

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Eighth Session
New York, 18 May – 29 May 2009

Agenda Item 6: Comprehensive Dialogue with UN Agencies

STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF

The National Indigenous Higher Education Network (Australia)

BY- Professor Boni Robertson and Professor Peter Buckskin

Thank you Madam Chair

As Indigenous Australians, we represent the oldest living civilisation on the planet. The National Indigenous Higher Education Network (NIHEN) of Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the place upon which we meet today. We pay our respects to the wisdom of the elders past and present.

NIHEN will make a short statement in this session and has provided a report on Indigenous education issues specifically related to Australia for the benefit of forum members.

We commend the members of the forum for including a comprehensive dialogue with UN agencies in this session's agenda. The impact of education on Indigenous peoples has been raised by many speakers at this and previous forums.

While Indigenous participation within western education has increased over the last twenty years, in reality many Indigenous populations continue to be faced with systemic and social barriers experienced by previous generations. Despite the claims made by governments that they have adopted more inclusive and culturally respectful practices within education systems, the broader societal approach to Indigenous education has continued to be a numbers game.

While increasing access and participation in education is important, equally important is the need for transformative change within the education system itself. The pursuit of quantifiable progress alone fails to recognise Indigenous people as contributors in the education process. It also fails to build upon respectful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems.

The inclusion of Indigenous histories and epistemologies within western education continue to be advocated, yet there is a reluctance to acknowledge Indigenous educators and Indigenous education frameworks.

It is of paramount importance that a more culturally inclusive process is adopted if barriers that have historically excluded Indigenous people are to be overcome. For our men this is critical. For our women this is even more critical, as women tend to make up a high percentage of Indigenous enrolments in our education system where racism is entrenched.

Education systems have not yet recognised the tension between the needs and aspirations of Indigenous people in the provision of post compulsory education.

Many of the historical barriers continue to divert Indigenous people away from a tertiary education towards vocational roles.

The challenge for the Australian education system is to recognise the cultural capital all citizens bring to the process of education thereby realising the collective potential. Indigenous Australians must be integral to this process.

The engagement of Indigenous peoples within the education system has been based on accommodation and conformity. This is in direct opposition to the transformative process which is much needed.

Indigenous people continue to be rated against benchmarks imposed by education systems, rather than responsibility for failures resting with governments that fail to adequately prepare and support non-indigenous teachers.

While there has been an increase in the number of advocates calling for change in relation to Indigenous education, many of the negative interrelated factors that influence Indigenous peoples' progression and retention remain.

Despite recent commitment made by political leaders to find a new way forward, the Australian government is yet to adopt more inclusive policies and practices that engage and respect the unique position of Indigenous Australians.

While this need is pertinent across all levels of social policy, it is particularly important within education.

A shroud of poverty is evident in the lives of a large percentage of the Indigenous populations. In order to lift this shroud, successful progression through education, particularly post compulsory education, is an imperative goal.

Further education for Indigenous Australians can only be achieved when education systems include Indigenous worldviews, perspectives and knowledges in the education of all Australians.

True success will be measured on the ability of Indigenous peoples to overcome educational hurdles constructed and maintained by western meritocracy.

The systemic disparity that has formed the basis of Indigenous education, will not be overturned until the voices of Indigenous learners, teachers, administrators, parents, communities and policy makers are able to appropriately influence much needed transformation within the development and delivery of curriculum across all levels of education. This must be mirrored by practices and policies that promote change in the way Indigenous people are included in research, engagement and other areas of education, where many injustices continue to be evident. The accomplishment of these goals can be the only indicators of true social, systemic, cultural and political success.

Members of the permanent forum are uniquely placed to seek from UN agencies and nation states specific details related to the positioning and support for Indigenous

education. Specifically, we seek the members of permanent forum to urge all UN agencies and bodies to support the education of Indigenous peoples everywhere. NIHEN makes the following recommendations.

