

## Indigenous Participation in University Education

Joe Lane

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Since the 1980s, more than 20,000 Indigenous university graduates have joined the Australian labour force. In 2007 alone, almost 1,500 graduated, an average of four a day. The proportion of Indigenous students enrolled in degrees and post-graduate courses has risen to more than 90 percent of Indigenous university enrolments, signaling the terminal decline of 'Aboriginal' sub-degree courses. In proportion to their population, Indigenous women have current commencement rates very similar to those of non-Indigenous men. Indigenous enrolments at university in 2007 were at record levels, presaging steadily growing graduate numbers into the future.

Until the late 1990s, most Indigenous tertiary students were enrolled in 'helper-role' courses, especially in teaching, nursing and welfare. Historically, university entrants tended to enrol under special entry conditions, many in sub-degree courses. The assistance of Indigenous education and support centre staff was often an essential component of enrolment and completion for the great majority of students. But over the past 10 years in particular, enrolments have moved from sub-degree to degree courses, and students tend to be standard-entry and have diversified into a range of higher-level professional fields. For example, in addition to nursing they are now studying to be doctors, and instead of teaching many more are now choosing law. Along with the 129 Indigenous practising doctors, there are at least as many medical students currently enrolled. Indigenous students have moved from basic administration to mainstream business courses, and into law, architecture and environmental science.

The growth in graduate areas has facilitated the increasing integration of Indigenous people into mainstream society through access to far more employment opportunities. Indigenous mainstream families, like other upwardly mobile socio-economic groups such as immigrants, now tend to send their children to university. But there is a widening gulf between the 60 percent or more Indigenous people working and living in mainstream Australia and the minority living in welfare-dependent urban ghettos, country towns, or remote settlements.<sup>3</sup> Fewer young people from the welfare-embedded population are being educated effectively and enrolling in universities than a decade ago, as off-campus centres and sub-degree enrolments wither away. Support services, which have been available for nearly 30 years, have recently been incorporated into 'Aboriginal programs,' with a declining emphasis on student support.

Scholarship programs that bring Indigenous students from welfare-dependent families to quality independent boarding schools are attempting to bridge the gap between mainstream and welfare-dependent Indigenous communities. But they can only support a limited number of students. Educational standards, particularly in welfare-dependent populations will need to be raised to mainstream levels from pre-school through primary and high schools to include

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English-language and mainstream curriculums. This would help students achieve the same pass rates as non-Indigenous children in literacy and numeracy and access to the same range of courses in humanities and social and natural sciences. Emphasis should be placed on successful completion of high school and not just school 'attendance.' In some schools, it is possible for Indigenous children to have their name marked off on a school roll, and then go to the Culture or Withdrawal room where they are allowed to watch DVDs and play games.<sup>2</sup> In some states, this is called 'inclusive curriculum.' Education standards and expectation of Indigenous students' performance needs to improve if they are to make the same informed choices as other Australian children. Once they do, children in welfare-dependent communities may be able to make choices that increasingly include genuine TAFE and tertiary education.

## Introduction

It is commonly argued that there is a major gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational achievement: Indigenous children have lower school attendance rates; low literacy and numeracy passes in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9; and markedly low retention at school to Year 12. But Indigenous participation and success in tertiary education has scarcely been touched on in the annual *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (2005–07) reports published by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Services, while the Bradley Review did not discuss it in detail. Perceptions of Indigenous educational incapacity ignore the sharp increase in Indigenous participation in tertiary education since 1990, and especially in degree- and post-graduate-level enrolments since 1999. By the end of 2008, there were nearly 24,000 Indigenous university graduates in Australia. On current trends, there are likely to be at least 50,000 Indigenous graduates by 2020.

