

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 In March 1998 the Committee was asked by the Senate to inquire into and report on the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians over the past ten years. The Committee received 43 submissions from all states and territories. It also visited schools and other educational institutions, and had both formal hearings and less formal discussions with a range of people connected with Indigenous education in four states and the territories. This introductory chapter is intended to cover some of the main findings and conclusions of the Committee as well as some of the matters on which the evidence was not conclusive and which may only be referred to briefly in the report.

1.2 The terms of reference included the requirement for the Committee to survey the most important reports published over that time which have made recommendations on the education of Indigenous people, and to make an assessment of the extent of their implementation. In general, it can be stated that recommendations have been easier to make than to implement. In a federal system of government, priorities vary from state to state and national implementation of recommendations often depends on state perceptions of how serious a problem appears. Only some of the recommendations on education made by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody have been implemented, partly because of these jurisdictional differences.

1.3 The introduction of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) in 1989 was one of the most important initiatives undertaken in the past decade in relation to Indigenous education. The NATSIEP was a national policy jointly developed by the states and territories and the Commonwealth. It was one of the principal recommendations of the 1988 Hughes report, a case where report recommendations were adopted. The central goal of the NATSIEP was 'to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education'.¹

1.4 In 1999 it is clear that equity for Indigenous people in most educational sectors has not yet been achieved and may still be some way off. However, it is also clear that there has been considerable progress in a number of areas, with major improvements in many levels of Indigenous educational participation. The record, therefore, is mixed, with continued failure in some areas and partial success in others. This report draws attention to the successes, and to the difficulties that often seem

1 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy: Joint Policy Statement*, Canberra, 1989, p. 9

beyond the power of governments to overcome in the quest for improved educational outcomes, but which need to be systematically addressed.

The Indigenous population

1.5 In Australia in 1996 the Indigenous population numbered around 390,000, making up about two per cent of the Australian population. Compared to the non-Indigenous population, the Indigenous population was more heavily concentrated in younger age groups.²

1.6 Indigenous Australians represent a diverse range of cultures and backgrounds, from the peoples of the Torres Strait Islands to those of Central Australia. This diversity needs to be remembered in examining educational issues and needs. Some Indigenous people are located in remote communities while others live in urban locations. This report is not exceptional in devoting most of its attention to remote and rural dwelling Indigenous people, but this overlooks the fact that the majority of Indigenous people live in or around large provincial and metropolitan centres. The Committee received few submissions from Indigenous groups in capital cities, and the Committee's inability to visit Indigenous education institutions in some capital cities is regrettable.

1.7 The majority of Indigenous people in Australia (about 80 per cent) speak only English. However, in the Northern Territory just over 60 per cent of Indigenous people also speak an Indigenous language, or Aboriginal English and have varying levels of English proficiency.³ English is a second language for many of these people, and for many Indigenous people in remote areas in other parts of Australia. Levels of literacy among Indigenous people are higher in provincial and metropolitan cities than they are in rural and remote areas. In this respect Indigenous education reflects a national trend which applies to the whole population. So much concern about educational achievement centres on levels of literacy, and so it is appropriate that this report concentrates on sections of the Indigenous population less likely to use Standard English.

Educational participation of Indigenous peoples

1.8 At almost all levels, educational participation and achievement rates for Indigenous people remain behind those of the non-Indigenous population. Retention rates to year 12 are around 30 per cent compared to over 70 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians. In 1997 the higher education award course completion rate for non-Indigenous students was almost double that for Indigenous students (24 per cent compared to 14 per cent).

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Population Distribution, Indigenous Australians*, ABS, Canberra, 1996, cat. no. 4705.0, p. 13

3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, ABS, Canberra, 1996, cat. no. 2034.0, p. 85

1.9 However, there have been improvements in Indigenous educational participation over the past ten years. While retention rates are still low, year 12 retention has increased significantly from 12 per cent in 1989 to 31 per cent in 1997. Between 1986 and 1996 the school participation rate for Indigenous people aged 16 to 17 years increased by 40 per cent. Although these increases appear to have slowed in more recent years, they represent considerable progress. Similarly, between 1988 and 1996 the number of Indigenous higher education students more than doubled, while the number of higher education award course completions increased by threefold, to nearly 1,000.

