a lot.”

Another client wrote in the survey, “This service has been highly valuable as it provides direct access to experienced professionals who offer guidance, share insights and help navigate industry-specific challenges.”

The high value that hub clients placed on the mentoring they received from business support staff was reflected in the survey results, as shown in Figure 7 below: 58 per cent of respondents selected “Mentoring and advice” as one of the hub services they have found most valuable.

Figure 7 | Survey results for: What hub services have you found most valuable? Select all that apply:



These findings also show that the 'one-stop shop' aspect of the hubs model is valued and needed, with clients suggesting – through the survey and interviews – that their hub is providing a range of valuable services.

Responses to this question were similar across individuals at different stages of business operation. This suggests that many of the hubs' services are valuable to businesses across the business lifecycle and at different stages of maturity. The main exception was in 'mentoring and advice': respondents who chose this answer were more heavily weighted to those who had operated their business for only zero to two years (47 per cent of all respondents who chose this answer).

A defining feature of the hubs' role as 'one-stop shops' is the front-desk service they provide, often acting as the first point of contact for clients to be referred to more specific or specialised business supports that the hubs cannot offer. For example, the hubs frequently support businesses to access grants through referrals to other providers such as Many Rivers, Indigenous Business Australia or private funding sources. The Northern Territory hub also refers clients to the Northern Territory Government's Aboriginal Business Development program.³²

Across the four hubs, many clients reported receiving valuable referrals, suggesting that the hubs are delivering a useful 'one-stop shop' service as intended by the IBSS.³³ As one client interviewed said, "there's support from lots of different areas. But for me I like to go to the hub to understand how to navigate this and get a referral or roadmap." The evidence collected by the evaluation also validates the assumption within the IBSS that First Nations businesspeople require support to navigate and access the range of business supports available to them.

Section 4.1.3 further explores the extent to which the hubs program complements the existing ecosystem of business support services.

Interviews and surveys revealed clients value the hubs because they:

- support cultural safety
- impose low barriers to access (that is, they support all First Nations businesses)
- provide a coworking space, providing an opportunity for clients to network and build connections with other First Nations businesses
- offer services that are cost-free to access.

These features of the hubs' service delivery are explored in more detail throughout this report.

For established businesses, the hubs play an important role in facilitating networking and connections with buyers, which in some cases has led to hub clients successfully accessing procurement opportunities. Many business owners interviewed across all hubs said that networking events and workshops were the most valuable service they accessed through the hubs, and that these events have enabled them to build connections and ultimately win work. In some cases, hub clients have won large contracts as a result of meeting customers through hubs events and/or referrals. One client interviewed said that "some of our biggest clients have come from [hub name]'s meet the buyer events."

Furthermore, several clients emphasised that the events held by the hubs have supported community-building. The events enabled hub clients to, in the words of one hub client, "naturally meet people [and create] authentic connection with community, in a way that is not like corporate networking."³⁴ This sentiment was offered by clients based in metropolitan areas and regional areas.

³² NT.GOV.AU, "Aboriginal Business Development Program", accessed 3 July 2024.

³³ National Indigenous Australians Agency, *The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy*, p.2.

³⁴ Hub client.

Supports for hubs in joint ventures

The Waalitj Hub has contributed to supporting businesses in problematic joint venture arrangements, in particular through the development of its Joint Venture Tool Kit. Many clients and hub staff interviewed for this evaluation reported that they believe 'black cladding' is common across Australia, as respondents described non-Indigenous entities seeking to exploit First Nations businesses by taking advantage of Indigenous procurement policies. Several stakeholders reported that the Waalitj Hub has played an active role in supporting hub clients to avoid or escape these problematic joint venture arrangements, including through supporting clients to access legal advice. The development of the Joint Venture Tool Kit, which was launched in May 2024, is seen by some stakeholders as a valuable resource for the First Nations business sector. One government stakeholder said,

"The work the [Waalitj Hub] has done around JVs has been really important...[it's] really important for them to do this work and provide legal advice to clients who may have gotten themselves into situations that haven't worked out."

Some clients whose businesses are more mature or ready to expand felt that the hubs had less to offer them

Across some hubs, a small number of more established businesses owners – those that had been operating their business for multiple years – shared that they do not see the hub services as especially valuable to them. Networking opportunities and support with procurement processes appear to be the forms of support accessed most by established businesses. Clients who have been operating their businesses for longer suggested that they no longer require the kinds of start-up and ideation support from the hubs that many other clients said they found valuable when starting their businesses.

One client who owns a more mature business said, "The hub primarily supports start-ups [...] because I didn't fit within that, it wasn't able to be utilised by me." Another survey respondent who strongly disagreed with the statement "*The hub's services meet my needs as a business owner*", wrote that, "the coaches need more high-level business experience for mature business operators to scale and grow." One business owner from Queensland suggested that there is a gap in supports for First Nations businesses to expand beyond the start-up phase more generally. They said, "there's a gap in support for scalability. There's a lot of support for ideation, but for the scale stage apart from Austrade I don't know who to go to." One government stakeholder suggested that as First Nations businesses grow and mature, "the way the hub supports those businesses will also need to grow and mature. We can't say we are a one-stop-shop and only support small and medium businesses." These findings suggest that the needs of business owners who are ready to scale and expand their business are distinct to the needs of start-ups. There is an opportunity for the hubs program to ensure it is better meeting the needs of more established business owners. This is explored in Recommendation 3.

Except for Yarpa, it appears that the hubs' support for more mature businesses is predominantly focused on helping them to win work, such as through networking events or support with tender applications, rather than building clients' capabilities to sustainably grow their businesses. In 2020, Yarpa launched the Yarpa Grow program in partnership with KPMG to provide tailored business growth support to more mature businesses.³⁵ From early 2024, the program has been delivered in collaboration with Western Sydney University.³⁶ This collaboration is a 12-week accelerator program that supports businesses to expand beyond the establishment phase and develop the skills to maintain business growth beyond the first five years. Interviewees provided anecdotal evidence that suggests the Yarpa Grow program is assisting participants to develop this skillset while delivering the program in an accessible way. One hub client said:

³⁵ Yarpa, "Yarpa Hub Launches Business Accelerator To Fast Track Indigenous Business Growth Across NSW", accessed 15 August 2024.

³⁶ New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, "New heights for Yarpa Grow program with Western Sydney University on board", accessed 15 August 2024.

“The pivotal moment for me would have been when I did the Yarpa Grow program - this was when I went full time. Doing the program straight off the bat meant I was looking into different concepts like marketing, financials, ensuring I had set myself up in a way to protect myself as my business grows.”

The hubs and the NIAA could learn more about the outcomes of this program in determining how the hubs could better support more established businesses in future and build strong partnerships (see Recommendation 3 and Recommendation 7). It was outside the scope of the current evaluation to investigate this accelerator program in depth.

Support provided to industry and government partners through the hubs creates opportunities for First Nations businesses

Interviewees among the hubs’ industry and government partners expressed support for the hubs, stating that their interaction with the hubs has helped them with achieving their First Nations procurement targets. All the hubs have staff that are responsible for managing relationships with external organisations. These staff members provide advice and support to industry and government partners in relation to procuring services from First Nations businesses. They also advise their partners on how they work with potential First Nations suppliers through tender application processes, and they refer partners to hub clients who may be potential suppliers. One hub staff member said:

“We advocate for the [First Nations business] sector and the value that First Nations businesses have and bring to the supply chain – both from a social procurement perspective and also just to break down the unconscious bias that does exist.”

This comment shows how the hubs are invested in supporting First Nations businesses to access procurement opportunities.

All four hubs host workshops and events where industry and government partners can present to hub clients about procurement or grant opportunities. The hubs also provide their space for industry and government partners to host workshops. These may be to inform clients about upcoming opportunities such as construction projects where there will be potential work for hub clients, or to provide upskilling on a particular topic. For example, Yarpa Hub worked with one of its partners to deliver an event to educate businesses on requirements for working with tier one companies. This included providing information on accreditation and licencing. This partner has a Memorandum of Understanding with Yarpa, and the hub has assisted them in connecting with First Nations businesses in the Sydney region.

In some cases, the hubs support industry partners to build their cultural capability, which aids their efforts in procuring from First Nations businesses and hiring First Nations people. Hub partners and staff suggested this usually occurs through informal conversations. The hubs also provide occasional formal support to their partners in a variety of ways, such as by co-delivering events or sitting on panels to inform discussions on Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs). This shows that the hubs play an important role in enabling First Nations businesses to access opportunities provided through IPPPs. This aligns with their role as identified through the IBSS.³⁷ Although the evaluation identified that the hubs are supporting clients to access procurement opportunities, interviews also highlighted that IPPPs continue to be confusing, both for First Nations people looking to access opportunities and for buyers in

“Some of our biggest work has come from [the hub’s] meet the buyer events [...] We have about a 30% success rate on Meet the Buyers – for every 10 people we meet we get 2 or 3 contracts.”

- Hub client

³⁷ National Indigenous Australians Agency, [The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy](#), accessed 3 October 2024

understanding how they can most effectively use their IPPPs. Recommendation 4 further details how the hubs can increase the education they provide to clients and partners on IPPPs.

Access to capital is an enduring challenge for First Nations business owners, and current solutions are inadequate in addressing this problem

The evaluation recognises that business-related capital can come in many forms such as grants, loans and investment. When we refer to ‘capital’ in this report, we are referring broadly to monetary support that covers the key financial products that support businesses to develop and grow such as loans, grants, assets and investment.³⁸

The vast majority of interviewees who spoke about barriers experienced by First Nations businesses, including hub staff and clients, raised that access to capital is the most significant barrier facing First Nations businesses. This was confirmed by the survey results shown in Figure 5 (see page 25), which demonstrated that “accessing funding/capital” was the option selected most often (by 72 per cent of respondents) to the question “What are your key challenges as a business owner?”. Through their interviews, hub staff and clients suggested that access to capital was a concern for businesses at all stages of the business journey, as capital is needed to start, sustain and grow one’s business. Of note, the survey did not distinguish between different types of capital or financial products.

“Every Aboriginal business’s main issue is capital. You can’t obtain funding from banks until you have profits.”

- Hub client

The interviews confirmed existing research that suggests that access to capital is particularly challenging for First Nations people, as they are less likely than non-Indigenous Australians to have access to intergenerational wealth, and they face systemic barriers, including ongoing racism and discrimination.³⁹ Additionally, low levels of home ownership can limit First Nations Australians’ ability to obtain business capital.⁴⁰ One hub client said that First Nations businesses are “starting 100 years behind all the other businesses.” The current economic environment, which is characterised by high costs of living and inflation rates, increasing interest rates and fluctuating demand due to financial uncertainty,⁴¹ may also be contributing to challenges First Nations businesspeople face in accessing business capital. Some hub clients

commented on the challenges presented by increases in the cost of living and inflation, with one client stating via interview, “I’ve been more profitable this year, but it feels like I’ve been worse off.” The IBSS suggests that there’s a need to ensure First Nations businesspeople have ready access to capital in order to drive increases in the number of First Nations people going into business and building a pipeline of future First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs that will support the longevity of the sector.⁴²

Hub clients suggested that current solutions to the problems First Nations businesses experience in accessing capital are often inadequate. The hubs are not funded or designed to provide direct access to capital such as grants or loans, and the IBSS did not intend for the hubs program to provide this service.⁴³

38 This aligns with Geoffrey M Hodgson’s definition of capital as “Wealth in the form of money or other assets owned by a person or organisation, or available for a purpose such as starting a company or investing.”; Hodgson, Geoffrey M. “What Is Capital? Economists and Sociologists Have Changed Its Meaning: Should It Be Changed Back?” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 38, no. 5, 2014, pp. 1063–86.

Similarly, ‘funding’ refers to “Money given by an organization or a government for a particular purpose.”; Cambridge Dictionary, “[Funding](#)”, accessed 23 July 2024.

39 NSW Treasury (2022), [The NSW First Nations Business Sector](#), 38–56.

40 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2.01 Housing, accessed 23 July 2024; Connolly, Ellis, Gianni La Cava and Matthew Read (2015), *Housing Prices and Entrepreneurship: Evidence for the Housing Collateral Channel in Australia*, Reserve Bank of Australia.

41 Reserve Bank of Australia Conference, Supply & Demand Shocks, Global Networks and Inflation, September 2023, 1–4.

42 IBSS, A strong, diverse and self-supporting business sector is the key to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, accessed 14 August 2024.

43 Ibid.

Through their interviews, several clients and some staff suggested that this was a gap in the hubs' service offering and see an opportunity for the hubs to fill this need. Currently, the hubs all play a role in connecting their clients to sources of capital through referrals to organisations such as Many Rivers and Indigenous Business Australia that provide microfinancing, loans and grants. All hubs also support their clients to apply for various grants by helping them to complete loan and grant applications or connecting them with a grant writer. Despite this, many clients emphasised that accessing any type of loan or capital is difficult. Interviewees also suggested that many loans that they can access are too small, or they feel they have to jump through bureaucratic hoops only to see their grant or loan applications refused.

Other interviewees spoke about being rejected for grant or loan programs because they were unable to show that they were generating ongoing cashflow, something they found difficult to show as new business owners. One hub client pointed out that,

"The Northern Territory Government Aboriginal Business Development Program's eligibility criteria requires you to be working on a new business full-time. This is silly as you might not be making enough revenue initially to work on your business full-time."

Outside of specific First Nations lenders, some interviewees suggested that commercial banks are unwilling to provide loans.

The hubs do not provide access to capital, and there are mixed views as to whether they should provide this service

Although access to capital was identified as a challenge experienced by a large majority of survey participants, some hub staff suggested that they do not think the provision of capital should be within the scope of the hubs' services. These interviewees argued that if the hubs provided loans or financial products, this would add significant complexity to the hubs' role and require the hubs to invest in additional staffing and training. Additionally, a small number of stakeholders felt that providing grants for start-ups is not an effective way to grow the First Nations business sector because to be successful; in the words of one hub staff member, new business owners "need to have skin in the game, [otherwise] if things fall apart, there's no fight."⁴⁴ However, several staff from each hub reported that they wished the hubs could have a mechanism to provide business capital. As one hub staff member said, "If we can actually get seed funding for people that would be fantastic."

These findings suggest that access to capital endures as a major challenge faced by First Nations businesspeople seeking to develop their enterprises. However, it is not the role of the hubs program to address this problem through directly providing capital to their clients.

Instead, the hubs play an important role in connecting their clients to potential funding providers and building clients' capabilities to increase their opportunities to access capital. Some interviewees pointed out that financiers "have to operate on a commercially viable basis", and therefore businesses need to be able to show their ability to repay loans. However, it will always be difficult for start-ups without collateral – such as a house to borrow against – to secure a loan, unless they can provide evidence of consistent revenue streams, profitability and sound financial management. Interviewees emphasised that this is a large barrier for First Nations businesses starting out who will be unable to demonstrate any cashflow over time. As such, having a financially sound business plan is an important factor in accessing a loan. Although the hubs do not provide direct access to capital, they support clients to build capability, write business plans and understand the requirements associated with sustainably managing their business finances. Thus the hubs support hub clients to increase their potential to obtain funding.

Recommendation 10 details how the hubs can play a more active role in connecting First Nations businesses with other service providers to improve their access to flexible capital. Furthermore, the hubs should ensure

⁴⁴ Hub staff member.

that business support staff have a consistent basic awareness of the different types of capital products their clients can access and how these products align with business needs.

There is some demand for additional in-house services to be offered through the hubs

The hubs currently offer varying types of business coaching and support at no cost to hub clients. While some hubs maintain a formal panel of specialist service providers whose services they cover or subsidise, both clients and staff supported the notion that additional funding would allow them to provide more complementary, specialised services in-house. Providing consistent access to commonly requested specialist services within the hubs would enable the hubs to be true 'one-stop shops'. Survey and interview participants frequently suggested that there was a need for the hubs to offer specialist services such as legal support, accounting, website development and marketing. Additionally, many staff across all hubs expressed support for the hubs to have additional funding to cover the costs of these specialist services that are often required by new businesses.

All the hubs facilitate referrals to providers equipped to handle specialised business needs. This creates commercial opportunities for First Nations businesses such as legal and accountancy firms and strengthens the local First Nations business ecosystem. For example, Waalitj Hub has a panel of service providers, comprising their clients and other providers, that they draw on to offer services to other clients. This panel predominantly consists of First Nations businesses; non-Indigenous businesses are required to complete cultural competency training to be included. The NT hub operates a similar expert service provider panel to provide referrals for specialists supports. While this approach could be emulated by the other hubs, some hubs described difficulties finding local First Nations legal and accounting firms. Some clients of these hubs reported mixed experiences in working with non-Indigenous service providers that the hubs have connected them to.

As detailed in Recommendation 9.2, there are opportunities the hubs could explore to provide their clients with greater access to specialist services through hiring in-house specialists and collaborating across hubs to assist clients to access services online that they cannot find locally.

The program model has been designed so most hubs are anchored in areas with high First Nations population density; but this approach is less appropriate for business owners based in regional areas

With the exception of the Northern Territory-based hub offices, the hubs program model was designed so that the hub offices are anchored in major cities to take advantage of opportunities presented by City Deals.⁴⁵ City Deals are "partnerships between the Australian, state/territory and local governments to position Australia's population centres for the future"⁴⁶. These City Deals enabled some hub providers to receive additional state government funding.⁴⁷ However, this city-centric approach is less appropriate for First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs based in regional and remote areas. Some

regionally-based hub clients noted that travelling to the hubs presents a significant time and cost burden. One hub client said, "for bush people, we'd have to travel all the way to [the] city. It's not really practical and culturally welcoming." The cost of parking in cities was also raised as a barrier by a number of clients, including those based close to the cities. One client said, "I'm lucky I'm in a position to pay for the parking but that [the cost of parking] is why I only go in [to the hub] one day a week." Hub partners, staff and clients

"I would dearly, dearly love for them to come out on country. They are stuck in the city."

- Hub client

⁴⁵ National Indigenous Australians Agency, *The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy*, p.23.

⁴⁶ Department of State Growth, "City Deals in Tasmania", accessed 6 December 2024.

⁴⁷ Government of South Australia, "Welcome to The Circle", accessed 13 August 2024.

Western Parkland City, *Western Sydney City Deal: Annual Progress Report 2021*, p.32.

City of Perth, "Perth City Deal", accessed 13 August 2024.

raised digital literacy and connectivity as challenges commonly faced by First Nations people living in regional and remote areas. These challenges mean that the physical presence of support is even more important for regionally and remote-based clients, as virtual support is often not a viable substitute.

While some regionally-based hub clients found the hubs difficult to access, the survey suggests that many clients living in regional or remote areas do feel they can easily access the hubs' services. Survey respondents who operate their businesses in regional or remote areas made up 30 per cent (34 of 113) of responses. Only six of these respondents selected "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the statement "*I feel as though I can easily access services delivered by the hub.*" Of these six respondents, two provided reasons unrelated to their location.

The NT hub program model differs from the other hubs in that NTIBN were contracted to service remote and regionally-based entrepreneurs through satellite offices in communities across the Northern Territory.⁴⁸ However, the NT hub offices are still relatively new in their establishment, with the Darwin hub opening in April 2023 and the Alice Spring hub opening shortly afterwards. NTIBN currently operates hub office spaces in Darwin and Alice Springs. It is intended that further hub offices will be opened in Katherine and Tennant Creek. At present, Katherine and Tennant Creek are being serviced by staff who travel from the Darwin and Alice Springs hubs respectively.

All hubs have increased their efforts to travel to regional areas and provide services to clients in these locations; this is further discussed in Section 4.3.1.

⁴⁸ Australian Government, Commonwealth Contract – Services, Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, 2022, 2–15.



KEY FINDINGS | 1.1 How appropriate is the hubs program model in meeting the needs of its target groups including the First Nations business sector?

- The hubs are providing many support services to First Nations businesses that are required across the business lifecycle, especially for newer businesses. A large proportion of hub clients interviewed and/or surveyed stated that these services are valued and meeting their needs.
- Some clients whose businesses are more mature or ready to expand felt that the hubs had less to offer them. Networking opportunities and support with procurement processes appear to be the forms of support accessed most by established businesses.
- Support provided to industry and government partners through the hubs creates opportunities for First Nations businesses
- Access to capital endures as a major challenge faced by First Nations businesspeople seeking to develop their enterprises. However, it is not the role of the hubs program to address this problem through directly providing capital to their clients.
- There is some demand for additional in-house services to be offered through the hubs, especially legal and accounting services.
- The program model has been designed so that most hubs are anchored in major cities; but this is less appropriate for business owners based in regions.
- The IBSS identified a number of key needs of the First Nations business sector, including the need to access a one-stop shop to receive culturally appropriate business advice and access a short-term office space. This evaluation demonstrates that the hubs program model effectively addresses most of these ongoing needs, specifically by providing:
 - mentoring and advice
 - someone to speak to about their challenges and needs
 - practical information
 - referrals to other services
 - a working space
 - connection to buyers.

4.1.2 How appropriate is the hubs program model in responding to challenges and changes that currently shape the operating environment in which First Nations entrepreneurs do business?

The hubs are appropriately supporting their clients in responding to many of the challenges, changes and opportunities that shape the operating environment in which First Nations people do business

Since the inception of the hubs program in 2018, there have been many shifts in, and external shocks to the business landscape that First Nations businesspeople operate within. These changes have created both opportunities and challenges. The hub staff interviewed were highly aware of these changes and appear to be supporting their clients well in responding to many of these challenges and opportunities. One hub staff member said that they try to “understand the emerging trends in markets and policies and industries and how our support service offering matches those trends, so that when businesses come through the door, we might have something [of value] to add to them (the business).” Further information describing how the hubs have sought to address such shifts is documented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 | Hubs’ responses to changes and challenges in the operating environment in which First Nations people do business

Environmental change/challenge	How the hubs have responded
<p>Increasing digitalisation</p> <p>In today’s digital age, an online presence is increasingly considered vital for small businesses to succeed in competitive markets.⁴⁹ New business owners may not know how to develop their own website and social media profile or conduct digital marketing.</p>	<p>The hubs are supporting new businesses to create a digital footprint (for example through website design and marketing support).</p> <p>Some hubs are working with partners to offer workshops so clients can upskill in this area.</p>
<p>Inflation and cost of doing business</p> <p>Over the last 12 months, all living cost indexes rose between 3.3 per cent and 6.5 per cent.⁵⁰ The most recent ABS data on the cost of doing business from April 2022 also found that over 57 per cent of businesses experienced an increase in the cost of doing business, with 21 per cent reporting increased costs “to a great extent”.⁵¹</p>	<p>The hubs provide free support and cover the costs of some services provided by external providers. This includes, for example, the development of business profiles through The Circle. These profiles are professionally designed flyers that clients can use to market their business’s product or service.</p> <p>As already discussed, the hubs do not provide access to business financial products. Many staff and clients shared that they wished the hubs could further cover the costs of external services. The hubs refer their clients to some funding providers and support them to apply for grants and loans. Recommendation 10 explores how the hubs can play a stronger role in connecting First Nations businesses with other service providers to improve their access to a variety of capital options.</p>
<p>Increased access to international markets</p> <p>As noted in a recent paper produced by the Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation, there has been a recent increase in awareness and international demand for First Nations products and services.⁵² This heightened demand has driven increased access to international markets for First Nations businesses.⁵³</p>	<p>Some stakeholders reported that there is an opportunity for the hubs to do more in connecting their clients with existing export support services. (See Recommendation 9, which encourages the hubs to explore opportunities to strengthen referrals for hub clients).</p>
<p>Access to capital/intergenerational wealth/business experience</p> <p>First Nations businesspeople have less access to intergenerational wealth than other Australians, which makes accessing business-related capital difficult.⁵⁴ One survey respondent emphasised</p>	<p>All hubs provide free support and cover the costs of lower cost services delivered by external providers.</p> <p>The hubs also all refer clients to service providers who offer grants and loans and support them in applying for this funding.</p>

⁴⁹ Forbes, “Building A Brand: Why A Strong Digital Presence Matters”, accessed 1 November 2024

⁵⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Selected Living Cost Indexes, Australia”, accessed 16 July 2024.

⁵¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Business Conditions and Sentiments”, accessed 16 July 2024.

⁵² Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (2022), *Discussion Paper: Indigenous-led trade, export and investment*, National Indigenous Land and Sea Strategy, accessed 23 July 2024, p6.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ NSW Treasury (2022), *The NSW First Nations Business Sector*, 38–56.

this, saying that the most valuable service provided by the hub is the networks because “we don’t have an Uncle who’s a partner at a law firm, or an Auntie who owns her own accountant business, nor family members who own 50 year old million dollar businesses to call on for help/support.”

In addition, the hubs educate their clients on starting and running sustainable businesses, which can create long term intergenerational business experience. However, as discussed in detail in Section 4.1.1, some of the hubs could do more to support clients whose businesses are more mature or ready to expand in understanding how to scale and grow their business sustainably. As reflected in Recommendation 10, there is more that the hubs can do to link clients with services that provide business capital.

Regional and rural accessibility challenges

First Nations Australians live in regional and remote areas at higher rates than non-Indigenous Australians.⁵⁵

The costs of travel, transportation and parking are barriers which affect regionally-based clients seeking to access hub services in capital cities. Regional and remote-based business also face connectivity and digital literacy challenges that increase their need for accessible face-to-face support.

The hubs have increased their focus on supporting clients in regional areas through visits to such areas and local events.

The NT Hub has opened an office in Alice Springs with additional offices planned for Tennant Creek and Katherine.

Waalitj Hub has recently appointed three regionally based business support staff in Bunbury, Karratha and Kalgoorlie.

Business support staff from Yarpa, The Circle and the NT hub travel to regional areas periodically to meet communities and existing clients.

Despite progress, all hubs reported challenges with meeting the demand for services in regional areas (see Section 4.3.1).

Black cladding/problematic joint venture arrangements

Several hub clients and staff across multiple hubs perceived that black cladding and problematic joint ventures are common. There was a perception among some respondents that businesses in states with Aboriginal Procurement Policies may be particularly vulnerable as non-Indigenous entities seek to exploit First Nations businesses by taking advantage of these policies.

The Waalitj Hub has led the development of a Joint Venture Tool Kit (discussed in Section 4.1.1) to support businesses in problematic or one-sided joint venture arrangements. The development of this kit was sponsored by the NIAA.

Ability to scale and be sustainable

Polidano et al. found that the number of First Nations sole traders has almost tripled over the last ten years, whilst the number of first Nations partnerships also grew by a rate of 5.8 per cent per year over the last ten years.⁵⁶

Some stakeholders argued that although there has been an increase in First Nations businesses,

The hubs all take a similar approach in encouraging their clients to pursue smaller contracts and grow their capacity and capability slowly in order to set their enterprises up for success.

Some stakeholders suggested that the hubs could do more to support their clients to run sustainable businesses through providing financial capability training initiatives.

⁵⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, “[Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians](#)”, accessed 13 August 2024.

⁵⁶ Michele Evans and Polidano, C., Dahmann, S. C., Kalera, Y., Ruiz, M., Moschion, J., Blackman, M. (2024), *Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0*, The University of Melbourne.

many small enterprises fail because they struggle to scale their businesses or achieve financial sustainability.

Environmental opportunities	How the hubs have responded:
<p>Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs)</p> <p>National and state based preferential procurement policies such as the Australian Government’s Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) and state-specific Aboriginal Procurement Policies (APPs) have stimulated demand for First Nations businesses from government buyers, but there are risks for new businesses entering into large contracts, such as the risk that they will not be able to scale up to deliver on their commitments. Stakeholders also described that procurement processes are often complex and difficult to navigate.</p>	<p>All hubs assist clients to respond to tenders by helping them write business plans and capability statements that communicate what clients’ businesses provide.</p> <p>The hubs also host workshops for government partners to discuss their procurement policies with hub clients.</p> <p>All hubs take steps to set businesses up to succeed by making sure they apply for contracts that they will be able to deliver successfully. Hub staff noted this often requires frank conversations with their clients about what their businesses are ready or capable of undertaking. This was mentioned by staff in all hubs.</p>
<p>Increasing interest in business ownership</p> <p>Between 2012 and 2022, the number of First Nations businesses grew at an average annual rate of 11.3 per cent.⁵⁷ Interviewees suggested that as First Nations people are successful in business they inspire others to develop their own businesses. Increasing interest in business ownership has also been stimulated by IPPPs. However, the sector is relatively young, and several clients noted that First Nations entrepreneurs lack the intergenerational business experience that non-Indigenous people have access to.</p>	<p>The hubs provide capability building for new business owners. To some extent this fills the gap in the First Nations business sector’s intergenerational business supports. They have also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> invested in increasing the number of business support staff in response to increasing interest in hub services, noting some challenges with recruitment hosted events to support the development of foundational business skills.

