

**SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAITS ISLANDER
AFFAIRS**

**NEEDS OF URBAN DWELLING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER PEOPLES – COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY**

**A SUBMISSION FROM WARAWARA – DEPARTMENT OF
INDIGENOUS STUDIES, AND PROFESSOR ANNETTE
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The following brief submission represents only some responses to the *Terms of Reference* to the Inquiry. A longer lead time would have given us the opportunity to canvass views more widely and to expand on the various points being made below. However both myself (Professor A. Hamilton) and staff of Warawara – the Department of Indigenous Studies, would be happy to provide further information in the form of supplementary documentation were that considered relevant by the Committee.

The principal views we wish to put to the Committee are as follows:

1. The needs of country and metropolitan urban dwelling people cannot be clearly differentiated from the needs of rural and remote indigenous communities. Many people travel frequently, or at different phases of their lives, between these situations. Many families have members living in several different locations and areas, including capital cities and remote and rural communities. Increasing numbers of adults and children are travelling from remote and rural communities to metropolitan locations for education, as is the case with a number of indigenous students at Macquarie. Therefore, while some programs and projects require different approaches due to location, there is a continuum rather than an absolute distinction between “urban” and “non-urban” contexts.
2. It is our view that one of the most important needs is for enhanced ability to participate in decision-making and self-management within the local area (whether it is rural settlement, country town or city suburb). A key to this must be carefully targeted and strongly supported programs for education and training which are consonant with indigenous community and individual values, and in harmony with existing family and occupational demands and expectations. Such programs must be constructed and delivered with substantial indigenous input, with grass-roots support, and with adequate resources and facilities to meet the distinctive needs of the communities and individuals.

3. Urban (and other) indigenous people are enabled and empowered regarding community participation when they feel confident and able to express themselves and their views, and believe their own abilities will be recognised and respected. Educational programs designed to enhance their abilities and provide a supportive but rigorous skill-base will significantly meet these needs, above and beyond the actual content provided within the programs.
4. Models for partnership governance need to be developed possibly by targeted and specifically funded programs which incorporate both indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives. Such programs could be developed through a co-ordinated research program which takes into account the differing needs in different states and areas.
5. The specific needs of young people in relation to housing, health and employment will no doubt be addressed in greater detail by other submissions. Here, we would like to address briefly the specific need to provide mechanisms for enhancing the educational achievements and skill-base of indigenous young people who have left school perhaps without higher formal qualifications and wish to extend their study at a somewhat later date. Programs providing a mix of on-campus and distance education are particularly suited to indigenous young people who have entered the workforce but want to increase their own abilities to participate both in higher levels of employment and in their communities generally. Such programs also limit the amount of time young people are required to be absent from their own communities, while still permitting a diverse experience of urban institutions.
6. Further to the needs of indigenous young people, the question of early childhood and pre-school education should be urgently addressed and the training needs recognised. This affects not only the young child in its earliest developmental years and phases, but also the parents, the majority of whom are themselves young people, in many cases under 20 years of age. Proper and adequate provision of child-care and appropriate indigenous pre-school facilities in urban, country and rural communities not only assists the children access a broad range of social, developmental and educational experiences, but also permits their parents to engage in further education and training, employment and community participation.
7. The maintenance of Aboriginal and TSI culture in urban areas depends in large part on the ability of indigenous people to maintain their links to family and community while participating in the broader parameters of economic and social activities. Programs which strengthen individual abilities while recognising and honouring indigenous knowledge, history and experience go far to assisting personal and community development.
8. With respect to urban housing needs there are a number of useful references which we are sure the Committee will already have been directed to, for example, the Australian Institute Discussion Paper #24 September 1999 "*Public Expenditure on Services for Indigenous People*" and the ABS 1999 "*The Health and Welfare of Australia's ATSI Peoples*". An issue which we believe requires explicit attention and positive policy change concerns the need for transparency

and accountability in the funding for government services. Of particular concern is the need to make clear the extent to which funding intended for housing and social services is affected by the imposition of such things as “administrative levies” which substantially reduce the amount of funding which actually reaches communities.