Recommendations

NIHEN asks members of the Permanent Forum to:

- 1. Urge nation states to implement their commitment to the principles of Indigenous sovereignty and social justice by ensuring Indigenous peoples are able to exercise their right to education without conditions, encumbrances or suspension of other rights guaranteed by the Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.**
- 2. Invite UNESCO to report specifically on Indigenous peoples' access to and participation in Higher Education at a future session of the forum.**
- 3. Direct the United Nations University, Institute of Advanced Studies' Traditional Knowledge Initiative to establish greater links with Indigenous people currently working in higher education within the pacific.**

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**Report to Members of the United Nations Permanent Forum on
Indigenous Issues
Eighth Session
UN Headquarters, New York
18 – 29 May 2009**

**Supporting Intervention for Agenda ITEM 6 – Comprehensive Dialogue
with UN Agencies**

About the Reporting Organisation

The National Indigenous Higher Education Network (NIHEN) is a professional network of Deans, Heads of Schools, Senior Policy Advisors, Directors and Managers of Schools/Units responsible for the leadership of Indigenous Education within Australian Universities. Australia currently has two Indigenous higher education committees that work with Indigenous Centres and entities within mainstream higher education institutions to form a community voice for Indigenous participation across Australia. NIHEN's main objectives are to:

- 1) Provide a collegial and supportive network for Indigenous educators, researchers and administrators working in higher education
- 2) As a national collective, in collaboration through the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, provide informed program and policy advice to the federal government.
- 3) Raise the profile of Elders and Indigenous scholarship in higher education
- 4) Protect and embed the use of Indigenous knowledge, knowledge systems, languages and epistemologies within higher education, curricula, policy, research and student services.
- 5) Provide flow of information amongst Indigenous educators and
- 6) Establish local, national and international links and networks between Indigenous educators, researchers and institutions.

NIHEN members view access to education and educational outcomes as critical to addressing many of the issues that continue to impede the economic and social development, well being and sustainability of Indigenous Australians.

This paper is an IPO's perspective of the current position of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the Australian education

system. It is underpinned by goals and statements related to the following international reports, declarations and programs.

The Millennium Development Goals

Goal 2 Achieve Universal Primary Education

- Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.¹

Implementation of the Second Decade of Indigenous Peoples

The Decade's 5 Main Objectives

- Promoting non-discrimination and inclusion of indigenous peoples in the design, implementation and evaluation of international, regional and national processes regarding laws, policies, resources, programmes and projects.
- Promoting full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in decisions which directly or indirectly affect their lifestyles, traditional lands and territories, their cultural integrity as indigenous peoples with collective rights or any other aspect of their lives, considering the principle of free, prior and informed consent.
- Redefining development policies that depart from a vision of equity and that are culturally appropriate, including respect for the cultural and linguistic diversity of indigenous peoples.
- Adopting targeted policies, programmes, projects and budgets for the development of indigenous peoples, including concrete benchmarks, and particular emphasis on indigenous women, children and youth.
- Developing strong monitoring mechanisms and enhancing accountability at the international, regional and particularly the national level, regarding the implementation of legal, policy and operational frameworks for the protection of indigenous peoples and the improvement of their lives.²

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Article 14

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access,

¹ <http://endpoverty2015.org/goals/universal-education> (accessed 7 April 2009)

² <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/second.html> (accessed 7 April 2009)

when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.³

Report of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
Report of the First Session

- V. Study on Lessons Learned and challenges to Achieve the Implementation of the right of Indigenous Peoples to Education⁴

Reporting Mechanism

This paper is divided into four sections titled Access, Participation, Retention and Success. In Australia these indicators are known as The *Martin Equity Indicators*.⁵ These are currently used to measure the performance of Indigenous people and other identified equity groups in Australian higher education. With regards to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, these indicators are measures of their share of access, participation, retention and success compared with Non-Indigenous performance.⁶ Current outcomes and challenges for Australian education will be presented using these indicators as section titles. The performance being monitored is that of the Australian education system and its approaches in policy and practice regarding Indigenous Australian people.