Misleading information prevails because Indigenous educational trends have not been broken down to differentiate between those from urban, mainstream society whose parents are employed and speak English and those from rural, remote or welfare-dependent backgrounds with no or limited English. Nor are the data broken down to differentiate between award-level and preparation program enrolments. Many more of the 540,000 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who identify as Indigenous are working and living in mainstream Australia (325,000)—including graduates—rather than those subsisting on welfare in remote communities (70,000) or urban ghettos or country towns (145,000).<sup>3</sup> The mainstream Indigenous population works and owns or is increasingly buying or renting homes privately. It participates in our pluralist civil society. Like other disadvantaged socio-economic groups, notably immigrants, many of these Indigenous families want their children to find secure professional employment. But a huge gulf exists between families in this Indigenous population and those living welfare-dependent lives in remote areas, city ghettos, and country towns, with few obvious aspirations for their children. These children experience extremely poor education delivery combined with the problems and false expectations engendered by welfare dependence. Expectations of lifelong welfare mean that children often cannot see the point of schooling: they have ‘learnt’ that education and work, after all, are for mugs.

This paper first examines the growth of Indigenous tertiary participation as reflected in the ABS population census, enrolment, and graduation data. Trends in tertiary participation are examined by gender, discipline and location. The reasons for the increasing bifurcation of educational outcomes between mainstream population and welfare-dependent population are analysed. A concluding section suggests policy remedies.

## Growth of Indigenous university participation

Wilfred Lawrie, a long-time teacher at the Point McLeay Aboriginal School in Lake Alexandrina, advised the South Australian Education Department in 1940 that he ‘would not care to suggest that we can produce tradesmen able to work independently, but under suitable supervision our trained young men would be satisfactory workmen. For farm and station purposes they would be exceedingly useful.’<sup>4</sup> This racist attitude was common across non-Indigenous Australia right into the 1960s and beyond. Amazingly, as late as 2006, Professor Jon Altman of the Australian National University was still arguing that:

... too much emphasis was being placed in the current debate on providing opportunity for indigenous kids in very remote Australia for imagined futures as lawyers, doctors and plumbers (as suggested by Amanda Vanstone) and too little for futures as artists, land managers and hunters living on the land they own.<sup>5</sup>

**Perceptions of Indigenous educational incapacity ignore the sharp increase in Indigenous participation in tertiary education since 1990, and especially in degree- and post-graduate-level enrolments since 1999.**

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Are we to assume that remote communities do not need the services of ‘lawyers, doctors and plumbers’ as well as qualified land managers and economists? This comment overlooks the obvious results of a good education. If children are well educated, then they get to choose how to live their lives and what career paths to take, which is their right in a democratic society. Tens of thousands of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have effectively cast their votes for mainstream education, graduating from universities into professional occupations: Between 1990 and 2008, some 60,000 Indigenous people commenced tertiary studies; 20,000 graduated; and 10,000 are currently studying, with no observable negative effects.

Charles Perkins (University of Sydney, 1965); Margaret Valadian (University of Queensland, 1966); and John Moriarty and Ken Wanganeen (Flinders University, 1970) are considered to be the first university graduates of Indigenous descent in Australia. By 1970, a small number of Indigenous teachers had also qualified throughout Australia in teachers colleges, and Indigenous nurses were being trained in teaching hospitals. With the conversion of colleges of advanced education into universities, these occupations came into the university orbit. However, the introduction of student support programs from the mid-1970s eventually led to a massive increase in Indigenous tertiary enrolments and graduations. By the time Indigenous graduate data became available in the 1991 Census, there were more than 3,600 Indigenous graduates. By the 2006 Census, their numbers had grown to almost 20,000 (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Highest level of education reached by Indigenous graduates, 1991 to 2006

Year	Diploma	First degree	Post-graduate degree	Total
1991	749	2,506	362	3,617
1996	2,629	5,325	921	8,875
2001	6,196	5,638	1,587	13,421
2006	8,741	8,161	2,344	19,246

**Note:** Three-year teaching and nursing awards tended to be classed as ‘diplomas’ rather than degrees until the late 1990s.

