CHAPTER 4

CURRICULUM

4.1 In August 1999 the Committee met educators and community members from the Townsville region at a public hearing. During the meeting the Committee asked about the educational expectations of Indigenous parents from urban areas like Townsville. An important element was the need for a good mainstream education that would enable their children to compete equitably in the labour market. Equally important, however, was the need for Indigenous people to maintain a connection with their cultural and linguistic heritage. One Indigenous educator from Townsville summed up this position.

> We want our children to achieve in the mainstream, but we do not want them to forget their identity and grassroots, most importantly. We want them to hold on to their language, but be articulate in other languages as well.[1]

4.2 The two aims of mainstream educational achievement and the incorporation of Indigenous cultural values into the curriculum have driven much policy making over the past decade. They have been seen at various times as both complementary and contradictory. Evidence of some of these tensions arose in the course of the inquiry and are explored in this chapter.

4.3 The chapter also surveys some of the recommendations that have been made in relation to curriculum over the past ten years, and looks at the impact of more general developments in curriculum theory. The main areas covered include:

- cultural inclusiveness and the mainstream curriculum;
- other curriculum developments in the schools sector and their implications for Indigenous education;
- the implementation of Indigenous studies subjects for all students;
- developments in vocational education and training, and adult education; and
- the impact of new technologies on the curriculum.

4.4 A key point to note in relation to curriculum is the relatively limited role of the Commonwealth. Much of the practical work in curriculum development has taken place at the state or territory level. Through its involvement in national Indigenous education policy, however, the Commonwealth has played a part in attempts to introduce more culturally inclusive curricula across the various education systems and

---

1 Mrs Dorothy Savage, *Hansard*, Townsville, 4 August 1999, p. 169

has also influenced curriculum development through other funding and policy initiatives.

4.5 Currently, the Commonwealth is developing an Indigenous literacy and numeracy strategy. The strategy will aim to encourage school systems to rethink teaching practices and develop more relevant curricula for Indigenous students. The Commonwealth also funds intensive English language tuition for Indigenous language speaking students under ESL funding. Under the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) the Commonwealth provides supplementary funding for Indigenous education projects aimed at trialing ways to overcome barriers to educational achievement. In the higher education sector, the Indigenous Support Funding Program assists institutions to develop Indigenous education strategies. Some Commonwealth funding has also gone towards developments in Open Learning. Another curriculum area of importance has been that of vocational education and training programs in schools, and school to work pathways. The Commonwealth School to Work Transition for Indigenous Australians Taskforce has been looking at this area.[2]

Cultural inclusiveness and the mainstream curriculum

> … educational gain amongst young people is slow and generational. It is even more so when people from one culture are being schooled by people from another and quite different culture.[3]

4.6 The central curriculum issue in Indigenous education over the past decade has been how to provide a curriculum that is both academically rigorous and culturally relevant to Indigenous peoples. In the various inquiries conducted during this period, Indigenous people have called for a curriculum that provides the opportunity for them to participate in mainstream society and also to maintain their languages, cultures and spiritual beliefs. An important aspect of this has been the need for a curriculum that responds to and reflects the level of cultural diversity of the Indigenous population.

4.7 However, there is no consensus on the importance of cultural issues in the curriculum. A number of questions are raised in the literature, with a corresponding range of opinions. One question is the extent to which the curriculum needs to take cultural factors into account. Another is the extent to which education systems, and the curriculum, reflect and reinforce social structures that serve to perpetuate economic inequality among marginalised peoples, and whether there may be a need for more fundamental reform of mainstream educational institutions.

4.8 The basic assumption underpinning most educational policy is that education is beneficial and allows individuals to participate more fully in mainstream society. The assumption that education brings benefits has not always been true for Indigenous peoples, at least in terms of western education systems. In Australia, educational

---

2 Submission No. 32, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, vol. 4, pp. 56-69

3 Submission No. 7, Mr Peter Reynolds, vol. 1, p. 52

policy towards Indigenous peoples has at various times involved segregation and assimilation. Only more recently has self-determination been recognised. In the past, schools have actively participated in the suppression of Indigenous languages and cultures, and the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families. One submission from the Australian Education Union asked 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 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities'.[4] Although education systems no longer take such a deliberately oppressive role, they retain elements of assimilation and institutionalised racism that can make them alienating environments for many Indigenous people.

4.9 Critiques of assimilation, and of western education systems and curricula as assimilationist, dominate much of the literature on Indigenous education. Mainstream education systems can be seen as assimilationist in the sense that one of their aims is to prepare students for participation in mainstream society. The ability to participate in mainstream society, however, is seen as essential by many Indigenous communities. The Committee notes in particular ideas expressed by Torres Strait Islander academic Dr Martin Nakata who argues the proposition that Indigenous people do not stand in a separate domain from the western world: that the relationship is one of complementarity rather than separateness.

> 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 cultural difference agenda are not sufficient to deliver the standards we are pursuing.[5]

4.10 The Committee received a great deal of evidence that access to mainstream educational services is what most Indigenous people want. In 1989 the NATSIEP Joint Policy Statement commented that 'numerous reviews, inquiries and consultations conducted in recent years have all demonstrated that Aboriginal people place a high priority on education'.[6] Representatives of the communities visited in the inquiry spoke of the need for access to mainstream educational opportunities and for high teaching standards.

4.11 If Indigenous people want access to mainstream education, they also want an education that is welcoming and accepting of Indigenous culture and values. Stephen Harris put it this way: 'Aboriginal parents have a short answer to the dilemma: their

---

4 Submission No. 24, Australian Education Union, vol. 2, p. 121

5 Dr Martin Nakata, 'Cutting a Better Deal for Torres Strait Islanders', *Youth Studies Australia*, Summer 1995, p. 32

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

children need to learn the three Rs and to grow up Aboriginal'.[7] This perspective was reflected in evidence given to the Committee in Townsville.

The case for a culturally inclusive curriculum

4.12 There are a number of arguments that can be used to support a more culturally inclusive curriculum. Western educational institutions have traditionally been alienating environments for Indigenous people, and many institutions remain so today. Implementation of a more culturally inclusive curriculum, it is argued, could help reduce some of these institutional barriers to Indigenous educational participation. It might also have a positive effect on levels of self-esteem and identity for Indigenous students.

4.13 Teaching a culturally appropriate curriculum, which recognises and builds on the cultural and linguistic background of Indigenous students, could also aid learning across the curriculum. Some studies have suggested, for example, that bilingual education assists acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

4.14 Cultural issues can be important motivating factors in communities where the traditional benefits of education, such as improved employment prospects, are less obvious. A greater acknowledgment and understanding of Indigenous culture can also open the way for the involvement of the wider Indigenous community in education.

4.15 Finally, and by no means least importantly, acknowledgment of cultural issues can help in the maintenance of Indigenous cultures and languages. Indigenous studies subjects also have a role to play in spreading the cultural and linguistic heritage of Indigenous communities to the wider community, and aiding in the reconciliation process.

Critical perspectives on culturally inclusive curricula

4.16 There are a number of concerns regarding the incorporation of Indigenous cultural values into the curriculum. One of the central concerns has been that it may have led, in some instances, to poor curriculum and teaching practices. One submission to the inquiry, for instance, described the education available to secondary aged Aboriginal students at Community Education Centres (CECs) in remote parts of the Northern Territory.

> The CEC's offer young Aboriginal secondary-aged students a watered down syllabus, which amounts to a 'post-primary' education, based on a series of curriculum documents many of which are a strange amalgam of nativism and assimilationism.[8]

7 Stephen Harris, *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling,* Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990, p. 137

8 Submission No. 12, Dr Christine Nicholls, vol 1, p. 141

4.17 Some writers have been critical of the primacy of cultural issues in Indigenous education policy, arguing that this has shifted the focus away from the need for good mainstream education. They caution against the danger that acknowledgment and incorporation of cultural differences in education systems may mean an acceptance of different, and lower, educational outcomes.[9] An assumption that Indigenous people are less able to undertake subjects such as science and mathematics, for example, is seen as one of the dangers of an over-emphasis on cultural factors.

