

The background of the cover is a photograph of a large group of children, likely of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, sitting on the ground in front of a building. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The children are dressed in casual clothing, and some are looking towards the camera while others are looking away.

The Right to the Good Life:

Improving Educational Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

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THE CENTRE FOR
INDEPENDENT
STUDIES

CIS OCCASIONAL PAPER 133

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CIS Occasional Paper 133



2013

Published September 2013
by The Centre for Independent Studies Limited
PO Box 92, St Leonards, NSW, 1590
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: www.cis.org.au

Views expressed in the publications of The Centre for Independent Studies are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre's staff, advisers, directors, or officers.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

Langton, Marcia, 1951- author.

The right to the good life : improving educational outcomes for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children
Professor Marcia Langton AM.

9781922184146 (paperback)

CIS occasional papers ; 133.

Children, Aboriginal Australian--Education--Australia.
Children, Torres Strait Islander--Education--Australia.
Indigenous children--Education--Australia.
Education--Australia--Curricula.

Other Authors/Contributors:
Centre for Independent Studies (Australia)

371.979915

The Right to the Good Life: Improving Educational Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

Marcia Langton

I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners of Sydney, to the Eora peoples and others, and to their ancestors and elders.

My address concerns the crisis in education for Indigenous people, which is finally being understood in some quarters.

Some years ago, I worked with Monash University education expert Dr Zane Ma Rhea on an accelerated learning project titled ‘The Yachad Accelerated Learning Project.’ Neither of us is associated with the project now, having resigned from it several years ago. We did learn a great deal from working with Indigenous communities to identify the challenges in Aboriginal education. In this address, much of what I have to say is based on the joint work Zane and I did over a number of years to find solutions to improve Aboriginal education outcomes.

I hope this address provides some clarity to these issues. While education is a key ideological battleground in debates about how to address Indigenous disadvantage, there is alarming evidence that the lack of capacity in mainstream education to educate Indigenous children will continue to keep Indigenous families and communities in poverty. Yet, the recent report to Parliament on the progress on the ‘Close the Gap’ targets provides evidence of slow progress

and the need to change how we go about reaching the educational outcome targets. It is clear that much of what we are doing is not working.

There are only small numbers of Indigenous children in a very big education system. Currently there are about 150,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at school and they attend about 5,000 of the more than 9,000 schools in Australia. Immediately, one can see that only half the schools in the education system would have Indigenous students. This arguably lessens the necessity of the education system to engage in capacity building to address what education needs might exist for Indigenous students. In organisational terms, this represents a significant difficulty in achieving 'buy-in' in a system that already faces competing pressures for resource allocation and attention. For example, in Victoria, there are just over 2,000 primary and secondary schools, and Indigenous students are enrolled in about 900 of these schools. About 40 schools have reasonably large cohorts of Indigenous students. The number of Indigenous students enrolled in other schools ranges from 10–20 to a single child.

The figures suggest that compared to Australia-wide policy problems or those on an international scale, the problems in Indigenous education are small scale, manageable and feasible—and, yet, we are forced to ask why we are failing at correcting some problems and succeeding in correcting others. I am also forced to ask why it is that recent immigrants who speak no or little English are able to succeed in Australian society after a short time attending English-speaking and related classes.

The Productivity Commission puts the total government outlay at \$44,128 for every Indigenous person in Australia in 2011. This includes federal, state and local government spending, and is up 16% from two years ago, from \$21.9 billion in 2009 to \$25.4 billion in 2011. The figure for total government spending for the non-Indigenous population is \$19,589 per person. These figures do not include non-government spending on Indigenous affairs, through charities, churches, sporting clubs, and cultural bodies. It is unclear whether they include university and tertiary education programs.

Let's look at some of the Close the Gap targets.

Target: Ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities by 2018.

The *Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2013* states this target will be met by 2013. The benchmark for the target is 95% enrolment for Indigenous children in remote communities. The *Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2012* claimed data was not available to assess the progress of this target but new data shows the government is on track to achieve it.

