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# Promoting Indigenous Participation at Tertiary Institutions: Past Attempts and Future Strategies

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Since 1967, enormous progress has been made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia in gaining access to, and participating in, tertiary education. National statistics provided by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET, 1992), show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolling in, and graduating from, a wider variety of courses in ever increasing numbers.

The current level of tertiary participation enjoyed by Indigenous students has not been attained easily. Over the last 25 years, a number of factors have inhibited their successful participation at university. The existence and nature of such factors have been discussed in a number of documents which have significantly shaped tertiary educational policy and practice. Four of these documents will be briefly outlined to provide an overview of, and rationale for, the way Indigenous tertiary student participation has progressed in Australia. The documents revisit the successes

and failures of the past, and suggest strategies for the future, of which tertiary administrators, academics and general staff should be aware.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been insisting upon equality of access to, and participation in, higher education 'without compromising cultural identity and values' (Morgan, 1992: 48), for many years. It has only been in recent times that the imperative of cultural survival in higher education has come closer to reality in tertiary institutions.

Prior to 1967, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were not required to attend school beyond the primary years, and nor was there any incentive to do so. In 1969, the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme (ASGS) was introduced to encourage students to engage in post-secondary studies. However, Bin-Sallik (1991: 16) notes that, due to the very few numbers of Indigenous students enrolled in universities and colleges at the time, most of the ASGS grants were used for apprenticeships and job training programs.

The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme (ABSEG) was established in 1970 to provide limited financial assistance to students who wanted to remain at school beyond the compulsory age limit (Bin-Sallik, 1991: 16). Those students who completed Year 12 under this scheme, and intended to enrol at university, were faced with

many obstacles:

- they were denied access into tertiary institutions because, as Keffe (1992), Bin-Sallik (1991), and McConnochie (in Sherwood, 1982) noted, the secondary school system had failed to adequately equip Indigenous students to meet university entry requirements;
- once Indigenous students managed to gain access to tertiary institutions, they often faced the reality of being the only Indigenous student in their course which Bin-Sallik (1991) and Jordan (1985) noted often resulted in the student feeling overwhelmed, and hence, dropping out of the course;
- there was a lack of courses which appealed to their interests, a general misrepresentation of Indigenous history, and a lack of respect for Indigenous culture in courses which did exist (Bin-Sallik, 1991: 16).

Therefore, the situation of gross under-representation of Indigenous students in tertiary institutions would not be amended by government funding alone.

The student support enclave system, in conjunction with special tertiary entry procedures, began in Western Australia at the former Western Australian College of Advanced Education and in South Australia, at the former South Australian Institute of Technology, in the mid-1970s (Jordan, 1985: 1). By 1984, eleven tertiary institutions (mostly Colleges of Advanced Education) around Australia were offering special entry programs for Indigenous students enrolled in Education.

The functions of such enclaves and programs have evolved from basic student support mechanisms (Bin-Sallik, 1991) to more sophisticated teaching and research organisations. Today, student support enclaves, in their various

forms, have functions which are more or less similar to those of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit of the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) (A&TSI, 1993: 6), which focus on providing academic and personal support for Indigenous students, providing Indigenous perspectives to courses through lecturing, and conducting research and consultancies.

One of the earliest strategies which has been acknowledged by authors such as Morgan (1992), Keffe (1992), Bin-Sallik (1991), and Jordan (1985) as being significant in promoting Indigenous participation at tertiary institutions is the Hughes and Willmot (1982) paper entitled 'A thousand Aboriginal teachers by 1990'.

The paper was written by Hughes and Willmot (1982) on behalf of the now-defunct National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC). An investigation into the state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational circumstances revealed, among other things, that there were only 72 fully qualified Indigenous teachers in Australia in 1979. In order to achieve the same ratio of Indigenous teachers to Indigenous students as non-Indigenous teachers to non-Indigenous students, 'there should have been 2001 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders teaching in Australian schools in 1979' (Hughes and Willmot, 1982: 46).