The hubs appear to have been dynamic in responding to the challenges, changes and opportunities that face the First Nations business sector. At the same time, there are opportunities to enhance their responses in some areas, such as through providing increased education for clients on IPPPs. There are also opportunities for the hubs to continue working to fill gaps in their service delivery, for example, through increasing their service provision to regionally-based entrepreneurs.

The hubs’ responses to many of these challenges, changes and opportunities are explored in more detail throughout the report. See:

- section 4.3.1 for detail on the hubs’ progress in servicing regional areas and the ongoing challenges associated with this
- section 4.3.1 for how the hubs are supporting their clients to realise the potential benefits from IPPPs

⁵⁷ Michele Evans and Polidano, C., Dahmann, S. C., Kalera, Y., Ruiz, M., Moschion, J., Blackman, M. (2024), *Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0*, The University of Melbourne.

- section 4.1.1 for further detail on Waalitj Hub's Joint Venture Tool Kit.

Most hub contracts and key performance indicators allow for needed flexibility in service delivery and tailoring to local needs

Hub contracts for three of the hubs have similar key performance indicators (KPIs).⁵⁸ One hub has a few additional KPI requirements for the delivery of the hubs program, including related to:

- the maintenance of a website featuring a Jobs Dashboard for genuine employment opportunities that corporate partners can share
- the development of agreements with government funded providers to co-locate or work from and deliver directly from the hub weekly.⁵⁹

Staff from the three hubs with fewer reporting requirements commonly suggested that their current contracts and KPIs allow them sufficient flexibility and autonomy in their service delivery. They described that they can be flexible within the parameters of their KPIs. For example, although the hubs' funding agreements state that they must host between three and 20 events per year, they are able to design these events according to clients' needs.⁶⁰ Furthermore, hub staff suggested that their funding agreements allow them to be creative and responsive to the needs of clients as they arise, regardless of whether these needs align with stipulated KPIs. For example, if the hubs would like to offer a particular program to clients, they can propose the idea to the NIAA for approval. In this way they have the autonomy to adapt to emerging needs, whilst they also feel that the KPIs provide direction.

Conversely, staff from the hub with additional KPI requirements felt that these requirements are a burden on their resources, detract from time spent delivering hub services, and cause them to direct efforts to initiatives that have minimal impact. One business support staff member who works for this hub stated that they spend up to 30 per cent of their time on client administration and reporting to meet contractual reporting requirements. Another staff member said, "for NIAA we need to document everything [...] the administrative burden is heavy." In addition to requiring staff to update the hub's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, the hub employs one full time equivalent staff member whose role includes reporting progress on KPI requirements to the NIAA. Other staff members noted that the hub offers numerous workshops in order to meet the KPI requirement for 14 workshops per year; however, many of these workshops do not get high levels of attendance. Clients provided feedback that they will "go broke" if they attend so many events during business hours. Recommendation 6 details how the NIAA can enhance and streamline reporting requirements for the hubs to ensure that staffs' administrative tasks and activities are aligned with creating value for hub clients and enabling the measurement of outcomes and impact.

"The KPIs are open for us to navigate whatever the need is and adapt to what mobs' requests are. Coming from government I know what really strict KPIs look like and it can stifle progress."

- Hub staff member

⁵⁸ Hub provider contracts with the Australian Government.

⁵⁹ Hub provider contracts with the Australian Government.

⁶⁰ Hub provider contracts with the Australian Government.



KEY FINDINGS | 1.2 How appropriate is the hubs program model in responding to the challenges and changes that currently shape the operating environment in which First Nations entrepreneurs do business?

- The hubs are appropriately supporting their clients in responding to many of the challenges, changes and opportunities that shape the operating environment in which First Nations people do business.
- Most hubs perceive that their contracts and key performance indicators allow for needed flexibility in service delivery and tailoring of services to local needs.

4.1.3 How appropriate is the hubs program model in complementing other initiatives?

The hubs fill an important gap in the ecosystem of First Nations-specific business supports

Clients and hub partners felt that the hubs fill an important gap in the ecosystem of First Nations business supports because the service they provide is a unique combination of six key elements, in that it:

1. is free
2. is culturally appropriate and safe, and delivered mostly by First Nations people
3. is high-touch, tailored, and involves one-on-one mentoring
4. offers a front door or referral service to help clients navigate the complex web of supports available to business
5. enables networking so clients can meet buyers and other First Nations businesses
6. is delivered by a local provider who cultivates a community between hub clients.

Several of these characteristics – such as the ‘one-stop shop’ referral role, culturally appropriate business support, and platform for building connections – were identified by the IBSS as the intended role that the hubs program would play.

There is some duplication of the hubs’ services with those offered by other providers. For example, Indigenous Business Australia offers business information and advice, as well as some capability building workshops.⁶¹ Meanwhile Many Rivers provides free, First Nations-specific business supports and help with discrete services such as support with business plans.⁶²

However, the evaluation team interviewed many clients who use multiple business support services and found that the hubs’ services are valuable and unique because they encompass *all six* of the above characteristics. While other business support services provide one or two of the above elements, the evaluation team did not come across any other organisations that provide all six of the above. There are some First Nations-specific supports that provide culturally appropriate services but charge a fee, which limits access. Other services such as Many Rivers do not have physical hub offices.

The hubs play a unique role by cultivating a community of First Nations businesses through their physical office spaces which are used for networking events and informal connection between clients. Delivery by local, First Nations-led providers appears to support the hubs to build a sense of community. One client emphasised that their hub is “so beneficial for the community” and highlighted the importance of “local

61 Indigenous Business Australia, “[Business Finance and partnerships](#)”, accessed 13 November 2024

62 Many Rivers, “[Small Business Support](#)”, accessed 13 November 2024

Aboriginal mob here who understands what our community is going through". Another client commented that their local hub has strong networks and "access to people in community" due to their local presence. Delivery through local providers appears to be a strength of the hubs model that supports hub staff to have a good understanding of local cultural context and the service ecosystem in their jurisdiction.

These findings indicate that there is merit in how the hubs program model was designed through the IBSS. The program is meeting many of the enduring needs of First Nations businesspeople by delivering a service with several of the characteristics outlined by the IBSS and playing a unique role in the ecosystem of supports.

The hubs provide a front door for First Nations businesses and help their clients to navigate the service ecosystem

The IBSS states that the hubs will be a 'one-stop-shop to access better business advice, support and connections'.⁶³ Interview and survey results showed that the hubs act like the first point of call or a central point of contact for First Nations businesses to be referred on to other supports that can meet their specific needs. The hubs play the role of a concierge or triage service that refers businesses to other more specialised services.

Numerous stakeholders, including hub clients, partners and government representatives, expressed that the ecosystem of business supports is confusing in that it is difficult to know what services exist and where different types of support might be accessed. Most of these respondents also said that the hubs provide valuable support to their clients in helping them to navigate the various services and opportunities available. One client who had to close their business during COVID-19 said:

"If we had a hub like this back then we wouldn't have had to shut down during that time. We didn't know what was out there and didn't know how to navigate those issues."

A state government representative suggested their local hub is providing this navigation role well, saying "[the hub] has established itself as a clear contact to help businesses navigate these supports." When asked about whether the ecosystem of supports could be better coordinated, another Australian Government stakeholder said,

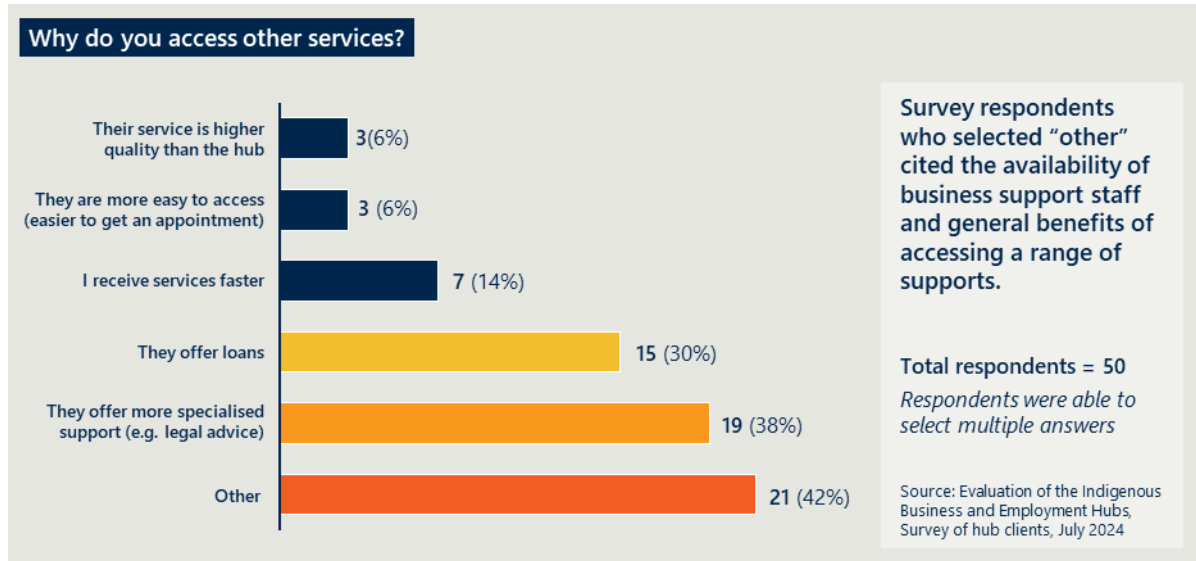
"This is where I think the hub model is really good, [the hubs are] engaged heavily at the local, state and commonwealth level and having them as a body that can do that and help suppliers navigate the ecosystem and having access to agnostic business support services – it's having that as a package [that is valuable...] I do suspect that the areas where the hubs don't exist have a lack of this support."

As noted above, clients value the ongoing relationships they have with hub staff. Clients will often reconnect with their hub as new needs emerge to be connected with services they need. In this way the hubs are a central point of contact for their clients in the business support ecosystem and play an important role in supporting clients to navigate the complex web of services available.

The survey results further demonstrate that the hubs play an important role in supporting their clients to access a wide range of support services. 50 survey respondents (of 113) reported that they access other business supports in addition to the hubs. Of these, half said that the hub referred them to these other support services. The reasons survey respondents access other supports are shown in Figure 8 below. Respondents were able to select multiple options.

⁶³ NIAA, Indigenous Business Sector Strategy, 2, accessed 26 September 2024.

Figure 8 | Survey results for: Why do you access other services? Select all that apply:



Findings from client interviews aligned with these results. Hub clients interviewed most commonly reported accessing other services to meet specific needs such as support with a particular legal issue, assistance to apply for a grant or to access loans.

Survey respondents who selected "other" in responding to this survey question cited the lack of availability of hub business support staff and the benefits associated with accessing a range of supports and learning from multiple providers as reasons for accessing other services. A few respondents suggested that they access other supports because their hub has been unable to help them or is unresponsive. Overall however, the hubs appear to be playing a needed referral role for the First Nations business sector that many hub clients value.

Interviews with stakeholders in Queensland highlighted the value of a one-stop shop playing a coordination function for the First Nations business sector. Business owners in Queensland, where there is no Australian Government-funded hub, emphasised that there are challenges with the disconnected nature of business support services, which further compounds the complexity associated with navigating access to the right supports. This is discussed further in the Queensland case study overleaf.

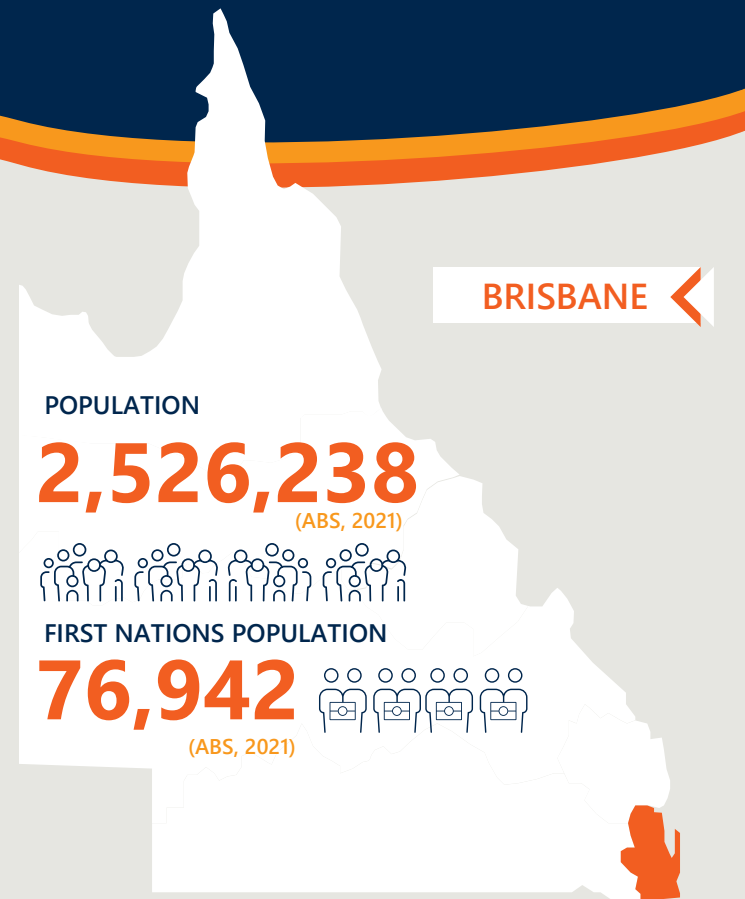
Interviews with stakeholders from Queensland highlighted the value of the hubs program in coordinating the business support sector and supporting First Nations businesses

The evaluation team used Queensland as a case study to understand the needs of First Nations businesses in a jurisdiction without a hub and to serve as a contrast to the interviews conducted with stakeholders in hub locations. This supported the evaluation to more deeply understand the role the hubs are playing and their impact, and to validate outcomes attributed to the hubs' work. Queensland has 28 per cent of Australia's First Nations owner managers, behind New South Wales which is home to 40% of First Nations owner managers in Australia.⁶⁴ This follows the pattern of where most First Nations people reside, making Queensland an appropriate choice to understand the environment and needs of First Nations businesses who do not have access to a local business hub. The evaluation team conducted 12 interviews with 13 individuals from Queensland, comprising:

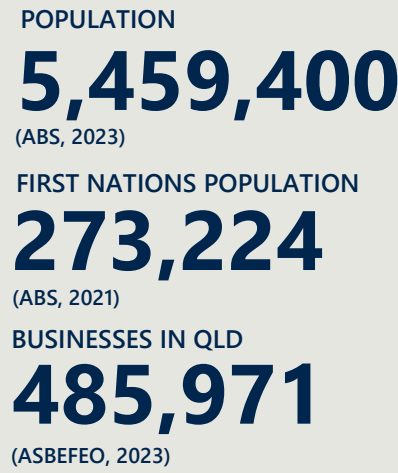
- 4** First Nations business owners
- 4** Business support providers
- 3** Community stakeholders
- 2** Queensland Government representatives

The environment of each jurisdiction varies significantly, so it is important to note that the analysis undertaken with Queensland stakeholders is not intended to show what the experience of other jurisdictions would be without the hubs, i.e., it was not intended to serve as a counterfactual. Multiple stakeholders suggested that there is a wealth of First Nations business activity in Queensland but described the support landscape as "confusing" and "disjointed." A few interviewees from Queensland shared the view that "there are lots of businesses up here, but no support", while others suggested that there are a range of services, but "the gap is in knowing that they exist." Initiatives such as Black Coffee are currently attempting to boost connections between First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs across the state, however one business owner still suggested it is "so lonely as an entrepreneur in the First Nations space."

⁶⁴ ABS Census (2021), NIAA Analysis



QUEENSLAND



"I've had a lot of people reach out [to me] in Queensland because there's just not enough support or guidance on where to go. In Brisbane I was quite shocked that there was no support. Who's here to support and who do I go to if I have issues? [...] Businesses looking to export don't even know where to go. I think we're lacking here in Queensland a lot."

Experienced business owner from Queensland

FIRST NATIONS BUSINESSES IN QLD

BLADE data (2020-21), NSW Treasury analysis

546 Supply Nations businesses made up only **0.1%** of all QLD Businesses in 2020-21.

\$256K Median revenue of Supply Nation businesses in QLD.

ABS Census (2021), NIAA analysis

5057 Indigenous owner managers in QLD by usual residence

A couple of business owners interviewed from Queensland had previously accessed support from the hubs and described positive experiences in accessing these services. One hub client who relocated to Queensland discussed challenges associated with building a network and winning work in Queensland and attributed their previous business success to the support they previously received from the NTIBN hub. Another business owner continues to receive successful referrals from one of the hubs and provides specialist services to its clients.

Interviewees highlighted that the core services that business owners in Queensland need are:

- face-to-face business coaching,
- support for business owners to navigate across a complex system of supports,
- uplifting digital and financial literacy and basic business skills,
- fostering collaboration amongst the First Nations business sector,
- helping business owners to access procurement opportunities and
- supporting corporates and government to modify their processes to better engage with First Nations people.

These services align with the types of support provided by the hubs. In the words of one respondent, a hub “is definitely a need in Queensland and it’s been that way for a long time.” All the interviewees from Queensland echoed this view.

The Queensland Indigenous Business Network (QIBN) is a recent initiative by the Queensland Government intended to fill this gap in supports across Queensland.⁶⁵ Like the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program, QIBN intends to act as a connector for First Nations businesses to each other and other services. It will also be the representative body for First Nations businesses in Queensland. One Queensland community stakeholder who provides support to businesses described the support landscape as “very disconnected” and said that they are “hoping that QIBN will help to join those dots”.

“I’ve had a lot of people reach out [to me] in Queensland because there’s just not enough support or guidance on where to go. In Brisbane I was quite shocked that there was no support. Who’s here to support and who do I go to if I have issues? [...] Businesses looking to export don’t even know where to go. I think we’re lacking here in Queensland a lot.”

Experienced business owner from Queensland

The research with Queensland-based stakeholders indicates that First Nations businesses in Queensland have similar needs to business owners in other jurisdictions where the hubs are meeting these needs. Findings from Queensland support the evidence that the hubs are playing an important role in directly supporting businesses while also multiplying the benefits of existing support services through warm referrals and coordination of the First Nations business support sector. They also suggest that the hubs are targeting the core needs of First Nations businesses.

Although the limited engagement with stakeholders in Queensland signals that Queensland is currently lacking a service like the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program, the evaluation is not advocating for an expansion of the hubs program at this stage; it is clear that QIBN is intending to fill this gap in supports.

The hubs should connect with exiting initiatives such as QIBN to increase the level of coordination of supports across Australia for First Nations businesses. There may be a role for the Commonwealth to play in the future to enhance support for First Nations businesses in Queensland, however, new initiatives should not be undertaken without first considering the extent to which QIBN will deliver needed services once fully established.

Any expansion of supports for First Nations businesses in Queensland by the Australian government must be coordinated with the state government so as not to duplicate the work of QIBN.

⁶⁵ QIBN, “Welcome to The Queensland Indigenous Business Network (QIBN)”, accessed 1 October 2024

The hubs have established systems for working with other organisations, but there are opportunities to strengthen some relationships

Interviews with hub staff, partners and clients confirmed that the hubs work collaboratively to build relationships with other organisations who provide services that may benefit their clients. Mostly, the hubs have strong relationships with Many Rivers and Indigenous Business Australia and will refer clients to these services where appropriate. Supply Nation and Many Rivers have a presence in some of the hubs, with arrangements where a representative from these organisations will work from a hub one day per week or month and provide services to hub clients. Representatives from these organisations also spoke about referring their clients to the hubs for support.

There are opportunities to improve the hubs' relationships with other organisations that provide similar or complementary support to the First Nations business sector. However, it appears that at times the hubs have attempted to build relationships with some organisations, but partnerships have not resulted sometimes due to a lack of interest from these other parties. In other cases, some hub staff, partners and Australian Government stakeholders reported that there are opportunities for the hubs to broaden their relationships. For example, one government stakeholder said "there are opportunities for the hubs to build their partnership base outside of government and outside of Aboriginal organisations ... If they engage more broadly with private sector and philanthropy they can tailor their services more to their client base."

"Because we talk to our businesses all the time, we have real time information about where they're at and what they can do, so when we make the referral we know that they can do the job."

- Hub staff member

The hubs have relationships with government agencies including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrade, AusIndustry, state government First Nations business support providers and the NIAA. Hub staff reported that the hubs have made efforts to build relationships with some of these organisations, with mixed results. The hubs' engagement with government agencies appears to occur mostly through co-run business networking events, but there are opportunities for government organisations to better work with the hubs and use their role to disseminate information and opportunities more effectively. This is reflected in Recommendation 9.1.



KEY FINDINGS | 1.3 How appropriate is the hubs program model in complementing other initiatives?

- The hubs fill an important gap in the business support ecosystem for First Nations businesses by providing services that:
 1. are free
 2. are culturally appropriate and safe, and delivered mostly by First Nations people
 3. are high-touch, tailored, and involve one-on-one mentoring
 4. offer a front door or referral service to help clients navigate the complex web of supports
 5. enable networking so clients can meet buyers and other First Nations businesses
 6. cultivate a community between hub clients.
- The hubs provide a front door for First Nations businesses into this ecosystem and help their clients to navigate through this service system.
- Interviews with stakeholders in Queensland highlighted the value of a one-stop shop playing a coordination function for the First Nations business sector.

- The hubs have established systems for working with other services and government organisations, but there are opportunities to strengthen some relationships so that they can better support First Nations businesses to access the services they need.

4.2 Strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative program model

This section explores findings on the following Key Evaluation Questions:



2. Strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative program model: Key Evaluation Questions

2.1 How well does the hubs program model represent a strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative model?

2.2 Does the program model encourage collaboration between users at hub sites?

4.2.1 How well does the hubs program model represent a strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative model?

The definition of cultural safety outlined within the National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognises that “only the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who is the recipient of a service or interaction can determine whether it is culturally safe.”⁶⁶ This definition also states that “cultural safety is met through actions from the majority [non-Indigenous] position which recognise, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”⁶⁷

Curtis et al conducted a literature review in 2019 which found that cultural safety in healthcare involves the achievement of health equity.⁶⁸ They emphasised that culturally safe healthcare provision should be “defined by the patient and their communities”⁶⁹ and suggested that cultural safety is an outcome of the education of the service provider that “enables safe service to be defined by those that receive the service.”⁷⁰

The evaluation team recognises that it is up to those that seek to benefit from the hubs’ services – the clients – to define what cultural safety means for them. Accordingly, the evaluation does not seek to provide one definition of cultural safety. To evaluate the cultural appropriateness and cultural safety of the hubs program, the evaluation team were informed by individual experiences of hub clients as told by them, and their perspectives on what constitutes a culturally safe experience at their hub.

As cultural safety is a concept that is to some extent individual, hub clients emphasised different aspects of the hubs program when describing the hubs’ cultural safety. Clients interviewed suggested that inputs to

⁶⁶ Closing the Gap, “[12. Definitions](#)”, accessed 13 August 2024.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Curtis E, Jones R, Tipene-Leach D, Walker C, Loring B, Paine SJ, Reid P. Why cultural safety rather than cultural competency is required to achieve health equity: a literature review and recommended definition, *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 2019, Vol 18, No.174, p1-17.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p14.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p10.

cultural safety include the cultural competency and/or the First Nations heritage of the staff, the hub office space, and the hubs' governance and leadership.

The vast majority of interviewees found the hubs to be culturally safe and appropriate.

The hubs' First Nations staff and physical layouts underpin cultural safety across the hubs

The majority of interviewees said that hub services are culturally appropriate. They viewed First Nations staff members as key to ensuring that culturally appropriate services are being delivered. The vast majority of hub clients interviewed said that they feel culturally safe when visiting the hubs and in accessing the hubs' support. They suggested that this is unlike supports they have accessed elsewhere. One client interviewed said of the hub staff,

"they are culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive, and they have the experience because they are Aboriginal. You don't get that anywhere else."

Key to ensuring the hubs operate a culturally safe service is the high proportion of First Nations staff members in the hubs – in all hubs the majority of staff members identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (78 per cent across the program). As one client said,

"I had the confidence because they were an Aboriginal organisation so I was very comfortable. They could relate to me. They understand where you come from because the staff are Aboriginal. Going into a non-Indigenous agency I would feel very anxious."

Another client said,

"I always feel culturally safe when talking with my business coach. Their natural flair for cultural responsiveness and strict adherence to cultural protocols creates a secure environment. This allows me to discuss my business goals with trust and loyalty."

Most of the hub staff who are not First Nations have prior experience working with First Nations people and/or appear to have high levels of cultural competency. A small number of hub clients specifically called out the cultural competency of non-Indigenous staff members, with one client saying, "even though I know [hub staff member] isn't Aboriginal, I know she is fully committed and the organisation is committed to mob."

The interview data reflects the clients' strong sense of trust in the hubs. Another interviewee went on to say that the hub they have accessed services from, "is the only [business support service] that I've felt is fully aligned with the interests of Aboriginal people."

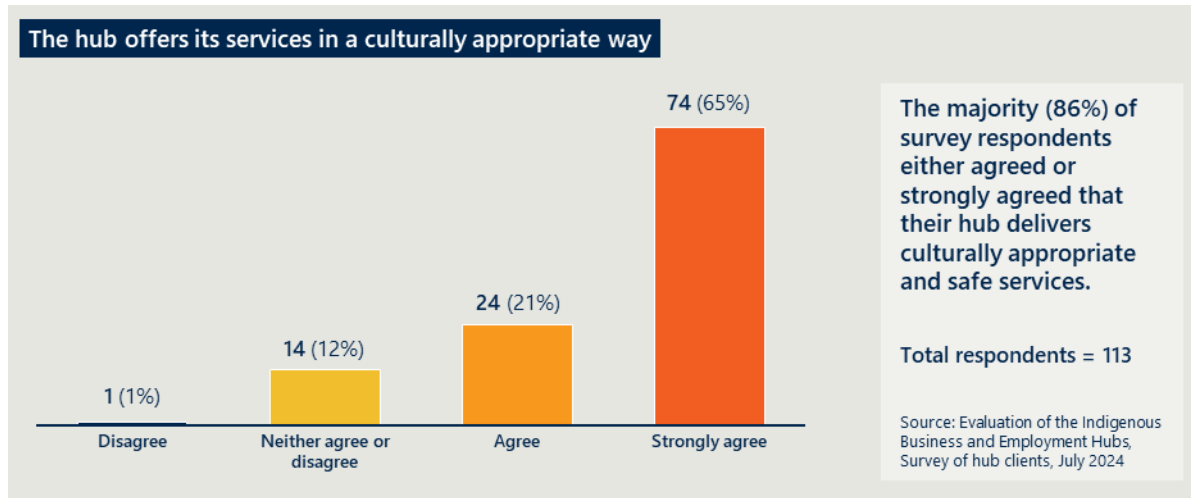
Many hub clients emphasised that hubs staff demonstrated a genuine interest and care for clients and this was a key factor which ensured they felt culturally safe in the hubs. When asked what makes the hub culturally safe, one client said, "probably how friendly they all are." A new client of one of the hubs described their impression of the hub after their first meeting as "supported, friendly and warm." Several clients reported that the hub staff's genuine interest in relationship-building is what continues to ensure the hubs are their first point of call when they need support.

"I think The Circle leads with heart. They are people first and I think that's why they have that magnetic effect on people – because they feel safe."

- Hub client

The majority (86 per cent) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their hub delivers culturally appropriate and safe services, as shown in Figure 9 below. Only one per cent of survey respondents disagreed with this statement. Data from survey and interviews was largely unequivocal in demonstrating that clients view the hubs as a trusted, culturally appropriate service.

Figure 9 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The hub offers its services in a culturally appropriate and culturally safe way



Despite the finding that the hubs appear to be providing services in a culturally appropriate way, a small number of hub clients reported incidents where individual staff members have not shown high levels of cultural competency and do not create a culturally safe environment. However, these clients suggested that these were isolated examples and that such incidents are not indicative of cultural safety at the hubs more broadly or their general ways of working. The evaluation found no other examples or incidents involving culturally inappropriate behaviour beyond these.