4.18 Some cultural approaches have also tended to treat Indigenous cultures as static victims of mainstream cultural domination. This has been criticised as simplistic, with some writers pointing to the dynamic nature of Indigenous cultures and the ways in which they interact with and use aspects of mainstream culture.

4.19 Some writers have also pointed to the ways in which cultural approaches fail to recognise the level of cultural diversity among Indigenous Australians. Much of the literature on cultural differences focuses on remote and more traditionally oriented societies. While these are important areas with specific needs (in some cases representing the most educationally disadvantaged of all Indigenous Australian communities), they are not where most Indigenous people live. Many Indigenous Australians live in cities or large regional centres and speak English as their first or only language. Cultural issues may also be important in these areas but the nature and extent of these issues will vary widely.

The Committee's position

4.20 While these are difficult issues to resolve, the Committee believes that education systems have an important role to play in the social and economic advancement of Indigenous peoples and should receive due support and recognition from governments. It is fundamental that Indigenous people should have access to the same educational opportunities as all Australians. This includes access to curriculum that is educationally challenging as well as culturally appropriate. It is also axiomatic that good educational practice takes into account the background and needs of the student. There is strong evidence that cultural issues are important for Indigenous people and should be taken into account in curriculum design. There is also evidence that this may have resulted in poor curriculum in the past. Cultural inclusiveness should not be at the expense of academic standards. Consideration of cultural issues should also take into account the level of cultural diversity of the Indigenous population.

4.21 There are also two issues involved in the debate over curriculum and Indigenous culture. One is the attempt to improve levels of mainstream educational achievement and the extent to which culturally inclusive curricula need to be incorporated into the mainstream curriculum. The other is the separate but related issue of the teaching of Indigenous cultures and languages to both Indigenous and

9 Dr Martin Nakata, 'History, Cultural Diversity and English Language Teaching', *Ngoonjook: A Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, July 1997, p. 64

non-Indigenous students. These areas tend to overlap, particularly in more traditionally oriented communities, but are different in terms of educational aims. The use of Indigenous languages in bilingual or 'both ways' education, for example, is a different issue to the teaching of Indigenous languages as part of the Languages Other Than English (LOTE) curriculum. The first is concerned with the use of language and culture across the curriculum while the second is concerned with the specific teaching of language and culture.

Recommendations from previous Inquiries

4.22 Inquiries into Indigenous education have focussed on recommendations relating both to participation in the mainstream curriculum and the incorporation of Indigenous cultural values into the curriculum.

4.23 The 1988 Hughes report highlighted the importance of cultural issues and also the central role of education in achieving the income and employment equity objectives of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP). In part, the focus on cultural issues was seen as a response to curricula that had involved the suppression of Indigenous cultures in the past. The challenge was to find better ways to provide access to the benefits of mainstream education.

> Perhaps the most challenging issue of all is to ensure education is available to all Aboriginal people in a manner that reinforces rather than suppresses their unique cultural identity.[10]

4.24 The report recommended the provision of funds for curriculum development in early childhood education and the schools sector, as well as the provision of bridging and orientation courses, and the development of off-campus and external study programs in vocational education and higher education. The report also recommended the establishment of eight Aboriginal Education Centres in higher education institutions, and the provision of guidelines to ensure that higher education courses acknowledged the validity of Indigenous cultural issues. In addition, the report called for programs that would provide all Australian students with 'a curriculum that includes Aboriginal Studies, in order to increase their understanding of Aboriginal culture and enhance their sensitivity towards the needs of their Aboriginal peers'.[11]

4.25 The 1990 NATSIEP Joint Policy Statement pointed to the importance of cultural issues in Indigenous education. Lack of sensitivity to Indigenous cultural issues was said to be one among a range of factors behind low levels of participation.

---

10 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force*, Canberra, 1988, p, 2

11 *ibid*., p. 17

> Aboriginal youth are more likely to participate in education and develop learning competencies when … the curriculum is, and is perceived to be, relevant and appropriate.[12]

4.26 The Joint Policy set out nine goals in the area of equitable and appropriate educational outcomes, which covered curriculum related issues. Five of these (goals 13, 14, 15, 16 and 19) involved the achievement of equitable mainstream educational outcomes, while three (goals 17, 18 and 20) involved Indigenous cultural or community development issues. A further goal (goal 21) covered the provision of Indigenous studies subjects to all students.[13]

4.27 The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody also made some recommendations in relation to the curriculum. These related to parental and community participation in educational services, the importance of pre-school programs, the need for more Indigenous teachers, improving prison education resources and opportunities, additional funding for community controlled programs, and the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters.[14]

4.28 The 1994 review of Indigenous education examined curriculum issues in relation to the achievement of 'appropriate and equitable outcomes'. The review dealt largely with cultural issues in the curriculum. The review highlighted the tension existing between notions of 'equitable' and 'appropriate' outcomes for Indigenous people. The review endorsed the use of 'both ways' approaches in Indigenous education and also strongly emphasised the importance of literacy development.[15] Some writers have criticised the review for over-emphasising the importance of cultural issues.

4.29 The review covered the following main curriculum areas in its recommendations:

- the development of courses of study in Indigenous languages (recommendation 24);
- the identification and provision of appropriate English as a Second Language support to Indigenous students whose first language was not English, as well as increased Commonwealth funding (recommendations 25 and 26);
- support for Indigenous studies courses at all levels of education (recommendations 27 and 28); and

---

12 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy: Joint Policy Statement*, Canberra, 1989, p. 13

13 *ibid*., p. 15

14 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 130-131

15 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report*, Canberra, 1995, p. 91

- additional Commonwealth funding for the Vocational Education and Guidance for Aboriginals Scheme (VEGAS) (recommendation 29).

4.30 The 1995 MCEETYA National Strategy reflected these concerns and made a strong case for culturally relevant curricula. 'It is now time that Indigenous culture, language and history become a part of all education and training programs by integrating Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum.'[16] The Strategy covered areas of pre-service education for teachers, programs of language and cultural maintenance, the teaching of Indigenous languages as part of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) programs, and the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum.

4.31 Priority six of the National Strategy focussed specifically on Indigenous cultures, languages and history, calling on education systems 'to promote, maintain and support the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, cultures and languages to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous students'. This teaching was seen as being of particular importance for Indigenous students. Among other factors, the provision of a 'culturally relevant curriculum' would contribute to a supportive learning environment, enhanced confidence and self-esteem, and improved learning outcomes.[17] The key outcomes included increased knowledge of Indigenous cultures among all students, and greater access to Indigenous language programs.

4.32 Priorities four and five also touched on curriculum issues and addressed some of the tensions that arise in trying to implement culturally relevant curricula. Priority four called on education systems 'to ensure participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education and training'. The National Strategy identified limitations in curricula, including 'cultural context, teaching styles and forms of organisation and assessment', as one of the barriers to increased Indigenous educational participation.[18]

4.33 Priority five concerned equitable and appropriate educational achievement for Indigenous students. As in the earlier review, the strategy highlighted the tension between 'equitable' and 'appropriate' achievement. While focussing on mainstream educational outcomes such as increased levels of English language literacy and numeracy, priority five acknowledged the need for culturally inclusive methodologies and recognised that there was much work yet to be done in this area. The Strategy endorsed the call in the 1994 National Review for 'a concentrated effort and a major investment in literacy development by the Commonwealth and the education providers'.[19] Access to English as a Second Language programs and teaching strategies were seen as crucial.

---

16 Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002*, Canberra, 1996, p. 61

17 *ibid.*, pp. 61-62

18 *ibid.*, p. 40

19 *ibid.*, p. 51

Findings

4.34 A recurring theme throughout the literature is the tension between the objective of success in the mainstream curriculum and the extent to which cultural issues need to be addressed in achieving success. There were a range of opinions on this in the hearings, to some extent reflecting the level of diversity within and between Indigenous communities.

