

# **The Review of Higher Education**

## **2008**

**Supplementary Submission by the Australian Federation of  
University Women Inc. on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres  
Strait Islander Students**



A. F. U. W.

Submitted on behalf of AFUW Inc by

Dr Jennifer Strauss AM  
President, AFUW  
2/12 Tollington Ave,  
East Malvern Vic 3145

and

Erica Jolly, MA, MACE, Cuniv [Flinders University]  
Vice President AFUW-SA  
30 North Street,  
Henley Beach SA 5022



A. F. U. W.

## **A Note on the Supplementary Submission**

The Australian Federation of University Women (AFUW Inc) is a not-for-profit incorporated organization open to all women graduates of Australian universities and of accredited universities worldwide. Established in 1922, AFUW has as its aim the advancement of women through access to affordable quality education, so that they can fulfill their personal potential, achieve economic independence and make informed contributions to civil society, especially in the pursuit of human peace and security. AFUW advocates nationally and internationally in support of policies that further these aims.

In 1998, AFUW received DEST funding to convene a Conference on Indigenous Education. Papers from this Conference were published in 1999 as *Indigenous Education and the Social Capital*. From the time of that Conference, AFUW has had a commitment to advocate on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Please see the note on terminology at the beginning of the Submission). That commitment has been strengthened by AFUW's membership of WomenSpeak, one of the four Secretariats advising the office for Women on policy matters. WomenSpeak is holding, as a current OfW-approved project, a series of consultations on Standing in Solidarity with Aboriginal Women, the aim of which is to develop better policies in all areas for the conduct of Aboriginal affairs.

These WomenSpeak consultations are guided by a policy that AFUW had already adopted as an outcome of the Conference mentioned above, namely an undertaking to the Aboriginal participants present that AFUW would not speak on matters of Indigenous policy without prior consultation with Indigenous communities. The consultations required for the current Review were unfortunately not complete at the time that the AFUW President was required, from pressure of other commitments, to complete the general AFUW submission, which has already been sent to the administration of the Review. The material relating to Indigenous students included in that main submission was therefore based on established AFUW policy that was relevant to the Review questions. We would however ask that this additional material, which has resulted from the consultations we sought, especially in South Australia, be now added to our original submission on the grounds that it extends the material therein.

## SUPPLEMENTARY AFUW SUBMISSION TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW

### **A Preliminary Matter Of Terminology**

During meetings of the WomenSpeak Secretariat, the question was raised as to whether ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander’ was the preferred designation of the relevant women attending the meeting. They were firm that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander was preferred, hence its adoption in the WomenSpeak consultation project. The latter nomenclature was of course reflected in the title of ATSIC, as Professor Lowitja O’Donoghue pointed out at the Australian Women Uniting forum, held in Adelaide May 10-13, 2008. The change to ‘Indigenous’ as the official term was made by the Howard government and hence was reflected in the title of the AFUW Conference in 1998, since this was a function sponsored by that government. The desire to revert to ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ has been prompted in part by a recognition that the term ‘indigenous’ could be applied to any second-generation person born in Australia and obscured the distinctive position of Aboriginal peoples as the first Australians (along with Torres Strait Islanders). AFUW respects the expressed wish of these women and therefore the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and ‘non-Aboriginal’ have been used where appropriate throughout this submission, and we would respectfully recommend that, if more extensive consultation confirms that this is the nomenclature preferred by those whom it designates, then it should be adopted for regular use in future in DEEWR and all government documents.

### **Re Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in Higher Education**

Under Section 3.20 of the Discussion Paper the question to be address in this submission are 8 and 9.

### **8. Whether there should be national approach?**

#### **Preamble: An historical perspective**

There is an historical warning to be taken into account here. Decisions in the 1970s that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, support and welfare were to be a Commonwealth responsibility enabled States, where they chose to do so, to ignore or refuse to participate in programmes being initiated and supported by Commonwealth departments. On the other hand, State programmes could be undermined by Commonwealth insistence on particular policies or by withholding of funding. While Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people had been recognised as citizens in the census, that did not mean immediate, equal access to different levels of education. Nor did it mean that those engaged in promoting programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were culturally competent. To a significant extent the transfer of responsibility to the Commonwealth entailed continuation of a policy of assimilation, with little recognition of the validity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. It did not entail the endorsement and support of a bi-lingual and bi-cultural approach, with properly funded support through the provision of appropriately trained teachers of English as a Second Language. Indeed it appears to have been at the insistence of the Commonwealth government on an English-only education that the previous Northern Territory government abandoned its few existing bi-cultural programmes. On matters of health, State and Territory governments, until Commonwealth funding for health was tied to particular programmes, could put the money received into general revenue and not use it for the original purpose.

