



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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ABORIGINAL TERTIARY EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA: A MORE SUCCESSFUL MODEL?

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By the end of 1990, at least three hundred Aboriginal and Islander people had graduated in South Australian tertiary institutions, from associate diploma level and above. In 1990, the annual graduation rate surpassed forty, the great majority at three-year level or above, including at least one Honours, one doctorate and graduates in architecture and law. The eight-fold increase in graduate numbers over the total up to 1980 reflects the active presence on campuses of Aboriginal/Islander-oriented support services and, even more so, of preparation programs: some three-quarters of all graduates had participated in some form of supplementary preparation.

Over time, the proportion of students graduating from specifically Aboriginal/Islander awards has declined, as has the proportion at lower award levels, such as associate diploma. The range of awards has greatly expanded: in 1990, Aboriginal and Islander people graduated from close to twenty different areas of study. The move towards diversification of awards places a heavy obligation on preparation program planners to be as useful and relevant as possible in increasing access, particularly to those areas which, on the one hand, Aboriginal and Islander people seek to enter, and, on the other hand, will be most appropriate for those wishing to fulfil the needs of self-management and self-determination.

The need for adequate preparation for tertiary study has been a hard lesson for many support program staff, certainly for those with any conscience or feelings for Aboriginal/Islander people and their aspirations: many basic awards and more general awards can be tackled with fairly minimal preparation, or with a relatively general preparation

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curriculum. For some awards, a good sense of literacy and a bit of basic study skills is about all one might need. But for the great majority of courses, particularly the more crucially needed or sought-after courses, much more rigorous, or more specific, preparation is vital, in order to arm students with the confidence, the study skills and study habits, and the foundation content that will get them through the critical first year. For instance, it would be nonsensical, from our point of view, to 'prepare' students for entry into teaching awards without providing a solid basic knowledge of the main concepts, theories and jargon of educational psychology, or bringing students' maths levels up to a workable level, or providing a brief run-through of what to expect in language arts or the sociology of education. Of course, any sensible planners would integrate study skills, study habits, familiarity with all aspects of the campus and its educational technology into such a program. Similarly, it would be approaching the criminal level not to provide students seeking to enter Nursing or Environmental Science with adequate biology, maths and general science, even if this takes longer than the usual single semester. Of course, if a program or an institution merely wants bums on seats, none of this need apply: a few destroyed Aboriginal or Islander people here or there would not worry such people.

However, for those of us who think we care enough about meeting the hopes of Aboriginal and Islander people, and who measure success in terms of numbers of graduates, and reduced attrition rates, rather than in terms of the number of conferences or new cars, much more attention has to be paid to improving genuine access -- and this means ensuring that students are adequately prepared, no matter what that might take. For the handful of low-level courses that do not need much more preparation than a short orienting summer school, programs may not need to worry about preparation, depending how marginal their weakest student might be. But getting students into higher-level and more useful courses is a fundamentally different proposition: invariably, these courses will have units of study which have a reputation for tripping students up: consistently these include psychology, sociology (of whatever), sciences such as biology, chemistry or physics and maths. Depending on the award, there will be a different emphasis on any one of these: obviously, students in science-oriented awards would need far

more biology than teaching students, of course. But there will usually be two to three areas of study in which preparing students will need a solid foundation. Invariably, once this need is recognised, two imperatives come into force: preparation programs must be at least of appropriate length, longer rather than shorter; and preparation programs must be specific to the intended study area.

Appropriate-Length Preparation Programs

The writers, between them, have had experience of pre-selecting many hundreds of people for entry into preparation programs of different lengths. Many students hardly need any further academic preparation (which is not to say that familiarisation with the campus and socialisation into a group of fellow-students wouldn't go amiss) -- some students could have got through an award underwater. But many applicants, at the other end of the scale, are the best part of ten years' rigorous study away from a tertiary course. And most are in-between, so that (without telling any secrets) most preparation programs take in students at differing levels of current ability, with varying levels of motivation and ability to adjust quickly to a new situation, move house, change friends, locate funds, and so on. At Salisbury, three types of preparation programs try to cater for these variations: a three-week, intensive Summer School, specifically for students finishing secondary school or applicants with similar academic levels; a second-semester program, in fact two programs, to prepare students for Teaching/Community Work/Recreation Management, and for Conservation and Park Management; and a full-year Bridging Course to prepare students for Conservation and Park Management, which is effectively a first-semester course, feeding into the second semester. It has been found, by fairly bitter experience, that Parks and Wildlife requires a good deal more science and maths, and especially biology, than most applicants have with only a single-semester program: the only alternatives seem to be either twelve solid years of schooling, with five successful years of science in secondary school, or at least one hard preparation year with intensive study in quite specific areas of work. Many para-science areas, such as Nursing, would be faced with the same alternatives: Year 12 or a year's Bridging Course, with very few students able to cope otherwise.