1.10 In the vocational education and training (VET) sector Indigenous participation rates now more closely match those of the non-Indigenous population in all age groups except for the 18 to 20 year age group. A lack of reliable historical data in the VET sector makes it difficult to examine changes over time. However, there appears to have been a dramatic, increase in participation. Indigenous students now comprise 3 per cent of the total number of enrolments in the VET sector, higher than their proportion of the population.⁴ In general, it must be said that Indigenous people in both the higher education and VET sector are

Under-represented in many VET course areas that are of particular relevance to them, such as ‘business, administration and economics’, and they continue to be over-represented in other areas such as ‘general (multi-field) education’ courses and in lower level Certificate II programs.⁵

Higher proportions of the Indigenous population are studying non-award courses. As the recent NCVER report, *Creating a Sense of Place: Indigenous peoples in vocational education and training*, points out, TAFE institutes have been generally successful in creating secure and supportive learning environment for Indigenous students. The new challenge is to build on this success by having Indigenous students access mainstream study support facilities.⁶

1.11 This is by far the best indicator of an improvement in both participation and outcomes for Indigenous adult education. The Committee believes that this increasingly strong interest in vocational education may be a springboard to renewed interest in education among Indigenous youth, and lifelong learning generally. In this respect the expectation for vocational education as a solution to underachievement does no more than reflect a hope that is held for the education of all underachieving youth, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. As previous inquiries of this Committee have shown, the VET component of the mainstream secondary school curriculum has expanded considerably over the past five years.

4 Chris Robinson and Paul Hughes, *Creating a Sense of Place: Indigenous People in Vocational Education and Training*, NCVER, Kensington Park, 1999, p. xi

5 *ibid.*, p. xii

6 *ibid.*, p.57-59

1.12 Recent developments in information technology have the potential to link remote communities into the wider community in ways which were not previously available. The Committee received evidence in a number of places about the positive spirit in which Indigenous young people were accepting new technologies and using them effectively. The medium of computer technology was claimed to be particularly appealing to Indigenous youth, who often exhibit an affinity with visual technologies.⁷

1.13 In regard to age, the most significant increases in Indigenous educational participation have taken place among mature age students. Educational participation rates among Indigenous people aged over 30 years are now higher than among the non-Indigenous population. Adult education has become increasingly important as a result. The lowest rates of increase in post compulsory educational participation have been among Indigenous people aged 16 to 24 years.

1.14 There remain significant concerns about levels of literacy in the Indigenous population, with a perception in some quarters that literacy levels among younger Indigenous people have been declining in recent years. This may be the case in the Northern Territory and some remote areas of the states. According to a recent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory, 'Many Indigenous people shared their concern that today's students have fewer and less well-developed literacy skills than the generation before them'⁸. However, it is not reflected in the data available from national surveys. These show a slight but steady improvement in literacy rates overall among Indigenous people, possibly reflecting the urban experience.

1.15 While any improvement is encouraging, Indigenous literacy improvement remains a formidable challenge. The Committee acknowledges the complex social and pedagogical factors involved in raising Indigenous numeracy and literacy standards - from earlier and better access to pre-school and school, to health issues and family and addressing community problems which result in disadvantage to children and their education. The Committee considers this issue to be of such vital importance that it warrants renewed effort from all levels of government and the Indigenous communities.

Recommendation 1

1.16 The Committee recommends that MCEETYA ensure that raising of literacy and numeracy skills of Indigenous students to the level obtained by non-Indigenous students remains an urgent national priority.

The historical context

1.17 The ten years since 1989 have seen important developments in Indigenous affairs. There have been changes in government at the Commonwealth level and in all

7 Kalgoorlie District Education Office, *Hansard Precis*, Kalgoorlie, 15 September 1999

8 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, NTDE, Darwin, 1999, p. 117

States, and changes in government policy on Indigenous issues. There have also been the Mabo and Wik decisions in regard to native title, as well as a range of government inquiries and initiatives in regard to Indigenous education and training, and Indigenous affairs more generally.