4.35 Staff from some of the larger regional and urban high schools, where Indigenous students formed a significant proportion of the population but were not in a majority, tended to put a strong emphasis on mainstream educational achievement. In Dubbo, for instance, they were using targeted funds to provide intensive Reading Recovery programs for Indigenous students, and considered that they had achieved some significant increases in literacy levels. On the issue of cultural relevance, the principal commented that schools needed to recognise that they had children for a limited time, and that their priorities needed to be on the acquisition of basic skills.

> … the one thing that I am convinced of is that nothing does more for an Aboriginal student's self-esteem than being as good at reading, writing and arithmetic as all the other kids. … The reality of it is that we do not have any Aboriginal programs. All that we have got is good teaching programs for all kids.[20]

4.36 This was an approach that received qualified endorsement from some Indigenous people in relation to issues of culture and language.

> I have always been taught, and I certainly stand by this today, that the languages I have on both my mother's and my father's side are something that I will never lose. I do not need anybody to put it into print to retain it for me, and I do not need anybody to teach me or my children what my language is. What I need is to ensure that the resources, policies, and the attitudes of mainstream Australia in terms of Indigenous education and Indigenous needs are the focus of our effort. It is important to have language there, but it is not an absolute priority.[21]

4.37 This was also a concern that was raised in terms of access to education in some of the more remote locations. One submission from the Jilkminggan community near Katherine called for a wide range of mainstream secondary subjects such as science to be made available to students in their community.[22] Some concerns were also expressed about the quality of education offered to students at Community Education Centres in the Northern Territory. One submission described it as 'a watered down syllabus'. This submission was critical of the failure to provide the same secondary curriculum as that provided to non-Indigenous students irrespective of

---

20 Mr Des O'Malley, *Hansard*, Bourke, 26 July 1999, p. 70

21 Mr Roger Thomas, *Hansard*, Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 95

22 Submission No. 2, Jilkminggan School Council, vol. 1, pp. 12-14

their location, ability or achievement. The submission argued for strategies to ensure the provision of a full secondary education to all students in the Northern Territory.

> The argument that Aboriginal youth are not 'ready' for 'proper' secondary education programmes, and so therefore should be offered 'transitional' education programmes, is not ultimately a valid one.[23]

4.38 Active pursuit of mainstream educational outcomes and a belief that Indigenous students should not be denied access to educational opportunities was said to be achieving results in some areas. Brewarrina Central School, for example, had taken this approach and reported significant improvements in retention to Year 11 and 12. Active support from staff was seen as vital for students who would be completing schooling through distance education. While there were limitations involved in relying on distance education for some subjects, the school had taken the approach that they would not deny the students access to any subjects they wanted to take. According to the principal, 'I want people to see years 11 and 12 as a possibility for students.'[24]

4.39 Most educational institutions with large Indigenous populations also supported the need to take Indigenous cultural issues into account. The extent of this need and the emphasis placed on it varied between locations. In one of the primary schools in Cairns the Committee was told that the main difficulty in relation to Indigenous students had been the way the curriculum was delivered in a mainstream school. Discussions with parents resulted in a list of twelve required learning styles. These were used to design educational programs, with the aim of preparing the Indigenous students for success in mainstream education.[25]

4.40 Most of the State Indigenous education advisory groups have developed plans that include provisions for culturally inclusive curricula. Participants in a research project on year 12 completion in South Australia considered that inclusive curriculum practices were central to successful outcomes. The Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum (APAC) package, developed in South Australia, was identified as one positive strategy by teachers, schools and parents.[26]

4.41 Some submissions and witnesses were highly critical of the perceived failure of mainstream educational institutions to provide a culturally relevant curriculum for Indigenous students. High rates of truancy among young Indigenous people in some government schools in the Northern Territory, for example, were said to reflect inappropriate curriculum and teaching methods. Levels of attendance were said by

---

23 Submission No. 12, Dr Christine Nicholls, vol. 1, pp. 141-143

24 Miss Ruythe Dufty, *Hansard*, Brewarrina, 26 July 1999, p. 19

25 Caravonica Primary School, *Hansard Precis*, Cairns, 2 August 1999, pp. 1-2

26 Mr Lester Irabinna Rigney, *Hansard*, Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 137

some witnesses to be higher in those institutions which provided a 'culturally appropriate pedagogy serving the needs of Indigenous students'.[27]

4.42 In some instances, the consideration of cultural issues extended to a belief that different forms of teaching and assessment were appropriate for Indigenous people. This was most strongly felt in relation to issues of language. The principal of the Catholic primary school in Bourke, for example, made the following comment.

> I feel very strongly that the country and the government really have to look at other forms of literacy that are more suited to Indigenous children's learning. Yours and our ways of reading text and of looking at a book and putting information together do not work with Indigenous students.[28]

4.43 Another area where social and cultural differences were seen as important was that of higher education, particularly in those fields where there were pressing needs for Indigenous professionals (such as health and education).

> Trends in government policy to reward retention and completion are trends we all aspire to meet. Nevertheless, just getting people here and participation going is really the primary task that we see for ourselves. Whilst we are committed to improving performance of students, we still regard ourselves as in a developmental phase where participation of Indigenous students, whether they stay for the whole or partial completion of a course or simply come and do not even complete a large number of subjects, are all achievements for the context in which we are working.[29]

4.44 The general consensus of opinion was that educational institutions needed to prepare Indigenous students for mainstream educational participation and achievement. However, there was also a strong view in many areas that this needed to involve recognition of Indigenous language and cultural issues. One example of this was the recognition of Aboriginal English as a form of language usage and not as simply an example of 'bad' English. In more remote and traditionally oriented communities this extended to the use of bilingual and 'both ways' education.

4.45 Some witnesses suggested that the traditional culture and lifestyles of Indigenous peoples were incompatible with European educational systems, and that success in mainstream education might require Indigenous communities to change their behaviour in regard to issues such as attendance. There was a suggestion from some witnesses that governments ought to consider withholding welfare payments for non-attendance, although this idea was strongly resisted by other witnesses.

4.46 In some quarters there was a perception that 'back to basics' methods may have produced better educational outcomes in the past. The old 'mission school'

---

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

28 Brother Mark Fordyce, *Hansard*, Bourke, 26 July 1999, p. 64

29 Professor Robin McTaggart, *Hansard*, Townsville, 4 August 1999, p. 152

approach, where Indigenous people 'were basically forced to go to school to survive', was seen by some witnesses as having produced higher levels of literacy among the older generation.[30] This perception is probably true for some locations. It has been accepted by the *Learning Lessons* report as being true of the Northern Territory. Comment to this effect comes from older Indigenous people and from experienced teachers. As will be noted later in this chapter, however, anecdotal evidence of a recent decline in standards is not supported by the national data. Historically, most Indigenous people received an education that strongly emphasised the acquisition of basic skills through traditional teaching methods. On the basis of levels of participation and achievement alone, the educational benefits have been debatable and may have contributed to reluctance on the part of Indigenous parents to engage in and contribute to education. The emphasis on the need for more inclusive curriculum and teaching practices has been in large measure a response to the failings of more traditional approaches.

4.47 One of the dilemmas articulated in the National Review was over whether it was simply that mainstream education needed to be made more culturally relevant or whether a more radical approach needed to be taken to concepts of mainstream education.[31] The predominant view in the hearings and submissions seemed to be that, for the majority of Indigenous peoples, the realities of economic power required access to and participation in mainstream education. However, this was less strongly felt in remote areas where economic opportunities were more severely limited.

4.48 The Commonwealth funds a number of programs which involve curriculum-related areas. The Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) provides supplementary funding for Indigenous education based on the numbers of Indigenous enrolments. Strategic results projects are aimed at trialing ways to overcome barriers to educational achievement for Indigenous people. In the higher education sector the main source of Commonwealth funding is the Indigenous Support Funding Program, which assists institutions to develop Indigenous education strategies. Some Commonwealth funding has also gone towards developments in Open Learning.

