Partnerships, Pathways and Policies
- Improving Indigenous Education Outcomes

Conference Report of the
Second Annual Indigenous Higher Education Conference
18-19 September 2006
The Hon. Julie Bishop, MP
Minister for Education, Science and Training
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister Bishop

Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council policy advice on matters relating to Indigenous people in higher education

On behalf of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, I am delighted to present you with the attached policy advice paper and recommendations arising from the discussions held during the second annual conference on Indigenous higher education Partnerships, Pathways and Policies – Improving Indigenous Education Outcomes, held in Perth in September 2006.

The recommendations derive from the Council’s commitment to a national, evidence based approach to the development of policies and programs for Indigenous higher education. The recommendations were developed on the premise that certain pre-conditions are necessary before long-term sustainable change and improvement in the participation in higher education for Indigenous people can be made.

The Council seeks to create conditions in Australia under which:

- more young Indigenous people are completing senior secondary school and are on a trajectory towards higher education;
- more Indigenous people are completing undergraduate education; and
- more Indigenous people are completing postgraduate education.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your sustained support of the Council’s work in its pursuit of improved educational outcomes for the future of Indigenous Australians.

Yours sincerely

Professor Marcia Langton, BA (Hons) ANU, PhD, FASSA, AM,
Chair IHEAC
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This report was prepared by Associate Professor Marcia Devlin (Director, Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics and Commerce, University of Melbourne) and Professor Richard James (Director, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne). The authors wish to thank Ms Ciannon Cazaly (Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics and Commerce), and Ms Adeline Sze (Centre for the Study of Higher Education) for their assistance in preparing sections of the report.

December 2006

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December 2006

IHEAC members with the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon Julie Bishop MP, at the Conference Improving Indigenous Outcomes and Enhancing Indigenous Culture and Knowledge in Australian Higher Education held in September 2006. Absent: Ms Veronica Arbon
Executive Summary and Recommendations

The 2006 Indigenous Higher Education conference focused on identifying the strategies, policies and practices that have proven to be effective in improving Indigenous higher education outcomes. The conference built on the work of the 2005 conference and was informed by the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council’s (IHEAC) Strategic Plan 2006-2008, Improving Indigenous Outcomes and Enhancing Indigenous Culture and Knowledge in Australian Higher Education. The IHEAC commends the federal government on its recent commitment of $1.73 million to a series of initiatives in Indigenous higher education as an initial response to the IHEAC’s policy advice.

The IHEAC is committed to a national, evidence-based approach to the development of policies and programs for Indigenous higher education. The 2006 conference sought to identify the essence of successful programs, across all educational sectors, and to determine the key ingredients behind success. The IHEAC seeks to create conditions in Australia under which:

- more young Indigenous people are completing senior secondary school and are on a trajectory towards higher education;
- more Indigenous people are entering higher education;
- more Indigenous people are completing undergraduate education; and
- more Indigenous people are completing postgraduate education.

To achieve these objectives, universities and government must work collaboratively to devise and implement new strategies. Some of these strategies will involve new partnerships with government, with schools, with TAFE colleges, with employers and with industry.

Establishing the Conditions for Change

This report provides a summary of the conference outcomes for the benefit of various stakeholders, including the conference participants, leaders of higher education institutions, and the education sector more broadly.

In addition to the deliberations and conclusions set out in this report, one important outcome of the conference is the assistance provided to the Council in its consideration of advice to the Minister for Education, Science and Training on policy for Indigenous higher education. Conference participants provided informed and considered feedback on the key topics that formed the program of workshops. Based on the discussion and suggestions of the invited participants at the 2006 Conference, the IHEAC has developed a set of new policy recommendations for consideration by the Minister for Education, Science and Training and by universities and university leadership. The IHEAC has written to the Minister setting out these policy recommendations.

The recommendations to the Minister were developed on the premise that certain pre-conditions are necessary before long-term sustainable change is made and an improvement in the participation in higher education and outcomes for Indigenous people is achieved. These pre-conditions include:

- New national policies, especially for Indigenous student finances.
- The commitment and strategic intervention of university leadership and incentives for universities to improve Indigenous outcomes.
- Enhanced communication channels for information on Indigenous higher education.
- The establishment of new partnerships, especially between secondary schools, providers of vocational education and training and universities.
- The strengthening of the roles and activities of Indigenous Centres on campus.
- The widening of Indigenous community involvement in university life and decision-making.
- A national commitment to developing evidence-based approaches to all Indigenous programs and initiatives.