1.18 The 1988 Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, chaired by Professor Paul Hughes, led to the formulation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) in 1989. A major review of the National Policy was undertaken in 1994, chaired by Manduwuy Yunupingu. The final report of the review was presented in 1995. In response to the review, the Commonwealth, state, and territory governments reaffirmed their commitment to the NATSIEP goals and restated these goals in the 1995 MCEETYA National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002.

1.19 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs produced two separate reports in 1989 and 1990 after inquiring into the effectiveness of existing support services within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, including administrative and advisory services. The first, *A Chance for the Future: Training in Skills for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Community Management and Development* made forty-nine recommendations in total, the majority of which have not been implemented. In the case of the Northern Territory, one submission detailed an erosion of adult education and training services to Indigenous communities over the ten year period, diminishing the means for the recommendations to be effectively implemented.⁹ The report's discussion about community development and planning is as relevant today as it was in 1989. The second report, *Our Future Our Selves: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Control – Management and Resources*, explores concepts such as self-determination, self-management, and community control, as well as the difference between consultation and negotiation. Both reports still have relevance, particularly in relation to issues of self determination, community development, and community control and management of schools, particularly in remote areas.

1.20 The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody examined educational issues in relation to high rates of incarceration of Indigenous people. Again, self-determination featured prominently, particularly in relation to the delivery of appropriate services, including education and training. Again there have been concerns over the level of commitment of governments to implementing the recommendations.

There has been inadequate regard to a key recommendation on the need for negotiation and self-determination in relation to the design and delivery of services. A failure to comprehend the centrality of this recommendation has

9 Submission No. 4, Mr Peter Toyne MLA, vol. 1, p. 25

negatively impacted on the implementation of a range of other recommendations.¹⁰

1.21 In 1994, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs tabled a report, *Justice Under Scrutiny*, on its inquiry into the implementation by governments of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Self-determination is described in the report as a 'broad intent' to empower Indigenous people, in turn described as 'the desire and capacity' to 'exercise, according to circumstances, maximum control over their own lives and that of their communities'¹¹. This Committee believes that education and training is central to ensuring communities have this capacity to be self-determining.

1.22 While the House of Representatives committee report did not examine government responses to the specific recommendations contained in the Commission Report's section on Aboriginal prisoner education, the importance of monitoring the implementation of its recommendations was stressed¹². In particular, the Standing Committee was critical of the monitoring mechanisms that had been put in place, and the limited involvement of Indigenous people in the implementation process.¹³

1.23 In May 1997 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released the report *Bringing Them Home*, which examined the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families. One submission to the current inquiry asks the Committee to note its formal apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for the role that educators and schools had in the removal of Indigenous children from their families.¹⁴

1.24 Other relevant reports include a House of Representatives inquiry into the maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in 1992, and a 1992 Schools Council review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education from preschool to year 5. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Rural and Remote Education Inquiry Report* will be completed in 2000, and will have recommendations relating to Indigenous education.

1.25 A number of government programs in Indigenous education were introduced at the Commonwealth level in response to these inquiries. These included programs such as the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program (ASSPA), the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), and the Vocational and Educational

10 Chris Cunneen and David McDonald, *Keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People Out of Custody*, ATSIC, Canberra, 1997

11 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Justice Under Scrutiny*, Canberra, 1994, p. 11

12 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, *National Report*, vol. 3, recommendations 184-187 inclusive

13 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Justice Under Scrutiny*, Canberra, 1994, p. 11

14 Submission 24, Australian Education Union, vol. 2, p. 121

Guidance for Aboriginals Scheme (VEGAS). Some of these programs have been evaluated in recent years. The Commonwealth also administers the Aboriginal Student Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY), which has gone through a number of changes in the past decade, and the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP).

1.26 There have also been various inquiries into Indigenous education at the state and territory levels. Most state and territory governments have introduced specific educational programs for Indigenous people. The past decade has seen a growing body of academic literature and research into Indigenous education. Much of this research has informed educational practice at both the local and national level. Programs of bilingual instruction and ‘two way’ education, for example, have been influenced by research into Aboriginal learning styles and the importance of cultural issues in Indigenous education.