1. ACCESS

The broader societal approach to Indigenous education has become a numbers game. Increasing the enrolment and retention rate of Indigenous people within the education system has taken priority over systemic transformative change wherein the intellectual and scholarly contributions of Indigenous knowledge are recognised and respected. This pursuit of quantifiable progress alone fails to recognise Indigenous peoples as contributors in the education process.

Despite the prolific contributions by Indigenous educators to western teaching and research, educational institutions continually fail to recognise the tension between supplying post-compulsory education and the needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples. The Australian education system, until recently, was locked into a philosophical base that condoned the isolation of Indigenous Australians through the retention of archaic policies and practices. Increasingly Indigenous scholars, Elders and policy advocates have called for greater parity and recognition at all levels within the education system. The challenge for the Australian Government is to adopt a more inclusive

³ <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html> (accessed 7 April 2009)

⁴ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/ExpertMechanism/1st/docs/A-HRC-10-56.pdf> (accessed 7 April 2009)

⁵ See - Martin, L. M. 1994, *Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education: Volume 1 Equity Indicators*, Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service

⁶ The Martin Indicators are ratios expressed as Indigenous: Non-Indigenous performance over total outputs. Access refers to new enrolments. Participation refers to the share of teaching and learning undertaken. Retention is a measure of progression through a degree program. Success measures completion of units and courses. These are reported annually as part of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations assessment of publicly funded higher education.

approach that engages Indigenous cultural capital within the education system. Such an approach would harness the full potential of all its citizens and ultimately work towards the betterment of the state.

The successful implementation of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to Education rests upon the acceptance and implementation by nation states of a more culturally astute and competent education system. This system must be based upon a more inclusive set of criteria and an explicit set of values that underpin the development of policies to enhance the level of Indigenous participation and progression within the western education system. Such a system must be based upon a framework that is inclusive of Indigenous epistemologies and practices contained within the scholarship of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural world views. Such a world view needs to underpin the disjuncture that exists between Indigenous and non Indigenous education and the appalling retention and graduation rates of minority students within mainstream institutions. While this is of major concern for Indigenous men, it raises particular issues for Indigenous women. statistically they are three times more likely than their male counterparts to enrol in post compulsory education, the retention and graduation rates of Indigenous women continues to be an area of concern. There are many factors that contribute to this situation. Impoverishment, high incarceration and mortality rates of many Indigenous men, limited support networks and poor health act to inhibit the ability of many Indigenous women to progress successfully through the education system. The Australian Government's commitment to "closing the gap" on Indigenous poverty and enhancing their emotional and social wellbeing will be to little avail if more strategic action is not given to address these issues.

1.1 Acknowledgement of the holistic nature of Indigenous education

Both Indigenous and non Indigenous scholars nationally and internationally have increasingly highlighted the intellectual and meritorious values of Indigenous knowledge. Those who have sought much needed transformational change within western education systems have historically been confronted with distinct bias that fails to recognise the scholarship upon which Indigenous knowledge is based.

The recognition and intellectual activation of Indigenous knowledge today is perhaps one of the greatest acts of empowerment sought by Indigenous people across the globe.⁷ The task for Indigenous academics and social advocates has been to affirm and activate the holistic paradigm of Indigenous knowledge to reveal the wealth and richness of Indigenous languages, world views, teaching and experiences, all of which have been systemically excluded from contemporary educational institutions and from Eurocentric knowledge systems.⁸

⁷ Battaste M. , Indigenous knowledge: Foundations for First Nations WINHEC Journal 2006

⁸ Ibid, p1, 2006

Developing an understanding of the paradigm upon which Indigenous knowledge is based is critical to the alleviation of many of the social problems that continue to mar the progression of Indigenous people within Australia. The retention of the Eurocentric nature of western education has contributed to the marginalisation of Indigenous Australia where poverty has reached endemic proportions.