Summary of Recommendations for National and Institutional Policy

The IHEAC conference has led to the development of a broad set of recommendations for possible policy directions and research issues. The IHEAC invites the consideration of these recommendations by governments, the governing councils of universities, Vice-Chancellors and other leaders of universities, and education research centres and agencies. These recommendations have informed the IHEAC’s policy advice to the Minister for Education, Science and Training.

1. The conference participants recommended that an investigation of the financial circumstances of Indigenous students be conducted, including an assessment of the relationship between income levels and retention and success of Indigenous students in universities and other higher education and vocational education and training institutions. It was noted that the Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee is conducting a survey of Indigenous student income levels and related financial issues. This initiative was welcomed by the IHEAC. Further research will be necessary to identify the ways in which financial and other assistance to Indigenous students might contribute to higher retention and success rates in the higher education sector.

2. The conference participants supported the proposed investigation of the experience of first year level Indigenous students at universities and other higher education and vocational education and training institutions, with a view to identifying the risk factors and vulnerabilities that contribute to withdrawal from enrolment, failure to succeed, and failure to continue with further studies.

3. Strongly supported by the IHEAC, the conference participants suggested a variety of options for stronger leadership from Vice-Chancellors and leaders of other institutions to improve the outcomes of Indigenous students in the higher education sector. After considering the advice of conference participants and other information, the conclusion drawn by the IHEAC is that there is a great deal to be gained in understanding the various ways in which the outcomes of Indigenous students in higher education might be improved by focusing our deliberations on future strategic directions and policy initiatives at a national summit on Indigenous higher education in 2007. It has been recommended that the Minister for Education, Science and Training, IHEAC and DEST jointly convene the summit with the objective of involving Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors and other university leaders, education research and project leaders, and key education policy thinkers and practitioners in discussion on possible ways forward.

4. Strongly supported by the IHEAC, the conference participants suggested that a national Indigenous higher education website be designed as a strategic communication tool to publicise the activities and achievements of Indigenous students and Indigenous scholars, to facilitate dialogue on contemporary issues, and to promote new programs and opportunities.
The provision of specialised leadership training for the next generation of leaders among Indigenous Exploration of the possibilities for financial support for the creation and introduction of new mentoring The development of an extensive new program within education faculties, led by the Deans of The funding of a national research agenda, that is systematic, rigorous and sustained, to chart the Innovative ideas for the development of new incentive mechanisms for universities associated with new mechanisms for seeking Indigenous community advice on community educational needs. 

5. Innovative ideas for the development of new incentive mechanisms for universities associated with targets for Indigenous recruitment, retention and graduation were discussed at the conference. The conference participants suggested various funding incentives for increasing university success rates and improving Indigenous outcomes. These include:  
   Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for Indigenous students for undergraduate completion and progression to postgraduate education.  
   Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for Indigenous graduates to encourage PhD enrolment and completion.  
   Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for industry to support Indigenous staff who wish to attain university qualifications, including through time release to attend classes, holding positions open while staff complete qualifications full-time, promotion pathways once qualifications are completed.  
   Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for industry to actively seek Indigenous students for work experience and Indigenous graduates on completion of their courses.

6. The development of an extensive new program within education faculties, led by the Deans of Education, to train new teachers and retrain existing teachers to improve their understanding of Indigenous education issues and of possible strategies for building higher aspirations among Indigenous students and their families, as part of a national campaign styled on the theme ‘Indigenous kids can go to university’. 

7. The provision of specialised leadership training for the next generation of leaders among Indigenous academics. 

8. Exploration of the possibilities for financial support for the creation and introduction of new mentoring schemes for Indigenous students and staff. 

9. The funding of a national research agenda, that is systematic, rigorous and sustained, to chart the progress being made in achieving educational outcomes for Indigenous people in higher education. 

10. The development and promotion of exemplars in the encouragement and support for greater community participation in university life and decision-making, through, for example, ‘Elders in residence’, opportunities for young Indigenous people to visit campuses and experience university, and new mechanisms for seeking Indigenous community advice on community educational needs.

The 2006 Conference: A focus on evidence-based policy

An integrated policy approach is needed to advance Indigenous higher education, for the issues are systemic. It was noted by [2005] conference participants that universities acting alone cannot address the root causes of Indigenous educational disadvantage - this requires action by all educational sectors. Further, there was consensus among the conference participants that the current issues in Indigenous higher education must be tackled through a suite of integrated initiatives, for equal attention must be given to, among other things, the recruitment and support of Indigenous students, the recruitment, support and promotion of Indigenous staff, and the building and strengthening of Indigenous Studies and Indigenous Research. Urgent action is needed in all of these areas if a positive cycle of participation in higher education, which breeds further participation in higher education, is to be established.


The 2006 Indigenous higher education conference focused on identifying strategies, policies and practices that are demonstrably effective in improving Indigenous education outcomes.