However, for many courses, and for many students, a single-semester course is adequate, provided it has been designed to provide specific foundation skills for specific award areas:

Preparation Specific to Students' Needs

Preparation programs never seem long enough: there always seems to be not enough time to get across everything that staff would like. So time is precious: knowing what areas give enrolled students trouble dictates to preparation staff what skills and content have to be learnt, to ensure a measure of comfort for enrolling students. By integrating tertiary study skills with the content areas, staff can -- and must -- prepare students in terms of both form and substance, the how and the what of their specific intended course of study. To neglect content is to keep students disarmed, and it is difficult to teach content without teaching study skills and habits. Specific preparation also assists in integrating preparation and enrolled students: they have much more to talk over if they have studied, or are studying similar material, so that old-hands are more likely to take on mentoring roles with beginning students. As well, the doubts and fears of preparation students -- is this all a con? Is it worthwhile? Can I manage a course like this? -- can be focussed and allayed much more easily, the clearer and more identifiable the work-load and content -- and, inevitably, the more sense the study skills and study habits become, as well: instructions about essay-writing are much more understandable if the essay happens to be about an aspect of necessary content; and why not integrate note-taking, use of the library and its equipment, the notion of an assignment timetable or a sequence of study, essay plans, drafts, use of computers, bibliographies and title-page layout at the same time? In other words, why miss an opportunity to be useful to students? The simple, and regrettably likely, answer is that some staff in some programs don't have the skills or the inclination to be specific: a specific-oriented preparation program requires staff with quite specific skills (all things being equal, and if staff have teaching qualifications or experience as well, the general skills will easily be picked up).

But, if Aboriginal and Islander students are going to be enrolled in awards above the basic and general level courses, and without coming through twelve or more years of schooling, preparation programs are going to have to be more specific-oriented. So, programs must deliberately seek staff with specific skills: for instance, if a program wishes to have an intake into Nursing, it follows that specific staff would have to be appointed with nursing qualifications, and with high standards in biology, maths, clinical practice and so on. Social Work preparation would require staff who have expertise in psychology, sociology and community studies. This would be true no matter how long the preparation program is and, in fact, such staff would obviously be of more use to students once they are enrolled and progressing through their awards: tutoring and counselling would be greatly facilitated if staff are available with specific areas of expertise. This will be elaborated later, but one other issue concerning preparation programs must be examined, perhaps for the first time.

Limits to Preparation Programs?

Tertiary study areas form a triage: some awards, fewer as time passes, don't really need any extensive preparation; many award areas need a varying amount of preparation, depending on the entry level, motivation and aptitude of the students; but many higher-level -- and crucially important -- award areas unambiguously require twelve solid years of schooling: engineering, architecture, dentistry and so on. High-status areas such as medicine or law may be available through extended-length preparation programs, precisely because their attractiveness and high status outweigh the negative factors associated with having to undergo preparation for a couple of years. But many study areas -- not coincidentally areas which are going to be vital to any genuine self-determination of communities -- are never going to be entered through preparation programs, except in most exceptional circumstances: science teaching, engineering, medical science and the like. For example, although secondary science teaching has been available at Salisbury (and advertised as such each year in PASS publicity) not a single person has ever enquired about entering secondary science teaching through a PASS preparation program. A

moment's thought would explain why: if one knows little enough about science to require a preparation in it, would the teaching of it be one's first career preference? Put another way, if one liked science teaching enough to want to commit one's life to it, wouldn't one have to be doing or have done pretty well at school, right through to Year 12, in those areas?

So it is time we admitted that many careers will only be accessible to Aboriginal and Islander students who have come straight through primary and secondary school, not through preparation programs. This puts limits on the ability and capacity of preparation programs on tertiary campuses, and places the responsibility firmly on Careers Aspirations Programs, by whatever name, for guiding and encouraging students through the years of schooling to go straight on to tertiary study. For this reason, every support must be given to the development of appropriate support services in secondary schools so that the strange anomaly of more tertiary graduates than matriculants can be corrected.

