

***Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities:
Submission from the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association.***

In response to an invitation from the Senate, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) prepared a submission to the *Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities*.

VAEAI's response is directed towards the following issues upon which the Select Committee requested input:

- (b) the impact of state and territory government policies on the wellbeing of regional and remote Indigenous communities.
- (c) the health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote Indigenous communities; and
- (d) the employment and enterprise opportunities in regional and remote Indigenous communities.

Introduction

Established in 1976 as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (VAECG), the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) is a community based and controlled organisation. The major aim of the VAECG was to develop processes for the involvement of Victorian Koorie community members in decision making regarding education provision for Koorie students.

VAEAI represents the Victorian Koorie community in relation to education policy development and strategic programming at the local, state and national levels.

1958 Education Act states that 'every Victorian child shall have an appropriate education'. But who defines 'appropriate' for Koories? For an education to be appropriate for Koorie people, Koories themselves need to be involved in defining what is appropriate for us.

There are few Koories in the system, so we have to work with the system, in partnership, to develop educational policies, strategies and programs that will lead to an appropriate education for all Koories. To make progress in education for Koorie students it's necessary to involve the whole community - and through communities involve families.

Partnerships are about empowering the disempowered: those who for a long time have had no say in their education. Along the Eastern seaboard, most Indigenous people are isolated, living in cities or regional areas. There may only be a handful of people in a particular area. In the context of a dispersed population, VAEAI enables the Koorie community to advocate for better outcomes in education, from early childhood to higher education.

As part of our organisational structure, VAEAI established Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs) in 30 locations across Victoria. VAEAI also has in place a partnership with the Victorian State Government. This partnership

was first formalised in 1990 under the *Partnership in Education: Koorie Education Policy*.

As a result of this partnership VAEAI has been able to devise and implement State and local level protocols that enable active involvement of Koorie people in education decision making. In October 2001 the Victorian State Government and VAEAI recommitted to this partnership with the launch of *Yalca: Koorie Education Policy*. *Yalca* acknowledges that local Koorie communities, through LAECGs, are best able to determine local education and training needs.

Yalca has served as the policy foundation for the development and implementation of strategies and programs that are currently being applied from early childhood through to post compulsory education and training.

The *Wurreker* strategy was launched in 2000. *Wurreker* is the current joint strategy developed through VAEAI's partnership with the Skills Victoria, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development (DIIRD).

Wurreker acknowledges VAEAI as the peak body providing valid and accurate advice to Government on Koorie training requirements.

Most recently the *Wannik* strategy was launched, in February 2008. The *Wannik* strategy was developed through the partnership between VAEAI and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD).

Wannik continues with the same philosophy of equal partnership with the Koorie community that is central to *Yalca* and *Wurreker*. The strategy clearly states that it will be "responsive to community needs at the local level. It will be implemented in partnership with, rather than for, the community".

The policies that have been formed in partnership between VAEAI and the Victorian State Government have impacted positively on the education outcomes for Koorie people, as this submission will demonstrate. The aim of this submission is therefore not to solely focus on a deficit perspective of Koorie people in the education system. Rather, VAEAI wishes to present a viewpoint on successes that should be taken as models to be emulated, as well as to identify the challenges that require focused attention.

Early Childhood

In 2008 the Council of Australian Governments Early Childhood Sub-Group released a *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*. That Framework contained a number of goals, and amongst them were the following:

- Ensure that early childhood education and care plays a central role in local community development and community life, and is closely linked to other local services.
- Tackle disadvantage through early childhood education and care.

- Support parental choice and encourage diversity in the provision of early childhood education and care services. (11)

In addition DEEWR's *Family Schools Partnerships Framework*, released in August 2008, contains within it the complementary aim of addressing "barriers to involvement in schools by families, in particular Indigenous families" with a view to "actively helping previously uninvolved families to become involved" (2). Involving Koorie families in early childhood services is the first step towards developing a positive regard for, and active involvement in, the education system. To achieve this it is of crucial importance that these services welcome, respect and celebrate the cultural identity that the child is developing within their home, family and community. Early childhood services are sites where parents are entrusting their children to care outside of the home or community for the first time. The targeted services provided to Koorie children must be specifically developed within the geographical, cultural, social and linguistic diversity of Koorie families and communities.