The evaluation team’s site visits and interviews highlighted that the physical location and layout of the hubs play a role in supporting culturally safe service delivery. For some interviewees the layout and location have a bearing on how welcoming and open the hub space is perceived to be. All of the hubs have First Nations-designed furniture and artwork within their hub office space. Clients of all hubs commented that this supports their sense of belonging in the hub.

Some of the hubs are located in government office buildings. A few clients suggested that this was not ideal for maximising cultural safety. Where the hubs had open doors that are easily accessible from main streets, clients expressed feeling more welcomed and comfortable entering the physical space. This appears to have an impact on the number of clients that use the hubs’ physical spaces to work on a regular basis. Hubs with open doors and/or easily accessible locations reported more usage by clients of the hub office space than hubs where clients suggested that either the layout or the location of the hub is not accessible.

The hubs are strengths-based in how they support their clients

Several stakeholders reported that confidence and personal marketing can be a challenge for First Nations people. One hub partner said,

“Mob are traditionally not the best at shouting out what they’re good at in government speak. [The hub] is really good at helping our businesses with full tender processes that require a capability statement.”

“I would not have the confidence to do what I’ve done without the hub.”

- Hub client

All four hubs take a strengths-based approach in seeking to support their clients through building their confidence, showcasing clients’ businesses through events and advocating for their clients and the First Nations business sector. Early meetings between hub staff and clients typically focus on identifying clients’ strengths and determining how the hubs can support them. Clients and staff emphasised that the process of developing business capability statements and business profiles not only gives clients clarity in relation to their business ideas but helps build new business owners’ confidence.

The evaluation team spoke to clients across all four hubs who reported increased levels of confidence and stated that their businesses were successful due to the support they had received through their hub. One client who now provides services to their hub said,

“What I really valued from [the hub] was that even when they engaged me to run the workshops, they wouldn’t let me undersell myself and my worth – they pushed me to understand that better. And that’s really huge [...] it has strengthened my business overall – it made me assess everything else in my business. And I’m in a solid spot now.”

The evaluation’s findings were clear in suggesting that the hubs are taking a strengths-based approach to how they support their clients.

The hubs set their clients up for success by helping them to set realistic goals and providing pragmatic advice

“They have experts and if you’re being unrealistic or a bit too ambitious they’ll certainly let you know. They don’t want to set you up to fail.”

- Hub client

Hub business support staff described setting their clients up for success through providing practical and honest advice. This includes conducting frank conversations with clients about their capabilities and the amount of work they are ready to take on. Hub staff emphasised that they did not want their clients to accept large projects and fail, and that they often talked to clients about the high failure rates of small businesses. Clients similarly stated that hub staff had encouraged them to start with smaller contracts to enable them to develop required capabilities and build their capacity sustainably.

Hub staff described giving their clients ‘homework’, to make sure that they are committed to developing their business and willing to work hard, and that they understand that the hub will not run their business for them. Hub staff spoke about challenging their clients appropriately and ensuring they are realistic about their goals. This, in combination the hub staffs’ practice of drawing clients’ attention to their strengths, appears to build clients’ confidence and reflects a strengths-based approach.

The hubs have varying levels of First Nations governance, but this does not prevent them from providing culturally appropriate services

The hubs have unique operating models and authorising structures, with varying levels of First Nations representation in leadership and governance roles across the hubs. The majority of hub managers are First Nations people, but the hubs’ administering bodies have varied levels of First Nations governance:

- **Yarpa Hub** is administrated through the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, a statutory corporation under the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Rights Act of 1983.⁷¹ The NSW Aboriginal Land Council is governed by a council of democratically elected First Nations Councillors.⁷²
- **Waalitj Hub** sits within the broader Waalitj Foundation, a not-for-profit established by the West Coast Eagles. Waalitj Foundation is governed by an independent Board of Directors which requires at least 50 per cent representation by First Nations people at all times.⁷³ The NIAA advised that in December 2024, the Waalitj Foundation formally became an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisation.
- **The Circle** is administrated by the South Australian Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC). The Circle’s governance framework consists of the senior governance partners made up of representatives from NIAA and DPC, who provide strategic oversight, direction and monitoring.⁷⁴

⁷¹ New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, “[Our Organisation](#)”, accessed 9 December 2024

⁷² New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, “[Our Council](#)”, accessed 9 December 2024

⁷³ Waalitj Foundation, [Annual Review 2023](#), accessed 9 December 2024

⁷⁴ The Circle First Nations Entrepreneur Hub, “[About](#)”, accessed 9 December 2024

- The Northern Territory Indigenous Business and Employment hub is operated by the NTIBN, a First Nations owned organisation. NTIBN also has a Board comprising of First Nation Directors.⁷⁵

A small number of interviewees thought that some hubs do not have governance structures that support First Nations self-determination. In particular, a small number of community stakeholders reported that they felt the hubs/hub providers should be First Nations-owned. A small number of hub clients also said that they felt First Nations support staff are better placed to provide culturally appropriate services than non-Indigenous staff. However, many hub clients reported feeling that the hubs generally provide culturally appropriate services and they understand that providing culturally safe services is of high importance to the hubs, as already described.

"I think what is most important is the results. Are they helping Aboriginal businesses? From my observation, they are."

- Hub client

Further, many hub clients reported that the most important factor motivating them to attend the hubs was the quality of service and the positive impact the hubs deliver to the First Nations business sector. Some hub clients also suggested that the hubs' non-alignment with any particular Traditional Owner group is a strength, as it provides a welcoming and safe environment for a diverse range of hub clients (i.e. First Nations clients from multiple communities and groups). Overall, the findings indicate that the hubs are furthering the program outcome, "First Nations businesses are able to access culturally appropriate services tailored to the needs of their business, families and communities."

Further discussion on the impacts of the hubs' varying governance models is discussed in Section 4.4.2.



KEY FINDINGS | 2.1 How well does the hubs program model represent a strengths-based, culturally respectful and collaborative model?

- The majority of hub clients who participated in the evaluation felt that the hubs provide a culturally safe service which improves outcomes for First Nations businesses.
- The hubs' First Nations staff and physical layouts are important drivers of cultural safety across the hubs.
- The hubs are strengths-based in their approach to supporting their clients.
- The hubs set their clients up for success by helping them to set realistic goals and providing pragmatic advice.
- The hubs have varying levels of First Nations governance, but this does not prevent them from providing culturally appropriate services.

4.2.2 Does the program model encourage collaboration between users at hub sites?

Clients felt that the hubs' office spaces and hub-run events created connection and community among First Nations businesses

The evaluation collected strong evidence that the physical hub office spaces at all hub sites support opportunities for connection and collaboration between businesses. The hubs engage in a range of formal

⁷⁵ Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network, "[About Us](#)", accessed 9 December 2024

initiatives to bring clients together while providing a space where hub clients can meet informally, make coffee and chat to each other.

Several clients from all hubs said that events held at the hubs are useful for connecting with other business owners. They suggested that the hubs have created a sense of community and enabled them to connect and network with other like-minded First Nations business owners. Clients who spoke about the hubs' workshops and networking events all suggested that the events felt culturally safe and community oriented, as opposed to being corporate or clinical. One client said,

"You get all these great people around with their own stories and you make friends and want to naturally meet people. It's authentic connection with community that doesn't feel like corporate networking."

This finding is important, as one of the key areas for action identified by the IBSS was to build stronger connections and relationships for First Nations businesses, who have historically faced difficulties in accessing opportunities created through networks.⁷⁶ Additionally, the National Roadmap for Indigenous Skills, Jobs and Wealth Creation identifies that there is an opportunity to build entrepreneurial skills, capabilities and networks to address historical exclusion.⁷⁷

Evidence from the evaluation shows that the hubs are largely meeting this need to facilitate networking in major cities where they are anchored. This occurs formally through the hubs hosting regular events, and informally through clients working from the hub offices – clients use both opportunities to meet others and expand their professional networks.

However, hubs in smaller or less accessible locations are not as effective at providing regular networking and collaboration opportunities. One hub experienced challenges associated with being located in an area that is difficult for most of its clients to travel to. Another hub does not have much co-working space and is difficult to access. These features do present some barriers to collaboration between hub clients, as anecdotally these two hubs are not frequented by clients as much as they could be. However, despite these challenges, clients from these hubs still reported positive networking experiences at events hosted by their hub, and some connection with other clients.

Overall, the evidence shows that the hubs are advancing the program outcomes: "Increased networking and connections allows First Nations businesses to build relationships with other First Nations and non-First Nations businesses" and "First Nations businesses find it easier to identify, communicate and collaborate with complementary First Nations businesses in their communities."

The hubs have developed mutually beneficial relationships with their clients

The hubs have fostered reciprocal relationships with their clients which support the development of both the hubs and their clients' capabilities and businesses. Clients with more established businesses or greater business experience provided anecdotes describing how they mentored less experienced business owners. These relationships were informal and stemmed from the mentors' desire to support community and drive the success of the First Nations business sector. One client said, "My relationship with [the hub] is a bit of a twofold thing with [accessing support for] my business and providing mentoring [to other hub clients]. And I don't get paid for the mentoring, I'm not interested in that."

In one hub, business support staff and clients reported cases where staff enlisted clients with particular expertise to advise other clients, thereby leveraging the collective skill set within the hub community. One

⁷⁶ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy 2018–2028, (2018), accessed 27 September 2024.

⁷⁷ National Indigenous Australians Agency, National Roadmap for Indigenous Skills, Jobs and Wealth Creation, (2021), 22, accessed 27 September 2024.

hub client who owns a leadership consulting business described a situation where one of the newer business support staff called them for business coaching advice. This client said:

“My experience with [the hub] has been a two-way street. It’s been an opportunity to learn from [the hub] but also for them to learn from and harness the strength of their clients ... I love the [hub] crew. I could not speak more highly of them. We can call each other after hours. Not everything has to be paid; it’s relationship-building too.”

In another hub, staff provided an example where a client proficient in traditional languages provided pivotal translation services to a fellow client, and the hub paid for this service. Hub staff reported that they try to procure services that they need from their clients, further evidence of the hubs’ efforts to support and collaborate with their clients (see Section 4.3.2 for further detail).

Overall, it appears that the hubs facilitate networking and beneficial connections between clients in a culturally safe environment.



KEY FINDINGS | 2.2 Does the program model encourage collaboration between users at hub sites?

- Clients felt that the hubs’ office spaces and hub-run events created connections and a sense of community among First Nations businesses.
- The hubs’ physical locations and layouts play a role in supporting culturally safe service delivery. For example, clients of all hubs commented that the First Nations artwork and furniture in hub offices supports their sense of belonging when visiting their hub. On the other hand, a few clients suggested that their hub’s location in a government building or a secure building with locked doors is not ideal for maximising cultural safety.
- The hubs play a needed role in creating formal and informal networking opportunities for hub clients, who have historically found these opportunities hard to access.
- The hubs have developed mutually beneficial relationships with their clients, which supports both the development of the hubs and their clients’ capabilities and businesses.

4.3 Program outcomes

This section explores findings on the following Key Evaluation Questions:



3. Program Outcomes: Key Evaluation Questions

- 3.1 To what extent have the expected outcomes of the program been achieved?
- 3.2 To what extent has the hubs program contributed to the Closing the Gap targets?

The program logic provided in Appendix B.1.3 outlines the expected activities and outputs of the hubs program, and the outcomes that these activities and outputs are expected to deliver.

The hubs’ key performance indicators (KPIs) and reporting requirements provide data on the hubs’ activities and outputs, but they have limited usefulness in the assessment of outcomes and impacts. Data on the economic outcomes of the program is limited: for example, the hubs are not required to collect data on clients’ business growth.

However, as the theory of change and program logic assume a causal link between the program’s outputs and outcomes, the evaluation also considered the hubs’ achievement of program outputs as the key drivers

of program outcomes. The evidence in this section relating to program outcomes is drawn largely from the interview and survey results collected for this evaluation.

The challenges associated with quantifying the hubs program's outcomes and impact are discussed in further detail in Section 4.5 on achievement of value for money.

4.3.1 To what extent have the expected outcomes of the program been achieved?

The hubs are delivering the required activities and outputs which are expected to drive program outcomes

The hubs' KPIs are aligned to the expected outcomes of the program listed in the program logic model.⁷⁸ There are variations in the key performance indicators of each hub. However, all of the hubs have targets in relation to:

- the proportion of full-time-equivalent staff who identify as First Nations
- the percentage of hours worked by First Nations staff as a proportion of total hours worked by hub staff
- the number of services provided to hub clients
- the time taken to respond to inquiries, and that 100 per cent of inquiries are responded to
- a minimum number of events or workshops held per quarter
- the number of partnership arrangements with other service providers who provide complementary services to hub clients
- the number of referrals in and out of the hub.

As the hubs are all required to report on slightly varied KPIs, it was not possible to aggregate their delivery of activities and outputs. However, according to the hubs' June 2023 performance reports (the most recent reports at the time of data analysis), all of the hubs are meeting or exceeding the majority of their KPI requirements. The hub contracts, theory of change and program logic make assumptions that these activities and outputs are expected to deliver the intended program outcomes. The qualitative analysis provided below suggests that the hubs are delivering many of the expected program outcomes. This validates the program assumptions that the program's core outputs and activities as identified in the program logic would drive the desired program outcomes.

When the hubs program was implemented, it was intended that the hubs would provide employment support to First Nations jobseekers. The program logic therefore specifies that the hubs will provide "advice to jobseekers on employment services or self-employment" and achieve an outcome of "fewer unemployed First Nations jobseekers (for example, through both business owners and employees)". However, since the inception of the hubs program, the scope of the program has narrowed to focus on providing support for business owners and entrepreneurs. Some of the hubs have agreed with the NIAA that they will only provide light touch employment support. Additionally, two of the hubs have separate funding agreements with the NIAA to deliver employment services, so they are not funded to deliver the same services through the hubs. However, staff in one of these hubs report there are some synergies across the hubs' services and the employment programs offered by the organisation as whole.

As a result of this revised scope in hub services, the evaluation did not explore the support that the hubs provide to jobseekers.

⁷⁸ Hub contracts; Program Logic Model for the Hubs Program

The hubs appear to be delivering many of the expected program outcomes

As already described in detail in preceding sections, this evaluation has found that the hubs are largely delivering on program requirements (as defined by the IBSS) and furthering many of the agreed outcomes outlined in the program logic, listed in Figure 10 below.

It is important to note that the hubs program was only initiated in 2018 and the newest hub was launched on 5 April 2023. Thus, it is likely that many of the long-term outcomes and impacts arising from the hubs' support of their clients would not yet be realised. As such, although the evaluation did not collect strong evidence in relation to the expected impacts of the program, this does not necessarily indicate flaws in the program's design or implementation; rather it suggests an opportunity for future research.

Recommendation 6 details how the NIAA and the hubs should co-design outcome indicators to better measure and understand the impact and outcomes of the program.

Figure 10 | Intended program outcomes and impact



The evaluation collected evidence which shows that the hubs are effectively achieving the following requirements and outcomes:

- providing a single point of contact for First Nations people to access business supports and be referred to other First Nations-specific and mainstream services
- supporting the development of collaborative partnerships between hub clients
- delivering culturally appropriate services

- collaborating across the business support ecosystem to provide required support to clients
- collaborating with industry and government partners on joint programs and efforts to enhance First Nations procurement
- supporting their clients to grow their businesses and, in some cases, employ other First Nations people

The findings also highlight that the assumptions of the IBSS were well founded: there is an ongoing need for government-funded business support services to be provided to First Nations entrepreneurs to assist them to navigate multiple sources of support. Additionally, there is a need for a one-stop-shop through which First Nations businesspeople can access a range of culturally safe, tailored business supports to help them start and grow their businesses and build connections across relevant industry networks and with other First Nations businesspeople. The hubs are meeting these ongoing needs, indicating that the program model is sound.

The hubs have supported many of their clients to start and grow their business

As already noted, the IBSS was intended to support growth in the First Nations business sector. The hubs program supports this. Several clients in interviews commented that they would not have started their business without the support of their hub. Other interviewees described how their hub has been instrumental in their business's growth and has enabled them to win multiple contracts and significant pieces of work through the networking events and 'meet the buyer' initiatives hosted by their hub. Some interviewees also spoke about successfully securing government and private contracts after their hub guided them through tendering or procurement processes. Most of the hubs' services either directly or indirectly support the business growth of their clients, for example through building their business literacy and capacity or by supporting them to connect with buyers or improve tender proposals.

Some clients in interviews described how their businesses have been able to expand and employ other First Nations people as a result of the work that they have won through networking opportunities and events organised through the hubs. One hub client described that they have grown their business to the point that they now have 19 employees, and said, "this is where [the hub] comes in – we have engagement with other hub clients to increase our Indigenous workforce." This shows that the hubs sometimes provide a useful network for facilitating businesses' expansion, in this case by providing connections between First Nations business owners and jobseekers. The examples outlined in this section also show that clients directly attribute their business success to support from their hub.

Multiple clients from all hubs described how their hub has supported their growth in many non-financial ways such as supporting improvements in their sense of empowerment, business maturity and confidence. As well, existing research shows that for many First Nations businesses earning substantial revenue is not their primary goal, but rather First Nations people often go into business to support their communities.⁷⁹

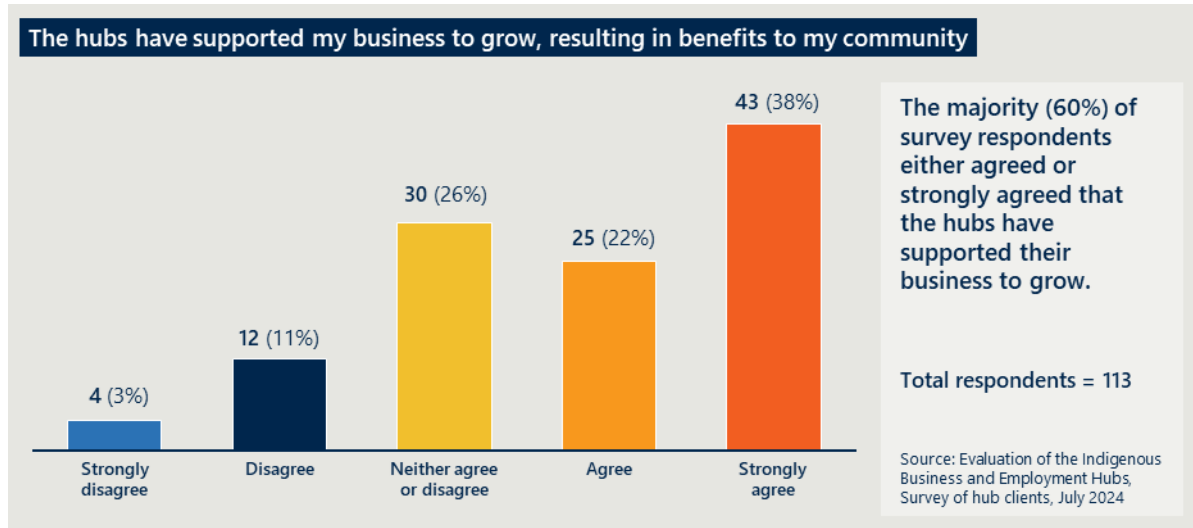
These findings are supported by survey results in this evaluation. The top three reasons given for starting a business by clients who completed the survey were:

- to be self-employed and have the freedom of being my own boss – 30 respondents (24 per cent)
- to pursue my passion – 26 respondents (21 per cent)
- to give back to my community – 23 respondents (18 per cent).

⁷⁹ Weaven, S, Frazer, L, Brimble, M, Bodle, K, Roussety, M & Thaichon, P, 'Encouraging Indigenous Self Employment in Franchising' in Ratten, V, Jones, P, Braga, V & Marques, C. S 2019, *Subsistence Entrepreneurship: The Interplay of Collaborative Innovation, Sustainability and Social Goals*, Springer, Cham, p.79.

Only seven respondents (five per cent) reported making money as a reason for starting their business. Section 4.5.2 further explores how First Nations people assess value for money differently compared to non-Indigenous business owners.

Figure 11 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The hubs have supported my business to grow, resulting in benefits to my community



As shown in Figure 11 above, 60 per cent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the hubs have supported their business to grow, resulting in benefits to their community. One reason for this mixed result may be that some hub clients reported that they do not intend to grow their businesses further. One hub client described via interview that they were at a stage in their career where they valued the flexibility and autonomy of self-employment but were not seeking to grow their business. This result could also be associated with the fact that some hub clients do not yet see benefits being realised by their communities.

Additionally, the relatively higher proportion (26 per cent) of survey respondents who chose “neither agree or disagree” may reflect that the survey question required agreement with two statements: supporting business to grow and creating benefits to community. Section 4.3.2 below explores how the hubs program has delivered non-financial benefits to hub clients by supporting economic empowerment.

The hubs are supporting and facilitating the growth of a circular First Nations economy

As discussed above in Section 4.2.2, all four hubs make concerted efforts to connect First Nations businesses to each other for services. They are facilitating these connections successfully in many cases. All hubs do this in informal ways, including through relationship-building and personal referrals from business support staff.

Waalitj Hub and the NT hubs have also developed panels of First Nations service providers that deliver services to clients and partners. These are detailed in Figure 12 below.

Figure 12 | First Nations service provider panels

> NTIBN's Expert Service Provider Panel

NTIBN has an internal panel of service providers that includes many First Nations businesses. This panel is used to deliver specialist services to hub clients and certified members. As part of NTIBN's BlakFirst policy the hub preferences and prioritises First Nations businesses to support a circular First Nations economy.

NTIBN's certified members also have access to the Blak Business Directory and Procure Connect Tool which facilitate procurement of work between buyers and NTIBN's paying members.

> Waalij's Panel of First Nations service providers

Waalij has a similar internal panel of First Nations service providers comprised of their clients and other providers. They refer their clients to each other using this panel, and providers undergo a formal tender process to bid for work. Where possible, Waalij will then subsidise the cost of services for their clients. This is a formal mechanism that facilitates the local circular First Nations economy, noting that a small number of panel members are non-Indigenous businesses.

Providing opportunities to First Nations businesses through the panel arrangements allows these businesses to build their capability and portfolio of work. Several clients across hubs spoke about procuring the services that they need from each other, including services such as website design or marketing. In some cases, Yarpa has connected its clients together to create alliances or joint ventures, and they have been able to apply for larger contracts as a result. These efforts to link First Nations businesses together in a 'matchmaking service' supports the creation of a circular First Nations business economy.

Although other organisations such as Supply Nation also maintain registers of First Nations suppliers, the hubs' registers are more accessible for small businesses, which comprise the majority of hub clients.⁸⁰ Evans and Polidano et al. found that other First Nations business registries such as Supply Nation's Indigenous Business Direct (IBD) are dominated by medium-sized businesses and only capture a limited proportion of existing First Nations sole traders or joint venture partnerships.⁸¹ Their research found that a probable cause of this low representation of sole traders or partnerships in such registries is likely linked to the lengthy and complex Indigenous verification processes required to register under these directories. Additionally, smaller businesses and start-ups are likely to be less competitive for the larger contract opportunities awarded to businesses on these registries.⁸² Most of the hubs create profiles on their registries for all of their clients, the majority of whom are sole traders. In addition to Supply Nation, some of the hubs employ their own local verification processes to validate the ownership and control of their client's businesses.

Moreover, the hub staff have a personal and in-depth understanding of their clients' businesses that goes beyond the business capability statements stored in the register. This sets referrals up for success, as hub staff understand their clients' capacities and capabilities well.

Staff at all four hubs also make a concerted effort to support the First Nations business sector through the procurement of goods and services from hub clients and the employment of First Nations individuals. This goes beyond what is required by the hubs' contracts. For example, multiple hubs use the marketing services

⁸⁰ Hub performance reports

⁸¹ Evans, M., Polidano, C., Dahmann, S. C., Kalera, Y., Ruiz, M., Moschion, J., Blackman, M. (2024). [Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0](#). The University of Melbourne, 20.

⁸² Polidano, C., Evans, M., Moschion, J. and Martin, G. (2022). [Indigenous business and snapshot study 2.0](#). The University of Melbourne, 33.

of their clients. One of the hubs is re-branding, and has procured services from one of their clients who has a marketing and graphics design business. This client noted that this piece of work commissioned by the hub represented the largest contract that they had received to date. Other hubs employ existing clients to develop business profiles for clients with new businesses. One of the hubs spoke about delivering targeted capability development workshops focused on specialised areas such as leadership and marketing delivered by clients who have expertise in these areas.

Overall, the hubs appear to be successfully providing opportunities for First Nations businesses to win work from buyers and other hub clients through panels and informal referrals, contributing to the delivery of the program outcomes “Increased networking and connections allows First Nations businesses to build relationships with other First Nations and non-First Nations businesses”, and “more First Nations businesses are successful on their own terms”.

The hubs play an important role in supporting First Nations businesses to realise the potential benefits from preferential procurement policies

IPPPs and reconciliation actions plans (RAPs) used by government and industry have stimulated demand for goods and services supplied by First Nations people.⁸³ This increased demand is driven by affirmative action, wherein organisations with Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs) reserve a percentage of contracts for the First Nations business sector. Hub clients confirmed that IPPPs and RAPs enable participation and growth for First Nations businesses. A few hub clients mentioned that the emergence of IPPPs gave them greater courage and incentive to start their businesses because they felt there were now more opportunities and an increased likelihood of business success.

Several hub partners emphasised that the hubs play an important role in supporting their clients to understand and take advantage of IPPPs. Clients from all hubs described government tender and procurement processes as confusing and discussed how the hubs helped them to navigate IPPP application and contractual processes and articulate their business’s value proposition. One Australian Government stakeholder stated that “being aware of opportunities and understanding how Australian Government buyers work” is essential to successfully accessing procurement opportunities. These stakeholders said that the hubs helped First Nations businesspeople to “articulate their value proposition in a way that an Australian Government buyer will be able to say: ‘yes this is value for money.’” Several clients provided feedback that the procurement support provided by the hubs helped them to win multiple pieces of work.

“IPP has opened a door for many First Nations businesses, but they still need to be competitive to walk through it.”

- Hub staff member

The hubs’ work in educating businesses about IPPPs furthers the achievement of the program outcome that “more First Nations businesses are successful on their own terms”, as it equips businesses with knowledge required to take advantage of the opportunities associated with IPPPs.

The hubs have also supported their government and industry partners to understand how they can better meet their targets, such as by breaking projects into smaller contracts that more First Nations businesses are likely to have the capacity and capability to deliver. They have also supported partners to build their cultural competency and work with First Nations businesses navigating their own procurement processes.

However, some stakeholders reported that the IPPPs are not well understood. One hub reported that the level of understanding about IPPPs is inconsistent; some stakeholders have good awareness of IPPPs but seek the hub’s support on how to best leverage the opportunities presented by them. One state government representative advised that “it’s not used to its full potential on both sides [i.e. by either government buyers or First Nations suppliers]”. Buyers – including those in government – have mixed

⁸³ National Indigenous Australians Agency, “Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP)”, accessed 24 July 2024; Reconciliation Australia, “The Impact of RAPs”, accessed 24 July 2024.

awareness about the policies in place, while some businesses misunderstand how they can benefit from them. Hence, Recommendation 4 calls for the hubs to increase education for hub clients and government partners about opportunities, including IPPPs.

Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of building the capability of First Nations businesses to be competitive without the support of the IPPPs

Multiple stakeholders suggested that although procurement targets enable growth for the First Nations business sector, they are imperfect in driving demand for First Nations businesses and do not provide a single solution to close the gap in First Nations economic participation. Some hub staff and partners reflected that procurement targets are confusing and create perverse outcomes. They were concerned that the IPPPs may be 'artificially' propping up the First Nations business sector and that they may create complacency in terms of innovation. One hub staff member said, "when all these policies go away, infrastructure stops, when it becomes competitive again – what do those businesses do? They've always had a leg up."

As well, the existence of preferential procurement targets can be misleading and set unrealistic expectations among First Nations businesses about the potential for winning large contracts. Some hub clients spoke about their initial misconception that operating a profitable business would be easier than it was, in part because of the recent emergence of IPPPs. One client shared their early experience of business, saying, "I thought coming in as an Indigenous contractor into an industry with hardly any contractors at all would be easier."

