

Indigenous students

Everyone says Indigenous students need flexibility. Indigenous students want the bar raised. They want structure, good support systems, high-level materials, excellent teachers and a partnership with the community. You put that in place, and the successes are there.¹¹⁵³

Indigenous Australians are the group most under-represented in higher education. The lower participation of Indigenous people in higher education is due in part to factors that have already been discussed in this report. Indigenous Australians make up less than one per cent of the total Victorian population.¹¹⁵⁴ However, like Indigenous people across Australia, Indigenous Victorians are more likely to come from a low socioeconomic status background, have low achievement at school, and many live in non-metropolitan areas. In addition, the Committee heard that specific cultural needs should be considered by policymakers when developing strategies aimed at raising the level of participation in higher education among Indigenous communities.

The experience of Indigenous students was an important focus for the inquiry, in the context of the Victorian Government's overarching Indigenous policy framework, *Improving the Lives of Indigenous Victorians*. The framework, being implemented by the Victorian Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs, focuses on six areas of action, one of which is to improve year 12 or equivalent completion rates and develop pathways to further education, training and employment.¹¹⁵⁵ The framework is consistent with the six targets set by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) for closing the gaps in outcomes for Indigenous people under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement. As outlined in a recent Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision report, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*, COAG has a range of targets and headline indicators reflecting the importance of education and training. Of most relevance to the inquiry, these include increasing school retention, achievement and year 12 attainment, and improving participation in post-secondary education.¹¹⁵⁶

¹¹⁵³ Ms S. Rice, Director, Centre for Engagement in Vocational Learning, TAFE Division, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 22.

¹¹⁵⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Indigenous Status by Age by Sex,' table, *2006 Census of Population and Housing: Victoria (State)*, Cat. no. 2068.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2007).

¹¹⁵⁵ Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, *Improving the lives of Indigenous Victorians: Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework* (Melbourne: Department for Victorian Communities, 2006), 4.

¹¹⁵⁶ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009* (Canberra: Productivity Commission, 2009).

Context of participation in higher education by Indigenous students

According to the 2006 Australian Census, there are around 33,000 Indigenous people living in Victoria.¹¹⁵⁷ The state has around 30 distinct Indigenous communities, which are based around location, language and cultural groups, and extended familial networks.¹¹⁵⁸ Almost half of all Indigenous Victorians live outside Melbourne.¹¹⁵⁹ While Victoria's broader population is ageing, its Indigenous population is young; more than half of all Indigenous Victorians are aged under 25 and more than a third are aged under 15.¹¹⁶⁰ There are six Local Government Areas with over 600 Indigenous young people aged 0 to 24 years: City of Greater Shepparton; Mildura Rural City; City of Greater Geelong; City of Casey; Shire of East Gippsland; and City of Greater Bendigo.¹¹⁶¹

Statistics show significant gaps between Victorian Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in a variety of social indicators, such as health, crime and employment.¹¹⁶² According to the 2006 Census, the unemployment rate for Indigenous persons (aged 15 to 64) was 13.0 per cent in metropolitan Melbourne and 19.1 per cent in regional Victoria. The corresponding figures for the overall population were 5.4 per cent and 5.7 per cent, respectively.¹¹⁶³ Indigenous Victorians are also over-represented in low-income Victorian households, with most Indigenous Victorian households living on incomes in the lowest and second lowest quintiles.¹¹⁶⁴ In addition, there are significant differences in family structure between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Nearly 40 per cent of Indigenous families are sole parent families, compared with 15 per cent of non-Indigenous families,¹¹⁶⁵ and extended family members are often closely involved in the care of Indigenous children.¹¹⁶⁶

Indigenous Australians are less likely to participate in higher education than their non-Indigenous peers. National and state statistics show significantly lower rates for Indigenous Australians at all stages of participation, including enrolment, retention and completion.¹¹⁶⁷ In part, this arises from lower levels of educational achievement among Indigenous students generally. The highest level of education achieved for many Indigenous Victorians is year 9 or below, and less than a quarter of Indigenous Victorians have completed year 12, compared with almost half of other Victorians.¹¹⁶⁸ Lower average attainment and achievement have prompted a range of government interventions at the

¹¹⁵⁷ Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), *Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report 2007/08* (Melbourne: DPCD, 2009), 7.

¹¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶¹ Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), *Indigenous Data Mapping – Census 2006*, (Melbourne: DPCD, 2009).

¹¹⁶² Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), *Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report 2007/08* (Melbourne: DPCD, 2009), 8–10.

¹¹⁶³ Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), *Indigenous Data Mapping – Census 2006*, (Melbourne: DPCD, 2009).

¹¹⁶⁴ Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), *Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report 2007/08* (Melbourne: DPCD, 2009), 7.

¹¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶⁶ Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria, 'Indigenous Housing Report,' AHBV, <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~ahbv/homelessnessreport/report3.htm> (accessed 3 July 2009).

¹¹⁶⁷ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Selected Higher Education Statistics* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008).

¹¹⁶⁸ Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), *Victorian Government Indigenous Affairs Report 2007/08* (Melbourne: DPCD, 2009), 9.

state and national level to help raise the educational achievement of Indigenous Australians, including raising participation rates of Indigenous students in higher education.

At the same time, the Committee is conscious of the differences within the Indigenous population, and notes that average figures should not be generalised to reflect the Indigenous population as a whole. A recent paper published by the Centre for Independent Studies commented that generalised data relating to the Indigenous community can often underestimate the level of disadvantage experienced by some groups, while failing to recognise the achievements of others.¹¹⁶⁹ The paper suggested that Indigenous data should differentiate between factors such as urban and rural background, parents' employment status and language background, to present a more accurate picture of Indigenous educational achievement.¹¹⁷⁰

The Committee acknowledges that efforts to improve higher education participation rates for Indigenous Victorians must take into account a range of contextual factors. Different approaches will be needed for different communities and individuals in urban, outer urban, regional and rural areas. With these considerations in mind, the Committee examined issues associated with participation in higher education among Indigenous communities.

Indigenous enrolments in higher education

A 2008 report by Universities Australia noted that Indigenous people participate in higher education at less than half the rate they would if parity existed with non-Indigenous people.¹¹⁷¹ While the Indigenous population constitutes around 2.4 per cent of the Australian population, in 2006, Indigenous students comprised only 1.25 per cent of the higher education student population.¹¹⁷² The participation share of Indigenous students has remained at a consistent level over the period 2001 to 2006. Universities Australia noted that this persistent under-representation occurred during a period in which there were at least three factors that might have increased the rate of access: the increase in the Indigenous population overall; the increase in secondary school participation among Indigenous young people; and the higher proportion of young people in the Indigenous population than in the non-Indigenous population.¹¹⁷³

In 2007, there were 9,370 Indigenous students enrolled in Australian universities,¹¹⁷⁴ with just over 1,000 enrolled in Victorian institutions. Deakin University had by far the greatest number of enrolments (443), followed by the University of Melbourne (181), Monash University (117) and La Trobe University (88).

The majority (62.0%) of Indigenous students at Victorian institutions identify their home address as in a metropolitan area, with 30.0 per cent having a home address in a provincial

¹¹⁶⁹ Joe Lane, *Indigenous Participation in University Education* (St Leonards, New South Wales: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2009), 9.

¹¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁷¹ Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 43.

¹¹⁷² Mr T. Greer, Group Manager, Indigenous Education Group, Meeting with representatives of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, 17 June 2008.

¹¹⁷³ Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 44.

¹¹⁷⁴ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Selected Higher Education Statistics* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008).

location, and just over 7.0 per cent in remote and very remote locations.¹¹⁷⁵ With government statistics showing that only around a half of Victoria's Indigenous population live in metropolitan areas, it seems that metropolitan Indigenous people are over-represented in higher education compared to their rural and regional counterparts.

Australia-wide, there has been a substantive change in the enrolment pattern of commencing Indigenous students over the past decade. Historically, Indigenous university entrants tended to enrol under special entry conditions, many in sub-degree courses. As shown in Table 9.1, there was a large increase in Indigenous enrolments in degree and postgraduate courses in Australia over the ten years to 2007, coinciding with a large decrease in Indigenous enrolments in sub-degree courses. In 2007, 76.4 per cent of Indigenous students were enrolled in degree level courses, 16.5 per cent were enrolled in postgraduate programs and 7.0 per cent were enrolled in enabling or other non-award courses.

Table 9.1: Indigenous enrolments in Australian higher education, by award level (1997 to 2007)

Year	Sub-degree	Degree	Postgraduate	Total
1997	1,411	3,863	723	5,997
1998	1,357	4,095	791	6,243
1999	1,419	4,351	765	6,535
2000	1,098	4,500	675	6,273
2001	1,068	4,630	716	6,414
2002	947	5,449	1,029	7,425
2003	986	5,664	1,079	7,729
2004	867	5,780	1,224	7,871
2005	647	5,697	1,158	7,502
2006	573	6,050	1,286	7,909
2007	588	6,408	1,390	8,386

Source: Derived from Australian Government Higher Education Statistics and published in Joe Lane, *Indigenous Participation in University Education* (St Leonards, New South Wales: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2009), 5.

Higher education statistics show that Indigenous students Australia-wide are enrolled predominantly in three key disciplines: Society and Culture (33.7%), Education (21.2%) and Health (16.5%).¹¹⁷⁶ However, Indigenous students have been moving into more specialised and skill-intensive components within disciplines, and therefore into a wider range of occupations.¹¹⁷⁷ For example, 'health' graduates are no longer only nurses but also doctors, podiatrists, physiotherapists, radiologists and pharmacists. Indigenous students are also slowly increasing their numbers in disciplines requiring mathematics and science, notably accounting, natural sciences, architecture and engineering.¹¹⁷⁸

Participation in higher education by Indigenous students is highly gender-biased. In 2007, Indigenous males accounted for only 34.7 per cent of Indigenous higher education students

¹¹⁷⁵ Mr T. Greer, Group Manager, Indigenous Education Group, Meeting with representatives of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, 17 June 2008.