Target: Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children by 2018.

Using NAPLAN testing data, the report states that progress on this target has been mixed. Only three out of eight literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students are on course to meet the target. The data also shows that Indigenous students in metropolitan areas achieve higher literacy and numeracy outcomes than their rural counterparts: only 20.3% of students in very remote areas achieved at or above national minimum standards compared to 76% in metro areas.

Target: Halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020.

The report states that progress on this target is ahead of schedule. The Year 12 or equivalent attainment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians closed by 4.3 percentage points, as attainment rates among Indigenous students grew at a faster rate than for non-Indigenous students. To meet this target, however, 'continued rapid improvements will be needed' from 2011 to 2016.

What improvements are needed? The first and most important is to normalise the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and raise the expectations of families, communities, teachers and educators about Indigenous students complying with school attendance; undertaking the standard curriculum; performing all normal school work and assessment; and participating in school events. This does not exclude bilingual and Aboriginal language

and culture classes. But it emphasises the necessity for Indigenous students to be treated not as incommensurately different, but as students like all other students who are required to become competent in the national curriculum.

We also know that along with regular full-time attendance, good teaching is essential to improving educational outcomes (by good teaching I mean professional teaching engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the classroom). We know that explicit instruction—that is, making each step of the curriculum explicit to the student in a ‘brick-by-brick’ approach—also helps improve outcomes. Similar approaches are direct instruction, accelerated literacy, and many more.

Kirsten Storry, a former researcher at The Centre for Independent Studies, asked some years ago: What is working in good schools in remote Indigenous communities? Her findings are so familiar to those of us who have been to these schools, we could write a song about them:

In remote community schools, children often miss one or two days of school a week. A majority cannot do maths or read at their age level, and few ever do so beyond the level of an eight year old. As many as half do not make the transition to secondary school and only a handful obtain a Year 12 certificate.

School attendance, achievement and retention are among the minimum requirements for a good school education. Children who leave school unable to read or write at their age level and unused to a five-day-a-week work ethic will find only limited social and economic opportunities open to them. Knowing how schools perform on these most basic measures allows us to recognise and replicate successful programmes and to jettison programmes that might look good but are ineffective.

Too often, schools are making excuses. They say that even well managed schools with good teachers have little influence over attendance, are unable to disguise the plain hard work involved in phonics and times tables, and have little chance of overcoming the results of family dysfunction, violence and chronic poor health.

But some remote schools are reporting much higher rates of attendance, achievement and retention. So what is working in good schools in remote Indigenous communities? On the school side, evidence-based remedial skills programmes, secondary school readiness programmes, and secondary boarding schools are some initiatives that have shown the potential to achieve results. In the case of literacy programmes, for example, research has shown that whole language instruction alone is not effective for 20 to 25% of children, who need intensive, systematic, skills-based instruction. Some good schools are already seeing results from evidence-based programmes like ‘Scaffolding Literacy’ and MULTILIT.

On the community side, school readiness and attendance initiatives have shown promise, at least in the short term. Some school readiness programmes are now helping to develop the positive parenting behaviours that they need to achieve the mainstream outcomes to which they aspire for their children. Kuranda District State School is already seeing results from its ‘Families as First Teachers’ project.

Many of the school-side initiatives at good schools are remedial and many of the community-side initiatives only boost demand in the short term.

The best results come from a combination of good teaching and management on the school side, teamed with support and determination on the community side. Warrego Primary School and the 'Every Child is Special' programme are two initiatives that represent the way forward.

Good schools can and do make a difference. We need to stop making excuses for poor school education in communities and to start learning from what is working, inside and outside communities.

Another educator, Dr Ken Rowe of the Australian Council for Educational Research, is co-authoring an evaluation of literacy methods in NT schools. Rowe and his colleagues are comparing an experiment group of 35 schools where teachers have undertaken training in explicit instruction with a control group of 21 schools and the teachers continued with their usual classroom practices. His conclusion could not be simpler: 'If you give kids basic skills via explicit instruction,' he says, 'they take off like rockets.'