Hub staff and partners recognised that preferential procurement from First Nations businesses is necessary in the short term, but they were conscious that there is a role for the hubs to play to support First Nations businesses to be competitive and resilient should procurement policies change in the future. As discussed above in this section, the hubs are supporting their clients to build their capabilities in order to grow their businesses, furthering the program outcome: "the capability and confidence of First Nations business owners is strengthened". Hub staff emphasised that they, "treat [their clients] as a business, not an Aboriginal business", meaning that they worked to ensure that these businesses would be self-sustaining in the long term and competitive regardless of the existence of IPPPs.

The hubs have made progress in increasing their regional outreach, but some practical challenges remain

Research by Evans and Polidano et al. shows that there has been substantial growth in the number of First Nations businesses over the last 10 years. The number of sole traders has grown by an average of 11.3 per cent per year, while partnerships with at least 20 per cent First Nations ownership have grown by 5.8 per cent per year.⁸⁴ The study also found that 56 per cent of First Nations sole traders and 79 per cent of partnerships with at least 20 per cent First Nations ownership operate in rural and remote areas.⁸⁵

Staff from all hubs spoke of increasing demand for their services from regional and remote communities who have a growing interest in developing businesses. Several clients who operate their businesses in regional areas also supported more regional service delivery from the hubs. It is likely that the rapid growth in the number of First Nations businesses across regional Australia would simultaneously generate demand for business support services to be delivered in these areas, explaining the increasing demand experienced by the hubs to service regionally based businesses.

⁸⁴ Evans, M., Polidano, C., Dahmann, S. C., Kalera, Y., Ruiz, M., Moschion, J., Blackman, M. (2024). [Indigenous Business and Corporation Snapshot Study 3.0](#). The University of Melbourne, 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 6.

As discussed in Section 4.1.1, First Nations people based in regional areas experience greater challenges when seeking to access hub services.

All hubs have increased their efforts to service and travel to regional areas, resulting in greater access to business support services for First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs living outside metropolitan areas. These enhanced efforts have been positively received by existing and potential clients in regional and rural areas. Examples of such increased services include:

- Waalitj Hub's recent appointment of three regionally based business support staff in Bunbury, Karratha and Kalgoorlie
- Yarpa's increased presence and a recent workshop based in Wagga Wagga
- The Circle's growing presence and business information session in Port Augusta
- business support staff from Yarpa, The Circle and the NT hub traveling to regional areas periodically to meet communities and existing clients
- the Northern Territory-based hub's expansion to cover the whole Northern Territory region. This includes the establishment of hub offices in Darwin and Alice Springs and planned hub offices in Katherine and Tennant Creek. At times, the NT hub has employed staff in Katherine servicing the surrounding region.

However, staff from all four hubs stated that capacity and resourcing demands constrain their ability to service regional areas to meet the growing demand for business support services from clients based in these areas. One key challenge is the limited time and capacity that business support staff currently have to adequately meet the needs of hub clients in the city and the regions. Many stakeholders also raised that it is important for the hubs to develop local relationships.

Interviewees suggested that the hubs are constrained by their location in major cities when it comes to effectively servicing regionally-based clients. Hub staff suggested that when the hubs offered ongoing, in-person support this appeared to be more effective than business support staff travelling periodically to regional areas. Staff from hubs that are engaging in this 'FIFO' or 'pop-up' approach discussed challenges with sustaining relationships, momentum and continuity of support. One government stakeholder confirmed the value of a permanent regional presence, saying that "from a cultural perspective, we know that there is huge value in having a place to be able to have some of the conversations that [hub clients based close to the hub] have." The hubs should continue to work towards establishing a more permanent regional presence and utilise the 'FIFO' model on a case-by-case basis where it is not feasible to have a permanent presence.

Recommendation 5 details opportunities for increasing the hubs' regional presence through hub and spoke or 'footprint' models. Importantly, the hubs and the NIAA should first seek to identify existing organisations that already have a presence in regional areas to increase the coverage of business support services for First Nations people. This may involve:

- hub staff delivering training in partnership with organisations or people who already have community connections
- hub staff delivering business skills training to existing organisations where there is an identified need, for example as a 'train the trainer' model.

Where there are no existing service providers that the hubs or the NIAA could work with, providing this continuity of support will likely involve employing additional business support staff based in regional areas who can provide a dedicated resource and build stronger, local connections. The hubs should also explore opportunities to collaborate and co-locate with their partners such as Indigenous Business Australia or other community organisations who have existing physical spaces in regional areas.

In choosing which regional areas to expand to, consideration should be given to the number of First Nations people who live and work in those areas, the demand for business support services and the business opportunities in regional areas that could benefit First Nations people, such as large, long-term infrastructure projects.

The hubs are seen by clients as advocates for the First Nations business sector

All four hubs widely promote the strengths and value of First Nations businesses. They do this through a variety of mechanisms such as:

- building relationships across government and industry and initiating conversations to advocate for opportunities for First Nations businesses with government and industry buyers
- holding events that showcase their clients' businesses. These also support clients to sell their products and services
- participating in events held by other partners and stakeholders to raise awareness about their clients' capabilities and innovative work
- marketing initiatives that showcase their clients' businesses, such as NTIBN's Blak Business magazine.

"We advocate for the sector and the value that First Nations business have and bring to the supply chain - both from a social procurement perspective and also just to break down the unconscious bias that does exist [among non-Indigenous buyers]."

Several hub clients also spoke about how showcasing the success of First Nations businesses inspires other First Nations people to go into business because, "you can't be what you can't see." Clients have suggested that advocacy by the hubs supports a sense of pride and confidence in their work and cultural identity.



KEY FINDINGS | 3.1 To what extent have the expected outcomes of the program been achieved?

- The hubs appear to be delivering many of the expected program outcomes
- The hubs have supported their clients to start and grow their business.
- The hubs are supporting and facilitating a sustainable, circular First Nations economy.
- The hubs play an important role in supporting First Nations businesses to realise the potential benefits arising from preferential procurement policies.
- Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of building the capability of First Nations businesses to be competitive without the support of IPPPs.
- The hubs have made progress in increasing their regional outreach, but some practical challenges remain.
- The hubs are seen as advocates for the First Nations business sector and widely promote the strengths and value of First Nations businesses.

4.3.2 To what extent has the hubs program contributed to the Closing the Gap targets?

The hubs program was established in July 2018, pre-dating the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap.⁸⁶ Hence, the hubs program was not designed in line with specific Closing the Gap Priority Reforms or

⁸⁶ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#), July 2020

Targets and Outcomes. However, the program is broadly aligned to the National Agreement as a government initiative that aims to increase the economic participation and empowerment of First Nations people.

The hubs program contributes to some of the Priority Reforms

The Closing the Gap Priority Reforms are a commitment by the Australian Government to change the way that government works with First Nations people and communities.

The four Priority Reforms are:

1. Formal partnerships and shared decision-making.
2. Building the community-controlled sector.
3. Transforming government organisations.
4. Shared access to data and information at a regional level.⁸⁷

New South Wales also has its own state-specific Priority Reform focused on Aboriginal employment, business growth and economic prosperity:

- Closing the Gap Priority Reform Five – Aboriginal economic prosperity, jobs and businesses.⁸⁸

The hubs program plays a role in contributing to some of the Priority Reforms. The NIAA's design and implementation of the hubs program directly contributes to advancing Priority Reforms One and Two. Priority Reform Three is being delivered by the work of hubs themselves (as opposed to the NIAA) to build the cultural competency of their government partners. The evaluation did not find evidence to support that Priority Reform Four was being realised by the hubs program; however, it is not necessarily the role of the hubs program to further all Priority Reforms.

Figure 13 below outlines the extent to which the hubs program contributes to each of the Priority Reforms.

⁸⁷ Closing the Gap, "[Priority Reforms](#)", accessed 3 October 2024

⁸⁸ NSW Government, "[Aboriginal Business Growth](#)", access 12 July 2024.

Figure 13 | Contribution of the hubs program to the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms



The hubs program has enabled increased economic participation among clients and has supported improved outcomes across Closing the Gap targets

Economic empowerment is a critical lever in efforts to close the gap, which refers to reducing disparities between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians across 17 targets and four Priority Reforms. Enabling economic empowerment can lead to multifaceted benefits that contribute to narrowing these gaps. For example:

- Economic empowerment through employment increases First Nations Australians' financial resources, which can lead to improved access to healthcare, nutritious food and better living conditions. These factors contribute to physical wellbeing and can help to reduce the health gap.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Dick, D., and Calma, "Social determinants and the health of Indigenous peoples in Australia – a human rights based approach" (2012), Australian Human Right Commission, accessed 3 October 2024

- The economic empowerment of First Nations Australians improves educational outcomes.⁹⁰ As individuals gain skills that are marketable and valuable, they also enhance their employability, setting in motion a positive cycle of higher income potential and job stability.
- Economic empowerment has a social and cultural dimension by providing opportunities for First Nations Australians to engage in work that promotes connection to culture and community development.⁹¹ This bolsters social cohesion and self-determination, which are essential elements of psychological wellbeing.⁹²

As an initiative under the IBSS, the hubs program was established to contribute to the “social and economic empowerment” of First Nations people through a “flourishing Indigenous business sector”.⁹³ The achievement of First Nations economic empowerment requires collaborative, culturally sensitive approaches that respect and integrate First Nations knowledge and leadership. The program’s alignment to the Priority Reforms – for example, by enabling shared decision making with hub providers, tailored service provision and First Nations leadership – supports the hubs to deliver services in a way that contributes to First Nations economic empowerment. Section 4.2 and Section 4.4 further discuss how the hubs are delivering support in a way that builds clients’ confidence and capabilities.

There is evidence that the hubs have supported First Nations peoples’ increased economic participation and self-determination. This includes by supporting their clients to become self-employed through successful business ownership and inspiring other First Nations people to also develop their own businesses. In particular, the program supports the achievement of Closing the Gap targets 7 and 8:

Target 7 - Youth are engaged in employment or education: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15–24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent.

Target 8 – Strong economic participation and development of people and their communities: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–64 who are employed to 62 per cent.⁹⁴

Nous acknowledges that the amount of evidence gathered on the hubs’ contribution to Closing the Gap targets is limited. This is largely because the hubs do not collect longitudinal economic outcomes data about their clients. This constrains their ability to quantify the impact of their work. This limitation is discussed in detail in Section 4.5 and Recommendation 6. However, the evaluation collected sufficient data through the interviews and surveys to show that the hubs are delivering support that has translated to economic empowerment for hub clients. As discussed in Section 4.3.1, several clients shared that their businesses and confidence have grown because of support from the hubs.

One hub client described their personal journey of being unable to find work and starting their business with the support of their local hub. Through the support of a business coach and networking opportunities hosted by the hub, this hub client started, established and expanded their business within one year. This client has also utilised the hub to connect with and employ First Nations jobseekers, demonstrating how enabling the economic empowerment of one individual can have widespread benefits. Another client described that they had experienced direct outcomes from the hubs’ support, saying:

⁹⁰ Doery, E., Satyen, L., Paradies, Y. et al. Impact of community-based employment on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing, aspirations, and resilience. *BMC Public Health* 24, 497 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-17909-z>

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Tsey K., Whiteside M., Haswell-Elkins M., Bainbridge R., Cadet-James Y., Wilson A. (2010). Empowerment and Indigenous Australian health: A synthesis of findings from family wellbeing formative research. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 18, 169–179.

⁹³ National Indigenous Australians Agency, *The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy*, 2017, p.3 accessed 12 November 2024.

⁹⁴ Closing the Gap, “[Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes](#)”, accessed 12 July 2024.

“The support I have received has been both rewarding and empowering, enabling me to establish my own business and pursue my personal aspirations. The ongoing support from [my business support staff] has been invaluable; they consistently keep me updated with the latest news, events, and information relevant to my business. This continued guidance has opened doors to opportunities for securing contracts with companies and organisations, allowing me to fulfill the primary objectives of my business.”

This quote is a clear example of how the hubs are contributing to directly to the economic empowerment and self-determination of their clients, and contributing to Closing the Gap Target 8.

Several clients also shared evidence of personal experiences that supports existing research⁹⁵ showing that economic empowerment contributes to improvements in wellbeing. For example, one hub client described that the hub’s support enabled them to grow their business: “now I take fee-paying visitors out to connect with and care for Country, and I’m doing what I really love to share knowledge.” This is an example of how running a business can contribute to wellbeing and connection to culture.

The evaluation collected less information about the program’s contribution to Target 7 but did uncover a small amount of evidence to suggest that the program is likely supporting the achievement of this target through supporting business owners to employ other First Nations people. Some clients also described how their businesses have expanded and employed other First Nations people because of the work they have won through networking opportunities organised through the hubs. In some cases, this involved offering paid internships to young First Nations people, indicating that the hubs program is likely supporting Target 7.

Some hub staff and partners also noted that supporting improvements in the economic wellbeing of First Nations people indirectly supports improved outcomes across other Closing the Gap targets. One hub staff member said, “if you have a strong Aboriginal business economy the rest will take care of itself. Because black people take care of black people.” This staff member was referring to the fact that First Nations people place high value on community and First Nations businesses support their communities in various ways. This was reflected in interviews with some hub clients who shared that they feel a sense of responsibility towards their communities. As discussed above, the survey results in Figure 11 reflect that the hubs’ support has resulted in some benefits to clients’ communities.

Overall, the hubs program is being delivered in accordance with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and aligning with some of the Priority Reforms. As a result, the program has demonstrated clear contributions to the increasing the economic empowerment of First Nations businesspeople and the aim of the National Agreement to narrow socioeconomic disparities between First Nations Australians and non-Indigenous people. However, this evaluation was limited in its ability to quantify the extent of the program’s contribution to the National Agreement. There is an opportunity for future research to undertake this analysis. Recommendation 8 discusses how the NIAA can ensure each hub’s governance model maximises opportunities for First Nations leadership and self-determination, in alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.



KEY FINDINGS | 3.2 To what extent has the hubs program contributed to the Closing the Gap targets?

- The hubs program contributes to some of the Priority Reforms. In particular, the hubs staff have some shared decision-making power through flexible KPIs that they have been able to adapt and

⁹⁵ Tsey K., Whiteside M., Haswell-Elkins M., Bainbridge R., Cadet-James Y., Wilson A. (2010). Empowerment and Indigenous Australian health: A synthesis of findings from family wellbeing formative research. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 18, 169–179.

tailor; three hubs are now being delivered by Aboriginal organisations, and the hubs play a role in improving the cultural competency of their government partners.

- The hubs program has supported increased economic participation and empowerment of First Nations people through their businesses; in particular, the program supports the Closing the Gap targets 7 and 8.
- By supporting increased economic participation and employment opportunities for First Nations people, the hubs program is contributing to improved outcomes across other Closing the Gap targets.

4.4 Program Implementation

This section responds to the following Key Evaluation Questions:



4. Program Implementation: Key Evaluation Questions

4.1 What is working well or less well and why?

4.2 What are the enablers/barriers to the effective implementation and delivery of the program?

Recommendations in Section 5 cover the Key Evaluation Question 4.3: What can be done differently to maximise the achievement of any beneficial outcomes and reduce any negative impacts?

4.4.1 What is working well or less well and why?

Many aspects of program delivery are working well

As already described, this evaluation uncovered many ways in which the hubs program is working well, including through:

- playing an important role in connecting First Nations businesses to potential buyers and clients through referrals and networking events, which supports them to grow their businesses
- playing a central role in the First Nations business support services ecosystem and referring their clients to other supports to help them access specific services and navigate the business support environment
- providing free, culturally specific and culturally safe services
- growing their presence in regional areas to expand their support to a wider range of businesses.

Working well: hub staff mostly have a wide range of relevant qualifications and experience to provide valuable business support services to hub clients

The leadership and expertise of hub managers appears to be highly valued by hub staff, clients and partners. The hub managers have a range of qualifications and experience relevant to their work; all have previously operated their own businesses or worked in policy roles that support the First Nations business sector. All hub managers are well respected by their staff, who often spoke about seeking guidance from these individuals when needed to support their work. Hub managers also appear to be engaged in their communities. All hub managers provide direct support to hub clients, sometimes in an ongoing coaching capacity, other times through providing ad hoc advice to augment the support that clients received from business support staff. Several clients in each hub spoke very highly of the hub managers.

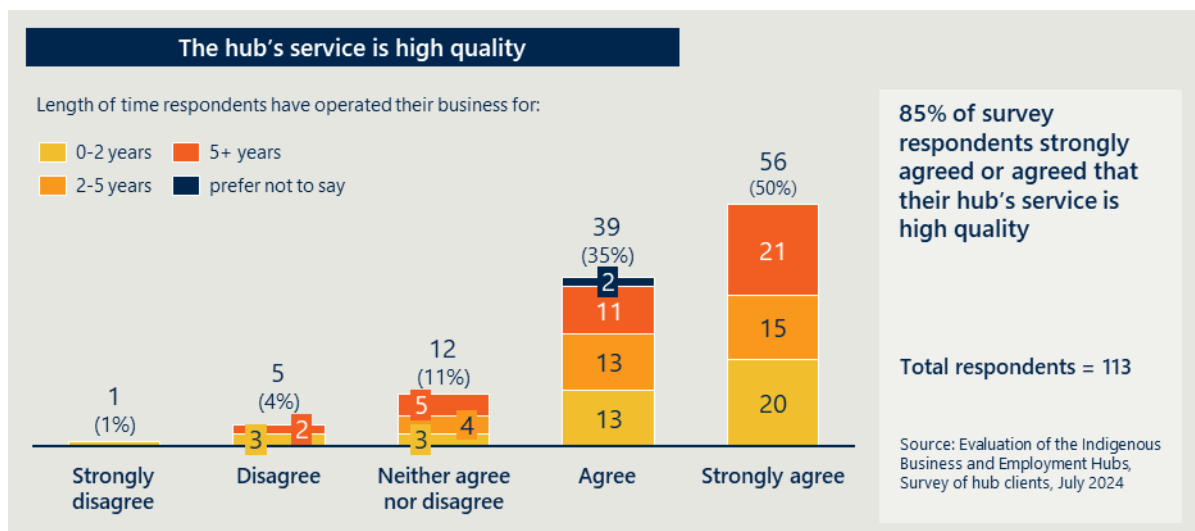
"I think the hub's service really gives you the confidence – it's having those people backing you and supporting you."

- Hub client

Business support staff provide various valuable services to hub clients, in particular foundational support to start-ups. Across the hubs the business support staff have a range of expertise and valuable experience that they can draw on to support their clients. Notably, a number of business support staff across the four hubs have owned or continue to own their own businesses. The hubs' business support staff come from a variety of backgrounds that span previous business coaching roles, insurance, government, corporate leadership, project management, First Nations culture and heritage, industry, marketing and community advocacy.

The evaluation shows that hub clients view business support staff as passionate about their work and generally well-qualified to provide relevant, tailored support. Several clients said that their business support staff member goes "above and beyond" to support them, often calling and working with them after hours if needed. The survey data supported the notion that clients are satisfied with hub services. As shown in Figure 14 below, 85 per cent of survey respondents selected "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statement: *The hub's service is high quality*.

Figure 14 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the statement: The hub's service is high quality



Hub clients at different stages of the business lifecycle again responded similarly to this question, suggesting that a diverse range of First Nations businesses felt they had received high quality support from the hubs. However, a small number of survey respondents and interviewees suggested that some hubs staff do not have the depth of business experience to support clients who have more established businesses.

Some hubs have struggled more than others to hire business support staff with relevant business experience. At one of the hubs, some stakeholders raised concerns that the business support staff do not have the necessary business skills to support businesses to develop. One hub client said, “sometimes I’ve come to [the hub] looking for an expert and I didn’t find it.” One hub partner acknowledged that finding staff members with the necessary business experience, capabilities and cultural competency is a challenge and said, “staff could do with some upskilling [...] but I will say it’s a hard skillset to find”. However, this hub has since made efforts to provide training to their staff to build their business skills and capabilities. Several clients also reported being able to access the help that they needed through the staff at this hub, indicating some success in efforts to build the staff’s capability.

Clients view the skills and passion of hub staff as vital to the success of the hubs program and the First Nations business sector. However, arguably clients should be able to access a consistent minimum quality of support at any hub. Recommendation 2 explores how the hubs can better achieve consistency in the business skills and availability of business support staff across the hubs program by strengthening business support staffs’ capabilities and capacity.

Working well: hub staff understand the cultural complexities of operating a businesses as a First Nations person

A few stakeholders emphasised that in addition to possessing the relevant business acumen and experience, business support staff need to understand the added cultural complexities that affect First Nations businesses as they start out in business. Interviewees suggested that challenges can include a reluctance to talk about one’s achievements, perceived financial responsibility to community, and a sense of being responsible for the reputation of the First Nations business sector as a whole. One senior hub staff member said,

“it’s important to reflect on the impact of tall poppy syndrome and the shame that First Nations Australians face in shouting out their achievements.”

An experienced business owner explained that “there’s so many layers if you’re a First Nations business coach.” This client described community obligations that First Nations businesspeople say affect them: “culture and money start to play massively in these spaces”, and often business owners will have questions such as, “how do I balance this business and play a role in my community, but not give all my money away to my community?” This client suggested that business support staff “need to have an understanding of all these complications in our communities or for us”. Hub clients across all hubs suggested that hub staff do possess this nuanced understanding. When asked what the hub does well, one client said, “service delivery by First Nations people who understand the environment we work and live in.”

These findings suggest that to provide high quality and culturally appropriate services, business support staff should have adequate business skills as well as the relevant cultural awareness to support hub clients with the added complexities they may face as First Nations business owners. This finding is captured in Recommendation 2.

Working well: The hubs’ layouts are foundational for building a sense of First Nations business community

Permanent physical hubs are an important feature of the program that enables the hubs to build a sense of community amongst their clients and differentiates the program from other support services. Firstly, it is foundational to the informal nature of the support service; clients can ‘drop in’ for a chat with staff or each other over a cup of coffee without needing an appointment. One client emphasised that this was important, saying, “First Nations Australians love the idea of wandering in and having a coffee and a chat.” Another client said,

OFFICIAL

"I just get along with these mob – I come and pop in and say hello, have a coffee and a yarn when I'm in the area, and see if there's any other jobs going. I mostly use them now for connecting with other jobs and clients and coming in for a chat."

This echoed the sentiment expressed by many clients, demonstrating that clients value the informal connection offered by the hubs which would not be possible without a physical presence and layout to accommodate this. The cultural safety of the hub layouts discussed in Section 4.2.1 above is also an important factor in clients using the space.

The hub spaces also facilitate community and connection between clients by offering co-working spaces for collaboration and workshops where clients can meet each other and learn. As discussed in Section 4.2.2 above, clients shared that they highly valued the opportunities at workshops to meet other First Nations business owners and the sense of community provided by these events.

Notably, the hub's location and layout is important, but it is not the most crucial aspect of the service for all clients, as many will access the support of their dedicated staff member via phone or video call. Additionally, the hub space is only valuable if the services that clients receive at the hub are helpful. As one client said:

"you can have a beautiful space but if people don't feel welcomed, they won't come back. If you don't have the people who develop connections and relationships and actually care, [clients] won't return to the beautiful space."

These findings show that while the physical hub offices can have a meaningful impact on the experience of some clients, they are just one factor in the successful implementation of the program.

Some elements of the hubs' office layouts and locations are working less well

Clients of all four hubs offered suggestions to improve their hubs' physical space or location. Except for the NT hub's Alice Springs hub site, the hub offices are all located in central business districts in metropolitan areas. There are advantages and drawbacks associated with locating the hubs in these places. Some clients spoke positively about the hubs' locations; others suggested that it would be better if the hubs were located in suburban areas rather than in their current locations. Clients who commented on the drawbacks associated with their hub's location in a city cited the cost of parking and transport as barriers to accessing the hub. However, clients also shared that they see benefits associated with locating the hubs in cities. One interviewee said that they "really like the hubs," and that "travelling to capital cities is easier now because the hubs provide a working space between meetings."

However, clients of other hubs reported that the hubs are not located centrally enough and the time they take in travelling to their hub prevents them from using the hub more often. For example, one hub is located in an area which is far from where most of its clients live and work. One hub staff member reported that "everyone says that it's a beautiful space, but they wish it wasn't in [this area]." This view was repeated by many interviewees who had visited this hub. As a result, unless the hub is hosting events or workshops, they do not receive many drop-in clients because as one hub staff member said, "the accessibility's not here." A client from another hub highlighted that there are benefits and drawbacks associated with locating hub offices outside of major metropolitan areas. This client shared their view that the hub, "is a bit out of town ... But having said that I do like being able to work out of town without the distractions and people walking in and out all the time."

Several clients across all hubs also shared that they wished their hub had a physical presence in more regional areas. This was further highlighted through client interviews where, for example, one client shared they want the hub staff to "visit regional and remote communities where [hub clients] and Indigenous businesses work and live." Another client shared that the "the hubs should be more accessible to regional communities." The hubs' progress and challenges in servicing regional clients is discussed in detail in Section 4.3.1.

The layout of hub offices also has an important influence on how clients respond to hub services. There is inconsistency across the hubs with respect to the appropriateness and functionality of their physical spaces. For example, one hub has experienced challenges associated with its location in a secure building that means the front door is not automatically open for drop-in clients; clients have to be let in by staff. This resulted in one interviewee saying, "it can be somewhat intimidating trying to find your way in, it's not super clearly marked from either end." Other interviewees who are clients of this hub expressed similar views. A few interviewees suggested that building access can have an impact on clients' sense of cultural safety when accessing hub services. A few stakeholders also said that the hub's office space is too small for the number of clients it has. One client said, "I think they have outgrown the physical space of the hub", while a staff member shared that the hub's space "doesn't represent how significant we think the First Nations business sector [is]". Similarly in another hub, a couple of clients and staff members commented that the hub's previous building was more suitable than their current office space, with one staff member suggesting that "the building is not really culturally appropriate for Aboriginal people." This view was held by some hub clients and staff, who viewed the current downstairs location as being less open compared to the previous location.

These findings show that the hubs' spaces have a meaningful impact on their accessibility, clients' sense of cultural safety and their experience in accessing hub services.

There are few key factors of the hubs' layouts that influence how clients experience them. These are:

- **Building access:** Clients have expressed that having easy access to the hub, where they can enter freely, contributes to a welcoming atmosphere.
- **Ease of entry:** Clients suggested that having their hub visible and on the ground floor of a building, reflecting a shopfront, would make the hub more inviting.
- **Building type:** Some clients suggested that they would prefer their hub not to be located in government buildings.
- **Interior:** Clients of all hubs liked the furniture, which features First Nations designs and also the artwork in the hubs, suggesting that these aspects of the hubs' decor supported the cultural safety associated with the hubs and made them feel welcome.

The combination of each hub's location and layout affected how frequently hub clients use the hub office spaces. While it is not possible for the hubs' office spaces to suit the needs of all hub clients, each hub's location and layout can influence clients' experiences. The evaluation identified opportunities for some of the hubs to explore how they can improve the location or layout of their office space. These recommendations have been provided from the evaluation team to individual hubs.



KEY FINDINGS | 4.1 What is working well or less well and why?

- Many aspects of program delivery are working well, including that the hubs are connecting clients to other business support services as well as potential buyers and clients through referrals and networking events. The hubs are delivering free, culturally specific and culturally safe services which are also an important factor for successful implementation, and they are working well to increase their presence in regional areas and to expand their support to a wider range of businesses.
- The hubs are delivering services that clients consider to be high quality.
- Most hub staff are passionate about their work, have a range of skills and experience relevant to their roles and provide a range of valuable services to hub clients.

- The hubs' physical locations and layout have a significant impact on how hub clients experience hub services, including supporting clients' cultural safety.
- Respondents had mixed views and preferences with respect to the hubs' locations, specifically regarding whether the hubs should be located in cities or regional areas.

