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Aboriginal Student Empowerment through the Oorala Aboriginal Centre at the University of New England

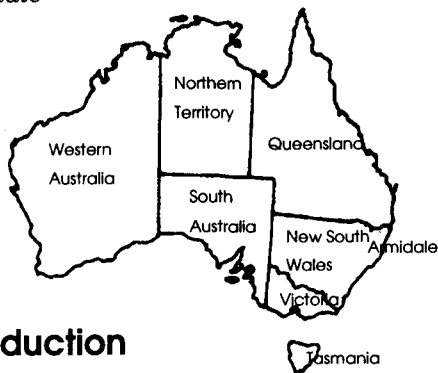
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Introduction

Our position still seems to me to be a somewhat uncertain one. There is a national ambivalence towards us. Numerically we are not very strong — just 1.6 per cent of the population; 265,000 people as counted at the 1991 Census. It could be said, however, that we get more than our share of this nation's attention. There are good and bad aspects to this. In the popular imagination, there are two basic images of Indigenous Australians: one I would term a 'cultural' image, that accepts us for our uniqueness, our 'Australianness'; the other image is the ramshackle world of poverty, deprivation and hopelessness. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most disadvantaged group in the country. Whatever social indicator you use — health status, education, employment, contact with the law — we are at the bottom of the heap. This is such a commonplace statement of fact that it is in danger of becoming a piece of empty rhetoric.

These are the views on the current position of Aboriginal disempowerment in Australian society, expressed by Lois O'Donoghue (1995: 5).

In this article the Oorala Centre, as an initiative and strategic tool in empowering Aboriginal students at the University of New England, will be introduced and briefly discussed. Some of the unique problems experienced by Aboriginal students on entry to tertiary education, will thereafter be presented and discussed. The focus will be more specifically on students' experiences

and perceptions of being disempowered, discriminated against, disadvantaged, and related social problems. This paper will focus on the results of the experience of disempowerment and discrimination in educational terms and the attempts of one university to address the challenges of tertiary education for Indigenous students.

Disempowerment: Historical Roots

The marginalised position of Aborigines in contemporary Australian society is a direct consequence of colonisation and concomitant discriminatory practices and legislation. With the British settlement in 1788 came the beginning of Aboriginal suffering from disease, conflict harassment and exploitation. British settlement resulted in conquest and dispossession which are, as argued by various researchers, still experienced in contemporary Australian society. Those people who escaped the genocide suffered the ignominy of being marginalised in the emerging colonial society (Lippmann, 1981; Reynolds, 1982; Stewart, 1987). For at least 40,000 years Aborigines have been living on the Australian continent (McGrath, 1995). During a time of relative social and psychological isolation from the rest of global society, Aboriginal societies developed which were socially and culturally diverse, depending on the climate, landscape and idiosyncratic needs and preferences of various groups. The impact of British colonisation changed traditional Aboriginal society in a drastic and violent manner. Aborigines still have a fundamentally justifiable reason to be concerned about human rights and social justice in modern Australia (Edgar *et al.*, 1993).

Through racism, systemic bias and structural violence Aborigines have been marginalised, disempowered, impoverished and dispossessed.

Eckermann *et al.* (1992) emphasise that in contemporary Australian society, racism is still bred and perpetuated through social organisations which maintain Aboriginal people in an interacting cycle of poverty, prejudice and systemic bias. Clear evidence of structural violence through the destructive interaction of these processes may be demonstrated through phenomena such as low levels of education and higher levels of health problems than the general, predominantly Anglo-European, Australian population.

The mid-twentieth century period of assimilationary government policies was marked by a deficit model of education, which squarely placed the blame for poor educational performances of Aboriginal children on their socialisation, family patterns, cultural traditions and socio-economic situation (Kaplan and Eckermann, 1996: 9). Low intelligence, lack of encouragement by parents, low self-esteem and poor self-discipline all have been blamed as causal factors in the so-called sub-standard performances of Aboriginal students. Thus Aboriginal participation and success rates in education have continually remained at lower levels than the rest of the Australian population (DEET, 1995: 69). Pre-school education for example, was available to only 50 per cent of Aboriginal children in 1992, whilst it was available to 90 per cent of the population as a whole.

Lankshear (1991: 216) maintains that schooling is a ritual system in which children of disadvantaged groups, such as Aborigines, are most likely to be induced into failure. Low retention rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education, fewer educational qualifications and lower levels of literacy attainment than the general Australian population (Morgan, 1987), as well as frustration of group aspirations through system bias are evident in all Aboriginal populations in contemporary Australia, and accordizÁ to Eckermann *et al.* (1992), may be illustrative of structural violence, violence inherent in the social order.

