



Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on  
Indigenous Affairs

**Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres  
Strait Islander students**

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to what I consider to be a critical and valuable inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across the Nation and to endorse the words of the Chair of the Committee, the Hon Dr Sharman Stone MP, that “education is the key for all Australians to realise their life goals and to become financially independent.”

I gathered the information around identifying the best opportunities/pathways for enabling Indigenous students to succeed in school through:

- a discussion with Associate Professor Jay Phillips, Head of School of Indigenous Australian Studies, Charles Sturt University and Mrs Pat Doolan, Chair, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Dubbo, NSW; and
- inviting input from a number of school communities around the country – principals, teachers, support staff, parents and the wider school community – and from Indigenous academics and researchers at 3 universities in different states. Informants included both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and all were asked to focus their responses to the Committee's Terms of Reference on those initiatives that, due to their own experiences, they knew worked for Indigenous students. The data gathered through that process has been compiled to provide the responses set out in this submission. Respondents chose to address only those Terms of Reference that were relevant to their knowledge and experience.

**Responses to Terms of Reference**

**Pre-School**

*Strategies, programmes, practices that positively influence access to pre-school education for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children.*

- Critical that parents are encouraged to send their 3-4 year old children to child care programs so that they can develop an understanding that these programs provide opportunities for their *children to establish relationships with other children and build a knowledge base relating to how to behave in a school setting*.
- Various transition to school models were in place, all designed to support the child's interests, needs and development generally through enhancing quality of school engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A number of schools highlighted ways in which their programs were designed to stimulate children's thinking, communicating, investigating, exploring and problem solving skills.
- Professor Bob Perry and Professor Sue Dockett's work with Aboriginal families and communities, in remote and urban locations, on issues around school transition, family engagement and early years numeracy is highly commendable and their findings provide valuable information for early childhood educators in all settings.
- Financial costs are critical as poverty remains a dominating aspect of life for many Indigenous families. However, it is critical that parents make some commitment to their child being 'in preschool', eg. pay a fee and/or have the opportunity to give 'time' undertaking various tasks that would enable them to recover the cost of those fees.
- Quarantining specific number of places for Aboriginal students in each cohort.
- Strategies to reduce prejudice and racism that exists in the minds of some non-Aboriginal staff.
- Weekly (or fortnightly) meetings that one or both parents (carers, community members) must attend as part of the agreement around 'getting their child IN to pre-school'. Meetings provide the opportunity for teachers to talk about what children have been learning thus raising awareness of parents/carers and community on the

benefits of children's access and involvement in pre-school education while also enabling establishment of closer relationships between those who work in the pre-school and the families whose children they work with thus ensuring that Aboriginal people, especially parents/carers become engaged in the educational decision making related to their children's needs.

- Pre-schools can encourage the deep engagement that will enhance the quality of their relationships with all of their stakeholder groups by holding various events, including open days, creating school gardens, building nature trails, etc. – any activities that enable parents to 'get involved' in their child's educational life, to establish their own and their child's sense of 'belonging' within that learning environment.
- Running child-care/pre-school bus services is essential to enabling/encouraging children to 'get into education early' so that starting pre-school when they turn 5, doesn't disturb their routine. Bus services have also proved extremely effective for getting children to pre-school/school, in remote locations.

*Strategies, programmes or practices that positively influence ongoing, effective participation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in pre-school education.*

Schools highlighted the value of:

- having trained Aboriginal teachers and aides in preschools;
- integrating students' cultural experiences into learning activities as means of enhancing development of meaningful literacy and numeracy skills;
- assessing local data against state base or federal benchmarks to determine learning needs and interventions designed to improve local outcomes;
- 'young mums'/parent' programs as a means of assisting parents and communities to more effectively focus on learning, hence, ensuring their children are 'school ready'.