The NAEC report (Hughes and Willmot, 1982) also indicated that Indigenous students are subject to the same sociological processes as other students. In order for Indigenous people to eventually participate across all levels of society, employed in all professions, the NAEC determined that the teaching profession should be targeted. Reasons which Hughes and Willmot (1982: 47-48) gave for this included:

- that a large number of people trained in this

profession would have the greatest impact on their own children;

- that there would be a positive effect on non-Indigenous Australians in having more Indigenous teachers in the classroom, in terms of altering stereotypes and introducing them to Indigenous cultures; and,
- strong, positive role models should have a profound effect on Indigenous students' self-image and future educational aspirations.

As a result, Education faculties of universities and colleges received the greatest proportion of enrolling Indigenous students.

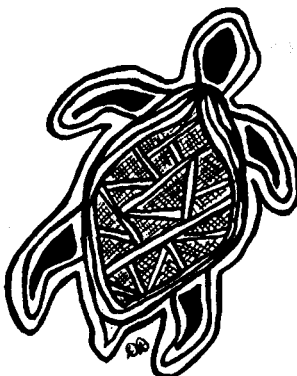
Another profound document which was significant to tertiary education was the report on the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The RCIADIC examined many aspects of Aboriginal society, and their relationship to the incarceration rates of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. One prominent factor which was identified as being common to the 99 Indigenous prisoners who died in custody was the general lack of complete secondary schooling and absence of university education (Johnstone, 1991a: 339).

The RCIADIC also reiterated the main factors which restrict Indigenous students' access to and participation in tertiary education, such as the fact that Indigenous students experience a lower quality secondary schooling than other students (Johnstone, 1991b: 337) due to the predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture permeating all levels of education.

There were several recommendations made which refer specifically to the tertiary sector. The first

one is Recommendation 210 (Johnstone, 1991b: 61), which encourages those government employees who provide services to Indigenous people to undertake cultural awareness programs, which should be conducted by Indigenous people. The second Recommendation 295 (Johnstone, 1991b: 322), suggests that teacher training courses should have compulsory Indigenous subjects, which are taught by Indigenous people. It also suggests on-going in-service courses for existing teachers.

Many other recommendations have implications for tertiary education, particularly those which relate to the quality of schooling for Indigenous students. This is because the schooling experiences of Indigenous students are directly related to the expertise and attitudes of teachers (Keeffe, 1992: 65). As Bourke *et al.*, 1991: 41) have suggested, tertiary institutions have the greatest opportunity to foster culturally sensitive attitudes in teacher graduates and lecturing staff, and therefore, directly improve the quality of education experienced by Indigenous students.



The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP), was created in consultation with communities, teachers, education institutions and government departments, and came into effect in all states and territories in 1990. It was designed in phases: the first triennium covering 1990 until the end of 1992, and the second triennium governing 1993 until 1995, and so on. The major aim of this policy is to achieve equitable educational opportunity for Indigenous people by the year 2000 (DEET, 1993: 1). Specifically, the policy (DEET, 1993: 3) addresses four key areas:

- (i) to involve Indigenous people in decisions about their own education, and to actually deliver educational services;
- (ii) to provide equal access to all levels of education, from pre-school to tertiary, on par with the rest of the population;
- (iii) for Indigenous people to take part in all levels of education, in a relevant and enjoyable way, to the same extent as other Australians;
- (iv) the need for fair educational results for Indigenous people in terms of their own performance, and the appreciation by all Australians of their history and culture.

From these four key areas, twenty-one long term goals have been identified and prioritised.

It is not simply a policy document for educators to adhere to. It also provides the funding structure for the delivery of services to Indigenous students from pre-school to tertiary levels of education. Those funds which impact directly upon Indigenous tertiary students include 'Direct Assistance', in the form of ABSTUDY and ATAS (Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme), and 'Higher Education' funds, which are paid directly to higher education institutions for the delivery of Indigenous education initiatives (DEET, 1993: 5).

