

A Response to the Discussion Paper on the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy

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The Discussion Paper on Higher Education Financing and Policy draft report only briefly addressed the issue of higher education for Indigenous Australians. While noting there had been an increase in participation the paper which failed to distinguish the very real need for indigenous Australians to have an education would strengthen their identity and culture.

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, as minority groups in their own country, are being offered an education at Australian universities which, in the main is not based upon any appreciation of cultural diversity in curriculum, pedagogy or environment. It is not designed to perpetuate Indigenous culture and identity.

The future of Indigenous Australians for the twenty first century may largely depend on what happens in higher education institutions. The maintenance of core Indigenous values in our children and our grandchildren must be sustained otherwise, the struggle and progress of the last fifty years will have been for nothing. Indigenous Australia will become but a memory and all Australians will be the poorer. A strong Indigenous cultural base is essential for a vibrant Australian identity.

There is an evergrowing pool of information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and beliefs which deserves to be acknowledged at university level. Presently such knowledge and information is used mostly in an exploitative way. Indigenous philosophy, spirituality, languages, history, ecology, psychic phenomena, art and socials and political organisation are all subjects worthy of serious university study as are historical and contemporary issues. Such subject matters require an Indigenous focus and medium for their transmission. An Indigenous Australian university is the logical venue for their dissemination.

Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are facing a situation where languages and cultures are dying out. Languages are no longer being spoken and transmitted, and, cultural values are being eroded by western influences. This is not surprising considering the history of black/white relations in Australia. White dominance, suppression, assimilation policies and removal of children from their families have severely eroded Indigenous perceptions of their own worth and ability as a people and relegated Aboriginal aspirations to the lowest of priorities. Mainstream education has been a vehicle reinforcing negative stereotypes and perceptions.

Over the last two decades in many parts of the world Indigenous, or fourth world, people have endeavoured to get out from under the yoke of fourth world colonial status (Barnhardt, 1993)¹. Indigenous people in the United States (Native American/Hawaiian/Alaskan Native), Canada (First Nations/Native Indian/Inuit), New Zealand (Maori), Australia (Aborigines/Torres Strait Islander), Greenland (Inuit), Scandinavia (Saamli) and elsewhere have sought to establish and control their own institutions offering programs of post-schooling, education.

The attributes, qualities, character and intent of such innovations have been diverse due to the circumstances in which they were conceived. All have, however, been distinguished from their mainstream counterparts in that, there has been an endeavour to meet the particular social, cultural, political and economic interests of the Indigenous people they were designed to serve. Each initiative has had a cultural focus and has, endeavoured to include Indigenous perspectives, philosophies, principles and practice.

¹ Barnhardt, Ray, (1993). *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, Vol 15, No 2, College of Rural Alaska.

All fourth world peoples face threats to the survival and maintenance of their cultures. Most have seen education as essential to ensure cultural survival. Debate is developing throughout Australia on the possibility of an independent, or autonomous, Aboriginal or Indigenous university. Many argue that it has the potential to be the keystone of Indigenous Australian education, essential for cultural survival. Others express concern regarding the effects of isolation from mainstream or the lowering, of academic standards.

History suggests that the cultural survival of a group of people requires, at least one of the following factors as a pre-requisite: geographic isolation or territorial sovereignty; common language; common religious beliefs; or, a system of education designed to perpetuate that culture.

When the British colonised this country Indigenous Australians lost their geographic isolation, sovereignty and control of education; languages and religious beliefs were always diverse. To retain those aspects of culture that we wish, Indigenous Australians must take control of, and responsibility for, education. The establishment of an Indigenous university should be considered as a first step in establishing an Indigenous intellectual life and producing, Indigenous teachers who are qualified to teach an Indigenous curricula in schools and universities.

The Indigenous university has the opportunity to commence its activities with research and post-graduate studies using the communication technologies available today - post-audio and video-broadcasting or taping, telephone and facsimile, and computer communications, to deliver the courses and provide the inter-activity of educational practices and communication. It could offer a unique curricula through flexible approaches to teaching and learning, supervision and collaboration.

While it would need an administration and communication epicentre, the Indigenous University could venture into open educational space unconfined by institutional walls and limited only by means of communication, language, culture, finance, time and imagination

Most universities in Australia have opened up their programs so that research students, many of whom are part-time, can undertake university studies at home or in the work place. Many are now offering, good quality research degrees which are conducted off-campus with supervision mediated using forms of communication technology (Evans, J. 1995)².

The challenge for the Indigenous University, if it follows this course, will be to develop supervision practices which will relate to the context of its students and its mission, and to see that these practices are framed by a dialogue which reflects the personal autonomy of the student as researcher-learners and yet attains international standards of scholarship.

The post-graduate activity, when combined with the research outcomes, could provide much of the reference resource material required to develop an Indigenous reference resources base for undergraduate students in the future. This would mean Indigenous undergraduates would then study texts written by Indigenous scholars and taught by Indigenous scholars. Indigenous Australians would then receive an Indigenous education from an Indigenous University and be enculturated, as are others, in their own cultural context.

It is recommended that the Committee should make a positive statement regarding Indigenous Australian Education and recommend that the Indigenous Australian Higher Education Association be funded by the Commonwealth Government to undertake a feasibility study into an Indigenous Australian University.

2. Evans, T., (1995). Post-graduate research supervision in the emerging 'open' universities, The Australian Universities Review.