¹¹⁷⁶ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Selected Higher Education Statistics* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008).

¹¹⁷⁷ Joe Lane, *Indigenous Participation in University Education* (St Leonards, New South Wales: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2009), 6.

¹¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 7.

in Victoria (and 33.8% nationally),¹¹⁷⁹ despite constituting nearly half (48.9%) of the total Victorian Indigenous population.¹¹⁸⁰ A recent paper published by the Centre for Independent Studies commented on some of the potential causes of the gender imbalance in higher education participation by Indigenous people Australia-wide:

There are different reasons, however, for the gender imbalance amongst Indigenous university students. Indigenous men are rarely able to follow their fathers into trades or farms or businesses. But Indigenous boys tend to drop out of secondary school earlier and in larger numbers than girls. In welfare-dependent populations, the situation is often even worse, with very few boys completing year 10.

The issue of Indigenous male educational disparities is becoming a critical one. With very poor math skills, Indigenous men tend to shut themselves out of more traditionally male university courses and careers. Careers that are popular with Indigenous female students, such as teaching or nursing, are regarded as female preserves. Because more Indigenous women than men go to university or TAFE, some Indigenous men tend to view these institutions as places for women.¹¹⁸¹

Indigenous students also have a different age profile compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. In 2006, the average age of a commencing Indigenous undergraduate student in Australia was 29 years, compared to 22 years for other students.¹¹⁸² For enabling courses, the average age of commencing Indigenous students was 29 years, and for postgraduate students, the average was 38 years. The corresponding figures for the non-Indigenous population were 27 years and 33 years, respectively.¹¹⁸³

University retention and completion rates among Indigenous students

The 2008 Universities Australia report commented that Indigenous students enrolled in higher education courses throughout Australia have lower apparent retention and completion rates than other students, with first year attrition rates being of particular concern.¹¹⁸⁴ The Review of Australian Higher Education has also reported that Indigenous students pass their subjects at a rate 23 per cent below their non-Indigenous peers.¹¹⁸⁵ In addition, the retention rate for Indigenous students has been between 19 per cent and 26 per cent below the rate for other students during the last six years.¹¹⁸⁶ Universities Australia reports that the nationwide university completion rate for Indigenous students remains well below 50 per cent.¹¹⁸⁷ Victoria needs to boost Indigenous completion rates by two-and-a-half times to reach parity with the wider community.¹¹⁸⁸

¹¹⁷⁹ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Selected Higher Education Statistics* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008).

¹¹⁸⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Indigenous Status by Age by Sex,' table, *2006 Census of Population and Housing: Victoria (State)*, Cat. no. 2068.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2007).

¹¹⁸¹ Joe Lane, *Indigenous Participation in University Education* (St Leonards, New South Wales: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2009), 5.

¹¹⁸² Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2006* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), 109.

¹¹⁸³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸⁴ Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 49.

¹¹⁸⁵ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 32.

¹¹⁸⁶ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2006* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), 110.

¹¹⁸⁷ Universities Australia, *Advancing Equity and Participation in Australian Higher Education: Action to address participation and equity levels in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Canberra: Universities Australia, 2008), 2.

¹¹⁸⁸ Victoria University, 'Co-operation to close the gap in Indigenous higher education,' VU, http://www.vu.edu.au/About_VU/Media_Releases/Co-operation_to_close_the_gap_in_Indigenous_higher_education/index_dL_94870.aspx (accessed 27 May 2009).

Nonetheless, the number of Indigenous graduates Australia-wide is increasing. There has been a 29.3 per cent increase in the total number of course completions by Indigenous students, and a 43.6 per cent increase in bachelor degree completions since 2001.¹¹⁸⁹

Importantly, Indigenous graduates have higher take-up rates into full-time employment than non-Indigenous graduates (85.6% compared to 82.4%, respectively) and the mean starting salary for Indigenous graduates is higher (\$42,575 per annum compared to \$40,636 for non-Indigenous graduates).¹¹⁹⁰ The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council suggests that these outcomes may be partially explained by the mature age of many Indigenous students, the fact that many are in employment while studying, and the extent to which well qualified Indigenous people are sought after for leadership roles.¹¹⁹¹

National policy context

The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council plays an important role in higher education policy for Indigenous people. The Council was established by the Australian Government in 2005 to provide policy advice to the Minister for Education, Science and Training on improving outcomes in higher education for Indigenous students and staff. The vision of the council is for a higher education system in which Indigenous Australians share equally in the life and career opportunities that a university education can provide.¹¹⁹²

In moving towards this vision, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council identifies seven priority areas:

1. Encourage universities to work with schools and TAFE colleges and other registered training organisations to build pathways and raise the levels of aspiration and confidence of Indigenous students.
2. Develop a concerted strategy to improve the level of Indigenous undergraduate enrolment.
3. Improve the level of Indigenous postgraduate enrolment, enhance Indigenous research and increase the number of Indigenous researchers.
4. Improve the rates of success, retention and completion for Indigenous students.
5. Enhance the prominence and status of Indigenous culture, knowledge and studies on campus.
6. Increase the number of Indigenous people working in Australian universities.
7. Improve the participation of Indigenous people in university governance and management.¹¹⁹³

The above priorities are consistent with issues and needs identified in evidence to this inquiry.

¹¹⁸⁹ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2006* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), 110.

¹¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹¹ Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, *Improving Indigenous Outcomes and Enhancing Indigenous Culture and Knowledge in Australian Higher Education*, report to the Minister for Education, Science and Training (Canberra: Australian Government, 2006), 21.

¹¹⁹² *ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁹³ *ibid.*, 3.

The Committee is aware that the Australian Government supports participation in higher education by Indigenous Australians through a range of initiatives. These include programs which aim to support Indigenous higher education students through to degree completion. The Indigenous Support Program provides performance-based funding to higher education institutions for Indigenous services, while students can access direct academic support through the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme.

The Australian Government also offers a number of scholarships that support Indigenous students to participate in higher education, including scholarships offered through the Commonwealth Scholarships Program. The Indigenous Youth Leadership Program also provides scholarships for Indigenous students to attend high-performing schools and universities, while the Indigenous Youth Mobility Program supports Indigenous students from remote areas to relocate for participation in education or training. The Australian Government also supports higher education institutions to meet the costs of mixed-mode delivery through Away from Base funding, and offers Indigenous Staff Scholarships.

The Committee recognises current efforts aimed at improving participation in higher education among Indigenous communities. Many of the themes identified in the national policy context were reiterated in evidence to the inquiry. The Committee supports the recommendation of the Review of Australian Higher Education that the Australian Government, in consultation with the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, regularly review the effectiveness of measures to improve higher education access and outcomes for Indigenous people.¹¹⁹⁴

The Toorong Marnong Accord

The Committee is also pleased to note recent moves in the Victorian higher education sector to improve participation rates for Indigenous students. The Toorong Marnong Accord (meaning 'joined hands' in the Woiwurrung language of the Wurundjeri people) was signed in December 2008 by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association and the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.¹¹⁹⁵ It commits Victoria's nine universities to a range of collaborative initiatives to boost Indigenous participation in higher education, including joint recruitment and outreach, statewide staff and student networks, and a range of annual awards and conferences.

In a recent article, a spokesperson for the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee announced that the Toorong Marnong Accord signalled a new era of institutional collaboration in meeting the needs of Indigenous students:

Rather than competing for students, the Victorian universities are now working cooperatively to ensure that as many Aboriginal people as possible have the opportunity to study at university ... The accord acknowledges that Indigenous people are the traditional owners of the land upon which our universities are built, that they have a rich history of education, and that we value the integrity and wisdom of our Koorie people. This is a new collective approach that encourages Aboriginal people to come to our universities as students, as members of staff and as representatives of their community.¹¹⁹⁶

¹¹⁹⁴ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), xxiii.

¹¹⁹⁵ Victoria University, 'Co-operation to close the gap in Indigenous higher education,' VU, http://www.vu.edu.au/About_VU/Media_Releases/Co-operation_to_close_the_gap_in_Indigenous_higher_education/index_d_94870.aspx (accessed 27 May 2009).

¹¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*

The Committee commends the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee on the development of this significant new approach, which provides a genuine opportunity for Victoria to lead the way in collaborative approaches to Indigenous participation in higher education.

School factors influencing Indigenous participation in higher education

The Committee heard that along with other students, a number of factors affect the ability of Indigenous students to participate in higher education long before the threshold of enrolment has been reached. Lower school participation and achievement was identified as a significant barrier for Indigenous students. The high number of Indigenous students undertaking vocational rather than academic studies in years 11 and 12 was also identified as a potential issue of concern.

School retention, engagement and achievement

In the last decade, the population of Koorie people aged between 5 and 19 years grew around 50 per cent to 10,700.¹¹⁹⁷ At the same time, the number of Koorie students in Victorian schools rose by 89 per cent, to over 8,500.¹¹⁹⁸ The vast majority of Koorie students (89%) are in government schools, of which two thirds have at least one Koorie student. In 2007, however, only 72 schools had 20 or more Koorie students (accounting for 35% of all Koorie students), with 200 having 10 or more.¹¹⁹⁹ As noted by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, this pattern of enrolment, one of high dispersion but with pockets of high concentration, creates some unique policy and program challenges.¹²⁰⁰

The education performance of Indigenous students in Victoria has shown some improvement over time, with quite significant gains in some areas. While Indigenous students in Victoria generally perform better than in other states, they remain substantially behind other students and cohorts with similar socioeconomic profiles.¹²⁰¹ Their performance against key measures such as participation, attendance, literacy, numeracy, retention and completion remains poor.¹²⁰²

The Committee found that improving school attendance may be the first step in setting Indigenous students on the path to higher education. Koorie students have lower levels of attendance than other students across all year levels. On average, by year 9, Koorie students are absent from school around one day per week.¹²⁰³ Ms Kellie Frankland, an Indigenous support worker in the Portland region, indicated that school attendance is a significant challenge in the area, where students may skip a day of school because they do not have enough to eat, and where many are 'not engaged whatsoever' in formal schooling.¹²⁰⁴ Behaviour problems present a further barrier to attendance, with Ms

¹¹⁹⁷ In Victoria, the term 'Koorie' is often used to identify Victorian Indigenous people. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development uses this terminology to embrace all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Victoria.

