Submission to the Education and Training Committee, Parliament of Victoria:
Increasing access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families

About The Aspiration Initiative (TAI)

The Aurora Project and the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University are currently working with the Charlie Perkins Trust for Children & Students and also the Roberta Sykes Indigenous Education Foundation on a number of education initiatives known collectively as The Aspiration Initiative (TAI).

TAI aims to increase opportunities and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students, helping to ensure they realise their potential at school, university and beyond. Current TAI projects include:

- scholarship opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students to study overseas, including:
  - Charlie Perkins Scholarships for postgraduate study at Oxford and Cambridge Universities
  - Roberta Sykes Harvard Club Scholarships to Harvard University
  - Roberta Sykes Scholarships for postgraduate study at overseas universities
  - Roberta Sykes Scholarships for postgraduate students studying in Australia to spend up to one year at overseas universities
  - Roberta Sykes Scholarships to undertake short executive programs at overseas universities

- Indigenous scholarships guidebooks - *the Indigenous students’ guide to undergraduate scholarships in Australia* (to be published in June 2011) and *the Indigenous students’ guide to postgraduate scholarships in Australia and overseas* (published in November 2009)


- an academic enrichment program (including a residential component) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students, that provides opportunities for students to develop their academic skills, with the goal of preparing them for further study.
In Australia, a university degree is a prerequisite for many job opportunities and professional careers. Given the comprehensive public education system, there should be little that holds a student back from realising his or her full academic potential throughout their secondary and tertiary studies. Yet even today, with 10,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in Australian universities, disproportionately few are completing high school with the marks to enter university. In 2008, only 11% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Year 12 Government and Catholic school graduates were eligible to go to university. By comparison, nearly 47% of non-Indigenous school graduates from Government and Catholic schools were eligible to attend university. In Victoria, for the cohort of Year 8 students in 2004, only 14% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were eligible to attend university in 2009, in comparison to 60% of non-Indigenous students.

Furthermore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander undergraduate students do not complete university at the same rate as other students, and of those that do complete, few continue on to postgraduate study. From 2004-09, on average nationally only 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander direct pathway undergraduates received a degree, just one-seventh of the 2,700 that should have graduated, given age-adjusted population sizes. In Victoria, within the same six-year period, there have been no more than three undergraduate qualifications awarded annually to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students under the age of 25 in any of the broader fields of Agriculture and Environmental Studies (1.7), Architecture and Building (1.3), Education (2.8), Engineering (1.3) and Information Technology (0.7). The reality is that rather than a strong flow of students surging through the pipeline from high school to university, there is little more than a trickle.

Given that the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student graduated from university in 1959, it is no surprise that today, some fifty years on, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are the first in their family to attend university (‘first generation students’). In some cases, the

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1 This figure includes those students enrolled in university under alternative entry schemes. Indigenous Education Data & Reporting Team, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2008).
2 Indigenous Education Data & Reporting Team, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2008).
4 Aurora analysis of data from University Statistics Unit, Higher Education Group (DEEWR, 2009).
5 Direct pathway students are those that enrol in university straight from high school. For the purposes of the Aurora data analysis, the population of direct pathway students has been defined as those aged 15 to 25 years.
6 On the basis of the proportion of non-Indigenous Australians in each age-group who are at university, we have calculated the expected number of similarly aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, if 60% of 15-25 year-old non-Indigenous males are enrolled at university, then we would expect that 60% of the same proportion of 15-25 year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males would be enrolled.
7 Aurora analysis of data from University Statistics Unit, Higher Education Group, DEEWR, 2009. Figures indicate average graduates per year in each field of study across the six year period.
families of these students may not have the experience or resources to provide all of the educational support necessary for students to pursue their academic goals. Research on first generation students in Australia and overseas has examined the impact of a family history of tertiary education on university achievement. It suggests that first generation students (that includes most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) are less likely to attend university and to complete their studies than the broader student population. According to a recent study conducted by The Smith Family, 65% of students whose father went to university attained university qualifications, compared to 29% of students whose father left school by Year 10.

Other research indicates that students are four times more likely to enrol in university if their friends do. As such, there is a need to create a strong cohort of motivated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who can inspire each other to go to university and support each other while there.

