

**‘Educating for the Future’, National Report Volume 4,
Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody:**

A Template for Future Indigenous Education Policy?

A Report for Indigenous Education Policy Makers & Analysts

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Executive Summary

The extent to which government policies have contributed to improved educational experiences and outcomes for Indigenous students is contested factor. Opinion is split, have we set off down the right path, or have the string of attempts resulted in little? This paper looks at the recommendations from ‘Educating for the Future’, National Report Volume 4 from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991). Through the construction of a chronologically ordered table of subsequent policies and recommendations, a determination can be made as to the extent to which the issues raised by the Royal Commission have been addressed.

The implementation of a holistic approach to the issue of Indigenous education, teacher training, and ‘true’ participation of Indigenous people are identified from the table as being issues of significance, and hence worthy of further attention. This must include all levels of government and administration. There has also been a failure to adequately communicate the content of these strategies to their ‘target audience’. To some degree over analysis and potential apathy is seen as a result of this continual stream of policies, strategies and recommendations.

Six key recommendations have been made for the consideration of policy makers. They are:

Recommendation 1: That by utilising the table developed within this report, or by other means, Indigenous education policy is assessed on the basis of what has worked and what has not, and a determination should be made of what policies have been implemented over time and what still needs to be or should be implemented.

Recommendation 2: That the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, especially ‘Educating for the Future’, is identified as having provided a unique opportunity to gauge the opinions of Indigenous communities in relation to education, and hence should be analysed to determine the relevance of this extensive body of Indigenous commentary on the state of education, and which of the issues need to be addressed.

Recommendation 3: That the Partners for Success program is identified as a major step forward in addressing Indigenous education issues, and that it’s implementation is tracked and analysed on the basis of providing real improvements in educational experiences and outcomes for indigenous people.

Recommendation 4: That the continued and impassioned requested by Indigenous Australians for consultation and a ‘real’ say in the determination of education policy and planning be heeded, and that Indigenous people are included in all phases of the process, from planning, implementation, performance and review. This should be facilitated through the communication of existing policy in an appropriate and easily ‘consumable’ manner.

Recommendation 5: That there is greater integration, connection and communication between the various education programs and planners at the various levels of government, both local, State and Commonwealth, and that at all stages these elements remain transparent and accountable to all groups and individuals.

Recommendation 6: That the focus should now be on the outcomes of education, rather than on the education system itself, to ensure that improvements in that system are translated in greater and better employment and the increased transition of Indigenous people from school into further education. Ultimately policy must ensure that Indigenous Australians can take a full role in Australian society without needing to forsake their communities or cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to look at the recommendations from ‘Educating for the Future’, National Report Volume 4 from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991). In part, a determination will be made as to the extent to which these recommendations have been reflected in policy, or in subsequent recommendations for Indigenous education. From this, the degree to which these original recommendations have been adopted or actually applied can also be determined.

Due to restrictions in time and in the interests of brevity, this paper will not be systematically addressing indicators of Indigenous educational outcomes. Rather it will rely upon government policy, and academic commentary to determine the extent to which issues are being addressed, as opposed to making a determination as to whether these policies actually are successful.

There clearly exists a divergence of opinion as to the success of the various State and Federal programs for improving Indigenous education outcomes in Queensland. The National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (1998) takes a positive view. Their report shows that:

[A] concerted national policy effort can make a real difference if there is widespread agreement amongst all levels of government and if there is widespread community support for reform amongst indigenous and non-indigenous Australians alike.

Things are not yet right, but in just one decade Australia has gone a long way towards achieving parity in participation in education and training amongst indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. The national indigenous education and training policy that was adopted a decade ago has created the conditions for real progress. The educational outcomes attained by indigenous students have also improved greatly, but a significant gap between the outcomes achieved by indigenous and non-indigenous people still remains.

However, in ‘Improving the School Attendance of Indigenous Students’, Bourke (et al, 2000), concludes that:

Despite initiatives which have been introduced by Commonwealth and State/Territory governments in the last 20 years to improve participation in, and outcomes from, education among Indigenous students, they continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia, with consistently lower levels of academic achievement and higher rates of absenteeism than among non-indigenous students.