¹¹⁹⁸ Koorie Education Strategy Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future: Education Strategy for Koorie Students* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 8.

¹¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹²⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰² *ibid.*

¹²⁰³ *ibid.*, 10.

¹²⁰⁴ Ms K. Frankland, Drug and Alcohol and Indigenous Family Violence Worker, Dhauward-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 69.

Frankland commenting that in 2007, every Indigenous student in year 7 was suspended within three weeks of the start of the school term.¹²⁰⁵

Indigenous students are also likely to leave school earlier than their non-Indigenous peers. The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association identified early school leaving as the most significant barrier to participation in higher education for Indigenous students.¹²⁰⁶ Currently, 16.0 per cent of Koorie students leave school between year 9 and 10, 22.0 per cent leave between year 10 and 11, and 41.0 per cent leave between year 11 and 12. The rates for other students are 3.0 per cent, 5.0 per cent and 18.0 per cent, respectively.¹²⁰⁷

In Victoria, issues surrounding school retention and completion among Koorie students resemble those for other students. However, the Committee heard that retention issues may begin at a younger age for Koorie students, with a number of community representatives commenting that school retention is a significant issue from the middle years onwards.¹²⁰⁸

Low levels of trans-generational wealth are impacting on disengaged Koorie students, resulting in early school leaving aimed at gaining immediate employment.¹²⁰⁹ Perceptions regarding the relevance of school curriculum to Koorie students are also seen as a key contributor to lower levels of student engagement. Mr Lawrence Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, commented that the 'huge gaps' in cultural content in senior secondary curriculum send the message that Indigenous people are the 'forgotten mob'. This can contribute to low self-esteem and, consequently, disengagement among Indigenous students.¹²¹⁰

Concomitant with lower levels of engagement in schooling for Indigenous students is the lower level of student achievement. Indigenous achievement at school was a recurring concern in the inquiry, with one Koorie educator describing the underachievement of some children in her region as 'heartbreaking'.¹²¹¹ Another participant observed that many Indigenous people, especially in older generations, have English as their second language, which creates additional challenges in English-medium literacy and numeracy acquisition for students from Indigenous communities.¹²¹²

Lack of access to computers and the internet in the home was also raised as a concern during the Committee's public hearings in Robinvale.¹²¹³ Mr Lawrence Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, told the Committee that Swan Hill North Primary School had recently surveyed parents about their interest in purchasing laptops for their children. He advised, however, that the majority of families attending the school would not be able to afford the computers and that this would

¹²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁰⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 1.

¹²⁰⁷ Koorie Education Strategy Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future; Education Strategy for Koorie Students* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 10.

¹²⁰⁸ For example, Mr L. Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 52; Ms K. Frankland, Drug and Alcohol and Indigenous Family Violence Worker, Dhauward-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 70.

¹²⁰⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 1.

¹²¹⁰ Mr L. Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 54.

¹²¹¹ Ms S. Connelly, Koorie Educator, Swan Hill North Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 53.

¹²¹² Mr B. Kennedy, Koorie Liaison Officer, Robinvale Campus, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 53.

¹²¹³ *ibid.*, 58.

increase the gap between the 'haves and the have nots'.¹²¹⁴ Ms Sue Connelly, Koorie Educator, Swan Hill North Primary School, stated:

If you look at, say, grade ones now and if you track them to secondary school, if they have not had computers at home it has to show up, they are so far behind. You cannot do your homework unless you have got a computer.¹²¹⁵

In its 2006 report on the inquiry into the effects of television and multimedia on education in Victoria, the Committee recommended that the Victorian Government investigate and encourage community education models that facilitate greater student, parent and community access to computer and multimedia resources after school hours. The Committee stated that the particular aim of this recommendation was to help provide more equitable access to computers and the internet for disadvantaged students.¹²¹⁶ In its response to the Committee's report, the Victorian Government supported this recommendation in principle, pending further consideration.¹²¹⁷

The Committee notes that one of the strategies outlined in the Victorian Government's new education strategy for Koorie students (refer below) is to support greater student and community engagement by developing innovative learning tools and programs through the use of technology. The Committee believes that if this strategy is to be successful, the Victorian Government must ensure that Indigenous students have access to relevant technologies both in school and in the home. The Committee therefore believes that the Victorian Government should prioritise the upgrading of information and communications technology (ICT) in schools with large Indigenous populations and implement a program to ensure that all Indigenous school children have access to computers during and after school hours.

The Committee notes that Indigenous students who remain at school are also less likely to successfully complete the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), or to attain the tertiary entrance score required to enter a higher education course. The successful completion rate for the VCE in 2006 was 84.3 per cent for Koorie students, compared to 96.7 per cent for other students.¹²¹⁸ Additionally, of Indigenous students nationwide who were undertaking an academic senior secondary certificate in 2005, only 12 per cent attained a tertiary entrance or equivalent score that would gain them university entrance, compared to 47 per cent of non-Indigenous students.¹²¹⁹ Of all students commencing higher education in 2006, the proportion of Indigenous students with a tertiary entrance or equivalent score was 8.6 per cent, compared to 35 per cent for other students.¹²²⁰

Another significant trend in Indigenous schooling is the high number of Indigenous students undertaking vocational rather than academic studies in years 11 and 12. In 2005, only 35 per cent of Indigenous students in government schools Australia-wide undertook year 11 or year 12 studies in a senior secondary qualification that provides a pathway to university,

¹²¹⁴ Mr L. Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 58.

¹²¹⁵ Ms S. Connelly, Koorie Educator, Swan Hill North Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 59.

¹²¹⁶ Education and Training Committee, Parliament of Victoria, *Education in the Net Age – New Needs & New Tools: Report on the inquiry into the effects of television and multimedia on education in Victoria* (Melbourne: Parliament of Victoria, 2006), 176.

¹²¹⁷ Victorian Government, *Government Response – Inquiry into the Effects of Television and Multimedia on Education in Victoria* (Melbourne: Victorian Government, 2007), 7.

¹²¹⁸ Koorie Education Strategy Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future: Education Strategy for Koorie Students* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 10.

¹²¹⁹ Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 14.

¹²²⁰ *ibid.*

compared to 80 per cent for other students.¹²²¹ While the Committee does not have directly comparable figures for Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association stated in its submission that Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a popular choice for Koorie students, and that they are participating in high numbers.¹²²² In 2006, 25 per cent of Koorie students undertaking senior secondary schooling were enrolled in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).¹²²³ This suggests that a potential barrier to participation in higher education for some Indigenous students in Victoria is their tendency to pursue vocationally oriented studies, rather than a university oriented school curriculum.

Wannik—Education Strategy for Koorie Students

During 2007, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development conducted the most comprehensive review of education provision for Indigenous students ever undertaken in Victoria. The review confirmed that the Victorian education system must do better in addressing the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous students, and give them greater opportunities to succeed in life.¹²²⁴ As a result, the department, in close partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, developed a new major education strategy for Koorie students, known as Wannik.

Wannik recognises that an increased level of commitment and action is required from both within and outside the education sector.¹²²⁵ It sets out in detail the steps the Victorian Government will take to improve educational outcomes for Koorie children, in conjunction with their parents and the Koorie community. Fundamental to the strategy is the improvement of outcomes for Koorie students across the whole of the government school system.¹²²⁶ This will be achieved by:

- Repositioning the education of Koorie students within all government schools through strong leadership that creates a culture of high expectations and individualised learning for Koorie students.
- Underpinning this approach with explicit accountability mechanisms for improvement in outcomes for Koorie students across all levels of the school education system.
- Creating an environment that respects, recognises and celebrates cultural identity through practice and curriculum.
- Reinforcing the responsibility of all government schools to meet the needs of all students, by moving away from strategies designed around inadequacies in the general approach.¹²²⁷

Wannik will support the individual learning needs of Koorie students through: intensive literacy and numeracy programs for low-achieving students; additional support and incentives for top students, to provide encouragement to excel; the development of leadership opportunities for Koorie students in secondary schools; and the celebration of Koorie culture and identity in all schools for all students.¹²²⁸

¹²²¹ *ibid.*

¹²²² Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

¹²²³ Koorie Education Strategy Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), *Wannik: Learning Together – Journey to Our Future; Education Strategy for Koorie Students* (Melbourne: DEECD, 2008), 10.

¹²²⁴ *ibid.*, 5.

¹²²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²²⁶ *ibid.*, 6.

¹²²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²²⁸ *ibid.*

As part of the repositioning of the education of Koorie students within the government school system, school leaders and teachers will be given substantial professional support and development to lead reform.¹²²⁹ At the same time, the Koorie support workforce, which already plays a vital role in engaging families and supporting Koorie young people in early childhood and through their schooling, will be reformed and expanded.¹²³⁰ The strategy includes funding that allows schools and regions to be innovative and responsive to local needs, and to implement proven strategies.¹²³¹

The Committee sees Wannik as a potential means of improving the level of engagement and achievement among Koorie students, thereby providing the basis for future participation in higher education. It urges the Victorian Government to closely monitor its implementation and outcomes, in consultation with Indigenous communities.

Aspirations

The complex and interrelated factors that contribute to young people's education, training and employment aspirations are explored in Chapter 4. These factors, including socioeconomic status, perceptions of affordability and perceptions of achievability are also relevant to Indigenous students. Additionally, the Committee heard that for many Indigenous students, the formation of aspirations towards higher education may be affected by inter-generational disadvantage and underachievement.