**Academic enrichment and gifted and talented programs and in the United States**

In October 2010, TAI staff visited the United States to meet with a variety of camps program managers and coordinators. The main aim was to understand how academic camps and other programs for disadvantaged youth from minority backgrounds have been developed and run in the United States, and to find out what makes them successful and sustainable. Although programs of this type have never been attempted in Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, successful models have been running in the United States for over 30 years. In fact, hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually on well over a thousand academic initiatives aimed at assisting promising disadvantaged students from minority backgrounds. These include programs for Native American, African American and Hispanic American students that are held over the course of their school and university study.

Upward Bound (www2.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html), is one such example which provides a four-year program of academic and social support for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. There are 700 Upward Bound programs across the United States, with a total cost to the Federal Government of $250 million per year. There are more than 42,000 participants in these programs that typically provide over 300 contact hours a year through weekly tutoring, summer camps and weekend seminars. It has been reported that students are reaching university where previously their teachers did not think this was possible.

Another interesting example is the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) at Johns Hopkins University (http://cty.jhu.edu/), which has been running residential academic programs for gifted and talented students for over 30 years. Approximately 10,000 gifted and talented students participate in CTY’s three week program each year. In the late 1990s, CTY expanded their program to low income

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students, but it was found that three weeks was not enough to support and nurture the students’ gifts and talents. Many of the students’ parents had never been to university and as such did not know how to guide their own children towards making informed choices about their education. It was recognised that these students needed extra services to keep them on the right track throughout the school year. This would include support to strengthen their skills, learn about other opportunities and stay engaged in learning. This led to the establishment of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars Program in 2002 and the Johns Hopkins CTY Scholars Program in 2004.

In Iowa, the Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development (Belin-Blank Center) (http://www.education.uiowa.edu/belinblank/) established ‘Project ACHIEVE’ in the 1990s to provide support for gifted and talented students from low income backgrounds living in inner-city Chicago. The program aimed to better prepare students for study at the University of Iowa. Students were selected in Year 10 and, over the course of two years, participated in two six-week residential academic programs before attending university. During their time at university, they attended weekly two-hour seminars that focused on how to stay successful at university. All students selected for the program were ranked first in their high school classes and all were to be the first in their family to attend university. Whilst these programs provided over 500 hours, the program had a 50% retention rate, and only 40% of the students that started the program graduated from university. Program organisers reported that in order to be more successful, Project ACHIEVE would need to start earlier when students are in middle school. They also noted that the program should have been more consistent (year-round), rather than only two camps towards the end of high school. For example, the Belin Blank Center’s ‘Iowa Talent Program’ which starts in Year 8 and continues through to university achieves 85% graduation rates. Furthermore, the program provides services for students throughout the academic year, not just in their summer holidays.

Another program, Mathematics and Science for Minority Students (or (MS)²) (www.andover.edu/ms2), based in Andover, Massachusetts, offers a program comprised of three successive five-week residential academic summer camps for African American, Hispanic American and Native American students in Year 9. Students participate in 350 hours of maths, science and English classes each year. They also receive ongoing college application advice and training, and continuous mentoring. (MS)² has over 1,100 alumni, the vast majority of whom have completed university. Of the students attending the program, 97% have enrolled in four-year college courses, and 50% have enrolled in elite universities, such as Harvard and Yale.

Various other programs that have been operating in the United States for many years include Prep for Prep, Sponsors of Educational Opportunity, the Posse Foundation, AVID, College Success Foundation, and GEAR UP. While not all American academic programs have been successful for every participating student, overall significant progress has been made. Taken together, these programs illustrate the collective commitment required from government, families, communities, students and universities to make a real impact on the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students from minority backgrounds.
As research by Wyner, Bridgeland and Diulio demonstrates, promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not automatically succeed in their studies, but need to be continuously supported. Similarly, as recognised in the examples above, our consultations in the United States highlighted three key program characteristics necessary to have a positive impact on students’ educational outcomes. These are:

- a significant number of contact hours with students (usually a minimum of 200 hours per annum)
- support which starts early (starting before students are 15 years of age)
- continued support over a long-term period (more than three years)

Unlike the United States, it appears that Australia does not have comparable programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that include all necessary characteristics listed above. Research conducted in Australia, however, indicates that these characteristics are essential for the success of those programs aiming to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged students. In particular, Gale et al. similarly emphasise the need for early, long-term and sustained programs, which involve collaboration with local communities, schools, universities and education departments. Many of the educational programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that do exist are focused on attaining basic literacy and numeracy levels, particularly during early years of schooling. The only programs that start early and have sustained ongoing support for a number of years, including hundreds of contact hours per year, are linked to sports. There is an urgent need for programs which move beyond basic levels of attainment and focus on students who are performing at or above the national average in early high school. These students need to be challenged and supported over a number of years through programs which instill in them an aspiration to achieve excellence. While we are not arguing for carbon copies of United States academic initiatives, we believe that we should draw on their experience in designing our own.