Self-determination, and community control of schools

1.27 Self-determination and the need for Indigenous control or ownership of education has been one of the central recommendations for Indigenous educational policy over the last ten years. The Committee received evidence of strong links between Indigenous aspirations for education and self-determination, but also found that the ideal of self-determination has presented problems in implementation.

1.28 Cultural diversity affects self -determination. It can manifest as control of Indigenous schools in remote areas, or Indigenous parental involvement in decision making in a metropolitan mainstream school. It depends very much on geography and the proportion of Indigenous people in a particular region. It also depends very much on the social, cultural and political dynamics of communities, the sense of identification Indigenous people feel for their land, and the relationships they have with land councils and other representative bodies and organisations. This varies greatly across the country. The views of ATSIC were made known to the Committee in a submission as well as oral evidence.

ATSIC also believes that it is important that the inquiry appreciates a point made by numerous inquiries over many years – that educational outcomes are closely linked to the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can exercise control over education policy and programs. ATSIC believes that progress towards improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination at all levels of the educational system has not been as rapid or as comprehensive as it should have.¹⁵

1.29 The Committee also heard the views of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers, who provided energetic support for Indigenous autonomy in the running of educational institutions. The Committee remains unclear about the practical implementation of the vision of ‘Indigenised’ schools proposed, and about concrete proposals Indigenous groups may have about running such

15 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 118

schools, especially when the social, cultural, and political dynamics of communities vary markedly across the country. However, there are many good examples mentioned later in this report of Indigenous schools that have demonstrated self-determination in their organisation and programs. These schools offer ideas and choices for the future.

1.30 The relevance and need for Indigenous self-determination in education is borne out by the report of the review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory carried out by former Territory senator, the Hon Bob Collins. The report of this review, referred to from here on by its title, *Learning Lessons*, was commissioned by the Northern Territory Government. It reviewed curriculum and teaching practice, community relations and administration, and finance and human resources issues. The report describes a breakdown in trust and confidence on a large scale. The administrative neglect and the misallocation of Commonwealth funds described in *Learning Lessons* are symptomatic of wider problems, which may only be overcome by assisting Indigenous people to assume increased levels of responsibility for the education of their children, where that is their choice.

1.31 While all submissions supported increased Indigenous involvement in educational administration, some were critical of the way in which this had been applied in the past. One submission pointed to a simplistic approach to ‘self-management’ which had seen Aboriginal staff appointed to managerial positions on minimal qualifications or experience and then being left to fend for themselves.¹⁶ Some attempts by governments to institutionalise models of self-determination were said to have been nothing more than setting Indigenous organisations up for failure. At the practical level, self-determination undoubtedly requires a delicate balance between Indigenous aspiration and direction on the one hand and specialist assistance at appropriate levels and times on the other.

1.32 If Papunya School near Alice Springs is to be a model, and it has received praise in *Learning Lessons* for its efforts in building community leadership and involvement in school life, then the model is fairly straight forward. Teachers and running costs are the responsibility of the government, while decisions about curriculum and school programs generally are the shared responsibility of the community and the Department of Education. The Papunya community has worked hard to achieve a large measure of community control, presumably overcoming the hurdle of ‘red tape’ described below.

1.33 The ATSIC submission noted improvements in the running of schools in many areas, including government schools, which were beginning to reflect community concerns more closely in their curriculum and teaching strategies. Nonetheless, ATSIC remained concerned about the obstacles faced by independent Aboriginal schools in gaining accreditation and funding.¹⁷ ATSIC claimed that the

16 Submission No. 7, Mr Peter Reynolds, vol. 1, p. 53

17 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 136

process of Aboriginalisation had become such a bureaucratised process in the Northern Territory that it actually increased the control of the Northern Territory Education Department over Aboriginal schools.¹⁸

1.34 The Committee made some attempts to find out about the practicalities of implementing self-determination. ATSIC representatives were asked at a public hearing whether an independent Indigenous school sector, analogous to Catholic systemic schools, would be an appropriate response to the need for Indigenous community controlled schools. ATSIC appeared reluctant to accept this analogy, pointing out the difficulties that such a model would create in mixed communities.¹⁹ The Committee understands this concern. Community controlled schools, like Papunya School described elsewhere, are likely to run successfully in resilient remote and rural communities with high proportions of Indigenous people, but may face problems elsewhere. The Committee also found, however, that even in some metropolitan schools Indigenous students were likely to travel across several suburbs to attend a particular state school. Often such schools were unofficially recognised as 'Koorie schools' because of their high proportion of Indigenous students. Some Indigenous parents, on the other hand, continue to prefer mainstream schooling. Diversity of culture requires diversity of choice.