One can conclude that these two statements merely reflect an optimistic and a pessimistic interpretation of the same factors. Ultimately a defeatist attitude is not an option. However,

we cannot simply look to existing policies and reach the conclusion that at least some improvements have been made. If the current policies closely reflect those of the past, we must ask the question are they really going to achieve positive outcomes for Indigenous students, when they have not already?

2. A Chronological Comparison between ‘Educating for the Future’ and other Indigenous Education Policy and Recommendations

The primary tool by which these issues will be addressed is through the construction of a comparative table, comparing existing government policies and recommendations in chronological order with those of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). From this the focus of policy over time will become evident, as too will the similarities. Although apparently simplistic, the ‘distilling’ of the information used to construct this table was a major academic undertaking, requiring the review of many hundreds of pages of documentation. This should prove to be a useful resource by which people will see the variety of approaches to achieving better outcomes for Indigenous students. It should reveal weaknesses in existing policies by highlighting their ineffectiveness over time.

The first column highlights the recommendations made within the ‘Educating for the Future’ section of National Report Volume 4. The subsequent columns correspond, in chronological order, to subsequent recommendations or policy from a variety of sources. Where similar policy exists, that policy will be stated in the corresponding row. Where no policy or recommendation is found, that is similar to those within ‘Educating the Future’ a ‘blank’ will be entered. These ‘blanks’ can be of equal importance to entries of similar policy, as one can ask the question, ‘Why was this issue not addressed in this policy?’ or ‘What has changed to make this issue no longer relevant?’ Of course, the focus of each policy or recommendations statement may inherently result in the absence of some issues, and these must be considered in any subsequent analysis. Limitations also exist in the fact that policy relevant to Aboriginal education, but which was not discussed within the RCIADIC report, is not included on the table. Ultimately a complete comparison between all policies over time is the ideal, however due to the restrictions discussed above, only a comparison between the RCIADIC recommendations and the other policies and recommendations will be performed.

Table 1: A Chronological Comparison between ‘Educating for the Future’ and other Indigenous Education Policy and Recommendations

Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Educating for the Future (1991) (paraphrased)	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1989)	The National Goals for Schooling in Australia in the Twenty-First Century (1999)	National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (1999)	Queensland State Education 2010: A New Deal on Equity (1999)	Improving School Attendance of Indigenous Students (2000)	Partners for Success (2002 - present)
289: Pay attention to the fact that the scope of the NAEP extends to pre schooling programs and that it should be recognised that to a considerable extent the success of the whole NAEP will turn on the success of pre schooling initiatives. Parents and carers must be involved.	7: To ensure that ATSI children of pre-primary school have access to pre-school services on a basis comparable to that available to other Australian children of the same age.		To increase the proportion of the Indigenous 3 to 5 year old population in preschool education and ensure those students are confident and competent to enter primary school			
290: The curricula of schools at all levels should reflect the fact that Australia has an aboriginal history and Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters. It is essential that Aboriginal viewpoints, interests, perceptions and expectations are reflected in curricula, teaching and administration of schools.	21: To provide all Australians students with an understanding of and respect for ATSI traditional and contemporary cultures.	3.4 All students should understand and acknowledge the value of ATSI cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity.		Given the different social and economic circumstances facing indigenous communities in different regions and the cultural diversity of indigenous communities, any agreement should provide for regional approaches.		Ensure the development of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting policies and programs that are responsive to the needs of ATSI students and contribute to improved standards of education
291: When implementing programs incorporating Aboriginal viewpoints, local schools should seek the support and participation of the local Aboriginal community in addition to any other appropriate Aboriginal organisations or groups.	2: To increase the number of ATSI people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teachers assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers, including community people engaged in teaching ATSI culture, history and con-temporary society, and ATSI languages.		Improving attendance levels by engaging parents and the community.		11. The schools curricula should be developed in conjunction with parents and community members with the local Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA) having a meaningful role.	Partnerships between schools and ATSI communities, based on mutual respect and recognition of mutual obligation, are essential for improving outcomes
292: Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups should to take into account when negotiating with schools, the fact that many Aboriginal communities and organisations have identified the need for the education curricula to include a course of study to inform students on social issues such as the legal system – including police and courts – civil liberties, drug and alcohol use and sex education.		1.4: Students should be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia’s system of government and civic life. 1.8: Students should have the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to maintain a healthy lifestyle.				All students have the right to develop at school the knowledge, skills and attitudes to function successfully in life beyond school, to access further education and training and to secure rewarding and worthwhile employment.
293: The introduction of the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program should be commended as being an appropriate recognition of the need for the participation of Aboriginal people at a local level in the delivery of school programs. The success of the program will be dependent on the extent to which the Aboriginal community is guaranteed adequate consultation, negotiation and support in devising and implementing this program.	5: To provide education and training services to develop the skills of ATSI people to participate in educational decision-making. 6: To develop arrangements for the provisions of independent advice from ATSI communities regarding educational decisions at regional, State, Territory and National levels.				11. The schools curricula should be developed in conjunction with parents and community members with the local Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA) having a meaningful role.	Partnerships between schools and ATSI communities, based on mutual respect and recognition of mutual obligation, are essential for improving outcomes
294: Governments and Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups should take note of the methodology employed in such programs as that at Batchelor College, Northern Territory in the training of Aboriginal teachers and others for work in remote communities.					8. That intensive professional development programs for teachers be developed to provide cross cultural training and an understanding of Indigenous education.	
295: All in-service and initial teacher training courses should include courses which will enable teachers to understand that Australia has an Aboriginal history and Aboriginal viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters, and to teach the curriculum which reflects those matters. Aboriginal people should be involved in these training courses.					3. All teacher education students in Australia should undertake compulsory Indigenous education and Indigenous studies units in their pre-service training.	Encourage both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to undertake professional development studies relevant to teaching in ATSI communities or schools.
296: Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups should consider such processes which might allow communities and teachers to negotiate and agree upon the role of teachers at local and community level, and to negotiate guidelines for the teaching of Aboriginal students and the employment and conditions of teachers on local communities.	18: To provide community education services which enable ATSI people develop the skills to manage the development of their communities.			Any agreement should specify how education would be coordinated with other government and private community services at the local level and linked to community development.		Establish guidelines at State level outlining the freedom schools have to design educational experiences suitable for Indigenous communities and students.
297: Aboriginal Education Workers should be given the recognition and remuneration which their vital role merits and it should be recognised that they suffer from conflicting expectations of community and Department as to their role. They need to be accountable to the Aboriginal community and their employer.	2: To increase the number of ATSI people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teachers assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers, including community people engaged in teaching ATSI culture, history and con-temporary society, and ATSI languages.		Utilising the skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers to improve attendance levels			Develop local accountability frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the achievement of agreed targets.
298: It should be recognised that owing to substantial historical educational disadvantage which Aboriginal people have experienced, a course for Aboriginal students may necessarily be longer than might be the case if the course were provided to non-Aboriginal students.		3.1: Students’ outcomes from schooling should be free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on culture and ethnicity. 3.3: Students should have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve.	Supporting families and parents to overcome the social problems that make it difficult for them to get involved in their children’s education		5. That schools in rural and remote regions should be encouraged to negotiate the annual school calendar and daily timetable with their communities, to achieve greater fit between school needs and community wishes.	
299: Should establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning , delivery, and evaluation of preschool, primary and secondary education services for their children, in order to achieve equity in education for Aboriginal people but also to achieve a strengthening of Aboriginal identity, decision making and self-determination.	1: To establish effective arrangements for the participation of ATSI parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of pre-school, primary and secondary education services for their children.	Improving attendance levels by engaging parents and the community.	Improving attendance levels by engaging parents and the community. Greater flexibility in preschool and school organisation to meet Indigenous community cultural and other needs.		11. The schools curricula should be developed in conjunction with parents and community members with the local Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA) having a meaningful role.	Partnerships between schools and ATSI communities, based on mutual respect and recognition of mutual obligation, are essential for improving outcomes

