

CHAPTER 2

THE EVOLUTION OF A NATIONAL INDIGENOUS EDUCATION POLICY

If we were to rewrite the Aboriginal education policy today, we would focus a lot more on the specifics of outcomes. But, given the time in which it was developed, it has been a very major tool for focusing all operations of Aboriginal education - be they at a preschool, primary, secondary, VET or higher education level - around a common set of issues that people needed to at least develop policies on and begin to plan to report against. In that respect, it has been extraordinarily successful. I know there has not been a development like that occurring in any other part of the world in Indigenous education.¹

2.1 The year 2000 marks the tenth anniversary of implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP). The policy, introduced on 1 January 1990, was a joint initiative of the State and Territory governments and the Commonwealth government. The central goal was 'to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education'.² Arguably, the policy has been the single most important initiative undertaken in Indigenous education in the past decade. It represented a broad consensus of views on the critical issues facing Indigenous education, and on the resources and strategies needed to tackle these issues. The broad goals of the policy have guided the activities of governments and educational organisations throughout Australia during this period, and were widely quoted in submissions to the inquiry. The policy remains in place today and continues to influence the educational agenda.

2.2 The policy has had both its critics and supporters during this period. Some educators have seen it as assimilationist while others have questioned the commitment of governments to its aims. Supporters of the policy have commended its aims, the provision of dedicated supplementary funding for Indigenous education, and the involvement of governments in a coordinated national approach. In late 1999 it is clear that equity for Indigenous people in most educational sectors has not yet been achieved and may still be some way off. However, it is also clear that there has been progress in a range of areas, with improvements in many levels of Indigenous educational participation. The record on the national policy, therefore, is mixed, with continued failure in some areas and partial success in others.

1 Professor Paul Hughes, *Hansard*, Canberra, 30 August 1999, p. 327

2 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy: Joint Policy Statement*, Canberra, 1989, p. 9

The role of the Commonwealth in national education policy

2.3 Under the 1967 referendum, the Commonwealth government was given special responsibilities in Indigenous affairs. However, the Commonwealth has a limited role in education. State and territory governments have primary responsibility for most matters relating to schools and vocational education and training. The Commonwealth purchases educational services but does not manage an education system.³ The Commonwealth provides funding for institutions in the higher education sector but does not manage any institutions.

2.4 The Commonwealth has a role in formulating educational policy at the national level, although much policy implementation necessarily requires the involvement of state and territory governments. The Commonwealth is a member of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), which is responsible for coordinating education policy at the national level. The Commonwealth also funds a number of specific educational programs for Indigenous students. These programs are generally supplementary to those administered by the states and territories.

2.5 At the Commonwealth level, policy responsibility for education lies primarily with the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) also provides policy advice to the Minister as requested, and Government agencies, on Indigenous issues, including education. In their submission ATSIC noted that they were currently negotiating a memorandum of understanding with DETYA covering a range of issues, including policy advice. ATSIC does not administer any educational programs.⁴ Another of ATSIC's core functions is to monitor the effectiveness of programs for Indigenous people, including those programs conducted by other bodies.⁵

2.6 Indigenous education programs administered by DETYA include financial assistance (Abstudy), tutorial assistance (ATAS), parental involvement (ASSPA), and vocational and educational guidance (VEGAS). The Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP), which is also administered by DETYA, provides supplementary funding to state and territory governments as well as other education providers for Indigenous education initiatives and projects. DETYA also provides some funding for Indigenous education through its mainstream programs in the various educational sectors.⁶

2.7 There are varying opinions on the Commonwealth role in Indigenous education. The notion that the Commonwealth should have no role at all received little support in the inquiry. Commonwealth funded programs were seen by most witnesses

3 Submission No. 32, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, vol. 4, p. 48

4 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, pp. 121-123

5 *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act, 1989*, Section 7, pp 11-12

6 Submission No. 32, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. vol. 4, pp. 62-67

as important initiatives (although opinions sometimes differed over whether they could be improved or implemented differently). The provision of supplementary Commonwealth funding was also seen as important, particularly in providing consistency in resourcing for Indigenous education at the national level. There were some concerns that some state and territory governments may have used supplementary funding to substitute for their own funding. There was less support for a more proactive Commonwealth role. Generally, the states and territories were seen as the main providers of educational services, with the Commonwealth in a supplementary role. However, there were some strong criticisms of the record of some state and territory governments in Indigenous education, and a belief in some quarters that the Commonwealth should take a more interventionist role.

The development of the national policy (NATSIEP)

2.8 The national policy (NATSIEP) has been implemented over a period that has seen considerable change and development in Indigenous affairs. The policy itself has not been a static policy. During this time, it has been subject to one major policy review, in 1994, and to refinements through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).

2.9 External developments included the Mabo and Wik decisions on native title, the establishment of ATSIC in 1990, moves towards greater self-determination among Indigenous communities, and the reconciliation process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. These developments have had a profound impact on issues of Indigenous identity and self-determination, and on perceptions of Indigenous peoples among the wider community. There have also been developments in the various educational sectors, as well as a number of reports and other initiatives with implications for Indigenous education. These include the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry into the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families.

2.10 The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy was developed as a result of the 1988 Hughes Report. The Policy was a joint initiative of the state, territory and Commonwealth governments. Its development involved consultations with Indigenous community representatives in each state and territory as well as discussions with education authorities and providers. The Policy was introduced in 1990.