The Committee recommended in Chapter 4 that the Victorian Government implement a statewide program aimed at raising aspirations towards higher education among under-represented groups. The Committee believes that this program should include specific strategies aimed at assisting Indigenous students. The Committee notes that the Toornong Marnong Accord presents a significant opportunity for the coordination of relevant aspiration-raising activities developed by the university sector. A range of additional existing initiatives exist (including those developed by TAFE institutes and various community organisations) that could be further developed and expanded as part of a coordinated, statewide approach. Strategies aimed at raising aspirations for higher education among Koorie communities should focus on three key areas: creating a culture of high expectations within Koorie communities; developing and promoting role models and mentoring programs for Koorie students; and improving the quality of career advice, taking account of the specific cultural needs of young Koorie people.

Creating a culture of high expectations

Perhaps most importantly, raising aspirations among Indigenous young people requires both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to believe that Koorie students can succeed in higher education. The Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne has suggested that low aspirations for higher education among Indigenous communities should not be attributed to an 'undervaluing of education', but to Indigenous students' lack of confidence in their academic ability.¹²³² This was supported by the National Rural Health Alliance during the inquiry:

¹²²⁹ *ibid.*

¹²³⁰ *ibid.*

¹²³¹ *ibid.*

¹²³² Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 48.

For Indigenous students, self-esteem is a major issue in the decision to pursue further education. Many Aboriginal students are scared of failure because of doubts expressed about Indigenous students' abilities and the history of low Indigenous achievement generally.¹²³³

A representative of Swinburne University of Technology described how Indigenous students thrive on challenging, high-level materials, as long as they have the support to build the skills to tackle them.¹²³⁴

The Committee believes that acknowledging, rewarding and celebrating achievements is an important aspect of raising Indigenous students' aspirations, and belief in their ability to succeed. It therefore welcomes the Victorian Government's recently introduced scholarships for high-performing Indigenous school students, aimed at creating a culture of high expectations, and highlighting the contributions these students make to the community.

The Committee heard that it is especially important for Indigenous students that programs to raise aspirations begin well before school-leaving age. The National Rural Health Alliance suggested that universities should begin engaging Indigenous students in year 8, as 'by the time the possibility of higher education is raised, it is often too late for the student to gain the necessary prerequisite educational standards'.¹²³⁵ Mr Isaac Haddock, Koorie Home-school Liaison Officer, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, argued that outreach directed at Indigenous students needs to begin in primary school:

We have a lot of programs within the schools where the liaison officers will go in the final years of secondary education and try to build the aspirations of Indigenous students to access tertiary education. Unfortunately most of our students have already left long before then. We need to start building the aspirations of our children in late primary school into early high school.¹²³⁶

Mr Ray Cadmore, Pathways Coordinator, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, supported the view that Indigenous students should be introduced to tertiary education opportunities in primary school.¹²³⁷ The Committee also notes that a critically important strategy for putting Koorie students on the path to higher education is to engage parents and families in the education process.¹²³⁸ The Committee believes that this should commence from pre-school education, with Indigenous families being welcomed through culturally inclusive curriculum and environments within the early childhood sector.

Koorie representatives told the Committee that many Indigenous people currently do not see the long-term value of education, and that there is a lack of awareness of the benefits of higher education in particular. One participant described the ongoing cycle of low achievement and low expectations in Indigenous communities in the Robinvale area:

We are not being afforded the opportunities to become the accountants or the town planners or to participate proactively. It is always the lower end of the scale in terms of the labouring stuff and those sorts of things. The expectations are very low for our mob in that, 'This mob are not going to get past year 7 or 8 and therefore they are going to be in this sort of stream'.¹²³⁹

¹²³³ National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 3.

¹²³⁴ Ms S. Rice, Director, Centre for Engagement in Vocational Learning, TAFE Division, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 22.

¹²³⁵ National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 3.

¹²³⁶ Mr I. Haddock, Koorie Home-school Liaison Officer, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 23.

¹²³⁷ Mr R. Cadmore, Pathways Coordinator, Sunraysia Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 70.

¹²³⁸ National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 7.

¹²³⁹ Mr L. Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Planning and Community Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 57.

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association also reported a trend among Indigenous school leavers to regard 'anything' as a good job, provided it was full-time and provided an income.¹²⁴⁰ In the face of inter-generational social disadvantage, it is not surprising that some Indigenous students regard any form of paid employment as worthy of their aspirations, to lift them one step above the cycle of disadvantage.

Significantly, the Committee heard that the focus on attaining employment can create a vicious loop between aspirations and opportunities in some Indigenous communities. Mr Daryl Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, observed that the activities and support provided by the local cooperative could bias young people's aspirations away from higher education:

Part of the issue is because there is no support from the co-op to go to any further education stuff. If that is not fixed up they are going to still look at where their strength is and where they feel safe, and that is going to be at home. Therefore, the more we do by providing a service that actually meets their needs, they are only going to look at it very narrowly, staying home, staying around the place, and not look at broadening themselves.¹²⁴¹

Mr Rose suggested that the support provided by the cooperative for local employment opportunities can actually 'create a monster', as no other service is providing comparable support for participation in higher education.¹²⁴²

Role models

The presence of role models in Indigenous communities is another important factor in raising aspirations and showing Indigenous students what can be achieved. One participant commented that many Indigenous young people in her community are disengaged from education because they have 'no-one in their family who are positive role models—who get up, go to work, anything like that'.¹²⁴³ Mr Kent Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, also linked the lack of confidence to undertake higher education among many Indigenous students to a lack of role models in their families and the local community:

Part of that could be because ... there is no adequate role modelling in the family. If no other brothers, sisters, parents or close relatives have actually undertaken tertiary study, then there is no role modelling to encourage an individual to do just that ...¹²⁴⁴

On the other hand, Mr Shane Kelly, Acting Principal, Swan Hill College, advised the Committee that the College has an active program to encourage role models to come 'back to town' to speak to Koorie students.¹²⁴⁵ Professor Wendy Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, also told the Committee that the 'success stories' of students and the students themselves constitute the institute's 'biggest recruitment strategy'.¹²⁴⁶ Professor Brabham commented that many of the institute's graduates remain in their communities and contribute to the local workforce.¹²⁴⁷

¹²⁴⁰ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 1.

¹²⁴¹ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 45.

¹²⁴² *ibid.*

¹²⁴³ Ms K. Frankland, Drug and Alcohol and Indigenous Family Violence Worker, Dhauward-Wurrung Elderly and Community Health Service, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 68.

¹²⁴⁴ Mr K. Farrell, Executive Director, Mildura Campus, La Trobe University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 46.

¹²⁴⁵ Mr S. Kelly, Acting Principal, Swan Hill College, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 22.

¹²⁴⁶ Professor W. Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 60.

¹²⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 59.

The Committee heard that as more graduates permeate Indigenous communities, participation in higher education can gain a momentum of its own. Initiatives by Charles Sturt University in Wiradjuri country in New South Wales have reportedly raised Indigenous enrolments to ten per cent of the total student cohort, which in turn has created 'strong community aspirations' for Indigenous students to go on to further education.¹²⁴⁸ In addition, it means that many students attending the university are now second-generation students, overcoming the barriers faced by students who are the first in their family to participate in higher education.¹²⁴⁹ A similar trend was reported by representatives of Kurongkurl Katitjin (Centre for Indigenous Australian Education and Research, Edith Cowan University) who commented during the Committee's meetings in Geraldton, that attaining a 'critical mass' of role models in the community provided a significant boost to aspirations and participation.¹²⁵⁰

The Committee is aware that government and non-government organisations have implemented a range of successful role model programs aimed at raising aspirations and achievement among young Indigenous people. The Committee believes that continued development and expansion of these programs will be essential in lifting school retention and completion within Indigenous communities and providing the basis for the development of higher education aspirations. The Committee calls on the Victorian Government, through the Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs, to develop and resource a program for Indigenous role model speakers to visit Victorian Indigenous school children, particularly those in the middle years, with the aims of lifting school completion and aspirations for higher education.

Career education

Effective career education is necessary to ensure that students are aware of the available post-school opportunities. The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association commented that there is still a proportion of Indigenous students who are receiving inadequate careers counselling, and argued that Koorie students require more individualised career counselling and personalised education plans.¹²⁵¹ The National Rural Health Alliance similarly stated that Indigenous students may suffer from a lack of planning and preparation for higher education, and insufficient setting of educational and career expectations.¹²⁵² It suggested that the role of Indigenous education workers should be redefined to better complement that of careers educators in schools.¹²⁵³

The Committee notes that a recent study by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne also highlighted some of the gaps in career education currently provided to Indigenous students. In particular, it noted inadequacies in the nature of careers advice provided in schools, particularly where a school relies on students to approach careers advisers, rather than the other way around.¹²⁵⁴ It also noted the lack of role models in the community who have been to university, and the inability of many families to inform

¹²⁴⁸ Ms R. Heckenberg, Head and Lecturer, Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 18.

¹²⁴⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁵⁰ Meeting with representatives of Kurongkurl Katitjin, Edith Cowan University, Geraldton, 29 April 2009.

¹²⁵¹ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

¹²⁵² National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 3.

¹²⁵³ *ibid.*, 7.

¹²⁵⁴ Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 49.

their children of the options and possibilities, despite having high aspirations and wanting the best for their children.¹²⁵⁵

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association suggested that given the focus for many Indigenous Australians is on obtaining work, participation in higher education must be clearly linked to defined employment pathways.¹²⁵⁶ Similarly, the Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, commented that it uses the strong employment outcomes for graduates to promote both the institute itself, and higher education in general.¹²⁵⁷ One way of making this link may be to focus aspiration-raising activities on identified areas of workforce need. For example, the National Rural Health Alliance suggested that the shortage of Indigenous health care workers provides a powerful impetus for raising the expectations of Indigenous young people regarding higher education.¹²⁵⁸ While fully supporting this as a useful strategy, the Committee believes that aspiration-raising activities can and should make the link to a broader range of employment opportunities in the public and private sectors.