Parents/Communities highlighted the value of:

- Including parents and carers within the pre-school setting through seeking volunteers to assist, to facilitate activities, etc. so that children see their own parents/carers role modelling positive interaction and interest in their children's learning activities.
- Education and awareness to parents/carers and community on the benefits of children's involvement in pre-school education,
- Activities for children that are educationally engaging while also being relevant within context of home life and culture. This is what Indigenous children need, to build stronger futures for themselves. It is what has been left out of their education in the past. This will establish the sound foundation that they will need for living in two separate cultures when required.
- Activities that are grounded in Aboriginal cultural learning. The challenge is the balance between Aboriginal culture pre-colonisation and post colonization.
- Acknowledging the specific cultural identity of Indigenous Australian children and supporting their specific heritage within the school learning environment.

*Strategies, programmes or practices that positively influence outcomes of pre-school education for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children.*

Schools highlighted the value of:

- Tracking individual children's data against benchmarks and providing parents with a clear explanation of what that means in terms of their child in their school. Such accountability to parents is essential to overcome what schools did not do in the past and to build an environment of trust between parents and school staff as a critical factor in enabling them to work together in ensuring the best educational outcomes for all students.
- Acknowledging the close link between pre school and kindergarten for teachers – curriculum content – and students – making the critical transition - and for parents – making the vital connection with the teacher and system, before the child starts school.
- Health Screening and assessments to ensure children can effectively engage in the learning activities.
- Reading at Home strategies – preparing parents and the child for schemes such as 'home reader'.

Parents/Communities highlighted the value of:

- Providing education that is balanced and inclusive of both the non-Aboriginal way of life and Aboriginal cultural customs and beliefs.
- Addressing the issue of the prejudice individual staff may have regarding Aboriginal people and culture as a result of what they may have read or their negative interaction with some Aboriginal people.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander teachers/teachers' aides in classrooms have a positive effect on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.
- Valuing Indigenous children as leaders rather than locking them into deficit model and making stereotypical assumptions about who they are.

### **Boarding School**

*Relevance of education, delivered within a boarding school setting for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.*

Schools highlighted the need to acknowledge that:

- Boarding schools do have an important role because, for many children living in remote areas, they may be the only opportunity for them to:
  - obtain a school education.
  - access services and opportunities that may exist in rural towns.
  - lift themselves and find opportunities that respond to the diverse dreams and aspirations of young adolescents.
  - pursue sporting opportunities that are not available at home.
- For students to succeed it is important that they can work within an environment that is academically supportive and motivating.
- Currently, the standard of education delivered in many primary schools in rural and/or remote locations, does not adequately prepare Indigenous students to engage in learning programs offered in most boarding schools.

Parents/Communities highlighted the importance of:

- Parents'/carers' attitude to work and study. If valued in the home, the opportunities offered through boarding school environment will be valued. Not all parents and carers appreciate importance of the opportunities boarding schools can offer.
- Aboriginal students need emotional support to attend boarding schools. Not only does this come from the home, provision also needs to be made for appropriate support to be delivered through the boarding school to enable Aboriginal children to develop the independence and strength they need to live away from their families and engage in the wider society. Critical issue is to achieve this without the student forgetting where they came from or becoming ashamed of their Aboriginality as this can become an issue when they return to their communities.
- Boarding schools with genuine interest in delivering education programs that are worthwhile in terms of meeting the individual student's needs will realise and acknowledge the critical importance of valuing the student's cultural heritage and of the need to provide cultural support that will demonstrate such awareness, that will make students feel they 'belong' and that the knowledge and skills they bring with them are valued by their teachers and their fellow students.
- Understanding the issues associated with Aboriginal students attending boarding school may include:
  - Students who are very connected to their families and life in small rural towns, can find it extremely challenging, emotionally, when attending boarding school.
  - Some boarding schools offer opportunities that students have never experienced in their home town, therefore, may not know how to engage.
  - Feeling disconnected from their Aboriginality and cultures.
  - Students coming from another state or territory, may find the curriculum content and the teacher's style of delivery very different to what they experienced in their previous school/education system. Similarly, moving from a small primary school in a rural or remote location to a large city-based secondary school can be extremely daunting and boarding staff may need to be very vigilant in ensuring such students do not become isolated due to their own fears concerning their ignorance of what is going on around them within the everyday school operations.