The evidence is clear that nothing happens in Indigenous communities unless there is local ownership of any change process. A common complaint heard across Australia is that outsiders are like seagulls that fly in, do their business, and fly out. Very little has changed in the community but the relevant 'consulted with the community' box can be ticked. For each community to own the education achievements of its children instead of seeing it as someone else's responsibility changes people's active engagement in leadership and decision making.

Outsiders need to recognise that local issues are important to the local people and need to be addressed alongside other local business. Children participating in ceremonies and gathering bush food at the right time are part of learning. Recognising and teaching Indigenous languages at school means a lot to local people.

Parents and caregivers have specific responsibilities over and above their community-level involvement. They must be the ones held responsible for their children attending school. Children

must also be 'school ready,' to borrow a term from Noel Pearson. They need to be safe at night. They need to be properly fed. They need help with their homework. But the single most important responsibility is finding ways to get their kids to attend school because we know that children who do not attend school, or don't go often enough, are the ones who are failing.

Communities and individual families are approaching high-performing schools across this country precisely because they want their children to receive good quality education. Outsiders need to understand that this is not creating a new generation of stolen children. This is Aboriginal people actively seeking to improve their children's futures.

It will be much easier to direct the wider community to become involved in meaningful change if their skills and resources can be used in a targeted manner for improved education.

Educators: Partnership and collaboration

Indigenous people across the country are very concerned about the academic standard of their local schools. As opportunities increase for young Indigenous children to take up places in high performing schools, and become involved in programs such as Andrew Penfold's the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, the Clontarf Foundation, and Yalari, families are getting a better sense of the academic level of their children. Many have expressed shock that the report cards from their local school bear little resemblance to their children's actual academic level when they start at a boarding or day school in a capital city. They rightly ask how this could happen. And it is not only remote schools where this occurs. Many Indigenous children in cities and rural towns are being advanced in their school grade level without gaining the age appropriate level of academic achievement. As one principal in a remote area school said: 'We're resourced to cope, not to succeed.'

We need to formalise what some communities and families are already doing by proposing a plan whereby Indigenous communities and families would be trained and funded to approach their local

schools, or high performing state, independent or interstate schools, and work with them to find the right 'fit.' Within the partnership, they might want to start a community primary school or work with their local government or church school to collaborate with a high performing school.

Programs that I urge education departments and schools to adopt include:

- a federal program supported by states and territories to train larger numbers of Indigenous teachers at the full professional level
- flexibility in the timings of school terms
- smaller class sizes, especially in lower grades
- remedial classes for students who have been out of school for some time
- remote teacher incentive packages and support services to encourage teachers to remain in remote communities for three years or longer
- separate classes for boys and girls aged 12 and above
- employment of Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEW) in all schools
- cross-cultural training for Aboriginal children on 'dominant culture' and all children to be taught about Aboriginal people's history and culture.

Importantly, in these partnerships, the exchange would be both ways: rotation of governing bodies, staff and student exchanges, joint assessment, curriculum development, and networking with other partnered schools to develop regional transition colleges. A collaborative approach would help move away from a deficit welfare dependency model towards partnerships to achieve the aspirations of Indigenous people for their children and grandchildren. The non-Indigenous parties would have the opportunity to learn about Indigenous lifeways and ensure the curricula accurately include the histories, achievements and ideas of Indigenous people.

These partnerships would also integrate the work done in university teacher education programs and research. Universities and TAFEs would then work together with the partner schools facilitating—for example, student-teacher placements—and giving pathway opportunities for students into further education, as was recommended in a 2006 report of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), when I was the chair of the council. Collaborative research partnerships would also drive an accountable-evaluation framework for the change process.

