

Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group Submission to the 2026 NRI Roadmap Issues Paper

Northern Australia is the location where Net Zero, critical minerals, renewable energy and regional development agendas intersect with the Action Plan and the wider task of building Indigenous capabilities and capacities. The Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group (IRG) has recommended treating the Action Plan as an *infrastructure legacy portfolio*: assessing investments by their contribution to (1) expanded real-economy production, (2) stabilised earned incomes across the year, and (3) growth in locally held assets, supported by a long-horizon frame that tracks capability, resilience, institutional capacity, ownership and substitution away from program dependence. **This submission proposes that National Research Infrastructure (NRI) be configured as the measurement and learning backbone for this legacy mission.**

Q1. Definition of NRI

Yes. The definition should explicitly recognise NRI as part of a long-term infrastructure legacy portfolio rather than solely as a research support service.

Proposed wording: **National Research Infrastructure comprises the nationally significant assets, facilities, data resources and highly skilled personnel that provide services supporting leading-edge research, innovation and capability-building over the long term. It is accessible to publicly and privately funded users across Australia and internationally, may be single-sited, virtual or distributed, and is governed in ways that: (a) contribute to Net Zero and other national priorities; (b) build enduring productive capacity, stable earned incomes and locally held assets, particularly in regional and remote Australia; and (c) uphold appropriate Indigenous data governance at the framework level while enabling low-friction data flows for clearly defined system purposes.**

Q2. Indigenous data, self-determination and benefit sharing

In northern Australia, future NRI investments should be designed to place high-quality, timely information in the hands of Indigenous decision-makers so they can steer governments and markets towards outcomes that build capability, reduce reliance and grow locally held assets.

The relevant starting point is the IRG's indicator frame: expansion of production, stabilisation of earned incomes and growth of locally held assets, with companion indicators for capability, resilience, institutional strength, ownership and substitution. Over the next 3–5 years, NRI should therefore:

- establish agreed purposes and indicator sets for Indigenous futures, aligned with the Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data and Closing the Gap Priority Reforms;
- configure integrated data flows across schooling, VET, higher education, employment, enterprise and infrastructure programs in the North; and
- support regular (e.g. quarterly and annual) reporting that enables Indigenous organisations and governments to see whether production, incomes and assets are moving together in the desired direction.

Q3. Indigenous Research Data Commons and uplift across NRI

An appropriate balance is to position the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Research Data Commons as the engine room for common metrics and data flows, with mainstream NRI expected to interoperate with, and contribute to, this capability.

The Commons should:

- co-design and maintain core data models, indicators and time series for Indigenous wealth- and capability-building (production, incomes, assets, education-to-employment pipelines, enterprise dynamics, household resilience, institutional capacity and substitution);
- establish clear, up-front rules for ongoing administrative data supply from relevant systems (education, skills, employment, enterprise support, infrastructure programs); and
- embed Indigenous governance at the framework level so that routine data flows for agreed purposes do not require continual renegotiation.

Discipline- and theme-based NRI should then align their designs with these models where relevant and treat appropriate sharing as the default within agreed guardrails. In northern Australia, the IRG legacy mission and its measures should be treated as priority use-cases for the Commons.

Q4. Current humanities NRI priorities

Three priorities for humanities-oriented NRI are:

1. **Infrastructure for observing social and institutional transitions** in regions such as northern Australia as Net Zero, critical minerals and Action Plan investments reshape communities and institutions, drawing on longitudinal, place-based datasets.
2. **Infrastructure for generational wealth and capability analytics**, integrating production–income–asset indicators with companion measures of capability, resilience, institutional capacity, ownership and substitution, and supporting regional “observatories” that explain divergent trajectories across places.
3. **Humanities-informed AI and decision-support environments**, using the wealth-creation metrics as a backbone for AI-assisted scenario testing, reflection and institutional learning in policy and program design.

Q5. Emerging humanities areas (3–5 years)

Over the next 3–5 years, NRI investment will be particularly important for:

- **Design and testing of simple, stable accountability frames** for complex systems, including experimental work on how production–income–asset metrics and their companion indicators are constructed, communicated and used in practice.
- **Evidence-informed market and policy design**, with linked data on procurement, finance, regulation and firm-level outcomes (including Indigenous enterprises) to assess whether market rules are compounding participation into ownership and asset-building.
- **Learning-systems research**, capturing how institutions interpret signals and adjust, including measures such as time from signal to adjustment and the breadth of regions where capability, reduced reliance and ownership advance together.

Q6. Specialist vs generalist humanities NRI workforce

A hybrid model is recommended. Specialist humanities infrastructure roles (for example, in social and institutional analytics and Indigenous-focused data environments) require deep disciplinary expertise and strong relational capacity. At the same time, cross-cutting NRI (environmental, health, economic, AI) require generalist staff with sufficient humanities understanding to embed social, ethical and institutional considerations in design and governance.

Q7. Critical skills for the NRI workforce

Irrespective of technical area, NRI staff should possess:

- relational capability and partnership skills, particularly for sustained work with Indigenous and regional partners;
- practical data-ethics and governance capability, drawing on the Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data and Closing the Gap Priority Reforms to **clarify purposes and enable safe flows**;
- translational literacy regarding how infrastructure supports production, incomes and asset growth in specific regions; and
- a strong orientation to learning and stewardship, including the ability to read indicators, engage in “what changed and why” reflections, and adjust practice accordingly.

