



BATCHELOR INSTITUTE

OF INDIGENOUS TERTIARY EDUCATION

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The Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts References
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Inquiry into ABC Board Appointments

Batchelor Institute is a specialist public tertiary institution which provides accredited higher education and vocational education and training (VET) programs (approximately half in each sector) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with a particular focus on people from remote areas.

In 2001, more than 2 500 students are enrolled in higher education and vocational education and training courses in more than 20 discipline areas. Currently, the emphases in these courses are education, health, community studies and other areas pertinent to the community development aspirations of students' communities. Broadcasting and journalism is a significant area, with increasing student demand for places. This is one of the reasons for the Institute's interest in this Inquiry.

Indigenous representation on the Board

The ABC provides services to sectors of the broader Australian community; and has a proud record of support for Indigenous media aspirations during the early struggle by Indigenous leaders who sought to redress serious shortcomings of accuracy and balance throughout mainstream media's reportage of Indigenous issues. Additionally, many Indigenous radio stations might not have begun operations without practical technical support from the ABC's regional divisions.

However, Indigenous communities need to be directly represented on the ABC Board in order to fulfill the ABC's Charter obligations. Further, to more accurately reflect Indigenous aspirations in programming and policy making procedures, the cultural diversity of Indigenous communities should be represented at Board level. Such representativeness cannot realistically be achieved unless the reality of that diversity is clearly understood and accepted by the ABC and government prior to the establishment of each Board.

Media (and other) students come to the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education from a wide diversity of cultural and social backgrounds. Approximately 85% of Institute students come from remote Indigenous communities where the majority of people speak English as a second or a foreign language. Most students are from remote areas of the Northern Territory, with around 12% from outside the Northern Territory, mainly from northern parts of Queensland, northern parts of Western Australia and the north-west of South Australia, with small numbers of students from all other states in Australia.

Their needs and aspirations reflect that wide diversity; and representation of various groups of Indigenous Australians —urban and remote area, State/Territory jurisdictions, backgrounds and experiences—should be given considered during selection of Board members. It will be through Board appointments accurately reflecting the whole range of listeners and viewers that the ABC can enhance public confidence in its independence and representativeness.

Other considerations

Two other avenues through which the ABC Board could increase its independence and representativeness, particularly in relation to Indigenous Australians, are:

- closer collaboration with the Indigenous Media Network, at staff level or through representation on the ABC Board, to facilitate exchanges of ideas, programming and views between the national broadcaster and the largest Indigenous network; and
- closer collaboration with training providers, particularly those with national perspectives, again at staff level or through representation on the ABC Board. This would be of mutual benefit, providing institutions working in media training with a broader perspective on industry needs, and media organisations such as the ABC the ability to enhance the balance between their in-house training programs and pre-service or in-service external training.

Another consideration is the transparency associated with any appointments made to the Board. It is, perhaps, telling that there is little, easily-found information about the criteria for selection of ABC Board members. The ABC's website section on the Board provides no information about why the current Board members have been appointed – their skills, who (if anyone) they represent; and the link to Section 8 of the relevant Act is of little assistance. One positive outcome of the Inquiry would be more accessible information about the criteria for selection of Board members.

Finally, the Institute is pleased to have had the opportunity for a brief input into the Inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish any discussion of this submission.

Yours sincerely,

VERONICA ARBON
Director

7 August, 2001