MACS centres

Dedicated Koorie early childhood education services have demonstrated significant outcomes in improving the participation of Koorie children. The dedicated Koorie early childhood education services that currently exist are in high demand, with long waiting lists, and these services should be developed and replicated to maximise their capacity to meet present and future needs.

An example is the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) which were conceived as early childhood service hubs and have operated as such since they were first established in 1987 – with playgroup, occasional care, long day care, after school care, vacation care, outreach service, transport (bus) and culturally appropriate programs. The service is provided to ensure that the cultural, physical, social and emotional well-being of Koorie children is catered for. There are six MACS centres in Victoria: Robinvale, Mooroopna Shepparton, Echuca, Melbourne, Morwell, and Lake Tyers. In addition to providing a service that approaches childcare holistically, MACS also recognise the importance of physical co-location of services. Currently Yappera MACS operates next door to Yappera Kindergarten, and early this year Lidje MACS and Badja Kindergarten will combine.

Current Federal and State policy has acknowledged the value of multifunctional services like the MACS. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* identifies the co-location and integration of services as a central aim for the future of early childhood services in the State. At the Federal level, MCEETYA notes that: "successful programs are multi-faceted and provide opportunities to build upon the strengths of the children, educators, families and communities as they work towards promoting positive educational outcomes". (Transitions Report, 18).

The MACS centres offer a wide variety of services that cover all educational levels for children between 0 and 5. MACS centres provide the requisite cognitive skills needed to enter Prep using Koorie knowledge, culture and history as the foundational blocks of all educational lessons.

MACS centres provide a smoother transitioning period to Prep as each MACS has developed strong partnerships with local primary schools and the teaching staff, and provide a longer timeframe for the transitioning period.

One of the continuing challenges in providing high quality early childhood education services for Koorie families is that more MACS centres have not been established in other areas of Victoria. MACS have proven to be an invaluable educational institution in this state when it comes to providing quality education skills to children that are needed for the child to be 'school ready'.

Koorie playgroups

Where MACS are not available Koorie playgroups provide an alternate means for Koorie children to experience a supportive educational setting prior to entering school. The dedicated Koorie Playgroups are targeted at groups between the ages of 1-4.

There are 30 dedicated Koorie Playgroup sites through out Victoria with various session times.

Unfortunately, the VAEAI Early Childhood Unit and Early Childhood Subcommittee have observed that a proportion of Koorie children are not entering playgroups until the child is aged 4 and getting ready to enter Prep.

In Home Support Program

It is hoped that in the very near future more Koorie children will benefit from early childhood services at an earlier age. The Home Support Program, a new initiative by the Victorian State Government, (responding advice from VAEAI) was developed to address this issue amongst others. The In Home Support model is different from the other early childhood services mentioned, in that it can provide support to families from the antenatal stage. VAEAI, with the In Home Support Program and other Koorie early years services, are actively providing information and support to Koorie families to ensure that children are entering playgroups at the earliest age possible.

VAEAI has been funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to coordinate the In Home Support Initiative in the following five sites where an In Home Support worker has been employed:

- Geelong
- Mildura
- Shepparton
- Bairnsdale
- Melbourne

The initiative creates a service aimed at producing positive health, development, learning, safety and wellbeing outcomes for Koorie children, parents and the wider community. Through In Home Support Koorie families are informed about the range

of maternal and child health and early childhood services that are available. The In Home Support Program is targeted at years 0-3; currently DEECD is trialling the Home Based Early Learning program in Mildura.

Koorie early childhood workforce

Koorie workers in the field of early childhood assist families with accessing Koorie services, or provide support where there are no services available. The demand for dedicated Koorie early childhood services currently far exceeds the number of places available. It is important therefore to ensure that Koorie early childhood workers are employed in both dedicated and generalist services to meet the needs of Koorie families.

The In Home Support workers, Koorie Early Childhood Field Officers (KECFOs) and Koorie Preschool Assistants (KPSAs), fulfil the vital function of liaising with the community, stressing the importance of early years development and encouraging and facilitating the attendance of Koorie children at preschool- which is still below 70% - more than 20 percentage points below the general population.