1.35 It is worth noting two successful models of Indigenous community control which have been the subject of some investigation by the Committee.

1.36 The best known Indigenous controlled institutions are the community-controlled adult education and VET colleges affiliated with the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers. The oldest of these, Tranby College in Glebe, was established in 1958. The Committee visited Tauondi College in Port Adelaide, another affiliated college, which is referred to later in this report. A recent NCVET report shows students attending independent colleges, generally from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, achieved better pass rates than did Indigenous students enrolled at mainstream TAFE colleges.²⁰ The surveys also indicated that the employment prospects for graduates were surprisingly good, at 36 per cent within four months of completion of courses. This is a low figure from one perspective, and is well below rates for non-Indigenous people who have completed VET courses, but it is a very high figure when looked at in the light of Indigenous employment rates overall.

1.37 There are also a number of Aboriginal community controlled schools in operation around the country. Although the Committee did not have the opportunity to visit any community controlled schools, it was made aware of their importance during

18 *ibid.*, p. 147

19 Mr Lewis Hawke, *Hansard*, Canberra, 30 August 1999, p. 323

20 Deborah Durnan and Bob Boughton, *Succeeding Against the Odds: The outcomes attained by Indigenous students in Aboriginal community-controlled adult education colleges*, NCVET, Kensington Park, SA, 1999, pp. ix-xi

its hearings and visits. The community controlled schools have been particularly important in Western Australia, where there are a total of thirteen non-government non-Catholic Aboriginal independent schools. The thirteen schools form a loosely affiliated group within the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia. To be regarded as a member the school must have either majority Aboriginal membership of its governing body or full involvement by Aboriginal community members in its development. The first community school was established in Western Australia in 1976. The schools include the Aboriginal-controlled Christian schools as well as remote area community controlled schools. While the thirteen schools each have their own ethos, they share 'a commitment to Aboriginal control and the maintenance of the world views and values of the respective communities'.²¹ The goals of language and cultural maintenance have been a strong motivating factor for some of these schools. Rawa Community School, for example, located on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, has a two way learning philosophy which aims to prepare students to enter the mainstream world (if they choose) and also to keep the Martu people's culture and language alive.²²

1.38 The relationship between Indigenous control of a school and its continuing denominational affiliation was not fully explored by the Committee. There is some evidence to suggest that in areas currently or formerly controlled by missions, schools have enjoyed a great deal of latitude in implementing policies sympathetic to ideals of self-determination, usually because this is consistent with current religious attitudes. This is the case with Catholic schools of the Diocese of the Northern Territory in places like Bathurst Island. It is also true of a number of schools conducted by Indigenous bodies affiliated to various Protestant denominations across northern Australia. Not all of these trace their origins back to colonial times, though they build on a long-established tradition.

1.39 For instance, Shalom Christian College in Townsville began in 1992 as an initiative of the Aboriginal and Islander Uniting Church Congress, a national body of the Uniting Church. This independent, co-educational College offers an educational program from preschool to Year 12, as well as a boarding house which draws Indigenous students from the Torres Strait and other parts of Queensland. The College is adopting the 'scaffolding' approach to literacy mentioned favourably at Yipirinya School in Alice Springs. Although both the primary and secondary areas each have a principal, they report to the governing body of the Congress, Community Development and Education Limited, an incorporated non-profit organisation. Shalom Christian College is part of a network of community interests which includes the Shalom Elders Village, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, the Crystal Creek conference centre and camp site, the Yalga-binbi Institute for Community Development and Education Unit, and Shalom Development Services, the construction arm of the Congress. All interact for the benefit of the Indigenous

21 <http://wisdom.psinet.net.au/~aiswa/aics.htm>

22 <http://www.users.bigpond.com/rawa/raawa14.htm>

Uniting Church community, although Yalga-binbi operates fee-for-service activities in community development, education and training for a wide range of government agencies and other Indigenous community organisations. Congress members have adopted a community development approach suited to their needs and aspirations, where all the above activities are administered individually, but operate on an interdependent basis. The school also operates within this wider community context.