Communities and partnered schools would form leadership groups to provide guidance to volunteers, philanthropists and industry partners, giving clear direction as to the skills and resource needs of each school community. For example, a group visiting a school for a week might read to the children, help with maths, and then help at the homework centre after school. They might go on a trip to collect bush food. They might start learning the local language. There is already evidence that when schools and communities work together, it gives immediate support for the preservation and maintenance of the Indigenous languages of the people involved.

In this new process of partnering for change, strengthening the local school, and sending children to a transition or boarding school then forms part of a long term, sustainable education strategy led by the families and communities of these children. This is not the era of forced removal and forced assimilation. It is part of a broad strategy to educate the next generation of young Indigenous Australians.

Governments: Alignment, transparency and accountability

Poverty within the Indigenous families has, by far, the most negative impact on children's academic achievements; there are some distinct demographic characteristics in the Indigenous student cohort that must be considered. The traditional stand-off in the financial arrangements between federal and state education jurisdictions, and the subsequent experimental or 'bolt-on' approach to Indigenous

education, is harming the provision of coherent, high quality education services to Indigenous people. Therefore, a planned organisation-level response focusing on quality must be at the forefront of any response to this education crisis, with measurable and legally binding undertakings made and enacted. These are key elements for the education system to address urgently over the next five years to deliver on the oft-quoted ‘closing the gap.’

Over the last 10 years, a growing body of empirical data globally demonstrates that social justice imperatives cannot be sustained in poverty. The Cape York Institute, under the leadership of Noel Pearson, has published a series of studies and papers that culminate in a sustained argument for the reform of Indigenous communities dependent on government welfare payments. He and others have argued that welfare dependency creates a false economy that operates largely outside the mainstream economy. The call for welfare reform has, as an essential ingredient, the improvement of education outcomes for Indigenous students, who currently lack the skills required to create vibrant, sustainable economies in their communities. This work, while focused on the Cape York communities, highlights the insidious impact of poverty on many Indigenous families, whether they are living in metropolitan, provincial, remote or very remote locations. A sobering fact, and one that must be addressed before all others, is the estimate that about half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population fall into the bottom 20% of the population in terms of income.

The fact of poverty experienced by a significant proportion of Indigenous families will have a direct impact on the ability of children from these families to take advantage of the opportunities promised by access to education.

While Indigenous students overall are underperforming in national school benchmark testing when compared to their non-Indigenous peers, there is a range of demographic factors that make the situation far more complicated for policymakers and departments of education because these demographics have variable

impacts on an individual child's academic achievements. Moreover, some Indigenous students are performing very well academically for an equally diverse range of reasons. The problem is to clearly identify which of the myriad factors are causal, which are correlational, and which are irrelevant to successful academic achievement.

There is no 'quick fix, one-size-fits-all' solution to this problem, which is exacerbated by a historical stand-off between the federal government and the state and territory education jurisdictions about whose responsibility it is to ensure that the education system provides appropriate education services to Indigenous students, with their widely different needs and aspirations. Under the arrangements agreed at Federation, states, and belatedly the territories, control education. Only after the 1967 referendum did the federal government offer financial incentives to the states to pay additional attention to their Indigenous students over and above their usual activities. Over time, this came to be interpreted that if anything special was to be done in providing education services for Indigenous students, it was a federal responsibility. Thereby, many education initiatives have been brought into the main work of education as marginal programs, experiments or 'bolt-ons' to the larger system. An outcome of this strange arrangement has been that the fortunes of the provision of appropriate education to Indigenous students has depended on a complex mix of politics, cap-in-hand begging by the federal government, and the largesse of variously engaged state and territory departments of education. Added to this mix has been the Christian missionary involvement; more recently, philanthropy and businesses have made their voices heard and their money available to governments, non-government agencies, and in some cases, directly to Indigenous communities and community-controlled organisations under a range of conditions and favourable taxation arrangements.

Arguably, providing education to Indigenous children has become a lightning rod to contemporary humanitarian aspirations for the good life under globalisation.

