

## PREFACE

The inquiry into Indigenous education and training was first referred to the Committee on 9 March 1998. Progress was interrupted by the 1998 election and the reference was referred back to the Committee on 3 December 1998. As the inquiry extended over two parliaments, there were some changes in Committee membership. The Committee received 43 submissions and conducted public hearings as well as inspections and site visits in four states and both territories. A list of submissions received and of witnesses who appeared before the Committee at its public hearings appear as appendices to this report.

Over the past decade a number of parliamentary, government and commission inquiries have made recommendations on Indigenous education and training. These include the Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force (1988), the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991), and the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1995). The Committee was asked to review parliamentary, government and commission reports on Indigenous education and training during the past ten years, assess the recommendations made in these reports and investigate the extent to which action had been taken to address them.

One of the most significant initiatives undertaken in the past decade in relation to Indigenous education and training was the introduction of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) in 1989. The NATSIEP was a national policy jointly developed by the states and territories and the Commonwealth. The central goal of the NATSIEP was 'to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education.'<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the inquiry, it became clear to the Committee that equity for Indigenous people in most educational sectors had not been achieved. At almost all levels, educational participation and achievement rates for Indigenous people remained behind those of the non-Indigenous population. However, it was also clear that there had been substantial progress in a range of areas, with some major improvements in Indigenous educational participation. These included increases in Year 12 completion and in participation in vocational education and training. The period also saw an appreciable increase in educational participation by mature age Indigenous students. The record, therefore, has been mixed, with continued failure in some areas and partial success in others.

The past ten years have also seen significant developments in Indigenous affairs generally. These developments include the Mabo and Wik decisions on native title,

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy: Joint Policy Statement*, Canberra, 1989, p. 9

the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry into the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families, and continuing efforts towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In the broader social context the decade saw developments in information technology which have the potential to link remote communities into the wider community in ways which were not previously available. The decade also saw a growing body of academic literature and research on Indigenous education. Much of this research has informed educational practice at both the local and national level. Indigenous education has also been influenced by moves towards self determination in Indigenous communities, and the desire of Indigenous communities to have more control over their own affairs.

Many of these changes were reflected in debates over Indigenous education and training which the Committee encountered in the course of the inquiry. Central issues in Indigenous education such as the role of bilingual instruction, aboriginal learning styles, ‘two way’ education, and Indigenous participation in educational decision making were brought to the attention of the Committee in various locations. One example was the decision in early 1999 of the Northern Territory Education Department to phase out supplementary funding for Indigenous bilingual programs in government schools. The announcement sparked a heated debate over the role of bilingual programs and the level of commitment of Australian governments to Indigenous education. Other important issues considered by the Committee included school attendance, literacy and numeracy, and teacher training.

The numerous government inquiries and commissions into Indigenous education and training over the last ten years have resulted in a range of recommendations. In some instances, these have been backed up by government programs and funding initiatives. At the community level, many initiatives have been put in place which have sought to build on a growing understanding of how indigenous people learn and interact with an essentially non-indigenous educational system. The inquiry took stock of some of these developments.

At the national level, the Committee examined many of the reports into Indigenous education and training that were conducted during this period. A major focus was on the recommendations and the extent to which they were successfully implemented. Of necessity, this required the Committee to focus on those reports and inquiries considered to be the most significant. In this process, the Committee was guided by the advice provided in submissions and public hearings. However, the Committee is aware of the selective nature of its work and the fact that some important reports may have received less attention than others.

A key part of the inquiry involved identifying recent initiatives that had proven successful in improving educational achievement for Indigenous Australians. The public hearings provided an opportunity for the Committee to gain first hand information on educational issues and initiatives at the local level. The level of diversity of the Indigenous population suggests that many educational needs are best tackled at the local level. One of the areas investigated in the hearings was local

responses to educational concerns and the factors that support or hinder these responses.

The Committee was also asked to compare the level of state, territory and Commonwealth resources devoted to education and training programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders over the last decade. Work on this indicated that reliable information on which to base comparisons was difficult to get, and that there were difficulties in making useful comparisons because states and territories use different measurement indicators. The Committee has made some recommendations in this area aimed at improving reporting on expenditure on Indigenous education. The extent of Commonwealth and state or territory involvement in the various educational sectors was an important issue here. The Commonwealth has only a limited role in program delivery. Many submissions to the inquiry raised issues that were largely state responsibilities. The Committee has recommended that a number of these issues be referred to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).

Much of the inquiry concentrated on the compulsory years of schooling because of the relatively low numbers of Indigenous students who complete secondary education. However, vocational education and training, adult education and higher education are assuming greater importance and were subject to some controversy as to content relevance and control. Similarly, much of the inquiry focussed on rural and remote regions. Indigenous people in these regions experience considerable difficulties in gaining access to education. Some of these issues were raised with the Committee. However, a large proportion of Indigenous people also live in urban locations. Their educational needs were also investigated, although the Committee was regrettably unable to visit any Indigenous schools in large urban areas. Health issues were addressed in many submissions and also in the public hearings and inspections.

In the course of conducting the inquiry, the Committee was made aware of the complex inter-relationships involved in addressing Indigenous educational needs. This was most strongly felt in relation to health, social and community development, and the diverse nature of Indigenous populations. These factors have a strong impact on levels of educational participation and achievement in Indigenous communities, and are in turn influenced by the educational levels of Indigenous peoples. Perhaps the strongest message to come out of the Committee's hearings was the need for holistic approaches that involve action across a range of areas. Educational improvements on their own stand little chance of success without improvements in health care, social and community well-being, and general living conditions. Progress in all areas depends fundamentally on the involvement of Indigenous communities. However, the support of government agencies working cooperatively to provide an appropriate and sensitive 'whole of government' approach is essential to this process.

Senator Jacinta Collins  
Chair

