Ms Karen Ellingford  
Executive Officer  
Education and Training Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE 3002  
Via email: etc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Ellingford,

Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education

In response to an invitation from the Education and Training Committee, Parliament of Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) have prepared a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education.

The following are VAEAI’s responses to issues on which the Inquiry requested input.

- The advantages and disadvantages of university education and alternative post school pathways for Indigenous people, their families and communities in different metropolitan, regional, rural and isolated areas.

- any barriers to university participation for Indigenous people from different areas

- strategies to help Indigenous people from different areas to enrol in and complete university studies.

Barriers to Higher Education

In addressing barriers to higher education VAEAI has sustained a focus on Koorie students who are early leavers. VAEAI has sought to examine the reasons why a proportion of the Koorie student population have disengaged from the education system, rather than making the transition from secondary to VET and/or university. During 2007 and 2008 VAEAI has been targeting these disengaged students in a series of Youth Forums to gather qualitative data.

Low levels of transgenerational wealth is an issue clearly impacting on disengaged Koorie students. Family and community responsibilities often must come before the pursuit of TAFE or university qualifications. A concerning trend that became apparent during these processes was the number of students who report that they will do ‘anything’ as a career option ‘as long as it was a full time job with money’. This indicates a strong drive to escape the situation that these young people find themselves in.
The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s 2007 “On Track” Survey examined reasons why non-completing Koorie secondary students exited school early. 85.0 per cent of disengaged Koorie students surveyed stated that “I wanted to earn money”. 60.5 per cent would have stayed in school “if there had been good vocational or VET programs”. 69 per cent would have stayed in school “if there had been a wider range of subjects”.

Therefore whilst many Koorie students are being informed about the wide range of VET programs available and going on to access them there is still a proportion who are receiving inadequate careers counselling and advice.

Creating Pathways into Higher Education

An important means to assist Koorie students to enrol in Higher Education is to provide the necessary support along the educational pathway with an emphasis on vocational outcomes. In order to create a sense of career focus in secondary education Koorie students require more individualised career counselling and personalised education plans. In VAEAI’s Youth Forums Koorie students frequently stated that the time available to discuss careers was very limited, and they would prefer a one-on-one discussion. Amongst Koorie students surveyed those who provided vague responses about their aspirations most commonly also stated that they would like a broader variety of subjects to widen their experience and options.

Financial assistance is another crucial support which is necessary for Koorie students contemplating a long term commitment to study. Scholarships and housing assistance are the fundamental supports that are required. Funding for tuition is also essential for addressing the disparity in educational outcomes between Koorie and non-Koorie students. From July 2007, Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) Vocational and Technical Education and (VTE) Tuition is available to assist students who are undertaking VTE courses leading to the attainment of a Certificate III and above. VAEAI believes that this tuition should also be available to students who undertaking courses towards Certificates I and II.

Where there is an identified need among Koorie students for skill building in literacy and numeracy it is imperative that there is focused support available. Ideally these skills should be gained in the school setting, however VET courses often provide a second chance option for those students who have not attained the requisite skill set in the school classroom. VAEAI has provided advice to TAFEs on the development of foundation courses that facilitate the transition of Koorie students to higher level qualifications.

For example, the Learning Pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Cert I, II and III courses were designed to provide accredited training for Koorie students who want to develop their skills in order to access further education, training or employment.
In 2007 these courses were reaccredited, and VAEAI chaired the Project Steering Committee.

Enrolment patterns over the past three years show there is a continuing demand for the courses. Certificate I enrolments have steadily increased.

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The courses have also demonstrated successful outcomes. Employment of graduates has occurred across a number of areas, including in Indigenous community organisations such as the Health and Legal services, Australia Post, Healthcare, Childcare, Council and Government departments.

The Project Steering Committee were mindful that the courses had been successful and sought to build on this by making them more accessible, as in their current structure there were too many restrictions on an entry point with a number of units requiring prerequisites.

These restrictions were resulting in fewer enrolments at Certificate II and III, so changes were required to promote transition through to those higher levels and from there to either employment or further study. The intended outcomes of the courses were re-evaluated to sharpen their end focus as the PSC believed that they should be more vocationally driven with more defined links to industry.

**Articulation from VET to HE**

Across Victoria, approximately a fifth of Koorie people are undertaking Vocational Education and Training. In 2006 there were 4,798 enrolments in VET. This represents 19.13% of the Victorian Koorie population as measured by the ABS census. Clearly VET is a popular choice for Koorie people, and they are participating in high numbers. VAEAI is currently looking at strategies to encourage articulation from VET to HE. Most articulation agreements are arranged individually between interested parties in the VET and HE sectors. Articulation should be considered with the program planning for VET courses, with Recognition of Prior Learning easing the financial and regulatory burden of transition from VET to Higher Education.

To promote retention of Koorie students in Higher Education it is also crucial that courses have clearly defined links to employment. VAEAI’s Wurreker Strategy has made significant progress in building participation and completion rates for Koorie students. The Wurreker strategy is applied within the VET sector, however VAEAI believes that there is the potential to develop like or complementary strategies for Higher Education.
Since being launched in 2000, Wurreker has continued to gain recognition and traction as an effective means of building strong links between Koorie communities and training providers to ensure the availability of appropriate, culturally sensitive and targeted training.

Completions have increased markedly since the launch of the strategy. There has been a difference of 178 completions from 1998 to 2005, and an increase from 431 in 2005 to 607 in 2007 (136 completions). This is a significant improvement, indicating that the Wurreker Strategy is working.

In many regions, the Wurreker Strategy increasingly plays a key role in facilitating partnerships with communities and employers to create local, Koorie-specific employment initiatives, such as apprenticeships and pre-employment programs.

**Flexibility in Approaches to Delivery of Higher Education Courses**

In order to encourage Koorie students to enrol in and complete Higher Education courses a flexible approach to delivery is required. Family and community responsibilities must be taken into account. The Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University provide programs that are structured around:

- Off-campus community-based delivery
- On-campus intensive study blocks, and
- Local tutors at regional study centres.

This approach to course delivery promotes access and equity for Indigenous Australian students. Students from all areas; rural, remote and metropolitan, and across all age ranges, particularly mature age, are able to undertake studies without compromising their family and community obligations. VAEAI sits on the board of Deakin University, ensuring Koorie community participation in program planning.

The model employed by IKE is uncommon for Australian universities, and should be emulated. A flexible approach to learning, with off campus based community delivery, must be accompanied by access to the requisite technological resources, as much of the delivery is online.
Koorie Support Units in TAFE and Universities

TAFE Koorie Units are playing a pivotal role in supporting Koorie students by providing advice about careers pathways that is personalised to account for each student's skills and aspirations. All Victorian Universities also have in place support centres for Koorie students. One example is the Centre for Indigenous Studies (CIE) at the University of Melbourne which provides comprehensive support for Koorie students assisting with course selection, tutorials, accommodation, study, personal support, community networking, cross-cultural development and career counselling.

The work that Koorie Support Units are doing in TAFEs and Universities to provide a culturally welcoming environment for students is essential to promoting enrolment and retention.

Thankyou for consideration of this submission.