'Two way' education

4.49 In *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling* Stephen Harris explored some of the dilemmas facing Indigenous communities in their attempts to reconcile mainstream European education with Indigenous cultural values and aspirations.

30 Mr Lester Kerber, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 270

31 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report*, Canberra, 1995, p. 85

> A two way school is designed not so much to limit the choices of Aboriginal students but to clarify what the choices are and to provide the training necessary for making living in both domains a real possibility in adult life.[32]

4.50 'Two way' or 'both ways' learning has been embraced by many remote Indigenous communities and by many educators working with these communities. The basic principle of 'two way' schooling is that learning should involve a two-way exchange of knowledge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Educational institutions need to acknowledge Indigenous cultures and languages and to recognise the significant skills possessed by Indigenous peoples. A critical aspect is the involvement of the whole community in education.

4.51 One example of two way education in practice was provided in the Goldfields Education District of Western Australia. The district covers approximately one third of Western Australia and includes some of the most remote schools in the world. The district is divided into three areas: the Town, the North Country and the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Indigenous people from the Lands were predominantly non-English speakers while those from the North Country spoke Aboriginal English.

4.52 Curriculum delivery was looked at in two ways. It involved, firstly, the acknowledgment of Aboriginal people as ESL speakers, including those whose first language was Aboriginal English. The Committee was told that it had taken a long time for the teaching community to acknowledge Aboriginal English as a language in its own right, with standard grammatical structures. An important aim of the District Education Office was to ensure that teachers were ESL skilled. Secondly, curriculum delivery involved acknowledging Aboriginal culture as a key focus. Prior Indigenous learning and cultural understandings were acknowledged, rather than forcing European learning and culture on Aboriginal students. The acknowledgment of Aboriginal students as second language speakers was said to have made a great difference in attitudes to education, although the difference had not yet been documented.[33]

4.53 'Both ways' approaches were also important in some areas of post-compulsory education. Programs at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory followed a 'both ways' philosophy, with the aim of bringing together 'Indigenous and Western knowledge and academic traditions'.[34]

4.54 The recognition of Indigenous languages has important implications for curriculum delivery. The 1994 National Review supported the recognition and use of Indigenous languages in the curriculum.

---

32 Stephen Harris, *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990, p. 20

33 Goldfields District Education Office, *Hansard Precis*, Kalgoorlie, 14 September 1999

34 Submission No. 36, Ms Veronica Arbon, vol. 5, p. 205

> We believe that forms of education which are based on the recognition and acceptance of a child's first language as a legitimate form of communication best serve the educational needs of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and have recommended increased levels of ESL support for these children.[35]

4.55 As in Kalgoorlie, a number of locations were moving to recognise and accept forms of language usage such as Kriol and Aboriginal English. The majority of students at Jilkminggan School near Katherine, for example, spoke Kriol. In their submission to the inquiry, the Jilkminggan community identified ESL teaching as an important need.[36] Recognition of Aboriginal English was also identified as an important issue in the Alice Springs region.

> We have a lot of young Indigenous students who come speaking Aboriginal English. For a long time we have looked at them as students who speak English poorly, so we correct their English.[37]

4.56 Some witnesses favoured a more traditional approach. At Yirara College, in Central Australia, literacy was seen as central to all curriculum areas. The majority of students were from a non-English speaking background, and came to the College 'specifically to be put in an English language-dominant environment'. The College provided a broad curriculum covering pathways into secondary education or TAFE, mainstream junior secondary courses, intensive literacy and numeracy instruction, as well as Indigenous language programs. The emphasis was on 'intensive education in the non-Indigenous domain'.

> … they and their families want to be able to walk into a restaurant in a major town or stay in a motel or visit a city without feeling 'shamed'.[38]

4.57 'Two way' schooling and bilingual education have attracted some criticism for concentrating too much on cultural maintenance, and for placing less emphasis on mainstream educational achievement. The Committee heard some criticisms of bilingual education, in particular, as well as some expressions of support. The criticisms centred on the lack of fluent bilingual teachers, problems involved in teaching written versions of oral languages, and the lack of a significant body of literature in Indigenous languages.[39] These witnesses considered that there was a need to put more resources into ESL approaches. Those witnesses who supported bilingual education pointed to the desire by some Indigenous communities to retain their languages and the positive effect on attendance. Some of the perceptions of failure were put down to a lack of support for bilingual approaches from governments.

---

35 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report*, Canberra, 1995, p. 101

36 Submission No. 2, Jilkminggan School Council, vol. 1, p. 13

37 Mrs Jillian Totham, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 257

38 Submission No. 9, Yirara College, vol. 1, pp. 76-77

39 Professor Paul Hughes, *Hansard*, Canberra, 30 August 1999, p. 340

4.58 The success or failure of 'two way' approaches undoubtedly owes much to the commitment of governments. In those regions where 'two way' approaches were being backed up with teaching support and resources, such as in Kalgoorlie, they appeared to be achieving results. This support should be provided consistently. The recent Collins review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory also suggested that it would be more appropriate to refer to bilingual education as 'two way learning', as this more accurately reflects what is happening in classrooms.[40] The Committee found some ambiguity in the use of the terms 'two way' learning and bilingual education, and this issue is discussed in more detail in the following chapter. The Committee supports moves to recognise Indigenous languages in the classroom, providing this recognition is accompanied by appropriate resources and support for staff. While there will always be criticisms of vernacular instruction, the Committee recognises that it is already happening and will continue to happen. The simple fact is that it has to in many Indigenous communities, and it should not be seen as being in competition with English language instruction.

Mainstream curriculum developments

4.59 While many recommendations from previous inquiries have dealt with the need to provide a more culturally appropriate curriculum, there have also been general curriculum developments over the last ten years that have had implications for Indigenous education. Issues of access to mainstream curriculum, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels, were also raised with the Committee.

4.60 A number of the State education systems have implemented new curriculum frameworks during this period. In recent years there has been increased attention to outcomes-based learning in the curriculum. The curriculum framework currently being implemented in Western Australia, for instance, has a focus on outcomes rather than means or content. What students should achieve is specified in the framework. How they achieve it is determined by education providers. Teachers have flexibility to use culturally appropriate teaching methods with Indigenous students where these are appropriate.

4.61 Some of the advantages and disadvantages of an outcomes focus were articulated in curriculum documents provided to the Committee by the Education Department of Western Australia.

> The argument is that there is considerable social justice potential in the clear articulation of 'what's important' and the commitment to ensuring that all groups of students … are expected to achieve at high levels on a common curriculum. … [We] should not be prepared to accept a situation where, explicitly or implicitly, less is expected of, and offered to, certain groups of students. As these and other commentators point out, however, the dangers

40 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, Darwin, 1999, p. 125

> are considerable that what is offered as a promise to students becomes a threat or hurdle to be jumped by them.[41]

4.62 Proponents of outcomes-based education have also argued against time-based curriculum structures. These result in poor achievement for a significant proportion of students, who 'are expected to build new ideas on a progressively weaker foundation'.[42]

4.63 In the Kalgoorlie region of Western Australia, teachers were using 'both ways' teaching methodologies as part of an outcomes-based curriculum. With languages, for instance, they were recognising Aboriginal English, and were employing code-switching to move between Aboriginal English and standard English. The aim was to enhance both mainstream English literacy outcomes and learning outcomes in other areas of the curriculum.

4.64 Some writers, however, consider that an outcomes-based approach diminishes the importance of motivational, attitudinal and interpersonal factors in learning (the affective domain). The emphasis tends to be on issues of curriculum content and learning environment rather than the teacher-learner relationship or the learner as an individual. There is little emphasis on how and why students learn, which may inhibit teachers and schools in working effectively with students as individuals. In recent times, there has also been a strong emphasis on outcomes in Commonwealth funding for educational programs, particularly with regard to literacy and numeracy. The introduction of reporting measures such as national benchmarks may have some implications for curriculum content, although it is still too early to assess their effect.