In order to ascertain the success of the education policy in addressing the four key areas, Indigenous professors, lecturers, and students from around Australia met in 1992 to discuss the status of Indigenous tertiary education. Their findings were reported in the proceedings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Network (ATSIHEN) Annual Conference (White, 1992). The proceedings of the conference were entitled 'Towards 2000 — Maintaining the Momentum', in reference to the NATSIEP's ultimate aim of

achieving equitable educational access by the year 2000.

There were two important outcomes of this conference. The first outcome was that the acknowledged difference in experience of Indigenous tertiary staff and students at various institutions was vast (White, 1992). The second outcome was that the quality of experience at tertiary institutions invariably depended upon how far down the evolutionary road from assimilation to cultural survival the respective institutions had travelled (Malezer, 1992; Morgan, 1992). It is for this reason, that tertiary practices which are assimilationist, and those which allow for cultural survival, need to be examined:

The cultural dominance of academia can only escalate the dilemma confronting Aboriginal tertiary entrants, serving as a 'white intelligentsia' to plough through or contextualise for the purpose of survival (Malezer, 1992: 28).

Malezer (1992) succinctly describes the difficult choices which Indigenous students have had to make in order to succeed at university. The approach by universities in the past has been to provide a place for Indigenous students to learn the dominant culture as best they can (student support enclaves), as they are 'dropped' into inflexible academic programs. This 'sink or swim' approach has led to high Indigenous attrition rates (A&TSI, 1994: 14) for those who prefer to maintain their identity, and therefore, 'sink', or the abandonment of Indigenous culture for those who choose to 'swim'.

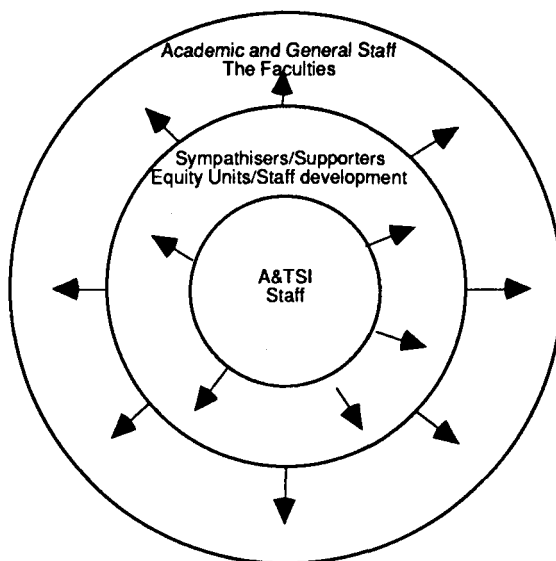
The main problem with this approach is that, apart from relaxing entry requirements, no other concessions to the presence of Indigenous students were made (Bin-Sallik, 1991: 42). Course content remained the same; lecturing styles remained

unchanged; and, subject assessment remained inflexible. If the individual could not cope with the academic world the way it was, it was assumed the individual was not capable enough, or was not receiving adequate assistance from the support enclave. At no stage were universities at large assuming any responsibility for the high attrition rates of Indigenous students.

Another problem, of a different nature, was the willingness of some academic staff to lower pass standards for Indigenous students as their response to addressing the difficulties the students faced in undertaking a tertiary education. As O'Brien and Callow (1992: 12, 15) noted, not only was this practice insulting to Indigenous students, it was dangerous as it perpetuated the patronising stereotype that Indigenous students were unable to complete tertiary studies at the same level as non-Indigenous students.

There are many other examples of assimilationist practices, which Keffe (1992), Morgan (1992),

O'Brien and Callow (1992), and Bin-Sallik (1991) have described in detail. It is extremely difficult for non-Indigenous educators to recognise these practices, as from a non-Indigenous perspective, they are the norm. Culturally appropriate policies, and therefore, practices, rarely filter down to the academic staff and general staff level. For example, QUT has an Aboriginal Education Strategy (A&TSI, 1993), which outlines the rationale for culturally appropriate educational practices, and steps needed to initiate them. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit staff are aware of the strategy, and what it espouses, as are a majority of staff employed in the Equity Unit, and the Academic Staff Development Unit (ASDU). The wider academic community is appallingly ignorant of what the strategy aims to do, and how it intends to do it (A&TSI, 1994). Until an entire academic community acknowledges, supports and implements culturally appropriate strategies, such as QUT's strategy, inappropriate practices in tertiary institutions will persist (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The diffusion of knowledge and understanding of Indigenous policies and culturally appropriate practices throughout the university environment.

