

Batchelor Campus

Prof Peter Stephenson
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research)

T: 08 8939 7166

F: 08 8939 7331

M: 0418 487 920

peter.stephenson@batchelor.edu.au

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The Secretary, Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Batchelor Institute submission to the Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities

Background

This response is submitted in the context of a Batchelor Institute being a relatively new player in the research training arena. Batchelor Institute's main historical emphasis has been to serve the tertiary education interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through the provision of higher education and vocational education and training programs, which engage students in the development of appropriate responses to issues of cultural survival, maintenance, renewal and transformation, within the context of the national and international social, political and economic order. Hence the vision of the Institute is: 'A unique place of knowledge and skills, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians can undertake journeys of learning for empowerment and advancement while strengthening identity' (Strategic Plan, 2001).

The recent establishment of a Division of Research within the Institute and the accreditation of postgraduate research programs (including the accreditation of a PhD program for commencement in 2008) has positioned Batchelor Institute to build on and orient its existing and future staffing and student profile toward key areas of research activity.

Through its emerging research and research training programs, the Institute is now in a stronger position to provide opportunities for students, staff and community members to engage in research that documents knowledge and/or brings about meaningful change to the lives of Indigenous individuals and populations. The Institute's research agenda is to:

- a. provide a nationally and internationally recognised centre of excellence in Indigenous research;
- b. promote the value of research within Indigenous Australian contexts;
- c. make a positive change to lives in remote, rural and urban Indigenous communities;
- d. privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge and epistemology; and
- e. embed Indigenous methodologies within practice.

Context

Throughout the world there is a renewed interest in researching Indigenous Knowledge, and using it innovatively in commercial areas such as environmental management, pharmacy, health and the arts. Moreover, throughout Australia there are well-documented inequities in Indigenous Social, Educational and Health issues that need to be addressed through an Indigenous perspective. Both provide an imperative to change research policy in Australia so that more Indigenous researchers are trained, particularly given the fact that in the last ten years only 2% or less of those graduating with research awards have been Indigenous Australians.

While it should also be noted that the participation of Australia's Indigenous people in *undergraduate* tertiary education has rarely met Government targets, those that do gain first degrees rarely see research degrees as a high priority. Anecdotally, one reason for this is because graduates of VTE and university undergraduate programs can find well paid employment without the need to pursue higher degree research qualifications.

It is therefore essential to make full-time research training more financially rewarding to Indigenous graduates, and the environment in which they receive the training less threatening and more supportive. Furthermore schemes that continue to provide training and opportunities for qualified Indigenous researchers in academia need to be more financially competitive.

The following comments are therefore made with respect to the research training and prospects of Indigenous candidates.

Batchelor Campus

Post Office

Batchelor NT 0845

T: 08 8939 7111

Central Australian Campus

PO Box 9170

Alice Springs NT 0871

T: 08 8951 8300

Barkly Annexe

PO Box 595

Tennant Ck NT 0861

T: 08 8962 4407

Darwin Annexe

PO Box 106

Parap NT 0804

T: 08 8946 3800

East Arnhem Annexe

PO Box 1621

Nhulunbuy NT 0881

T: 08 8987 0482

Katherine Annexe

PO Box 1896

Katherine NT 0851

T: 08 8973 8488

www.batchelor.edu.au

enquiries@batchelor.edu.au

The contribution that Australian Universities can make to research in Australia

1. Contribution of Research Training programs to competitiveness

Formal research training schemes built into all Australian research training schemes can only *improve* and *enhance* the competitiveness of future Australian researchers.