3. New from Old: A Discussion of Indigenous Education Policy Over Time

This section of the report will discuss issues that have become evident through the construction of the table and will raise the questions that these issues warrant. From this, policy makers will be able to identify the issues they will need to address, and will be able to see justification for the subsequent recommendations for action at the conclusion of this report. These questions will not, however, be answered here.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) provided a unique opportunity to gauge the opinions of Indigenous communities in relation to education. It was a process, the extent of which is not likely to be repeated in the near future. Hence it provides a good comparison by which to gauge the appropriateness of subsequent and current policy. Using the report as a 'point of reference' or 'yard-stick' by which to analyse other policy should not, however, be equated with recognition of it as a definitive statement or an ideal policy path. Rather, it broadly reflects Aboriginal opinion relating to education issues in Australia.

From the table, it becomes immediately apparent where the focus of the various Indigenous education policies lay. As each policy focussed on different aspects of the education process or on different issues, it cannot simply be concluded that any was deficient for not encompassing the full scope of the recommendations brought out of the RCIADIC report. However, over time it is important to identify that each component of the RCIADIC recommendations were at least being dealt with. As such, the table does highlight one area of criticism, that is, the failure to approach the issue of Indigenous education in a holistic or integrated manner. In particular, teacher training has been one element that is continually overlooked or undervalued in the process. How can we hope improve programs, involve communities or include Aboriginal viewpoints in teaching, if there are neither Indigenous teachers nor teachers trained specifically in Indigenous issues.

Each column within the table, and the number of blanks, points to the piecemeal approach of educational policy makers in the last 10 years. Only now, with the 'Partners for Success' policy from the Queensland State Government, do we see the recognition for this broader approach. Partners for Success, in addressing many of the issues raised in the RCIADIC, is in part able to satisfy these issues. We are at a stage where a definitive strategy must be

implemented to counter any apathy for, or confusion regarding the continually changing policy 'front'. Through this review, it has also become evident that the sheer scope of the variety of programs and initiatives, both at local, state and federal level, and the a complete lack of appropriate documentation for the Indigenous Australian population, could become a contributing factor in their success.

The continued requests by Indigenous Australians, to be involved in a consultation process has been matched, in policy, by continued recognition of the rightly involvement. The table therefore, has cemented the concept of participation and consultation as an essential element of any Indigenous education policy. However, it must be determined whether these demand for involvement are being met and whether the degree of involvement is satisfactory to the Indigenous people and whether it is contributing to improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students. One cannot help but wonder if the demands of inclusion over time, can be determined to be indicative of a failure for Indigenous people included in these initiatives.

4. Conclusion

From 1989 to the present a continual stream of policy, programs, initiatives and recommendations have been devised to ‘improve the lot’ for Indigenous students. However no significant innovation in these attempts can be seen. Consultation with Indigenous people has highlighted the same concerns now as existed at the time of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. While some see that we are on the right path but more still needs to be done, others see the failure to achieve positive outcomes, more than offsets any improvements in the classroom experience for Indigenous students.

Through the use of the table, policy makers will be able to identify the various strategies over time, and use this information to investigate which components of each worked and why. The table has also highlighted that ‘Partners for Success’ has taken a broader approach, that seems to satisfy more of the issues raised in the Royal Commission. Now, a program of monitoring, both of school experiences and of the outcomes of education needs to be implemented to track the success of this strategy.

5. Recommendations

I have no intention of adding to the ever growing list of recommendations for improving education for Indigenous Australians. Rather, this section of the report will provide policy makers and education program implementers, points to consider in the continual policy development and review process.

Recommendation 1

That by utilising the table developed within this report, or by other means, Indigenous education policy is assessed on the basis of what has worked and what has not, and a determination should be made of what policies have been implemented over time and what still needs to be or should be implemented.

Recommendation 2

That the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, especially 'Educating for the Future', is identified as having provided a unique opportunity to gauge the opinions of Indigenous communities in relation to education, and hence should be analysed to determine the relevance of this extensive body of Indigenous commentary on the state of education, and which of the issues need to be addressed.

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Abbreviations

ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
NAEP	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy
RCIADIC	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody