



Australian Government



Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council

# **Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council**

**Submission to the National  
Indigenous Knowledge Centre  
Project**

**March 2010**



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Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council

Professor Steven Larkin, Chair  
Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Deputy Chair  
Professor Roger Thomas  
Associate Professor Ngiare Brown  
Professor Paul Chandler  
Associate Professor Susan Green  
Professor Lynette Russell  
Mr Russell Taylor  
Mr Asmi Wood

Dr. Jackie Huggins AM  
National IKC Project  
State Library of Queensland  
PO Box 3488  
SOUTH BRISBANE QLD 4101

Dear Dr Huggins

**National Indigenous Knowledge Centre Project submission**

Since its inauguration in 2005, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) has provided policy advice to Government on improving outcomes in higher education for Indigenous students and staff relating to their participation, retention and progression both in study and in employment.

The Council, now in its third term, reports to both the Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the Minister for Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. The Council welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the development of the proposed National Indigenous Knowledge Centre.

The subject of the National Indigenous Knowledge Centre was discussed at the 15<sup>th</sup> IHEAC meeting in February 2010. The content of that discussion and subsequent input from Council Members is reflected in this submission, which was endorsed by myself as Council Chair via electronic communications.

Yours sincerely

Professor Steven Larkin  
Chair  
3 May 2010

# Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council submission to the National Indigenous Knowledge Centre Project.

## Key Recommendation:

**While the Government has committed to establishing a National Indigenous Knowledge Centre, the Government must establish if there is an unmet need which justifies the establishment of a new entity.**

**If a National Indigenous Knowledge Centre is indeed warranted, the proposed body must align with and complement the existing work being undertaken around Indigenous research and knowledge, in particular that of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.**

## Needs Analysis

IHEAC supports the concept of a National Indigenous Knowledge Centre (NIKC), but stresses the importance of determining the need that this Centre meets and the desired outcomes.

In its response to the final report of the *Australia 2020 Summit*, the Government noted that Indigenous culture is a critical part of Australia's identity and strengthening it is a core element of sustaining a strong and healthy Indigenous community. The Government further noted that the idea of a national body dedicated to Indigenous knowledge or culture was a prominent theme at the Summit and was raised across multiple streams.

Based on this feedback of Summit participants the Government made the following commitment to establish a new Centre:

*As the first step in the establishment of a centre, the community will be consulted on its form.*

*We are therefore initiating a feasibility study to engage the Indigenous and wider communities and existing institutions to develop options for the most effective way to strengthen and support Indigenous culture.*

IHEAC believes a key issue for consideration during the feasibility study is whether a new centre is needed or whether existing bodies, networks, and organisations can be expanded upon to serve this role.

## Role of the Centre

The Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education highlighted the importance of Indigenous Knowledge in the higher education sector in its findings<sup>1</sup>:

### Indigenous knowledge

*"Higher Education providers should ensure that the institutional culture, the cultural competence of staff and the nature of the curriculum recognises and supports the participation of Indigenous students." (Chapter 3.2)*

*"Indigenous knowledge should be embedded into the curriculum to ensure that all students have an understanding of Indigenous culture." (Chapter 3.2)*

While universities are moving in the direction of ensuring Indigenous Knowledge is embedded in the curriculum, IHEAC supports a national Centre whose role might in part

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/default.aspx>

be to promote the value, application and utility of Indigenous Knowledges. This will benefit all Australians.

IHEAC also believes the NIKC must be actively engaged in supporting cultural transmission activities – i.e. the passing of Indigenous knowledge from older to younger generations. Such transmission is vital for both cultural continuity and identity by, for example, ensuring the socio-cultural histories of communities are disseminated and understood by younger generations. This has the potential to promote healthy cultural identities which are important determinants for positive self esteem. As a consequence contemporary strategies aimed at improving Indigenous health, education, and justice outcomes are likely to have better chances of success.

For cultural transmission to occur the NIKC cannot be a mere repository of Indigenous knowledge; it must be a two-way institution where community knowledge can be both stored easily accessed and repatriated. This might occur through a centralised site, or by having the NIKC facilitate pathways to existing materials and/or collections currently stored in existing knowledge institutions.

### **Other Initiatives**

As highlighted in the NIKC Issues Paper, there are numerous initiatives already operating in Australia which aim to protect, strengthen and promote Indigenous cultures and knowledge. The scoping study into the proposed NIKC will need to examine these existing initiatives in order to identify areas of unmet need and opportunities for collaboration and alignment.

The following initiatives are of particular interest to IHEAC members, and should be considered for their potential relationship to the proposed NIKC.

- The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)

The key role of AIATSIS is to conduct and promote research in all areas of Indigenous studies. The Institute holds the world's largest collections of research materials for Indigenous studies, including films, photographs, video and audio recordings and has its own publishing house.

In addition to conducting research in fields relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island studies, AIATSIS also encourages other persons or bodies to conduct such research, and assists in training persons, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as research workers in fields relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies.

- United Nations University Traditional Knowledge Institute

A United Nations University-Institute of Advanced Studies pilot research programme on Traditional Knowledge was established at Charles Darwin University in 2007.