The interconnectedness of education, health, justice and emotional wellbeing must be seen to underpin the philosophical world view of Indigenous Australians and the manner in which education policies and programs are implemented. Such a framework will build upon the spiritual, physical, psychological and intellectual learning needs of individuals which aim to build a strong foundation for their families and communities. This is in direct contrast to the ideologies upon which western education systems are based. In the face of mounting concerns about the poor literacy and numeracy rates amongst Indigenous children and the systemic bias that continues to thrive within the western education system at all levels, the challenge for governments in Australia is to foster a more inclusive and culturally astute curricula that encourages a more holistic approach.

1.2 The human rights-based approach to the right to education - equality and equity, accountability, empowerment and participation

Indigenous peoples should be able to exercise their right to education without compromising or suspending their basic human rights

The Northern Territory Intervention and broader welfare reform agenda has resulted in an education system used by governments to impinge on the human rights of Indigenous Australians. Mutual responsibility has become a government strategy to enforce behaviour modification in Indigenous communities in order to receive services expected and assured by the geographical and cultural position of other sections of the Australian community. Despite promises contained in the National Apology given by the Australian Prime Minister on the 13th February 2008 and the action taken by the Australian Government to endorse the Declaration of Indigenous Rights on the 3rd April 2009, no action has been taken to redress the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, legitimising the roll out of the welfare reforms and denying Indigenous people their most basic human rights undermines the spirit of the National Apology and maintains the disempowerment of Indigenous Australians

1.3 Bi-lingual and Bi-cultural Education

Indigenous children have the right to be socialised in a manner that nurtures their cultural heritage and affords them access to western education regardless of where their communities are located. It is a concern that such rights have been based upon a history of systemic failures that have accomplished little to address the endemic poverty and appalling conditions which are prevalent in communities where the majority of Indigenous people reside.

Rather than addressing the underlying issues that would encourage greater participation of Indigenous children in the education system, governments are increasingly linking their access to schooling to their family's eligibility to income support. This enabled Governments to quarantine welfare payments to a large section of the Indigenous population in Australia and to deny essential services to many rural and remote communities. Whilst this has resulted in severe ramifications for many Indigenous families, it is the women and children who have suffered the most. High male incarceration and mortality rates and youth suicide have depleted many Indigenous families of vital social capital provided by father figures and the vibrant healthy young men. This situation has been compounded by the forced removal of young Indigenous children an action often based on allegations that have been inadequately investigated and unsubstantiated. Teachers and school administrators have been forced to be complicit in the marginalisation and further disposessions of Indigenous Australians while the cultural bias within the curriculum predominately remains.

Behrendt is critical of welfare reform and its promotion as mutual obligation:

Critics of mutual obligation describe it as 'selective paternalism' in the way that it treats some Australians as capable of taking responsibility for their own welfare, and others not. It is argued that implicit in the approach is the assumption that policy makers are more 'rational' and 'moral' than welfare recipients, who are by implication incapable of looking after their own interests or those of their families.⁹

1.4 The increase of government funding to boarding schools for Indigenous children

In recent years, philanthropic and government support of boarding school scholarships have resulted in significant numbers of Indigenous children being moved away from their communities to attend school. The underlying reality is the lack of sufficient infrastructure and human resources allocated for regional, rural and remote education. This has placed families in the unenviable position of having to agree to an option that would otherwise be culturally objectionable.

1.5 The provision of community education services that will support indigenous peoples to develop the skills to manage the development of their communities and to participate in educational decision-making

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted in 1999 and under general comment No. 13 identifies Availability Accessibility, Accountability and Adaptability as the assessment framework for measuring human rights action. For over three decades, the Australian *National Aboriginal Education Policy* has been current national policy with four major

⁹ Behrendt, L and McCausland R. August 2008. "Welfare payments and school attendance: An analysis of experimental policy in Indigenous education." In An Issues Paper for the Australian Education Union: Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology Sydney. p 7

themes of Involvement, Access Participation and Outcomes expressed through its twenty one goals.

