

Chapter 2

Opposition Senators' Report

2.1 The provisions of this bill are the latest in a series of attempts by the Government to 'mainstream' provision of education and other services to indigenous Australians. Opposition party senators consider the retention of culturally appropriate provision of education services to be an important factor in maximising the benefit to indigenous Australians of their educational endeavours. The bill also extends the new policy of 'competitive funding' to institutions providing education for indigenous students. The committee first encountered this in dealing with the 2004 amendments to the bill, on which it reported twice, earlier this year. Competitive funding has the objective of broadening the scope of funding availability to particular groups and of targeting funds for specific needs or directing funds to people fitting categories who are in need. The obverse of this is that such funding is of limited duration. The emphasis now is on 'leverage'. The Government uses its funding to leverage increases in fees and other sources of revenue which the institution has notional access to.

2.2 Four independent indigenous VET providers have been targeted in this bill. They are the Institute for Aboriginal Development, Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative College, Tauondi College, and the Aboriginal Dance Theatre. Each of these institutions has played a valuable role in the provision of VET services to indigenous Australians for at least twenty years.

2.3 The bill before the committee seeks to remove Transitional Project Assistance (TPA) funding from independent Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers and force them to seek funding through a competitive process.

2.4 The transitional assistance was originally provided to assist institutions to adapt from a project-based funding program to an outcome-based program under the Government's Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP). The TPA was designed to bridge the gap between a provider's per capita entitlement and the previous funding level. Since its introduction in 1997 TPA funding has been steadily withdrawn, as enrolments increased and other per capita entitlements rose. However, it is clear that the funding is still an important source of income for VET institutions. Tranby College submitted that 75 per cent of its operational funding is derived from NIELNS TPA, which stands to be removed. Even if Tranby were to be successful in a competitive bidding process in 2006 and beyond, it would be highly unlikely to secure the current level of funding. This would disadvantage the teaching provided to indigenous students, many of whom come from disadvantaged remote areas.

2.5 In taking this action, opposition party senators are concerned that the government has failed to consider the contents of its own review into indigenous VET providers, the *Report on the Review of the Independent Indigenous Vocational*

Education and Training Providers, and the important, specialised role they play in providing appropriate and tailored services to indigenous people.¹ The review was conducted by DEST in 2003, and specifically examined the providers identified in this bill. The review analysed each organisation's use of capital and recurrent expenditure, and their role in educating students. It sought also to compare outcomes and cost-effectiveness between indigenous and non-indigenous VET providers, and advised what program areas, if any, might be improved upon.

2.6 The review found that providers:

...[A]re making a contribution to Indigenous training in Australia at a time when Indigenous training outcomes still lag behind those of other Australians.²

2.7 The review also drew on the 2001 National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, which found that services through these providers were more successful at attracting indigenous people, particularly in remote areas, where vocational education and training is a difficult challenge. The Report also found higher literacy and numeracy module completion rates to be higher than the national average among indigenous VET providers.³ DEST's 2003 report explicitly identified the importance of cultural appropriateness for effective learning, and the contribution independent providers played in providing it. The report found that:

All four organisations had a strong commitment to Aboriginal self-determination through education, with a strong bias towards cultural identity and Aboriginal learning styles. The importance of Indigenous control was also emphasised and achieved through Indigenous governance. While there is no doubt that TAFE is committed to culturally appropriate learning, a specially developed Indigenous learning environment is important to some Indigenous students – In terms of their confidence, commitment and long term engagement with the education process.⁴

2.8 This is of no surprise to opposition senators. There was a consistent theme among respondents to the inquiry that institutions like Tranby College performed well in educating students, many of whom had particular cultural needs. Typical of individual respondents was Ms Aleshia Lonsdale, who submitted that:

As a student I believe this success can be attributed to the fact that Tranby recognises and respects the cultural values and needs of their students. We

1 Department of Education, Science and Training, *Report on the Review of the Independent Indigenous Vocational Education and Training Providers*, October 2003, Commonwealth of Australia

2 VET Review, p.13

3 *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001, pp.73,78

4 VET review, p.14

are receiving training which is tailored to meet the educational needs of students in a culturally appropriate and supportive learning environment.⁵

2.9 Similarly, participants in the National Indigenous Legal Advocacy course at Tranby had this to say:

In our class, we have a retention rate of 92 per cent. When you consider the poor retention rates of Aboriginal children through the public education system, and compare them to the rates of students at Tranby, the figures speak for themselves and the question must be asked, 'why can an Aboriginal college obtain such fantastic outcomes that our mainstream education system cannot?' The answer is simple; the mainstream system simply does not understand and cater for the cultural needs of Aboriginal people, nor do they teach in a way that facilitates a better understanding of what is being taught.⁶

2.10 It is this cultural appropriateness that stands to be lost when indigenous institutions are forced to compete for funds with other schools and colleges who are in the business of serving a different market and using different methods.

2.11 Dr Bob Boughton is an academic with extensive experience in indigenous education, including his co-authorship of a report on indigenous VET outcomes for the National Centre for Vocational Education research (NCVER). His submission to the committee highlighted the fact that better outcomes are achieved where indigenous people own and control their own educational institutions and processes, and that this was solidly supported by evidence from a number of sources, including research he had overseen.⁷ The concern expressed in submissions, often more implicitly stated than is usual, is that funding is too precarious to give confidence that successful programs will continue.

2.12 The 2003 review conducted by DEST recommended the continuation of independent providers, but suggested that their Commonwealth and state government funding and reporting systems should be better integrated.⁸ While the current bill seeks better integration between levels of government, it also seeks to 'mainstream' funding arrangements. As a result of the change, opposition senators consider that the measure might not take account of the specific needs of indigenous students, which were discussed at length in the 2003 review and in other expert opinion supplied to the committee. If so, successful results may not be achieved by indigenous people in remote areas seeking to further their education.

2.13 As Dr Boughton observed, in relation to certainty of funding:

5 Aleshia Lonsdale, *Submission 11*, p.1

6 Participants of the National Indigenous Legal Advocacy Course at Tranby Aboriginal College, *Submission 7*, p.2

7 Dr Bob Boughton, *Submission 2*, p.2

8 VET Review, p.26

The aim of any change should be to secure stable sustainable core funding for independent community-controlled Indigenous education providers, so they can continue their outstanding work without having constantly to waste scarce resources re-establishing their basic right to provide a legitimate and appropriate education to their people.⁹

2.14 Opposition senators believe that the precarious nature of future government funding will affect the ability of such institutions as those listed in the schedule to the bill to plan for their future expansion. The work and reputation of the colleges is well known. There is nothing that smacks of unfairness in ensuring their continued access to high levels of funding because they are regarded as 'lighthouse' institutions. If the Government can continue funding to 'Establishment' independent schools, it can ensure that equal consideration is given to indigenous education colleges. Accordingly, opposition senators believe that current levels of funding to the four identified institutions should be maintained.

Recommendation

Opposition senators recommend that, in the absence of recurrent funding, access to indexed TPA funding for the four identified institutions be continued.

Senator Gavin Marshall
Deputy Chair

Senator George Campbell

9 Dr Bob Boughton, *Submission 2*, p.4