It is also essential that all early childhood workers receive cultural competency training so that they bring an understanding of traditional and contemporary Koorie society to their interaction with Koorie children and all children. LAECGS, the Aboriginal Cooperatives and such Programs as Best Start are currently playing a key role in making the generalist services more culturally sensitive to the needs of the Koorie children.

Schools

Cultural awareness

In August of 2007 VAEAI prepared a submission to a Review of the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). The 2007 Review was established to examine whether the organisation continues to meet contemporary expectations of the Government, the community and the teaching profession.

VAEAI's submission to the Review was made in response to an invitation from the former Minister of Education, John Lenders.

Two of the terms of reference set out by the Review were addressed in VAEAI's submission:

- I the appropriate objectives for the Institute in the light of government policies and changes in all educational sectors since its establishment*

- III the most appropriate structures for achieving the objectives identified under point I*

VAEAI proposed that VIT incorporate new regulations regarding the mandatory inclusion of Indigenous studies for pre-service and in-service teacher training in Victoria. The stated purpose of the regulations proposed by VAEAI is to develop

school environments that acknowledge and celebrate Koorie cultural identity, recognising the pivotal role teachers play in that process. VAEAI regards it as essential that teachers feel confident they are equipped with the appropriate strategies and cultural understanding to teach the Koorie students in their school.

Adopting these proposed regulations also would align the VIT with current government policy regarding future directions in Indigenous education. This includes policy set out in the Australian Education Systems Committee (AESOC) document, *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008*.

Amongst the strategic directions included within that document were the following items:

Provide by 2010 pre-service and in-service professional training accredited by teaching accreditation authorities to:

9.1 (a) ensure that school leaders and teachers have the cultural understandings to significantly improve outcomes for Indigenous students.

9.2 ensure that professional learning at recommendation 9.1(a) is a prerequisite for appointment or contract renewal as a teacher.

In alignment with those strategic directions in 2007 MCEETYA developed a submission to Teaching Australia proposing a national system for the accreditation of pre-service teacher education. The purpose of the submission is:

to ensure that the proposed national system for the accreditation of pre-service teacher education developed by Teaching Australia reflects the commitment of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to provide graduate teachers with the requisite knowledge, skills and understandings to engage Indigenous students in learning and significantly improve Indigenous student outcomes.

The proposed new standards for Teaching Australia would offer a national framework that is non specific to States or Territories. Amongst the proposed new standards, teaching programs would be:

delivered by appropriately qualified staff who have an understanding of Indigenous dimensions of Australian history, Indigenous cultural norms and practices and pedagogical approaches that result in high levels of academic expectation and achievement by Indigenous school students across all learning areas.

Current Victorian standards are much less prescriptive. In June 2007 the Victorian Institute of Teaching released *Preparing Future Teachers, The Standards, Guidelines and Process for the Accreditation of Pre-service Teacher Education Courses*. The standards require that teachers 'have an understanding of cultural and religious

diversity and of socioeconomic factors which may influence the students they teach', The associated guidelines require that 'Courses should prepare graduates with the appropriate level of skills and strategies they will need to respond effectively to ...community goals for Indigenous students...'.

VAEAI made its submission to the VIT review from the perspective that the current standards in Preparing Future Teachers were broad and would benefit from clearer directives. VAEAI supports the idea of a national framework through Teaching Australia, but also believes that it is important that Victorian regulatory bodies provide standards for Teachers that specify the importance of local context.

As per VAEAI's proposal to VIT, mandatory inclusion of Indigenous studies for pre-service and in-service teacher training in Victoria should consist of:

- Studies of Indigenous culture, from pre-invasion to contemporary, with a particular focus on the Victorian context. Such studies would examine the historical relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the impact of governmental policies and practices. Integrated into these studies would be an examination of the social justice and Indigenous rights issues which continue to affect Indigenous people in contemporary life.
- Integration of Indigenous cultural awareness into all key learning areas across the curriculum.
- Examination of the roles of the Indigenous dedicated workforce within Victorian systems and at school, and the contribution of Victorian Indigenous education and community organisations in improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

The 2007 submission was not the first time VAEAI had put forward a proposal of this kind. In 2003, the Education and Training Committee, (Parliament of Victoria) conducted an inquiry into the suitability of current pre-service teacher training courses. The Education and Training Committee consulted with VAEAI during the course of the inquiry. VAEAI suggested that all teacher education programs should be required, within agreed timeframes, to incorporate significant and assessable mandatory Indigenous studies units. The Australian Education Union and the Mathematical Association of Victoria also recommended Indigenous studies units in pre-service teacher training courses.