2.11 A major review of the policy was undertaken in 1994, at the end of the first triennium of operation. The report of the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples was published in 1995. The findings of the review were examined by a MCEETYA taskforce in 1995, resulting in the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996 – 2002. The intention of the strategy was to confirm and significantly advance the aims of the national policy by the year 2002. In May 1998 the Ministerial Council (MCEETYA) agreed to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education as a permanent item

on the Council's agenda. In 1999 the Council resolved to undertake additional efforts over the next five years to ensure that Indigenous students achieve equitable and appropriate educational outcomes.⁷ At the time of the inquiry, it was noted that the Commonwealth is currently developing national strategies on Indigenous school attendance, and literacy and numeracy.

The Hughes Report

2.12 The mid-1980's saw a number of reports and recommendations on Indigenous education, training and employment.⁸ In April 1988 the then Minister for Employment, Education and Training, the Hon John Dawkins MP, and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon Gerry Hand MP, appointed an Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force. The role of the Task Force was to examine the findings of previous reports into Indigenous education, provide advice on Indigenous education in Australia, and identify priorities in funding for existing programs and new initiatives.

2.13 The Task Force, chaired by the former Chair of the National Aboriginal Education Committee Professor Paul Hughes, concluded its inquiry in July 1988 after a three month period. The report of the Task Force drew largely on existing documents such as policy papers and other government reports. The report highlighted the high level of Indigenous educational disadvantage documented in previous studies. The Task Force made 59 recommendations, the most significant of which was a proposal for a coordinated national Aboriginal education policy.

Findings

2.14 The Task Force found that disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational participation rates were most marked for those in the 16 to 25 year age group. Participation rates for Indigenous pre-school and primary school students, although higher, were still considerably below those of non-Indigenous Australians. The Task Force noted that 13 per cent of compulsory school age Indigenous children were not enrolled at school in 1986 compared to less than two per cent of non-Indigenous children. Indigenous participation rates in higher education were also well below those of other Australians, with the vast majority of Indigenous students studying arts, humanities, social sciences or teacher education.⁹

2.15 The Task Force highlighted the importance of education to the employment prospects of Indigenous people. It found that Indigenous people with tertiary qualifications were employed at comparable rates to their non-Indigenous counterparts

7 *ibid.*, pp. 49-53

8 These included the reports of the National Aboriginal Education Committee, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, and the Miller Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs.

9 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Taskforce*, Canberra, 1988, pp. 9-12

with similar qualifications.¹⁰ The report argued that equity in employment outcomes could only be achieved through the elimination of educational inequalities. The report noted that there were strong links between the work of the Task Force and the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy, introduced in 1987.

[The] employment objectives of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP), ... cannot be achieved without the elimination of inequality in education. Improved educational outcomes are needed to successfully address the range of social disadvantages within the Aboriginal community, such as drug and substance abuse and other health problems, and high levels of welfare dependency.¹¹

2.16 The report outlined some of the major barriers to increased Indigenous educational participation documented in previous studies. These included racial discrimination, economic disadvantage, and geographical, social and cultural isolation. A lack of coordination in the provision of services to Indigenous people, particularly between different levels of government, was also highlighted as a significant barrier to increased educational participation.¹²

Recommendations

2.17 To overcome the educational disadvantages experienced by Indigenous Australians, the Task Force proposed the development of a national Aboriginal Education Policy based on five general objectives. These were:

- to achieve equity in the provision of education to all Aboriginal children, young people and adults by the year 2000;
- to assist Aboriginal parents and communities to be fully involved in the planning and provision of education for themselves and their children;
- to achieve parity in participation rates by Aboriginal people with those of other Australians in all stages of education;
- to achieve positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal people in schooling and tertiary education; and
- to improve the provision of education services across the nation at the local level.¹³

2.18 The Task Force recommended re-negotiating existing arrangements between the Commonwealth and the states and territories in order to achieve 'properly resourced long-term strategies to eliminate Aboriginal inequality in education'.¹⁴

10 *ibid.*, p. 15

11 *ibid.*, p. 2

12 *ibid.*, p. 16

13 *ibid.*, pp. 16-17

2.19 The involvement of the Aboriginal community in developing policies and programs was seen as central to the development of a national policy. The Task Force stressed that the involvement of Indigenous communities had to be based on the 'principle of self-determination in education'. The Task Force recommended continued support of state and territory Aboriginal education consultative groups, in order to provide an opportunity for local communities to advise governments on aspects of Indigenous education.¹⁵

2.20 The Task Force noted that Australian education policy was based on the view that a minimum of ten and preferably twelve years of schooling should be provided to all children. It recommended the adoption of strategies that would result in parity in participation rates at all levels of education between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by the year 2000.¹⁶

2.21 Participation rates alone were not considered to be a sufficient measure of improved educational outcomes. The Hughes Report also argued that improving outcomes required changes to the nature and appropriateness of the education provided. This could only be achieved through the establishment of a learning environment that was inclusive of Aboriginal languages, values and culture at all levels. The Task Force advised that any initiatives employed to improve participation rates should take Indigenous cultural values into consideration. One way of achieving this would be by facilitating input into curriculum development from Indigenous communities. The Task Force also argued that the inclusion of Aboriginal studies in the curricula available to non-Indigenous students would increase their understanding of Indigenous culture and make them more sensitive to the needs of Indigenous students.¹⁷

2.22 Geographical isolation posed a major obstacle to increased educational participation. The Task Force observed that over 11,000 Aboriginal children did not have access to a school program, and identified the expansion of local education programs to rural and remote parts of Australia as an essential goal.¹⁸

2.23 The Task Force noted that the vocational education and training sector was of particular value to Indigenous people because of the range, diversity and adaptability of programs and courses available. Many Indigenous people, however, were enrolled in non-award or general education courses. While these were valuable in enabling adults to acquire skills missed during their school years, they did not necessarily provide training for employment. The Task Force recommended a number of

14 *ibid.*, p. 2

15 *ibid.*, p. 18

16 *ibid.*, p. 19

17 *ibid.*, pp. 17-20

18 *ibid.*, p. 20

strategies to improve the level and quality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in vocational education and training.¹⁹

2.24 The importance of an Aboriginal presence in the classroom was reflected in recommendations for the Commonwealth Government to promote the training of Aboriginal teachers through the provision of off-campus teacher education courses. Continued Government support for Aboriginal education workers and assistants was also recommended, as was an extension of the National Scheme for Placement of Teachers in Aboriginal Schools.²⁰ The report also recommended an increase in funding for remote area teacher education in order to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’.²¹

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP)

2.25 A major purpose of the NATSIEP was to ‘achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education.’²² The joint policy statement issued in 1989 acknowledged the diversity existing in Indigenous communities, and reaffirmed the main conclusions reached by the Hughes Task Force. The statement drew attention to the need to develop a concerted effort ‘by cooperatively directing the strategies of the Commonwealth, the States and Territories, non-government education authorities and educational institutions, to achieve agreed goals’.²³

2.26 The National Policy focussed on the development of agreed common goals as a means of providing a framework for a national effort. The aim was to encourage flexibility and innovation within diverse educational systems operating under differing philosophies and practices, in order to meet agreed common goals.²⁴ Importantly, the policy established, as the benchmark for Indigenous Australians, the level of educational access, participation and outcomes achieved by non-Indigenous Australians.

2.27 The policy outlined 21 agreed long term goals.²⁵ The goals addressed four main educational areas:

- the level of involvement of Aboriginal people in educational decision making;

19 *ibid.*, p. 30

20 *ibid.*, pp. 22-29

21 *ibid.*, p. 40

22 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy: Joint Policy Statement*, Canberra, 1989, p. 9

23 *ibid.*, p. 11

24 *ibid.*, p. 13

25 The 21 long term goals of the AEP are outlined in detail in Appendix 1.

- equality of access to educational services;
- equity of educational participation; and
- equitable and appropriate educational outcomes.

2.28 The policy identified, as an immediate priority, the establishment of ‘effective arrangements for the involvement of Aboriginal people in decision-making regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of education services at institutional and system-wide levels’. The strong emphasis on the involvement of Indigenous people in educational decision making came as a response to the concerns raised in the Hughes report over the cultural appropriateness of mainstream education systems and curricula. Early attention was also given to improving educational access and participation for Indigenous children of pre-school and compulsory schooling age.²⁶

2.29 The goals of the national policy were incorporated into legislation with the *Aboriginal Education (Supplementary Assistance) Act 1989*. The Commonwealth undertook to supplement recurrent and capital funding for education with a commitment of funds through the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP).²⁷ Financial arrangements were agreed to on the understanding that Commonwealth funding commitments would be maintained at the levels negotiated, and that finances allocated by the states and territories would not be diminished because of additional funding from the Commonwealth. The policy also included arrangements for the development of performance indicators to monitor, evaluate and report on the strategies adopted under the policy.

Opinions

2.30 The Committee heard a range of opinions on the NATSIEP. Most submissions to the inquiry were generally supportive of the policy. Much of the evidence saw the policy as a significant initiative, which had had a positive impact on Indigenous education. Literature in support of the policy praised the commitment to increased funding, the element of cooperation between governments, and the support for Indigenous curriculum. The Australian Education Union (AEU) expressed strong support for the national strategy in its submission, commenting that it represented ‘the most comprehensive and culturally appropriate consolidation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy to date’.²⁸

2.31 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission argued that the policy was important for both symbolic and practical reasons. According to ATSIC, a significant feature of the policy was the consolidation of supplementary funding for Indigenous education into the one Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program

26 *ibid.*, pp. 15-16

27 *ibid.*, p. 16

28 Submission No. 24, Australian Education Union, vol. 2, p. 129

(IESIP).²⁹ In most of the states there were strong state-based consultative groups involved in decision making regarding implementation of the policy. Many of the submissions highlighted the ways in which the policy had been used to provide a framework for Indigenous educational provision. Submissions from state Indigenous consultative groups in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia described how the National Policy goals had formed the basis of their educational strategies. In Victoria, the goals had underpinned both the *Partnership in Education: Koorie Education Policy*, introduced in 1990, and the *Koorie 2000 Strategy*, introduced in 1997.³⁰

2.32 At a more local level, the Papunya community mentioned the NATSIEP goals in their submission and described the process by which the community had identified ways to progress towards achieving these goals. The national strategy was seen as particularly relevant to the situation at Papunya.³¹

