To whom it may concern

A submission to the Review of AIATSIS

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Review of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. I have been a Member for many years, and served in the past on the Research Committee, other Committees, as Deputy Chair of the Council and as Chair of the Council. As the Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, I use AIATSIS (‘the Institute’) and encourage my students to do so as well. I have been the recipient of a grant, and so too have my students.

General comments:

AIATSIS is an important national research institution that provides a range of services to researchers, Indigenous people and communities, native title practitioners and the public across Australia and overseas.

Since its inception, the status of Indigenous Australians and our standing in the Australian community has changed radically. This has come about with the changes instigated by the 1967 Referendum, the Woodward Inquiry into Land Rights, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, many other commissions of inquiry and investigations, the recognition of a range of Indigenous rights, such as land rights and cultural heritage rights, native title, the Reconciliation process, and the ‘Close the Gap’ campaign and policies.

The Institute’s role has also changed with these events.

Indeed, the Institute is the preeminent research and collecting body for Australian Indigenous people and is vital to the preservation of our linguistic and cultural heritage, history and socioeconomic status. Like myself, every researcher in any discipline, field or practice related to Indigenous Australians would have used one of the services, the library or research grants program. The funding levels to the Institute have decreased over a number of years, and this has resulted in a decrease of services and functions, including statutory functions.
The funding levels to the Institute would need to be increased if we are to expect the high levels compliance with the Act, with service obligations and innovation that were the hallmark of the Institute in past years.

I make brief comment below in relation to each of the matters (for which I have relevant knowledge or experience) provided in the announcement of the terms of reference:

1. **AIATSIS’ current role and functions and future strategic directions, against its legislated objectives;**

Since the AIATSIS Act was passed back in the 1960s, there have been radical changes in research practices, ethics, technologies and archiving practices. In particular, it should be noted that the Institute was established ostensibly because of the jeopardy in which Aboriginal languages and cultures were placed at the time, and established precisely to record these languages and cultures for posterity, in a 'before it is too late' paradigm. Indeed, rates of language extinction in Australia exceed the rates on all other continents. But the approach to preservation and maintenance has changed markedly and the primary focus is no longer on the authoritative and god-like researcher but on community capacity building. This is evident in the vision of The National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia [http://www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP_vision.htm]:

> The vision for the ‘National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia’ (NRP) is to systematically record and document the unique and endangered performance traditions of Indigenous Australia. Through this process, it will assist in the development of Indigenous Knowledge Centres and similar digital archives as primary repositories for locally recorded and documented materials, and a secure national repository in which copies of all data generated can be archived. The simplicity and accessibility of digital technologies today are changing relationships between performers, scholars and archivists in ways that empower Indigenous communities to determine how their unique performance traditions are recorded, documented and accessed in light of international best practice. Rather than being driven by academic agendas, all recording and documentation under this project will be directed by local elders and driven by local priorities. Primary responsibility for the management of archived data will reside with Indigenous Knowledge Centres and similar digital archives with assistance from partner organisations.

It is important that this relationship between the Institute and community archives and knowledge centres is made a priority in any reform of AIATSIS because of the ethical and other considerations that AIATSIS places frontline researchers in with regard to collecting, archiving and ownership and ethics.

The Act has served the Institute well since its enactment in 1964 and the community of researchers and other professionals that has developed as partners in the work of the Institute.
In terms of future strategic directions, some change is required, in my opinion:

- The Institute should be required under the Act to partner with Indigenous community archives and knowledge centres, as well as public collecting institutions, according to strict criteria, to increase Indigenous access to its collections and to provide greater scope for depositing master copies of community archives. This would require increased funding but would be essential to preserve the cultural heritage of Indigenous Australians. The criteria might include: community collections under threat of deterioration or destruction and the cultural and research significance of the collection, among others.

- The Institute should be required under the Act to partner with universities and research institutions to ensure that its staff and research community are part of the wider Australian and global research community, aware of key developments in research practice and ethics, and participate in research and scholarly projects and events to ensure best practice and outcomes.

- The Institute should be required under the Act to prioritise research into, and collection of materials relating to, Australian languages and performance (particularly song and dance) traditions because of the high rates of loss and extinction. Research and documentation is urgently required to avoid even greater loss of languages. (That the Online Dictionaries project no longer exists and the online dictionaries no longer available is a great loss to not just the research community, but to Indigenous speakers of their languages and to the nation.)

2. How AIATSIS meets the needs and expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and researchers and whether there is an unmet need;

It is not possible for the Institute to meet the totality of the needs and expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and researchers because of its steadily reducing funding levels. The unmet needs are great. I have already mentioned the urgent need for Australian languages and performance traditions to be a research priority. There are many other urgent needs, but this, in my opinion, is of the greatest importance.

The following remain key priorities for research:

- The health disadvantages of Indigenous Australians
- The socioeconomic status of Indigenous Australians
- The identification, documentation and protection strategies for rock art across Australia
- The arrest and imprisonment rates for Indigenous Australians and contributing factors;
- Greater collaboration with local community archives and Indigenous knowledge centres.