It is vital for the broader education system to become more closely aligned with Indigenous models of learning.

Collister writes,

Education should 'speak' to the whole person and focus on concepts not content, questions and not answers, interrelatedness and not reductionist abstract fragmentation. The synergies between eastern philosophies and Indigenous education methodologies can provide a useful map for community education which is not reliant on the next government policy document but instead is rooted in genuine learning in communion.¹⁰

1.6 Higher Education

1.6.1 university research that assist indigenous women's organizations in identifying and effectively utilizing available education resources and programmes, and promoting capacity-building through fellowships and grants

1.6.2 Increasing the outreach and information flow to and from the academic community, including indigenous educational institutions, on indigenous women's issues

Higher education institutions in Australia have only recently recognised the need to systemically embed Indigenous perspectives in curriculum and acknowledge the scholarly contributions of Indigenous communities in developing a culturally ethical framework to underpin research and learning. While many view this as a move toward the adoption of a more culturally astute and competent learning environment, Indigenous people see it as a critical step toward the accomplishment of social parity, sovereignty and economic freedom for their people. Indigenous women view education as a vital means by which they can address and sustain family and community well being, including their rights to enjoy the freedom of motherhood that so many non Indigenous women take for granted. This has particular relevance to western education and the quality of the graduates produced. The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council has increasingly challenged the Australian Government to adopt a more socially responsible approach to teaching, research and education. A model of cultural competency has been proposed for use by Australian universities. The Council in collaboration with the National Indigenous Higher Education Network is also calling for the adoption of more culturally inclusive curriculum across all levels of education. Both of these endeavours are designed to address the impoverishment of Indigenous

¹⁰ Collister, Rupert, Synergies between Indigenous education methodology and eastern philosophies and their application for community education Enriching learning cultures: proceedings of the 11th annual international conference on post-compulsory education and training: volume 1. pp.110-116 Brisbane: Australian Academic Press, 2003

communities and improve the level of participation and progression of Indigenous students.

A recent project sponsored by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council focussed on positioning Indigenous Australian women for leadership in the higher education sector. *Tiddas Showin' Up, Talkin' Up and Puttin' Up: Indigenous Women and Educational Leadership* promoted the development of leadership capacity by allowing the sharing of Indigenous women's knowledge, learning and networking experiences to support professional development.¹¹ Specifically, it promoted and supported strategic change in higher education by strengthening the participation and leadership capacity of Indigenous women academics.¹²

2. PARTICIPATION

The systemic failure to acknowledge and embed Indigenous knowledge as a valid form of scholarship has contributed to the ongoing isolation that Indigenous students experience when engaged in western education.

Indigenous peoples have often had to compromise their cultural values in order to fully participate in the system of education provided by the state. Rather than build the esteem of the Indigenous students, the system has acted to marginalise and label them as unintelligent and scholastically challenged. Despite the attention given to the appalling literacy and numeracy rates amongst Indigenous students, little has been accomplished by successive governments over the past twenty years to overturn this social concern. The inadequacies within the western education system warrant in-depth examination and exposure. Indigenous students are bearing the responsibility for the failures that have occurred against imposed benchmarks derived from inadequate preparation and support for teachers and significant levels of under resourcing.

The sustainability of viable programs implemented by Indigenous communities is continually challenged by the lack of appropriate resources and support by government. The development of programs through community based models are overlooked in favour of imposing the latest educational trends more often created by non-indigenous people.

This continues to devalue the spirit, cultural integrity and worth of the Indigenous educators and the programs themselves.