It is in the light of the above considerations that we wish to draw to the Committee’s attention the existence of programs specifically designed to support the development and education needs of the ATSI community currently in place at Macquarie University, and to indicate some recommendations which we believe would further assist the development of these programs. It is our belief that these programs have the capacity to materially and socially enhance the ability of indigenous peoples’ participation at every level of community life. It is our wish to deepen, extend and enhance our program offerings for indigenous students, and at the same time extend an indigenous perspective to all levels of the University and general community through the integration of indigenous studies and activities within the fundamental goals and structures of the University.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMS - WARAWARA AT MACQUARIE

Indigenous access and participation rates at Australian Universities have continued to improve, such that indigenous representation at Universities is now approaching a similar ratio to that of indigenous people in Australian society (2% and approximately 3%). Course completion and student progress rates however lag significantly, and when level of study and discipline areas are examined it is clear there is a long way to go before outcomes will approach those of the wider community.

While the educational needs of students in remote regions, larger settlements, and country towns may not seem the same as those of students living in cities, there are many similarities. Indigenous students often come from educationally deprived backgrounds, may have family responsibilities at an early age as well as needing to support elderly parents and various younger kinfolk, may be in uncertain occupations or in occupations which do not lend themselves to regular study, and often need to travel on family and community business, taking them away from their centre of study. Thus, enrolment in study on the normal pattern (regular attendance week by week over a series of semesters and years) may be equally difficult for many urban people as it is for country town and rural dwellers.

An Aboriginal educational program has been in place at Macquarie for over 10 years. Macquarie, in the green hills of Sydney’s northern suburbs, may seem an unlikely place for a successful indigenous higher education program. However its success does not arise from serving a “natural” catchment area, but rather from its long-term and active commitment to developing a program for indigenous higher education based on the recognition of the actual needs of indigenous students and their communities. We believe it is due to the provision of block-release based courses, the particular course mix at Macquarie, and increasingly the provision of a strong indigenous studies program across a number of disciplines that our programs have developed the success-rates we have observed especially over recent years.

Macquarie University and the University of Technology Sydney between them account for 21 % of all indigenous postgraduate students and 25% of all indigenous higher degree students (see p. 23 of *Indigenous Participation in Higher Education*, August 2000, online at <http://www.deet.gov.au/highered/occpaper/00C/00c.pdf>).

Originally a unit concentrating on Aboriginal transitional programs and support, Warawara has now been incorporated formally as a Department of Indigenous Studies within the Division of Society, Culture, Media and Philosophy. Warawara is responsible for the development of programs of study leading to the Diploma in Community Management (DCM), the Advanced Diploma in Community Management (ADCM), with the Institute of Early Childhood the Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) and the Masters of Commercial Law. (Some information on these programs is provided as an Appendix).

Both indigenous-specific and mainstream approaches are utilised in these programs, which have achieved remarkable success in spite of many difficulties over the years. We are now at the point of wanting to extend, deepen and broaden our commitment to indigenous education, within the basic framework already developed. This rests on providing education through a “block release” system, whereby students study on campus for defined periods of time each year, while having various kinds of additional support in their home environments. The DCM and ADCM have been established to provide a thorough preparation in many aspects of Community Management, including generic skills such as public speaking, communication systems, computing and IT, and many other aspects. (Full details of the program can be provided to the Committee on request). The Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood) focuses on the preparation of indigenous students for careers in early childhood education, and covers a wide variety of community related elements as well. The Master of Commercial Law is a mainstream program into which several successful graduates from the ADCM have entered. Warawara staff spend considerable time visiting communities and working with community organisations, and graduates of the programs frequently proceed to other higher education achievements. The DCM and ADCM are being calibrated to offer advanced standing in other Macquarie University degrees, for example the BA, BSc, BsocSci and so on, so that students who have been successful in the Warawara programs can then proceed into mainstream programs. Many graduates however return to their own, or other, communities, and undertake employment related to the skills and abilities they have obtained during their studies at Macquarie.

In 1999 Macquarie University had a total of 281 indigenous students. These made up 3.5% of all indigenous students in Australian programs and accounted for 4.5% of course completions by indigenous students. Macquarie was placed 8th (out of 43) in terms of the number of indigenous students in the country (see Tables 17 and 20, *Indigenous Participation in Higher Education 2000*). In 1999 out of 274 student enrolled in Award courses, approximately 120 were enrolled in courses with block release delivery modes:

- 80 in the DCM, ADCM
- 30 in the BTeach
- 10 in (the non-indigenous specific) Master in Commercial Law (MCL)

While the programs have been a remarkable success we wish to emphasize several points which are appended here as Recommendations. These Recommendations arise from the many years of experience at Warawara, where indigenous staff have reflected on their own experiences of decision-making in university and indigenous community settings, and are strongly committed to the greatest possible enhancement and development of indigenous education in the broadest sense.