- Racism does exist at boarding school and can be a complex issue to effectively address. But if it is going on then it needs to be discovered and dealt with so boarding staff need to be very mobile, able to move quickly and quietly and have sound hearing.
- Even with a scholarship, students from lower-socio-economic backgrounds, can be ostracised and made to feel the pressure of being poor and unable to afford the same things as some of their fellow students. This can present a huge challenge.

### Remote area education

*Practices that positively influence the deep engagement of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in school education delivered in remote areas.*

This brief comment sums up the outcome of conversations that were conducted in several remote area schools: *"Overall there was not a lot of good news especially if NAPLAN is our main source of data, but there does seem to be some fundamental shifts taking place within and between schools and communities. Participants in the conversations were asked to comment on anything they believed to be fundamentally important to student success, that is:*

- (a) 'What' do you think works for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education, and, more critically,*
- (b) 'Why' do you think it works?*

*Academically there was little shift in thinking, however, attitudinally there was a very marked sense of positivity and good will. The last question appeared to be a major barrier for most and may indicate that we are still not preparing educators to be able to operate from within a constant cycle of critical reflection. Most participants were quite able to name what they believed worked but totally unsure as to WHY it worked."*

Schools highlighted the value of:

- Well trained Aboriginal staff – teachers and support staff - connecting school to community.
- Using sport as the hook can be an effective way of getting kids to school, but it must also be related to attendance and engagement if it is to be a positive and effective strategy.
- Having real post school options certainly works.
- Schools must put greater emphasis on identifying and supporting their best and brightest Aboriginal students, of enabling those students to experience feelings of pride concerning their success in order to overcome the negative attitudes toward school achievement that exist in many communities as a long-term, very persistent impact of what education did not do for Australia's First Peoples.
- Excellent teachers who establish relevant and engaging classrooms where all students thrive as a result of taking responsibility for their own learning.
- Well run Aboriginal Hostels set up in larger regional centres where senior students may reside during the week, while attending school, returning to their homes on weekends.

Parents/Communities indicated that Aboriginal students will engage with education when they feel valued through their teacher's engagement. They argued that teachers need to be:

- passionate about teaching.
- willing to interact and get involved in the local community.
- aware of their impact and the influence they have on Aboriginal children.
- interested in learning and show they value Indigenous cultures. Have the capacity to teach children to value themselves and their own culture. Teachers need to value this culture too, as this helps children to grow up feeling proud and strong.
- able to create inclusive educational environments, that:
  - welcome involvement of Aboriginal students, carers, parents and extended family within the school environment.
  - use art, posters, flags, etc. to provide environment where Aboriginal parents, families and children do feel welcome and interested in engaging.
  - accept different values and recognise that the family plays a large and important role in Aboriginal communities.

*Practices that positively influence educational achievement of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in remote areas.*

Schools highlighted the value of:

- Experienced school leaders who can select and incentivise their staff.
- Kids may need to go away to:
  - develop the skills and confidence that will enable them to move away from “country” and their mob while still believing they can be successful, to transition into that period of their lives which is beyond school activities.
  - Gain exposure to work and develop a work ethic – few have role models for this and it is important if they are going to develop the capacity to make decisions in relation to their own lifestyle choices - where they wish to live, choosing career, engagement in the wider society, becoming successful.
  - Connect with other kids in the same situation.
  - Experience a healthy lifestyle curriculum.
  - Gain access to internet, telephones, and other technologies in order to overcome current significant barrier to online study and business operations.
- Good quality school leaders and teachers who will stay for longer periods 3-5 years.