2.1 Labelling Indigenous children

¹¹ Bunda T and White N, 2009 Final Project Report -The Australian Learning and Teaching Council, *Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching Program*, Tiddas Showin' Up, Talkin' Up and Puttin' Up: Indigenous Women and Educational Leadership. Australian Learning and Teaching Council. <http://www.altc.edu.au/resource-tiddas-showin-up-flinders-2009> (accessed 5 May 2009)

¹² For Further Information see: <http://www.flinders.edu.au/yungorendi/tiddas/HomePage.html>

Indigenous education is often described in deficit language. Performance or non-performance against normative assumptions and labelling of Indigenous children as slow or special needs is an excuse by systems that have failed to resource and adequately prepare culturally competent staff responsible for teaching Indigenous students. Rather than provide support, a large number of Indigenous students are placed in the position of feeling inadequate and incompetent. While a percentage of the students struggle through the education system many disengage from formal schooling and embark on self harming and “at risk” behaviour

There is a concern for the growing tendency to place Indigenous children in Special Education Units (SEU). This has become an alternative for the delivery of supplementary support for literacy and numeracy development. There is a considerable psychological impact upon children as a result of this placement based upon their status as Indigenous learners. Within the SEU, teachers and other professionals are dealing with significant learning needs related to the physical and intellectual disabilities of their students. Under resourcing of schooling can leave Indigenous children intellectually fending for themselves or becoming socially and educationally bereft. Cumulative provision of schooling in this manner results in Indigenous young being unable to secure employment and impacts negatively on the emotional and social well being and economic development of families and communities. A systemic and consistent analysis across educational sectors is urgently required to identify the prevalence and consequence of this concern.

2.2 Indigenous languages in education programs

On September 13, 2007 the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the United Nations. Included within the text of this document was the recognition of Indigenous language rights, articulated in Article 13-1 which stated “Indigenous Peoples have the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their history, languages, oral traditions, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.” Article 14-1 read, “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”

Despite this and the action taken by the United Nations General Assembly to declare 2008 as the International Year of Languages, it is concerning to note the diminishing existence of many Indigenous languages across the globe. At the heart of this phenomenon lies the ongoing struggle for self determination by Indigenous Nations and their peoples. This situation is equally as critical for Indigenous Australians given the protracted history of policies that have denied their right to practice culture and to use their traditional languages. The retention and revival of traditional languages is viewed by Indigenous Australians as vital to the longevity and protection of their culture.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages in their

2005 survey reported that of an original a number of over 250 known Australian Indigenous languages, only about 145 languages are still spoken and the vast majority of these, about 110, are in the severely and critically endangered categories. Eighteen languages are strong. Under the definition of strong languages (where the language is spoken by all age groups)¹³

An immediate investment in revival, maintenance and teaching of Indigenous languages in schools and institutions is required. Recognition and inclusion of Indigenous language speakers is vital.

2.3 Vocational Education and Training Sector Participation

Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in Australia per their proportion of the national population. A major challenge for this sector is the progression of students to higher level qualifications either within VET or to degree level programs within higher education.

During 2007, 4.9 per cent of government funded VET students in Australia identified as Indigenous, while 8.2 per cent of students did not report their Indigenous status (figure 5.3). The proportion of government funded VET students who identified as Indigenous (4.9 per cent) was higher than the proportion of Indigenous people in the total population nationally (2.4 per cent)¹⁴

Of those Indigenous Technical and Further Education (TAFE) graduates who went on to further study, 64.4 per cent continued within the TAFE system (compared with 63.1 per cent for all TAFE graduates) and 14.6 per cent went to university (compared with 21.2 per cent for all TAFE graduates)¹⁵

The progression of Indigenous people from vocational training into employment is still a concern. High rates of unemployment within Indigenous communities contribute greatly to levels of despair and marginalisation.