Q8. Retaining staff and adding new capabilities

Retention and capability development are likely to be strongest where NRI roles are clearly situated within long-term regional missions. In northern Australia this implies:

- explicit linkage of NRI roles to the Action Plan, Net Zero and critical-minerals agendas; and
- structured pathways for Indigenous and regional people into NRI roles (scholarships, cadetships, apprenticeships and traineeships) via regional study hubs, universities and TAFEs, aligned with the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, National Skills Agreement, Jobs and Skills Australia and Universities Accord reforms.

NCRIS and related funding arrangements should recognise Indigenous and regional workforce outcomes as a component of facility performance.

Q9–Q12. Translation and industry

For translation and industry, three principles are proposed:

- NRI should be regarded as a **real-economy enabler** anchored to the northern investment spine (Action Plan, Net Zero, Future Made in Australia, critical minerals, First Nations Clean Energy Strategy, NAIF), lowering the cost and risk of entry for Indigenous and regional enterprises.
- Translation metrics should be aligned with the production–income–asset frame and its companion indicators (capability, resilience, institutional strength, ownership, substitution), especially where NRI is expected to catalyse new industries.
- NRI should support **learning systems** by reporting not only outputs, but also how quickly and coherently institutions respond to data signals, and how many regions show

simultaneous improvements in capability, reduced reliance and increased ownership.

Q13. Prioritising existing suggestions (Survey responses)

When identifying up to three Survey suggestions to prioritise, preference should be given to those that:

- strengthen Indigenous-governed data and digital capabilities oriented to system-level metrics for capability, wealth and reliance;
- enhance regional and Northern research infrastructure that underpins Net Zero, critical minerals, environmental stewardship and place-based humanities/social research; and
- deepen public-interest digital observability, including humanities-led infrastructures that support the production–income–asset and legacy frames.

Specific Survey response numbers can then be selected against these criteria.

Q14. Additional capability suggestion

Northern Australia Indigenous Futures Observatory and Learning Infrastructure (NAIFOLI)

We propose the establishment of NAIFOLI as a distributed NRI capability for northern Australia that integrates environmental, economic, social and educational system-performance data under Indigenous-informed governance and provides tools to track production, incomes, assets and intergenerational capability using the agreed legacy indicators and timelines. It would be co-located with regional hubs and Indigenous organisations to build local technical and analytic capacity, and support AI-native learning and decision-support consistent with the National Digital Research Infrastructure Strategy. Over a 10–15-year horizon, NAIFOLI’s mission would be to:

- provide a stable evidence base for the Action Plan and related strategies;
- demonstrate how NRI can assist in tracking and accelerating capability, resilience, ownership and substitution away from program dependence; and
- build a pipeline of Indigenous and regional researchers, data specialists and infrastructure professionals through co-designed pathways from school through VET and higher education into NRI careers.

BIOGRAPHIES

Professor Martin Nakata, Chair – Townsville, Qld



Professor Martin Nakata, AM, PhD, is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Indigenous Education & Strategy at James Cook University (Member of the Northern Australia University Alliance).

Prof. Nakata has over 30-years of Indigenous education, research, and community engagement experience.

Troy Fraser, Doomadgee (Gulf of Carpentaria), Qld



Mr. Fraser is Chief Executive Officer at Doomadgee Aboriginal Shire Council, and formerly worked as Community, Youth and Economic Development Manager at the Aboriginal Development Benefits Trust.

Mr. Fraser represented the IRG at several parliamentary inquiries and on one occasion Mr. Fraser’s insights prompted the parliamentary select committee to ask for a supplementary submission on the topic.

Alinta McGuire, Darwin, NT



Ms. Alinta McGuire has experience in the banking industry, having served at Westpac as the State Manager for Indigenous Banking in the Northern Territory from 2015 to 2024. In September 2024, she commenced in a new position as Director of Impact and Innovation Learning Projects at Impact North. Impact North is a not-for-profit organisation empowering social entrepreneurship. Ms. McGuire has strong networks and strategic leadership in empowering Indigenous communities.

Damien Djerrkura, Nhulunbuy, NT



Mr. Damien Djerrkura is the CEO of the North East Arnhem Land (NEAL) Aboriginal Corporation, which oversees the development of North East Arnhem Land’s resources. Mr. Djerrkura demonstrates expertise in Indigenous community development, strategic program design, stakeholder engagement and training and development.

Nini Mills, Broome, WA



Ms. Mills is CEO of Nyamba Buru Yawuru, the operational company of the Yawuru Native Title Holders Aboriginal Corporation based in Broome. Ms. Mills has previously held senior management and leadership roles within government agencies and community organisations that are focused on leading strategic direction, policy reform, program design and service delivery.

Flora Warrior, Torres Strait, Qld



Ms. Warrior has a background in Indigenous health and is also a former local government CEO. Ms Warrior is also involved as a community advocate in the Education, Economic Development, Health, Languages and Fisheries space. Ms Warrior is well known throughout North Queensland Indigenous communities for her Cultural Brokerage work and was also a state and national winner in the People Development category at the Queensland (2018) and Australian Seafood Industry Awards 2019.

She has a Bachelor of Arts, and a Master of Business Administration, is a principal consultant in her business, Saltwater Blue Consultancy Services and is involved in several sectors.