Subsequent to these consultations taking place the Education and Training Committee put forward the following recommendation in *Step Up, Step In, Step Out: Report on the inquiry into the suitability of pre-service teacher training in Victoria* (2005).

Recommendation 4.13

That the Victorian Institute of Teaching, in consultation with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, develop standards for graduating teachers that appropriately reflect the Government's and the community's goals for indigenous students. Further, that

these priorities be reflected in the accreditation process for pre-service teacher education courses in Victoria, as of 2007.

The 2003 Inquiry by the Education and Training Committee unequivocally endorsed the development of revised standards for pre-service teachers in specific regards to Indigenous studies of local community relevance. The items VAEAI has put forward in the 2007 Review are a continuation on those that were developed for the 2003 Inquiry.

The 2007 VIT Review was conducted separate to but concurrent with the Victorian Government's 2007 Review of Education Outcomes of Indigenous Students. As a result of the findings of this Review, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in partnership with Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEAI) developed the *Wannik* strategy. *Wannik* established the following actions for addressing the issue of pre-service and in-service teacher training:

Develop in partnership with VAEAI cultural awareness training for teachers and support staff in Victorian schools. This will be delivered in partnership with the Koorie community.

and

Develop a professional learning package in partnership with VAEAI and universities that supports pre-service and in-service training for teachers in the history and contemporary culture of Victoria's Koorie community.

While these initiatives will not include changes to VIT regulations, they will support the development of greater awareness of Koorie culture in all schools, both metropolitan and regional. As stated in the *Wannik* strategy VAEAI will provide support in the implementation of new strategies that will provide teachers with the confidence to provide a culturally inclusive classroom for Koorie students.

Higher Education

In addressing barriers to higher education VAEAI has sustained a focus on Koorie students who are early leavers.

VAEAI has sought to examine the reasons why a proportion of the Koorie student population have disengaged from the education system, rather than making the transition from secondary to VET and/or university. During 2007 and 2008 VAEAI targeted these disengaged students in a series of Youth Forums in LAECG locations across the state, to gather qualitative data.

Low levels of transgenerational wealth is an issue clearly impacting on disengaged Koorie students. Family and community responsibilities often must come before the pursuit of TAFE or university qualifications.

A concerning trend that became apparent during these processes was the number of students who report that they will do ‘anything’ as a career option ‘as long as it was a full time job with money’. This indicates a strong drive to escape the situation that these young people find themselves in.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s 2007 “On Track” Survey examined reasons why non-completing Koorie secondary students exited school early. 85.0 per cent of disengaged Koorie students surveyed stated that “I wanted to earn money”. 60.5 per cent would have stayed in school “if there had been good vocational or VET programs”. 69 per cent would have stayed in school “if there had been a wider range of subjects”.

Therefore while many Koorie students are being informed about the wide range of VET programs available and going on to access them there is still a proportion who are receiving inadequate careers counselling and advice. Individual education plans and personalised careers advice are urgently required. Under the Wannik strategy personalised planning for Koorie students is identified as a priority. DEECD has stated that implementation will begin in 2009.

Creating Pathways into Higher Education

According to Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development data, at present, 16% of Koorie students leave school between Years 9 and 10, 22% leave between Years 10 and 11, and 41% leave between Years 11 and 12. The rates for non-Koorie students are 3%, 5% and 18% respectively. Clearly there is a significant gap in Year 12 completion rates between Koorie and non-Koorie students. Although these figures are stark they should also be regarded from the perspective that VET courses are currently a popular post-compulsory option for Koorie students. There is a need to promote Year 12 completion for Koorie students so that they are able to access the broadest range of career options. At the same time the VET model has proven successful for Koorie students and should also be regarded as one means of developing career pathways and/or transitioning into Higher Education.