The right to a good life

Going to school, whether the children like it or not, lays an often taken-for-granted foundation for the rest of their life. Building on that foundation, most go on to further study or work; marry or find a partner; have children; go on holidays; pay mortgages, school fees, and other debts—enjoying what in Australia we call the ‘good life.’

Despite examples of Indigenous people succeeding at the highest level, education has failed far too many Indigenous young people—failed them at that very important foundational stage in their lives—while the rest of educated Australia does not know what it is like not to have that foundation.

For the Indigenous citizens of this country, the problem is twofold. First, missionary or state education has historically been forced on Indigenous people. Second, the standard of education available to many Indigenous children is not what most other Australians would have experienced. Apart from notable exceptions, it was, and continues to be, of such poor quality that there is now a crisis spanning three generations of education failure in many places. I would suggest that there is a fundamental inability among well-educated Australians, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous, to understand this problem.

I want to draw your attention to the work of educators such as Professor Noel Pearson, director of the Cape York Institute, and schools in major cities—for example, St Joseph’s in Sydney, Trinity Grammar, Loreto, Melbourne Grammar, Melbourne Girls Grammar, PLC, MLC, and Scotch College in Melbourne—who are working with Indigenous communities across Australia to avert this crisis.

I should also mention the 30-year relationship that Mt Evelyn Christian School has had with Yuendumu community; the growing number of independent schools, such as Trinity Grammar, Methodist Ladies College, and Scotch College, with many distinguished Indigenous alumni; the inspiring independent Indigenous controlled schools such as Yipirinya and Yirrkala—all of which show how to teach Indigenous children with dignity and respect.

Given these examples of changing the education paradigm in Australia to engage Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike, what would this change be?

In Australia, this would require a systems approach that clearly identifies inputs, actions required, and expected outcomes as well as incorporating a quality assurance cycle and maintaining high expectations of success. Like any systems level problem, issues facing communities, educators and governments in providing education services to Indigenous people can appear overwhelming and unsolvable. I do not share this view.

Three levels of coordinated action are required to solve this problem.

The community level, the foundation for the pyramid, involves the local Indigenous community, and more importantly, the parents and caregivers of the children in these communities. It also involves the wider Australian community, including individuals, community service, corporate, industry, and philanthropic organisations. The second level is the education system (local schools, high performing state and independent schools, TAFEs and universities). The third level includes governments and bureaucracies responsible for providing education services to Indigenous communities.

Community: Ownership, high expectations and engagement

The role of the government and its bureaucracies then becomes very clear: develop legislation to formalise and resource school partnership arrangements and manage the change process within the accountability frameworks already emerging regarding improvements in literacy and numeracy results. This means matching federal and state accountabilities for providing education services to Indigenous people. Bureaucracies will manage the alignment of local, state and national level policies. Governments will also provide allocated Indigenous education funding to schools entering into partnerships with clear accountabilities and

performance measures to ensure the quality management cycle delivers sustainable success. Allocated 'Indigenous education' funding would no longer be given to non-participating or low performing schools not involved actively partnering with Indigenous families and communities.

Over the past five years, the national benchmarking of literacy and numeracy has been very helpful in showing how poor the education outcomes are in many Indigenous communities. The national coordination of measurement and standards would continue to drive the performance measures across Indigenous education.

The past uncoordinated approaches to tackle the problem has led to a culture of low expectation in education bureaucracies and schools. There has been significant resource dissipation, constant experimentation, underfunding, and no agreement on the way forward. In particular, in the absence of a systemic approach to change, experimentation has been rife with what are known as 'bolt-on' programs being constantly foisted on already under-resourced and understaffed schools.

The school partnership strategy provides structure to support successful schools and integrate success into the wider system, stopping the wastage and lack of proper accountability in the system. It also overcomes the problems associated with remoteness and inaccessibility of many small Indigenous communities by enabling high quality education provision, while increasing accessibility to information about successful local initiatives in education.