4.65 Australian educators have only recently begun to move from concepts of norms and deficits to those of pluralism and diversity. The use of 'two way' approaches can be seen as part of a wider move towards a curriculum that values and builds on what students bring to the classroom, rather than seeing it as a deficit to be overcome through education. However, as some writers point out, many teachers and curricula have still not moved far in these directions.[43] The curriculum at the secondary level also remains dominated by the need to achieve outcomes that are not always appropriate to many Indigenous students (or indeed to many non-Indigenous students). The principal of Bourke High School, for example, commented on the restrictive nature of the current secondary curriculum.

> [The] big limiting factor in a secondary school is the curriculum we have, which is bound by two major exams. That sets a lot of what we can and cannot do. It is something we have been struggling with at Bourke High School now for the 18 months I have been there. With Denise Burke, who is

---

41 Sue Willis and Barry Kissane, *Outcome-based Education: A Review of the Literature*, Education Department of Western Australia, Perth, WA, 1995, p. 3

42 *ibid*., p. 25

43 National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, *Desert Schools*, SA Teaching and Curriculum Centre, University of SA, Adelaide, 1996, vol.3, p. 16

> my English head teacher, we are going through a process of completely restructuring our curriculum. Basically, we are saying that what the Board of Studies is saying we have got to teach does not suit our kids, and so we are disregarding it.[44]

4.66 Some studies of literacy development have pointed to the need to take social, cultural and environmental factors into account for all students.

> … acquiring the intellectual capital that schools have to offer remains contingent upon children having the social capital to play the institutional game of schooling.
>
> The single most important issue – and it is not new – is that some children can do a lot more with words than others when they begin school, and that this gap widens rather than diminishes. Educational disadvantages and advantages already exist before children attend preschool and school.[45]

4.67 Concepts such as the hidden curriculum, which refers to the way in which the curriculum acts to reinforce existing social and economic arrangements, remain relevant in Indigenous education (as well as among the wider student population). Some witnesses also pointed to the restrictive nature of the organisation of the school year and school timetables. There were some suggestions that current holiday periods are inappropriate for Indigenous students.

4.68 An important aspect of recent curriculum design has been the emphasis on lifelong learning. Most curricula now incorporate a focus on lifelong learning, and on the skills and processes students will need to deal with social change. Questioning, decision making and the ability to think and problem solve are seen as core skills. These skills will be vitally important for Indigenous people and the Committee believes they should receive due recognition from educators.

4.69 In the higher education sector, Indigenous students have tended to choose a relatively narrow range of subjects, with most studying in the fields of arts, education, health or social work. There has been some broadening of participation in recent years. However, the areas of study remain relatively narrow in comparison to non-Indigenous students. Some institutions have introduced measures to encourage Indigenous students into other areas such as medicine. Some universities pointed to the diverse nature of the Indigenous student population as an issue universities need to deal with. James Cook University, for example, has students from both traditionally oriented communities and urban areas.[46]

---

44 Mr Michael Chapman, *Hansard*, Bourke, 26 July 1999, p. 77

45 Susan Hill et al., *100 Children go to School*, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, 1998, p. 174

46 Professor Robin McTaggart, *Hansard*, Townsville, 4 August 1999, p. 152

Access

4.70 In some locations, simply getting access to a good standard of mainstream education was the main problem. This was particularly so in remote areas of the Northern Territory, where there was often only limited access to the secondary curriculum available to students in less isolated areas. One submission highlighted this situation.

> [The] majority of secondary-aged Aboriginal students living in the Northern Territory are currently not enrolled in any formal secondary education programmes, that is, in programmes which lead to recognised qualifications which in turn translate into admission into further education programmes and/or employment opportunities. … were these students non-Aboriginal, most of them would be in secondary schools and programmes, staffed by trained secondary teachers, working to secondary curricula.[47]

> … students who live in predominantly non-Aboriginal remote towns (eg. the predominantly White mining town of Jabiru) of a similar size to the larger Aboriginal settlements in the Northern Territory are supplied with secondary school facilities and 'proper' secondary education programmes with qualified secondary school teachers who provide a range of subjects, at least to Year 10, or JSSC level. By contrast, in CECs, secondary-aged Aboriginal students are often taught by primary-trained teachers.[48]

4.71 This submission called for a long term plan to improve access to high school education for all rural Indigenous youth in the Northern Territory. The recent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory found that poor access to quality schooling was a critical factor in poor outcomes.[49] The review recommended the development of a clear policy on increasing access to secondary education in the Northern Territory.[50] Priority three of the MCEETYA National Strategy calls for equitable access to education and training services. Evidence presented to the inquiry suggests that there is still some way to go in this area.

Recommendation 10

4.72 The Committee recommends that coordinated strategies aimed at improving access to secondary education in remote communities be investigated by an independent national consultative body on Indigenous education established by MCEETYA.

---

47 Submission No. 12, Dr Christine Nicholls, vol. 1, p. 137

48 *ibid*., p. 141

49 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, Darwin, 1999, p. 95

50 *ibid*., p. 109

4.73 The Committee conducted an inquiry into early childhood education in 1995 and 1996[51]. Recommendations from this inquiry included that preschool programs be universally available across all states and territories[52], that the Kidmobile service be extended in remote areas[53] and that State and Territory Ministers allow greater flexibility in their childcare licensing guidelines to address the needs of small and remote communities[54].

4.74 In particular, the Committee made recommendations relevant to Indigenous communities[55], including community involvement, a holistic health and community approach to education, the continued supply of professional Indigenous educators, where appropriate the use of bilingual early childhood services and the promotion of an understanding of Indigenous culture across the school system.

4.75 During the course of this inquiry the Committee again saw firsthand these areas of need. While some improvements and successes were evident, the lack of preschool access for the majority of remote Indigenous students remains a matter of concern to the Committee.

Recommendation 11

4.76 The Committee recommends MCEETYA give renewed emphasis to the provision of pre-schools for remote communities.

Conclusion

4.77 Some of these general developments in curriculum have the potential to benefit Indigenous students. Moves towards pluralism and diversity in education are consistent with the aims of specific approaches such as 'two way' schooling. The emphasis on lifelong learning is also of potential benefit. There is general support for outcomes-focussed approaches as more educationally accountable. However, there are some concerns that these approaches need to retain an emphasis on the needs of individual students, and on the teacher-student relationship.

Indigenous studies

4.78 Priority six of the MCEETYA National Strategy calls for the teaching of Indigenous studies, cultures and languages to all students. This is a separate but related issue to that of implementing more culturally inclusive mainstream educational practices. Part of the rationale is to create a more welcoming educational environment for Indigenous students. Indigenous studies subjects are seen as essential to furthering

---

51 Senate Employment, Education and training References Committee, *Childhood Matters – The report of the inquiry into early childhood education,* Canberra, 1996

52 *ibid.*, Recommendation 6, p. 65

53 *ibid.*, Recommendation 21, p. 158

54 *ibid.*, Recommendation 22, p. 165

55 *ibid.*, Recommendation 23, p. 170

the educational participation of Indigenous people, and the reconciliation process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The strategy also sees a crucial role for Indigenous studies 'in the development and maintenance of culture and language'.[56]

4.79 In 1995 the National Strategy considered that the actual teaching of Indigenous studies subjects was limited. This situation appears to be improving. The Committee found that Indigenous studies subjects were being implemented in most of the locations visited, but retains some concerns over the ability of predominantly European teachers to teach these subjects. What was pleasing to note, however, was the involvement of local community members in these studies in almost all of the locations visited.