Conference participants discussed the steps needed to create long-term, sustainable change in the access to higher education and outcomes of higher education for Indigenous people. A core issue for the IHEAC is the development of policies and programs to address the under-representation of Indigenous people in Australian higher education. The IHEAC has a particular interest in creating the conditions in Australia under which:

- more young Indigenous people are completing senior secondary school and are on a trajectory towards higher education;  
- more Indigenous people are entering higher education;  
- more Indigenous people are completing undergraduate education, and  
- more Indigenous people are completing postgraduate education. 

To achieve these objectives, universities must devise and implement new strategies. Universities have a social obligation to assist and promote the development of Indigenous education across all sectors, through, for example, the training of teachers to work in early childhood education and primary education. Universities must be involved in making more students ‘university ready’. They must collaborate in partnerships with government, with schools, with TAFE colleges, with employers and industry.

A starting point for developing new policies and partnership is the recognition that there are many programs that are working well. The IHEAC acknowledges the success of certain policies and programs and believes it is timely to consider how these can be developed, extended in scale and replicated — the IHEAC is concerned with an evidence-based approach to the development of policies and programs. The 2006 conference was an opportunity to consider the programs across all educational sectors that are effective and to learn from these — to identify the essence of successful programs and to determine the key ingredients behind the success.

The 2006 conference continued and extended the discussion and planning that took place at the inaugural 2005 Conference. An important outcome of the 2005 conference was the development of the first strategic plan of the IHEAC. The 2005 conference report and the IHEAC Strategic Plan 2006-2008, titled Improving Indigenous Outcomes and Enhancing Indigenous Culture and Knowledge in Australian Higher Education, was endorsed by the Minister, The Hon. Julie Bishop and launched on 18 July 2006. This report builds on that work.
The IHEAC Strategic Agenda

The IHEAC Vision for Indigenous Higher Education


The IHEAC identifies ongoing problems associated with:

- the poor recognition given to Indigenous studies and the lack of visibility of Indigenous culture and knowledge on campus;
- the uneven quality of Indigenous research programs and the limited number of active Indigenous researchers;
- the small number of Indigenous people working in Australian universities, especially in senior roles; and
- the low levels of participation of Indigenous people in university governance and management.

The under-representation of Indigenous people in many facets of university life is unacceptable in a society in which education is essential for successful community participation and national development.

Participation in higher education is pivotal to Indigenous people achieving a rightful place in Australian society. Australian universities must therefore play a national leadership role in recognising and valuing Indigenous people and Indigenous culture. The IHEAC believes that government and institutional policies for Indigenous higher education must reflect the goal of the social, cultural, and economic development of the whole Indigenous community. The vision of the IHEAC is for a higher education system in which Indigenous Australians share equally in the life and career opportunities that a university education can provide.

This means working cooperatively, persistently, and strategically to create universities in which:

- Indigenous people and their culture and knowledge are visible and valued on campus;
- Indigenous research is of high quality and high status;
- Indigenous studies are a prominent and vibrant part of the curriculum;
- Indigenous knowledge and culture are developed and preserved;
- Indigenous leaders of the future are educated and trained; and
- Indigenous people are active in university governance, leadership, and management.

The seven priority areas

The IHEAC Strategic Plan is based on five principles:

1. respect for Indigenous people, knowledge and culture;
2. mutual obligation for universities, government, and Indigenous people;
3. integrated, cross-sectoral policies and programs;
4. high expectations; and
5. clear goals.

The IHEAC commits the Australian Government on its recent commitment to initiatives in Indigenous higher education that will assist with these seven priority areas. On 18 July 2006, the Minister launched the IHEAC report Improving Indigenous Outcomes and Enhancing Indigenous Culture and Knowledge in Australian Higher Education and announced a $1.73 million funding package of initiatives as an initial response to the IHEAC’s policy advice contained in the report including:

- $750,000 to develop up to partnership projects to encourage universities to increase the number of cross-sectoral partnerships and pathways for Indigenous students;
- $600,000 to develop three lighthouse national projects of two years duration to develop cross-sectoral collaboration including guaranteed pathways, particularly for mature age students;
- $310,000 to commission research including a study of the first year experience of Indigenous students; a study of strategic models of leadership in the higher education sector to support Indigenous people; and an evaluation of the role of the Indigenous Education and Support centres;
- $50,000 to award two International Scholarships under the Endeavour Programme. The Scholarships provide up to $25,000 for each Indigenous Australian postgraduate student or postdoctoral fellow to undertake short-term research for 4-6 months during 2007 in any field of study in a participating country in Asia, Pacific, and Middle East;
- $20,000 to recognise and award cross-sectoral partnerships.