### **Why that preamble matters**

This preamble matters because, while there should be a national approach, it should take into account the existence of attitudes that might still exist in different States and Territories which help or hinder the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education. It should also take into account and reward programmes in those different universities across the nation that are supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education. Since there are so many difficulties faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their success should not be measured by the numbers ultimately graduating. The higher the level of educational achievement, the greater the chance for the next generation.

### **Funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students in Higher Education**

Everything that is said in this Submission is based on the premise that investment in Indigenous peoples' education is not only something that is their due, but something which will return future rewards to the whole of Australian society in terms of both productivity and social cohesion.

The funding model for Indigenous Higher Education has not changed since the 1990s, despite the fact that Indigenous education activity in the universities has developed significantly from a student support basis to include teaching and research. The funding model needs to reflect this. Improvements must not, however, be made by shifting funding from other areas of a sector that is currently seriously under-funded.

### **Problem of basing support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on EFTSUs.**

Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should not be part of the general EFTSU basis of the funding of universities. That financial approach has undermined important sections of the universities because it has been market-driven. The humanities, including languages, have been devalued, with a consequent diminution in western cultures generally, as in Australia, to understand the complexities of other cultures at the same time as they claim entitlement to make major decisions affecting human beings who live by those cultures. The undermining of the humanities, in secondary as well as tertiary and higher education, has been a contributing factor to the impatience of non-Aboriginal students with the historical evidence of that denial of cultural understanding. We are told, for example, that in a number of courses in law, '*they* (i.e. non-Aboriginal staff and students) don't want to know' (i.e. about the different concepts prevailing in Aboriginal culture).

EFTSU funding is also inappropriate because it simply cannot assure the level of special support that Indigenous students need now and for some time into the future, given that general access to government-funded formal western education dates from a mere thirty-eight years ago.

### **Guaranteeing of funding long-term**

Given the depth of cultural deprivation, poverty and ill-health, access to higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be guaranteed through an allocation of, perhaps, two percent of the Future Fund, to ensure that the disadvantage of the past does not continue into the future. As part of the process, the following steps need to be taken:

### **Long term support for Schools of Education**

Given that ongoing commitment exists in the States and Territories to the provision of educational options – not all ‘mainstream’ and allowing for flexibility of approaches – there should be room for options that increase the opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to make up the leeway in their educational experience..

This will demand support by the Commonwealth government for Aboriginal teachers at every level of schooling and education. It will demand guaranteed funding for Schools of Education. It will demand real evidence of commitment by the States and Territories to the provision of Aboriginal teachers, not just the provision of Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs). While they are needed to assist Aboriginal children in schools from early childhood, through junior primary, to primary and secondary levels up to and including the Foundation Studies programmes, that is not enough. It will demand a multi-disciplinary approach that ensures potential teachers understand matters related to health and cultural imperatives.

### **Problem of a focus on Aboriginal Educational Workers**

While a focus on AEWs may help Aboriginal people to come to terms with demands in higher education courses, this is no substitute for the encouragement of Aboriginal men and women to join the teaching profession. They need to be seen as the equals of their non-Aboriginal colleagues, not just as subordinates with limited roles in professional development, curricula development, the development of cultural awareness among non-Aboriginal members of the teaching profession and engagement with students. We do not mean to denigrate the work of AEWs but the position of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders will always be subordinate if that is what they remain.

### **ATSI Foundation courses**

All universities with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander enrolments should have in place ATSI Foundation Studies programmes to assist students to come to terms with the demands, written and other, of Australian universities. Given the concerns with the approach to the teaching of English at pre-tertiary levels, it is vital that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not presented with an additional hurdle by having to face the demands of higher education with limited preparation.