Recommendations.

- 1. ABSTUDY needs to be urgently reviewed.** It is clear that serious problems have arisen with respect to mature-age indigenous students. In particular, the determinations of Living, Travel and Accommodation Allowances, in effect since 1/1/00, have disadvantaged mature aged students in particular. (See ATSI Commissioned Report *Changes to ABSTUDY for 2000*, summary as Appendix 1). It has been found that these changes have significantly increased the attrition rates of mature aged indigenous students, especially those with community and family responsibilities.
- 2. Funding mechanisms to support composite-mode teaching need to be reviewed.** The particular benefits of composite teaching modes, and the substantial associated costs, need to be recognised. On-campus intensive residential schools, external study, computer-enhanced study strategies, on-site local workshops and the like break down the division between rural and country and urban environments, assist the free flow of students between a variety of locations, allow a broadening of experience and understanding, and permit people to meet and work together from across a broad range of backgrounds and local environments. However the full costs of these programs need to be met: at the moment, the call on staff working with students in these environments is very substantial and cost-recovery is very difficult given the funding parameters at present in place.
- 3. Cross-university (and/or TAFE) mechanisms to recognise non-formal, community-based knowledge and skills need to be put in place.** At the moment, many indigenous students do not have sufficient formal qualifications to enter programs, or, do so without their previous life skills being recognised. This does however need to be done on a broad and co-ordinated basis so that there is overall coherence across the sector.
- 4. Further articulation-paths between TAFE and University programs need to be explored.** While some work has been done on this, an extension of TAFE-based education with explicit pathways into other indigenous (and other) educational programs need to be prioritised.
- 5. Indigenous curriculum development in higher education needs to be explicitly supported.** Curriculum development in indigenous-specific and mainstream educational programs requires a much stronger input from indigenous communities, individuals and educators to make the curriculum more reflective of indigenous knowledge, skills and attitudes
- 6. Cross-University cooperation is required to address continued shortcomings of the indigenous Year 12 transfer rate** (this problem was addressed in section 4.111 of the report *Mainly Urban*, 1992 House Standing Committee on ATSI Report). Since that time there have been some improvements, but specific programs aimed at remedying these problems should be further enhanced and supported.

7. **The need for grass-roots community involvement at all levels should be recognised.** While efforts are constantly being made to incorporate the perspectives of indigenous community members, it is sometimes felt that the lack of formal educational qualifications renders their contributions less valued. It is necessary to undertake the recognition of the concept of Prior Learning through Life Experience as an element of skill and ability within the indigenous community.
8. Targeted and coherent research programs need to be established and adequately funded which focus on the areas of concern raised here, and others like them. At the moment, the existing frameworks of research funding and research management do not adequately meet these needs. The possibility of Collaborative Grants, of co-ordinated programs such as that required for partnership in governance, and similar initiatives need to be developed with full cooperation and participation of indigenous structures and organisations. A properly funded Research Centre for Indigenous Social Needs could be established to establish and co-ordinate research in multiple sites around the country under an overarching management structure including both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers and community representation.

SUMMARY

It is our view that underlying many of the needs of Urban Dwelling ATSI people is the fundamental question of educational opportunity, taking education in its broadest sense. This submission recommends that steps be taken to strongly support existing educational programs which have proved to have a high level of success and acceptability within the indigenous community, and a number of associated activities be undertaken to extend the capacities of these programs to remedy a variety of deficiencies currently experienced in these contexts. It is suggested that a focus on educational programs and successful delivery of these will:

- Extend the involvement of urban and other indigenous people in decision making
- Foster the establishment of satisfactory parameters for partnership governance arrangements
- Ameliorate the needs of young people at many levels
- Assist with the maintenance of indigenous culture and promote cultural development
- Enhance opportunities for economic independence

This submission was prepared by Professor Annette Hamilton, Head of Division, SCMP, and by members of staff of Warawara – Department of Indigenous Studies in particular Noel Leslie and Sam Altman.