The Strategic Plan is a working document to focus the priorities and activities of the IHEAC in fulfilling its Terms of Reference and in developing its advice to the Minister for Education, Science, and Training. The plan is reviewed on an annual basis. The Strategic Plan presents seven areas as priorities for government and universities:

Priority 1: Encourage universities to work with schools and TAFE colleges and other registered training organisations to build pathways and raise the levels of aspiration and confidence of Indigenous students.

Priority 2: Develop a concerted strategy to improve the level of Indigenous postgraduate enrolment.

Priority 3: Improve the level of Indigenous postgraduate enrolment, enhance Indigenous research and increase the number of Indigenous researchers.

Priority 4: Improve the rates of success, retention, and completion for Indigenous students.

Priority 5: Enhance the prominence and status of Indigenous culture, knowledge and studies on campus.

Priority 6: Increase the number of Indigenous people working in Australian universities.

Priority 7: Improve the participation of Indigenous people in university governance and management.
Snapshots of the Context of Indigenous Education in Australia

- Indigenous people are significantly under-represented in higher education. Indigenous students make up approximately 1.5% per cent of the commencing domestic student population and 1.2% per cent of the total domestic student population. This compares with a government reference point of an estimated 1.9% per cent of Indigenous people in the Australian population overall and an age distribution reference point for benchmark purposes of 2.5% per cent. Other estimates, however, suggest the Indigenous population may be closer to 4 or 5% per cent of the national population and is growing substantially.

- Fewer Indigenous young people are ‘university ready’ than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The Year 12 retention rate for Indigenous school students in 2005 was 40% per cent compared with 77% per cent for non-Indigenous students. A much higher proportion of Indigenous students enter university through special entry or enabling programs — around 70% per cent of Indigenous students gain entry to higher education through special entry programs. Only 57% per cent of Indigenous people who entered university in 2001 had completed secondary schooling, compared with 90% per cent of non-Indigenous entrants. One in six Indigenous students commencing a bachelors degree in 2004 was admitted on the basis of Year 12 studies compared with almost one in two non-Indigenous students.

- There was a sharp decline in higher education Indigenous enrolments in 2000 and ABSTUDY recipient numbers in higher education have declined significantly (DEST 2006).

- Indigenous students in higher education are far more likely than non-Indigenous students to be enrolled in sub-degree programs.

- The gender imbalance may be cause for concern: Indigenous males make up only 39% per cent of Indigenous enrolments.

- Attrition amongst Indigenous students is more severe than for non-Indigenous, particularly in the first year of study. Fewer than one half of the Indigenous people who enrol in higher education can be expected to complete their program of study. The completion rate for Indigenous students is two-thirds of the completion rate for other students. The success rate, which measures the progression of students through degrees, is lower for Indigenous students than for non-Indigenous students. DEST figures indicate Indigenous students successfully complete 68% per cent of subjects undertaken compared with 87% per cent for non-Indigenous students (DEST 2002).

- The Discovery Indigenous Researchers Development Scheme has operated since 1996. In the first year, 45 applications were received. In 2005, only eight applications were received. In 2006, there was a significant increase in applications; 15 projects out of 21 were funded. As a result of the high standard of the applications, the success rate of grants awarded also increased. The success rate for the Discovery Indigenous Researchers Development Scheme in 2006 was 71% per cent, a notable achievement following the small number of applications and declining success rates in previous years.

- The total number of Indigenous staff in universities has increased gradually. While there has been progress, the number of Indigenous staff continues to be small relative to total staff numbers (0.8 per cent) and to the proportion of students who are Indigenous (1.2 per cent in 2004).

- In 2003, one half of Australia’s higher education institutions had Indigenous involvement in peak decision-making bodies. Almost all institutions reported having an Indigenous Advisory Committee in place that had input at a policy level and provided leadership and advice to various levels of governance, including the Vice-Chancellor.

Partnerships for Pathways

‘The present environment of strong public policy and political commitment to directly addressing barriers to Indigenous higher education participation coupled with a similar level of commitment form the University sector presents a unique opportunity for achieving significant progress.’

Andersen, Bunda & Walter, 2006, Indigenous Higher Education: Releasing the Potential

Making more young Indigenous people ‘university-ready’

Encouraging indigenous people to ‘take the plunge’ into higher education

There is growing international momentum around the role of universities in working directly with disadvantaged communities and disadvantaged schools. These trends are yet to be fully realised in Australia. The IHEAC would like to explore the possibilities for encouraging universities to undertake greater responsibility for reaching back into schools and communities to widen Indigenous people’s horizons, to boost perceptions of the attainability and relevance of higher education and, most importantly, to equip more young Indigenous people to be ‘university-ready’.