4.4.2 What are the enablers/barriers to the effective implementation and delivery of the program?

Enabler: Collaboration with other service providers supports the hubs to ensure they are not duplicating service offerings

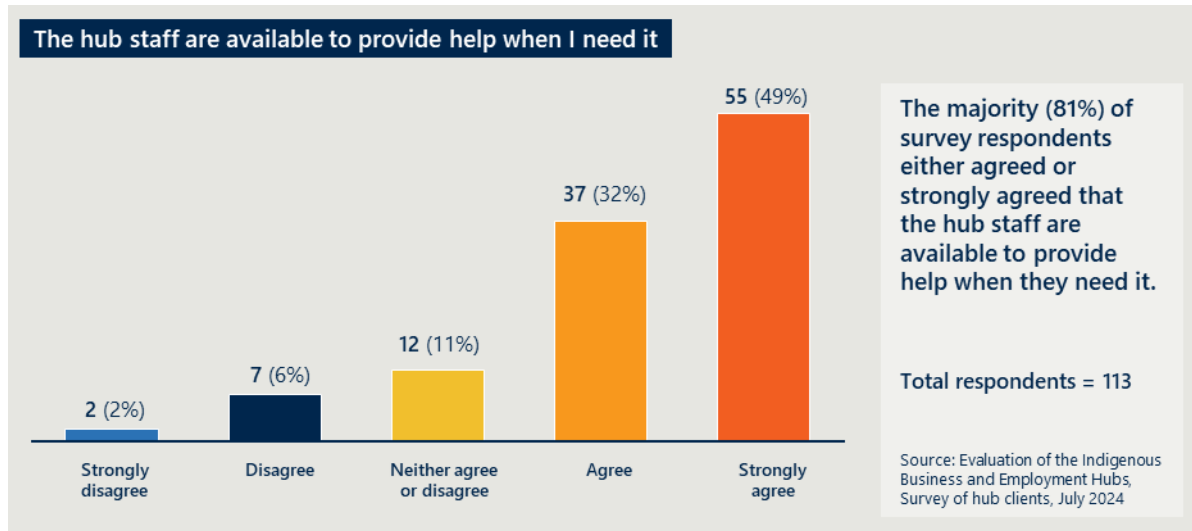
The hubs participate in ongoing communication and collaboration with other service providers to understand how they can support First Nations businesspeople to access a more comprehensive service offering. The hubs meet regularly with other organisations that support First Nations businesses, such as Many Rivers, Supply Nation and First Australians Capital, to ensure there is clarity over each organisation's role and service offering and identify where duplication and gaps may be. For example, The Circle recently met with UniSA, Supply Nation, Indigenous Business Australia, First Australians Capital, Many Rivers, SA Tourism Commission, AusIndustry, the Office for Small and Family Business and the Office of the Industry Advocate in a facilitated discussion to map out the business support ecosystem and the services each organisation offers. One hub partner highlighted the value of this collaboration by explaining the importance of ensuring that "the grey area between two entities is not a communication gap and there's warm handovers so businesses aren't falling through the cracks." At the Waalitj Hub, a representative from a commercial bank visits the hub once a month to provide access to banking services for hub clients. Supply Nation also have a partnership with Waalitj Hub and use their workspace to connect regularly with clients. These are practical examples of how the hubs are working with partners in the ecosystem to coordinate services.

Senior hub staff members discussed how understanding the work of other service providers was needed to define the role their hub should play in the business support space. Staff from all hubs emphasised they do not want to duplicate work that is already being done by others, but instead seek to add value by meeting needs that are not currently being served by other organisations. One hub staff member said, "duplicating services is pointless ... we want to value add and be doing something worthwhile that nobody else is doing." It appears that the hubs' efforts to collaborate with and understand the work of other service providers not only allows them to more seamlessly refer their clients across the ecosystem (discussed in Section 4.1.3), but also allows them to target their resources towards gaps in support.

Barrier: All hubs reported that resourcing is a challenge

The four hubs have different levels of funding, staffing levels and client numbers. However, staff from all hubs consistently reported that resource limitations constrain their ability to service First Nations businesses to the extent that they would like to. Staff from some hubs said that resource constraints limit their ability to provide time-intensive dedicated mentoring services to clients. They reported that they refer clients to external support services for supports the hub does have the capability to provide, such as for the development of business plans, but does not have the time to support. Some hub clients also said that they had observed that business support staff are very busy, and they had mixed views about staffs' capacity to provide support. In the survey 81 per cent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that hub staff are available to provide help when they need it; but 10 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Figure 15 below).

Figure 15 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The hub staff are available to provide help when I need it



Resourcing and staff capacity is a challenge for all hubs, but especially for The Circle, which has received less funding than the other three hubs. Resource constraints are compounded by the fact that The Circle’s membership has grown more quickly than expected – it was originally established as a Project Hub but now delivers the range of supports expected of the hubs. As one hub partner said, “one of the barriers is that we are growing Aboriginal businesses [in South Australia] at a rate that is moving faster than The Circle is able to sustain with their staff and resources.” ABS Census data indicates a ~54.5% increase in the number of First Nations owner managers in South Australia between 2016 and 2021.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, The Circle’s client numbers almost tripled (an increase of 191 per cent) between 2023 and 2024.⁹⁷

As outlined in Recommendation 1, the NIAA should ensure that there is equitable funding across all hubs and that each hub’s funding levels are sustainable and relative to the size, diversity and needs of their client base.

Barrier: Hub staff view the short duration of funding cycles as a barrier to strategic planning, staff recruitment and retention

Staff from all hubs reported that the hubs program’s short funding cycles (typically between one and three years) make it difficult to undertake long-term strategic planning. Hub staff described uncertainties in relation to future funding levels. At times hub staff are working without knowing whether their hub would even be in operation in six months. These uncertainties mean that detailed long-term planning is not possible or is undermined by too many unknowns to be productive.

Additionally, short-term funding cycles have adverse effects on staffing. Some hub managers noted that finding First Nations staff with the right skillset to be business support staff is difficult. This is compounded by the fact that the hubs can only offer short-term contracts to their staff. Experienced First Nations businesspeople have many career options, and short-term contracts are not attractive. Additionally, short-term contracts create retention challenges, as talented staff who may be concerned about the continuation of the program will look elsewhere for work.

Recommendation 1 explores opportunities for the NIAA to assure continuity of the program through sustainable, longer-term funding commitments. Longer-term funding would enable employment of hub staff under longer-term contracts, and it would support staff recruitment and retention by increasing

⁹⁶ NIAA analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2022), 2021 Census of Population and Housing, [Census Table Builder].

⁹⁷ Nous analysis of The Circle’s hub client numbers, 2024.

certainty. It would also support the hubs' sustainability, growth and future preparedness to meet the needs of a maturing First Nations business sector.

There is also a role for the hubs to play in exploring ways to diversify their revenue streams so that they are less vulnerable to government funding cycles. Diversified income sources could include co-funding arrangements with state and territory governments as well as philanthropic and private sectors, or fee-for-service arrangements with industry partners who benefit from the hubs' connections to First Nations businesses.

All hubs have unique operating models and governance structures, which creates differences in relationship dynamics and perceptions among communities in which they work

The hubs' operating models can be either an enabler or barrier in different contexts. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits the Australian Government to support governance arrangements that deliver greater community control and empowerment for First Nations people:

Priority Reform One seeks to empower First Nations people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress on Closing the Gap through formal partnership arrangements.⁹⁸

Priority Reform Two commits the government to increase the amount of government funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services going through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations.⁹⁹

Section 4.3.2 above also discusses how the hubs program is contributing to the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and shows there are opportunities for NIAA to strengthen shared decision-making and community control through the governance of the hubs program.

As discussed in Section 4.2.1 above, the hubs have different governance models with varied levels of First Nations leadership and representation across their authorising structures. Some hubs are challenged by operating under these models, while others experience external criticism as a result of their governance or reporting arrangements. For example, one hub has received some criticism on the basis that it is not First Nations-owned (see Section 4.2.1). However, as discussed, the majority of clients interviewed for the evaluation that use this hub reported that this hub's governance structure does not prevent it from meeting their needs and providing culturally safe services.

Some stakeholders reported challenges associated with the fact that the hubs are government funded. Some, for example, described delays relating to slow approvals for new initiatives through their provider or the NIAA. One hub staff member suggested that they need to go through "several levels of approval" to undertake certain initiatives and said that there is "so much red tape".

Additionally, a small number of hub partners and clients interviewed perceived that their hub provider does not have the profile or voice that would enable the hub to play the advocacy role that they would like to see for the First Nations business sector. Some interviewees suggested that the hub's governance arrangements undermine its ability to advocate for itself and the sector, with one partner stating that the hub's governance arrangements are "keeping them stuck in their current space, size". Another hub partner said, "They do feel here that it's really hard to get a seat at the table [with government] ... I know they felt like they weren't being heard by anyone in government."

⁹⁸ Closing the Gap, "[Priority Reforms](#)", accessed 3 October 2024

⁹⁹ Ibid.

As discussed in Section 4.1.2, the evaluation found that the hubs' contracts allow for flexibility and enable the hubs to have a reasonable level of autonomy in delivering their services to meet the needs of their clients. However, these findings suggest that the governance models of some hubs are not maximising autonomy or self-determination for hub leadership, and this can result in some inefficiencies or constraints on the hubs' effectiveness. At the same time, a few interviewees felt that connection to government was an enabling factor for the hub, suggesting that it gave the hub credibility and enhanced trust for clients sharing information about their business as "they know [the hub staff] will keep things confidential [...and are] bound so there is a sense of confidence in that."

Although no single governance structure will meet the ideals of all stakeholders, there are further opportunities to ensure the governance model of each hub is appropriate for the community in which it operates, as explored in Recommendation 8.



KEY FINDINGS | 4.2 What are the enablers/barriers to the effective implementation and delivery of the program?

- Enabler: Effective collaboration with other service providers enables the hubs to avoid duplicating services and enhances support for First Nations businesses.
- Barrier: All hubs reported that resourcing is a challenge.
- Barrier: Hub staff view the short duration of funding cycles as a barrier to strategic planning, staff recruitment and retention.
- The hubs have different governance models and each hub delivers services through different providers. Some hubs are challenged by these models, while others experience external criticism as a result of their ownership or reporting structures. Perceptions about the hubs' links to government could be viewed as a barrier in preventing the hubs from advocating for the First Nations business sector to government. It is also potentially an enabler in giving the hubs a level of credibility – clients trust that the hubs will respect the confidentiality of their' business information.

4.5 Achievement of value for money

The hubs program constitutes a total committed investment by the Australian Government of \$54.3 million between 1 July 2018 and 1 January 2026. For the purposes of this value for money analysis, we have focused on the government's investment to date: between July 2018 and November 2024, the Australian Government provided \$45.9 million. As of November 2024, 1,931 clients have accessed support from the hubs program – an average investment of \$23,800 per client. Note that this figure is not an annual cost per year but indicates the average *total* investment per client since the commencement of the hubs program. Because the average cost per client to date includes the fixed costs of establishing the hubs, the growth in client numbers, which averaged 46 per cent per year between 2020 and 2024, has contributed to a downwards trend in the average cost per client. This suggests that the hubs program is delivering increasing value over time as the fixed costs are spread over more clients.

A notable limitation of this calculation is that it only takes into account the number of clients who have directly received services from the hubs. It does not reflect the broader contribution of the hubs to the First Nations business sector, or the work that they do apart from directly supporting individual clients. Further limitations of the value for money analysis are detailed below.

The evaluation found that the hubs program delivers benefits to a range of stakeholders through providing needed support to the First Nations business sector and through its contribution to the achievement of

Closing the Gap targets. In the short term, there are opportunities to deliver the program more efficiently. In the long term, the program should explore opportunities for greater financial sustainability, and it will need to evolve alongside the growth of the First Nations business sector. The program delivers value from the perspective of hub clients by providing free, culturally safe services that meet the needs of First Nations business owners.

This section explores the hub program’s value through two lenses:



5. Achievement of value for money: Key Evaluation Questions

5.1 Is the hubs program on track to support the achievement of value for money, i.e., is the program economical, efficient, effective, equitable and ethical?

5.2 Is the program providing value for money from the point of view of hub clients?

4.5.1 Is the hubs program on track to support the achievement of value for money, i.e., is the program economical, efficient, effective, equitable and ethical?¹⁰⁰

This section provides program-level insights related to the cost of the program and the five elements of value for money set out in the Key Evaluation Questions: economical, efficient, effective, equitable and ethical.¹⁰¹ These are considered the key elements for evaluators to analyse when assessing whether an investment provides good value.¹⁰²

ELEMENTS OF VALUE FOR MONEY

- **Economical:** The inputs to the program have been acquired at the least cost for the required level of quality.¹⁰³
- **Efficient:** The value of program outputs is maximised in relation to the total cost of program inputs.¹⁰⁴
- **Effective:** Program outcomes are achieved at the least cost for the required level of quality.¹⁰⁵
- **Equitable:** Program benefits are distributed equitably; for example, no type of business is disadvantaged in accessing or benefiting from the service.¹⁰⁶
- **Ethical:** Program delivery, services and outcomes are ethical; for example, services are delivered fairly and without the presence of bias.

The hubs program inputs include a committed investment totalling \$54.3 million (GST inc.) between July 2018 and January 2026. To date, \$45.9 million has been provided to the hubs (between July 2018 and

¹⁰⁰ Australian Institute of Family Studies, [‘Evaluation and Value for Money’](#), 2017, accessed 12 October 2023.

¹⁰¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, [‘Evaluation and Value for Money’](#), 2017, accessed 2 July 2024.

¹⁰² Australian Institute of Family Studies, [‘Evaluation and Value for Money’](#), 2017, accessed 2 July 2024; Department of Finance, [‘Value for Money’](#), accessed 13 August 2024; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [‘Value for Money principles’](#), accessed 13 August 2024.

¹⁰³ Australian Institute of Family Studies, [‘Evaluation and Value for Money’](#), 2017, accessed 12 October 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Australian Institute of Family Studies, [‘Evaluation and Value for Money’](#), 2017, accessed 12 October 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

November 2024). This has supported the establishment of four hubs in Perth, Western Sydney, Adelaide and the Northern Territory (where there are physical spaces in Darwin and Alice Springs).

At the time of the evaluation, there were 40 staff members employed across the four hubs, with 78 per cent of staff identifying as First Nations.

The hubs are delivering on most of the expected outputs and contributing to many intended outcomes of the program

The evaluation collected qualitative data which indicates that the hubs are furthering many of the program outcomes defined by the program logic model. As explored in detail in Section 4.3 above, the hubs are delivering:

- culturally appropriate business support services, tailored to the needs of the combined 1,931 hub clients who have received support up to November 2024¹⁰⁷
- access to business support for First Nations people in some regional areas
- access to an office space and use of office facilities, which has facilitated connections between First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs
- supports that facilitate collaboration and relationship-building between First Nations businesses
- capability-building support that has helped First Nations business owners to acquire new skills and confidence
- connection to buyers, which has resulted in hub clients being awarded contracts.

There is no quantitative data available to measure program outcomes.

The hubs program has operated at an average total cost per client to date of \$23,800

The hubs program has received \$45.9 million in funding over 6.3 years, constituting an average investment of \$7.3 million per year. This has supported a total of 1,931 clients across the four hubs, being an average cost per client to date of \$23,800 (total funding divided by total clients served). More detail on the methodology of the value for money analysis is on page 81.

Across the four hubs, the average cost per client ranges from \$14,400 to \$63,000. This variation is explained by differences in both the funding provided and the number of clients in each hub. While this variation may indicate some difference in efficiency between the hubs, the number of clients served to date also reflects the hub's stage of establishment, the size of the First Nations business sector in each jurisdiction, the cost to provide services in each region and the level of service provision. Importantly, the trend analysis of costs over time (discussed below) shows that hubs deliver less value for money initially during their set-up and early implementation phases; as a result, the cost per client is higher in the first years of operation and reduces over time. The \$63,000 per client figure is an outlier that reflects the costs of a newer hub. Based on the trend analysis below, it is expected that this average cost will also reduce over time.

It is also important to note that the average cost per client figure reflects the average cost of supporting one hub client over the duration that they receive support from the hub; it is not a cost per year. This would have required detailed data on the number of clients actively serviced each year, which was not available to the evaluation team.

Importantly, the benefits realised by the hubs program are not isolated to the 1,931 clients who have received support from the hubs. The social return on investment of First Nations businesses is high: research by Supply Nation suggests that every \$1 of revenue generated by a First Nations business owner delivers an

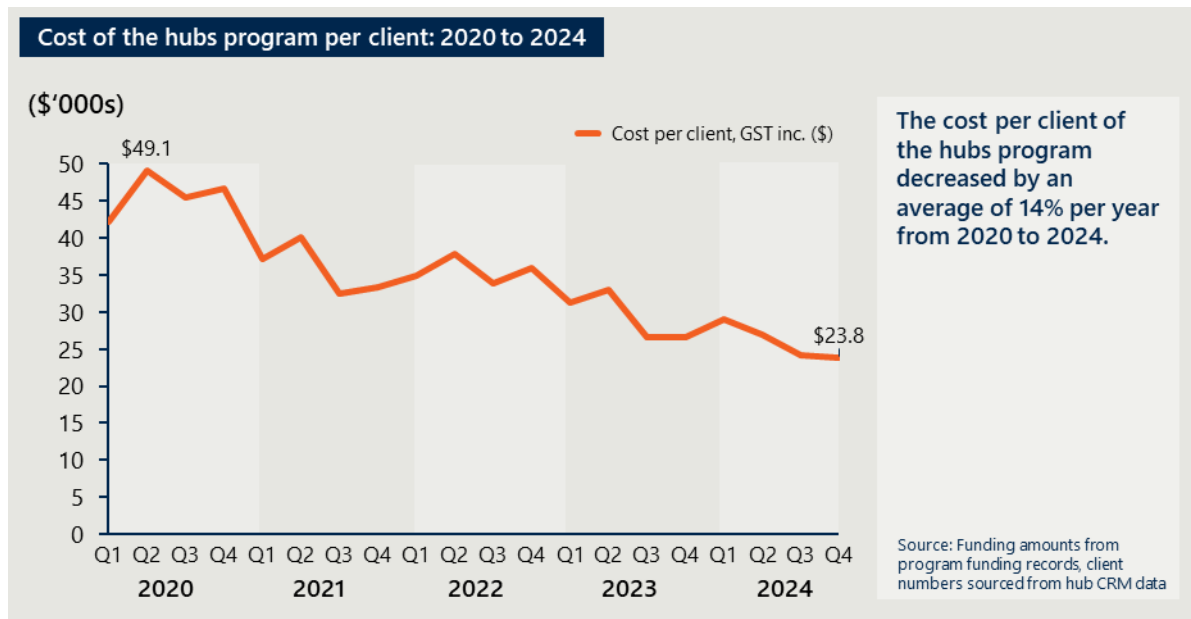
¹⁰⁷ This number reflects the total number of hub clients who have received support from a hub since the commencement of the program. It does not reflect the number of hub clients currently seeking services from the hub.

average social return of \$4.41.¹⁰⁸ This is because many First Nations business owners employ other First Nations people, re-invest in their children’s education, and act as role models for their communities, thereby creating significant wide-reaching benefits through their businesses.¹⁰⁹ As discussed throughout the report, the work of all hubs has supported many of their clients to start and grow their businesses, and several clients reported additional non-economic benefits as a result of being able to pursue their business goals.

The hubs program is delivering greater value on a per client basis as the program grows

The cost per client to deliver the hubs program is decreasing over time. This is primarily attributable to the increasing client numbers that the hubs service (see Figure 16), which shows that the cost per client reduced by an average of 14 per cent per year to date.¹¹⁰

Figure 16 | Cost per client over time (cumulative total funding divided by cumulative total clients served)



The trend shown above is not unexpected; it reflects the early establishment costs and smaller client numbers during the hubs’ start-up phase. Some hubs received larger funding injections in the initial years of establishment to support the associated set-up costs. This trend is also largely a result of the growth of the total program’s client base year on year, which has increased by an average of 46 per cent per year. The peaks in the trend line reflect discrete funding allocations to existing hubs and in some cases the establishment of a new hub. Although the addition of new hubs temporarily caused a rise in total average cumulative per-client costs, the efficiency of the program as a whole still increased over time as all hubs grew their client numbers.

This downwards trend may also be attributable in part to productivity gains that the hubs are realising as a result of becoming more mature. For example, the hubs are now capturing better data about their clients through their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems which they established a couple of years into operation. This allows them to capture consistent data about hub clients and deliver tailored services, for example workshops related to common queries. The hubs’ CRMs also reduce administrative overhead costs which would lower costs on a per client basis.

¹⁰⁸ Supply Nation, *The Sleeping Giant: A Social Return on Investment Report on Supply Nation Certified Suppliers* 3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Note that most hubs established their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems and data collection processes a couple of years into their operations, so numbers on client data were only available from 2020 to 2024 and were only available from the second or third year of each hub’s operation.

The hubs program model is resource intensive, but is a worthwhile investment in supporting the First Nations business sector and contributing to Closing the Gap

The hubs program model is resource intensive; it operates largely through a one-on-one support model and requires frequent travel for a number of staff members at each hub. However, it likely has other wide-reaching social benefits which come from supporting the economic wellbeing of First Nations businesses and people.¹¹¹ Further, it is an investment that targets a group that has been historically disadvantaged and has had reduced access to business ownership.¹¹² As discussed in Section 4.3.2 above, it is also an important initiative for furthering the Australian Government's commitment to Closing the Gap.¹¹³

Of note, the hubs operate within a broader ecosystem of business support, with their clients often accessing multiple business support services. In this context, it would be very complex and likely misleading to attempt to isolate, accurately measure and attribute specific financial growth to the hubs alone.

The evaluation found that the hubs program is playing an important role in providing needed support for First Nations business and filling a gap in the support ecosystem. On balance, it is a significant but worthwhile investment and should continue to be funded as a key initiative in the Australian Government's commitment to supporting the growth of the First Nations business sector.

The hubs program will need to evolve to become more sustainable over time

As discussed, the hubs program realises value through its 'hands-on' approach, particularly for businesses early on in their journey, which suits the nature of the growing First Nations business sector. It is likely that the needs of hub clients and the nature of the support they require will change as:

- they move through the business lifecycle and require other supports associated with their expansion, change of business ownership, or closure
- the operating environment in which First Nations businesses work changes. This could include shifts to market access across domestic, state and territory and international borders; changing access to the First Nations talent pool from which businesses recruit employees; and growth in the First Nations business sector which may increase the potential for collaboration among businesses.

As the needs of hub clients change in response to these changes and challenges, the supports provided by the hubs should evolve to meet these needs. (See Recommendation 3).

Sustainability of the program model is an ongoing concern for the hubs' leadership teams to consider. In particular, one senior hub staff member reported that the funding model is an important issue and suggested that investment in the hub should be diversified beyond just the Australian Government. They said, "We could probably do more if we had more funding ... that's where we could definitely get some more corporate support. It doesn't have to be government funding; we know it's a shared responsibility."

More broadly, several stakeholders commented on the sustainability of the First Nations business sector as a whole, with reference to Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies. Several hub staff thought that the hubs should aim to ensure that the sector itself is sustainable without significant government support (see Section 4.3.1). Given the substantial benefits of the program, the NIAA and hubs should consider how the hubs program can be made more sustainable in the long term. This could be realised through cost savings, expanding the funding base or other ways to increase revenue. This is explored further in Recommendation 1.

¹¹¹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, "[Growing the Indigenous Business Sector](#)", accessed 24 July 2024.

¹¹² National Indigenous Australians Agency, [The Indigenous Business Sector Strategy](#), 2017, p.3 accessed 15 August 2024.

¹¹³ Ibid., p.4

Some costs may not be the most effective use of program funding

Interview findings suggest that there are some elements of the hubs' required expenditure that may not be maximising value for money. KPIs in the hubs' contracts encourage hubs to undertake activities that may not be the most effective means of delivering outcomes. For example, some of the hubs reported delivering workshops in order to meet KPI requirements that resulted in low attendance levels. One hub noted that they went to great lengths to organise an event in a regional area and had no participants attend.

Staff from some hubs also commented that they could use the funds spent on their hub office's high rental costs for more appropriate options, such as smaller spaces in more convenient locations, or larger spaces outside the city. In these cases, the costs associated with the hubs' physical spaces may not represent the most effective use of funds, as their location or layout means they are not conducive to being frequently used by many clients. This is detailed in Section 4.4.1.

The establishment of successive hubs did not fully leverage opportunities for cost savings

The NIAA established each individual hub in the program one at a time over five years, and awarded hub contracts to different, local providers. Newer hubs were established based on learnings from previous hubs. For example, the increased regional focus of the NT hub was in part a result of feedback the NIAA received from the established hubs noting challenges they experienced in servicing regionally-based clients.

The NIAA has sought to foster collaboration between the hubs. However, there has been limited communication or interaction between the hubs to date. Although the program design intended that the hubs would evolve to their unique operating environments, newer hubs made limited use of the work and learnings developed by earlier established hubs. The hubs are now working predominantly in a siloed way and do not actively collaborate to support Indigenous businesses who may seek to move interstate or expand into interstate or national domestic markets.

Exemplifying the siloed approach, all of the hubs have developed their own resources and frameworks for initial meetings with new clients. Across the hubs these are referred to as 'business canvassing', flow charts, business profiles and capability statements. All of these tools provide clients with a similar diagnostic service that helps them to understand their strengths and how the hub can help them, clarify their business idea, and communicate their capability. The Waalitj Hub and the NT hub were also set up within existing organisations that had pre-established processes and systems, which limited the ability to standardise these across the program. However, this has meant that the hubs have duplicated efforts in developing similar resources.

Going forward, there are opportunities to realise efficiencies at the hub and program levels through greater collaboration between hubs to leverage existing processes and materials. A more coordinated approach would support the hubs to provide clients with a consistent, baseline level of support no matter which hub they access. It would also enable clients to access seamless support when expanding nationally or across regional markets. A programmatic approach should involve creating a standardised set of criteria for launching new hubs and an implementation plan to support their rollout, as well as better leveraging learnings and resources from existing hubs (see Recommendation 7).

Additionally, the hubs are not maximising the full potential for collaboration across the business support ecosystem. There are opportunities for the hubs and the NIAA to collaborate further with service providers, government organisations, industry networks and clients to operate in a coordinated manner and take full advantage of the hubs' unique strengths as well as minimise overlap and service duplication. For example, the First Nations tourism market has several Australian Government-led initiatives in place to increase tourism exports, but there appears to be limited interaction between the hubs and related stakeholders to take advantage of these opportunities. Collaboration across levels of government could help to identify gaps and duplication in service offerings and establish a consistent understanding of available services. Reducing these deficiencies and duplications would support the cohesion of the First Nations business

support ecosystem and give First Nations business owners a more streamlined experience in accessing support (see Recommendation 9.1).

There is some inconsistency in the level of service provided to hub clients across the four hubs

The hubs differ in their operating environments and have varied:

- funding levels
- client numbers
- staffing levels, makeup and skillsets
- levels of organisational maturity.

The hubs program was designed to allow the hubs to evolve and tailor services to their local context. However, these differences mean that the quality and nature of the service provided to clients varies between the hubs. The evaluation team found it difficult to quantify business support staffs' active client caseloads, noting that the level of support each 'active client' requires will fluctuate and differ between individuals. When asked, many business support staff were also unable to give the evaluation team an exact number of the clients they support, likely because a hub client's transition from an 'active' client to an 'inactive' client is hard to clearly define. Business support staff in each hub reported differing estimates of the number of active clients that they support, ranging from ten per staff member to up to 100 for one particular business support staff member. Notably, these numbers reflect different levels of support, which is also determined by the needs of clients. Some staff members will speak to each of their clients on a weekly or fortnightly basis, others consider active clients as those they connect with every few months and for whom they play more of a referral role as opposed to providing high-touch, one-on-one support.

As discussed in Section 4.4.1, the business experience and expertise of business support staff also differs across hubs, and the hubs have varying numbers of administrative and back-end staff. This can affect the level of expertise that hub clients have access to, as well as the time that business support staff can spend with individual clients.

The variability of hubs' key performance indicators may also be a driving factor in their divergent service delivery. For example, one hub is required to provide "12 Business Development Support meetings per month with prospective, new and existing members,"¹¹⁴ while another must provide intensive services (of eight hours or more) to a minimum of 20 clients per quarter, and non-intensive services to a minimum of 20 clients per quarter.¹¹⁵

Site visits and interviews with stakeholders highlighted that because of these differences and funding commitments there are some differences in the quality and timeliness of services provided to clients across hub sites. These differences in funding and hub setup means that the hubs program is not currently delivering equitable access across all hub sites.

Hub staff are working to deliver increasingly equitable services to all First Nations entrepreneurs and business owners

All hubs are trying to provide an equitable service to hub clients, irrespective of their location or stage of business development. However, as discussed in Section 4.3.1, the hubs are not servicing regionally-based business owners to the same level as those based closer to hub offices. The hubs are increasing their efforts

¹¹⁴ Hub provider contract with the NIAA.