Parents/Communities highlighted the importance of:

- Promote role models from the local community who have completed school and have continued to study and/or work.
- Work and teach in an holistic approach. What happens at home and in the community does impact on the educational achievements of Aboriginal Students.
- Opportunities for students to attend a tertiary institution to see and experience what is available at University/TAFE - provides a long term link to why they are in school. Some universities run science or maths programs for students from Years 6 – 9, perhaps an hour over 4-6 week period as a motivator to raise interest and/or enable students to realise they ‘can do’ these subjects.
- Support for students to attend career expos which provide a link to why they are studying at school.
- Mentoring for Aboriginal students to begin as early as possible, around year 6? These mentors would be people, preferably Aboriginal, who are in the workforce.
- Connect Aboriginal students to local industry.
- Children only benefit if and when the teacher is dedicated and has community support to operate effectively in the classroom.
- Engagement with students, at the school level, highlights the need for Aspirational programs that connect the parts – students, parents and school. An excellent model was the AITAP program that was implemented in Queensland, using a Statewide Program Co-ordination model, following the implementation of the first NATSIEP in 1990. The programs were conducted in metropolitan Brisbane and in Townsville and across the Northern Region, bringing together students, their parents, teachers and Indigenous support staff from a number of schools in 3-day forums where the various groups worked with educational specialists to explore the critical role of each of the groups and identify ways in which individuals, within those groups, might engage more effectively with each other. The focus was how these individuals/groups could support the students to think about their future, to reflect upon possible aspirations for what they might want to do, to identify pathways to that future and establish their plan for achieving what they wanted. Amazing transformations occurred within that focused process of ‘coming together’ and demonstrated the enormous potential of such a strategy for success. But, as is so often the case in Indigenous educational history, the funding was cut before the project had time to really produce results. Nevertheless, despite its very short run, this program was attributed by many working in the field as having been a critical factor in producing the first wave of Queensland Indigenous graduates in the higher professions, eg. medicine and law.

## Different school models

*School Models considered as highly beneficial to enabling more equitable access and engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.*

A range of school models were identified, including:

- Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Schools (EATSIPS) framework which has been developed over the 10 years the Principal has been at the school. Has focused on creating:
  - a safe, supportive but challenging educational space that recognises and respects difference; and
  - a culture of learning that equally values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing which they call the 'third cultural space'.

Has been a collaborative partnership between school and community and while it has taken considerable time to effect this critical attitudinal change within the school and its wider community, all those who have been engaged in the process are highly enthusiastic about the capacity of their students to build great futures for themselves whatever those futures might be. One of the most exciting aspects of the future for the students graduating out of this school, is the fact that the High School down the road, started its transformational journey in the late 90s with the result that they have become the school of choice for many Indigenous families in the city and the statistical evidence of their student outcomes clearly demonstrates why that is the case. These schools clearly demonstrate that when Indigenous students are enrolled in schools where they know they are valued for being the people they are, where they experience a sense of belonging, they will attend school, they will engage with their education, they will aspire to building great futures for themselves and they will achieve those futures.

- Multi-campus College inclusive of Senior College model with multi stage campuses, comprehensive government school, 2000 students with 37% Aboriginal.

Model offers all students access to teachers who specialise in working with young adolescents; adolescent and young adult learning needs, hence, have ability to focus on pedagogy that best addresses student' needs.

- Many staff can share skills and best practices, hence, teams forming mass of teaching experience, can deliver what works best for certain groups of students including Aboriginal students in terms of: 'Best and brightest'; 'at risk'; etc.
- Use of Aboriginal staff across college – shared expertise, eg cultural instruction; sporting elite opportunities; music; AEOs; etc.
- Connection to community through AECG.
- Careers education integrated into key programs and across the entire 7-12 curriculum allowing targeted opportunities for Aboriginal students based on personalised learning plans (PLPs).

