

arrangements. It has often been argued, following this line of reasoning, that funding current arrangements in Indigenous affairs only amount to community self-management of individual programs, rather than self-determination.

The current funding arrangements provide little encouragement to Indigenous economic development, since the resourcing of Indigenous organisations does not increase in line with increases in economic activity in their local area (with the exception of the funding under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*). Without such a linkage, the idea of development gets reduced to one of community development, devoid of any economic dimension. Service delivery in itself brings few economic benefits.

### CONCLUSION

Commonwealth policy towards Indigenous people since the late 1960s has focussed on the delivery of what are essentially mainstream services to Indigenous people. In large part the Commonwealth has assumed this role due to the reluctance of State, Territory and local governments to assume their responsibilities. However, Commonwealth policy, and its spending programs, have rarely been underpinned by a rights agenda. 'Practical reconciliation', as espoused by the current government, represents more of the same.

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# Indigenous Australian Participation in Higher Education

## The Realities of Practical Reconciliation

WENDY BRABHAM AND JOHN HENRY  
WITH ESME BAMBLETT AND JENNIFER BATES

Indigenous Australian engagement with the Australian university system has changed dramatically with the implementation of the Howard Government's stated policy of 'mainstreaming'. This policy shift was a response to what Bunda and McConville (2002) have accurately described as the denigration of established and successful Indigenous-specific support programs by extremist political forces as 'discriminatory'. We must not underestimate the strength of this backlash, which constitutes a rejection of

the advances made by successive Commonwealth Governments into Indigenous affairs since the 1967 referendum. From the early 1970s through to the mid-1990s the Commonwealth progressively changed the legislative and policy environment directly impacting on Indigenous communities. These developments reached a peak with the introduction in 1994 of the Native Title Act in response to the High Court Mabo decision in 1992. While the debates over Mabo resulted in laws that were negotiated into existence

by a government prepared to acknowledge the existence of Indigenous Australian cultural, spiritual and proprietary rights, these same debates exposed the depth of the opposition to Indigenous specific laws and policies from the conservative forces in Australia (Manne 2001).

It was no accident that the first public pronouncement by John Howard on becoming Prime Minister in 1996 was an attack on ATSIC – an attack he carried out with the newly-sworn-in Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Herron, by his side. The pent-up opposition to the positive discrimination policies of the past Commonwealth Governments – policies which had opened up access for Aboriginal Australians to new areas of employment and education – was about to be given full effect on the Treasury benches of the Federal Parliament. Howard and his ministers distanced themselves from the more unsavoury expressions of the ‘mainstreaming’ agenda, which relied upon a cynical and simplistic argument against ‘discrimination’ on the grounds of racial and ethnic origins. Yet they also flowed with the tide, allowing the rhetoric of racism to run unchallenged. Australians were now being informed by speeches in Canberra that Indigenous Australians ‘were on a gravy train of government handouts devised by do-gooders in the “Aboriginal Industry”, and ordinary Australians were missing out’ (Bunda and McConville 2002, p. 13). The PM tacitly supported this view by observing that the pendulum had swung too far in the direction of acceding to the demands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and that there was a need for ‘correction’.

Caught in the firing-line in this new assault were the programs for supporting and promoting Indigenous Australian engagement with the country’s formal education systems. Principal amongst these was ABSTUDY. This program was unashamedly a comprehensive scheme of positive discrimination towards Indigenous Australians and had slowly developed as such through the 1970s to the mid-1990s. ABSTUDY was an example of a policy that evolved over time to become ‘finely tuned to differences in student circumstances. The ABSTUDY student classifications (had) been developed over time to accommodate the cultural circumstances of Indigenous families and individuals. Therefore the ABSTUDY classifications (were) more inclusive of the range of differences relevant to student assistance within the Indigenous student population’ (Brabham and Henry 1999, p. 3).

Under the new political regime of mainstreaming, ABSTUDY was progressively re-aligned by the Commonwealth in 1998 and 2000. The Higher Education components of ABSTUDY were shoe-horned into two new mainstream support programs introduced by the Howard Government – Youth Allowance and NewStart. The under 21 years of age aspects of ABSTUDY were now aligned

with the provisions of the Youth Allowance scheme and the mature age student provisions of ABSTUDY were redefined to match the Government’s newly introduced scheme of support for the mature aged long term unemployed – NewStart.