2.4 Australian Indigenous Education and UN bodies

2.4.1 United Nations University Traditional Knowledge Initiative in Australia – participation of Indigenous Australian people in Higher Education

During 2007 The United Nations University's Institute of Advanced Studies established the UNU Traditional Knowledge Initiative located at Charles Darwin University in Darwin, Northern Territory. The Australian Indigenous higher education sector welcomes the opportunity for increased collaboration

¹³ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL) (2005). National Indigenous Languages survey report 2005. Canberra: AIATSIS.

¹⁴ SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2009, *Report on Government Services 2009, Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra p 73

¹⁵ SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2009, *Report on Government Services 2009, Indigenous Compendium*, Productivity Commission, Canberra p 83

and participation in the development of initiatives to address the social and educational needs of Indigenous Australians.

2.4.2 UNESCO to include the participation and experience of Indigenous peoples in post-compulsory schooling in its report to the UNPFII

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights described higher education access and responsiveness in a general comment on Article 13 The Right to Education. Higher education should be universally available.

The United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has a mandate for higher education. Over time, it has included the perspectives of Indigenous peoples as part of broader education agendas. As an agency providing reports to the UNPFII, UNESCO it is uniquely placed to report on the participation and experience of Indigenous peoples in post-compulsory education across the world and be effective is highlighting good practices.

3. RETENTION

Many interrelated factors impact upon the retention and progression for Indigenous peoples in education. Institutions, governments and communities need to be inclusive in policy and practice of the contributions Indigenous peoples make to education. Progression to post-compulsory schooling and further education is achieved where positive relationships are established and maintained through the acknowledgement and inclusion of Indigenous worldviews, perspectives and knowledges.

3.1 Indigenous perspectives in curriculum

During the last decade Indigenous scholars, policy makers and social advocates have called upon the Australian Government to embed Indigenous history as a compulsory component of curriculum across all levels of education. To date this vision has achieved limited success despite the dearth of knowledge about Indigenous Australians within the wider population. In the Spirit of the National Apology and the Nation's commitment to becoming a reconciled state, Indigenous scholars are lobbying Governments for much needed educational reform to address this issue. The achievement of this goal is critical for the well being of Indigenous women who continue to experience the consequences of colonial policies that legitimised the many atrocities imposed. Such an approach is seen by many as critical to the restoration of Indigenous self determination facilitating an awareness of the historical role that Indigenous people have played in the development of Australia since colonisation.

3.2 Schooling for urban Indigenous communities

The 2006 Australian Census revealed that 75.4% of Indigenous Australians live in urban and rural communities.¹⁶ Indigenous students undertaking education in major towns and cities are overlooked in relation to statistics arising from inadequate services provision in remote locations. The identity of urban Indigenous peoples is continually contested with enormous impacts on their engagement with schooling. Being a lone Indigenous child in the school is a common reality for this group. The challenge for schools is to provide a culturally inclusive curriculum which recognises the needs of Indigenous people living in urban settings. This isolation can have a negative impact upon the individual and their families' participation and retention within the school community.

3.3 Resourcing schools, retaining quality teachers

The number of Indigenous people who are employed as teachers and other professional positions within the education systems must increase. Recognition of their cultural capital and contributions as educators is vital for their retention in the system. The engagement of teachers and schools within the broader community is seen as necessary for ensuring service provision matches needs and aspirations. Embedding Indigenous perspectives in curriculum has been identified as a contributing factor to retention and achieved by establishing and maintaining relationships between teachers and Indigenous community members, particularly Elders. Teacher education programs in higher education have over time recognised the need for exposure of its undergraduates to issues affecting the social, economic and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and their impacts on the educational process. However, the number of Indigenous people employed in universities delivering pre-service teacher preparation remains low. Children are entitled to professionally competent as well as culturally competent teachers.

4. SUCCESS

Success is measured by the ability of Indigenous peoples to overcome educational hurdles constructed and maintained by western meritocracy. Inclusion of the voices of Indigenous people in education as learners, teachers, administrators, parents and policy makers is surely an indicator of a successful system.