The IHEAC believes attention must be given to:

- the characteristics of the most effective school-based initiatives.
- the importance of the language of instruction for Indigenous students in remote communities.
- the forms of teacher training needed to prepare young teachers for working with Indigenous children.
- the forms of support needed for new teachers working with Indigenous children.
- the role that might be played by the Deans of Education in expanding the curriculum of teacher training courses to include Indigenous issues.

Many Indigenous people who would benefit from higher education do not feel they are capable of achieving it. Studies have shown that Indigenous students have less confidence in their academic ability than non-Indigenous students and that Indigenous families often do not have the educational capital to inform their children about the options and possibilities, despite having high aspirations and wanting the best for their children (Craven et al. 2005a). Universities have a role in working with schools and TAFE colleges and other registered training organisations to build Indigenous students’ confidence and raise perceptions of the relevance and attainability of higher education. The IHEAC asked conference participants to consider:

- the pathways that are working well, and whether these can be transferred and extended.
- the new partnerships that might be developed to expand the available pathways.
- the ways in which young Indigenous people can be offered an enticing ‘sample’ of university life.
- the forms of information, support and encouragement for families.
- the best forms of early support for Indigenous people who commence enabling programs and degree programs.
Conference discussion

The issues and potentially inhibiting factors

- The majority of funding for Indigenous programs is short term but the goal of enrolling more Indigenous people in higher education requires sustained commitment of resources. Long term funding is essential in order to maintain and expand successful programs.

- Communication and cooperation between the state-funded primary and secondary education sectors and the federally-funded higher education sector needs to be enhanced.

- Indigenous people continue to lack awareness of the higher education opportunities that are available to them and the value of that education in the workplace — prospective students are unaware of the possibilities and unlikely to seek them out. University engagement with communities to communicate the value of higher education and to discuss their specific educational needs has been less than adequate.

- The often low expectations of teachers, families and communities in relation to Indigenous student achievement are likely to lie behind the generally low aspirations of Indigenous students. There remains a tendency for some teachers to believe that ‘aboriginal kids here are not bright enough to go to university’.

- There is a feeling among some Indigenous people that undertaking ‘western’ higher education is to risk forsaking one’s own culture.

- The English literacy level of many Indigenous students is a significant hindrance to them considering higher education and having the preparedness to commence tertiary study.

Ideas for ways forward discussed by conference participants

- Universities need to develop stronger mechanisms for informing prospective students about the opportunities available to them and for marketing their programs to Indigenous people.

- Greater emphasis needs to be placed on career and course counselling for indigenous secondary students to make them more aware of the options available to them. Careers and course counselling should continue throughout higher education to support and motivate students.

- Universities should work to highlight the success of Indigenous students and graduates within Indigenous communities and to encourage the development of alumni groups and mentors as examples of success and a source of information for Indigenous people.

- The successful programs which allow students to experience university and the university enabling programs can be expanded.

- Universities, through their teacher training and professional development programs, need to work with Principals and teachers to assist them to develop higher expectations of their Indigenous students and embed the expectation of achieving a university education in Indigenous children from the early years.

- There should be professional development of teachers and education graduates to promote teacher awareness of Indigenous higher education issues and a better understanding of Indigenous knowledge. There needs to be recognition of Indigenous teachers and provision of professional development opportunities to upskill and promote higher education to Indigenous students.

- Work towards recognition of ‘English as a second language’ status for some Indigenous students and towards the development of Indigenous ESL policy, possibly with some assessment undertaken in the students’ own language.

- Curricula should be examined with a view to Indigenising assessment tasks and practices.

- The possible ways in which indigenous families and communities can be more engaged in the higher education process — in the context of a growing national trend to involve parents in their children’s education — should be explored. Such engagement might continue into higher education by including parents in progress reporting and supporting their children’s study.

- New mechanisms for seeking community advice on the education needs of the community need to be identified and implemented.

- New incentive mechanisms for universities associated with Indigenous recruitment, retention and graduation should be created and implemented.

- A public ‘report card’ system that audits and publicises university performance in all Indigenous areas could be developed.
Attrition is a major issue for Indigenous higher education students. If Indigenous students progressed towards completion of their studies at the same rate as non-Indigenous students, their higher education completions could be more than double the currently achieved rate.

