



October 2008

Indigenous Education and Employment - Position Statement

The AASW supports:

- The principles and aspirations of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights signed 13 December 1948;¹
- The principles of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples signed 13 September 2007;
- The findings of the Reconciliation Australia commissioned Access Economics Report revealing there are sizable economy-wide benefits for Australia from improving Indigenous health, quality of life and educational attainment.²

Introduction: The Social Work Platform

1. The social work profession is committed to maximising the well-being of individuals, families and the community in socially inclusive communities, which emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity
2. In carrying out their professional tasks and duties, social workers strive to act in ways that give equal priority to respect for human dignity and worth and the pursuit of social justice. This commitment is demonstrated through service to humanity, integrity, competence, and practice based on evidence, which characterise professional social work practice.
3. The AASW is the only national organisation for social workers qualified from accredited university courses in Australia, who are involved in the delivery of a range of community services including health, family and child welfare, income support, in the public, private and not for profit sectors. The AASW has established a dedicated national issues group called the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Work (ATSI) Committee. This sub-committee of the National Social Policy Committee has been formed to promote the ATSI voice on Indigenous issues in the

¹ Articles 22, 23, 24 and 25

² Access Economics Report "Economic Impact of Indigenous Disadvantage" 2008 (Commissioned by Reconciliation Australia)



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AASW. The AASW also works closely with the National Coalition of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Workers.

Role of Social Workers

1. Social workers are employed in a broad range of areas relating to Indigenous education and employment e.g. direct service delivery as School Counsellors, assisting Indigenous people at Job Centres and Centrelink Offices, working for Indigenous Controlled Community organisations, undertaking policy research and social policy development, administration, management, consultancy, education, training, supervision and evaluation within different levels of government and non-government services.
2. Social workers adopt a systems approach to facilitate change and recognise that the physical, mental, cultural, social, emotional and spiritual health of Indigenous people and communities can impact greatly on their educational aspirations and achievements and ability to engage in meaningful work.
3. Social workers strive to understand the importance of land and culture to indigenous people and the role these can play in motivating Indigenous people to engage in the education system and to seek meaningful work.

Key points

1. An appropriate policy response recognises the unique cultural traditions of Indigenous Australians and the links many Indigenous people have to their land and communities. 81% of the Indigenous population in the NT and 41% of the Indigenous population in WA live in remote and very remote communities and many Indigenous people living in these remote areas find it difficult to move away from their communities to attend school, complete a secondary education or gain employment.
2. Appropriate Indigenous education and employment policy recognises that many Indigenous people experience lack of access to a range of education and employment opportunities due to isolation, cultural differences, language and health barriers.
3. Appropriate Indigenous education policy recognises there is a shortage of classrooms and education facilities for the current enrolment of students in remote Indigenous communities. There is a lack of qualified, experienced teachers, including bilingual teachers and



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assistant teachers, to provide a quality, learning environment. There is also a high teacher turnover in remote communities due to short-term employment contracts, lack of housing, stressful working conditions and lack of support and funding.³

4. Many Indigenous children will have experienced trauma and abuse and have health problems, such as hearing loss, that require additional support.⁴
5. Appropriate Indigenous education policy recognises the vital importance of engaging Indigenous parents and local staff to improve Indigenous school attendance.
6. Feeling confident and having a positive self-esteem are steps along the pathway towards Indigenous people attaining employment in Australia's dominant white society.⁵
7. Appropriate Indigenous education and employment policy listens to what Indigenous communities say works for them, is evidence based and adopts a bottom-up community development approach rather than a top-down approach to policy formulation and service delivery.
8. Whilst 31% of Indigenous people live in the major Australian cities many do not access mainstream health, education or employment services and often live in overcrowded conditions impacting on educational attainment and employment status.

Policy context

Because of the huge range of health, housing, economic issues and other indicators of social disadvantage facing many Indigenous individuals and communities,⁶ Indigenous educational attainment and employment status lags behind that of the non-Indigenous Australian population.

Indigenous people are disadvantaged across a range of socio-economic factors as reported in the 2006 Census⁷.

³ Australian Education Union "Education is the Key" 2007

⁴ Australian Education Union "Education is the Key" 2007

⁵ Cram, F. "Valuing Indigenous Knowledge and Doing" 2008

⁶ See AASW Policy Statement on Indigenous Health Issues

⁷ *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4704.0) available on www.abs.gov.au and www.aihw.gov.au.