2.33 Some witnesses to the inquiry supported the goals and principles of the NATSIEP but were critical of an apparent lack of progress and a failure on the part of governments to implement key recommendations. These criticisms were also raised in regard to related areas such as health. Some submissions questioned the level of commitment of governments to the goals of the policy. The National Tertiary Education Industry Union commented that there had generally been a poor record of implementation of recommendations in relation to higher education.³² The submission from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Education Association argued that few attempts had been made in Tasmania to formalise the process for involving Indigenous groups in educational decision making.³³

2.34 Some submissions were more critical of the policy, describing it as ‘assimilationist’ and pointing to an emphasis on improvements in mainstream education rather than support for community controlled education initiatives. The 1994 National Review noted a number of similar criticisms, including a perceived lack of support for community controlled education. Criticisms reported in the Review centred on the policy’s assimilationist concerns and lack of support for community-controlled initiatives, its depiction of Indigenous people as victims, an apparent failure to adequately reflect the commitment evident in the Hughes report, and vagueness on implementation and evaluation.³⁴

29 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 129

30 Submission No. 20, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, vol. 2, p. 69

31 Submission No. 26, Papunya School, vol. 2, p. 204

32 Submission No. 27, National Tertiary Education Industry Union, vol. 2, p. 216

33 Submission No. 14, Tasmanian Aboriginal Education Association, vol. 1, p. 157

34 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report*, Canberra, 1995, p. 24

2.35 Criticisms of a lack of support for community controlled education initiatives were reflected in some of the evidence provided to the inquiry. Both the Hughes report and the National Policy included recommendations relating to self-determination. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody endorsed this approach. However, according to some witnesses, in emphasising access and equity in mainstream education, and the role of providers in achieving this, the National Policy played down the importance of Indigenous communities and organisations in providing their own education.³⁵

2.36 More recently, some literature has criticised the policy for emphasising and simplifying cultural issues in ways that may have limited educational diversity at local levels. These writings have suggested that concerns by policy makers for cultural relevance in education may not necessarily reflect the concerns and aspirations of local communities. The policy is seen as reflecting the concerns of policy makers and interest groups in ways that have not always fitted with the aspirations of local groups, reflecting a tension between local and national priorities.³⁶

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

2.37 The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was undertaken during the period in which the national policy was being developed. The final report of the Royal Commission, released in April 1991, drew attention to the link between poor educational outcomes and high rates of imprisonment among Indigenous Australians.

2.38 The Royal Commission endorsed the goals of the national policy and made a number of recommendations in relation to Indigenous education. The Report expressed strong support for the principle of self-determination. 'The only chance for improving education as a social resource for Aboriginal people will come as a result of Aboriginal people deciding for themselves what it is they require of education and then having the means of determining how that end is to be achieved.'³⁷ The Report emphasised the important role of pre-school education, the need for Indigenous studies courses, the value of community controlled programs, and the importance of incorporating Indigenous viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters.

2.39 The report of the Royal Commission was quoted in a number of submissions to the inquiry. The Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers was supportive of the Royal Commission recommendations but saw shortcomings in the extent to which they had been implemented under subsequent policy initiatives. Their submission examined the relationship of policy initiatives in the vocational education and adult education sectors to Royal Commission recommendations. They pointed to a

35 Submission No. 17, Ms Deborah Durnan, vol. 2, p. 32

36 Cathryn McConaghy, 'Containing Diversity: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy', in Bob Lingard and Paige Porter eds., *A National Approach to Schooling in Australia*, Australian College of Education, Canberra, 1997, p. 127

37 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report, vol.4, 1991, p.301

failure by governments 'to demonstrate any real commitment to the right of Aboriginal people to choose their own alternatives to the dominant or mainstream education system'.³⁸ These views were endorsed by the submission from the Institute for Aboriginal Development, particularly in relation to Indigenous control of educational organisations. The report of the inquiry into implementation of RCIADIC recommendations, *Justice Under Scrutiny*, was also mentioned in the submission from the Australian Education Union.

2.40 The submission from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission commented that the Royal Commission put pressure on governments and educators to move more rapidly on Indigenous education. The Royal Commission endorsed the national policy framework for consultation and involvement of Indigenous peoples in education, and drew attention to the importance of cultural differences and their effect on learning processes. The ATSIC submission drew attention to the fact that all governments supported the Royal Commission recommendations, with the Commonwealth committing additional funding for Indigenous education workers and pre-school places. ATSIC considered that there had been some positive changes since the Royal Commission, with an increasing number of schools providing a culturally responsive education.³⁹

2.41 The Commissions' recommendations were wide ranging and covered areas that are examined in greater detail elsewhere in this report. Recommendations in relation to Indigenous people in custody, in particular, are examined in more detail in chapter three. In general, while there have been encouraging developments in areas such as the introduction of Indigenous studies subjects in schools, there still remains much to be done. The area of support for community controlled education, in particular, remains an area where governments have generally failed to adequately reflect the intent of the Royal Commission recommendations.