Social, political and ideological dimensions of schooling provided broader contexts for the rhetoric of developing theories of cultural difference as an explanation for the educational disadvantage of Aboriginal children in the 1980s. The explanations of failure, however, were still the same: children were disadvantaged because they were different.

Very little of the rhetoric of failure was concerned with the failure of teachers, schools and educational systems to provide appropriate education for Aboriginal children (Walton, 1993).

Increasingly, however, explanations of poor achievements levels of minorities such as Aborigines have shifted towards more structuralist conceptualisations. Poor performance was no longer perceived to be a deviance from 'normal' social standards, but rather as the realisation that educational failure had its roots in both the wider historical and political contexts of political-economic marginalisation, as well as the cultural domination and social irrelevance imposed through schooling controlled by dominant societal groups (Giroux, 1983: 289). According to Eckermann (e.g. 1985, 1987), the influence of this deficit model continues to plague Aboriginal education, teachers' philosophies and teaching strategies to this day. However, the rhetoric of respect for cultural difference did not result in changes in fundamental systemic power structures with regard to education in Australia (Walton, 1993). Aboriginal children continue to fail at school in much higher proportions than non-Aboriginal children.

Although self-determination and self-management in relation to Aborigines became government policy in the 1980s, few structures were created in which Aboriginal self-determination could be exercised and educational systems themselves basically have not changed to this day (DEET, 1995: 31). Educational provisions for Aboriginal people highlight the fact that education was, and still is, not a tool for their empowerment. Rather, education has been a powerful strategy by which the dominant Anglo-European society ensured that Aboriginal people were kept firstly in a position of subservice, and secondly in a position in which success by any definition was virtually impossible. Such notions and realities were described by Freire and Macedo (1987), Gee (1990), Giroux (1987) and Luke and Gilbert (1993).

However, consultative structures in the form of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups have been established in New South Wales and other states, whilst the National Aboriginal Education Committee advises government on a national basis with regard to Aboriginal education. In New South Wales, an Aboriginal Education Policy has been in

existence since 1982 and Aboriginal Studies is now mandatory for all children in New South Wales schools.

Educational Disempowerment: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

The introduction to this article presented a few remarks on the historical context of Australian Indigenous peoples' marginalisation and disempowerment since 1788, specifically with regard to education. But what is the state of affairs today?

Nicholls and Watt (1996: 6-9) argue that the idea that Indigenous people learn differently from white people is a tenet of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy in Australia today. They maintain that this approach in fact ignores the social reasons behind their educational failure. Minority group Indigenous students are disempowered in very much the same way that their communities were, and still are,

disempowered in interactions with wider social institutions. Therefore, according to them, effective education programs for Indigenous students must be based on such an understanding. Powerlessness, poverty and paternalism are major problems that have been besetting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since colonisation, as was argued by Stanner some time ago. However, the relationships between power and oppression endure to this day and more accurately account for the continuing academic failure and underachievement of Indigenous students in current educational systems, than any explanation based on differences in learning styles, communication styles or social/motivational styles. In order to understand and effectively address this multifaceted and complex issue of Indigenous student underachievement, it needs to be viewed and appreciated in its global socio-cultural and political context.

Within the current national Australian secondary and tertiary educational context, Indigenous students appear particularly disadvantaged with regard to achievement and retention. Today, the poor representation of these students in tertiary

institutions is a cause of major concern. This tendency can be illustrated as follows.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the frequency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at first-year level and total enrolment, respectively, at the University of New England in NSW.

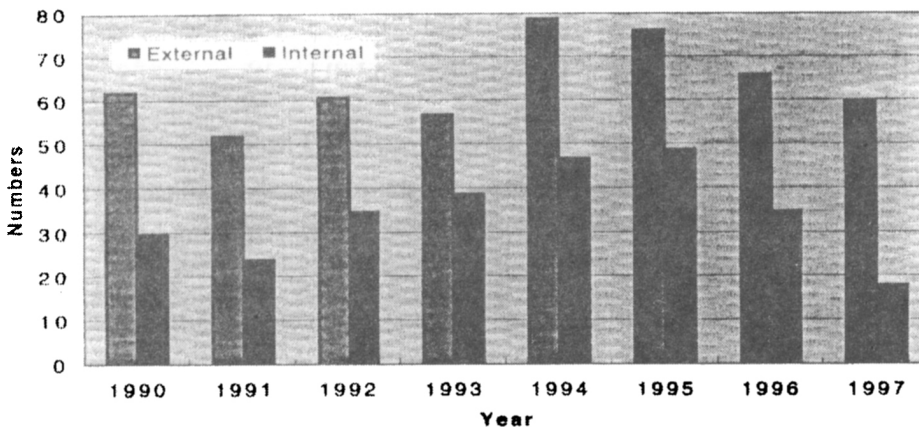


Figure 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander first-degree enrolments, 1990-1997