¹¹⁵ Hub provider contract with the NIAA.

but face resource constraints in their ability to provide services to business owners and entrepreneurs based in rural, regional and remote locations.

The hubs provide highly tailored and complementary services to new businesses, while clients with more mature businesses appear to benefit most from networking opportunities provided through events hosted by the hubs. As such, the hubs' value is realised differently by clients depending on the size and stage of their business, but this does not necessarily mean services provided are inequitable. As more of their clients' businesses and corresponding needs mature, the hubs will need to adapt to deliver services to more established businesses who face challenges such as supply chain management or expansion into international markets that smaller businesses do not (see Recommendation 3).

Hub clients suggested that the hubs are delivering services ethically

The evaluation also sought to understand whether the program's delivery and outcomes can be considered ethical. The evaluation team agreed with the NIAA to consider whether the program was ethical according to the following definition: *"Program delivery, services and outcomes are ethical; for example, services are delivered fairly and without the presence of bias."* The hubs appear to be delivering their services in line with these principles, in an ethical and fair way. However, this observation is based on the interviews and survey results from clients who opted in to contribute to the evaluation and were often referred to the evaluation team by the hubs. As detailed in the methodology, there are potential data limitations associated with selection bias, although the evaluation team took steps to mitigate this. These steps included ensuring that interviews were conducted in a safe way so that clients felt comfortable sharing their honest reflections about the hubs program.

Several clients during their interviews emphasised that the services provided by the hub staff were delivered in a respectful manner. One client said that the staff were "willing to share, be challenged, [and] have respectful conversations." Another client said that their hub "has politely and respectfully made some really good connections and suggestions." One staff member said that the service their hub provides includes "treating everyone with the respect and humility that they deserve."

There were some community stakeholders who expressed opposition to individual hubs' non-Indigenous governance structures but, as discussed above in Section 4.4.2, most clients did not feel that this prevented the hubs from providing culturally safe and beneficial support. One client even described that their hub's "independence" – non-alignment with any particular Traditional Owner group – is what makes it unique and "fairer" than other First Nations-specific services.

Acknowledging that there is potential for selection bias in evaluation respondents, it appears that the hubs' services are being offered ethically in that services are focused on the needs of clients and how the hubs can benefit them. This appears to be the view of the vast majority of hub clients and partners that participated in this evaluation. As well, hub staff expressed genuine passion, sense of purpose and a desire to make a positive impact on First Nations businesses. The staff's dedication to working in their clients' interests, ensuring their needs are met and the service is delivered respectfully, appears to provide a foundation for ethical service delivery.

Methodology of the value for money analysis

The evaluation team assessed value for money by analysing information from hub contracts, performance data from individual performance reports, and survey and interview data collected for this evaluation.

The evaluation analysed funding data and hub client numbers across the life of the program to date, to understand the average cost of the program per year, the average cost per client, and any trends over time. The average cost per client was calculated using the below formula:

$$\text{cost per client (\$)} = \frac{\text{total program funding}}{\text{total number of clients serviced}}$$

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$$\begin{aligned} &= \frac{\$45,870,622}{1931} \\ &= \$23,754 \end{aligned}$$

It is important to note that this assessment is not an audit, cost-benefit analysis or return on investment analysis. This means that the analysis did not include calculating the benefits from the hubs' services against the costs of each activity, as this data is not available. Consequently, the evaluation assesses the program's value for money but it does not delve into the granular financial details of individual service delivery outputs.

Our methodology drew on the program logic model (see Appendix B.1.3) to consider the known inputs and, to an extent, how these inputs are used to drive activities, generate outputs and achieve short-term outcomes. In addition, in considering the hubs program's value for money, the evaluation team was cognisant of existing research which suggests that First Nations people define 'program success' differently to non-Indigenous Australians and policy-makers.¹¹⁶ This section explores the hubs program first through the lens of a mainstream, capitalist concept of value for money, as defined by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.¹¹⁷ It then considers whether the hubs program provides value for money from the perspectives of hub clients, understanding that success includes non-financial factors more often for First Nations people than for non-Indigenous Australians.¹¹⁸

Limitations of the value for money analysis

While the evaluation provides some insight into the cost breakdown of the program, this is a high-level analysis which requires the below caveats:

- **The average cost per client reflects the total program cost.** It was not possible to isolate the fixed costs of the program – e.g., the cost to establish and set up each hub, from the ongoing delivery costs of servicing each client; this data was not available to the evaluation team. Therefore, hubs with a higher set-up costs or smaller client bases will have a higher average cost per client.
- **The cost per client for each hub should not be used as a simplistic measure of efficiency.** This is because this figure likely reflects a range of other factors, such as the maturity of each hub provider, the number of First Nations businesses in the region and the level of support offered to each client. For example, although one hub may be delivering services at a higher per-client cost, they may be delivering more hands-on, intensive support relative to other hubs. This means the cost per client for delivery at each hub cannot be compared against each other.
- **This evaluation primarily considered value for money across the overall program** rather than evaluating individual hubs or comparing them to each other, as this was the agreed scope. While the insights and findings presented below are relevant across the hubs program, the evaluation recognises that the program is not homogenous; the hubs are delivered across four jurisdictions by four different providers. This complicates the assessment of program-wide value, as the hubs are at varying stages of maturity and have each tailored their services to local needs.
- **It is not possible to meaningfully compare the hubs program to other services that support First Nations businesses.** There are a range of other services that provide similar support to First Nations businesses; however, there are also many differences in these models when compared with the hubs

¹¹⁶ Cargo, M, Potaka-Osborne, G, Cvitanovic, L, Warner, L, Clarke, S, Judd, J, Chakraborty, A & Boulton, A 2019, 'Strategies to support culturally safe health and wellbeing evaluations in Indigenous settings in Australia and New Zealand: a concept mapping study', *International Journal for Equity in Health*, Vol. 18, No. 194, p.2

¹¹⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies, '[Evaluation and Value for Money](#)', 2017, accessed 24 July 2024

¹¹⁸ Weaven, S, Frazer, L, Brimble, M, Bodle, K, Roussety, M & Thaichon, P, 'Encouraging Indigenous Self Employment in Franchising' in Ratten, V, Jones, P, Braga, V & Marques, C. S 2019, *Subsistence Entrepreneurship: The Interplay of Collaborative Innovation, Sustainability and Social Goals*, Springer, Cham, pp.79

program. These differences include coverage across jurisdictions, the level of support provided, regional service provision and the physical presence of the hub. Section 4.1.3 details the unique combination of characteristics that make the hubs program a valuable addition to the First Nations business support ecosystem. As a result of the program’s unique model, we cannot directly compare other services to the hubs program, and any meaningful comparison with another service would require a detailed cost analysis of similar activities or outputs. This data is not available for the hubs program or other services.

- Hub key performance indicators (KPIs) are heavily output focused, which limits the measurement of the program’s impact.** For example, the KPIs require that the hubs report on the number of workshops and client meetings they deliver per quarter, rather than the growth in revenue or staff employed in their clients’ businesses. Therefore, it is difficult to quantify the hubs program’s outcomes and impact, as the hubs do not collect regular, longitudinal data on the financial performance of their clients’ businesses. Quantifying the program’s outcomes and economic impacts would require significant data capture and analysis and would require clients to be comfortable sharing their business performance outcomes with the hubs. Recommendation 6.1 explores how the NIAA should co-design and measure impact and outcome indicators with the hubs to support them to better demonstrate their impact.
- It is likely that many of the long-term outcomes and impacts arising from the hubs’ support of their clients would not yet be realised.** Once sufficient data has been collected against outcome indicators, future research could explore a more holistic approach to assessing the value for money of the hubs program with a greater focus on quantitative measures. This might include elements of a cost-benefit analysis or social return on investment analysis, using data collected through outcome and impact indicators, as recommended by this evaluation

“I know the quality of what the hub does, because I've seen it. But I can't tell you what the impact is.”

- State government stakeholder



KEY FINDINGS | 5.1 Is the program economical, efficient, effective, equitable and ethical?

- The hubs program has operated at an average total cost per client to date of \$23,800.
- The hubs program is delivering greater value on a per client basis as the program grows, with average per-client costs reducing by 14 per cent per year.
- The hubs program model realises needed value for First Nations businesses early in their journey. It may face sustainability challenges in the future and will need to evolve as the First Nations business sector matures.
- The hubs program is meeting many needs identified as important by the First Nations business owners who participated in this evaluation.
- The establishment of the hubs did not fully leverage opportunities for economies of scale because later established hubs have not drawn on lessons learned from hubs established before them.
- The level of service provided to hub clients is not consistent across the four hubs.
- Hub staff are working to deliver increasingly equitable services to all First Nations entrepreneurs and business owners, irrespective of their location or stage of business development.
- Hub clients suggested that the hubs are delivering services ethically.

4.5.2 Is the program achieving value for money from the perspective of the hub clients?

Hub clients have different measures of success to the hubs and policy makers and value other outcomes of business ownership apart from profitability

There is a significant body of research that indicates that First Nations entrepreneurs and business owners define success differently to non-Indigenous people.¹¹⁹ A study by Weaven et al. found that, when asked to define success, First Nations people operating a business consider the positive outcomes they are able to provide their family and community in conjunction with financial benefits, while non-Indigenous people emphasised the importance of monetary outcomes more often.¹²⁰ The research undertaken for this evaluation confirmed this. Several clients across all hubs reported that they started their business to give back to their community and build intergenerational wealth. As one client said, “We want to be part of the change for First Nations people.” Another interviewee stated, “It’s not just about making money. I want to make meaningful change in the Indigenous community and business sector.”

“It’s not just about making money. I want to make meaningful change in the Indigenous community and business sector.”

- Hub client

Several respondents also emphasised that connection to culture and Country was an important driving factor for them in starting their businesses. One hub client interviewed said, “We don’t want to commercialise our culture. We want people to learn our culture. It’s not about the money. My cup is filling up from the wealth of what we can do.”

While respondents emphasised the importance of the non-monetary benefits they derived from operating their businesses, one hub staff member noted that the financial health and sustainability of clients’ businesses is an important foundation for enabling them to support their communities. They commented that they help clients to “make sure [their] business is commercially sound first, so then [they] can go help [their] community.”

Importantly, First Nations people are diverse, and hub clients have varying priorities and business goals. Some clients cited reasons related to pursuing their passion, self-employment and making money as the incentivising factors for starting their business. It is important, in understanding the value for money associated with the hubs program, to consider the range of benefits that arise from business ownership for First Nations people and not focus only on financial outcomes for participants.

Hub clients appear to value the hubs program highly and suggest that it is meeting many of their needs

The hubs program is delivered flexibly to allow its service to be tailored to support the ambitions of individual clients. The evaluation team observed that business support staff appeared to make a genuine effort to get to know their clients, often describing that they “walk beside them” on their business development journey. Interviews with hub clients also suggested that the level of support the program

¹¹⁹ Cargo, M, Potaka-Osborne, G, Cvitanovic, L, Warner, L, Clarke, S, Judd, J, Chakraborty, A & Boulton, A 2019, ‘Strategies to support culturally safe health and wellbeing evaluations in Indigenous settings in Australia and New Zealand: a concept mapping study’, *International Journal for Equity in Health*, Vol. 18, No. 194, p.2.

¹²⁰ Weaven, S, Frazer, L, Brimble, M, Bodle, K, Roussety, M & Thaichon, P, ‘Encouraging Indigenous Self Employment in Franchising’ in Ratten, V, Jones, P, Braga, V & Marques, C. S 2019, *Subsistence Entrepreneurship: The Interplay of Collaborative Innovation, Sustainability and Social Goals*, Springer, Cham, pp.79.

provides was valued. As one client said, "I refer everybody to sign up here [at the hub]. Simply because they do support you in ways that normal government don't."

Several clients expressed that they felt they could go to hub staff for help with anything they might need. One client interviewed said, "Everything we've needed we've been able to reach out to [the hub staff] and they've really helped with everything." Several clients also traced their business success directly to the services and support they received from the hubs. As one client said, "we would not be where we are without the hub."

Most survey participants and interviewees who were hub clients expressed strong support and gratitude for the program. For example, one said, "[the hub] have done a great job. It is such a benefit to our communities and I want to see it continue." There were a small number of respondents who reported feeling that their local hub did not provide the support services that they needed or did not help them. As already described in this report, this was because these clients perceived that business support staff had limited availability or that the hubs could not support them with specialised legal, accounting or other services tailored for mature businesses.

Overall, the hubs appear to be providing a service that their clients find valuable. Nevertheless, it is important to consider a range of opportunities to improve or enhance the hubs' services, for example to better serve clients with more mature businesses and those based in regional areas.



KEY FINDINGS | 5.2 Is the program achieving value for money from the perspective of the hub clients?

- Hub clients have different measures of success to the hubs and policy makers and value other outcomes of business ownership outside profitability.
- Hub clients appear to value the hubs program highly and suggest that it is meeting many of their needs.
- Many hub clients expressed strong support and gratitude for the program, further demonstrating that they valued the hubs' services.

5 Recommendations


The evaluation has identified ten recommendations for the NIAA to support the ongoing improvement of the hubs program. The recommendations have been grouped into the five categories below:

1. **Program continuation:** related to the ongoing funding and sustainability of the hubs program.
2. **Service delivery:** program implementation at the hubs that relates to improving the delivery of services to hub clients.
3. **Monitoring and reporting:** enhancing and streamlining the hubs’ reporting requirements.
4. **Governance and sustainability:** governance and sustainability of the hubs program and the individual hubs.
5. **Ecosystem collaboration:** how the NIAA and the hubs work with other organisations to support First Nations businesses.

The recommendations are set out in Sections 5.1 to 5.5 below.

5.1 Recommendations on program continuation

Table 2 | Recommendations: Program continuation


Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
 Program continuation	
<p>Recommendation 1: Continue to fund the hubs program while exploring options to improve its financial sustainability</p> <p>The evaluation found that the hubs program is a worthwhile investment by the Australian Government in supporting First Nations businesses that currently delivers value to the First Nations business sector. The program is also delivering increasing value over time as the program grows and matures.</p> <p>Going forward, alternative funding options should be explored to support the ongoing financial sustainability of the program. Additionally, greater assurance of program continuity would mitigate the challenges with long-term strategic planning and difficulties with staff recruitment and retention that are caused by short-term funding cycles (see Section 4.4.2).</p> <p>In continuing to fund the hubs program, the NIAA should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that renewed contracts with hub providers are a minimum of three years long while exploring avenues for longer contracts, up to five years. Currently, most of the hub contracts are four years long or shorter, and some contract extensions only span 12 months. Longer-term contracts are currently used in relation to other NIAA-administered programs including the Indigenous Rangers Program. The Australian Government expanded funding of the Indigenous Rangers Program to provide for contracts of at least ten years.¹²¹ • Explore ways to increase the financial sustainability of the program and diversify funding sources. • The hubs should support the NIAA in exploring: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) opportunities for improving the financial sustainability of the program by reducing costs b) further options for co-funding with state and territory governments or industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Government to continue funding the hubs program at current service levels as a minimum over the next three years. • Ensure equitable funding across all hubs. • Ensure that new or renewed contracts with hub providers are a minimum of three years long while exploring opportunities for contracts up to five years in duration. • Explore diversified funding options in collaboration with the hubs.

¹²¹ Grant Connect, “[Forecast Opportunity View - Indigenous Rangers Program Expansion Round One](#)”, Australian Government, accessed 2 September 2024

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
<p>c) additional paid partnerships with private sector and industry whose Indigenous procurement targets benefit from the hubs' connections and cultural capability-building services.</p> <p>It would be possible to charge clients membership fees, as some other similar providers do; however, that would undermine a key value of the hubs program, which its free service provision.</p> <p>Continued, sustainable funding will give the First Nations business community greater confidence and trust in the longevity of the program and the government's commitment to supporting First Nations economic empowerment.</p> <p>Any future plans to expand the hubs program should adopt the elements of the model found to be most appropriate in meeting the needs of First Nations businesses, outlined in Appendix A.</p>	

5.2 Recommendations on service delivery

Table 3 | Recommendations: Service delivery


Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
 SERVICE DELIVERY	
<p>Recommendation 2: Strengthen the capability and increase the capacity of business support staff at hubs</p> <p>There is a need to improve consistency in the business skills and availability of business support staff across the hubs program. Clients should be able to access a consistent minimum quality of support at any hub. Difficulties with recruitment and retention of qualified business support staff are further compounded by the short-term nature of hub contracts (see Recommendation 1).</p> <p>The services offered by business support staff are highly valued by hub clients, but there are opportunities to ensure coaching is more effective. As a baseline, business support staff should have adequate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capability: The hubs should upskill their business support staff where required to build their basic business skills and ensure there is a consistent baseline of skills among business support staff across the program. This could require the introduction of systematic onboarding processes for new business support staff or additional funding to pay for these staff members to upskill in more specialised areas such as accounting. All business support staff should have an understanding of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the foundations of setting up a business, including how to apply for an ABN, write a business plan and employ staff • the cultural complexities associated with doing business for First Nations people • finance, accounting and tax basics • the range of capital options available for First Nations businesses and entrepreneurs • how to respond to tenders and write grant applications • relevant Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies • digital literacy basics. • Capacity: The NIAA should ensure that sufficient funding is provided to the hubs over a reasonable timeframe to enable them to hire enough suitably qualified business support staff to service their clients. This would better enable the hubs to deliver on the expected program impacts, as defined by the key performance indicators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that a baseline in business support staffs' business skills is achieved through capability development and hiring decisions at the hubs. • Ensure the hubs are sufficiently funded to attract appropriately qualified staff and to develop staff capability.

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
<p>developed through Recommendation 6. However, alternative sources of funding should also be considered to achieve these goals, as improvements in the financial sustainability of the hubs will support staff recruitment and retention (see Recommendation 1).</p>	
<p>Recommendation 3: Ensure the hubs develop capabilities and resources to better support more mature businesses</p> <p>Hub clients with more established businesses reported that the hubs have fewer services to offer them. As the First Nations business sector continues to grow, more First Nations businesses will mature and have different needs when compared with start-ups and early-stage enterprises.</p> <p>The hubs and the NIAA should ensure they identify the specific challenges, needs and opportunities that emerge as businesses become more established and ensure that hub staff capability and resources develop to support these businesses.</p> <p>The hubs should consult with more established businesses on how their needs and challenges have evolved as they have grown or been in operation longer. To meet these needs, the hubs should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue to host networking events to foster connections and procurement opportunities for more established business • consider holding additional targeted capability development sessions with more established businesses, such as those described in Recommendation 4 • consider opportunities to offer a business accelerator program across the hubs program for established business seeking to grow, similar to the Yarpa Grow program • explore opportunities to connect established businesses with services that support businesses seeking to enter export markets • explore opportunities to facilitate a mentoring program between newer hub clients and experienced business owners who can provide industry specific support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the hubs develop staff capabilities and offer additional services to meet the distinct needs of more established businesses.
<p>Recommendation 4: Increase education for hub clients and government partners about opportunities, including IPPPs</p> <p>Government and First Nations business stakeholders interviewed did not demonstrate a strong understanding of how to best leverage Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs). If this lack of knowledge is widespread then this has adverse implications for the First Nations business sector, as discussed in Section 4.3.1. Greater education about IPPPs will enable hub clients to better leverage the opportunities they present and insure against the risk that these policies may be discontinued in future.</p> <p>There are three key challenges associated with IPPPs that the hubs would be well placed to address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • educating clients about the opportunities presented by IPPPs and setting realistic expectations about the capacity of IPPPs to fuel business growth • supporting clients who are responding to procurement processes to understand and navigate complex application processes • supporting government and industry partners who wish to procure services from First Nations businesses on how to best design opportunities and work with First Nations people so that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • they can more easily access opportunities they will be able to deliver successfully (for example, if buyers break up large projects into multiple smaller ones), and • they have a positive experience in engaging with government agencies and non-Indigenous companies. <p>The specific supports that hubs could provide to clients and partners could involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offering additional targeted workshops to hub clients about IPPPs • developing a guide for clients about IPPPs and how to navigate IPPP processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure the hubs increase education for hub clients. • Collaborate with the hubs to design and deliver initiatives to educate government partners about IPPPs.

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a guide or series of workshops targeted at buyers. The hubs could also leverage their expertise to support the NIAA in their education of government partners, building on the resources already available through the NIAA’s website. 	
<p>Recommendation 5: Explore opportunities to increase in-person support in regional areas</p> <p>Hub staff and clients reported that there is demand for hub services from First Nations businesses based in regional areas. Increasing in-person support in regional areas is important to ensure hub services can be easily accessed and hub staff can build relationships with local communities.</p> <p>The hubs should consider what model of service delivery is most fit for purpose for the communities they service in regional areas.</p> <p>Currently some hubs are trying to meet this demand with business support staff travelling to regional areas periodically, either to run events or meet regionally based clients. Where this ‘fly-in-fly-out’ model has worked best, business support staff have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> travelled to areas with significant existing First Nations business activity or where there are a high number of First Nations people who are interested in business development identified a need for business support services and targeted visits to meet specific needs such as through providing workshops on business basics or understanding IPPPs leveraged local connections with communities or partnered with organisations that have such existing connections planned visits well in advance so people attending events are well informed followed up with high-touch, in-person engagement. <p>Opportunities for increased regional presence could include the adoption of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a hub and spoke model akin to the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Hub model – this involves service delivery through an anchor hub in a city location with additional office spaces provided in regional areas a ‘footprint’ model, with a permanent business support staff presence in regional locations as appropriate. This has had some success as employed by Waalitj Hub in regional Western Australia. <p>Section 4.3.1 further explores how the hubs could use opportunities to collaborate with existing organisations that have an established presence in regional areas to meet demand for business support services in those areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to require and support the hubs to explore how to best meet the increased demand for their services from regionally based entrepreneurs.

5.3 Recommendations on monitoring and reporting

Table 4 | Recommendations: Monitoring and reporting


Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
 MONITORING AND REPORTING	
<p>Recommendation 6: Enhance and streamline the hubs’ key performance indicators</p> <p>Hub staff and other stakeholders described a range of shortcomings associated with the current approach to performance measurement used across the hubs program. Hub staff and stakeholders find it difficult to accurately quantify the hubs’ impacts in supporting First Nations clients, their communities and the First Nations business sector. Measuring</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lead in co-designing the refinement of performance measures with the hubs.

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
<p>indicators of beneficial program outcomes such as business growth would support the hubs to show their impact.</p> <p>Some of the hubs and their respective NIAA regional offices have engaged in co-design processes to develop their contracts. However, hub staff still described that their current contractual reporting requirements place a significant time burden on staff – particularly business support staff – and detract from time spent with hub clients. This suggests that there is a need for the NIAA to continue to engage with hubs providers to refine aspects of their performance reporting.</p>	
<p>6.1 Develop outcome indicators to better measure impact</p> <p>Develop a measurement model from the program logic for the hubs program that includes short- and long-term outcome indicators. In line with the principle of self-determination, the NIAA and hubs should consider how to include community and hub clients in this process. Indicators should be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • driven by the question: ‘What change are we expecting to see?’. This should be informed by hub clients’ definitions of success arising from participation in the program. • carefully selected – few and focused on what matters most – to drive accountability, maximise the value of measurement efforts, and simplify data collection, analysis and reporting. • both quantitative and qualitative. Combined, these indicators should support a holistic picture of what success looks like and will help to articulate the narrative of impact. • as consistent as possible across all hubs, so that data can be aggregated to demonstrate impact at the program level. • aligned with the intended outcomes of the program as per the program logic model (see Appendix B.1.3). <p>The NIAA should collaborate with the hub providers to develop targets for new indicators that are realistic and have achievable timeframes.</p> <p>Outcome indicators for hub clients could include, but are not limited to, measures of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individual financial outcomes, such as increases in business revenue or number of staff employed; or the number of clients who have expanded their business to other jurisdictions or who are exporting their goods or services • collaboration and growth of the sector, such as growth in value of procurement transactions between hub clients or the number of joint ventures developed between First Nations businesses • non-financial benefits to clients, such as improved wellbeing or self-reported confidence attributable to hub support • social return on investment, such as cultural outcomes or benefits to communities that result from business growth. <p>A key consideration for developing outcome indicators will be attributing effects to the various possible sources of support. This could be done by, for example, conducting analyses that involve hub clients who have accessed multiple business support services and comparing them to clients who have only accessed services through the hubs program.</p> <p>Section 4.5 explores further considerations for outcome indicators.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead in co-designing the development of outcome indicators to be used in performance reporting. The selection of indicators should be co-designed with the hubs.

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
<p>6.2 Streamline hub staff’s reporting requirements</p> <p>Recommendation 6.1 suggests including additional performance indicators in the hubs’ contracts which will add a further reporting burden on hub staff, who already feel that their administrative requirements are high.</p> <p>Therefore, the NIAA should co-design contracts with hub staff to streamline non-mandatory KPI and reporting requirements by removing the activity or output based KPIs that are less effective in driving desired outcomes. Administrative tasks and activities should be aligned with creating value for hub clients and enabling the measurement of outcomes and impact.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streamline hubs’ contractual reporting requirements by co-designing contracts with hub staff.

5.4 Recommendations on governance and sustainability


Table 5 | Recommendations: Governance and sustainability

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
 <p>GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY</p>	
<p>Recommendation 7: Establish mechanisms for regular collaboration and communication across hubs</p> <p>The hubs are currently operating as four separate entities and are not maximising potential benefits and efficiencies that could arise from collaboration. For example, newer hubs have developed internal policies and procedures from the ground up instead of drawing on the experience of the older hubs. Clients interviewed for this evaluation have also expressed a desire for cross-jurisdictional support should they look to expand their business interstate or re-locate. Greater collaboration and communication between hubs presents an opportunity for them to learn from one another, streamline significant work and deliver improved services to clients.</p> <p>The hubs should establish formal and informal mechanisms to build a community of practice between their staff. Such mechanisms should enable and drive regular collaboration and communication between hubs to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> share learnings with respect to the implementation and delivery of the hubs program. For example, the hubs are each undertaking different successful collaboration initiatives with external partners (see Section 4.1.1 and Section 4.3.1). They should share their experiences and explore whether other hubs’ initiatives could be emulated in their own locations. If the NIAA establishes additional hubs in other jurisdictions, these new hubs should take advantage of lessons learned from the existing program. share resources such as internal policies, procedures and processes and other tools that they have developed. For example, other hubs would benefit from Waalitj Hub’s Joint Venture Tool Kit. provide hub clients with opportunities to access consistent support across jurisdictions if they were to relocate or expand their businesses beyond state borders. This would include warm referrals across hub providers. <p>Mechanisms for collaboration may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> hosting twice yearly meetings in a central location or online, chaired by the NIAA where appropriate facilitating networking across the broad ecosystem of business support. This could include driving cross-jurisdictional collaboration and knowledge sharing. The hubs can play a lead role in introducing one another to other service providers and industry connections to enable cross-jurisdictional support for hub clients. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the hubs to foster collaboration, potentially through their contracts or direct facilitation where appropriate.

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
<p>Recommendation 8: Ensure each hub’s governance model maximises opportunities for First Nations leadership and self-determination</p> <p>The National Agreement on Closing the Gap commits the Australian government to support governance arrangements that deliver greater community control and empowerment for First Nations people:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority Reform One seeks to empower First Nations people to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress on Closing the Gap through formal partnership arrangements. • Priority Reform Two commits the government to increase the amount of government funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs delivered through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations. <p>The hubs have different governance models, which have their own advantages and drawbacks that manifest uniquely in their respective operating environments (see Section 4.4.2). Despite these differences, the evaluation found instances where community control and empowerment for First Nations people is being exercised, including through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Nations people visible in leadership roles and influencing decision making • First Nations people on the boards of the hub providers who contribute to overall governance and direction of the hub • providing services to all First Nations people within their service area, without being perceived to be aligned to a particular Traditional Owner group. • culturally competent leaders, where they are non-Indigenous • hubs consistently being positioned to advocate for themselves and have autonomy of influence and decision-making. <p>In line with the principle of self-determination, the NIAA should work with its regional networks to establish mechanisms to enable regular community feedback to be considered regarding the hub governance model that is most suitable for each region. This recognises that what is appropriate and empowering for each community is dynamic and evolving.</p> <p>The NIAA should then incorporate this community feedback into its requirements for selecting service providers when renewing hub provider contracts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with regional networks to establish ongoing feedback mechanisms with hub communities regarding the hubs’ governance models. • Ensure community feedback informs the selection of service providers.