This model enhances *quality of school engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* as programs are refined and integrated across the 3 campuses to better achieve desired results; enables economies of scale in the use of resources and submissions; provides capacity to track data across entire cohorts informs planning and resource allocation; and the size of operation has enabled employment of strong Aboriginal leaders and role models who are required to live up to the high expectations placed upon them. Despite the dreadful impact of the long and very bleak colonial history in this part of Australia, fundamental change is beginning to emerge in schools such as this one and the future looks increasingly positive for the Indigenous students who will be graduating out of this school in future years.

- Targeted Learning Support was identified as the preferred approach in a number of schools from pre-school through to secondary colleges.

Highly skilled Early Childhood Teachers use an extensive arsenal of teaching strategies to monitor individual student's progress and provide specific, targeted learning support as required. Schools use learning programs and specialised staff where and when needed and work in collaborative partnerships with Indigenous parents and carers to assist students with specific learning needs. Despite the many daily challenges, staff indicated they were beginning to feel they were finally working out "what works" for Indigenous learners.

A number of schools identified specific targets such as Transition to Work and/or Higher Education Programs, etc. and all were strongly committed to working with Aboriginal parents and community members in developing personalised learning plans for their Indigenous students. Engagement with Clontarf and Smith Family programs were perceived as bringing some successes.

Other programs such as Future Moves, which operate in higher education settings to undertake career path planning, also engage with schools in order to increase school-university connections as means of ultimately improving access to higher education opportunities, for groups that traditionally did not consider such options. The education literature clearly reveals how education was used as a “tool of cultural destruction”, hence, Herbert, writing about her research into Indigenous success in education, argues that “universities have a responsibility to lead the education community in addressing that reality” (2003: p81). With the focus on achieving long-term attitudinal change, these programs seek to encourage and enable Indigenous students to become aspirational thinkers. This is a critical aspect of future planning in Indigenous education for it is the vital shift in thinking that will allow Indigenous students to develop the capacity for ‘future-thinking’ - reflecting upon what they would like their futures to be, planning how that future could be achieved and then taking responsibility for getting the education they will need to achieve that future. Feedback from Aboriginal parents indicated a very positive and enthusiastic recognition of the value of the outcomes Future Moves is achieving with Aboriginal primary and secondary students across a wide area of New South Wales. Yet while Future Moves indicated that they were achieving some significant input into schools, this work could now be under threat as they are struggling to maintain their progress due to current funding insecurity.

### *Critical impacts of various models on families and communities*

- Keeping kids within their community is better for the future of that community and the school. If they go away for education, many do not return – a case of the grass is always greener – and no one benefits in the longer term.
- Access to technology is a must in today’s world yet many Aboriginal homes do not possess computers or other means of technological communication due to poverty or the lack of connectivity in many of Australia’s more remote locations. This has serious implications for the capacity of many students to effectively engage in their education as I discovered while working at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (2006-09). In order to ensure an equitable service delivery to all of our students, whether based in urban locations around Australia or in the many remote communities spread across northern and central Australia, we used various modes of delivery including: face-to-face when students came on campus or staff travelled to those communities where our students were based; and distance education delivery by teleconference, video-conference, on-line and mail-outs of hardcopy course materials to enrolled students. Effective on-line delivery caused considerable angst for various reasons, including the fact that few students owned their own computers and that connectivity was extremely spasmodic and severely impacted student capacity to engage. Even trying to get telephone connections into remote communities was difficult and could take anything up to 2 years to actually happen and then there was no reliability in terms of connectivity.
- Like all parents, Aboriginal parents want to know their child is being successful – using these models, schools have to prove and communicate their success so there is a need to build strong relationships with their parent bodies. Within this context, an excellent AEO or liaison officer is gold.
- The particular value of the Transition to Work and Higher Education Model, that has been adopted in many schools, is located in its capacity to prepare Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children to effectively transition into tertiary education studies. Students engage in apprenticeships and traineeships that are secured through the school and then have access to support from mentors and high quality careers advisors. Once they achieve successful outcomes from their training program they are moved on into part time work as a means of enabling them to build a work ethic. This is a critical element of such programs as it seeks to address the lack of a work ethic in families where the long term impact of this nation’s colonial history has been endemic unemployment where generations of Indigenous Australian families have been denied access to the paid employment that was considered the right of other groups living in those same locations. Education was the tool of the colonizer, used initially to exclude Aboriginal children from education and later to deny them access to equitable education, thus rendering them ‘unemployable’. Hence, education has long been considered by Aboriginal people as a destructive force in their lives, the critical factor that positioned them in the lowest socio-economic stratum of Australian society (Lippmann, 1994: cited in Herbert, 2003: 31-32). Within this context, it can be justifiably argued that education must take responsibility for restoring Indigenous Australians to their rightful place as respected and valued citizens, as ‘equals’ within contemporary Australian society. Clearly some schools are accepting that responsibility and the evidence indicates that in some areas Indigenous students and their families have