1.40 Despite agreement with the self-determination principle, two recent government decisions were undertaken without consultation with Indigenous people - the 1997 changes to Abstudy and the decision of the Northern Territory government to phase out funding for bilingual education. Whatever the educational merits of the decisions, the way in which they were reached showed a marked lack of regard for the central principles of Indigenous involvement in educational policy making established under the National Policy.

Indigenous education funding

1.41 Funding of Indigenous education remains the primary responsibility of the states and territories, except in the independent sector. The Commonwealth supplements these funds in the form of special purpose grants. Complaints about the administration of special purpose grants were heard by the Committee in Cairns and Alice Springs, as detailed in Chapter 8. A table showing Commonwealth funding since 1991 is presented below.

1.42 Table 1 shows that there was a steady increase in Commonwealth funding for Indigenous education since the NATSIEP was introduced in 1990. Although there were some fluctuations in individual years, the general trend was upwards. The Commonwealth also provided untied grants to the states and territories. These were used either as core funding by the states or as special grants on the Commonwealth model. As the table below indicates, it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which states and territories have followed expenditure trends for Indigenous education overall. Advice received from states and territories indicates that there is only a tenuous basis for comparing the expenditure performances of the states and territories even on a per capita basis.

1.43 The DETYA submission to the inquiry pointed to the problem of having no nationally aggregated data on Indigenous education.²³ In attempting to compile information on Indigenous education expenditure from the states and territories, the Committee saw firsthand evidence of this fact. The lack of readily available state and territory based data makes any state and territory expenditure comparison questionable as it is impossible to ascertain whether figures rendered are comparing like with like. Given the increased national and international interest in Indigenous affairs, the Committee considers this to be a problem worthy of immediate attention.

23 Submission No. 32, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, vol.4, p. 52

Recommendation 2

1.44 The Committee recommends to MCEETYA that agreement be reached on the uniform tabulation of expenditure on Indigenous education in all states and territories.

1.45 The importance of this recommendation should be clear from recent information on the record of the Northern Territory Government's failure to manage its education budget according to accepted norms of probity in relation to Commonwealth grants.

Table 1: Commonwealth Expenditure on Indigenous Education

Program/Outcome	91-92	92-93	93-94	94-95	95-96	96-97	97-98	98-99
	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000
<i>Indigenous Education (Supplementary Assistance) Act 1989 [AESIP]</i>	66 123	75 331	81 305	87 655	83 872	80 298	129 519	123 536
ABSTUDY	44 038	106 330	111 773	114 282	128 490	131 694	129 889	130 498
Special Employment Education and Income Support								
Indigenous Education Direct Assistance	26 283	37 091	34 540	43 096	51 353	48 606	58 356	60 189
Aboriginal Employment Education Assistance	317	959	291					
Overseas study grants for Aboriginals	207	181	383	345	188			
Totals - \$ '000	\$136 968	\$219 892	\$228 292	\$201 937	\$263 903	\$260 598	\$317 764	\$314 223

Source: DEET, DEETYA, and DETYA Annual Reports

Table 2. Comparative account of levels of resources devoted to education and training programs for Indigenous Australians by state and territory, 1988-89 to 1998-99.²⁴

Year	State or Territory							
	NSW \$ (m)	TAS ²⁵ \$ (m)	VIC ²⁶ \$ (m)	SA ²⁷ \$ (m)	WA \$ (m)	QLD \$ (m)	NT ²⁸ \$ (m)	ACT \$ (m)
1988-89	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.30	N/A	N/A	N/A
1989-90	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.04	N/A	N/A	N/A
1990-91	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.04	3.0	N/A	0.20
1991-92	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.04	3.2	N/A	0.29
1992-93	N/A	N/A	N/A	13.79	0.04	2.8	N/A	0.52
1993-94	N/A	0.20	N/A	14.14	0.36	3.1	N/A	0.56
1994-95	2.67	0.22	N/A	16.90	0.40	3.5	79.5	0.59
1995-96	13.10	0.26	N/A	16.37	0.44	3.6	79.5	0.61
1996-97	13.59	0.27	N/A	18.34	0.63	4.6	79.5	0.56
1997-98	13.93 ²⁹	0.29	8.5	18.24	1.3	7.2	79.5	N/A
1998-99	14.78	N/A	9.1	N/A	1.5	8.0	79.5	N/A