Pathways into higher education

As noted above, levels of participation and achievement in VCE are lower among Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students. Therefore, many Indigenous students lack the skills and qualifications necessary to enter higher education through mainstream pathways. However, there are a number of alternative pathways to higher education for Indigenous people who have not completed year 12 or equivalent. Many universities offer special entry programs to enable Indigenous students to access higher education without the need for an Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER). Evidence to the inquiry also suggests that pathways to higher education from VET, as well as programs to facilitate transition from the workforce, may be effective in improving higher education opportunities for Indigenous people.

Special entry options

Indigenous people have access to the range of university special entry arrangements also available to non-Indigenous people, such as recommendation-based entry schemes. Indigenous applicants applying through the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre may also increase their chances of selection through the Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS). As noted in Chapter 5, the Special Entry Access Scheme offers an opportunity for applicants to provide evidence of long-term educational disadvantage and/or circumstances affecting year 12 achievement. This may result in a re-ranking of the application, increasing a students' chance of selection. Prospective Indigenous students are eligible for special consideration under the scheme on the basis of Indigenous identification, and 74 Indigenous people made SEAS applications on this basis in 2007.¹²⁵⁹ At the same time, Indigenous people may apply under any additional applicable categories, such as rurality or socioeconomic disadvantage.

¹²⁵⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁵⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

¹²⁵⁷ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

¹²⁵⁸ National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 6.

¹²⁵⁹ Supplementary information provided by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre, June 2009.

Many universities also have selection processes, pathways or access schemes specifically for Indigenous students. At Monash University, for example, Indigenous applicants able to demonstrate writing ability at year 12 level and a strong commitment to tertiary study may be able to undertake the Indigenous Non-Award Pathway. With support, these students complete two normal units of study over two semesters. Successful completion of the units qualifies students for entry into an undergraduate degree.¹²⁶⁰

At a number of universities in Victoria and interstate, admission of Indigenous students occurs on case-by-case assessment of each application, rather than through comparison with other applicants. In such cases, selection is based on capability and likelihood of success,¹²⁶¹ which may be demonstrated through a variety of methods such as direct application, aptitude testing, interview, or relevant work experience. Typically, Indigenous support units at each institution offer extensive advice and support to prospective students throughout the admissions process.¹²⁶² Where an applicant is deemed not to meet entry requirements, the university or Indigenous support unit will generally advise the student on other study and pathway options, such as TAFE study or enabling programs.¹²⁶³

Building foundation skills

Indigenous students who have disengaged from formal education may need additional help to build foundation skills before they consider seeking a pathway to higher education. Many Indigenous students currently leave school with a need for basic skill building in literacy and numeracy, and may also have other knowledge gaps that leave them unprepared for higher education. The Committee heard about a variety of courses available to help Indigenous students address knowledge gaps and build the general skills necessary for university study.

While foundation courses may be offered by a range of providers, the Committee heard that courses offered through the TAFE sector are especially well accessed by Koorie students. The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association stated that it has been active in advising the TAFE sector on the development of foundation courses that facilitate the transition of Koorie students to higher level qualifications.¹²⁶⁴ For example, the Learning Pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Certificate 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.¹²⁶⁵ The Association stated that these courses have been successful in achieving employment outcomes. They were therefore reaccredited in 2007 with some modifications aimed at better promoting transition through to higher level certificate courses, and from there to employment or further study.¹²⁶⁶

The Committee also heard about the important role of the adult and community education sector in providing programs to build foundation skills specifically for Indigenous students. For example, Ms Sally Brennan, Chief Executive Officer, Upper Yarra Community House, outlined the success of the Oonah Pathways program it operates through the Oonah

¹²⁶⁰ Monash University, 'Non-Award Pathways Scheme,' Monash University, <http://arts.monash.edu.au/cais/support/nonaward.php> (accessed 25 June 2009).

¹²⁶¹ Committee analysis of university admission and selection processes, May 2009.

¹²⁶² *ibid.*

¹²⁶³ *ibid.*

¹²⁶⁴ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

¹²⁶⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 3.

Indigenous Learning Centre in Healesville.¹²⁶⁷ The program delivers Certificate I in General Education for Adults, which then provides a pathway into the VCAL, at either Foundation or Senior level.

Another program brought to the Committee's attention is the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, which is based in Shepparton. The academy is a unique education initiative of the Goulburn Valley Indigenous community, run in partnership between the University of Melbourne and the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club. It uses sport as an avenue for (primarily) Indigenous people to undertake education and training within a trusted and culturally appropriate environment.¹²⁶⁸

The Committee is supportive of the breadth of activities undertaken by the Academy of Sport, Health and Education to help promote student engagement in the program. These include curriculum enhancements, promotion of healthy lifestyles and student support. Curriculum enhancement takes many forms (including field trips and camps, attendance incentives and guest speakers) aimed at personal development and increased employability of all students.¹²⁶⁹ The focus on healthy lifestyles includes a breakfast program, gym membership for full-time students and health and dietary advice.¹²⁷⁰ Student support services are extensive and include counselling and pastoral support, transportation, mentoring, personal development and goal setting, literacy and IT training, and employment assistance.¹²⁷¹

The Committee welcomes initiatives such as the Onah Pathways Program and the Academy of Sport, Health and Education. It notes that a critical factor in their success is the significant input by the local Koorie community in the management of the education of their young people. These, and other similar initiatives, are illustrative that partnerships between the various education sectors and local Indigenous communities can be highly effective in building Indigenous students' skills in preparation for further learning, as well as in raising their perceptions of the relevance and attainability of further education.

Articulation from VET

Courses in the VET sector also provide an opportunity for students to develop skills towards participation in higher education. As noted in Chapter 5, the development of improved pathways from TAFE to higher education was identified as a critical issue in higher education participation for under-represented groups, especially those who have not gained the requisite skills for higher education in the school classroom. The Committee believes that pathways from TAFE to university are especially relevant to Indigenous participation, due to the popularity of TAFE courses among Indigenous students.

Participation rates in VET are much higher for Indigenous students than participation rates in higher education. In 2006, 4,800 Koorie students enrolled in VET in Victoria, representing 19.1 per cent of the Koorie population.¹²⁷² The popularity of TAFE within Indigenous communities may be linked to efforts by the sector to offer a safe, comfortable learning environment. TAFE students are well supported by Koorie Liaison Officers and Koorie Support Units which provide a range of educational and personal support services.

¹²⁶⁷ Ms S. Brennan, Chief Executive Officer, Upper Yarra Community House, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 36.

¹²⁶⁸ Supplementary material provided by the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, March 2009.

¹²⁶⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

¹²⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹²⁷² Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

Indigenous participation in TAFE is underpinned by the Wurreker Strategy, which was developed by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association in partnership with the Victorian Government. Wurreker's overall vision is that vocational education, training and employment for Koorie communities support pathways and employment, Koorie community development, individual learner development and self determination.¹²⁷³ The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association noted in its submission that since being launched in 2000, Wurreker has made significant progress in building TAFE participation and completion rates for Koorie students.¹²⁷⁴

The Committee heard some concerns that not all Indigenous people are able to benefit equally from TAFE provision, especially in small rural and remote communities. One participant commented that it is difficult to attract funding for quality programs where there is a small student cohort:

The problem is that the government is funding mickey mouse courses out in our region, things that are designed for us to become perpetual training people and not things that are going to get us off and into real employment.¹²⁷⁵

The Committee acknowledges that the cost of delivery when dealing with a small cohort in rural Victoria can be prohibitive, particularly for small local education and training providers. Nonetheless, it heard a number of examples where successful TAFE programs have been developed, in close consultation between the TAFE and higher education sectors and local Koorie communities.¹²⁷⁶

Although initiatives to improve Indigenous participation in TAFE will not necessarily lead to improved participation in higher education, vocational skills gained at certificate level can provide the basis for subsequent progression to university level courses. Ms Sharon Rice, Director, Centre for Engagement in Vocational Learning, TAFE Division, Swinburne University of Technology, described this development of higher-order skills through vocational programs, with reference to a pathway developed to a Bachelor of Social Science degree:

With Indigenous people it is about skilling them up and giving them the skills at the certificate III level, along with encouragement, and then up they come to certificate IV; you build that skill at the diploma level, and it is starting to put in more theory-based courses, increasing knowledge, looking at how to write for academic purposes, how to do reports, and how to reference documents at that advanced diploma level. So at that advanced diploma level we will be looking at again raising the bar and preparing them for the bachelor of social science that they would have to enter at mid point.¹²⁷⁷

Ms Rice added that creating pathways that allow Indigenous students to build their skills ensures that they are able not only to enter higher education, but to succeed once they are there.¹²⁷⁸

¹²⁷³ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated and Office of Training and Tertiary Education (Victoria), 'Wurreker Strategy,' Wurreker Strategy, <http://www.wurrekerstrategy.org.au/general/strategy.html> (accessed 26 June 2009).

¹²⁷⁴ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

¹²⁷⁵ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 43.

¹²⁷⁶ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 46; Ms D. Paton, Team Leader, Koorie Unit, Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 21.

¹²⁷⁷ Ms S. Rice, Director, Centre for Engagement in Vocational Learning, TAFE Division, Swinburne University of Technology, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 22–23.