recognized that reality and demonstrated that they are willing to engage in the process so long as the decision-making reflects a socially just approach that equally values and respects the rights and opinions of all who participate. Hence, the increasingly collaborative approach to developing and delivering educational programs within our educational institutions.

## **Best Practice Models**

*Identifying effective best practice models, domestically and internationally*

- Flexible Learning Options combined with a 'mainstream' version constitute a best practice model that has been developed domestically. They focus on identifying the barriers that prevent children from realising their dreams. Answers tend to relate to poverty and/or the lack of parental capacity to operate within a space that continues to be determined by white, middle class Australia. Critical focus for addressing these barriers is solving financial problems (scholarships, etc.) and building high expectations of students within teacher, parent and student groups. Groups that operate within this area include Clontarf programs and Edmund Rice schools.
- Community Cultural Model that connects to the cultural and community needs of students would constitute best practice and be most effective in areas where there is a strong community base. Capacity for connection is critical and requires real flexibility in:
  - starting and finishing times.
  - arrangements around connecting students with:
    - > Aboriginal mentors for cultural learning.
    - > vocational training and employment opportunities.
    - > pathways programs to tertiary studies.
  - Curriculum that is relevant to student learning needs.
  - Teaching of Aboriginal languages and languages of region's traditional owner group.
  - Including parents/carers and family in students' learning journeys thus increasing support for students.
  - Acknowledging differing degrees of Aboriginality within student groups.
  - Providing leadership activities.

However this model enhances the quality of school engagement for Aboriginal students as it instils pride in Aboriginal identity; is relevant to students' home life; and increases employment opportunities within the community.
- Within the context of identifying best practice in professional learning and support for school leaders, the Dare to Lead project, auspiced through Principals Australia Institute (2002-2014) offered world class professional learning for principals by principals. It was collegial and guided principals to reflect on their current practices and the needs of their Aboriginal students and their families. The annual national conferences where teachers, principals and Indigenous parents and students, shared their experiences and successes, within both formal and informal settings, were extremely valuable, particularly in addressing issues associated with effecting attitudinal change in schools and encouraging teachers to raise their expectations and Indigenous students and their families to become more aspirational in their thinking and expectations.
- Critically this model has provided the impetus for universities to begin taking greater responsibility in redressing the wrongs of the past through engaging with schools and Indigenous bodies in research projects that seek to ensure the truth of our colonial history is acknowledged and finding ways in which education for Indigenous students, across all sectors and systems, can become an empowering process that enables them to rebuild their lives and their communities, and take their rightful place as equal citizens in their country. That this is already happening can be demonstrated through the fact that this university, CSU, has moved to create the communicative spaces that will enable Indigenous Australians to engage in the transformative learning and practices that Herbert (2013) argued are a necessary process to overcome the discourse of 'failure' that continues to dog our First Peoples, their legacy of the education system that is a product of our colonial history. The CSU Indigenous Education Strategy was approved for implementation by University Council in 2009 and monitoring of targets has been a continuous process within Executive Management. Critically, CSU has established Indigenous Centres, on all regional campuses, thus providing spaces where Indigenous students and staff can come together to actively engage in their own practices of decolonization and self-empowerment, increasingly taking responsibility for their own learning.
- Within the context of developing strong role models, programs such as AIME have enabled successful Aboriginal university students to mentor aspiring Aboriginal secondary students.