5.5 Recommendations on ecosystem collaboration

Table 6 | Recommendations: Ecosystem collaboration

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
 ECOSYSTEM COLLABORATION	
<p>Recommendation 9: Explore opportunities to enhance referrals for hub clients</p> <p>The hubs play an important referral role in the First Nations business support sector in the jurisdictions where they are based. However, the evaluation found that the ecosystem is not well coordinated and there are still some gaps in available support.</p>	
<p>9.1 Develop an updated, system-wide understanding of business support services for First Nations businesses</p> <p>The NIAA does not currently have a comprehensive understanding of the services and the work that is being done to support First Nations people at the state level. Additionally, there are opportunities for the hubs to build and strengthen relationships with a wider range of service providers.</p> <p>Nous Group undertook some mapping in this regard as part of this project (see Appendix C). AusIndustry and IBA have also previously compiled information on available supports for First Nations businesses. To build on this work the NIAA should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support AusIndustry’s coordination efforts across levels of government and deepen relationships with Australian Government and state and territory government agencies that support business development. This would help to ensure that the hubs program continues to be complementary and aligned with initiatives at the state level. • require the hubs to collaborate on leading the mapping of support services, informed by the work of AusIndustry where possible. Through this, the hubs should maintain a system-wide understanding of the services available to First Nations people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support AusIndustry and other relevant agencies in coordinating across levels of government to identify available services. • Require the hubs to collaborate on leading the mapping of services, supported by other appropriate partners.
<p>9.2 Increase clients’ access to specialist expertise</p> <p>Clients suggested there is a lack of culturally appropriate specialist services including legal and accounting support within the business support ecosystem. One reason for this gap in supports appears to stem from a supply side challenge, as for some hubs there are a limited number of local First Nations legal professionals and accountants. However, clients of some other hubs spoke highly of the First Nations legal and accounting firms that their hub refers their clients to.</p> <p>To improve their clients’ access to such services, the hubs could consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inviting or hiring in-house specialists into hub offices for clients to use as a drop-in service. This could involve mirroring The Circle’s Experts-in-Residence program across other hubs. This program involves specialists such as representatives from Indigenous Business Australia (IBA) and First Nations legal and accounting firms having a regular presence in the hub, usually one or two days per month. • collaborating across the hubs to refer First Nations businesses to specialist services used by other hubs where there are no local options. There is an opportunity for the hubs to connect each other with First Nations businesses that could support their clients with culturally safe services from interstate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require the hubs to consider how to best increase hub clients’ access to specialist expertise.

Recommendation	Actions for the NIAA
<p>Recommendation 10: Strengthen partnerships to increase First Nations businesses’ access to flexible capital</p> <p>Echoing the findings of existing literature, this evaluation identified that limited access to capital is considered the most significant barrier to start-up, growth and success among First Nations businesses. It should not be the role of the hubs to address this issue through providing capital. The challenges that would be associated with the hubs providing business capital to their clients are discussed in Section 4.1.1.</p> <p>Instead, there is a role for the hubs and the NIAA to play in strengthening relationships with potential partners who can provide flexible capital to First Nations businesses.</p> <p>The NIAA should work in partnership with IBA to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate across the financial services sector, including with commercial banks, to investigate ways to improve First Nations businesses’ access to capital. This could include organising a symposium with banks and other stakeholders in the sector for this purpose. <p>The hubs should work with IBA to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • compile and maintain a comprehensive list of the range of capital options available to First Nations businesses. • strengthen connections with some service providers (for example, specialist First Nations lenders and mainstream commercial banks) to improve access to a range of funding opportunities for First Nations businesses. • Ensure that business support staff have a consistent baseline awareness of the different types of available capital and how these align with business’ needs (see Recommendation 2). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build partnerships with financiers to investigate ways to provide additional capital options to First Nations businesses and explore coordination of a symposium for this purpose. • Require the hubs to work with IBA to map the capital options available to First Nations businesses. • Require the hubs to build relationships with potential partners who can provide capital to First Nations businesses.

Appendix A Summary of key elements of the model

APPROPRIATENESS OF THE MODEL: SUMMARY

As described in the preceding detail, all four hubs are delivering services to their clients prescribed by the same key elements of the hubs program model – for example, providing one-on-one business support and access to physical hub offices in a centralised metropolitan area. However, local environments and unique constraints have caused the hubs to adopt varying approaches to some of these elements. Table 7 below summarises the evaluation findings regarding the most appropriate approach to the key aspects of the program model in meeting the needs of hub clients. This summary centralises findings that relate to the program model. The table notes where further detail is provided on each element throughout the report.

Table 7 | Summary table: Most appropriate approaches to key elements of the hubs program model

Program model element	This element of the model is most appropriate in meeting the needs of hub clients when:
<p>Business support <i>Discussed further in Section 4.4.1</i></p>	<p>Business support services are free for hub clients, and business support staff have a baseline level of business skills. Ideally, all business support staff should have an understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the foundations of setting up a business, including how to apply for an ABN, write a business plan and employ staff • the cultural complexities associated with doing business for First Nations people • finance, accounting and tax basics • the range of capital options available for First Nations businesses and entrepreneurs • how to respond to tenders and write grant applications • relevant Indigenous Preferential Procurement Policies (IPPPs) • digital literacy basics. <p>Collectively, business support staff should have a diverse range of relevant business skills and experience across industries, enabling them to draw on each other’s strengths to support clients.</p>
<p>Cultural safety <i>Detailed in Section 4.2.1</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a high representation of First Nations staff, particularly in business support roles. • All staff members have high levels of cultural competency. • The physical hub offices are easy to access and are decorated with First Nations artwork and furniture. Clients of all hubs suggesting that these aspects of the hubs’ decor supported the cultural safety associated with the hubs and made them feel welcome. • The hub is delivered by a local provider with an understanding of local culture and strong relationships in communities.
<p>Governance <i>Discussed primarily in Section 4.4.2</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Nations people are visible in leadership roles and influence decision making. • First Nations people are on the boards of the hub providers and contribute to overall governance and direction of the hub. • The hub provides services to all First Nations people within their service area, without being perceived to be aligned to a particular Traditional Owner group. • Leaders are culturally competent where they are non-Indigenous.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The hubs are positioned to advocate for themselves and have autonomy of influence and decision making.
<p>Support for regional businesses</p> <p><i>Discussed primarily in Section 4.3.1</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is ongoing, place-based and in-person support for businesses in regional areas. This can take the form of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A hub and spoke model akin to the Northern Territory Indigenous Business and Employment Hub model – this involves service delivery through an anchor hub in a city location with additional office spaces provided in regional areas. A ‘footprint’ model, with permanent business support staff presence in regional locations as appropriate. This has had some success as employed by Waalitj Hub in regional Western Australia.
<p>Physical office layout</p>	<p>Physical hub offices are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> easily accessible: clients expressed that having easy access to the hub, where they can enter freely, contributes to a welcoming atmosphere. visible and inviting: clients suggested that having their hub visible and on the ground floor of a building, reflecting a shopfront, would make the hub more inviting. Some clients also suggested that they would prefer their hub not to be located in government buildings. well equipped: with co-working spaces, hot-desks and standard office equipment such as printers and scanners. large enough to host workshops and events for the hub’s community of clients.
<p>Location</p>	<p>The location of the hub is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> close to where a large proportion of First Nations people in the region live and work easily accessed by public transport close to free or reasonably priced parking options.

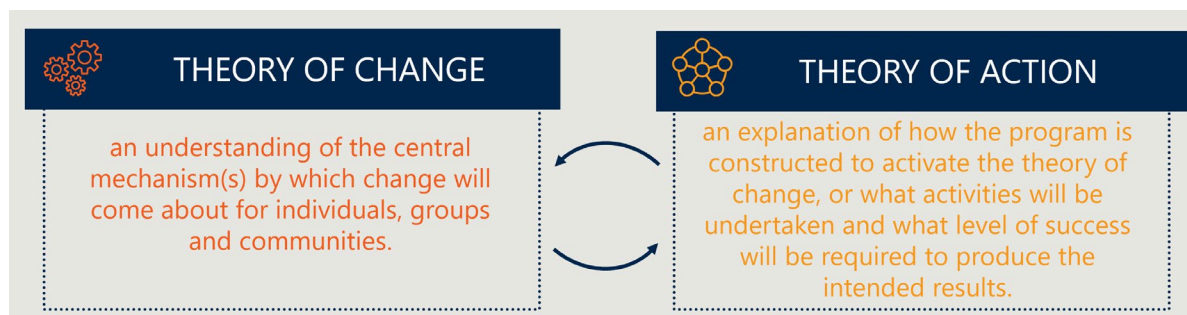
Appendix B Further detail on the methodology

B.1 Program theory

Program theory is the way in which organisations seeking to create change can clearly articulate the 'why' and the 'what' of a given program. A high-quality program theory will be plausible, consistent with the evidence available and useful to the people working in that context.

Program theory is made of two components, a theory of change and a theory of action (described in Figure 17).

Figure 17 | Interaction between the theory of change and the theory of action¹²²



B.1.1 Theory of change

The theory of change outlines at a high level the change that is expected to be delivered by the hubs program and the hypotheses underpinning how that change will occur. It is a brief summation of the rationale for the hubs program. It aims to drill down to the essence of what the program aims to do.

The hubs program aims to:

- ensure First Nations entrepreneurs and businesses are supported on their journey to become long-term and sustainable enterprises
- improve connections between First Nations people and the full spectrum of business services available, including government-funded support services and employment and procurement opportunities.

To do this, it seeks to:

- provide a central place where First Nations businesses and entrepreneurs can explore ideas, access business advice and training, network with other Indigenous businesses, connect with other corporates and tap into government programs and opportunities.

This theory of change underpinning the hubs program is described in Figure 18 (overleaf).

¹²² Sue C Funnell and Patricia J Rogers 2011, 'Purposeful program theory: effective use of theories of change and logic models' Jossey-Bass, CA

Figure 18 | Theory of change underpinning the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs program



B.1.2 Theory of action

The theory of action describes how the theory of change will be delivered. It underpins the theory of change and articulates the actions that will be taken to achieve the desired change, as well as predicted results. One of the most commonly used methods for displaying a theory of action is through a program logic model. A program logic model clarifies the inputs, outputs, activities and intended outcomes of a program.

The program logic helped guide the evaluation of the hubs program by providing a common, systematic model that depicts the intended activities and how they bring about desired outcomes of the program.

B.1.3 Program logic for the hubs program

A program logic model describes the inputs, outputs, activities and intended outcomes of a program. The following model for the hubs program was developed in consultation with the four hub providers and NIAA staff: see Figure 19 overleaf.

Figure 19 | Overarching Program Logic

CONTEXT	INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	ST OUTCOMES	MT OUTCOMES	IMPACT
<p>What need is being addressed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A strong, diverse and self-supporting Indigenous business sector is key to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Closing the Gap. Expanding the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people going into business and participating in supportive Indigenous business networks is critical for the longevity and prosperity of the Indigenous business sector. There is a high failure rate among small businesses. Indigenous businesses based in regional and remote areas face further barriers to participation and success. Indigenous businesses operate in a complex ecosystem requiring informed navigation. Mainstream supports to First Nations business owners (or those aspiring to run their own businesses) are not always accessible or culturally appropriate. Tailored and culturally appropriate supports are required. Indigenous people especially at the early stages of the business cycle require improved access to quality, timely and fit-for-purpose business advice. Established Indigenous businesses need support to navigate the multiple avenues for winning work and entering new markets. 	<p>What is being invested?</p> <p>HUBS PROGRAM MODEL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources to design the model. Support for implementation and negotiation with partners. National level facilitation, engagement, coordination and promotion. Program governance, including data collection, oversight and reporting. 	<p>What is the hubs program model designed to do?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oversee and support implementation of hubs in four locations to function as 'one-stop-shops' for First Nations businesses seeking support. 	<p>What is the hubs program model intended to produce?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Culturally appropriate, well-informed and comprehensive advice to current and aspiring First Nations business owners/managers. Shared learnings from experiences across the four hubs. 	<p>What will the hubs program model achieve?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participating First Nations-run businesses make more informed and timely decisions to support their growth and development. Greater collaboration between First Nations businesses. 	<p>What will the ultimate impact of the hubs program model be?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More First Nations businesses are successful on their own terms. More First Nations commercial, family, community and social enterprises. Fewer unemployed First Nations jobseekers (e.g. through both business owners and employees). 	<p>What will the ultimate impact of the hubs program model be?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> First Nations families and communities' benefit from greater economic independence and wealth establishment. Indigenous people, local economies and broader communities benefit from the increased economic inclusion of First Nations people and ongoing success of the First Nations sector. Progress is made on Closing the Gap Targets 7 and 8 relating to employment.
	<p>YARPA (Sydney)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operated by NSW ALC Western Sydney City Deal commitment to an Indigenous Business Hub and procurement targets in the construction sector Australian Government funding: TBA 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Design and deliver business mentoring and advisory services. Design and deliver training. Host networking events. Set up work spaces and procure office equipment. Engage with local stakeholders and research locally-available services. Build a loyal network of local supporters. Promote the hub and its services to potential users. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Advice to jobseekers on employment services or self-employment. Advice to current and aspiring business-owners on accessing capital or support. Advice to established business-owners government procurement opportunities. Capability development. An equipped workspace. An engaged local network. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> First Nations businesses are able to access culturally appropriate services tailored to the needs of their business, families and communities. First Nations businesses find it easier to identify, communicate and collaborate with complementary First Nations businesses in their communities. Services for First Nations businesses are accessible, trusted, valued and used by businesses of all sizes and types in the region. Increased networking and connections allows First Nations businesses to build relationships with other First Nations and non-First Nations businesses. The capability and confidence of First Nations business owners is strengthened. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> First Nations businesses are actively sought-after and thrive in the locality. Government purchasers in the jurisdiction have access to a wider range of First Nations businesses to meet their social procurement goals. Levels of unemployment and economic exclusion in the surrounding areas decline. Mainstream services to First Nations businesses become more culturally aware and responsive. The profile, reputation and cultural impact of the Indigenous business sector is increased. 	
	<p>WAALITJ (Perth)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operated by Waalitj Foundation Perth City Deal commitment to an Indigenous Business and Employment Hub Australian Government funding: \$10m 					
	<p>The Circle (Adelaide)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Operated by the SA State Government Adelaide City Deal commitment to an Aboriginal Entrepreneur Hub Australian Government funding: \$3m 					
	<p>NT Indigenous Business and Employment Hub</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Operated by the NT Indigenous Business Network Australian Government funding: \$10m 					

B.2 Stakeholder engagement

The primary research for this evaluation included interviews targeting the hubs program’s key stakeholders and a survey targeting hub clients.

B.2.1 Interviews

The evaluation team engaged with a wide range of stakeholders using qualitative research methods, combining a mix of semi-structured individual and group interviews that adopted elements of Yarning Circles. Some interviews were conducted in-person during the site visits and others were conducted virtually over Microsoft Teams. A small number of interviews were conducted over the phone when requested by hub clients. Table 8 below shows the number of individuals interviewed, by stakeholder type. Interview respondents have not been identified for privacy reasons.

Table 8 | Stakeholder engagement tracker

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS	TOTAL INDIVIDUALS
Hub staff	33
Hub clients	38
Hub partners/business support providers	16
Community stakeholders (including 4 community stakeholders from Queensland)	7
State and territory government stakeholders	15
Australian government	7
National industry	2
Queensland (First Nations business owners, community stakeholders, state government representatives, business support providers)	13
	TOTAL: 124

Two members of the evaluation team attended each interview. Interviews were led and conducted by the First Nations engagement leads, while non-Indigenous team members were present to take interview notes and ask clarifying questions where required. All members of the evaluation team supported the data analysis, with key direction, oversight and guidance provided by the lead evaluator, a Guwa/Koa man.

Recruitment of interviewees

The evaluation team carefully considered our recruitment approach for interview and survey respondents. The approach is covered by the Evaluation Plan, the Stakeholder Engagement Plan and the Recruitment Documentation developed for the evaluation’s AIATSIS ethics application. The Evaluation Plan outlines the planned communication with potential interviewees prior to engagement and remuneration of participants. The Stakeholder Engagement Plan documented detailed considerations for engaging with each stakeholder type. Finally, all recruitment documentation was drafted, reviewed, iterated and approved by the AIATSIS Ethics Committee. These documents formed the guardrails for recruiting participants throughout the project.

The evaluation team built on local knowledge to identify the right people to involve in interviews. For example, we worked with the hubs and other First Nations business community representatives as part of the pre-interview process to identify suitable stakeholders to consult. We also received letters of support from local peak organisations to show participants that the research was endorsed.

Interviewees were recruited through the following techniques:

- Referrals: the NIAA and the hubs were able to refer the evaluation team to potential interview participants. The evaluation team then provided information to participants about the hubs program, the evaluation and the interview process, emphasising that participation was voluntary. Despite the fact that the hubs and NIAA provided referrals, they were unaware of who was ultimately interviewed.
- Snowball sampling: Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where existing study participants recruit future participants from among their acquaintances. This method is especially useful for reaching hard-to-access or specialised populations by leveraging the networks of initial respondents.

B.2.2 Survey

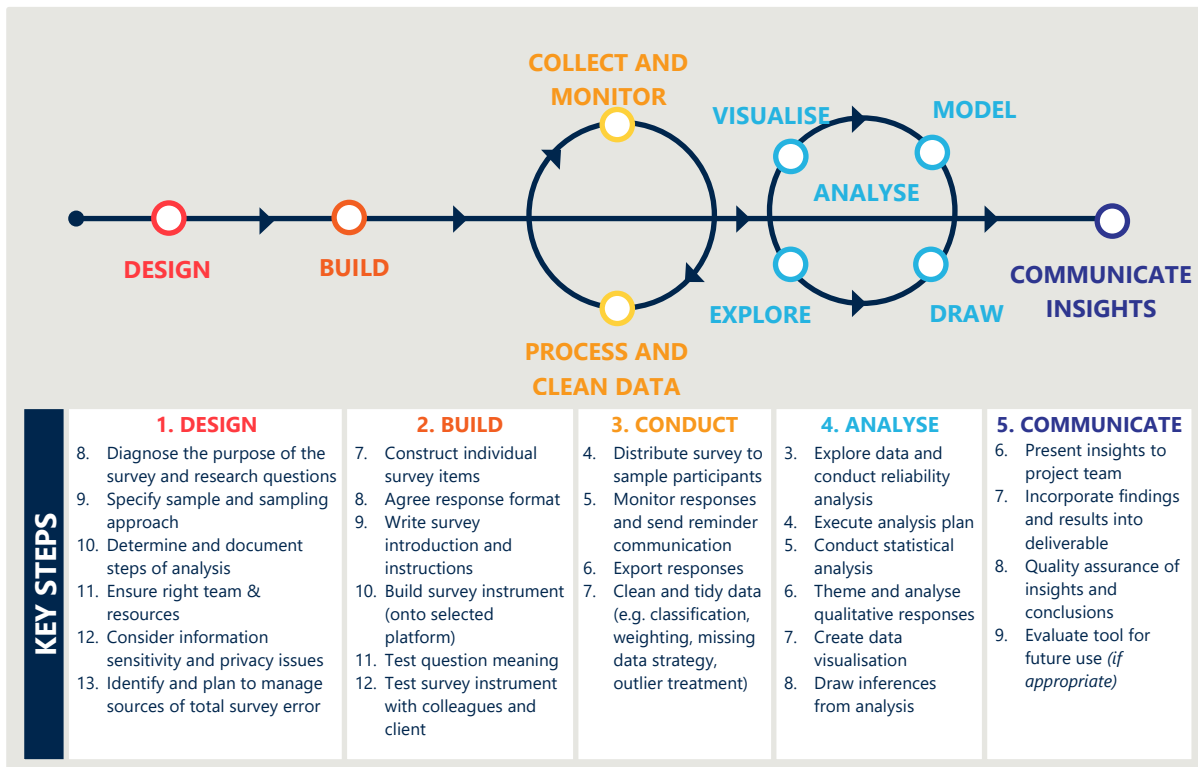
The written survey was designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data to answer the Key Evaluation Questions. It included open and closed-ended questions. The evaluation team undertook a robust survey development process (see

Figure 20) to develop a survey that was:

- fit for the purpose of the evaluation
- easily understood by respondents
- short and easily accessible
- culturally safe and appropriate – for example, the survey:
 - was opt-in
 - requested consent to participate from participants at the start and the end of the survey
 - ensured all free-text questions were optional.

Figure 20 below shows the survey development lifecycle that Nous adopted for the evaluation.

Figure 20 | Survey development lifecycle



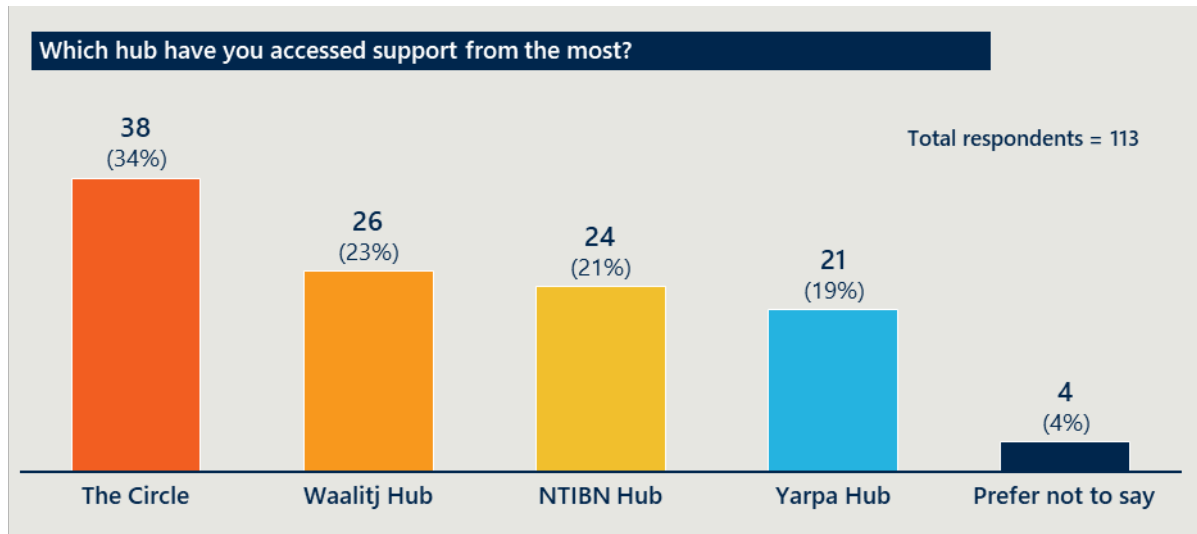
Recruitment of survey respondents

The evaluation team experienced some early challenges with recruiting survey respondents despite several attempts to promote the survey. To boost survey response numbers the evaluation team:

- included an optional prize draw at the end of the survey where participants could opt-in for the chance to win one of 10 x \$100 vouchers
- asked hub staff to distribute the survey via email directly to clients
- developed posters for display in all hub offices to advertise the survey, with QR codes for participants to easily access the survey via phone
- used a user-friendly interface, including a progress bar so participants could anticipate how long it would take them to complete the survey
- sent final reminders through the hubs as the survey close date approached.

These efforts were successful. The survey closed on 9 July 2024 with 113 completed responses, exceeding the target of 87 outlined in the Evaluation Plan. This represented 10 per cent of total hub clients at the start of the evaluation. Figure 21 below shows the survey response numbers by hub.

Figure 21 | Survey responses for: Which hub have you accessed support from the most?



Appendix C Intersecting programs and services

C.1 Overview of services

A range of support options apart from the hubs are available to First Nations business owners. These include those funded by the Australian Government in addition to state government programs and non-government support options. Some of these services are specifically tailored to First Nations business owners or incorporate culturally sensitive approaches.

This section provides a snapshot of programs and services available to business owners, entrepreneurs or prospective business owners nationally, in the hub regions and in Queensland. It offers an initial list of support options that complement or overlap with the support provided by the Indigenous Business and Employment Hubs Program. The evaluation team collated this snapshot to help contextualise the hubs program in the early stages of the evaluation. As such, note that the information below is a non-exhaustive list of support options as of March 2024 and available services may have changed since this time. As per Recommendation 9.1, more work is required to develop an updated, system-wide understanding of business support services for First Nations businesses.

The business support services identified by the evaluation team typically and commonly provide the following assistance:

- **Access to information** | Providing access to information to support entrepreneurs and businesses across the business lifecycle, from early business planning and financial and legal advice, to accessing broader market opportunities or adopting digital tools.
- **Tailored business coaching and advice** | Business coaching and guidance for First Nations entrepreneurs and business owners, as well as non-First Nations businesses looking to employ First Nations people or connect with or procure First Nations services.
- **Connection with suppliers and/or customers** | Supporting First Nations businesses in connecting with suppliers and customers through referrals, marketing support, events and other networking opportunities.
- **Business loans, grants or financial assistance** | Providing direct financial support to businesses in the form of loans, grants or other monetary assistance.
- **First Nations specific support** | Some business support services offer dedicated support to First Nations businesses or entrepreneurs.

C.2 Intersecting programs and services

This section details some individual services available to First Nations businesses and entrepreneurs across Australia.

C.2.1 National services

Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Business.gov.au Department of Industry, Science and Resources https://business.gov.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information 	<p>As described on the website, "Business.gov.au is a whole-of-government website for the Australian business community". Business.gov.au "collate information and resources from 3 levels of government into 1 website to reduce the number of websites you need to visit."</p> <p>The website provides information relevant across the business lifecycle, including information related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> planning and operating a business registrations finance legal people risk management online tools and templates, such as budget templates and profit and loss statements products and services marketing exiting grants and support. <p>The website also includes contact information and support services via phone, live chat or email, and access to information about grant programs.</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online and phone</p> <p>Service area: National</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets all businesses including First Nations businesses but does not identify First Nations specific supports</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Digital solutions – Australian Small Business Advisory Services <i>Department of Industry, Science and Resources</i></p> <p>https://business.gov.au/expertise-and-advice/digital-solutions-australian-small-business-advisory-services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Tailored business coaching/advice 	<p>As per the website’s description “The Digital Solutions – Australian Small Business Advisory Services program works with small businesses to make the most of digital tools and offers broader advice specific to your business needs such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how digital tools can help your small business • websites and selling online • social media and digital marketing • using small business software • online security and data privacy. <p>Digital Solutions offers up to 4 hours of one-on-one tailored support as well as unlimited attendance at group workshops or webinars.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Services are delivered through live webinars, face-to-face workshops, the digital content library, special events such as presentations, and one-on-one advisory support.</p> <p>Service area: Program providers are located across all metropolitan and regional areas in Australia.</p> <p>Cost: Workshops and webinars provided by Digital Solutions are free; one-on-one advisory services incur a small fee.</p>	<p>Targets small businesses including First Nations small businesses but does not identify First Nations specific supports</p>
<p>AusIndustry Regional Managers <i>Department of Industry, Science and Resources</i></p> <p>https://business.gov.au/expertise-and-advice/ausindustry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Tailored business coaching/advice • Connection with suppliers and/or customers (to government services) 	<p>Description of service as per website: “AusIndustry operates a network of 30 Regional Managers across the country who are connected to regions, communities and industries and provide a local business connection.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: In-person, phone, home and workplace visits.</p> <p>Service area: The service provides regional coverage across all states and territories.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Regional Managers are building capability to support Indigenous businesses in accessing market opportunities.</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>CSIRO SME Connect programs</p> <p>https://www.csiro.au/en/work-with-us/funding-programs/sme/sme-connect-programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	<p>CSIRO's SME Connect programs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovate to Grow: a "free online training course to understand how R&D can benefit businesses." • CSIRO Kick-start: "Connects start-ups and small business with CSIRO research expertise and capabilities to pursue R&D activities." This includes grant provisions of up to \$50,000. 	<p>Delivery type: Innovate to Grow is delivered entirely online.</p> <p>Service area: The service provides regional coverage across all states and territories.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets small businesses including First Nations small businesses but does not identify First Nations specific supports</p>
<p>Defence Industry Growth Program¹²³</p> <p><i>Department of Industry, Science and Resources</i></p> <p>https://www.industry.gov.au/science-technology-and-innovation/industry-innovation/industry-growth-program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Connection with suppliers and/or customers • Financial information or assistance 	<p>As per the website description, "The Industry Growth Program supports innovative small and medium enterprises undertaking commercialisation and/or growth projects within the National Reconstruction Fund (NRF) priority areas through advisory services and opportunities for matched grant funding."</p> <p>The program's Advisory Service provides eligible, innovative SMEs with access to advice and support to help commercialise ideas and/or grow their business operations.</p> <p>From 2024, businesses who receive advice may be able to apply for grants between \$50,000 to \$5 million to support commercialisation and growth projects.</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online only</p> <p>Service area: Program advisers are based across Australia.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets small and medium enterprises including First Nations small and medium enterprises but does not identify First Nations specific supports</p>
<p>Office of Defence Industry Support</p> <p><i>Department of Defence</i></p> <p>https://www.defence.gov.au/business-industry/finding-opportunities/office-defence-industry-support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and advice • Financial information or assistance • Connection to procurement programs, end users and industry programs 	<p>As per the website description: "The core function of ODIS, through its industry engagement teams around Australia, is to provide advisory, guidance and mentoring services to SMEs."</p> <p>ODIS works closely with State and Territory agencies, industry associations and Defence business partners, to help deliver capability that equips and sustains the Australian Defence Force."</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online, in-person training events, seminars, exhibitions and conferences around Australia.</p> <p>Service area: National</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets defence related businesses including First Nations defence related businesses but does not identify First Nations specific supports</p>

¹²³ Opening in 2024.