**Source:** Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing, 1991–2006*, Cat.2068.0

***Enrolments and graduations***

Census data fail to reflect the increasing professionalism of Indigenous graduates. Enrolment and graduation figures show a movement away from sub-degrees (Table 2). University enrolments increased from the early 1980s through the 1990s as universities created special entry procedures and programs to facilitate participation by Indigenous students with poor educational backgrounds. Modified sub-degree enclave programs, mostly under the rubric of ‘Aboriginal Studies,’ were created in health, education, welfare, administration and management, and cultural studies and facilitated the enrolment of Indigenous students with incomplete secondary schooling. Orientation and bridging programs were also created to support Indigenous students intent on entering mainstream courses. These support programs not only included tutoring but also social support and encouragement to enable students to manage mainstream studies. But between 2002 and 2005, when total enrolments had risen above 8,500, students’ interest in the enclave sub-degree awards declined rapidly. Special-entry enrolment fell away, reflecting, among other things, major social changes as Indigenous families moved into mainstream society.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2:** Indigenous enrolments by award-level, 1997–2007

Year	Sub-degree	Degree-level	Post-graduate	TOTAL
1997	1,411	3,863	723	5,997
1998	1,357	4,095	791	6,243
1999	1,419	4,351	765	6,535
2000	1,098	4,500	675	6,273
2001	1,068	4,630	716	6,414
2002	947	5,449	1,029	7,425
2003	986	5,664	1,079	7,729
2004	867	5,780	1,224	7,871
2005	647	5,697	1,158	7,502
2006	573	6,050	1,286	7,909
2007	588	6,408	1,390	8,386

**Source:** Derived from DEST Higher Education Statistics Collections, [www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/publications\\_resources/statistics/publications\\_higher\\_education\\_statistics\\_collections.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/statistics/publications_higher_education_statistics_collections.htm)

The institutions of Australia's mainstream society belong equally to all Australians. In an equitable and democratic country like Australia, there cannot be gatekeepers who limit movement on the basis of gender, class, political affiliation, or ethnicity. Since World War II, Indigenous people have moved out of the confines of missions and settlements to find work and improve opportunities for their children. At first they moved to manual jobs, usually in country towns. By the 1960s, a second generation had found small country towns too restrictive and began moving into more skilled jobs, often in metropolitan areas. Inter-marriage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people became increasingly common. More than 60 percent of Indigenous families are now working and living in mainstream society. Their children are growing up in the mainstream, in homes with a work ethic, going to normal mainstream schools (including independent schools), studying to Year 12, and going on to university. Living in mainstream society has not meant abandoning Indigenous identity. As a consequence of tertiary education, Indigenous graduates are contributing to the evolution of both Indigenous and Australian identity and culture.

Twice as many Indigenous women enrol in tertiary education as men, and the gap is widening. Gender imbalance is also marked in non-Indigenous enrolments, but while 68 percent of Indigenous students are female, only 59 percent of non-Indigenous domestic students are female. The reason for the female preponderance in university enrolments for non-Indigenous students lies in the wider range of alternative opportunities traditionally available to men: for non-Indigenous young people, sons more than daughters tend to follow fathers into skilled trades and small businesses such as farms. Girls tend to move to occupations such as teaching and nursing, which now require university qualifications.

There are different reasons, however, for the gender imbalance amongst Indigenous university students. Indigenous men are rarely able to follow their fathers into trades or farms or businesses. But Indigenous boys tend to drop out of secondary school earlier and in larger numbers than girls. In welfare-dependent populations, the situation is often even worse, with very few boys completing Year 10.

The issue of Indigenous male educational disparities is becoming a critical one. With very poor math skills, Indigenous men tend to shut themselves out of more traditionally male university courses and careers. Careers that are popular with Indigenous female students, such as teaching or nursing, are regarded as female preserves. Because more Indigenous women than men go to university or TAFE, some Indigenous men tend to view these institutions as places for women.

**More than 60 percent of Indigenous families are now working and living in mainstream society.**

**Indigenous people in mainstream populations are the source of most of the current university enrolment.**

Indigenous people in mainstream populations are the source of most of the current university enrolment.<sup>7</sup> While it is true that a handful of people from welfare-dependent communities have begun to enter the university stream from scholarship programs in high quality independent boarding schools, tertiary enrolments of Indigenous students from welfare-oriented backgrounds are declining.

The movement away from sub-degree courses to substantive courses is also evident in graduation data (Table 3). Sub-degree graduations declined from 23 percent to 7 percent of all graduations between 1996 and 2007.

