



# 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*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

## Section D: Research

---

### The Road Forward? Alternative Assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students at the Tertiary Level

*Peter Christensen and Ian Lilley*

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit  
The University of Queensland*

This report was funded under the Evaluations and Investigations Program (EIP) of the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The full EIP report can be found at the following web address:

<http://www.deetya.gov.au/divisions/hed/opertions/eip9708/front.htm>

The following Executive Summary and Recommendations appear on pages xi-xvi of the report.

#### Executive Summary

This report looked at the important, but contentious issue of alternative assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people studying at the tertiary level. Presented below, its findings give expression to the views of 47 respondents, chosen from Indigenous communities, Commonwealth and State Government departments, the tertiary education sector and business.

- Validating the project's funding, the surveys showed that most respondents viewed assessment as a worthy research area, though for some this was true only insofar as it formed part of the teaching and learning process. Counterbalancing these views, others thought that assessment was a complex subject justifying an in-depth study of its own.
- Respondents were similarly divided on Indigenous students' need for alternative assessment, with some seeing it as an effective

mechanism to address their disadvantage while others downplayed its importance. Still others believed alternative assessment policy would have little effect, as it merely formalised strategies already in use at some universities.

- Verifying a key question posed by the report, several findings suggested that mainstream assessment methods disadvantaged, or at least failed to cater for, Indigenous students.
- Highlighting mainstream assessment's inflexibility, the surveys found that while most respondents thought it valid to consider Indigenous culture when fixing deadlines and attendance requirements, among other things, they were restricted in doing so.
- Underscoring its credibility, the report showed the vast majority of respondents had at least some understanding of issues relating to the education of Indigenous Australians at the tertiary level. Significantly, up to 56.5 per cent of respondents regarded their grasp of the issues as either 'excellent' or 'good'.
- Most respondents were familiar with the issues surrounding alternative assessment for Indigenous students, but for many this awareness lacked depth. While just three respondents said their understanding came from the introductory letter sent to them, six others had no knowledge of the issues.
- Predictably, Indigenous respondents were more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be wholly familiar with the notion of alternative assessment, with the opposite being true for those whose knowledge of the issue lacked any depth.
- Respondents' perceptions of alternative assessment covered seven broad areas: measuring in different ways the skills, knowledge and understanding of students; clarifying the goals of education and empowering Indigenous people; recognising diversity; maintaining standards; effecting a

shift to oral modes of assessment; and accommodating Indigenous learning styles.

- Most respondents believed the tertiary education system should give Indigenous students an opportunity to take up alternative assessment. Yet this support varied with respondents' culture and occupations, with Indigenous academics embracing the idea more eagerly than others.
- Support for alternative assessment among university-based respondents (academics and researchers) was often guarded, reflecting their awareness of the potential pitfalls involved in carrying out the policy.
- Respondents saw alternative assessment as having benefits for Indigenous students, the tertiary education system, the economy and even society. For students, these benefits were its likely positive effect on academic performance and commitment, its capacity to build skills levels and to provide a choice, among other things.
- Regarding its benefits for the education system, some respondents saw alternative assessment as fostering 'two-ways' education, and by forcing institutions to look at their assessment regimes, improving the quality of their institutional policy and practices. As for the economy, alternative assessment would, by building up students' confidence and skills levels, produce a more capable and motivated workforce.
- For many respondents, the chief drawback associated with carrying out alternative assessment policy was its likely hostile reception from employers or other students, who may see it as giving their Indigenous peers special treatment.
- Reflecting their concerns about a possible backlash, many respondents strongly emphasised the need for alternative assessment to maintain standards, and form part of a strategy targeted either at all students or all equity groups.
- Respondents identified 15 requisites to assessment policy, including the need to

recognise Indigenous approaches to knowledge and learning, to permit a shift to oral methods, give students a choice, and provide for a promotion and implementation strategy — for some a necessity in the current political climate.

- An oft-expressed desire of Indigenous respondents — especially former students — was to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compete on an equal footing with all Australians. Consequently, most rejected the idea of a blanket policy of alternative assessment if it 'watered down' standards.

## Recommendations

Below is a list of 15 recommendations that provide a basis for addressing Indigenous students' tertiary assessment needs. According to the wishes of survey respondents, they do not advocate a separate policy of alternative assessment for Indigenous students. Rather, their aim is to provide academics, tertiary institutions and government agencies with guidelines on how to improve existing assessment regimes to cater for the needs of Indigenous students.