In 2007 there were 5,223 Koorie enrolments in VET. This represents 17.3% of the Victorian Koorie population as measured by the ABS census. The characteristics of Koorie student enrolments in the VET sector in 2007 are shown in the table below.

2007 Koorie student enrolments

Students	TAFE	ACE	Private	Total
Course enrolments	6,106	1,218	746	8,070
Module Enrolment	36,361	3,843	4,461	44,665
Female	2413	765	332	3510
Male	3693	453	414	4560
Age 10-14	38	8	3	49
Age 15-19	1,689	482	224	2,400
Age 20-29	1,786	236	248	2,270
Age 30 – 65+	2,519	438	240	3,197

VAEAI's Wurreker Strategy has made significant progress in building participation and completion rates for Koorie students.

Since being launched in 2000, Wurreker has continued to gain recognition and traction as an effective means of building strong links between Koorie communities and training providers to ensure the availability of appropriate, culturally sensitive and targeted training.

Completions have increased markedly since the launch of the strategy. There has been a difference of 178 completions from 1998 to 2005, and an increase from 431 in 2005 to 607 in 2007 (136 completions) update. This is a significant improvement, indicating that the Wurreker Strategy is working.

In many regions, the Wurreker Strategy increasingly plays a key role in facilitating partnerships with communities and employers to create local, Koorie-specific employment initiatives, such as apprenticeships and pre-employment programs.

VAEAI is currently looking at strategies to encourage articulation from VET to HE.

Most articulation agreements are arranged individually between interested parties in the VET and HE sectors. Articulation should be considered within the program planning for VET courses, with Recognition of Prior Learning easing the financial and regulatory burden of transition from VET to Higher Education.

Facilitating access to Higher Education

In 2008 VAEAI developed a new initiative with the Vice Chancellors of Victoria's 9 universities. The initiative is titled "*Promotion of a Collaborative Approach to the Engagement of Victorian Universities with Indigenous Peoples*".

We sought to establish this Accord to increase opportunities for the 1,000 Indigenous university students already studying in Victoria, and maximise pathways into higher education for the 4,800 vocational education participants and almost 10,000 school students across the state.

The initiative is focused on the establishment of an Accord between the universities. The Accord is a statement of partnership between the 9 universities and the Koorie community in Victoria. The Accord will lead to a range of cooperative activities. The first will be a handbook for Indigenous students who are interested in entering into Higher Education. The handbook will help the students decide on the best university pathway for them.

Other initiatives under the Accord are:

- Joint marketing and recruitment events to promote opportunities for Indigenous students
- An annual state wide Indigenous higher education conference and awards
- A formalised Indigenous staff development and a peer support network

- An Indigenous student network
- Development of a combined database for Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) tutors
- Coordination of Indigenous academic staff across Institutions to provide co-supervision for Indigenous higher research students.

Initiatives such as the Accord must also be complemented by financial assistance for Koorie students who are contemplating a long term commitment to study. Scholarships and housing assistance are the fundamental supports that are required. Funding for tuition is also essential for addressing the disparity in educational outcomes between Koorie and non-Koorie students.

Flexibility in Approaches to Delivery of Higher Education Courses

In order to encourage Koorie students to enrol in and complete Higher Education courses a flexible approach to delivery is required. Family and community responsibilities must be taken into account.

The Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University provides programs that are structured around:

- Off-campus community-based delivery
- On-campus intensive study blocks, and
- Local tutors at regional study centres.

This approach to course delivery promotes access and equity for Indigenous Australian students. Students from all areas; rural, remote and metropolitan, and across all age ranges, particularly mature age, are able to undertake studies without compromising their family and community obligations. VAEAI sits on the board of Deakin University, ensuring Koorie community participation in program planning.

The model employed by IKE is uncommon for Australian universities, and should be emulated. A flexible approach to learning, with off campus based community delivery, must be accompanied by access to the requisite technological resources, as much of the delivery is online.

It is important that strategies and programs for Koorie students continue to build on models that have proven successful, while also identifying areas that are lacking and require focused effort.

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