However, progress has been made. Using recommendations from the review of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Fujii, 1994), and examples from QUT, (A&TSI, 1994) strategies which are culturally appropriate will now be examined.

The national review of the education policy, of which preliminary findings were presented to the community in June 1994 (Fujii, 1994), and the internal NATSIEP review by QUT (A&TSI, 1994), have recently outlined the positive changes which have been occurring in tertiary institutions, and those changes which still need to occur.

Essentially, Indigenous people need to have greater control over Indigenous affairs in the tertiary sector, from finance to curricula. Using

QUT as an example, some areas have high levels of Indigenous involvement, while other areas need further improvement.

One of the proposed strategies is to change the status of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit to that of a 'Centre' (A&TSI, 1994: 21). In this situation, Indigenous staff would have greater control over their budget, have much greater involvement with subjects dealing with Indigenous issues, and share the responsibility for Indigenous students' success or failure with the staff from faculties in which they are enrolled. Other former student support enclaves, such as those in Deakin University, and the University of South Australia, have taken this path (see Figure 2).

| Enclave Model                                                   | Teaching/Research Centre                                              | Faculty Status                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student support only                                            | Student support is main function                                      | Lecturing role is dominant                                 |
| No control over budget                                          | Delegation of budget funds                                            | Student support is maintained                              |
| Full responsibility for Indigenous students' success or failure | Large lecturing role in other faculties                               | Full control over budget                                   |
|                                                                 | Research capacity                                                     | Active research and consultancy                            |
|                                                                 | Limited involvement in course planning                                | Full responsibility for Indigenous subjects                |
|                                                                 | Sharing of responsibility for Indigenous students' success or failure | Sharing of responsibility for Indigenous students' success |

**Figure 2:** A continuum showing how an Indigenous support enclave can evolve into a faculty.

Other solutions for increasing cultural awareness and practice in universities include the following:

- Indigenous input on decision-making committees for curricula, employment and policy-making. Indigenous staff at QUT have

minimal input into curricula planning, and employment panels, but have significant input into committees which form university policies;

- compulsory cultural awareness workshops during induction programs for new staff (academic and general). QUT has now set this strategy in place, but new staff form a very small part of the entire university population;
- on-going cultural awareness programs for existing staff. QUT runs such programs through ASDU, but these run in semester time, and are voluntary — 'preaching to the converted';
- include cultural knowledge and practices as criteria for 'quality assurance' status, thereby rewarding complying universities with extra funding. This is a co-operation strategy which needs to take place at federal level; and,
- include cultural knowledge and practices as criteria for lecturing portfolios, which will affect promotions, job applications, consultancies and research grant applications. QUT acknowledges the value of this through ASDU programs, but has no compulsory rules in place.

A university which attempts to employ the above-mentioned strategies will significantly redress the assimilationist (Morgan, 1992; Keefe, 1992) and/or 'tokenistic' (A&TSI, 1994: 24) approaches of the past.

Indigenous people can enjoy some satisfaction with the progress made in tertiary institutions over the last 27 years. Indigenous students are participating in a wider variety of courses, and therefore, professions, than ever before (DEET, 1992), and tertiary institutions are showing a willingness to implement strategies which reduce the hardships once faced by Indigenous students in the past.

Indigenous students can succeed in a cultural environment which is still predominantly Anglo-

Saxon (Malezer, 1992: 29) if tertiary institutions are prepared to commit themselves to positive change. Improved cultural awareness, which is still desirable, is not enough. Universities need to put policy into practice, involving Indigenous students and staff in all stages of development. As Morgan (1992: 57) succinctly summarises:

The challenge for us now is to ensure that the systems of higher education to which we entrust our people reflect and accommodate Aboriginal social, cultural and intellectual values. We must move beyond the prevailing situation where we are merely guests in someone else's education domain.

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