Immediate investment in sustained educational programs that realise the academic potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students is crucial for supporting these students to successfully complete Year 12 and excel at university.

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12 J. Wyner, J. A. Bridgeland, and J. Diulio, “Achievement trap: How America is failing millions of high achieving students from lower-income families” (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Civic Enterprises with Original Research by Westat, 2009), 4, See also, Bedsworth, Colby, and Doctor, Reclaiming the American Dream, 7.

13 T. Gale, S. Sellar, S. Parker, R. Hattam, B. Comber, D. Tranter, et al., Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students: A design and evaluation matrix for university outreach in schools, (DEEWR, 2009).
**TAI’s academic enrichment program in Victoria**

We believe there are opportunities to enhance support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gifted and talented students, their parents, carers, teachers and school leaders through an academic enrichment program for cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students. TAI is developing such a program, which aims to provide students with intensive and ongoing educational and related support primarily during holiday periods (‘residentsials’), and also throughout the academic year. In doing so, TAI will work to advance and strengthen the academic skills of participants, building their resilience and aspirations. At present, we are developing three concurrent pilot programs in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.

In Victoria, we will be inviting 30 students to participate in the program, with clusters of 3-4 students per school selected from up to 8-10 schools. We have analysed NAPLAN Year 7 results and, in consultation with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and representatives from the Wannik Implementation Unit at the Department of Education Employment and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), have identified schools where there are a cluster of students showing academic aptitude and potential.

Selected students from each school will participate in at least 200 contact hours over more than 20 days each year for 5½ years, from the middle of Year 8 through to the completion of their first year at university or their other chosen pathway. The residentsials will offer an academically rigorous program and will provide a learning environment that nurtures the students’ talents. The program will promote undergraduate and postgraduate university study as viable and accessible options, and will equip students with the skills and tools to make informed decisions about their future. **Our aim is for every participant to successfully complete high school and be eligible to attend university.**

A state coordinator will be responsible for arranging additional support, which could include tutoring and mentoring, organising work experience for students in different sectors related to their interests, and other personal support and guidance. They will liaise with the regional Koorie Education Coordinators (KECs) and Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESOs), as well as a designated teacher from each school, who will be available to assist and support students throughout the school term. Parents and other carers will also be part of the program, with some sessions specifically designed to assist them in finding out more about university and potential educational pathways for their children. State coordinators will remain in contact with both the parents/guardians and teachers of TAI students throughout the 5½ year program.

TAI’s academic enrichment program is being developed in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, consultative bodies, and communities, as well as schools, universities and state and federal education departments. TAI is also working with teachers and other professionals experienced in the field of Indigenous pedagogy and gifted and talented education to deliver an innovative and effective program, which integrates Indigenous and mainstream perspectives and content.

Although there are a number of programs providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the opportunity to study at private schools as boarders, TAI will target ‘day’ students, for whom there are fewer academic enrichment opportunities. Moreover, as an ongoing program, which builds skills and confidence over a number of years, it will complement existing mentoring programs and the one-off orientation and ‘taster’ programs currently offered by many universities.
Independent evaluators will undertake a comprehensive evaluation process to assess the program over the 5½ years. Annual reviews as well as a final report will be produced. The program evaluators will be involved in the program from the outset, and will be key members of the development team, providing insights as the program progresses.

To put into perspective the importance of the proposed program:

- 82 state and Catholic school students from around 1200 schools across Victoria were eligible to go to university in 2009.
- We are targeting 8-10 schools in Victoria and will work to ensure that all 30 students will be eligible for university.\(^{14}\)

Following successful pilots in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia, the academic enrichment program model has the potential to be replicated and adapted for other communities in those states, and more broadly across Australia.

We commend TAI’s program to you and invite the Victorian Government to support the implementation of TAI in Victoria so that it may commence in September 2011. We would welcome the opportunity to make a presentation to the Education and Training Committee.

*If you have any questions relating to The Aspiration Initiative, please contact Richard Potok, the Director of the Aurora Project and Executive Director of the Charlie Perkins Trust for Children & Students and the Roberta Sykes Indigenous Education Foundation. Richard can be reached at richard.potok@auroraproject.com.au or on 02 9469 8104.*

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\(^{14}\) Indigenous Education Data & Reporting Team, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2008).