Improving the outcomes for Indigenous students who enter higher education requires attention to their personal, academic and financial well-being. The IHEAC is particularly concerned about ABSTUDY and notes the recent DEST report Review into the impact of ABSTUDY policy changes that came into effect in 2000 (DEST 2006). The Minister has sought advice from the IHEAC on possible options and implications raised by the themes identified in this report, including:

- monitoring and evaluation arrangements for ABSTUDY;
- awareness of, access to and delivery of ABSTUDY programmes, particularly in remote areas;
- possible opportunities to target ABSTUDY allowances more effectively, including incentives oriented towards course completion;
- better targeted access to courses designed to develop the basic skills required for university, helping to expand the pool of Indigenous people with the capacity for higher education, and
- the need for aspirational targets for Indigenous higher education participation and completion to be supplemented with achievable milestones.

The career and further education pathways of Indigenous graduates are of profound importance to the future of Indigenous Australians. Indigenous graduates are role models in setting up a positive cycle of participation in education. Indigenous higher education is central to the goal of the social, cultural and economic development of the whole Indigenous community. Overall, the outcomes for Indigenous people who complete their courses are good. Indigenous students who graduate experience employment rates comparable with those for all graduates. Data from the Graduate Destination Survey show that the full-time employment rate for Indigenous graduates is slightly higher than that for non-Indigenous graduates and the average starting salaries for Indigenous bachelor level graduates are higher than that for non-Indigenous graduates (DEST 2005). These outcomes may be partially explained by the mature age of many Indigenous students, the fact that many are in employment while studying, and the extent to which well-qualified Indigenous people are sought after for leadership roles.

Enrolment in postgraduate education is another outcome that is pivotal, not only to the lives of the individuals concerned, but also to the objective of raising the profile and status of Indigenous people and Indigenous research and knowledge on campus. Indigenous students are presently highly underrepresented in postgraduate courses. Universities need to confront the circumstances that might make some Indigenous students feel isolated or out of their depth in such courses.

### Conference discussion

#### The issues and potentially inhibiting factors

- The financial cost of higher education participation is a major issue for the continuation of higher education study. Not only the level of course fees, but also the associated costs of accommodation and travel are disincentives for Indigenous students. The debt students accrue over the period of their study is also a major deterrent to continuation.
- There are fundamental problems with the ABSTUDY arrangements, in particular the criteria and eligibility for independent status. There is also a lack of additional and/or alternative financial support available to students to overcome financial difficulty.
- Some Indigenous students are discouraged by small failures and subsequently lack the motivation to persist with higher education.
- There is a continuing lack of awareness among Indigenous students of the support services available on campus.
- There is also a lack of awareness of Indigenous philosophies, knowledge and cultural scholarship among supervising academics and administrative systems (in particular, human research ethics committees) in research degrees.
- Family and social issues deeply affect the level of student engagement and persistence with higher education.

#### Ideas for ways forward discussed by conference participants

**Ideas related to financing Indigenous study**

- The ABSTUDY scheme needs to be made more broadly accessible and responsive to student needs and should include incremental increases to encourage continued study. The process for applying for ABSTUDY needs to be streamlined, simplified and better communicated to Indigenous students.
- Financial support for part-time study, with conditions that are not too restrictive, is also needed.
- More scholarships, from a range of sources, are needed to provide the financial support Indigenous students require.
- Specific financial incentives to continue study to honours and postgraduate level should also be considered. PELS or scholarships should be implemented for all postgraduate Indigenous students. Students need to be given a financial incentive to continue studying and provided with scholarships that adequately replace foregone income.
Ideas related to flexibility of course delivery and links with industry

- Universities may need to provide multiple exit points, with institutionally recognised achievements, as a motivation for persisting with further study.
- Consideration might be given to a national professional doctorate program or masters programs for mature-age Indigenous students that incorporates and recognises a component of workplace education.
- Similarly, universities need to develop innovative courses and curricula targeted at Indigenous students, which specifically recognise prior learning and work experience in non-school leaving students.
- Universities need to further explore the ways in which online delivery can widen access for Indigenous students.
- Careful consideration might be given to the possibility of extending degree timeframes for Indigenous students in situations in which the conventional timeframe is inadequate.
- Universities need to develop new partnerships with the private sector to raise awareness of Indigenous higher education in the workplace and provide Indigenous students with work placement opportunities. Cadetships could be a key element of these partnerships, providing an incentive for students to continue study, to experience the workforce and earn while they study.

Ideas related to curriculum

- Several strategies were identified for altering university courses to Indigenous needs. In addition to ESL recommendations made earlier, there should be a greater attention to cultural awareness in professional development programs for teaching staff.
- More foundation courses in Aboriginal Studies, which include Indigenous philosophies and cultural knowledge, should be integrated into the curriculum.

Ideas related to support for Indigenous students

- Universities should continue to develop and appropriately fund Indigenous centres for support and monitoring of progress for Indigenous students, particularly during first year.
- Individualised support for students is essential, with personal contact in student support services a key to providing an environment that acts as a ‘family-like’ safety net. This support is particularly crucial in a student’s first semester, when support should be coordinated across the university, not just through an Indigenous support centre.