ATSIC commissioned a study in 1999 to attempt to predict the effects of the mainstreaming trend on ABSTUDY. The consultants determined that these changes would have the most negative impact on the levels of financial support for mature age Indigenous TAFE and university students (Brabham and Henry 1999). The ATSIC report concluded that ‘the message coming from this research is that the majority of the ABSTUDY students in tertiary studies will be disadvantaged (by the proposed changes to ABSTUDY). These are the mature age students who make up almost 80% of the TAFE and university Indigenous student population in Australia. The majority of these mature age students are women, who in turn make up almost half of the total TAFE and university ABSTUDY population’ (Brabham and Henry 1999, p. 1).

These predictions were supported by an Inquiry set up by the Commonwealth Grants Commission (CGC) in 2000-2001 to investigate the distribution of Commonwealth funding for programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The draft report of this Inquiry (2000) noted that ‘the concerns expressed to us tend to bear out (the ATSIC commissioned study’s) conclusions’ (CGC 2000, p. 139).

The evidence is now quite stark. Despite the Howard Government’s claim that higher education enrolments are ‘trending steadily upwards’ (Behind The Scenes 2000, Liberal Party Website), there has been a reversal in the engagement of Indigenous Australians with the Higher Education sector over the period of the Howard Government’s intervention into the policies of educational support. The resultant support programs have been modified in the direction of equalising the benefits available to Indigenous students using the support programs for non-Indigenous students as the benchmark. This change in policy and program availability has occurred at the same time that the Prime Minister has been espousing a policy position of ‘practical reconciliation’ under which the lower than average socio-economic indicators for Indigenous Australian communities are to be addressed through programs that specifically target the education, housing, health and employment of Indigenous peoples. According to the Howard Government, ‘true reconciliation is...best found within practical means to improve the well-being and happiness of indigenous Australians and raising standards to levels enjoyed and expected by all of us’ (Menzies Lecture Series, pp. 3-4). Rather than supporting established programs with a record of expanding the participation of

Indigenous Australians in the sector of adult education, and delivering Indigenous communities highly skilled professionals sourced from amongst their own ranks, the Howard Government has intervened without any careful analysis, interest or understanding of the full impact of its policies of 'Aboriginal re-alignment'.

The evidence of the reversal in Indigenous engagement in tertiary (TAFE and university) education is provided by the Commonwealth's own statistics. Drawing on an analysis of DETYA figures available in the unpublished ATSIC Report *Abstudy 2000 Report Dissemination and Alternative Support for Mature Age Indigenous Students, Final Report*, Brabham, Henry and Saunders (2000) extrapolated from the growth trends as shown by the actual Indigenous student enrolments in University courses from 1987 to 1999. Taking a linear growth rate based on the figures for the full 1987 - 1999 set of enrolment figures and extrapolating out to the year 2005, the authors predicted that the "expected Indigenous student overall enrolment should be approximately 11,750" by 2005 (Brabham, Henry and Saunders, 2000, p. 25). The researchers repeated this growth extrapolation based on a division of the 1987 - 1999 set of data into two periods: 1987 - 1995 under the Hawke/Keating Governments, and 1996 - 1999 under the Howard Government. The growth trend lines for these two subsets of enrolment data were markedly different, and the extrapolations to predicted 2005 enrolments vary accordingly. Extrapolating from the 1987-1995 figures, the anticipated total enrolment in 2005 was in the order of 13,000 Indigenous students. Using the same method with the figures from 1996-9 produces a predicted 10,500 students in 2005. Brabham, Henry and Saunders concluded that

The extrapolated change in the level of Indigenous participation in Higher Education in 2005 has dropped even more dramatically when the potential for Indigenous participation as predictive from the enrolment figures for the past four years is compared to that which could have been predicted from the growth trend that was in place under the Government ABSTUDY policies in the first half of the 1990s. When this comparison is made, the drop in potential enrolments by the year 2005 is in the order of 20% or 2500 students (Brabham, Henry and Saunders 2000, p. 26).