4.80 A range of programs focussing on Indigenous cultural issues have been introduced in all educational sectors. Some of these programs are aimed at the general community, some programs target professionals such as teachers who work with Indigenous people, and some are aimed at raising the cultural awareness and self worth of Indigenous people themselves. At the schools level, the subjects that are being taught include Indigenous history and culture, and language programs implemented as part of the LOTE curriculum.

4.81 One example is the Aboriginal Studies Kindergarten – Year 10 Curriculum being implemented in the Goldfields region of Western Australia. This involves 'the planning, delivery and evaluation of quality learning experiences and educational programs which aim to promote the understanding and awareness of past and present Aboriginal societies'.[57] The program is divided into four curriculum books in primary school and three curriculum units in secondary school. Each unit or book covers five themes. Planning and delivery of the curriculum involves the participation of Indigenous staff and community members, who are paid for their work by the District Office in recognition of the expertise they bring to the program.

4.82 An important result of programs and partnerships such as these has been a growth in Indigenous knowledge and cultural pride.. The Committee saw a number of instances of this. During NAIDOC week celebrations in Kalgoorlie, for instance, the Committee observed celebrations of Indigenous culture and of partnerships between the local education office and Indigenous community. At Bourke, Aboriginal students from St Ignatius Catholic Primary School who met the Committee were highly enthusiastic about the Aboriginal studies program provided to all students at their school.

---

56 Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996 – 2002*, Canberra, 1995, p. 61

57 Tabled documents provided by Ms Jan Pocock, Curriculum Improvement Officer, Goldfields District Education Office

4.83 Local Indigenous people were also involved in providing language training in a number of the locations visited for the inquiry. There was general support for this training, along with a recognition that there was some way to go with the development of curricula and materials. Some research in South Australia suggested that the availability of English as a second language for Aboriginal students at stage 1 and 2 of the secondary certificate had been a successful strategy.[58]

4.84 While there was evidence of successful programs in some areas, the Committee also heard other evidence that suggests that much work remains to be done. One South Australian researcher spoke of the resistance to the teaching of Indigenous studies subjects experienced by some of his former student teachers in regional areas.

> What we find is that not only do we have parents but we have prominent community members outside of the school espousing ideas that are ill-informed, which rub off on school children. When they do start to have their consciousness raised, sometimes they do not want to have their comfort zones upset.[59]

4.85 In some regions the Committee noted a clear distinction between schools that were predominantly Aboriginal and those that were not. It noted that in Brewarrina the overwhelming majority of non-Indigenous students attended the Catholic primary school in preference to the government school, which was almost wholly Indigenous. The peculiar local circumstances of this enrolment imbalance are evident in the contrast with Bourke, where Indigenous students make up a majority of enrolments at St Ignatius Primary School. The Committee is aware that this situation is by no means unusual. While there are a range of factors involved in educational choice, it indicates a level of distrust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in some locations that will take some time to overcome.

4.86 Some Indigenous studies programs are also aimed at raising the identity and self worth of Indigenous students. The Hunter Region AECG have been running a number of programs for Aboriginal students that work on developing identity through raising cultural awareness. Some of these programs have arisen out of a need for alternatives to suspension and other penalties for disruptive students. They also attempt to address mental and other health issues that may arise later in life. The programs were said to have been successful in reducing the rate of suspension among participants.[60] Other locations identified a need for similar programs. In Geraldton, there were moves to set up a diversionary program for Indigenous students at risk of suspension. Funding issues for this program were yet to be resolved at the time the Committee visited Geraldton.

---

58 Mr Lester Irabinna Rigney, *Hansard*, Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 126

59 *ibid.*, p. 133

60 Submission No. 6, Hunter Region Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, vol. 1, p. 39

4.87 A number of higher education institutions have introduced courses in Indigenous studies. The University of Newcastle has been offering a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies since 1992. This is expected to become a Bachelor of Aboriginal Studies in the near future.[61] Edith Cowan University has created a school of Indigenous studies, and has introduced specific Indigenous courses into the university profile.[62] Programs in Indigenous studies have been introduced in many teacher education courses in response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The past decade has also seen the development of a number of Indigenous education centres in higher education institutions, in response to one of the recommendations of the 1988 Hughes report. The Commonwealth currently funds six Indigenous Higher Education Centres through the Higher Education Innovations Programme.[63] A number of other Indigenous centres or schools of study have been established within other higher education institutions.

Vocational education and training, and adult education

4.88 Vocational education and training is rapidly taking its place in the school curriculum, although its scope and effectiveness varies widely between states and between schools. While the experience to date of Indigenous students in school based VET programs is marked by as many problems as successes, it should be noted that the outcomes of mainstream VET courses in schools have also been questioned. The undoubted success of post-school VET courses in attracting Indigenous students is detailed in chapter 7.

4.89 Vocational education and training (VET) is an area that has seen significant change in the past decade with the implementation of the Training Reform Agenda (TRA) and the introduction of VET in schools programs. The VET sector is an area of post-compulsory education that has also seen significant levels of participation by Indigenous people. The introduction of VET in schools programs, in particular, has created new opportunities for young Indigenous people to continue their education. The Committee was told of some innovative vocational programs for Indigenous school students. However, the Committee was also made aware of the limited relevance of some recent reforms in the VET sector to Indigenous people and the restrictions placed on curriculum by some of these reforms. The Commonwealth School to Work Transition for Indigenous Australians Taskforce is currently looking at aspects of the VET sector.

4.90 Some of the vocational training programs were said to have been effective in raising levels of educational participation and interest in education among Indigenous communities. On Thursday Island, for example, the high school has put a strong emphasis on vocational education. Some school subjects are linked to the Board of Secondary School Studies and some directly to TAFE courses. All the vocational

---

61 Submission No. 10, Umulliko Centre, University of Newcastle vol. 1, p. 95

62 Site visit, Central West College of TAFE, Geraldton, 13 September 1999

63 Submission No. 32, Department of Education , Training and Youth Affairs, vol. 4, p. 57

programs are supported by industry placement on Thursday Island, the other islands of the Torres Strait or in Cairns. The vocational education subjects are said to be succeeding very well. While university entrance still dominates the senior curriculum, the hands-on approach of the VET sector was said to be working much better with Indigenous students. The school on Thursday Island also runs a careers market every year.[64]

4.91 Cooktown State High School provided details of a school based apprenticeship program called Step Ahead. This program does not target Aboriginal or Islander students, and goes up to year 12. It is an option that the school has been able to provide to students to give them a parallel pathway to mainstream schooling, where they can concentrate on their career and vocational skills as well as build up their literacy and numeracy skills. Step Ahead was developed out of a need to keep children longer at school.

4.92 Participants in the Step Ahead program are taken out of their classes and put in one class with a specialist, primary trained teacher. The teacher then deals with each student individually. There are generally about 12 to 15 students. The program concentrates on numeracy and literacy at the same time as looking at employment training. Each student can choose an industry in which they would like to work. The school finds a work placement in that industry and the students go to that job for one week in every month to work, but do not get paid. The absence from school was not found to be disruptive. The minimum age is 14, although students younger than that can do a work placement on the school grounds.[65]

4.93 In Kalgoorlie the Committee was told about the Commonwealth funded National Rural and Remote School to Work Project. This is a joint project with Queensland, the Northern Territory and South Australia. It aims to identify the most appropriate forms of delivery of VET in rural and remote locations. A pilot project is being implemented in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in Western Australia, and focuses on enterprise education and modified structured workplace learning. A number of innovative projects have been established in schools in the region, including a travelling disco, and clothesline production. The project will be formally evaluated in 2000 by a team from Central Queensland University.[66]

4.94 Brewarrina Central School has been running a joint secondary school-TAFE course that provides students with an introduction to TAFE subjects. One of the aims of the course is to try and attract students, particularly young boys aged 14 to 15, who would otherwise leave education. However, TAFE options in Brewarrina are limited due to lack of trained staff. One suggestion from the principal of Brewarrina Central