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION, CULTURE & PROTOCOLS

Developing a stronger profile and status for indigenous culture on university campuses

Though some progress has been made, Indigenous culture, knowledge and values typically remain marginalised on Australian university campuses. The IHEAC wishes to focus on the immediate steps that can be taken to increase the status of Indigenous culture and to raise the profile of Indigenous people in the physical and cultural environment. The IHEAC believes this to be a highly significant issue that will require sustained attention. The development and expansion of high quality research programs in Indigenous Studies and support for the career development of researchers in Indigenous Studies are major objectives — high quality research is central to, and must underpin, the progress made in enhancing Indigenous higher education outcomes.

The IHEAC conference participants considered:

- the potency of symbolism and the way in which symbolism might advance the integration and visibility of Indigenous culture.
- the way in which greater recognition can be given to the ‘Indigenous Academy’.
- the role and status of Indigenous units and centres and their location within the academic and administrative fabric of universities.
- the possibilities for embedding Indigenous history and culture across the curriculum and in the statements of graduate attributes.
- the recruitment and training of more Indigenous staff.
- the role of university leaders in advancing Indigenous higher education.
- the ways in which Indigenous people can be more involved in university management and governance.
- strategies for building and expanding Indigenous research culture.

Conference discussion

The issues and potentially inhibiting factors

- Indigenous students are to some extent ‘invisible’ on campus within Australian universities.
- Racism is still evident in many universities.
- Indigenous perspectives are absent from many university planning documents and reports.
- Indigenous knowledge continues to be inadequately recognised and is not given appropriate status within universities.
- Indigenous higher education is possibly seen as an ‘Indigenous problem’, when it is in fact an issue of wider significance for universities, government and society.

Ideas for ways forward discussed by conference participants

- Professional development programs are needed for Indigenous academics to assist them in preparing
for and entering leadership roles.

- Incentives should be considered to encourage researchers to participate in Indigenous studies.
- Institutions should develop, where these do not exist, Indigenous education strategy plans and reconciliation action plans.
- Cultural policies and protocols should be developed by all universities to help combat racism.
- Indigenous heritage should be further acknowledged in university materials and documentation, such as a ‘welcome to country’ on university webpages and acknowledgement should be included in major documents and before public lectures.
- Universities should expand public programs to develop campuses as meeting places for Indigenous communities.
- Universities should research the Indigenous history of the university itself, including the campus locality and publicise that history both inside and outside the university, providing information for teaching and further research purposes.
- An Indigenous Student Information Pack should be given to all students on enrolment at the university.
- University reports should profile Indigenous achievement.
- Indigenous representatives should be involved in university council.
- ‘Elders in residence’ programs which legitimise the role of elders within the learning community and provide support for Indigenous research should be created.
- Universities should take a leading role in research and discussion to grow public awareness of Indigenous issues and encourage students to feel engaged with debate of Indigenous issues on campus.
- More non-indigenous students should be included in Indigenous Unit programs.
- Universities should develop research areas dedicated to investigating and reporting on areas of importance and relevance to the Indigenous community.
- Indigenous cultural understanding should be identified and targeted as one of the graduate attributes for all university graduates.
- The visibility of Indigenous students and research should be increased through a larger physical presence on campus, the naming of university spaces in local languages and the creation of open days and public events for Indigenous communities on special days.
- Simple but significant symbolic gestures, such Indigenous flags being flown on university campuses, can send strong signals about institutional commitment and the extent to which Indigenous people are welcomed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The deliberations of conference participants led to a number of conclusions, suggestions and recommendations. These have informed the policy advice that the IHEAC has provided to the Minister for Education, Science and Training.

Conference participants were in agreement that a set of interrelated factors are needed to advance Indigenous higher education. These are as follows:

- **New national policies, especially for Indigenous student finances**
  If significant progress is to be made, the Australian Government should immediately consider new financial incentives in a number of areas. In particular, the present issues around student finances must be dealt with before any progress with student recruitment and retention can be made.

- **The commitment and strategic intervention of university leadership and incentives for universities to improve Indigenous outcomes**
  A cultural change is needed within the higher education sector and this must be led by senior university personnel. The strong commitment of senior university leadership and management to sectoral change is urgently needed.

- **Enhanced communication channels for information on Indigenous higher education**
  Greater dialogue and communication, to showcase outstanding programs, to highlight the research and achievements of Indigenous academics and students, to provide access to information on higher education opportunities, and to provide a forum for discussion on contemporary issues are needed.