- Indigenous Support Units in universities assist Aboriginal students to obtain part-time work in order to support themselves through University.
- Creating and maintaining close links between schools and Aboriginal units in local and/or other universities as a means of encouraging student and family aspirations.
- Indigenous Youth Leadership Programs in secondary schools have an increasingly positive influence on improving high success rate for graduating Aboriginal students.
- Various language and cultural programs are operated in educational settings around Australia. For example, in New South Wales, various Wiradjuri Language Programs have been implemented in schools and CSU offers the Wiradjuri Language, Culture and Heritage Graduate Certificate. All of these programs aim to reposition Indigenous learners within their formal learning environments by enhancing their sense of identity and empowering them as learners and risk takers in the classroom. They have been a huge success within context of access, retention, completion and success rates for all students.
- An innovative research model, “Rebuilding communities through rebuilding nationhood” is drawing on the latest research and practical knowledge from Australia, Canada and the United States. This is an interactive collaboration exploring innovations in the governing authority of Indigenous nations and identifying implications for policy and collaborative governance. This research has implications for the future of education for its focus is to provide Indigenous nations in this country with the knowledge and skills they will need to rebuild their own nations and restore their peoples’ pride in themselves, their identity and their place in the Australian nation. <https://government.unimelb.edu.au/new-trends-indigenous-governance>

The following response received from a dedicated educator, former school principal and manager speaks for itself.

### **What do you think works for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education?**

*What works is a school:*

- with an inclusive climate free of racism;
- that values and embraces diversity;
- that is led by an enthusiastic and committed leader;
- where teachers interrogate their own practice regularly;
- with a leader that empowers the school’s community in an authentic way – where the community has equal power in the decision making process based on mutual trust; where they all share a vision for change that includes a joint approach to any problem solving; where there is continuous communication; where the community grows and asks “what next?”
- with structures in place for the free flowing of ideas and feedback; there are spaces for the community and people to talk – organised spaces for interaction;
- where beliefs, values and actions about Aboriginal education, diversity and cultural responsiveness are embedded in every part of the school’s organisation.

### **Why?**

- The staff have a genuine commitment, respect and passion for Aboriginal culture. They are culturally aware.
- The staff ‘check themselves’ – interrogate their practice, collaboratively (including with community).
- The interpersonal relationships between all in the school community are solid.
- School actions and organisation are based on research.

In conclusion, much progress has been made since the implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy in 1990 (25 years ago) but we still have far to go before we can recover from the many years of exclusion from education, the intergenerational denial of the education that would have enabled people to take their place as ‘equals’ beside their fellow citizens. The reality is that two centuries of neglect cannot be undone in one quarter of a century!

The 27 May, 2017 will mark the 50 year anniversary of the ‘Yes’ vote in the 1967 Referendum, that changed the Australian Constitution and made provision for the Federal Government to make laws pertaining to Aborigines, thus marking the end of official discrimination and the promise of full and equal citizenship. But, most importantly, the overwhelming ‘Yes’ vote demonstrated that white Australians wanted to embrace social and political reform and expected their Federal Government to take the lead. In education, we need the Federal

Government to continue to lead, to acknowledge what HAS been achieved and maintain the funding for Indigenous education in our schools but equally importantly, in our universities so that we can maintain the momentum that is beginning to build in Higher Education. The statistics have changed in the past decade and increasingly younger Indigenous peoples are taking up the challenge to “go to” university, taking the opportunity to empower themselves and their families through an education that enables them, for the first time in this country, to be truly aspirational, to build their capacity as ‘future-thinkers’ because now they can begin to believe that they have a future. Let’s ensure 2017 will be a celebration we can all be proud of.

25 October, 2015.

*Professor Jeannie Herbert AM*

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