¹²⁷⁸ *ibid.*

The Committee heard about a range of further initiatives to support articulation from TAFE to higher education for Indigenous students. The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association reported that it is currently looking at various strategies to encourage articulation between TAFE and higher education.¹²⁷⁹ The Institute of Koorie Education has also worked with the TAFE sector through the Wurreker program to build articulation pathways to higher education, especially into nursing, commerce, early childhood education and social work degrees.¹²⁸⁰

In addition, through the Toorong Marnong Accord, Victorian universities and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association are currently working together to strengthen pathways between higher education and other forms of tertiary study for Indigenous students. Professor Elizabeth Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, described how the new collaborative approach to higher education under the Toorong Marnong Accord will enable Indigenous students to move more freely between institutions:

... we are trying to work together to ensure that any individual Indigenous student who comes into the tertiary sector in the state and needs to move or has a better opportunity elsewhere to continue their education has a chance to do so on a collegiate and collaborative basis in the system in Victoria, rather than us competing to hold on to them as they move from vocational to higher ed or from undergraduate to postgrad or to go from one discipline or field to another. I think that initiative will be a fabulous one if we can get it up and running as effectively as we hope to.¹²⁸¹

The Committee supports efforts in the tertiary sector to strengthen pathways from TAFE to higher education and believes that they would be further supported by the development of a structured career guidance and pathway program specifically for Indigenous TAFE students. The Committee believes that the Victorian Government should work with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association and the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee to develop a program that includes individualised pathway plans outlining agreed articulation and credit transfer arrangements for Indigenous students seeking to progress from TAFE to higher education. The Committee also believes that broader work on developing improved articulation and credit transfer arrangements, as outlined in Chapter 5, may also be beneficial to Indigenous students.

Transition from the workforce

The Committee heard that employment can also provide an important pathway to participation in higher education for Indigenous people. For example, the Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, has developed pathways into Bachelor of Nursing, Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Public Health degrees for workers already employed in Aboriginal health and welfare services.¹²⁸² These programs have been supported by scholarships provided through the Indigenous Training and Recruitment Initiative (INTRAIN), offered by the Department of Human Services to improve workforce diversity and the responsiveness of the Victorian public sector to the needs of Indigenous Victorians. INTRAIN scholarships provide a fortnightly living allowance (valued at \$25,470 per annum) to assist Koorie students to complete degrees and diplomas in the health and community

¹²⁷⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 3.

¹²⁸⁰ Professor W. Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 61.

¹²⁸¹ Professor E. Harman, Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Melbourne, 30 March 2009, 16.

¹²⁸² Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 2.

sector.¹²⁸³ The Institute of Koorie Education has also developed an articulation pathway from the Graduate Diploma of Natural and Cultural Resource Management for Koorie land management facilitators, catchment liaison and cultural heritage practitioners employed by the Department of Sustainability and Environment or Victorian National Parks.¹²⁸⁴

The Committee heard that supporting participation in higher education by Indigenous people can be a way to improve the responsiveness of government services, and to fill gaps more generally in Indigenous workforce participation. The National Rural Health Alliance commented on the 'serious and urgent need' to improve primary health care services for Indigenous people, and argued that increasing the number of Indigenous health professionals is one the most effective ways of achieving this.¹²⁸⁵ The Committee encourages the Victorian Government to continue to support Indigenous scholarship programs as a way of addressing specific skill needs. The Committee also notes suggestions in evidence to the inquiry for improvements to the program, including enabling Indigenous public sector workers to participate in higher education without the burden of taking leave without pay, and backfilling these positions while they are studying.¹²⁸⁶

Community-based delivery

The Committee recognises that Indigenous people's strong connections and commitments within their families and communities make an important contribution to their sense of identity.¹²⁸⁷ Indigenous people are therefore less likely to participate in higher education if doing so requires leaving these networks.¹²⁸⁸ Ms Sue Connelly, Koorie Educator, Swan Hill North Primary School, explained the importance of staying connected:

I have three children in secondary, and I am brainwashing them every day, saying, 'You're going to university. You're going to university.' But what will happen when they go? I will have to shift with them because, as a Koorie mum, I am not sending my child to Melbourne with all these horror stories ... It is just that we have our extended family here and, really, why should we move out when this is where we are from and where we live and where all our connections are?¹²⁸⁹

A participant in Robinvale commented that while there are a range of good higher education programs for Indigenous students, the reality is that few Indigenous people from the local area are moving away from the community to access them.¹²⁹⁰

The Committee heard that another factor affecting the ability of Indigenous people to relocate to study is their tendency to have families younger, and to live independently at a younger age than many non-Indigenous people.¹²⁹¹ One participant commented that it is 'near impossible' for Indigenous people to meet the cost of relocation for higher education

¹²⁸³ Department of Human Services (Victoria), 'InTrain scholarships,' DHS, <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/operations/careers/employment-programs/Indigenous-scholarships/intrain-scholarships2> (accessed 7 May 2009).

¹²⁸⁴ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 2.

¹²⁸⁵ National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 6.

¹²⁸⁶ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 4.

¹²⁸⁷ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 45.

¹²⁸⁸ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 45; Mr L. Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 55.

¹²⁸⁹ Ms S. Connelly, Koorie Educator, Swan Hill North Primary School, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 56.

¹²⁹⁰ Mr L. Moser, Indigenous Community Engagement Broker, Loddon Mallee Region, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Robinvale, 2 June 2008, 55.

¹²⁹¹ Mr I. Haddock, Koorie Home-school Liaison Officer, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 21.

once they have families of their own.¹²⁹² Low levels of trans-generational wealth also mean that relocation may be financially out of the question for many Indigenous students.¹²⁹³ One participant commented that a multiplicity of challenges arise from the 'one little decision' to move away to study.¹²⁹⁴

The Committee believes it is therefore especially important for Indigenous students to have opportunities to participate in higher education through a blended learning model that allows them to remain in their local community. This was emphasised by Ms Sharon Rice, Director, Centre for Engagement in Vocational Learning, TAFE Division, Swinburne University of Technology:

The success in the Indigenous area is taking the programs out into the regions and forming partnership arrangements with Indigenous organisations and providing it on site ... We do not go out and deliver, we always partner with Indigenous organisations, and we take it out into the community so we are running training in Mildura, Swan Hill, Shepparton, and we have trained in Warrnambool.¹²⁹⁵

The Centre runs certificate IV courses in four one-week residential blocks, and diploma courses in five-week residential blocks. Students are often currently employed, or working as volunteers in the community, and their workplaces are utilised within the courses. Teachers will fly in regularly to provide training, assess students' skills and assist them on the job.¹²⁹⁶ Ms Rice indicated that this model has been an outstanding success in Indigenous communities:

That particular model—residential, which involves raising the expectations and participation—is getting 96 per cent completion rates and the students love it.¹²⁹⁷

Ms Rice commented that while funding for the residential model is 'adequate', there are some difficulties around state and federal funding boundaries, and around paying for the students' accommodation and travel.¹²⁹⁸

Flexible, community-based delivery has also been the underlying philosophy of the Institute of Koorie Education, established in 1992 at Deakin University. The Director, Professor Wendy Brabham, told the Committee that the institute's founders had been 'drawn to Deakin' because of its historical role in distance education provision, and that the institute has grown out of that base.¹²⁹⁹ Professor Brabham added that the institute is the only Indigenous education unit that has specialised in the delivery of higher education courses in a way that does not take Indigenous students out of their communities.¹³⁰⁰

Evidence suggests that the Institute of Koorie Education makes a significant contribution to higher education for Indigenous Victorians. In 2008, the institute had 162 new students and 283 returning students, around half of whom (53%) were drawn from Victoria.¹³⁰¹ Most of the institute's students are mature age, suggesting that the institute's community-based

¹²⁹² Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 42.

¹²⁹³ *ibid.*

¹²⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 46.

¹²⁹⁵ Ms S. Rice, Director, Centre for Engagement in Vocational Learning, Swinburne University of Technology, Public Hearing, Lilydale, 17 July 2008, 20, 22.

¹²⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 20, 22.

¹²⁹⁹ Professor W. Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 58.

¹³⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹³⁰¹ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 1.

delivery model has offered a genuine 'second chance' at higher education for many Indigenous people who have previously left the formal education system.

All courses offered at the Institute of Koorie Education can be undertaken via community-based delivery, using blended learning. The institute offers 15 undergraduate and seven postgraduate programs in teaching, social work, nursing, law, arts and land resource management. The institute remarked that this is significantly different from Indigenous education programs at other universities, where students may be offered a limited number of courses or fields of study.¹³⁰² The institute also supports students who are undertaking higher degrees by research.

Students undertaking courses by community-based delivery can remain in their home communities and attend the Institute of Koorie Education for one- or two-week intensive residential study blocks. When they are on campus, the institute provides accommodation for students at the Kitjarra student residences.¹³⁰³ The Committee heard that Deakin University has provided \$2 million towards the establishment of the student residences, which operate separately from other student residences to reflect the 'coming and going' of students for block courses.¹³⁰⁴

Between study blocks, students receive ongoing assistance via telephone, teletutorials and e-mail. The Committee heard that students may sometimes use a public telephone to attend teletutorials if they do not have land lines in their homes.¹³⁰⁵ All students also have access to individual tutor support through the Australian Government's Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme, which funds tutors for Indigenous students at all levels of education. In addition, academic and administrative staff from the Institute of Koorie Education undertake 'field trips' to visit students in their home communities. While these visits are often based around the supervision of practicums for subjects such as social work, teaching and nursing, they may also simply be aimed at giving general support.¹³⁰⁶

The Committee encountered strong support for the Institute of Koorie Education's community-based, blended learning model during the inquiry. A number of inquiry participants were students at the institute. One of these students told the Committee that he would have been unable to participate in higher education without the community-based approach:

I am currently happily studying a community-based bachelor's degree at the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University, where I can study full-time and continue to work within the community and earn a wage which will support me ... Without this sort of study environment there is not a chance at all that in my situation, with a family and the financial responsibilities that I have, I would ever have been able to consider a tertiary education, much less successfully complete it, or be on my way to completing it.¹³⁰⁷

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association also supported the flexible approach to learning offered at the Institute of Koorie Education, noting that the approach is 'uncommon for Australian universities' and suggesting that it should be more widely emulated.¹³⁰⁸

¹³⁰² *ibid.*

¹³⁰³ *ibid.*

¹³⁰⁴ Professor W. Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 60.

¹³⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹³⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁰⁷ Mr I. Haddock, Koorie Home-school Liaison Officer, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria), Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 20.

¹³⁰⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 4.