We now have Indigenous higher education participation figures for the years 2000 and 2001. When these figures are factored into the calculations done by Brabham, Henry and Saunders in 2000, the predicted enrolment in 2005 slumps to a mere 55% of what was predicted on the basis of the 1987 - 1995 ABSTUDY figures.

Bunda and McConville (2002) have discovered a decline in the Indigenous participation in both TAFE and univer-

sity sectors. The much-vaunted growth in Indigenous participation in the vocational education and training (VET) sector (cited by the Commonwealth Government as the explanation for the decline in Indigenous enrolments in the higher education sector) has been found to be mythical. Using DEST figures for Indigenous VET participation, they show there has been a 12.57% decline in the growth rate from 1998/1999 to 1999/2000 and that the actual enrolments show a similar downwards trend to that for higher education. Bunda and McConville conclude from their analysis of the DEST figures on Indigenous enrolments in University courses that 'ten years of growth in participation of Indigenous Australians in higher education have been reversed in the space of two years' (2002, p. 18).

The Government now acknowledges this situation, though in language aimed at softening the real picture. According to the DETYA Annual Report 2000-01, 'The number of Indigenous students increased significantly between 1991 and 1999, but fell slightly between 1999 and 2000. The Commonwealth is currently investigating the reasons for this development' (p. 3). We have shown that although there was a continued increase in Indigenous participation up to 1999, this trend was slowing from 1997 before going into reverse after 1999.

The quantitative performance indicators for Indigenous participation in Higher Education reported by DEST for the period 1996 - 2001 provide a framework for more detailed analysis and understanding of what is happening to Indigenous higher education students under the mainstreamed student support provisions of ABSTUDY, Youth Allowance and NewStart. Two indicators are of particular interest. These are the Success and Retention Performance Indicators.

The DEST Success Performance Indicator defines success in terms of a student progression rate (SPR) - the proportion of units passed within a year compared with the total units undertaken. The Success Indicator is the ratio of the SPR for Indigenous higher education students to the SPR for all other students. Success then is a comparative measure based on the units passed out of the total in which the cohort (Indigenous or all other students) is enrolled. In 1997, the year before the Howard Government made its first challenge to the positive discrimination nature of ABSTUDY, the national Success Indicator was 0.78. In 2001 it was 0.75 - that is, the SPR for Indigenous higher education students was 65% while that for non-Indigenous students was 87%. Over this five-year period this performance indicator has fluctuated between 0.79 and 0.74. Improvements for Indigenous students studying at universities in terms of units passed seem to have stalled over this period.

The Retention Performance Indicator is calculated by DEST from the number of Indigenous students who re-enrol at a university in a given year as a proportion of the students who were enrolled in the previous year, less those who have completed their course. The Retention Performance Indicator shows the ratio of Indigenous students' retention to the retention of all other domestic students. The national Retention Indicator was 0.78 in 1997. In 2001 this performance indicator was 0.76 – based on an Indigenous retention rate of 59% and a non-Indigenous retention rate of 77%. For the intervening years the Retention Indicator has fluctuated between 0.77 and 0.73, once again showing that, according to this performance indicator, improvements for Indigenous students studying in the higher education sector has stagnated since 1997.

What we now have is an impending crisis in Indigenous higher education in this country. The predictions from the research done in 1999 by ATSIC are now unfolding. Worse is to come. As Indigenous Support Funding to universities is directly linked to Indigenous enrolments, the decrease in Indigenous student numbers in universities that we are now experiencing will produce a fall in overall Commonwealth Government funding for Indigenous Higher Education programs. According to Bunda and McConville (2002), DEST projections suggest that the level of Indigenous Support Funding will remain static for the 2002-2004 triennium, on the assumption that the number of Indigenous Australian students enrolling between now and 2004 will not increase. We are predicting that, without direct and constructive intervention by the Government, the DEST 2002-2004 projection of no growth but maintenance of existing numbers is unrealistic. The most probable outcome will be continued decline.

Rather than aspiring to improve Indigenous participation in Higher Education, as was the clear objective of all Commonwealth Governments from the 1970s through to 1995, the policies of the Howard Government now seem to be aimed at maintaining the diminished 2001 Indigenous participation levels as the status quo. But the forces within the system make it unlikely that even this lame position will be held.