**Table 3:** Indigenous graduations, 1996–2007

GRADUATES				
Year	Sub-degrees	First degree	Post graduate	TOTAL
1996	220	542	187	949
1997	189	592	175	956
1998	270	611	261	1,142
1999	206	600	217	1,023
2000	188	609	229	1,026
2001	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2002	169	733	226	1,128
2003	130	792	269	1,191
2004	179	748	268	1,195
2005	137	799	269	1,205
2006	137	926	297	1,360
2007	105	1,033	357	1,495

**Source:** DEST Higher Education Statistics Collections, [www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/publications\\_resources/statistics/publications\\_higher\\_education\\_statistics\\_collections.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/statistics/publications_higher_education_statistics_collections.htm)

### Distribution by discipline

Indigenous students at first had to enrol in lower occupational streams such as pre-school and primary rather than secondary teaching, and in nursing rather than medical degrees. But over time, Indigenous students have been moving into more specialised and skill-intensive components within disciplines and, hence, into a wider range of occupations.

Because they had low-level degrees, most Indigenous graduates at first had to find work in the public service and in Aboriginal organisations. But as they moved from 'helper' to more professional courses, increasing numbers are finding their way into private sector employment. Even so, Indigenous graduates have until recently clustered in a few disciplines, especially education and arts.

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**Table 4:** Total graduations by occupational field 1993–2007

Occupational field	Number of Indigenous graduates	Distribution of Indigenous graduates %
Arts and social sciences	5,946	37
Education	3,925	25
Health	2,841	18
Business, commerce, economics and management	1,756	11
Natural and physical sciences	738	5
Agriculture and environmental studies	315	2
Architecture and building	170	1
Engineering	231	1
Total	15, 922	100

**Notes:** Classifications changed in 2001. Law graduates have been merged into arts and social sciences and veterinary science graduates into agriculture.

**Source:** Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) Higher Education Statistics Collections. [www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/publications\\_resources/statistics/publications\\_higher\\_education\\_statistics\\_collections.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/statistics/publications_higher_education_statistics_collections.htm)

Indigenous graduates in general, and female Indigenous graduates in particular, have not only been encouraged to enter the ‘caring professions’ but also to seek employment in the public sector, notably in education, health and welfare, and in Indigenous organisations. Within these sectors, Indigenous graduates have often been confined to working in Indigenous units within those organisations. In South Australia, Indigenous teachers are steered towards Indigenous communities or in schools with high Indigenous student populations in Adelaide. Very few Indigenous teachers in South Australia work in schools that do not have large numbers of Indigenous students. Indigenous social workers have been concerned almost exclusively with Indigenous children, prisoners, and addicted persons. By denying Indigenous graduates a full range of professional opportunities, such practices have undermined the Indigenous graduates’ ability to develop professionally; affirmative action has thus become something of a Faustian bargain. Some Indigenous graduates have become so discouraged that they have dropped out of the professions they are qualified for to work in trades, retail, and other jobs well below their qualification level.

Summarising graduations data for 15 years does not convey the diversification that has been growing within disciplines, and that participation has been increasing at higher professional levels, especially within health and education. For example, ‘health’ graduates are no longer only nurses but also podiatrists, physiotherapists, radiologists, and pharmacists. There are now 129 Indigenous doctors practising in Australia, and at least as many Indigenous students studying medicine.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Indigenous students are slowly increasing their numbers in disciplines requiring mathematics and science, notably accounting, natural sciences, architecture, and engineering. Tertiary training for professional environmental positions means that Indigenous graduates are now graduating as real conservation managers instead of being confined to roaming the country as ‘Toyota rangers’ because of their lack of professional skills.