4.1 The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC)

The establishment of The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council in 2005 is a notable success for Indigenous education. The role of IHEAC is to provide policy advice to the Federal Government through the Minister for Education on issues concerning participation rates of Indigenous Australians in the University sector across Australia.

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2008. Population Characteristics: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006, cat. no. 4713.0, ABS, Canberra.

IHEAC's position is that higher education has a central role to play in the advancement of Indigenous communities and the preservation and development of Indigenous cultures. Its foremost objective is to bridge the gap for participation in Australian higher education by achieving:

- more Indigenous undergraduates, especially in the professional disciplines.
- more Indigenous postgraduates, in research higher degrees and doctorates in particular.
- higher completion rates for Indigenous people who commence university degrees.

For these outcomes to occur, Australian universities need to apply:

- greater cultural competence on the part of all students and staff.
- greater prominence for Indigenous studies and Indigenous research.
- more Indigenous staff, particularly in senior academic positions and leadership roles.
- more prominence for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and values on campus.
- more involvement of Indigenous people in university governance.

The current fourteen member Council's term of office expires in May 2009 and the Federal Government has committed itself to appointing a new Council to continue with the important work carried out to date.

4.1.1 Key Issue – Under-representation

Underrepresentation of Indigenous students and staff in the higher education system is due to

- intergenerational educational disadvantages
- high attrition rates of Indigenous students in senior school;
- an over-representation of Indigenous students undertaking vocational rather than academic studies in years 11 and 12.

4.1.2 Challenges

- To improve enrolment levels that are well below population parity levels, particularly in key professional areas.
- An access rate for Indigenous students as a ratio to the access rate for non-Indigenous students, a level which has declined annually from 1.61% in 2002 to approximately 1.43% in 2007.
- Increasing retention and success rates which are approximately 80% of those of non-Indigenous students.
- To reach population parity of Indigenous PhD students, candidature would need to rise by more than 500%.
- To improve the numbers of Indigenous academic and general staff (which is unacceptably low) - Indigenous staff represents only 0.83% of all staff in

higher education institutions in 2007, having increased from 0.71% in 2001.

4.1.3 Current Initiatives

IHEAC's vision sees a higher education system in which Indigenous Australians share equally in life and career opportunities available through university education.

IHEAC is currently involved in a number of initiatives to help achieve this vision. Focus will be on the whole of life learning:

- inspirational leadership and pathways projects in secondary schools.
- better support for Indigenous students at university – financial and academic
- An Indigenous Learned Academy and an Indigenous Model of Researcher Development.
- IHEAC and *Universities Australia* have formed a joint Working Party on Indigenous Cultural Competency.
 - Cultural competency ensures the institutional culture, staff culture and nature of curriculum of universities recognises and supports the participation and cultural knowledge of Indigenous students. It also equips all graduates with Indigenous cultural competence as a core skill to take into the broader workforce.
 - The Federal Government has allocated \$500,000.00 (Australian) to *Universities Australia* and the IHEAC to develop pilots and implement Cultural Competency across the Higher Education Sector.
- Development of a National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy that aims to increase recruitment and improve the development of Indigenous staff in academic and general positions in universities.

4.2 Relationship between NIHEN as a community body and IHEAC as the government advisory body

NIHEN is a professional network of Indigenous education leaders. It is a self governing group and as such is able to respond in flexible, pragmatic and community based approaches. A majority of the IHEAC are NIHEN members. A good working relationship has been established between the groups based upon shared goals for increasing Indigenous participation and success in education across all sectors. NIHEN has actively supported the IHEAC in its strategic directions and projects. IHEAC recognises NIHEN as the larger sector network.

Releasing the potential of Indigenous people as individuals, families, communities and nations through successful Indigenous education policy and programs is vital for the planet's survival. Ancient knowledge that is respected and cherished will ultimately cradle future humanity.