The Institute of Koorie Education's community-based learning model has also been recognised at a national level by the Australian Universities Quality Agency:

Through its commitment to the principles of community-based learning and a readiness to develop a broad range of programs to meet the needs of Indigenous communities, Deakin has sustained access and participation outcomes for Indigenous students at more than twice the rate experienced by the rest of Victoria and significantly higher than the national average.¹³⁰⁹

The agency described the institute as 'an exemplar for Australia', noting its students' appreciation of the opportunities and extensive support provided.¹³¹⁰

The Committee believes that there is strong evidence that community-based delivery can help to improve participation in higher education among Indigenous people. The Committee believes that community-based delivery models may be worthy of further consideration by higher education institutions seeking to improve participation rates for Indigenous students. The Committee recognises that the success of these models will depend on high levels of engagement with, and responsiveness to, the individual needs of Indigenous communities.

Financial considerations

The Committee is aware that financial disadvantage is a significant factor in the lower participation rates of Indigenous Australians in higher education. The importance of financial support to Indigenous students was therefore a strong theme of evidence to the inquiry. The Committee heard that the provision of financial support has proven to be a crucial factor both in access to higher education for Indigenous students, and in their success in their chosen course of study.¹³¹¹

The main Australian Government income support program for Indigenous students is ABSTUDY. Research in 2006 found that 25.8 per cent of Indigenous students received ABSTUDY payments. A small number of Indigenous students received Youth Allowance or Austudy.¹³¹²

ABSTUDY was introduced in 1969 to address low rates of participation in higher education by Indigenous people.¹³¹³ Under the original scheme, eligible full-time students received a Living Allowance, with higher rates applying to married students and those with dependent children. Compulsory course fees were also paid, as well as a book and equipment allowance. Travel costs were paid for students who needed to study away from home.¹³¹⁴ Over time, the original scheme was expanded to cover Indigenous students at secondary school, as well as to provide a wider range of post-secondary opportunities, both in education institutions and through specially arranged courses provided for groups of Indigenous students.¹³¹⁵

¹³⁰⁹ Antony Stella and David Woodhouse, *Serving the Cause of Indigenous Issues: Thematic Analysis of the Institutional Audit Reports of AUQA* (Melbourne: Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2006), 43.

¹³¹⁰ Australian Universities Quality Agency, *Report of an Audit of Deakin University* (Melbourne: AUQA, 2005), 35.

¹³¹¹ Professor W. Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 60; Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 3; Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Written Submission, March 2008, 2.

¹³¹² Richard James and others, *Australian University Student Finances 2006: Final report of a national survey of students in public universities* (Canberra: Universities Australia, 2007), 57.

¹³¹³ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 'History of ABSTUDY,' DEEWR, http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/Indigenous_education/publications_resources/abstudy/foreword/ (accessed 7 May 2009).

¹³¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹³¹⁵ *ibid.*

Further changes were introduced in 2000, bringing ABSTUDY Living Allowance payments into alignment with those payable under the Youth Allowance for students aged 16 to 20.¹³¹⁶ Indigenous students aged 21 years and over became eligible for the Newstart rate, which is a higher rate of payment than students in receipt of Youth Allowance or Austudy. Students over 21 years also became subject to a more generous partner income test than applied for Newstart recipients.¹³¹⁷

The Committee heard some concerns that the current level of ABSTUDY is not sufficient to facilitate participation in higher education for many Indigenous students. The Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, commented that decreases to ABSTUDY in 2000 had 'a major impact' on higher education participation for Indigenous people.¹³¹⁸ Another participant also commented that ABSTUDY was not 'properly' supporting Indigenous students.¹³¹⁹ In particular, he observed that Indigenous students who relocate to study may have close ties to family and community and must frequently return home, creating additional travel costs and impacting on their ability to secure part-time work in their new location.¹³²⁰ The Committee notes that concerns about the limitations of ABSTUDY are very similar to widespread discontent with current payment levels under Austudy and Youth Allowance (refer Chapter 7).

The Australian Government announced changes to ABSTUDY in the 2009–10 budget (subject to the passage of legislation), in line with changes to other government income support programs. These include:

- an increase in the parental income test threshold for students applying for ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance from \$32,800 to \$42,559, from January 2010;
- entitlement to an annual Student Start-up Scholarship of \$2,254 to all university students receiving income support, from January 2010;
- access to a Relocation Scholarship of \$4,000 in the first year and \$1,000 in subsequent years for university students receiving ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance as dependents (as well as independent students who are disadvantaged by personal and relationship circumstances) and who have to live away from the family home to study, from January 2010;
- an increase in the personal income threshold from \$236 to \$400 per fortnight from January 2011, so that students receiving income support payments will be able to earn up to \$400 per fortnight without having their payments reduced;
- phased implementation of a reduced age of independence from 25 years to 22 years, by 2012;
- tightening of the workforce participation criteria for independence, requiring that a young person has worked full time for a minimum of 30 hours a week for at least 18 months in a two year period, effective January 2010; and

¹³¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹³¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹³¹⁸ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 3.

¹³¹⁹ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 45.

¹³²⁰ *ibid.*

- exempting equity and merit-based scholarships from being treated as assessable income for means testing under the *Social Security Act* for those on income support payments.¹³²¹

In addition to Australian Government financial support, Indigenous higher education students, in common with non-Indigenous students, have access to a variety of scholarships offered by state and local governments, universities and other organisations. Some scholarships are targeted specifically at Indigenous students. For example, the Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, reported that scholarships for Indigenous students are available through the Pratt Foundation, ANZ Bank and the Victorian Government, in addition to the support provided by the university.¹³²² Scholarships offered by the Victorian Government are generally linked to departmental skills needs, such as teaching scholarships provided through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, scholarships for Indigenous health workers provided through the Department of Human Services, and scholarships in a range of justice related fields (law, criminology, para-legal, psychology, psychiatry, mental health and social work) offered by the Department of Justice.

While endorsing existing scholarship programs, the Institute of Koorie Education recommended that more scholarships be made available for Indigenous higher education students.¹³²³ At the same time, it added that universities and other agencies should not be expected to 'fill the gap' left by inadequate income support for Indigenous students.¹³²⁴ The National Rural Health Alliance agreed that there is 'significant unmet demand' for the scholarships and cadetships currently available to Indigenous students, and recommended a review of the quantity and effectiveness of scholarships available to Indigenous students.¹³²⁵

In addition, the Institute of Koorie Education suggested that Indigenous students need further assistance with tuition fees, commenting that 'debt aversion' within Indigenous communities means that Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debts have impacted negatively on participation rates.¹³²⁶ It suggested that strategies should therefore be pursued at the state and national level to abolish HECS-HELP liability for Indigenous students, 'until the participation is commensurate with that of other sections of the Australian community'.¹³²⁷ This concern was also raised in submissions to the Review of Australian Higher Education, with the Indigenous Department of the National Union of Students arguing for half-HECS equity scholarships to be made available to all HECS-liable Indigenous students,¹³²⁸ and the Indigenous Higher Education Council advocating for the removal of current HECS liabilities of Indigenous students, as well as the removal of HECS requirements for Indigenous students in the future.¹³²⁹

The Committee agrees that appropriate financial support will be a key aspect of any government strategies to increase the participation of Indigenous students in higher education. In general, the Committee welcomes recently announced changes to ABSTUDY,

¹³²¹ Australian Government. *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009.

¹³²² Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 3.

¹³²³ *ibid.*

¹³²⁴ *ibid.*

¹³²⁵ National Rural Health Alliance, Written Submission, February 2008, 7.

¹³²⁶ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 4.

¹³²⁷ *ibid.*

¹³²⁸ Indigenous Department, National Union of Students, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 9.

¹³²⁹ *ibid.*, 19.

which are likely to increase the level of financial support available to students most in need. However, as with Youth Allowance, the Committee is concerned that these changes may not go far enough to address the needs identified in evidence to the inquiry. The Committee believes that government income support programs should be closely monitored and reviewed to ensure they provide adequate support for Indigenous students to participate successfully in higher education. The Committee also supports the continued expansion and promotion of targeted scholarship schemes by federal, state and local governments, and the higher education sector.

Transition and completion for Indigenous higher education students

The Committee noted that lower retention and completion rates among Indigenous higher education students remain a key concern. Attrition amongst Indigenous students is more severe than for non-Indigenous students, particularly in the first year of study.¹³³⁰ The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council has noted that patterns of discontinuation are associated in part with the characteristics of Indigenous people who enrol in higher education, including age, field of study and enrolment type.¹³³¹

The Committee notes that most of the transition issues discussed in Chapter 8 are equally relevant to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students who have withdrawn from studies report that the factors in their decision to withdraw include financial pressures, the academic demands of study and insufficient academic support.¹³³² However, social or cultural alienation were also named among the reasons for some Indigenous students withdrawing from their studies, suggesting that there are specific cultural factors that may need to be addressed.

Culturally inclusive study environments

Many Koorie people told the Committee that universities typically do not provide culturally friendly learning environments. One student commented that the environment could sometimes be 'completely culturally unsafe', either due to lecturers or culturally inappropriate course content.¹³³³ Another added that institutions are often unwilling to make the additional effort required to meet the material and cultural needs of Indigenous students:

The issues around trying to work with non-Indigenous organisations are that a lot of them have got their own sets of rules and ways they want to run, and they will make very little allowances for the Koorie things that are needed to do it. They are things to help support the families, help them to get transport there or to just have a feed when they are there.¹³³⁴

¹³³⁰ Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, for Universities Australia, *Participation and Equity: A review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (Melbourne: CSHE, 2008), 49.

¹³³¹ Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, *Improving Indigenous Outcomes and Enhancing Indigenous Culture and Knowledge in Australian Higher Education*, report to the Minister for Education, Science and Training (Canberra: Australian Government, 2006), 22.

¹³³² *ibid.*

¹³³³ Ms S. Heckenberg, Student, Gippsland Campus, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 20.

¹³³⁴ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 43.