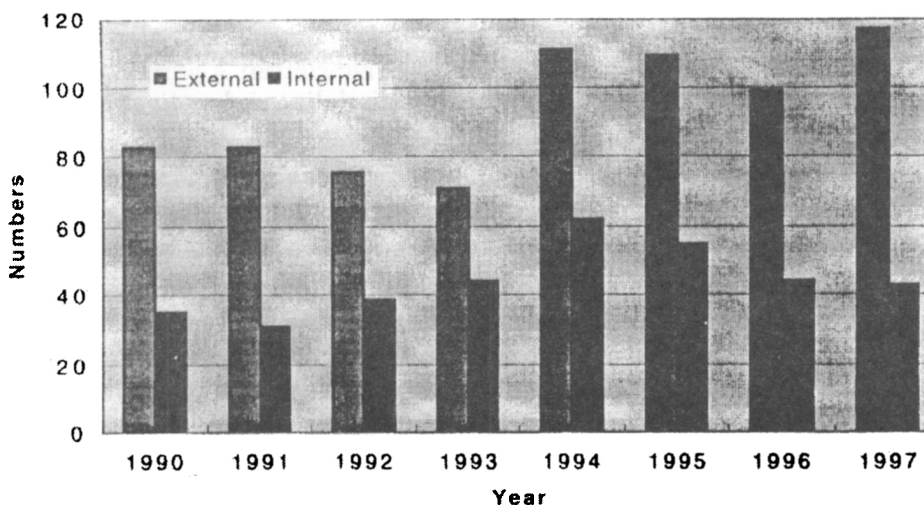


Figure 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments at the University of New England, 1990-1997

(Source: statistics for the period 1990-1997 were made available on 19-03-97 by the university's administrative staff; and are hereby officially acknowledged.)

Figure 1 clearly shows a decline in internal first-year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments at the University of New England from 1990 to 1997, whilst there has been an increase in the current total student number to more than 15,000. External first-year student intake has neither significantly declined nor grown: 62 in 1990; and 60 in 1997. Although these students originate from all Australian regions, about 25 per cent are from Queensland.

Figure 2 reflects the total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments at the University of New England since 1990. Because of an increase in external numbers (from 83 in 1990 to 117 in 1997), total enrolment has risen from 118 (1990) to 160 (1997) today; an unsatisfactory figure given the total student population of more than 15,000. At just over one per cent of the current student population at the University of New England, this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student percentage does not adequately approach a reflection of the total of 1.6 per cent Indigenous population in the 1991 Australian National Census. The situation at this regional Australian university, long known for its interest in Indigenous education, is no different from most other Australian tertiary institutions in relation to Indigenous student enrolment. Poor representation at tertiary level relates back to poor secondary school performances and lower retention rates than any other cultural group in Australia.

McInerney (1991: 155) identified the following factors which emanated from extensive research projects, as determinants for the disempowering educational situation being experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in formal school and tertiary education systems in Australia today.

Educational system

- comparatively recent introduction of compulsory education for Indigenous students
- poorly trained and inexperienced teachers for placement in predominantly Aboriginal schools
- high teacher turnover in these schools, which are predominantly in remote areas
- inappropriate teaching methods and school curricula

- few Indigenous teachers and administrators as models
- isolation from mainstream experiences and enrichment
- negative teacher expectations communicated to Aboriginal students

Home background

- lack of parental encouragement in children's continuing education
- lack of educational ethos and parental understanding of education's importance
- substandard housing, overcrowding and other factors not conducive to study at home
- few Indigenous models available of academic success at secondary or tertiary level

Socio-economic factors

- racial prejudice and societal discriminatory practices
- high unemployment rate and poor career prospects
- poverty and low socio-economic background
- malnutrition and ill health

Biological and cultural factors

- deficient English language skills
- cognitive, motivational and learning style differences
- socialisation practices at variance to mainstream culture
- peer group influences antipathetic to formal education
- excessive shyness, poor attendance
- poor academic discipline and motivation
- cultural conflict

The Oorala Aboriginal Centre represents a strategic initiative of the University of New England in order to promote equality of educational empowerment and to provide Indigenous students with optimal access and opportunity in tertiary education. Its origin, philosophy, objectives and activities will briefly be introduced.

