

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the provisions of the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2005

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Dear Senators,

The Uniting Church in NSW wishes to express its concern at aspects of the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2005.

The church is concerned by reports that \$10.9 million is to be transferred from direct allocation to 4 independent, Indigenous-controlled education providers to a general fund open to 'competition', with no requirement that competing institutions need to be Indigenous-controlled. This flies in the face of research cited in the government's own National Reports to Parliament on Indigenous Education in 2001, 2002 and 2003 which acknowledged the above-average performance of the four independent providers. It also undermines the government's response to the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody which specifically recommended Indigenous provision of culturally appropriate education as a key element of 'self determination'.

We understand the Committee has already received a number of submissions outlining the successful outcomes provided by the four providers, and Tranby in particular. Tranby has an outstanding record of education over many years and provides an essential supportive, culturally appropriate and intellectually rigorous environment which improves the life opportunities not only of its students but their communities, as one of their core principles is empowering people to empower their own communities.

This Indigenous provision is not just important for Indigenous students. In 2004 an organisation of which the Uniting Church is a member commissioned a report on various Indigenous matters. The report was written by a non-Indigenous person who had completed an Advanced Diploma in Applied Aboriginal Studies. Her ability to conduct necessary interviews and research was directly tied to the fact that she had studied Indigenous issues from an Indigenous perspective – giving her access to particular insights and giving the respondents confidence in her understanding of Indigenous cultures and history.

We note that the competitive framework for funding will also mean that some funds will necessarily be redirected away from education and into relevant submissions. If the government insists on this market approach it should accept this drawback and provide additional funds to compensate for it, otherwise there will be a net loss of funds available for the purposes intended.

Furthermore, these funds are not for additional activities of these institutions but rather form the basis of their operational income. It is one thing for a large organisation to tender for a particular project, knowing that the loss of that money will not substantively affect its existence. Yet if Tranby (for example) were to lose its Commonwealth funding its viability would be immediately threatened and it could potentially be forced to close, losing decades of institutional knowledge and wasting millions of dollars in capital works (funded by the government). This does not seem a sensible way to fund Indigenous education.

In summary, the Uniting Church urges the Committee to carefully consider the many significant negative impacts of the Bill and ask whether such impacts can be justified

by its rationale. We believe an amendment to ensure that the funds transferred under this Bill are reserved for Indigenous-controlled education providers is particularly important for preserving the integrity of the government's commitment in this area.

We would also like to take this opportunity to declare that the Uniting Church believes both Commonwealth and State governments urgently need to significantly increase targeted funding for Indigenous Education if it is serious about implementing its vision of equalising educational outcomes (Adelaide Declaration 3.3). Indigenous people in this country are currently locked in a 'cycle of disadvantage' in which their educational outcomes are both cause and effect. We accept that breaking this cycle is a difficult task but that does not in any way lessen its urgency.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Harry Herbert".

Harry Herbert
Executive Director
UnitingCare NSW.ACT