24 Amounts have been rounded. Where possible, any known differences in composition of these figures are specified in the footnotes. Caution should be used in making comparisons between the states or territories.

25 Expenditure on Indigenous programs. Figures do not include administration costs.

26 Funds allocated to specific Indigenous education initiatives. Expenditure does not include allocations made from school global budgets.

27 Figures do not include salary related on-costs, depreciation of assets, corporate services, country incentives, workers' compensation or teacher housing costs.

28 Expenditure on Indigenous school students taken only from the Northern Territory Public Accounts Committee Report Number 27, *Report on the Provision of School Education Services for Remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory*, p. 3. Figures are for 1994-95 only. However, expenditure for the other years is based on information provided by the Northern Territory Department of Education which indicated that after 1994-95 'in general terms ...there had been no decrease...in funding allocated to the education of Indigenous students (Fong, 1998).'

29 Figures for 1997-98 and 1998-99 are estimates.

1.46 The Committee's own interest in this matter was in establishing the reasons for official neglect of the needs of one school it visited, Papunya School. Questions were asked about why the Territory Government failed to pass on the Commonwealth funds allocated to schools. As *Learning Lessons* revealed, the Department of Education failed to access Commonwealth funds to the full extent that they were available, and it was later learned that the Department had misallocated \$90 million of Commonwealth supplementary Indigenous education funding to its core funding.³⁰ The Committee had long been aware of the unease within DETYA about accountability by the Northern Territory Education Department for the use of Commonwealth funds. A document cited in the Senate confirms the NT Department's recognition of this 'long-troubled relationship' due to a 'systemic lack of interest in Aboriginal Education'.³¹

Culturally appropriate pedagogies

1.47 Curriculum controversies appear to be more of a preoccupation with academics and activist groups than with classroom teachers, who will often say that they are more concerned with practice than with theory and assess the value of content and method on whether it works in the classroom. The Committee is aware that there is a tension between those who argue in favour of educational programs for Indigenous Australians which place strong emphasis on English language and numerical skills (that is, workplace preparation skills) and those who give a high priority to educational programs which value Indigenous identity, issues and world views. The Committee shares the general belief that these two positions are not mutually exclusive, and that good teaching will achieve both objectives.

1.48 The matter of culturally appropriate pedagogy extends well beyond the question of how to present information about Australian history. Remote, rural and urban schools will, by necessity of their diverse circumstances, address this issue in a variety of ways. It has been argued that the decision of the Northern Territory Education Department to phase out bilingual education will reduce the capacity of schools to provide culturally appropriate schooling for Indigenous people. Others oppose this view. Curriculum specialists, however, in nearly all cases, favour 'both ways' and bilingual learning, when appropriately resourced, or locally developed pedagogies which build on the unique circumstances of a particular locality, such as Martin Nakata argues for the Torres Strait. No one argues for culturally appropriate pedagogies at the expense of standards or accountability. One submission linked high rates of truancy by Indigenous students to culturally inappropriate pedagogy.³² More weighty evidence has been provided that suggests that good teaching in basic skills by teachers who form positive relationships with students and parents is what Indigenous people value most.