The National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

...education should be constructed in ways that value and respect diversity rather than standardisation.⁴⁰

2.42 In January 1993 the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon. Robert Tickner MP, announced that a National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples would be conducted. The principal aim would be to review the operation and effectiveness of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy at the end of its first triennium. A Reference Group chaired

38 Submission No. 15, Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers, vol. 1, p. 202

39 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, p. 133

40 Department of Employment, Education and Training, *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: Final Report*, Canberra, 1995, p. 21

by Mr Mandawuy Yunupingu was appointed to conduct the review. The review was given the following terms of reference:

Against the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP), examine the effectiveness of the strategies developed through the first triennium of the Policy, the outcomes achieved and the extent of unmet need; and develop subsequent strategies in terms of:

- ensuring Aboriginal involvement in educational decision making;
- providing equality of access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to education services;
- raising the rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in education to those for all Australians;
- achieving equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while acknowledging traditional and contemporary cultural differences, including gender issues;
- ensuring appropriate reporting, monitoring and evaluation procedures for the use of funds provided in support of the AEP, and
- examining allocations, distribution and management of resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and compatibility of these resource allocations with needs.⁴¹

2.43 The Review was conducted during 1993 and 1994. An extensive process of public consultations was undertaken, along with an examination of written submissions and analysis of statistical data. The final report was presented in 1995, and contained a total of 44 recommendations.

2.44 The Review found widespread support for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. The Review observed that access to education had improved for Indigenous people since the introduction of the Policy, despite technical problems with some programs. However, Indigenous Australians still lagged behind other Australians in terms of equitable cultural, economic and social outcomes from education.⁴²

2.45 Issues of equity and the link between education and reconciliation were central themes of the report. The Review argued that self-determination in education would be a significant step towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

For Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, self-determination in education is essential; it creates the framework which allows Indigenous

41 *ibid.*, p. 1

42 *ibid.*, p. 14

Australians to be themselves and puts them on an equal footing with other national and international communities.⁴³

2.46 The Review noted a number of criticisms of the NATSIEP for focussing on improving Indigenous participation and involvement in ‘mainstream’ education rather than providing a framework for self-determination and community controlled education. Some submissions described the policy as ‘assimilationist’. However, the Review recommended that governments reaffirm their commitment to the NATSIEP. The Review concluded that the policy was serving a ‘vital purpose’ by:

...helping to build an Australian culture in which there is greater recognition and respect for Aboriginality, together with a greater awareness and sensitivity to the aspirations and concerns of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders.⁴⁴

2.47 The Review outlined five principles underpinning its conclusions and recommendations, and suggested that these principles should be reflected in decisions made by organisations developing education policies or providing educational services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The principles were:

- enabling Indigenous people to exercise self-determination in education;
- providing Indigenous people with the power to make choices in education;
- shifting the administrative responsibility for decisions on Indigenous education closer to the communities;
- ensuring coordination of services between Indigenous communities and higher levels of administration; and
- maximising resource allocation to the provision of education services for Indigenous people.⁴⁵

2.48 The National Review was concerned at the limited power of regional and local Indigenous communities, whose role was often purely advisory. Greater direct control over funding and a strengthened decision-making role for Indigenous people was required to achieve self-determination in education. It was also important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were able to determine their educational needs and delivery options, thus exercising real choices in education, rather than choosing from options constructed for them.⁴⁶

2.49 The National Review concluded that different ways of involving Indigenous people in educational decision-making processes were needed to create a foundation

43 *ibid.*, p. 23

44 *ibid.*, p. 24

45 *ibid.*, p. 27

46 *ibid.*, p. 32

from which they could exercise greater control over their education. The Review recommended that organisations with responsibility for developing educational policy or providing educational services for Indigenous students should appoint an Indigenous person or advisory body to ensure that Indigenous views were reflected in their decisions.⁴⁷

2.50 The National Review also recommended the formation of a new independent national body, which would be a signatory to the NATSIEP, to oversee education for Indigenous Australians. The Review recommended that the Commonwealth convene a national conference to determine the terms of reference, membership, roles and responsibilities of this body and its relationship with other groups.⁴⁸ To the best of the Committees' knowledge this does not appear to have happened, although the Committee acknowledges the coordinating role being undertaken by MCEETYA.

2.51 The National Review noted concerns that there was insufficient contact between Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs) and local communities, and recommended that AECGs be restructured to ensure that office-holders were elected by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Structures should also be put in place to ensure access for local communities to AECG representatives. The Review recommended that AECGs should be established as incorporated advisory bodies, and should be paid directly by grants-in-aid to bring funding in line with other similar bodies.⁴⁹

2.52 The National Review recommended that programs aimed at encouraging Indigenous students to enrol in higher education be expanded to further increase participation and retention rates. State and territory governments should also provide incentives to ensure the retention of tertiary educated Indigenous Australians in the education sector, and provide employment conditions which recognised family, social and cultural responsibilities. Evidence presented to the Review indicated that progress in increasing Indigenous employment in education had been 'patchy'. While increases in ancillary and support staff had occurred, the number of Indigenous teaching staff was still small.⁵⁰

2.53 The Review found 'almost universal praise for the important and positive benefits' provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers (AIEWs).⁵¹ The AIEWs provided 'positive role models' for all students. The Report recommended a review of pay and working arrangements through the establishment of awards for AIEWs to better reflect their role in assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait

47 *ibid.*, p. 36

48 *ibid.*, p. 37

49 *ibid.*, pp. 40-41

50 *ibid.*, pp. 41-45

51 Also known as Aboriginal Teacher Aides, Assistant Teachers, Koorie Educators, Community Teachers, Aboriginal Literacy Workers, and Home School Liaison Officers.