The decision by an Indigenous Australian to take the pathway leading to a university degree is still something of an aberration. Although there has been a steady increase in the representation of Indigenous people amongst university students, the overall figures were still very small when they peaked in 1999. In that year there was a grand total of 8,001 Indigenous higher education students. In 2001 the figure had dropped to 7,342. As has already been mentioned, the profile of these Indigenous students is significantly different to that of non-Indigenous undergraduates. There is a much higher representation of mature aged stu-

dents with family responsibilities (ATSIC 1999) amongst the Indigenous student group. There are more women, many of whom are sole parents. The stereotype of the university student, moving directly onto a university course from a successful Year 12 secondary school education (perhaps the one that influenced Commonwealth Government's policy deliberations when they introduced the Youth Allowance scheme in 1998) is by far the minority case amongst the Indigenous higher education cohort.

That portion of the Indigenous community that had become the source of new and continuing enrolments in university courses through the 1980s and 1990s often also had responsibilities, not only for their own well being, but also for the well being of their immediate families, including their children and often their unemployed spouses and other dependent adult relatives. Their mature age, which provided them with the motivation and will to apply for admission to university courses, also provided these potential higher education students with the life experiences that enabled them to satisfy the special admission provisions of the universities. But the downside of this set of circumstances is that, as mature-aged Indigenous people, these potential students were also most likely to have family and cultural responsibilities within a domestic situation framed by all the lower socio-economic factors so familiar to Indigenous Australians.

This is still the situation today. But now the word is out that it is very difficult for mature-aged Indigenous people to survive on the mainstreamed ABSTUDY student support provisions. Whereas in the recent past, the message going back to Indigenous family circles and to their communities was, in the main, a positive one – 'Look: I can do it, so can you' – now the message is much more circumspect. Indigenous students now report on the struggle to make ends meet on the support provisions now available. They report that they are being discriminated against through the administration of ABSTUDY at the local bureaucratic level, being uncertain about the level of their entitlements from week to week, of being directly put under pressure as ABSTUDY recipients not yet 'transferred' to Youth Allowance or NewStart.

For a mature age Indigenous student to make the move from a managed-though-borderline family financial circumstance to the uncertainty of university study is now an undertaking of considerable courage. Most Indigenous students are 'pioneering students' in the sense that they are the first in their families to go to university. The majority have not been adequately prepared for higher education academic study via their secondary school educational experience. Now add these considerable barriers to potential success of family, cultural and community responsibilities. The vision of the individualistic university student



'doing their own thing' has to be tempered for many Indigenous higher education students with the realisation that they must be a student while continuing to be a significant figure in their own family. Family business continues unabated.

This is the context the Howard Government blundered into from 1996 onwards. Encouraged by backbenchers responding to popular antipathy towards Indigenous advancement through Indigenous-specific support programs, particularly in rural electorates, the Government rushed into changes to ABSTUDY which have become the 'straw that broke the camel's back', in the sense that they have raised the level of risk for mature age Indigenous students embarking on a university education to unacceptable levels. The message is now being clearly heard in Aboriginal communities – 'we really can't juggle study and families on the current levels of ABSTUDY financial support'.

Unfortunately, we do not anticipate that the shortfall in Indigenous university student numbers will be filled by young Aboriginal students supported by Youth Allowance. Although more Indigenous students are completing secondary school education, the transition of these young people into the higher education sector in large numbers has yet to eventuate.

This is the sorry state of Indigenous Higher Education. The current Indigenous support policies informed by the logic of practical reconciliation are really a governmental sleight of hand. There is, in reality, no distinctive Indigenous-specific study support program of any vigour left. The 2001 Social Justice Report put the general point as follows:

Practical reconciliation seeks to address Indigenous people on a restrictive basis of equality. Ultimately it is assimilationist in approach, aiming for formal equality with only limited recognition of cultural difference. It seeks to maintain rather than transform the relationship of Indigenous people to the mainstream society (2001, p. 205).

We are now seeing the consequences of this policy approach to Indigenous affairs in the realm of higher education being played out before our eyes. The consequences for Indigenous Australian communities will unfortunately take years to overcome. And, as we are all members of the one nation-state, so the cause of authentic reconciliation will be further compromised into the future.

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