3. AIATSIS’ role in supporting the Australian research sector, promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies and developing the capacity of Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander researchers; and

4. The nature of its current relationships with universities and a framework for possible future roles in supporting researchers, higher degree by research students, research supervisors and career researchers in areas of Indigenous studies;

The Institute was an effective body for several decades and built up a community of specialist researchers in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies and developing the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. The Institute’s capacity to continue this important work has diminished with falling funding levels. The community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers is increasing gradually as more and more Indigenous people complete postgraduate awards. The Institute has therefore become an essential hub for the activities of this growing community, in providing key conferences, library and collection facilities and other services.

It is essential that the Institute is able to continue to provide these services.

I have recommended that the Institute’s Act be amended to require it to partner with universities and other research institutions to that it is not isolated from the mainstream research community and that the Indigenous research community has the institutional means to continue to strengthen the Indigenous research community and provide high quality services.

5. The role of AIATSIS in maintaining and promoting the highest standards in ethical research with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous collections management;

Ethics guidelines and procedures are a critical issue that the Institute has dealt with responsibly and effectively for many years. I recommend the Institute’s ethical standards and procedures to all researchers in this field because they are effective and tested in the communities.

6. The impact and cost effectiveness of the AIATSIS managed grant program (and the Research Grants) and the Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowships employment program;

Of greatest disappointment is the closure of the Institute’s competitive research grants program as this is no longer available to Indigenous students, individual researchers and communities, academic researchers. This closure halted the steady research output of a large community of researchers and has especially disadvantaged those who do not qualify or were not sufficiently competitive for the limited Australian Research Council grant system or those of other competitive research grant schemes (such as the NHMRC).

It is my recommendation that the Research Grants program be re-instituted and that funding be identified for this to occur.

The Indigenous Visiting Research Fellowships have been a most necessary innovation and have served to give experience to early career Indigenous researchers that would
not have been available to them otherwise. I support the continuation (and if possible, the expansion) of this very important scheme.

7. The place of AIATSIS in conducting and facilitating research in Indigenous knowledge and community based research;

In past decades, the Institute instigated the then new and innovative research in Indigenous knowledge and community based research, as well as social and oral history and autobiography by individual researchers. Without the Institute this would not have occurred as, with a few exceptions, university and academic researchers were reluctant or unwilling to step outside of their disciplinary traditions to undertake such innovations. The closure of the research grant program has put a stop to this kind of innovation. Because of the levels of racism and ignorance in Australian society, it is essential that the Institute be resourced to continue to undertake this kind of innovation in the future. New strategic directions at the Institute would be necessary to ensure that it plays such a role.

8. The promotional role of AIATSIS in encouraging a greater understanding in the general community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (including through the provision of information, publications and outreach activities); and

9. AIATSIS’ role in preserving and disseminating information and knowledge about its cultural collection and how the collection can be best utilised and preserved including through digitisation; and

10. Strategies for the expansion, maintenance and management of the digitisation of the cultural resource collection in order to preserve it and make it available to Indigenous communities and individuals and students and researchers; and

While the Institute’s publishing arm produces outstanding publications which reach a wide public, the Institute’s ability to promote understanding of Indigenous people, culture and history, and its magnificent collection, is restricted by its apparent inability to digitise its collections and make key materials available online. The digital divide is most apparent at the Institute: with such a collection, and so little of it available digitally in the age of the Internet and social media, the urgent need to remedy this situation should be one of the highest priorities.

The development of a digitization and online accessibility project at the Institute is matter of the highest priority.

The Mura catalogue of the Institute Library was a great innovation, but even with documents that originate in electronic form, few of them are available on the catalogue. All PhDs (with a few exceptions) are required by universities to be made available online. The Mura catalogue does not include links to such published theses that relate to Indigenous matters. There are many other categories of publications and materials that are not available online from the Institute catalogue. This is a major oversight probably due again to the lack of funding and resources.
Indigenous community archives and Indigenous knowledge centres should become part of the Institute’s operations, especially in relation to raising understanding of Indigenous linguist and cultural heritage. (see above).

The digitization of native title documents is also required, although not necessarily made available online. Much of the documentation provided to the Tribunal and courts in the course of native title claim hearings is of great importance as primary research material and should be digitised for future generations. Negotiations with Native Title corporations, courts, legal libraries and the National Native Title Council should be conducted by the Institute principal with a view to instigating such a project.

11. Whether current circumstances and demands warrant any changes in structure, governance and/or funding to equip AIATSIS to effectively undertake its mission.

The Institute’s governance model has shrunk over several decades and the once strong and robust relationship between the Council and its members has diminished considerably. This relationship needs to be strengthened by re-instituting the research events that once marked the annual calendar of the Institute. The Institute also needs to have a stronger regional presence and this could be achieved through partnership with universities and Indigenous community knowledge centres. I remain supportive of the existing governance structure, the election and appointment of Council members and the criteria for membership.