Ms Robyn Heckenberg, Head and Lecturer, Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University, commented that 'systemic racism' represents a major barrier to higher education participation for Indigenous students.¹³³⁵ Ms Heckenberg commented that universities are, by nature, 'bastions of the establishment', and find it difficult to accommodate differences in student needs:

In a way it is the student who has to change the way they see the world rather than the university being able to model itself more to what the student needs.¹³³⁶

Ms Heckenberg observed that this does not necessarily reflect the views of individual institutions, but the difficulties of change inherent to all large organisations.¹³³⁷

A submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education from the Indigenous Department, National Union of Students identified some of the positive steps already taken by universities to embrace Indigenous culture. These include cultural celebrations during NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) Week, Reconciliation Week and other events to recognise and celebrate key achievements in the Indigenous community.¹³³⁸ It noted, however, a number of areas that could be improved, including basic measures such as flying the Indigenous flag on all campuses and promoting the Indigenous campus centres on university websites.¹³³⁹ Other areas suggested for improvement included ensuring staff involved in the delivery of services to Indigenous students are aware of Indigenous culture, and educating the wider student population about Indigenous culture in order to promote increased interaction and understanding.¹³⁴⁰ The Committee encourages all universities to embrace and promote Indigenous cultures in these simple ways.

The Committee believes, however, that recognition and engagement with Indigenous communities within the university environment must extend beyond the simple, symbolic measures. As the Review of Australian Higher Education observed, there is a need for institutional cultures and curriculum to recognise the value of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives:

Indigenous involvement in higher education is not only about student participation and the employment of Indigenous staff. It is also about what is valued as knowledge in the academy. Indigenous students and staff have unique knowledge and understandings which must be brought into the curriculum for all students and must inform research and scholarship.¹³⁴¹

The review went on to comment that meaningful recognition of Indigenous perspectives may mean that 'underlying assumptions in some discipline areas may themselves be challenged', and will require a deep and complex review of all elements of university study.¹³⁴² The Committee also believes that culturally inclusive learning environments require strong leadership from universities, working in partnership with Indigenous communities and their leaders.

¹³³⁵ Ms R. Heckenberg, Head and Lecturer, Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 19.

¹³³⁶ *ibid.*, 18–19.

¹³³⁷ *ibid.*, 19.

¹³³⁸ Indigenous Department, National Union of Students, *Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), 1.

¹³³⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹³⁴¹ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 32.

¹³⁴² *ibid.*

Support services for Indigenous students

Evidence suggests that the provision of recognisable Indigenous support services in higher education institutions can also make a genuine difference to Indigenous students' sense of belonging and their capacity to succeed. Support services in Victorian universities are delivered through a variety of models, including Indigenous units, centres, schools and institutes. They provide a range of support services, such as course advice, tutorial and study support, accommodation, networking and personal support.

The Committee heard that transition support services may be especially important for Indigenous students in the early stages of their course, as they adjust to the university environment. One participant commented that universities can be 'very isolating' for Indigenous students from close-knit communities, as they are suddenly required to 'fend for themselves'.¹³⁴³ However, participants also commented that Indigenous support units continue to play a vital role in assisting Indigenous students throughout their course of study.¹³⁴⁴

The Committee heard that additional support is important even in higher education environments that cater specifically for Indigenous students. The Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, reported that academic teams monitor and regularly review the progress of individual students.¹³⁴⁵ During a meeting in Geraldton, the Committee was advised that individualised support is also a critical feature at Kurongkurl Katitjin. This includes both academic support and social support with issues such as family caring responsibilities, child care, pregnancy or accommodation.¹³⁴⁶

Professor Wendy Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, described the additional support that Indigenous students may require, on top of material and logistical assistance. This encompasses embracing cultural and traditional values and practices, as well as overcoming lower levels of confidence and self-esteem:

There are a lot of variables that impinge on success [for Indigenous students] ... There is a lot of 'sorry' business goes on—you have got to put that in place; and ceremonial matters—you have got to put that in place. You have got to also work up the expectations of the learner—how do you actually relate to the learner so that the learner really does take control and believe in himself or herself as a higher education student?¹³⁴⁷

Professor Brabham went on to say that the provision of ongoing encouragement and support can be extremely time consuming, and requires a high level of focus from academic staff.¹³⁴⁸

The Committee heard some further suggestions for how Indigenous students could be supported while they are studying. One community group aims to purchase a house in Melbourne for students from the local community who must relocate to study, although it is currently reliant on the generosity of a Melbourne-based community member who has

¹³⁴³ Ms R. Heckenberg, Head and Lecturer, Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 19.

¹³⁴⁴ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 2; Ms S. Heckenberg, Student, Gippsland Campus, Monash University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 20.

¹³⁴⁵ Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Written Submission, May 2008, 2.

¹³⁴⁶ Meeting with representatives of Kurongkurl Katitjin, Edith Cowan University, Geraldton, 29 April 2009.

¹³⁴⁷ Professor W. Brabham, Director, Institute of Koorie Education, Deakin University, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Colac, 29 April 2008, 60.

¹³⁴⁸ *ibid.*

opened her house to students.¹³⁴⁹ Another suggested that a program be piloted to introduce paid mentors for current and prospective Indigenous higher education students.¹³⁵⁰ Others suggested that the transportation needs of Indigenous students need to be addressed.¹³⁵¹

The Committee recognises that support services are important for all higher education students, from transition to course completion. However, it believes that these services may be particularly important for Indigenous students, especially during the early stages of their studies. The Committee acknowledges that the university environment has grown out of non-Indigenous models of social organisation, with a strong emphasis on self-reliance and individual endeavour. In contrast, Indigenous culture has a more collective orientation, and opportunities to connect with support services and networks are therefore highly valued. The Committee is therefore pleased to note that strengthening Indigenous staff and student networks is a key initiative of the Toorong Marnong Accord.

Conclusion and recommendations

The difficulties faced by Indigenous Australians in education are well documented, and affect all levels of the education system. Evidence suggests that high levels of disengagement from education in Indigenous communities are in part due to an education system that is seen as unresponsive and irrelevant to the needs of Indigenous communities. The Committee was therefore pleased to note the many initiatives currently underway to make schools and universities more culturally inclusive, in consultation with Indigenous communities. These include models of delivery and pathways to higher education that take into account the particular needs, circumstances and preferences of Indigenous students.

Improving Indigenous participation in higher education will also require a willingness on the part of Indigenous communities to embrace higher education as a valuable and attainable means of social, economic and cultural empowerment. Many efforts are already underway to improve the profile and awareness of higher education within Indigenous communities. In particular, strategies involving community role models have proven particularly effective in promoting participation in higher education as desirable and attainable.

The Committee believes that the implementation of a statewide aspiration-raising initiative will further support existing efforts aimed at raising higher education participation rates in Indigenous communities. This initiative should encompass strategies aimed at addressing the needs of Indigenous students, including creating a culture of high expectations, further developing and promoting role models and mentors, and improving the quality of career advice to Indigenous students. Aspiration-raising activities should be supported through continued development and promotion of alternative entry pathways into higher education for Indigenous students, including special entry options, foundation courses, articulation pathways from TAFE, and transition from the workforce. Participation in higher education by Indigenous students must also be supported by adequate financial support and a range of transition and academic support programs.

¹³⁴⁹ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 42.

¹³⁵⁰ Mr S. Walsh, Central Gippsland Wurreker Broker, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 22.

¹³⁵¹ Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 43; Ms D. Paton, Team Leader, Koorie Unit, Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Churchill, 19 May 2008, 22.

A strong theme to emerge in evidence relating to Indigenous participation is the significance of engagement between the education sector and Indigenous communities. The Committee acknowledges that responding to the needs of Indigenous communities may involve profound shifts in how higher education is understood and delivered, and that meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities is unlikely to occur quickly or easily. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that institutions such as the Institute of Koorie Education demonstrate that the rewards of community engagement in raising Indigenous participation in higher education can be substantial. The Committee therefore encourages ongoing dialogue between universities and Indigenous communities throughout Victoria, and anticipates that this dialogue will become easier as participation increases and more models of best practice emerge.

At the same time, the Committee is aware that participation in higher education is just one area in which Indigenous Australians experience disadvantage. As one participant observed, social issues facing Indigenous communities such as health and housing must be addressed, otherwise Indigenous students will continue to struggle.¹³⁵² The Committee is aware that the difficulties facing many Indigenous communities are significant, and can make raising participation in higher education seem like a distant goal. Nevertheless, the stories of participants in the inquiry were testament to the power of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to work together to overcome disadvantage.

Recommendations

9.1 That as part of a statewide initiative to raise aspirations towards higher education (recommendation 4.1), the Victorian Government:

- create a culture of high expectations for Indigenous students at all levels of education;
- maintain the scholarship program for high achieving Indigenous school students;
- through the Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs, develop and resource a program for Indigenous role model speakers to visit Victorian Indigenous school children, particularly those in the middle years, with the aim of lifting year 12 or equivalent completion;
- ensure that Indigenous students receive individualised and culturally appropriate career education; and
- engage parents and families in these initiatives.

¹³⁵² Mr D. Rose, Chairperson, Heywood Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Transcript of Evidence, Public Hearing, Hamilton, 28 April 2008, 44.

- 9.2 That the Victorian Government work with universities and Indigenous communities to improve participation in higher education by Indigenous Victorians by:
- supporting targeted, high quality blended learning and community-based models of delivery;
 - developing culturally inclusive curriculum and study environments;
 - providing targeted scholarship schemes;
 - advocating to the Australian Government for increased income support; and
 - maintaining mentoring, academic and other support programs for Indigenous higher education students.
- 9.3 That the Victorian Government, in consultation with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association and the Victorian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, support the development of a career guidance pathway program for Indigenous TAFE students. The program should involve individualised pathway plans outlining agreed articulation and credit transfer arrangements for Indigenous students seeking to progress from TAFE to higher education.
- 9.4 That the Victorian Government implement a program to ensure that all Indigenous school children have access to computers both during and after school hours and that the program be regularly monitored and reviewed.

Adopted by the Education and Training Committee

Committee Room, Parliament House

East Melbourne

23 July 2009