Islander people to participate in education. The Review saw this as one way of combating high turnover rates among AIEWs.⁵²

2.54 The National Review made a total of 44 recommendations. These covered the following main areas:

- increasing involvement and self-determination in all aspects of education;
- improving access to and exchange of information on best practice in Indigenous education;
- changing Indigenous educator employment conditions;
- ensuring equitable access to and higher participation in all levels of education;
- achieving equitable and relevant outcomes;
- support for monitoring and evaluation projects, and
- improving funding for existing AESIP programs.⁵³

2.55 The National Review also published a comprehensive statistical annexe documenting levels of Indigenous educational participation and outcomes. While some submissions commented that statistical data show only a limited picture of Indigenous education, the statistics collected in the annexe have provided a useful means of measuring progress towards the NATSIEP goals.

Opinions

2.56 Some writers have challenged the assumptions and principles on which the National Review was based. Both Martin Nakata and Cathryn McConaghy, for example, point to evidence of ‘culturalism’, or a view that Indigenous educational problems are primarily problems of ‘culture’ to be solved by implementing a more culturally relevant education. This approach was seen as underpinning ‘both ways’ education and the National Policy, and was described as problematic for a number of reasons. It was said to leave unchallenged the major structural, material and moral bases of injustice from which the Indigenous population suffered. It took no account of contemporary ‘hybrid’ realities, which reflect a range of cultural influences. It also engaged in a politics of ‘tribalism’, in which Indigenous values were pitted against non-Indigenous values.⁵⁴

52 *ibid.*, pp. 50-52

53 *ibid.*, pp. 129-130

54 Cathryn McConaghy, ‘Containing Diversity: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy’, in Bob Lingard and Paige Porter eds., *A National Approach to Schooling in Australia*, Australian College of Education, Canberra, 1997, p. 231

2.57 Some writers have argued that one of the flaws of the Review was its failure to value diversity by favouring a cultural model for Indigenous educational disadvantage. McConaghy argues that the National Review did not favour a model of mainstream education for Indigenous Australians, yet many Indigenous parents argue for a mainstream education. According to McConaghy, the 1994 review failed to address some of the problems identified by critics of the national policy, and in large part reproduced them.⁵⁵ Writers such as Nakata and McConaghy have argued that both mainstream and non-mainstream approaches should be accommodated in a national Indigenous education policy, reflecting the diversity of views and opinions within the community.

The National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

2.58 In 1995 the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), in response to the National Review, developed the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996 – 2002. The National Strategy reaffirmed the commitment of MCEETYA to the National Policy and established a number of priority areas. The recommendations of the National Review were cross-referenced to the 21 NATSIEP goals. The 21 goals were also aggregated into seven priority areas, with an additional eighth priority covering reforms to implementation, evaluation and resourcing arrangements.

2.59 The eight priorities of the MCEETYA National Strategy were:

1. to establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision-making;
2. to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples employed in education and training;
3. to ensure equitable access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to education and training services;
4. to ensure participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education and training;
5. to ensure equitable and appropriate educational attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
6. to promote, maintain and support the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, cultures and languages to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous students;
7. to provide community development training services including proficiency in English literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults; and

55 *ibid.*, pp. 126-132

8. to improve NATSIEP implementation, evaluation and resourcing arrangements.⁵⁶

2.60 A range of agreed outcomes were specified for each priority, covering the areas of early childhood education, schooling, vocational education and training, and higher education. Strategies for implementation and performance monitoring were also outlined.

Opinions

2.61 As with the NATSIEP, the MCEETYA National Strategy has been used to provide a valuable framework for Indigenous educational provision in the states and territories.. In South Australia the eight priorities of the MCEETYA national strategy form the basis of the operations and future plans of the South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Advisory Committee (SAAETAC).⁵⁷ Educational programs being implemented in South Australia, such as *Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum*, are consistent with the National Strategy.⁵⁸ SAAETAC recommended a continued commitment to the Strategy on the part of all governments and education providers.

2.62 While it supported the National Strategy, SAAETAC commented that some providers had experienced difficulties in implementing the MCEETYA priorities.⁵⁹ In particular, there had been a level of uneasiness about the establishment of targets and performance indicators against the priorities providers felt they were able to achieve against. There was a concern that qualitative indicators should receive more recognition in assessing progress towards the MCEETYA priorities.

2.63 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission supported the commitment made by MCEETYA to the NATSIEP goals and the shift towards an outcomes focus. They saw a need, however, for further research and data collection, and commented that it had not been possible to offer views on the first triennium of the NATSIEP due to a lack of data.⁶⁰

2.64 Some submissions argued that the MCEETYA National Strategy again failed to acknowledge the role of independent aboriginal community organisations and education providers. The Strategy was primarily aimed at state and territory public education systems as the main providers. This represented a retreat from the recommendations of inquiries such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. One submission pointed to a tension between the goals of consultation

56 Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996 – 2002*, DEETYA, Canberra, 1996, p. 1

57 Mr Frank Lampard, *Hansard*, Port Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 136

58 Submission No. 31, South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Advisory Committee, vol. 4, p. 10

59 Mr Frank Lampard, *Hansard*, Port Adelaide, 27 July 1999, p. 136

60 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, pp. 133-137

and involvement on the one hand, and ownership and control on the other.⁶¹ In the vocational education and training sector, concerns were expressed that the National Strategy would direct scarce public funds specifically allocated for Aboriginal education into integrating Indigenous people into mainstream vocational strategies rather than supporting Indigenous community development strategies.