The UNU-IAS Centre of Traditional Knowledge aims to provide a range of opportunities to promote the recognition of the value of traditional knowledge systems. During its pilot period the Centre will focus on research and training in many aspects of the traditional knowledge of Indigenous communities from a global perspective, develop the capacity of Indigenous communities, and provide significant and direct benefits. In particular the Centre will:

- Promote the use of traditional knowledge in national and local education systems
- Promote respect and use of traditional knowledge in mainstream science and technology
- Promote greater self-reliance for Indigenous people
- Develop greater resilience of traditional knowledge
- Develop the capacity of Indigenous communities to use their knowledge in a globalised economy

IHEAC understands that the Australian Government has provided in-principle support for the centre. However, the Centre has not secured funding beyond its pilot phase, and will need sustainable funding from Australian governments to continue operating.

- Indigenous Centre for Researcher Development

IHEAC has commenced work on a concept for an Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development. A scoping study for the ICRD proposed that the Government fund the establishment of “a discrete Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development (ICRD)...to provide a nationally coherent, locationally diverse, program of Indigenous researcher capacity building and Indigenous research leadership development”.

IHEAC has resolved to further develop a network “hub and spokes” model as a first step towards an ICRD.

The ICRD network “hubs and spokes” model positions the entity as a virtual, dispersed presence with building Indigenous researcher capacity and leadership as its core functions. The ICRD network aims to build nationally focussed strategic leadership from a central, Indigenous researcher development ‘hub’ working with collaborative ‘spokes’ of Indigenous researchers dispersed throughout Australia. The ICRD network would need the participation of a range of universities as partners, and potentially other institutions such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

The ICRD network could support the building of Indigenous research capacity within the higher education sector.

- Indigenous Learned Academy

IHEAC’s *Report of the Scoping Study for an Indigenous Learned Academy* (the Scoping Study) recommended the establishment of a new Indigenous Learned Academy (ILA). The Learned Academy as discussed in the Scoping Study is envisaged as an Indigenous Knowledge ‘Centre of Excellence’; that is, a body that will undertake research in the field of Indigenous Knowledge, and coordinate research in this field across a number of research institutions. This focus is communicated in the key functions of the proposed ILA as identified in the Scoping Study:

- Affirming and sustaining Indigenous Knowledge and philosophy and developing national principles to assist universities in its development and best practice;
- Negotiating priority areas for Indigenous Knowledge Systems and setting national agendas across the sector;
- Developing national standards to safeguard against misuse of Indigenous Knowledge and violation of proprietary interest;
- Prioritising and promoting innovation with Indigenous Knowledge Systems;
- Investing in future leaders in Indigenous Knowledge;
- Organising cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural knowledge dialogues and exchanges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, and between Academies; and
- Convening symposia, think tanks and colloquia on key issues and publishing outcomes by bringing together leading scholars and experts in the field.

IHEAC is further exploring the ILA concept to more narrowly define its scope taking into account other initiatives in this area and the potential for duplication and overlap.

## Summary

As these existing initiatives demonstrate, there are a range of measures already operating in the fields of Indigenous research and traditional knowledge. IHEAC believes that a new national-level Centre could provide a significant contribution to these fields, on the

condition that it performs an unmet function, or significantly bolsters or supports the work of existing initiatives and organisations.

IHEAC particularly agrees with the Government's response to the final report of the Australia 2020 Summit, which noted that 'an Indigenous Knowledge Centre would build on the current role played by the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.'

IHEAC believes that AIATSIS is well placed to provide national leadership in this area through its existing archives, resources and infrastructure, potentially in the form of a central 'hub' around which other bodies might be linked and coordinated. However, Council does not have a prescribed view on how the final structure of the NIKC should be organised, other than to note that the form of the Centre should reflect its function, as determined through this scoping study and the views of the Indigenous community and other relevant stakeholders.

### **Other Issues**

Regarding the functions to be performed by a NIKC, IHEAC believes the Centre could explore a role in the accreditation of keepers of Indigenous knowledge. This arrangement could be based on the Wānanga institutions in New Zealand which are 'characterised by teaching and research that maintains, advances, and disseminates knowledge and develops intellectual independence and assists the application of knowledge regarding āhuetanga Māori (Māori tradition) according to tikanga Māori (Māori custom).'<sup>2</sup>

As with the Wānanga, a National Indigenous Knowledge Centre would be well-placed to recognise and accredit the holders of significant Indigenous knowledge both in substance and form, outside of the traditional system of Western academic classification. This would help to raise awareness of the intellectual and economic value of Indigenous knowledge, encourage the preservation of this resource, and enable the broader academic community to formally recognise the possessors of such knowledge.

As a number of physical centres already operate in the Indigenous Knowledge area, particularly as repositories of tangible Indigenous knowledge, a needs-analysis might identify a 'connecting' purpose for this Centre.

IHEAC also questions the inclusion of Indigenous astrology in the Issues Paper's discussion of 'technical level' Indigenous knowledge, and the implication that Indigenous astrology might be considered as a field for NIKC attention. Council assumes that the Issues Paper meant to use the word 'astronomy' in place of 'astrology'; however if this is not the case IHEAC believes that the concept of astrology is not a suitable field for an Indigenous Knowledge Centre's consideration.

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<sup>2</sup> See discussion in Durie, Mason, 'Towards Social Cohesion: The Indigenisation of Higher Education in New Zealand', *Vice-Chancellors' Forum (VCF2009) "How Fare Are Universities Changing and Shaping Our World"*, available online at < [http://www.nzvcc.ac.nz/files/aper\\_for\\_ACU\\_Forum\\_-\\_Towards\\_Social\\_Cohesion.pdf](http://www.nzvcc.ac.nz/files/aper_for_ACU_Forum_-_Towards_Social_Cohesion.pdf) >