Oorala Aboriginal Centre¹

Historical overview

On the 14th April 1986 the Oorala Centre was officially opened on the University of New England campus, whilst the Aboriginal Resource Unit was formed in June 1986. 'Oorala' is an Aboriginal word, derived from a local Anaiwan language, meaning 'a place where people come together'. In 1987 the Aboriginal Resource Centre began a series of monthly lectures in order to increase awareness of various aspects of Aboriginal life and culture. An Advisory Committee on Aboriginal Participation was established to provide direction for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation programs at the University of New England. As a community service structure of the University, Oorala offers the appropriate first point of contact for prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities. Thus, Oorala exists for: Indigenous people seeking access to the University; provision of academic and social services in the University; and community-specific programs and greater participation of the Indigenous communities within the University.

Philosophy

The Oorala Centre recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and access to higher education has substantially increased in recent years. Despite this, rates of participation remain well below those of other Australians. Thus, whilst some Indigenous students cope satisfactorily at tertiary level, others need academic and personal support in order to successfully negotiate a university program. The Oorala Centre develops and provides support structures, in order to ensure that no potential Indigenous student is prevented from acquiring a tertiary education due to past disadvantaged schooling experiences. In order to optimise human potential among Indigenous communities, the Centre strives to identify educational needs and to develop strategies to cater for the diverse educational needs of such Indigenous communities. The promotion of equality of educational opportunities at tertiary level represents the Oorala Centre's philosophical approach and endeavours at the University.

Goals and objectives

In pursuit of its mission to act as an Indigenous support, research and development centre, and to demonstrate a concern for developing qualities of excellence and equity, the Oorala Aboriginal Centre aims to:

- be responsive to the needs of specific, targeted Aboriginal communities, in order to increase retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students at tertiary level
- encourage academic recognition and acceptance of the validity of Indigenous ways of knowing
- establish collaborative partnerships with Indigenous Centres throughout Australia and internationally
- deliver units and programs which are designed to increase awareness and understanding of Australian Indigenous peoples' history and cultures across the University's campus
- increase the level of involvement of Indigenous peoples in all University of New England projects and activities
- establish, maintain and promote a relevant and up-to-date Indigenous resource base for use by students, staff and community
- maintain a high quality of service provision within Oorala.

Activities within Oorala Centre

As a support, research and development centre, Oorala is committed to the empowerment of Indigenous students at the University, as well as broader Indigenous communities. In its pursuit of excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, the Oorala Centre's staff encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to develop successful, independent study habits by conducting short courses in study skills for groups of students who wish to improve their skills in areas such as assignment writing, time management, concentration skills, effective reading skills, tutorial presentations, etc.

¹ All information on the Oorala Aboriginal Centre at the University of New England was obtained from the Centre's pamphlets and booklets with the Director's approval and is hereby officially acknowledged.

The Centre is also able to offer advice and assistance to faculties on the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives and cross-cultural awareness in curricular planning. Through research, teaching and publications the Centre is also responsible for promoting and developing its public and academic profile, as well as the development of Indigenous Australian Research methods within the University. This is a critical element in ensuring the Indigenous 'voice' is heard throughout the University.

The Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), a program funded by the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA), is coordinated by staff at the Oorala Aboriginal Centre. The aim of this initiative is to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the University in their studies by providing either individual or group tuition in particular subject areas. Each student is entitled to apply for two hours tutorial assistance per subject per week, provided by tutorial personnel trained by Oorala's staff.

Centres like Oorala have been operating in Australian universities for at least ten years, some much longer. Whilst they undoubtedly fulfil their role in providing academic and personal support for Indigenous students, the realities which frequently beset these students (see previous discussion), often mean the experience of failure is a common one. Given the levels of institutional and individual racism in Australia, it may be speculated that 'band-aid' measures such as the maintenance of centres such as Oorala will not substantially increase successful completion rates until the more deep-seated effects of racism in Australian society are addressed.

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- ◆ news items
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- ◆ notices of forthcoming conferences, seminars, etc.
- ◆ reports on relevant conferences
- ◆ information about resource centres and how to access them
- ◆ resources and materials for teachers and students.

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