30 Senate, *Hansard*, 22 November 1999, p. 10262-3

31 *ibid.*, p. 10263

32 Submission No. 4, Mr Peter Toyne MLA, vol. 1, p. 23

1.49 More recently, two way education has been subject to criticism. These criticisms centre on instances where priority appears to have been given to cultural maintenance over acquisition of basic skills such as English language literacy and numeracy. This is not what two way learning is about. Ideally, two way learning accords equal priority to European and Indigenous knowledge. Some writers have also pointed to tensions between ‘the politics of recognition’ and ‘the politics of distribution’, arguing that policies of recognition and self determination can sometimes conflict with concerns over levels of Indigenous disadvantage.³³

1.50 Cultural sensitivity is undoubtedly important because Indigenous children learn better if it evident in the teaching style. On the other hand, good teaching introduces new ideas and cultures. It shows an inappropriate respect for Indigenous culture to maintain it in an anthropological cocoon. Torres Strait Islander academic, Dr Martin Nakata, quoted elsewhere in this report, has some interesting comments to make in this regard:

If attention to cultural difference results in a more culturally sensitive pedagogy that is without doubt a good thing. But, if in the end it has a negligible or limited effect on outcomes, or if difficulties with acquiring academic skills persist, then I think we have to be honest enough to admit that the strategies of the cultural difference agenda are not sufficient to deliver the standards that we are pursuing.

In real terms, if educators decide through research and then institutionalise through practice a perspective that Islander children learn best in the visual and aural modes, and then adjust teaching strategies accordingly, how is that child ever going to come to grips with and master, English texts? How, that is, can students master English texts if these same texts are continually by-passed in the teaching process?

...Similarly, if researchers find that Islander children are collaborative learners who do not like to be individually competitive and teachers teach to those characteristics, how is the Islander child going to cope with or access the individually competitive world of higher education and the workplace?³⁴

1.51 It is unlikely that such ideas would have been expressed ten years ago when it would have been difficult for Indigenous educators to criticise cultural models of educational disadvantage. The simple fact is that cultural models had had only limited impact on educational systems ten years ago. The current debate on cultural models indicates the progress that has been made in curriculum theory and practice over the past ten years.

33 Tim Rowse, ‘Indigenous Australians’ Employment Prospects’, *Journal of Australian Political Economy*, No. 40, p. 118

34 Martin Nakata, ‘Cutting a Better Deal for Torres Strait Islanders’, *Youth Studies*, vol. 14 (4), December 1995, p. 32

Bilingual education and other issues for the Northern Territory Education Department

1.52 The Northern Territory education system is distinctive among Australian education systems in that it has the highest proportion of Indigenous students, as well as the largest number of Indigenous language speakers. The decision of the Northern Territory Education Department early in 1999 to cut out supplementary funding for Indigenous bilingual programs in government schools sparked a heated debate over the role of bilingual programs in Indigenous education in Territory schools. This debate spilled over the border to engage the views of teachers and linguists around the country. The debate was aired in evidence the Committee received at public hearings from Indigenous groups and from university-based linguistic authorities.

1.53 The Committee received a number of submissions which widely criticised this decision of the Northern Territory Government. The process by which the decision was made did not draw those people most involved into the decision-making process. As already mentioned, it was the antithesis of all that we understand about Aboriginal self-determination, a case of policy compromised by bungling processes. The educational merits of the issue are discussed further in Chapter 4.

1.54 The controversies surrounding curriculum, administration and educational funding arrangements in the Northern Territory are likely to continue, following the release in October 1999 of *Learning Lessons*. As expected, the report made trenchant criticism of the administration of Indigenous education in the Territory. It cited falling standards, poor management, and the failure to establish effective working relationships between schools and the community, as factors contributing to a lack of public confidence in the education system.

1.55 The Committee hopes that the report will have the effect of refocussing the attention of the Northern Territory government and its officials on the needs of Indigenous education in the Territory and that it will be read with as much interest outside the Territory because of its relevance to Indigenous education generally.

Summary

1.56 This introductory chapter has dealt with a number of issues that will be referred to in later chapters, as well as one matter, funding, which will not. The issue of the curriculum, of which some broad considerations have been given here, has been seen as highly important, and there are few chapters of the report which do not touch on this subject in some way. Central to this issue is the problem of how to achieve improved levels of literacy. Two other issues of central importance not touched on here are dealt with in later chapters: the problem of ensuring the attendance of children at school and the social and cultural determinants affecting school attendance; and the problem of ensuring a satisfactory supply of well-qualified and well-motivated teachers, especially for those areas where living conditions are difficult.