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- Indigenous Australians experience lower incomes than non-Indigenous Australians, higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of home ownership - all of which can impact on a person's educational outcomes.
 - Mortality rates of Indigenous people are almost three times the rate for non-Indigenous people in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory. This high mortality rate impacts on the time spent in mourning deaths and the expense of funerals that in turn impacts on time available to pursue education and employment opportunities, particularly in remote and very remote Indigenous communities.
 - Indigenous people are half as likely to complete Year 12 as non-Indigenous people.
 - Remote Indigenous communities have the highest rates of unemployment and lowest levels of education.⁸
 - Around 25% of the Indigenous Australian population live in areas classified as 'remote' or 'very remote', compared with only 2% of the non-Indigenous population. This isolation and remoteness impinges on access to and quality of education and availability of work opportunities for those Indigenous people in remote areas.
 - A much greater proportion of the Indigenous Australian population is in the age groups 10 - 14 years, compared to corresponding proportions in the non-Indigenous population. 39% in NT and 37% in Qld of the Indigenous population are under age 15 years. This has significant policy implications for increased demand on education, as well as housing and health services.
 - The NT has the highest Indigenous teenage fertility rate in Australia. This presents significant policy implications for education as well as health services, as having children younger can be an impediment to staying in education and getting a job.⁹
 - In the NT almost half the Indigenous people counted as being employed are on the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). However if Indigenous people are not in the workforce they may be meaningfully engaged in looking after family or caring for country. This has policy implications for Indigenous work/life balance, as many Indigenous people living in remote communities do not necessarily wish to be engaged in full-time work as many have strong obligations to care for family and country.¹⁰
 - There are serious weaknesses in education facilities in Aboriginal communities, including lack of access to schools (especially secondary schools) in many communities and an inadequate supply of classrooms and teachers in others (for example Wadeye). 94% of Aboriginal

⁸ Langton, M. "Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show – Re-imaging Australia" in Griffith Review. Edition 19 2007 Griffith University and Author.

⁹ Johnstone, K. "Australia's Indigenous Population: A Demographic Gift?" 2008

¹⁰ Altman, J. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) 2008



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communities in the Northern Territory have no preschool, 56% have no secondary school and 27% have a local primary school more than 50km away.¹¹

- Poor educational attainment and employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians need to be understood within the historical/cultural contexts of colonisation and cultural dislocation, and resultant inter-generational trauma.

Recommendations

1. The AASW recognises that education needs to be culturally appropriate and relevant, recognising cultural learning, including lifestyles and cultural knowledge expected from childhood¹² and that Indigenous people have a number of cultural obligations that may impinge on attendance at school and work.
2. The AASW urges governments to recognise the importance of Indigenous community controlled education and employment initiatives and community based solutions for alternative employment and development such as harvesting wildlife, indigenous arts, caring for country.¹³
3. The AASW urges governments to recognise the need for a joint government/Indigenous mutual understanding of Indigenous education and employment policy to achieve any significant improvements to the levels of Indigenous education and employment.
4. The AASW urges governments to recognise that policy decisions need to be based on a good evidence base and what works well in one community may not necessarily work well in another. An aunty, cousin or grandparent is often the person looking after school children in extended Indigenous families, a situation far less likely in non-Indigenous households.
5. The AASW recognises that Indigenous people need sustainable livelihoods. There is a role in some remote Indigenous communities for the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) to provide some autonomy and a lump sum of finance for the community to assist with options for community controlled development programs in areas such as education, housing and other community infrastructure whilst

¹¹ Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory (CAO), 2007, A proposed *Emergency Response and Development Plan* to protect Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory

¹² WA Child Health Survey (Vol 3)

¹³ Altman, J. CAEPR 2008



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providing Indigenous people with the flexibility and time for cultural obligations.

6. The AASW supports flexible funding arrangements to include training and mentorship for Indigenous people as a motivation towards employment
7. The AASW urges governments to recognise that feeling positive and having confidence is the pathway towards improving the education and employment status of Indigenous people.
8. The AASW supports strategies to address intergenerational trauma to assist individuals and communities grow in self-esteem and confidence necessary for achieving educational and employment outcomes.

Conclusions

1. The AASW considers that improvements to the education and employment status of Indigenous Australians will not be achieved without improvements to a range of socio-economic conditions in Indigenous communities including adequate housing, sanitation, clean water, availability of fresh food and access to a range of health services.
2. The AASW supports increased funding to culturally appropriate Indigenous controlled education facilities and increased training and mentorship to assist Indigenous people to be meaningfully employed on their land where they have strong cultural associations.
3. Improving Indigenous quality of life, increasing Indigenous educational attainment and workforce participation has significant economic benefits for the whole Australian economy.

References

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Disclaimer: Position statements

**Approved by the AASW National Social Policy Committee: 16 October
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