64 *Hansard precis*, Thursday Island, 3 August 1999

65 Cooktown State High School, unpublished precis, *Hansard*, 2 August 1999, p. 7

66 Sue Budalich, Curriculum Improvement Officer, Goldfields District Education Office

School, was for the school and the TAFE to combine. This would allow more efficient use of staff across the two facilities.[67]

4.95 As with teacher education, a critical aspect of vocational education for Indigenous people is the ability to deliver training on-site or in the community. One submission described the delivery of vocational training in north Queensland in partnership with the mining industry. The delivery of vocational training on-site or in the community, along with concurrent delivery of literacy and numeracy training, was identified as an important factor.[68] Similar comments were made in relation to health training. There were some criticisms of 'mixed mode' forms of delivery of health training in the Northern Territory that involved periods of off-site or campus-based training for people from remote communities.[69] On-site delivery, however, can involve significant additional on-costs. These were said to be about 40 per cent in the Northern Territory as opposed to 11 per cent for staff based on campus. The 'mixed mode' approach had been adopted by the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education partly due to the costs involved in providing for students over a large geographical area.[70]

4.96 Submissions from some of the independent education providers pointed to the importance of the VET sector for Indigenous people, and the need to consider the extent to which VET sector policies took account of Indigenous needs and aspirations. The National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) has been particularly significant.[71] Some aspects of the policy reform process, such as recognition of prior learning and flexible delivery, have proved to be of benefit.[72] However, the emphasis on outcomes as determined by industry was said to be problematic given the nature of the Indigenous labour market. Improved outcomes were said to hinge as much on the willingness of mainstream industries to employ Indigenous people as on the effectiveness of VET sector programs. This was a problem in relation to funding decisions based on narrowly defined outcomes.

4.97 One submission from members of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers described the mainstream VET system as being of only 'marginal relevance' to Aboriginal development.

> Because over 30% of those in work are on CDEP or in community employment, and because that is the major and preferred prospect for a significant proportion of those who are unemployed, and because many, perhaps most of those who are not in the workforce at all, still have a right to post-school education, for all these reasons, the mainstream VET system,

67 Ruythe Dufty, Brewarrina Central School, *Hansard*, Brewarrina, 26 July 1999, p. 20

68 Submission No. 11, Lesley Wemyss Training, vol. 1, p. 132

69 Submission No. 13, Central Australian and Barkly Aboriginal Health Workers Association, vol. 1, p. 149

70 Ms Ann David, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, pp. 243-244

71 Submission No. 17, Ms Deborah Durnan, vol. 2, p. 38

72 *ibid*., p. 50

> with its focus on training people for jobs in industry, has very little to offer.[73]

4.98 Batchelor Institute commented on some of the disadvantages of national training packages. While there were some advantages in a competency-based approach to training, they considered that the packages did not recognise competencies that were relevant to Indigenous communities. They also commented on the level of trade training in remote communities, seeing little advance in numbers in the last fifteen years. One of the major obstacles was the requirement to attend off-the-job training in mainstream institutions.[74]

4.99 The Aboriginal Education and Training Council of Western Australia commented that in many instances the significant linkage between education and training and the implications for Aboriginal employment and economic development had been overlooked in Indigenous education.[75] This issue came up on a number of occasions in relation to the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP).

4.100 One of the recommendations from the Ara Kuwaritjakutu project called for better coordination between Commonwealth and State agencies with regard to CDEP projects to ensure that works projects are undertaken by Aboriginal people with training provided.[76] This appears to be an area where only limited progress has been made. The recent Collins report in the Northern Territory called for more community involvement in school maintenance, recommending that 'community-based agencies [be] considered as the preferred maintenance providers where quality and cost-effectiveness can be assured'.[77]

4.101 Labour market issues were mentioned by the Brewarrina CDEP as one of the barriers to accessing funds for training. The CDEP had run a horticulture training program for 20 participants, 18 of whom obtained certificates, but was unable to get further funding due to the lack of full-time employment outcomes. Most of the participants returned to CDEP employment. This was said to be a particular problem with traineeships. The CDEP program was locked into a situation where it could only get continuing funding for relatively unskilled manual occupations, with little scope to provide training or improve the skill levels of participants. This is a significant dilemma in some rural and remote locations. Funds are tied to employment outcomes to avoid the charge of either 'training for training's sake' or an outcome that would see more highly skilled people engaged in low wage occupations through CDEP. However, this virtually condemns remote communities to an impoverished skills base, and all the implications this implies for community development.

---

73 *ibid.*, p. 49

74 Submission No. 36, Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, vol. 5, pp. 205-207

75 Submission No. 16, Aboriginal Education and Training Council of Western Australia, vol. 2, p. 15

76 Submission No. 24, Australian Education Union, vol. 2, p. 132

77 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Learning Lessons: An independent review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory*, Darwin, 1999, p. 6

4.102 The submission from the Australian Education Union (AEU) included some case studies from a study of Indigenous VET sector participants. The case studies highlighted the difficult paths into education for many mature age Indigenous VET sector participants.

> Each of the Indigenous interviewees was engaged in vocational education and training, at least partly, for vocational reasons. The author argues strongly that, these cameos illustrate the importance of recognising benefits of outcomes in terms which go beyond the individual and an immediate job. The problems they faced were exacerbated particularly by their low skills, insufficient education and training and prior unemployment. Assistance and encouragement in coming to terms with and strengthening Indigenous identity and self esteem offered within vocational education and training providers was an important factor in the difficult road to employment.

4.103 The AEU submission also reported on work in progress for the School to Work Transition for Indigenous Australians taskforce. The submission also raised the issue of young Indigenous people who left school at an early age but were too young to enrol in TAFE.

Adult education

4.104 Adult education, also discussed in chapter seven, is an extremely important part of the educational process for many Indigenous people. The biggest increases in post-compulsory Indigenous educational attendance in recent years have been among mature age students. Many of these have been women. One witness in Alice Springs described a pattern in towns and remote communities 'of Aboriginal women having their children young and returning to learning after that time'.[78] Adult education provides an entry into the education and training system for mature age Indigenous people who may have had only limited previous educational experience.

4.105 The current demographics of the Indigenous student population indicate that adult education will remain an area of strong demand. The statistics suggest that many Indigenous people leave the education system at an early age (around 14 or 15 years of age) and return to education as adults. There may be cultural factors involved. In many Indigenous communities young people become adults at an early age and are expected to take on adult responsibilities. Education may become more important as they become older. These trends suggest that the pool of potential Indigenous adult education students will remain a large one. Indigenous adults returning to education will also continue to participate at lower academic levels than other mature age students. However, adult education remains a poor relation in the educational system. It deserves to receive greater prominence from policy makers due to its importance to the Indigenous population.

78 Ms Ann Davis, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 244

4.106 A number of submissions specifically commented on adult education. Some of the independent community-controlled institutions, in particular, attempt to cater for mature age Indigenous students returning to education after long periods of time and from very low levels of previous educational participation and achievement. They commented on the limiting effect of mainstream policy developments in adult education.[79] The Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector was also the subject of two Senate reports, and the findings in relation to Indigenous education were reported in one of the submissions.[80] The ATSIC submission recommends 'that DETYA and MCEETYA give specific consideration to a national strategy to promote and implement Adult Community Education for Indigenous people'.[81]

4.107 Some evidence from adult education providers focussed on the difficulties of being an education provider for students who were coping with significant emotional and social issues. Typical of this was the comment from the Director of Tauondi College in Port Adelaide.

> We are treading that fine line between being criticised for not being wholly and solely an educational institution and acknowledging that you cannot have education of anybody, black or white, young or old, if they are not sound of mind, body and spirit.[82]

4.108 Some witnesses also called for better access to educational services and support for Indigenous adult education students. This issue was raised in particular in relation to the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), which is no longer available for students undertaking bridging or enabling courses ('the critical groundwork for going into higher level courses').[83]

4.109 The Committee considers recent trends in Indigenous participation in vocational training and adult education to be encouraging, but is also well aware that trends in adult education in particular may well be making up for past educational failures. The Committee is concerned at the limiting effect some VET sector reforms may have on Indigenous participation and achievement. In the area of adult education, the Committee considers that the sector needs to receive more prominence in policy making because of its importance to the Indigenous community. A recommendation on adult education is included in chapter seven.

Technology

4.110 Technology has become an increasingly important subject in schools over the last decade, both as a subject in its own right and in the delivery of other subjects in

---

79 Submission No. 17, Ms Deborah Durnan, vol. 2, p. 30

80 *ibid*., pp. 50-51

81 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 119

82 Mr Bill Wilson, *Hansard*, Port Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 148

83 Ms Ann Davis, *Hansard*, Alice Springs, 6 August 1999, p. 245

the curriculum. Witnesses in Townsville stressed the importance of learning in information technology. Some witnesses were concerned that the priorities in Indigenous education might be backward looking, with one witness arguing that information technology represented the most important part of the curriculum.

> … yes, literacy is important but it is not the most important game in town at the moment. The most important game in town at the moment is the use of computers.[84]

4.111 The use of technology in the classroom offers considerable benefits as well as some dangers for Indigenous students. It has received only limited attention in educational policy making at the national level. The MCEETYA National Strategy identifies strategies involving the use of open learning technologies in educational delivery and the use of computer software in the development of literacy and numeracy skills. These are areas where information technology can provide significant advantages for Indigenous students. Open learning technologies, in particular, can provide greater access to educational resources for remote communities.

4.112 This was an area where educational institutions appeared to be making some progress. Most schools were placing a strong emphasis on technology, and this was particularly evident in schools with large Indigenous populations. Some witnesses claimed that computer software provided a visual and aural learning environment that was more appropriate to the learning styles of Indigenous students. Computers also had the capacity to provide instantaneous feedback.[85]

4.113 The role of technology in curriculum delivery and assessment was emphasised in the Goldfields area of Western Australia. A particular feature was the development and use of electronic portfolios. The portfolios included audio, video, digital images, computer generated tasks and traditional work samples, and provided a compact record of student achievements. This could be used in reporting to parents and Aboriginal communities, as well as to support teachers when transient students moved to another school.

4.114 One witness from Townsville saw a need for interactive computer programs that children could use when they came back into a classroom after an absence. It was considered that this would need to be developed on a national basis with support from the Commonwealth due to the cost.[86]

4.115 Some schools have developed internet sites that promote their educational philosophies and achievements. Two sites that were of particular interest were Roebourne Primary School in the North West of Western Australia, and Rawa

---

84 Ms Gail Mackay, *Hansard*, Townsville, 4 August 1999, p. 174

85 Tabled document from Goldfields District Education Office

86 Ms Gail Mackay, *Hansard*, Townsville, 4 August 1999, p. 177

Community School in the remote Rudall River National Park (also in the north west of Western Australia). Both sites contained information and pictures of the school and students as well as examples of student work.

4.116 In the higher education sector, Open Learning Australia is involved in the development of Indigenous educational content for delivery in an on-line environment, and the application of on-line technology to foster communication and course delivery. The aim is to improve access to higher education courses for Indigenous communities.[87] The ATSIC submission recommended that DETYA fund a research project on the 'effectiveness and potential for expansion of computer aided learning for Indigenous people in remote communities'.[88] There are also a number of on-line resources providing useful information and links on Indigenous education. One example is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Website (NATSIEW).[89]

4.117 The dangers involved in the introduction of new technology centre around access to appropriate technology and infrastructure. Information technology has become an essential area of learning for all students. Without access to appropriate technology Indigenous students could be further disadvantaged in comparison to other students. This was an area where the Committee had some concerns. In Papunya in the Northern Territory the Committee found a school with an intermittent power supply. While steps have been taken to remedy this specific instance, the Committee remains concerned that some remote locations may not be adequately equipped to provide computer facilities or training. This situation is not acceptable in this day and age.

4.118 The Committee is encouraged by the willingness of schools and teachers to adopt new technologies in the classroom, both for use in curriculum delivery and as subjects in their own right. The Committee believes this willingness should be supported by governments. It is not acceptable that schools should forfeit access to the advantages of new technology on the basis of inadequate electrical power or a lack of communications infrastructure. This is an area where governments at all levels can and should do more.

Conclusion

4.119 In examining the issue of curriculum, the Committee has identified areas of significant change over the last ten years. Many of these changes are to be welcomed. However, the Committee has also identified some areas of concern and some areas where change has been less than satisfactory.

4.120 The strongest focus of Indigenous educational policy over the last ten years has been on the attempt to implement a more culturally inclusive curriculum. The

87 Submission No. 1, Open Learning Australia, vol. 1, p. 3

88 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 119

89 http://www.natsiew.nexus.edu.au/splash2.html

Committee found evidence of significant effort in this area but is also aware that much remains to be done. The Committee was also made aware of concerns regarding both the standard of curriculum, and access to mainstream subjects in rural and remote areas. The Committee supports the use of culturally inclusive curriculum, where this is appropriate, but is concerned that this should not be at the expense of a curriculum that is both challenging and academically rigorous.

4.121 At a more general level, the Committee supports moves towards a stronger outcomes focus in education, as well as the incorporation of lifelong learning. The Committee has some concerns, however, about the effect of wider curriculum changes on Indigenous students. This is a particular concern in the VET sector. Curriculum development on the basis of labour market and industry requirements may not accurately reflect the needs of Indigenous communities. The Committee is concerned that the needs of Indigenous communities should be taken into account in changes such as these.

4.122 The Committee is particularly encouraged by the growing use of information technology, and the innovative ways in which it is being used in curriculum delivery. The biggest concern of the Committee relates to access to technology. The Committee considers that all governments need to make concerted efforts to ensure that communities have access to appropriate infrastructure and facilities. Without this access, Indigenous students will fall further behind their non-Indigenous counterparts in this important area of education.

4.123 In some areas there is much that remains to be done. Education systems have only recently begun to deal seriously with issues such as transient lifestyles and the recognition of Aboriginal English. These areas offer great educational potential as well as some risks, and will need to be handled carefully by educators. Other areas where more work still needs to be done include the on-site delivery of training, particularly in the VET sector, and an appropriate emphasis on adult education. The Committee is aware of work that is being done in these areas and recommends continued effort.

4.124 Ultimately, the quality of curriculum delivery depends on the quality and sensitivity of teachers. While curriculum developments are important, they need appropriately trained and resourced teachers. Perhaps the central message to come out of the Committees' hearings and visits is that curriculum reform (such as the introduction of 'two way' learning) will only succeed with the provision of appropriate resources and support for teachers. This requires the commitment of governments at both levels.

4.125 In conclusion, comments from a 1985 history of Australian education on the critical issues facing Indigenous education still seem relevant. These were identified as:

> … how to develop or maintain an Aboriginal identity without jeopardising the practical values of a Western education, how to teach a bilingual program so as to provide full value to the local Aboriginal language and

culture, how to create a sufficient number of proficient Aboriginal teachers, and how to involve Aboriginal communities in contributing to curriculum development and school policy making.[90]

Recommendation 12

4.126 The Committee recommends that MCEETYA develop a coordinated consultative national approach to ensure that culturally appropriate best practice informs all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training needs.

Recommendation 13

4.127 The Committee notes the interest of ATSIC in exploring the potential for expansion of computer-aided learning for Indigenous people in remote communities and recommends that the Minister initiate a pilot project to trial the use of satellite or microwave based internet technology.

Recommendation 14

4.128 The Committee recommends that a set of national participation goals and outcomes be developed by DETYA for the education and training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and that these cover the spectrum of lifelong learning with specific and designated responsibilities being allocated to the Commonwealth and to states and territories.

90 W F Connell, *Reshaping Australian Education 1960 – 1985*, ACER, Hawthorn, 1993, p. 455