



Australian Government



Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council

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**Submission to DEEWR Discussion
Paper: Measuring the
Socio-economic Status of Higher
Education Students**

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

Mr Jason Coutts
Branch Manager
Equity, Performance and Indigenous Branch
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
GPO Box 9880
Location Code: C71NB3
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Coutts

**Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council - Submission to DEEWR Discussion Paper:
Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students**

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 *Discussion Paper: Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students*, developed by DEEWR.

IHEAC's submission incorporates work from the second IHEAC, in particular the second Council's submission to the Deputy Prime Minister on the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education final report.

The content of this submission was discussed at the 15th Council meeting on 23 February 2010 and subsequently endorsed by myself as Council Chair via electronic communications.

Yours sincerely

Professor Steven Larkin
Chair
1 March 2010

Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council Submission to the Discussion Paper: Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students

Key Recommendation:

Council recommends that a specific Indigenous indicator be included in the Socio-economic Status measure being developed by Government.

IHEAC supports the development of a new socioeconomic status (SES) measure that reflects a range of dimensions to indicate an individual student's SES. The Council agrees that a new measure that looks at the circumstances of individual students and their families, is more useful than an aggregate measure based on geographical location.

IHEAC stresses the need for the measure to include a specific Indigenous indicator.

A considerable weighting would need to be given to the Indigenous indicator given Indigenous students comprised 1.5% of all domestic commencements and 1.2% of all domestic students in 2008. A population parity rating might be considered.

The Third IHEAC notes the discussion paper's focus on identifying students from low SES backgrounds who experience educational disadvantage. The Discussion Paper acknowledges the educational disadvantage of Indigenous students. Thus IHEAC advises the need to ensure that the definition of low SES is broad and incorporates all under-represented groups in higher education, including Indigenous Australians.

This submission reaffirms the work of the Second IHEAC, which stated in its response to the *Review of Australian Higher Education - Final Report* (December 2008);

"IHEAC supports a review of the methodology to measure low SES of students. IHEAC would like to be involved in the development of a new SES measurement methodology to ensure that the specific and unique circumstances of Indigenous students and their families are included and that any new methodology does not result in unforeseen consequences for Indigenous students." (refer Attachment A).

Part-time students

IHEAC advises the need to ensure part-time Indigenous students are not disadvantaged through the new measure or the interim measure which is partly based on the current postcode measure of SES and partly on Centrelink data of income support recipients at each institution (including ABSTUDY recipients). There needs to be a mechanism by which these students are included in any count.

Extract from the second IHEAC's submission to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education in relation to the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education final report (January 2009)

"Indigenous Students and Low Socio-economic Status

The Review Panel states:

'The recommendations in this report will increase support for the bulk of Indigenous students because where an Indigenous person is also of low socio-economic status, their enrolment will attract a loading to the enrolling institution.' (p. 37)

IHEAC is concerned about the Review's categorisation of Indigenous students almost exclusively within the low Socio-economic Status (SES) category and the implications that are drawn from this in terms of how outcomes will be achieved. There is no evidence to suggest that generic strategies targeted at low SES students will also target Indigenous students in higher education. An unintended outcome of the low SES loading recommended by the Review Panel (Recommendation 31) could be the targeting by universities of students who are the 'easiest and cheapest to access'. Indigenous students may well fall off the universities enrolment target radar. This could have dire consequences on the already stagnating enrolments of Indigenous students.

Indigenous students are diverse and cannot be universally grouped with low SES students. This flawed categorisation impinges on the Government's ability to improve Indigenous students' participation and outcomes. As an example, only around a third of Indigenous students receive ABSTUDY support and have been categorised as low SES through means testing. Many Indigenous students miss out on much needed funding, including many Indigenous students living in urban areas. Indigenous students face multiple and complex disadvantage irrespective of SES. Application of support measures (including scholarships and ABSTUDY) to all Indigenous students is essential if they are to be effective.

Recommendation 3

'That the Australian Government commission work on the measurement of the socioeconomic status of students in higher education with a view to moving from the current postcode methodology to one based on the individual circumstances of each student.'

IHEAC supports a review of the methodology to measure low SES of students. IHEAC would like to be involved in the development of a new SES measurement methodology to ensure that the specific and unique circumstances of Indigenous students and their families are included and that any new methodology does not result in unforeseen consequences for Indigenous students."