Further Developments

2.65 In 1998 the Ministerial Council (MCEETYA) agreed to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education as a permanent item on the Council's agenda. In April 1999 the Commonwealth provided an overview of progress in Indigenous education to the Council, and pointed out that the absence of nationally aggregated data limited the Council's capacity to report on progress. The Council made a commitment to additional efforts in Indigenous education over the next five years, including the development of more consistent performance indicators and targets. The Council also agreed to establish a working group on Indigenous education chaired by the Commonwealth.⁶²

2.66 The Commonwealth is currently developing national strategies on Indigenous school attendance, and Indigenous literacy and numeracy. The Commonwealth has also adopted an increased focus on outcomes reporting. Education providers in receipt of IESIP funding are now required to set performance indicators for the measurement of progress in each of the eight MCEETYA priority areas.⁶³

Conclusion

2.67 Indigenous education policy at the national level has gone through an evolutionary process over the last ten years. While there have been a number of changes, the continuities have been more apparent than the differences and no doubt reflect the level of consensus established in the original joint policy statement. The changes that have been made for the purpose of making the policy more workable and accountable. The NATSIEP has proved highly durable, surviving changes of government at all levels and the broader social and economic transformations that have taken place over the last ten years. There has in fact been a remarkable degree of consensus among political parties and governments concerning the aims of the NATSIEP. The fact that the policy was enshrined in legislation no doubt accounts for some of its durability.

2.68 The NATSIEP goals are couched in terms that are hard to argue against. The achievement of educational equity is a laudable policy aim, and has been supported by all governments and political parties. The national policy provided a coordinated approach between governments backed up by dedicated supplementary funding. These

61 Submission No. 17, Ms Deborah Durnan, vol. 2, pp. 32-35

62 Submission No. 32, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, vol. 4, pp. 49-53

63 *ibid.*, p. 63

have been major improvements, and were supported by many witnesses in the current inquiry. The process of implementation has been a lengthy one, however, as one witness to the inquiry made clear, with formal agreement between the Commonwealth and the states and territories only being finalised in 1995.⁶⁴ The lack of apparent progress in some areas may reflect these processes.

2.69 At the Commonwealth level, the most obvious manifestation of the policy has been a number of national programs aimed at increasing the levels of Indigenous involvement in education and the levels of support provided to Indigenous students. These programs have provided consistent, supplementary levels of assistance across the various education systems. They were widely supported in many submissions to the inquiry. The centrally funded direct assistance programs of ATAS, ASSPA and VEGAS were seen as particularly important. At the same time, there were some concerns about the level of flexibility in some of the funding models used by DETYA. Some witnesses were concerned that there should be more certainty of funding and that it should be possible to provide funding directly to schools and regional projects.

Recommendation 3

2.70 The Committee recommends that the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance (IEDA) programs should be retained as centrally funded programs administered by DETYA.

Recommendation 4

2.71 The Committee recommends that DETYA investigate ways of providing greater flexibility in the use of discretionary funds, including funding for regional projects and direct funding for schools.

2.72 Since the National Policy was first implemented there have been both improvements in Indigenous educational participation and outcomes, and areas where progress has been less than satisfactory. The National Policy has undoubtedly contributed towards some of the improvements. However, the policy has also been subject to scrutiny during this period, and has been affected by continuing debate over some of the central issues in Indigenous education. The policy has been criticised both for being ‘assimilationist’ and for emphasising a cultural model of Indigenous educational disadvantage. The Committee sees some truth in both arguments.

2.73 Education policy is often based on a human capital model, where education is seen as an investment from which both the individual and the community benefit. ‘According to this model, increased education pays off in increased employment outcomes.’⁶⁵ The report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force in 1988 followed the implementation of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy and

64 Professor Paul Hughes, *Hansard*, Canberra, 30 August 1999, p. 333

65 R G Schwab, *Post-compulsory education and training for Indigenous Australians*, CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 131, Canberra, 1997, p. 7

drew strong links between education and employment. Education was seen as a significant factor in the elimination of income inequality. Indigenous people were notably disadvantaged when compared to other Australians on mainstream indicators of educational participation and outcomes, and this was a contributing factor to lower employment and higher levels of income inequality.

2.74 In its inception, the national policy was concerned with correcting mainstream indicators of educational disadvantage and using educational advancement to promote economic equity (a ‘human capital’ model of education). In this respect, the policy has been very much centred on the mainstream rather than on alternative forms of education, and on making whatever changes were necessary to the mainstream in order to improve participation and attainment. Some research has suggested that ‘human capital’ models of education may be problematic for Indigenous Australians. Nevertheless, education continues to be seen as an important element in improving the social and economic conditions of Indigenous Australians by both policy makers and many Indigenous Australians themselves. The Committee believes that there is a need to explore alternatives to mainstream education, particularly in the area of adult education.