### **Views on HECS – views on scholarships**

Those who attended the Australian Women Uniting conference (Adelaide, May 2008), organised by Dr Anne Pattel-Gray and Wendy Koolmatrie, two Aboriginal members of the Australian Aboriginal Advancement League-SA Inc, called for the abolition of HECS for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on the grounds that many Aboriginal students do not enter for scholarships which are based on the competitive approach of western education as their approach is more collaborative than competitive; they are also least likely to have the funds and family circumstances that will support them as they move through their courses. The AVCC 2007 survey of student finances identified Indigenous students as the most likely to be in financial difficulties, especially severe in the case of those who had managed nonetheless to reach postgraduate level. Yet it is exactly the movement of indigenous students into postgraduate studies that needs to be encouraged if the aim of having fully-qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners in field such as education, health services and law is to be fulfilled. They are needed both to provide culturally-informed

service in these areas, and to act as role models to encourage increased expectations of participation in higher education in Aboriginal communities.

Given the identification by the AVCC of the extreme financial difficulty faced by Indigenous postgraduates, especially those involved in course work or part time study, there is a strong case for scholarships that will provide adequate stipends to allow full-time study to be undertaken.

As an example of the need to consider approaches to supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students of individual universities, AFUW-SA provides these examples: one concerning the process at the University of Adelaide re freedom from fees, the other an example of the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across discipline and faculties.

At the University of Adelaide, some Aboriginal students do not pay fees if they are doing the University of Adelaide's Foundation Studies programme, nor do they pay for the one mainstream university subject that they do as part of the general study skills programme.

Rebecca Richards, recipient of an AFUW-SA Padnendadlu bursary, advocates that such a programme should be continued to get Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students engaged in university studies. She would argue that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates are in high demand and, if more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be brought through the first couple of years and enabled to complete their degrees, then paying HECS back should not be such a pressing issue. She sees means-tested financial support as a useful way of enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to complete their degrees.

Rebecca Richards also provided, as an example of a more advanced approach to engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across disciplines and faculties, the work undertaken by the University of South Australia since its establishment.

Rebecca Richards, undertaking a leadership role among her community, agrees with the contention of the Australian Federation of University Women that more flexible time-frames for the completion of degrees are required. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, like single mothers and mature-aged women, are often forced to give up their courses when family demands interfere. The intransigence of the previous government about deadlines for completion of degrees worked to undermine the engagement in higher education of those designated from lower socio-economic situations.

For Aboriginal students, these problems are compounded by the need to attend frequent family funerals and fulfil the cultural commitments of the family. Financial barriers, such as the cost of housing or renting and living expenses, given that their families are unlikely to be able to fund them, must be taken into account. Support could be means-tested to ensure that Aboriginal students in the most disadvantaged situations, either in remote areas or rural areas, as well as in difficult situations in metropolitan areas are not denied access to the opportunities their talent and interest demand.

To emphasize the fact that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are indeed capable of succeeding in higher education, Universities should celebrate the graduation of Aboriginal students. At Flinders University, where John Moriarty was the first Aboriginal graduate, his role as an entrepreneur has been acknowledged. Universities need to do much more publicly to counter the negative publicity of mainstream media's highlighting of Aboriginal despair and dysfunctionality.

## **Acknowledgement of prior learning**

There should be academic acknowledgement of prior learning. The previous government undermined the provision of Entry Level Foundation programmes which had been part of Aboriginal Colleges. When TAFEs became absolutely EFTSU based, that programme was discontinued at Tauondi because it did not have what was considered a ‘critical mass’ of students. So students from TAFEs, seeking entry to university courses should be able to be part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation courses to demonstrate and enhance their capacity to undertake university courses. There has also been a tendency to value postgraduate degrees by research as more valuable than those that encompass course work as well as research. In the education, health (for example audiology, public health and midwifery), welfare and social work areas students undertaking these courses may have been handicapped by the refusal to recognise the need for financial support to complete these courses. That needs to change. These areas, highly relevant to *Aboriginal communities, are ones where coursework degrees may be the best preparation for work in the community and should be valued accordingly—but even so, lack of financial support may mean that they are not completed. The AVCC survey identifies course-work postgraduate students as the worst off of all groups.*

## **9 Re how structured, resourced and monitored.**

The current government insists on its commitment to Reconciliation. Providing access to education is a very positive step towards that future and the provision of adequate funds through a quarantined percentage of the Future Fund will provide the financial security that is essential to its achievement.