**Some Indigenous graduates have become so discouraged that they have dropped out of the professions they are qualified for.**

## Distribution of graduates by location

The geographical distribution of the 19,000 graduates who identified as Indigenous in the 2006 Census showed a marked preference for employment in and near capital cities:

**Table 5:** Location of Indigenous graduates in 2006 Census

State	Number of graduates	Percentage of Indigenous graduates resident in ATSI capital regions	Percentage of total Indigenous graduates in each State
New South Wales	6,563	44	4.7
Queensland	5,360	38	4.2
Western Australia	1,929	57	3.3
Northern Territory	1,107	45	2.1
Victoria	1,928	64	6.4
South Australia	1,049	68	4.1
Tasmania	777	N/A	4.6
Australian Capital Territory	519	N/A	13.4
Australia	19,246	48	4.2

**Note:** Location is based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission regional classifications.

**Source:** Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing, 1991–2006*, Cat.2068.0

Graduates do not necessarily remain in their city of graduation. Some return to their home state or territory, or stay in the state where they graduated, but others find employment elsewhere.

## Policy Implications

Michael Dodson pointed out recently that as many as 30 percent of Indigenous people across Australia are functionally illiterate. While this highlights the truly heroic efforts of the other 70 percent, especially of women, to do as well as they have done in the last 30 years, it should also put the focus on the desperate need for more targeted programs to raise literacy and numeracy levels, and to find ways to encourage Indigenous men to participate in post-school education, including eventually tertiary education, to a far greater rate.

## Conclusion

Indigenous graduates are not the only Indigenous people living in mainstream society: many others are employed in sub-professional positions and in trades. The mainstream Indigenous population is still socio-economically skewed towards lower skill and lower pay occupations, but it is clearly moving toward Australian income norms, as indicated by the rapid increase in the proportion owning or buying their own homes over just the past generation. Partly because communal ownership has locked away their land, increasing numbers of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have followed other capital-poor social groups, such as immigrants, in seeking to develop their human capital, that is, reaching for trades and university education, to achieve personal fulfilment and higher living standards.

**30 percent of Indigenous people across Australia are functionally illiterate.**



The Indigenous majority in mainstream society not only has mainstream incomes, but, one suspects, also mainstream social characteristics in health, lifestyles, relations with the law and civil society: certainly, very few, if any, graduates ever come before the courts.

There is no 'average' Indigenous educational participation, just as there is no 'average' Aboriginal health situation: educational characteristics are sharply different for Indigenous mainstream and welfare-dependent populations, for urban and remote populations, and necessarily for illiterate and literate populations. The practice of using 'average' educational performance measures for the entire Indigenous population denigrates Indigenous achievement by ignoring the mainstream population and understates the critical educational needs of the welfare-embedded, remote and illiterate populations. The movement of children of mainstream Indigenous families from completion of standard secondary education into tertiary education is likely to increase very rapidly in the next ten years, particularly as children of graduates reach tertiary age and inter-marriage, especially in urban areas, will certainly help this along. But this inevitable movement is widening the gulf within the Indigenous population. The policy challenge is to provide mainstream pre-school, primary, secondary and appropriate adult education in welfare-dependent and remote communities so that all Indigenous people can make choices about their future.

**The practice of using 'average' educational performance measures for the entire Indigenous population denigrates Indigenous achievement by ignoring the mainstream population.**

## Endnotes

- 1 On the basis of 2006 Census employment and housing data, about half of the 455,000 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live in mainstream society and own or are buying their homes or renting commercially from real estate agents. Only some 70,000 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders lived on traditional lands away from mainstream labour markets and services. (Helen Hughes, 'Who are Indigenous Australians' *Quadrant* 451 (November 2008).
- 2 Letter to the editor, 'Tackling truancy,' *The Australian*, 23 February 2009.
- 3 Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, 'The Indigenous population of Australia,' Bennelong Conference, June 2008.
- 4 Wilfred T Lawrie, 'The education of half-caste children,' in Rev JH Sexton (ed.), *Aboriginal Problems* (Adelaide: Aborigines' Friends' Association, 1940).
- 5 Jon Altman, 'Letters to the editor,' *The Australian*, 5 October 2006.
- 6 The Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee, *Submission to the Review into the Impact of ABSTUDY Policy Changes that Came into Effect in 2000* (February 2005) failing to disaggregate enrolments mistook the decline in sub-degree enrolments for a decline in total enrolments that did not eventuate.
- 7 SA Department of Education statistics, 2007.
- 8 Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association, 14 October 2008.



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