- a. Provision of funding to institutions should be tied to the completion of a basic core of relevant research skills training that is continually reviewed and updated [see d below].
- b. In the case of Abstudy, which is absolutely essential for Indigenous students, it should be able to support a wider variety of travel to and from the training institution – not only that required for formal training units, but also personal development courses, seminars and conferences.
- c. There should be financial and time allowance support for trainee researchers to be placed in non-academic institutions whose core business is research, so that those outside academia at the cutting edge can have input to training.
- d. Those within academia are themselves given the opportunity to continually 'keep up to date' with what they will deliver to their trainee researchers

2. Effectiveness of current research training schemes

If completion figures and attrition rates are taken as a measure of effectiveness of current research training schemes for Indigenous representatives then there is, at present, a significant issue to overcome for Indigenous success. This is, in part due, to the following:

- a) There is a larger economic and social cost for Indigenous Australian students who engage in research training
- b) Those who have worked their way through to the research training stage still have gaps to be filled particularly in literacy and numeracy.
- c) The current schemes lack the flexibility to accommodate the needs of Indigenous research students
- d) When Indigenous Research students are being trained they require a greater time investment than mainstream students

Suggestions to overcome the lack of effectiveness.

- a) Enable research candidatures to be more flexible in the time required for completion, and enable the temporary movement of students in and out, but with a specified cut-off.
- b) Pay higher rates of Abstudy according to achievement of milestones
- c) Providing funding for Indigenous researchers to live in on-campus accommodation either free or subsidised
- d) Provide a dedicated allowance for a computer, necessary software and text books.
- e) Provide a paid mentor or buddy scheme

3. Adequacy of current research training schemes

It is difficult to give anything other than an unsupported opinion on 'adequacy'. Suggestions on how it could be improved, again in the specific situation of Indigenous researcher students, include:

- a) Dedicated funding for academics running training schemes to update their own knowledge and skills
- b) Formalised avenues [other than course accreditation] for non-academic institutions involved in research to have an input into training
- c) Paid opportunities for Indigenous trainee researchers to work in non-academic research institutions.

Challenges in training, recruiting and retaining high quality graduates & staff

1. Adequacy of training & support

In order to retain high quality Indigenous researchers, the following is needed:

- a) An improved level of support for neophyte researchers including mentoring and buddies
- b) ongoing training and reinforcement of research skills
- c) programs that help researchers understand the culture of any new organisation in which they are placed.
- d) The opportunity for the researchers to continue or be involved in issues that have for them a high priority and which could ultimately benefit the wider community

2. Factors that determine whether graduates would pursue a career in research

One of the most obvious factors that drives most of the trainee Indigenous researchers at this institution is the desire to research a cause – be it a threatened culture, language, or issues such as suicide and mental health. The desire to make a difference is an important factor which may not necessarily match the opportunities for research.

Other factors would include:

- Perceived prestige and status
- Financial reward
- Ability to work in a supportive environment

3. Opportunities for career advancement for research graduates

There does not appear to be a shortage of opportunities for qualified Indigenous research graduates. Rather there seems to be more positions than highly qualified Indigenous researchers. At the moment this unmet demand is felt both within academia and outside. Opportunities outside academia are both broad – such as in government institutions where research would form only part of a position, and narrow, such as in specific Indigenous organisations researching specific issues.

4. Whether Australian academic researchers are an ageing group and if so, any future impacts.

The current mean age of Indigenous students completing research awards in Batchelor Institute is a lot higher than those in mainstream Australian tertiary institutions [approx. 50 years]. This is to be expected, given the fact that most have had to overcome poor secondary education and completed their first degree at a later age, and then generally work in paid employment to pay off debt before reconsidering further studies in academia

Until the schooling problems for Indigenous students at primary and secondary levels are addressed it is not unrealistic to expect that for some ten or so years into the future, Indigenous researchers will be just starting a research career when many non-Indigenous researchers are thinking of finishing theirs. In some institutions this will require a change in attitudes, in others this will not.

Questions in relation to this response should be directed to
Professor Peter Stephenson
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research)
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
C/- Post Office
BATCHELOR NT 0845

P: (08) 8939 7166
F: (08) 8939 7331
E: peter.stephenson@batchelor.edu.au