The authors would like to stress that the recommendations are but suggestions on the way forward. They are not in any way directives to academics, tertiary institutions or the government on the approach they should take on the issue of alternative assessment.

### Good Practice for Tertiary Institutions

Based on the report's findings, we believe that to establish a well-founded policy addressed to Indigenous students' assessment needs, tertiary institutions need to:

#### *Recommendation 1*

- recognise that Indigenous students have particular needs which are not addressed by existing assessment regimes

**Recommendation 2**

- accept the principle of reducing opportunities for cultural bias when formulating and carrying out assessment policy

**Recommendation 3**

- initiate cross-cultural education programs directed at students, academics and business people. The programs' aims should be as follows:
  - (a) encourage a greater awareness and appreciation of Indigenous culture; and
  - (b) educate their target audiences on the academic needs of Indigenous students

**Recommendation 4**

- broaden, through information campaigns, academics' awareness of assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process

**Recommendation 5**

- establish contact and liaise with other universities/Indigenous support units to:
  - (a) exchange ideas on what constitutes best practice in assessment; and
  - (b) develop initiatives that ensure assessment practices encourage learning among Indigenous students

**Recommendation 6**

- initiate courses for academics that aim to:
  - (a) give them the skills to review and improve upon their assessment practices; and
  - (b) heighten their sensitivities to Indigenous students' assessment needs

**Recommendation 7**

- draw up a set of criteria to guide Indigenous students' assessments:
  - (a) to ensure their acceptability, these criteria should have the full backing of Indigenous communities, academics and the business sector; and
  - (b) incorporate these guidelines into an easy-to-use booklet and distribute it to all lecturers, university staff and all others who teach and assess Indigenous students

**Recommendation 8**

- at universities that have not done so, undertake reviews of assessment practices, the focus of which should be to:
  - (a) improve the learning experience of all students;
  - (b) examine how assessment practices can be modified to accommodate Indigenous students better; and
  - (b) look into the question of broadening assessment regimes to include non-traditional practices

**Good Practice for Academics**

In taking note of the views of survey respondents, we suggest that academics:

**Recommendation 9**

- assess Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a way that encourages and reinforces their learning

**Recommendation 10**

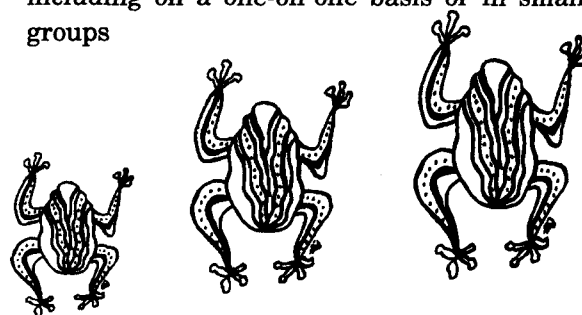
- shift the focus of their assessment practices to improving students' research and communication skills

**Recommendation 11**

- investigate ways of broadening the range of assessment options available to all students. In carrying out this goal, academics should aim to give students a choice to present their work in several formats, including orally

**Recommendation 12**

- look to giving students the option of delivering their oral presentations in different formats, including on a one-on-one basis or in small groups



**Responsibility of Government Agencies**

To facilitate improvements to tertiary institutions' assessments of Indigenous students, we urge DEETYA to:

**Recommendation 13**

- require that institutions, in the context of their Equity programs and Aboriginal Education Strategies, develop guidelines for staff on the assessment of Indigenous students

**Recommendation 14**

- give priority to further studies on assessment practice and policy under the Evaluations and Investigations Program. The research should focus on how to devise practical steps to broaden the range of assessments available to all students

**Recommendation 15**

- provide funding to broaden Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Units' support programs to tackle the issue of assessment.

**THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

(FORMERLY THE ABORIGINAL CHILD AT SCHOOL)

**1998 Subscription  
For Two Issues per Year**

**Australia:      A\$20.00  
Overseas:        A\$30.00**

Please complete this form and send with Cheque or Money Order Payable to:

***The University of Queensland***

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies Unit  
The University of Queensland  
Brisbane Qld 4072 Australia**

**Ph: (07) 3365 6699    Fax (07) 3365 2359**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_ POSTCODE: \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE: \_\_\_\_\_ FAX: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL ENCLOSED:    \$ \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE TICK:                      Renewal       New Subscription

*(Owing to Administrative requirements, prepayment only is requested.  
Please do not send purchase orders to cover payment.)*