Funds allocated for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be sacrosanct. It has been possible for the administration of a university to take away funds allocated to an Aboriginal Unit within the university to meet the needs of another part of the university. That should no longer be possible. If allocated funds cannot be used in a given year, they should be allowed to accumulate to support future students or to train teachers/lecturers or run appropriate professional programmes for colleagues.

The administrators of the Aboriginal sections within a university should be accountable in that same way that all other faculties are. However they should not be subject to sudden loss of income because a Vice Chancellor and Council might suddenly decide to use money budgeted to it for another need.

They should have clearly set parameters about how the money allocated is to be used. However, there must be room to deal with emergencies. For example, while a university might have allocated five places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in medicine, it is often the case that not all places are taken up. The money connected with their education should be invested so that future Aboriginal students in medicine have access to it. It should not be removed because it has not been used in that financial year. There probably should be aspects of the ATSI Foundation courses that help students to deal with the language demands of their different disciplines. The provision of staff for such Foundation courses, if there are not sufficient Aboriginal staff, should include culturally competent non-Aboriginal people who understand the demands of higher education at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Continuing with the example of students in medicine, where Medicine is a post-graduate course, such Foundation – Medicine based support should be available.

Universities will develop different structures according to the needs of their areas. One size will not fit all.

### **An allied matter – universities as custodians of knowledge.**

We know how everyone felt when the manuscripts of the library of Sarajevo went up in flames. So much knowledge of the past was being lost

In South Australia, and the situation may exist in other States and Territories, political imperatives as well as cuts in funding, because of the EFTSU basis of funding, may have undermined Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander archival resources. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders under a multicultural heading by the previous Commonwealth government worked to remove their specific significance as the First Nations of Australia as the acronyms for this composite Ministry changed from DIMIA to DIMA to DIC, gradually obliterating the specific naming of Aborigines.

In South Australia, the Aboriginal curriculum unit at Enfield, which was so influential in the 1970s and was providing curriculum material in use around Australia, was disbanded in the 1990s. It is uncertain whether students in Schools of Education can access these resources, or indeed whether the Schools of Education continue to be aware of their existence.

Recently, the Aboriginal Community College, Tauondi, closed its library. Its technically-educated librarian was made redundant. While that library may not have been used as well as it might have been, it is a repository of important Aboriginal material.

At a Conference at Flinders University, in July, an Aboriginal leader, Jo Wilmott of Relationships Australia, pointed out to the Network of Women Students of Australia that non-Aboriginal people had failed to recognise that they had destroyed the universities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait people. They had done this by the destruction of their land and denigration of their attachment to it, dismissal of the significance of Aboriginal ways of teaching, devaluing their stories and approaches to environment and health. She drew a comparison between these actions and the burning of the books by the Nazis.

In the Review of Higher Education so much emphasis is placed ultimately on economics in terms of productivity. These limited examples provide a microcosm of what is needed if the Australian universities are to fulfil their commitment to all Australians. They are at the heart of our knowledge, our research and our teaching. They are institutions of learning, so research and teaching are important and complementary, for even the most advanced research unit needs to be connected through teaching with its community. If we are to become a community where intellect and emotions are balanced, if we are to move through knowledge to wisdom, we must reassess our values.

We ask that the Review of Higher Education request, in addition to the practical avenues of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students suggested here and in the main Submission to the Review of Higher Education, that every effort be made to provide funds to ensure that Aboriginal archival material is not lost and that it is available to all. It may need to be digitised. Aboriginal people, the Elders and all, should be helped, if they so desire, to record their stories orally in the different State and Territorial Libraries so that the young people do not lose more of their history. Oral history is an integral part of Aboriginal culture. We need to value it and ensure that the voices of those members of Australia's First Nations who have lived through these times are not lost.



## **An Indigenous Workforce Strategy for Every University**

AFUW believes that the success of any initiative for Indigenous Higher Education requires an increase not only in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but also in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics and general staff. This requires a new, and newly-funded Indigenous Workforce Strategy. All universities do currently have Indigenous Employment Strategies, but these are not making much difference to the Indigenous employment profile within universities, largely because their operation depends on university administration and relevant Faculties/ Schools making available funds from their existing, considerably stretched, budgets for the employment of Indigenous staff. To return to our first argument, serious funding is needed if progress in Indigenous participation in Higher education is to be achieved, but there is little room in existing university budgets to provide this without damaging other programmes.