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>The TradeStart</p> <p>https://www.austrade.gov.au/en/how-we-can-help-you/programs-and-services/tradestart-advisers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information and advice 	<p>As per the website, "The network consists of sector specialists who work right across regional Australia, as well as our state capitals. They can advise smaller companies on trade, markets and export challenges. Our objective is to help small and medium-sized exporters in international markets."</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online and in-person support</p> <p>Service area: National – advisers are based across 34 cities in Australia.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets small and medium exporters including First Nations small and medium exporters but does not identify First Nations specific supports</p>
<p>Indigenous Business Australia Business Finance and partnerships</p> <p>https://iba.gov.au/business/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information and advice Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>IBA offers support to Indigenous-owned businesses through providing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> information workshops business support business finance. 	<p>Delivery type: Online, over the phone and in-person support is provided.</p> <p>Service area: IBA has offices in each state except Tasmania.</p> <p>Cost: free</p>	<p>All services are targeted to businesses that are at least 50% First Nations owned</p>
<p>Our Country Our Future Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation</p> <p>https://www.ilsc.gov.au/partner-with-us/our-country-our-future/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information and advice Connection with suppliers and/or customers Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>As per the website's description, ILSC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Invest in projects: through funding for purchasing, managing, and/or developing land or water-related interests. Provide advice and capability support: support landowners with information, knowledge, training, systems to develop and deliver projects. Connect people: facilitate, advocate, negotiate to develop partnerships, markets, other opportunities." 	<p>Delivery type: Over the phone and in-person</p> <p>Service area: ILSC has offices in Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>All services are targeted toward First Nations businesses or holders of land- or water-related rights involving the acquisition or management of land or water related interests.</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Many Rivers https://manyrivers.org.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and advice • Business coaching • Connection with suppliers and/or customers • Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>As per the website’s description: “Many Rivers is a for-purpose organisation that provides Microenterprise Development (MED) and Community Economic Development (CED) support to Indigenous and other Australians who want to access the economy however for various reasons, lack the financial or practical business support to do so.”</p> <p>Microenterprise Development Managers (MEDMs) “live and work in the communities. They serve and spend as much time as required with each client to help them gain the skills and knowledge to start and sustain a small business. [MEDMs] can help with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and meeting business registration and insurance requirements • Market research and marketing ideas • Risk analysis • Review of cashflow and bookkeeping support • Establishing links with customers and suppliers • Pro bono legal advice • Access to microfinance loans to help get the business started – based on an assessment of the individual’s character, capacity and cashflow.” <p>Many Rivers Community Economic Development “provides support to regional and remote Indigenous communities that want to establish or grow economic activity on their land. Together we step through what is required for a community to strengthen its understanding.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Onsite support at client businesses and in communities, online, in-person at the Sydney office.</p> <p>Service area: Staff work in communities across Australia. Phone services are also available nationally and Many Rivers has an office in Sydney for in-person services.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Many Rivers has a strong First Nations focus. Through Community Economic Development (CED) they support Indigenous organisations and their communities to achieve real economic outcomes.</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
First Australians Capital https://firstaustralianscapital.org/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information and advice Business coaching Connection with suppliers and/or customers Business loans 	As per the description on the website, "First Australians Capital provides a range of resources to Indigenous businesses, including professional business support and services, networking and access to financial capital."	<p>Delivery type: In-person support at offices, online and over the phone.</p> <p>Service area: Offices in Newcastle, Brisbane and Melbourne</p> <p>Cost: Fee</p>	All services are targeted towards First Nations businesses, enterprise and entrepreneurs.
Yarnline IP Australia https://www.ipaustralia.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/speak-with-us-on-yarnline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information 	As per the website's description, IP Australia's callback service Yarnline "is dedicated to helping people better understand Indigenous Knowledge and how IP rights can help protect it."	<p>Delivery type: Over the phone</p> <p>Service area: National</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	Services are targeted to First Nations businesses and those working with First Nations businesses and entrepreneurs.

C.2.2 New South Wales

Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Service NSW Business Connect</p> <p>https://www.service.nsw.gov.au/business/business-connect</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Tailored business coaching/advice 	<p>As per the website description, Service NSW Business Connect “supports NSW businesses as they navigate the challenges of starting, running, growing and adapting their business.” Key services include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • independent advisor bookings • webinars, online workshops or events • online resources. <p>Service Programs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal Business Advisory initiative (ABAI): “free one-one-one coaching and advice delivered locally by independent Aboriginal business advisors.” • Business Connect Procurement Specialist Advisors are experienced professionals who provide confidential advice independently from the NSW Government to small and medium enterprises across all industries in NSW. 	<p>Delivery type: In-person support at offices, online webinars and resources</p> <p>Service area: Offices across NSW</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Under the Aboriginal Business Advisory Initiative, coaching and advice is delivered locally by independent Aboriginal business advisors.</p>
<p>Rural Financial Counselling Service NSW</p> <p>https://rfcsnsw.com.au/about-us/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information 	<p>As per the website’s description, RFCS NSW “support primary producers and small related enterprises in finding financial stability and security, by providing confidential and professional advice on a range of issues.”</p> <p>RFCS NSW:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Offer free, independent, confidential, and professional expert financial counselling and support to farmers, fishers, foresters and other rural businesses that are experiencing, or at risk of, financial hardship. • Provide clients with the appropriate tools, skills, knowledge, and referrals to enable them to regain financial and emotional independence.” 	<p>Delivery type: Face-to-face financial counselling at offices and support over the phone.</p> <p>Service area: Offices across NSW.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets small and medium enterprises including First Nations small and medium enterprises but does not identify First Nations specific supports.</p>
<p>NSW Indigenous Chamber of Commerce Business Connect</p> <p>https://nswicc.com.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Tailored business coaching/advice 	<p>According to the website, NSWICC “supports Aboriginal People to establish and operate their own businesses and to provide a forum for Business owners to come together to network, to share and to learn from each other.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Virtual and face-to-face in NSW offices.</p>	<p>All services are targeted to First Nations entrepreneurs, business owners, social enterprises and job seekers.</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
		NSWICC also runs the Business Accelerator program, which provides teaching and mentoring for Indigenous business owners.	<p>Service area: Offices in Redfern and Rutherford NSW for members to access services and conduct business.</p> <p>Cost: Membership which is required to access NSWICC services incurs an annual fee.</p>	
<p>Women in Business NSW Government and TAFE NSW</p> <p>https://www.tafensw.edu.au/womeninbusiness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Tailored business coaching/advice 	As per the website, "Women in Business is a NSW Government and TAFE NSW initiative that offers a fully subsidised* online program for women who are looking to establish a micro business, a small business, or who are already operating a business."	<p>Delivery type: Online delivery with local in-person events</p> <p>Service area: NSW</p> <p>Cost: Fully subsidised for eligible applicants</p>	TAFE NSW has an Aboriginal Education and Training Unit with Aboriginal staff that can provide First Nations students with help and support to achieve their study goals.

C.2.3 Western Australia

Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>WA Government Grant programs</p> <p>https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-jobs-tourism-science-and-innovation/grants-assistance-and-programs-register-wa-industry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>As per the website’s description, “The Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation maintains a Grants Assistance and Programs Register which provides current and potential industry proponents with information on available state and federal government funding programs and assistance.”</p> <p>Grant programs include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Capability Fund, which includes an Aboriginal business round Access Asia Business Grants Investment Attraction Fund 	<p>Delivery type: Online</p> <p>Service area: National</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Many grants have dedicated funding to support outcomes for First Nations people.</p>
<p>WA Small Business Development Corporation</p> <p>https://www.smallbusiness.wa.gov.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice 	<p>As per the website’s description, The WA Small Business Development Corporation’s “primary role is to encourage, promote, facilitate and assist the establishment, growth and development of small business in Western Australia.”</p> <p>SBDC’s range of services includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> business skills workshops business licence finder database to identify the required licences, registrations and codes of practice required for your business advisory services commercial tenancy advisory service a low-cost dispute resolution service. <p>The service includes a statewide network of local business advisors.</p>	<p>Delivery type: Business support centres are located across Western Australia. Online information and services are also provided.</p> <p>Service area: Western Australia</p> <p>Cost: Business advisory services are free; workshops and dispute resolution services incur a small cost.</p>	<p>Targets small and medium enterprises including First Nations small and medium enterprises but does not identify First Nations specific supports.</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>New Industries Fund</p> <p>https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-jobs-tourism-science-and-innovation/new-industries-fund</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>As described on the website, the New Industries Fund “aims to support accelerating, new and emerging businesses in Western Australia, through innovation, to diversify the economy and create new jobs and industries across the state.”</p> <p>This includes through grants and innovation hubs.</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online services and in-person support</p> <p>Service area: Four hubs are located in Perth, with a fifth launching in 2024.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets small and medium enterprises including First Nations small and medium enterprises but does not identify First Nations specific supports.</p>
<p>Noongar Chamber of Commerce and Industry</p> <p>https://www.ncci.com.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information Tailored business coaching/advice 	<p>As described on the website, the NCCI is “a business advocacy group for Aboriginal owned businesses in Western Australia. [They] support contact between Aboriginal owned businesses and the broader WA business community.”</p> <p>The NCCI provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “business coaching throughout the life cycle of a business advice on managing the interaction between cultural awareness and commercial engagement employment/training procurement support project management advises government and private organisations on implementing the Indigenous component of major projects undertaken on Noongar country. other services as part of capacity building such as mentoring, networking, training and conferences.” 	<p>Delivery type: Online and phone services and in-person support</p> <p>Service area: NCCI supports projects across the Southwest region of WA. Offices are located in Perth and Subiaco.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Ordinary membership and support is available to businesses at least 51% owned by Noongar persons.</p> <p>Businesses that are not at least 51% Noongar owned but want to work with and support the NCCI’s mission are eligible for associate membership.</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Aboriginal Business Directory WA</p> <p>https://abdwa.icn.org.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	<p>As per the website’s description, the Aboriginal Business Directory WA is a free service managed by the Chamber of Commerce WA which “brings together Aboriginal businesses operating in Western Australia with potential buyers.” Business owners that meet the eligibility criteria are encouraged to list their details in the directory, while buyers in search of goods or services supplied by an Aboriginal business are encouraged to search the directory for suppliers.</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online only</p> <p>Service area: Western Australia</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>To be registered on the Aboriginal Business Directory WA, business must be at least 50% owned by an Aboriginal interest which is represented in the management and operations of the entity.”</p>
<p>Aboriginal Economic Development Program</p> <p><i>Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development</i></p> <p>https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/aboriginal-business-development-0#:~:text=The%20Department%20of%20Primary%20Industries,employment%20opportunities%20for%20Aboriginal%20people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	<p>As per the website’s description, “The AED program unlocks, activates and accelerates business and employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. Projects are co-designed and delivered in partnership with Aboriginal people, businesses and other entities.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: In-person</p> <p>Service area: Projects are delivered across several regions of Western Australia.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>All projects are intended to grow First Nations businesses and increase First Nations employment. First Nations people are included in the design and delivery of all projects.</p>

C.2.4 South Australia

Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Skills SA Department of Education https://skills.sa.gov.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information 	<p>Skills SA is a state-government website providing information and support for finding, hiring and retaining skilled workers and apprentices. As per the website's description, "Skills SA works in partnership with learners, businesses, peak and representative groups and the community to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> increase skill levels so that more people have job and career opportunities enable a quality, accessible and relevant training eco-system respond to current and emerging skills needs deliver timely services and supports for our customers, clients and partners promote VET pathways and make it easier to navigate the options available through VET." 	<p>Delivery type: Online only</p> <p>Service area: South Australia</p> <p>Cost: Use of website resources is free but some services referred to may incur a cost (such as VET training).</p>	<p>Targets all individuals looking to increase their skill levels and access training, including First Nations Australians, but does not identify First Nations specific supports.</p>
<p>Office of the Industry Advocate https://www.industryadvocate.sa.gov.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	<p>The Office of the Industry Advocate is an advocacy body providing advice and support for SA businesses looking to tender for State Government contracts. As described on the website, the role of the Office of the Industry Advocate is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Promote competitive, capable local businesses to government purchasers and private sector companies delivering contracts on behalf of the government. Recommend reforms to procurement and contracting practices to ensure local businesses are not disadvantaged, Ensure local businesses have a full, fair and reasonable opportunity to win work on major projects under the South Australian Industry Participation Policy." 	<p>Delivery type: Online and phone support, as well as in-person workshops and support at the Adelaide office.</p> <p>Service area: South Australia, office in Adelaide</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>The Office of the Industry Advocate has a specific objective to boost First Nations economic participation, through connecting procurement opportunities to Aboriginal businesses to support capability and capacity building.</p>
<p>Propel SA https://www.propelsa.com.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information 	<p>As described on Propel SA's LinkedIn page, "Propel SA is a not-for-profit community organisation providing low-cost</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online advisory services as well as in-person networking events and workshops.</p>	<p>Targets all South Australian businesses including First Nations</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	business advisory services to the Adelaide metropolitan region and beyond."	<p>Service area: South Australia</p> <p>Cost: Mentoring programs are \$660 for members and \$880 for non-members. Some workshops are free; others incur a small fee.</p>	businesses but does not identify First Nations specific supports.
<p>Stretton Centre https://strettoncentre.com.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information Tailored business coaching/advice 	<p>The Stretton Centre offers business support, spaces for training and workshops, and office spaces for small and medium sized businesses. As listed on the website, support is available for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Starting your business Business growth and expansion Application for grants, initiatives and tenders Access to training, networking and upskilling Coordinating interactions within council Helping you to understand opportunities within our region” 	<p>Delivery type: In-person work and meeting spaces, face-to-face support at the Centre, phone services and online services.</p> <p>Service area: North Adelaide</p> <p>Cost: Business support services are free; rent is charged to hire workspaces and meeting rooms.</p>	Targets all small and medium South Australian businesses, including First Nations small and medium sized businesses, but does not identify First Nations specific supports.
<p>Adelaide Business Hub https://adelaidebusinesshub.com.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice 	As per the website, Adelaide Business Hub is a not-for-profit organisation that “partner with Local, State and Australian Governments to deliver free and low-cost mentoring and training programs that specifically meet the needs of small business owners.”	<p>Delivery type: Face-to-face support at the Hub, in-person workshops, phone services and online services.</p> <p>Service area: Port Adelaide</p> <p>Cost: Mentoring programs incur a fee; rent is charged to hire workspaces and meeting rooms</p>	Targets all small and medium South Australian businesses, including First Nations small and medium sized businesses, but does not identify First Nations specific supports

C.2.5 Northern Territory

Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>NT Small Business Champions Northern Territory Government</p> <p>https://nt.gov.au/industry/business-support/small-business-champions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information 	<p>As described on the website, Small Business Champions provide assistance to NT businesses, Aboriginal Enterprises and non-for-profits to help “identify the types of support” available, including “networking, key contacts, information, tools and resources.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Face-to-face support at offices, over the phone and via email.</p> <p>Service area: Offices across the Northern Territory</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Small businesses champions will help Aboriginal entrepreneurs and business owners identify whether they are eligible for the Aboriginal Business Development Program, listed below.</p>
<p>Aboriginal Business Development Program Northern Territory Government</p> <p>https://nt.gov.au/industry/business-grants-funding/aboriginal-business-development-program-abdp</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>As per the website’s description, “The Aboriginal Business Development Program assists Aboriginal people interested in starting or expanding an existing business in the Northern Territory.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Face-to-face support at offices, over the phone and via email.</p> <p>Service area: Offices across the Northern Territory</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets NT businesses that are at least 50% Aboriginal owned.</p>
<p>Business Growth Program Northern Territory Government</p> <p>https://nt.gov.au/industry/business-grants-funding/business-growth-program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>As per the website’s description, “the Business Growth Program provides grant funding to improve and support local businesses. The Business Growth Program helps businesses access professional services to improve their performance, sustainability and profitability. It also provides mentoring and coaching support.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online and over the phone support, potentially in-person mentoring for successful grant applicants.</p> <p>Service area: Northern Territory</p> <p>Cost: Businesses can apply for up to \$10,000 based on a 50/50 co-contribution.</p>	<p>Targets all local Northern Territory businesses, including First Nations small and medium sized businesses, but does not identify First Nations specific supports.</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Business Innovation Program Northern Territory Government</p> <p>https://nt.gov.au/industry/business-grants-funding/business-innovation-program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice Business loans, grants, or financial assistance Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	<p>As per the website's description, the Business Innovation program "helps businesses develop and commercialise innovative concepts.</p> <p>It provides mentoring, funding, investment and networking opportunities.</p> <p>Participants can get up to \$30,000 funding and help from an advisor to progress and commercialise their concept."</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online and over the phone support, potentially in-person mentoring for successful grant applicants.</p> <p>Service area: Northern Territory</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets all local Northern Territory start-ups and entrepreneurs, including First Nations start-ups and entrepreneurs, but does not identify First Nations specific supports.</p>
<p>Territory Business Centre Northern Territory Government</p> <p>https://business.nt.gov.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information 	<p>As described on the website, the Territory Business Centres "provide assistance to businesses and customers regarding licensing requirements and lodgement, new and existing business guidance, grants and government assistance programs.</p> <p>As part of a concierge service, the Territory Business Centres can also connect businesses and organisations with support and information regardless of which area of government is responsible, for example Licencing NT licences, NT WorkSafe licences or SafeNT licence."</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online, over the phone and in-person support at business centres.</p> <p>Service area: Business centres are located across the Northern Territory. Information is also provided online.</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets all local Northern Territory businesses and entrepreneurs, including First Nations businesses and entrepreneurs, but does not identify First Nations specific supports.</p>
<p>Business Enterprise Centre</p> <p>https://www.becnt.com.au/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice 	<p>As per the website's description, the Business Enterprise Centre "provides a multitude of services covering all of the business skill-sets required to successfully operate your business." This includes provide one on one mentorship and free online courses.</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online, over the phone and in-person support at business centres.</p> <p>Service area: Centres are located in Darwin and Alice Springs. Online services are also provided. Information is also provided online.</p>	<p>Targets all local Northern Territory start-ups and entrepreneurs, including First Nations start-ups and entrepreneurs, but does not identify First Nations specific supports</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
			Cost: Free	
Northern Territory Aboriginal Investment Corporation https://www.ntaic.org.au/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	As per the website’s description, the NTAIC “works with Aboriginal Territorians to achieve economic, social and cultural impact through innovative approaches to investments, beneficial payments and other financial assistance.”	Delivery type: Online and in-person support at the Darwin office, as well as in-person events. Service area: Northern Territory Cost: Free	All services target First Nations people.

C.2.6 Queensland

Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
Business Queensland Queensland Government https://www.business.qld.gov.au/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to information 	As described on the website, “Business Queensland supports Queenslanders to start, run and grow a business by offering personalised, consultative, first contact resolution assistance. They provide targeted information, and access to a range of services and programs to help businesses succeed, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> business health check help to find grants and business support preparing and writing grant applications wellbeing information for small business owners information about licences and permits the small business hotline information about natural disaster assistance.” 	Delivery type: Online resources and over the phone support Service area: Queensland Cost: Free	Targets all Queensland businesses, including First Nations businesses, but does not identify First Nations specific supports

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
<p>Queensland Indigenous Business Network</p> <p>https://www.business.qld.gov.au/running-business/support-services/programs-networks/qibn</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information • Tailored business coaching/advice • Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	<p>As per the website’s description, the Queensland Indigenous Business Network is “an independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation being established and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to help First Nations owned small businesses grow and thrive.</p> <p>Independent of government, QIBN will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide services to support First Nations business growth, including establishing regional hubs and providing business mentoring • assist to link First Nations businesses to procurement opportunities and connect businesses to local networks and stakeholders • provide a channel of representative voice, advocacy, services and support to First Nations businesses.” 	<p>Delivery type: A physical hub will be established in addition to the provision of online services.</p> <p>Service area: Queensland</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>Targets First Nations - owned small businesses</p>
<p>Indigenous Workforce and Skills Development Grant</p> <p><i>Queensland government</i></p> <p>https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/community-orgs/iwsgd</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	<p>As per the website’s description, “The IWSDG program has a project-based delivery model and will fund Indigenous-led projects to address a training and skills challenge or opportunity, with a specific focus on activities that support job outcomes and improved economic participation and advantage.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online services, in-person grant writing workshops across Queensland, phone support.</p> <p>Service area: Queensland</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	<p>All grants are dedicated to fund First Nations designed and led projects that support or respond to local training and workforce needs.</p>
<p>Advance Queensland Programs and Funds</p> <p>https://advance.qld.gov.au/programs-funds</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailored business coaching/advice • Business loans, grants, or financial assistance • Connection with suppliers and/or customers 	<p>As per the website’s description, Advance Queensland provides “a range of opportunities for small businesses to collaborate and build on their innovation and ideas, to help them grow and improve products and services, and compete in a global market.”</p>	<p>Delivery type: Online and over the phone support, online training and resources, in-person events, networking and collaboration at the Agtech and Logistics Hub in Toowoomba.</p>	<p>The broader Advance Queensland initiative targets all small businesses and entrepreneurs in Queensland, including First Nations business owners and entrepreneurs. Some programs and funds are dedicated to First Nations people, such as the</p>

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Service	Service type	Description	Delivery type, service area and cost	First Nations specific supports
			<p>Service area: Queensland</p> <p>Cost: Differs by program and fund.</p>	Indigenous Native Food program and the One Business program.
<p>Small Business Financial Counselling Program</p> <p>https://www.business.qld.gov.au/starting-business/advice-support/support/wellbeing/support-services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice Business loans, grants, or financial assistance 	As described on the website, the Small Business Financial Counselling Program “helps small businesses experiencing financial challenges in their business. Business owners can meet with a financial counsellor for free, one-on-one financial support, including cash flow planning, budgeting, insolvency advice and dispute resolution assistance.”	<p>Delivery type: Financial counsellors have offices across Queensland and will conduct home visits if requested. Services are also available over the phone or video chat.</p> <p>Service area: Queensland</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	Targets all small businesses, including First Nations businesses, however does not identify First Nations specific supports.
<p>Mentoring for Growth</p> <p>https://www.business.qld.gov.au/running-business/growing-business/business-mentoring/mentoring-growth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailored business coaching/advice 	As per the website’s description, Mentoring for Growth “offers eligible businesses free access to volunteer business experts who provide insights, options and suggestions relating to challenges and opportunities they are experiencing.”	<p>Delivery type: online webinars</p> <p>Service area: QLD</p> <p>Cost: Free</p>	Targets all small businesses, including First Nations businesses, however does not identify First Nations specific supports.

Appendix D Accessible versions of graphs

Table 9 | Survey results for: What are your key challenges as a business owner? Select all that apply. Results are separated based on length of time respondents have operated their business for.

LENGTH OF TIME THE BUSINESS HAS OPERATED	0 to 2 years	2 to 5 years	5 or more years	Prefer not to say	Total (percent)
Accessing funding/capital	32	21	26	2	81 (72 percent)
Navigating procurement processes	20	13	14	0	47 (42 percent)
Accessing support in developing business skills	17	12	10	0	39 (35 percent)
Navigating other administrative processes/requirements (e.g. invoicing and taxation)	20	10	8	0	38 (34 percent)
Accessing markets from regional/remote locations	13	10	14	0	39 (35 percent)
Hiring staff	5	13	18	0	36 (32 percent)
Other	5	2	9	1	17 (15 percent)

Table 10 | Survey results for: The hub's services meet my needs as a business owner. Results are separated based on length of time respondents have operated their business for.

LENGTH OF TIME THE BUSINESS HAS OPERATED	0 to 2 years	2 to 5 years	5 or more years	Prefer not to say	Total (percent)
Strongly disagree	1	0	1	0	2 (2 percent)
Disagree	4	0	4	0	8 (7 percent)
Neither agree or disagree	5	4	6	1	16 (14 percent)
Agree	14	11	9	1	35 (30 percent)
Strongly agree	16	17	19	0	52 (46 percent)

Table 11 | Survey results for: What hub services have you found most valuable? Select all that apply. Results are separated based on length of time respondents have operated their business for. The range of services for this survey question were informed by what the hubs were intended to deliver under the IBSS and as stipulated by their contracts.

LENGTH OF TIME THE BUSINESS HAS OPERATED	0 to 2 years	2 to 5 years	5 or more years	Prefer not to say	Total (percent)
Connecting my business with potential employees	7	4	6	0	17 (15 percent)
Other	8	4	8	0	20 (18 percent)
Training opportunities	15	11	7	0	32 (28 percent)
Facilitating opportunities for collaborative partnerships	13	9	11	0	34 (30 percent)
Connecting my business with buyers	10	15	14	1	40 (35 percent)
A working space	17	10	14	0	41 (35 percent)
Referrals to other services	18	18	12	0	48 (42 percent)
Practical information	18	14	17	1	50 (44 percent)
Someone to speak to about my challenges	17	16	17	0	50 (44 percent)
Mentoring and advice	31	18	17	0	66 (58 percent)

Table 12 | Survey results for: Why do you access other services? Select all that apply:

REASON FOR ACCESSING OTHER SERVICES	Total (percent)
Their service is higher quality than the hub	3 (6 percent)
They are easier to access (easier to get an appointment)	3 (6 percent)
I receive services faster	7 (14 percent)
They offer loans	15 (30 percent)
They offer more specialised support (e.g. legal advice)	19 (38 percent)
Other	21 (42 percent)

Table 13 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The hub offers its services in a culturally appropriate and culturally safe way

THE HUB OFFERS ITS SERVICES IN A CULTURALLY SAFE WAY	Total (percent)
Disagree	1 (1 percent)
Neither agree or disagree	14 (12 percent)
Agree	24 (21 percent)
Strongly agree	74 (65 percent)

Table 14 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The hubs have supported my business to grow, resulting in benefits to my community

THE HUBS HAVE SUPPORTED MY BUSINESS TO GROW, RESULTING IN BENEFITS TO MY COMMUNITY	Total (percent)
Strongly disagree	4 (3 percent)
Disagree	12 (11 percent)
Neither agree or disagree	30 (26 percent)
Agree	25 (22 percent)
Strongly agree	43 (38 percent)

Table 15 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the statement: The hub's service is high quality. Results are separated based on length of time respondents have operated their business for.

LENGTH OF TIME THE BUSINESS HAS OPERATED	0 to 2 years	2 to 5 years	5 years or more	Prefer not to say	Total (percent)
Strongly disagree	1	0	0	0	1 (1 percent)
Disagree	3	0	2	0	5 (4 percent)
Neither agree or disagree	3	4	5	0	12 (11 percent)
Agree	13	13	11	2	39 (35 percent)
Strongly agree	20	15	21	0	56 (50 percent)

Table 16 | Survey results for: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The hub staff are available to provide help when I need it

THE HUB STAFF ARE AVAILABLE TO PROVIDE HELP WHEN I NEED IT	Total (percent)
Strongly disagree	2 (2 percent)
Disagree	7 (6 percent)
Neither agree or disagree	12 (11 percent)
Agree	37 (32 percent)
Strongly agree	55 (49 percent)



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