

**Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee***the council of Australia's university presidents*

(A.C.N. 008 502 930 – A.B.N. 53 008 502 930)

**RESPONSE TO THE MINISTERIAL DISCUSSION PAPER****“HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS”****by the AVCC Advisory Group on Indigenous Higher Education**

The AVCC Advisory Group on Indigenous Higher Education met in Canberra on 1 May 2002. The Advisory Group was pleased to note that Mrs May O'Brien, the Chair of the Western Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Council, is a member of the Reference Group to the Government Review of Higher Education, and compliments the Minister, Dr Brendan Nelson, on this selection. The members of the Group encourage Dr Nelson to ensure that sufficient consultations with Indigenous higher education groups and individuals take place as an essential part of this review process. In addition, the Advisory Group strongly suggests that there be representation of Indigenous scholars at the October 2002 summit.

It is very pleasing to note that the “unique place of Indigenous people” (p1) is to be a major focus of the review and an issue which the Minister clearly wishes to have a prominent part in the totality of discussion and review.

However, it was a little disappointing to find only two other references to Indigenous Australians within the body of the Ministerial Discussion Paper (paragraphs 102 and 106), both within the section on “access on an equitable basis”. The AVCC is well aware that Indigenous higher education is a central part of the Minister's platform and has featured prominently in many of his major speeches over recent months. For these reasons, we are confident that the important issues of Indigenous higher education will receive appropriate coverage as a central part of the review process. The Minister's statement of 14 May 2002 amply illustrates this point.

It is the strong view of the AVCC Advisory Group on Indigenous Higher Education that there is no more important an issue facing Australian higher education than the participation and whole-hearted involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff within the sector. Recent data from DEST indicates a substantial reduction in total Aboriginal student numbers entering into Australia's universities over the last two years. While part of the reason for this may be increased participation in TAFE (which we welcome), the base figure for Indigenous students is still particularly low. In addition, there are both data and anecdotal reports indicating that there are substantial problems for Indigenous Australians in secondary education which ultimately prevent many students

from completing their school education and becoming eligible for entry into university or TAFE. This is a situation which demands investigation and review.

Close consideration of the “At the Crossroads” document also leads to the following views:

1. Within the “principles for a higher education system” (p2), there should be an entry which suggests that all Australian higher education students receive at least some understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems, culture and values as an integral part of their studies. The AVCC accepted this as a major principle in September 2001. This view might also be represented in the key characteristics “ (a) a distinctive Australian system” (p5).
2. In regard to “developments in practice” (p9), the specific responsibilities which higher education bears in regard to Indigenous Australians deserve to receive special notice.
3. This attention ought to continue into “changing contexts” (Ch.3; p11) where it could be picked up in “social and environmental issues” (paragraphs 59 and 60) and in “fiscal capacity” where the special disadvantaged circumstances of many Indigenous students need to be acknowledged.
4. In regard to “a framework for consultation” (p17), the need for Australian students in general to have a better understanding of the knowledge systems, cultures and values of original Australians (see 1 above) is asserted. If the “impact of overseas students on learning experiences and outcomes” (Qa4), is important, then surely Indigenous students require similar specific identification.
5. Similar comments to those above relate to the remainder of the document. Thus, issues such as community engagement, institutional specialisation, management and allocation of public subsidies are all of great importance to Indigenous Australians. The Reference Group may wish to reconsider its current bank of consultative questions as listed in the “Crossroads” document to ensure that this most important topic receives the consideration it deserves.

A factor of great significance in Indigenous issues relates to the level of Abstudy and other support processes which aim to help keep Indigenous students at university. The Government’s changes to Abstudy which came into effect at the beginning of 2000, which may well have had a positive effect on Indigenous students in TAFE programs, have, in many cases, had a deleterious effect on university students and may well be associated with the decline in Indigenous student numbers which closely followed these changes. Similarly, the abolition of the Equity and Merit Scholarships, which

benefited a considerable number of Indigenous students, also seems to have contributed to the decline in student numbers. Other factors associated with the decline in participation include:

- the social factors being experienced in many Indigenous communities (such as alcohol and other substance abuse, and domestic violence);
- the general shift of a greater proportion of the costs of higher education on to students;
- a level of apparent racism on some campuses; and
- the fact that the number of individuals supported at least in part by an Abstudy (or similar) grant is often greater than just the student concerned. The AVCC Group has shown that family members, other than just the student, also “live” from the Abstudy grant, at least in part. The decline in the amount of Abstudy support available to any one student, although relatively small in itself, is often of significance to the family group concerned and becomes the trigger which necessitates the withdrawal of the student from the course of study.

Any consideration of Indigenous students within higher education needs to take into account other co-related issues to do with health, welfare, transport and the regional location of the students. This is a more complex, inter-related situation than is the case for other Australian students. Given this situation and its importance to the country, the AVCC welcomes the announcement by the Department in *Striving for quality* that the involvement of Indigenous Australians in higher education is to be the subject of one of the six issues papers which will follow the “Crossroads” document.

The current higher education review is very timely in the potential impact that it could have on and for Indigenous Australians. The AVCC supports a thorough review of the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within Australia’s university and TAFE sectors. The AVCC also sees it as essential that processes and mechanisms are put in place to considerably advance the number of Indigenous students in university programs, and the range of programs in which they are able to participate. For this reason, universities should report annually on issues to do with Indigenous participation and employment (including academic employment), perhaps via the profiles or some other reporting mechanism.

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