2.75 In concentrating on the mainstream, however, the NATSIEP put a strong emphasis on changing the mainstream to better accommodate the needs of Indigenous people. Changes included the advocacy of culturally inclusive curricula, the teaching of Indigenous languages, the employment of Indigenous teachers, and the introduction of Indigenous studies subjects in schools. Many witnesses in the inquiry welcomed these changes and pointed to positive effects on educational participation and outcomes. However, some witnesses considered they could go further while others thought they may have gone too far. The main concern of the latter group was that the emphasis on cultural issues may have shifted the focus away from the need for access to mainstream education of the same standard as that available to non-Indigenous Australians. The curriculum chapter in this report examines these issues in greater detail.

2.76 Indigenous educational policy has been largely driven by statistical comparisons. Although some submissions questioned the relevance of quantitative indicators, they will continue to drive policy in this area. The National Policy established the participation and achievement rates of the non-Indigenous population as the benchmark for Indigenous people. Many Indigenous people agree with this approach. Interest in statistical comparisons has, if anything, increased in recent years. Through MCEETYA, the Commonwealth has been involved in implementing standardised benchmarking and reporting procedures for Indigenous education, with support from state and territory governments as well as central agencies such as ATSIC. However, some organisations have questioned the performance indicators used in funding agreements with the Commonwealth, calling for the submission of qualitative as well as quantitative data for performance reports. Some organisations

have also called for more transparency in funding arrangements and outcomes measures.⁶⁶

2.77 To the extent that progress continues to be measured in mainstream statistical terms, the National Policy could be regarded as ‘assimilationist’. Yet, as the Committee heard when visiting Indigenous communities around Australia, mainstream educational success is seen as desirable by many Indigenous communities and not necessarily incompatible with Indigenous values. These concerns are driven by evidence showing that lack of mainstream educational success has serious social and economic consequences for Indigenous communities, and is a significant factor in entrenched poverty, poor health, and high rates of imprisonment. At the community level the debate is often about the means of achieving outcomes rather than the outcomes or ends themselves.

2.78 The National Policy put a strong emphasis on improving the cultural relevance of education through facilitating Indigenous involvement in educational decision making. The policy rationale was that greater Indigenous involvement would improve the relevance of education and therefore participation. Both the National Policy and the 1994 National Review drew the conclusion that mainstream approaches had not worked for large sections of the Indigenous population and that alternative approaches needed to be supported. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody also put a strong emphasis on cultural values and self-determination in education.

2.79 Some recent literature has been critical of this emphasis, suggesting that the adoption of a cultural model of Indigenous educational disadvantage may have limited the ability of policy makers to respond to diversity within Indigenous communities. In some instances a focus on cultural issues may have been at the expense of mainstream educational outcomes. Some communities visited in the inquiry were concerned at mainstream indicators such as English language proficiency and numeracy. Some of the literature argues that both mainstream and non-mainstream approaches should be accommodated in a national Indigenous education policy. This would better reflect the diversity of views and opinions within the Indigenous community. In the Committee’s view, there seems little reason to suggest that a national Indigenous education policy cannot recognise and encourage diversity, including a diversity of educational approaches.

2.80 Some writers have also pointed to differing policy processes in Indigenous education in recent years.⁶⁷ Over the period in which the national policy has been implemented, post-secondary education has also gone through significant changes. Particular examples include the Training Reform Agenda in the vocational education and training sector. These writers have pointed to a lack of fit between these separate but related areas and that of national Indigenous education policy.

66 Submission No. 34, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, vol. 5, pp. 137-138

67 Submission No. 17, Ms Deborah Durnan, vol. 2, pp. 29-30

2.81 With these caveats in mind, the Committee believes that the National Policy has provided a flexible and appropriate framework to initiate and administer innovative programs designed to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians. For the most part it has proved a successful strategy. However, the gap between educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians remains wide. The statistical record on Indigenous education ten years after implementation of the national policy is a mixed one. It would be fair to say that there have been significant increases in participation in almost all areas of Indigenous education over the past ten years, but that improvements in outcomes have been less spectacular. A closer scrutiny of participation data also show that in most sectors Indigenous people continue to participate at lower levels than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The fact that high levels of disadvantage still exist should not detract, however, from the very real advances that have been made. The Committee believes it is essential to increase efforts to build upon what has already been achieved, rather than becoming discouraged at apparently slow progress.

2.82 A number of submissions have called for regular national reviews of Indigenous education similar to the 1994 Review. The submission from ATSIC calls for triennial evaluations of the NATSIEP. The Committee notes that the National Review was conducted at the end of the first triennium of the NATSIEP and that the policy will soon be entering its fourth triennium of operation.

Recommendation 5

2.83 The Committee recommends that a comprehensive review of the NATSIEP be undertaken in 2002, at the end of the fourth triennium of operation.

Recommendation 6

2.84 The Committee recommends that all Commonwealth, state and territory policies and strategies be developed and delivered in a context that recognises, and takes full account of, the cultural history, identity, diversity and continuing educational disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Recommendation 7

2.85 The Committee recommends the appointment of an independent national consultative body to advise MCEETYA on indigenous education needs and policy; this body to include representatives of ATSIC and the Indigenous education consultative bodies that already advise state and territory education ministers.