It is a challenge to our education system to break free of the legacy of colonial education, enabling us to compete and thrive in the global market, and to secure the future for all of us, but most especially those Indigenous children who right here and right now have no 'good life' to look forward to.

Significantly, it is a change process that allows us to develop a mature education system which recognises the knowledge held by Indigenous people as important as everyone else's.

Special Publication

- SP9 Hughes, *Lands of Shame: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'Homelands' in Transition* (2007).

Policy Monographs

- PM134 Sara Hudson, *Panacea to Prison? Justice Reinvestment in Indigenous Communities* (2013).
- PM129 Helen Hughes, Mark Hughes, *Indigenous Education 2012* (2012).
- PM127 Sara Hudson, *Charlatan Training: How Aboriginal Health Workers Are Being Short-Changed* (2012).
- PM116 Sara Hudson, *Alcohol Restrictions in Indigenous Communities and Frontier Towns* (2011).
- PM113 Helen Hughes, Mark Hughes, and Sara Hudson, *Private Housing on Indigenous Lands* (2010).
- PM110 Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, *Indigenous Education 2010* (2010).
- PM107 Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, *Indigenous Employment, Unemployment and Labour Force Participation: Facts for Evidence Based Policies* (2010).
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- PM94 Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, *Revisiting Indigenous Education* (2009).
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- PM83 Helen Hughes, *Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* (2008).

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- IA122 Sara Hudson, *Healthy Stores, Healthy Communities: The Impact of Outback Stores on Remote Indigenous Australians* (2010).
- IA110 Joe Lane, *Indigenous Participation in University Education* (2009).
- IA88 Helen Hughes, *Kava and after in the Nhulunbuy (Gulf of Carpentaria) Hinterland* (2007).
- IA86 Kirsten Storry, *What is Working in Good Schools in Remote Indigenous Communities?* (2007).

- IA78 John Cleary, *Indigenous Governance at the Crossroads: The Way Forward* (2007).
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- OP127 Wesley Aird and Ron Staples, *Sustainability of Indigenous Communities* (2012).
- OP100 Noel Pearson, *Welfare Reform and Economic Development for Indigenous Communities* (2005).

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Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, 'Why Australia Still Denies Private Property Rights to Aborigines,' *Quadrant* (May 2012).

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Helen Hughes, 'Strangers in Their Own Country: A Diary of Hope,' *Quadrant* (March 2008)



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The Right to the Good Life: Improving Educational Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

Education is a key ideological battleground in debates about how to address Indigenous disadvantage. Yet, as the recent report to Parliament on the progress with the 'Close the Gap' targets shows, much of what we are doing is not working. When it comes to Indigenous students, there is a culture of low expectation in education bureaucracies and schools. Indigenous students should be treated not as incommensurately different but like all other students who are required to become competent in the national curriculum. There are only small numbers of Indigenous children in a very big education system – about 150,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attend about 5,000 of the more than 9,000 schools in Australia. Compared to Australia-wide policies, Indigenous education is on a small scale. It should be a manageable, feasible policy issue. However, past attempts to improve Indigenous education have involved constant experimentation and 'bolt-on programs' that have not worked. Explicit instruction and partnerships between Indigenous communities and high-performing schools are helping improve education outcomes and should be adopted more widely.



Professor Marcia Langton AM has held the Foundation Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne since February 2000. As an anthropologist and geographer, Professor Langton has made significant contributions to Indigenous studies in this country, and has been instrumental in developing government and non-government policy and administration on Indigenous matters. She was recognised for her advocacy of Aboriginal rights in

1993 when she was made a member of the Order of Australia, and became a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 2001. Professor Langton was also the Boyer Lecturer for 2012, delivering her address on 'The Quiet Revolution: Indigenous People and the Resources Boom.'

CIS Occasional Paper 133
ISBN 978-1-922184-14-6
ISSN 0155 7386

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