- **The establishment of new partnerships, especially between secondary schools, providers of vocational education and training, and universities**
  Improvement of the outcomes in Indigenous higher education requires the development and maintenance of a range of creative new partnerships between universities and other organizations, including schools, TAFE colleges, private training providers, and industry and employer groups.

- **The strengthening of the roles and activities of Indigenous Centres on campus**
  The consolidation of Indigenous centres and the incorporation of Indigenous studies within university curricula are key steps in raising the profile of Indigenous people, knowledge and values.

- **The widening of Indigenous community involvement in university life and decision-making**
  Australian universities need to be more welcoming places for Indigenous people. This must be achieved in many ways, including through creating opportunities for Indigenous people to visit campuses and experience university, through encouraging Indigenous students to bring family members onto campus and through establishing new mechanisms for seeking Indigenous community advice on the educational needs of the community.

- **A national commitment to developing evidence-based approaches to all Indigenous programs and initiatives**
  An evidence-based ethos around Indigenous policies and programs is necessary. All programs for Indigenous higher education require clear targets, key performance indicators, and thorough performance evaluation against targets.
Recommendations for national and institutional policy derived from the conference discussions
The recommendations that follow are for consideration by governments, the governing councils of universities, Vice-Chancellors and other leaders of universities, and education research centres and agencies. Some of these recommendations have formed the basis for the IHEAC’s policy advice to the Minister for Education, Science and Training.

1. The conference participants recommended that an investigation of the financial circumstances of Indigenous students be conducted, including an assessment of the relationship between income levels and retention and success of Indigenous students in universities and other higher education and vocational education and training institutions. It was noted that the Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee is conducting a survey of Indigenous student income levels and related financial issues. This initiative was welcomed by the IHEAC. Further research will be necessary to identify the ways in which financial and other assistance to Indigenous students might contribute to higher retention and success rates in the higher education sector.

2. The conference participants supported the proposed investigation of the experience of first year level Indigenous students at universities and other higher education and vocational education and training institutions, with a view to identifying the risk factors and vulnerabilities that contribute to withdrawal from enrolment, failure to succeed, and failure to continue with further studies.

3. Strongly supported by the IHEAC, the conference participants suggested a variety of options for stronger leadership from Vice-Chancellors and leaders of other institutions to improve the outcomes of Indigenous students in the higher education sector. After considering the advice of conference participants and other information, the conclusion drawn by the IHEAC is that there is a great deal to be gained in understanding the various ways in which the outcomes of Indigenous students in higher education might be improved by focusing our deliberations on future strategic directions and policy initiatives at a national summit on Indigenous higher education in 2007. It has been recommended that the Minister for Education, Science and Training, IHEAC and DEST jointly convene the summit with the objective of involving Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors and other university leaders, education research and project leaders, and key education policy thinkers and practitioners in discussion on possible ways forward.

4. Strongly supported by the IHEAC, the conference participants suggested that a national Indigenous higher education website be designed as a strategic communication tool to publicise the activities and achievements of Indigenous students and Indigenous scholars, to facilitate dialogue on contemporary issues, and to promote new programs and opportunities.

5. Innovative ideas for the development of new incentive mechanisms for universities associated with targets for Indigenous recruitment, retention and graduation were discussed at the conference. The conference participants suggested various funding incentives for increasing university success rates and improving Indigenous outcomes. These include:

   Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for Indigenous students for undergraduate completion and progression to postgraduate education.

   Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for Indigenous graduates to encourage PhD enrolment and completion.

Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for industry to support Indigenous students who wish to attain university qualifications, including through time release to attend classes, holding positions open while staff complete qualifications full-time, promotion pathways once qualifications are completed.

Exploration of the possibilities for financial incentives for industry to actively seek Indigenous students for work experience and Indigenous graduates on completion of their courses.

6. The development of an extensive new program within education faculties, led by the Deans of Education, to train new teachers and retrain existing teachers to improve their understanding of Indigenous education issues and of possible strategies for building higher aspirations among Indigenous students and their families, as part of a national campaign styled on the theme ‘Indigenous kids can go to university’.

7. The provision of specialised leadership training for the next generation of leaders among Indigenous academics.

8. Exploration of the possibilities for financial support for the creation and introduction of new mentoring schemes for Indigenous students and staff.

9. The funding of a national research agenda, that is systematic, rigorous and sustained, to chart the progress being made in achieving educational outcomes for Indigenous people in higher education.

10. The development and promotion of exemplars in the encouragement and support for greater community participation in university life and decision-making, through, for example, ‘Elders in residence’, opportunities for young Indigenous people to visit campuses and experience university, and new mechanisms for seeking Indigenous community advice on community educational needs.
Bibliography