Tertiary Support Services

The great majority of tertiary campuses nowadays house support programs of one sort or another. Again, a sort of triage exists: those programs which don't run any sort of preparation program, usually one-person plus many part-time-tutor programs; those programs which are more adequately staffed, run preparation programs but of a general nature rather than specific; and those which also conduct specific preparation programs. We would predict that the first sort of program would experience tremendous restrictions on student numbers, and devote (and waste) an enormous amount of time trying to match students with tutors; that the second sort of program would be staffed by generalists rather than by staff with specific skills and would also be marked by a very diffuse set of procedures (if any) and easily identified by the degree of drift of most students and by high attrition. The third sort of program would be characterised by a highly specific home-group system, by whatever name:

Home-Group Systems

Following naturally from specific preparation programming, a support program adopting such a preparation model would almost unavoidably adopt a form of student support which fixed responsibility for a specific set of duties and/or a specific group of students on a specific staff member, a fairly standard management principle: many programs would be using such a model without necessarily being aware of it: a single staff member is responsible for the tutoring, counselling and other needs of a definite group of students (to the extent which it is appropriate, of course) who, in turn, know who to see or work through with study matters. Nobody drifts, time isn't wasted and staff and students know where they stand. Total anathema to lazy or incompetent staff, or course, and not entirely free of its own problems: for example, it is conceivable that unhealthy relationships could be fostered, as with the staff-student mentor model. It is possible that programs could be fragmented, each staff member going their own way and the student body divided along award lines, but this does not seem to have happened at Salisbury where the home-group system has been in operation for some years, following the model pioneered by ATEP at Underdale.

Many small, one-person programs and remote, one-person enclaves would be run, whether staff are aware of it or not, along specific home-group lines and would be effectively conducting quite specific preparation programs. Certainly, the graduation figures, attest to the efficacy of one or both of these aspects of the model. So much so that it could be proposed, for somebody's master's thesis, that some of the ways to keep results down in a program, or to cripple it if it is getting results, include the avoidance/abandonment of any specificity in its preparation program and its form of student assistance: make its preparation program as general, warm-fuzzy and broad as possible, and don't allow specific staff to deal with specific groups of students, year-groups or students in similar awards. This would be a most appropriate way to keep tertiary support programs operating within the doom-and-gloom framework that we are used to.

S.A.: ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER GRADUATES
BY INSTITUTION, YEAR AND AWARD MIX (A.Dip. minimum)

INSTITUTION:	YEAR:	954-1975	76	77	78	79	1980	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	1990						TOTAL
FLINDERS UNIVERSITY:																							
- Flinders																							
B.A. (Hons)		2						1							1	1	2						6
B.Sc. (Hons) / Ph.D.		1																					5
- Sturt																							
Dip. T., B.Ed.							1	1	1		1		1	1	1	2	1						7
Diploma/BA/BSc/BA/BEd																							21
UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE:																							
- North Terrace																							
B.A. (Hons), B.Sc. (Hons), B.Ed.																							2
B.A. (Hons), B.A. (Hons)																							3
- Roseworthy																							1
Agribusiness																							2
Agribusiness																							1
Agribusiness																							1
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA:																							
- North Terrace																							
B.A. (Hons) / B.A. (Hons)																							67
- The Levels																							1
- Magill																							
Dip. T., B. Ed.																							40
- Salisbury																							
Dip. T., B. Ed.																							3
Agribusiness / Agribusiness																							7
Agribusiness / Agribusiness																							2
Agribusiness / Agribusiness																							1
- Underdale																							
Dip. T., B. Ed.																							8
Agribusiness / Agribusiness																							58
Agribusiness / Agribusiness																							5
Agribusiness / Agribusiness																							3
- Whyalla																							
TOTAL BY YEAR:																							
		15	1	5	8	2	8	12	10	15	15	15	31	34	35	41	39						286

* marks the year when programs came on-stream

University of South Australia

Salisbury Campus

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(P.A.S.S.)**

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**For further information contact
Joe Lane : Co-Ordinator : (P.A.S.S.)**

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Breaking The Doom-and-Gloom Cycle

But the current situation in tertiary study is far from the usual one: with forty to fifty graduates in South Australia moving straight into careers (since unemployment is practically unknown amongst Aboriginal graduates) each year, and some programs yet to come on-stream, we can anticipate that close to one thousand Aboriginal and Islander people will have graduated in South Australia by the year 2000. South Australia produces roughly a fifth of all Aboriginal and Islander graduates in Australia, about three times its population quota. So, up to five thousand Aboriginal and Islander people may have graduated by the turn of the century across Australia, mainly in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. They will make up over ten percent of the total Aboriginal and Islander work-force, and will possess the full range of skills required to staff genuine self-determination and displace non-Aboriginal/Islander people from community positions, if so desired. If current trends continue, they will be predominantly urban and metropolitan, under forty and slightly more likely to be female. Since the economy as a whole will be much more skills-based and less hospitable to Aboriginal and Islander people with no or few skills, we may witness a growing rift between and within Aboriginal communities, with widely differing demographic patterns: one more or less mainstream, the other with drastically worse levels of health, employment, income and life expectancy. The tasks ahead will be made lighter for Aboriginal and Islander people if they have tertiary-level skills and insights, and surely only the most extreme pessimist would look to the future without anticipation and renewed hope and confidence in the ability of the Aboriginal and Islander people to transcend their current situation.