Australian Catholic University is pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the DEST Discussion Paper, *Achieving Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes: Indigenous Australians in Higher Education* (August 2002). This Response does not seek to address the many complex issues raised in the discussion paper, but rather to focus on a limited number of issues where the University wishes to provide advice based on its direct experiences with Indigenous students and communities.

The submission commences with some general comments about the Issues Paper. Suggestions are then put forward in relation to a limited number of specific issues, which are seen as particularly relevant to the Review.

**General Comments**

1. The University agrees with the broad theme of the Issues Paper, which emphasises how much still needs to be done to enhance the circumstances of Indigenous communities, including in higher education. Given the context of low participation and achievement of Indigenous community members in primary and secondary schooling, and the multiple disadvantages experienced by these communities, we believe that there is much to celebrate in the educational achievements at university level over this period. At ACU National, experience of working with a wide range of Indigenous communities in various parts of the country leads us to take a positive view of progress by Indigenous students and communities. The mutually supportive relationships which have developed among non-Indigenous and Indigenous staff, students and community leaders have led to outstanding achievements by many Indigenous students who have had to surmount great difficulties arising from the socio-economic contexts of their daily lives. It is important to the empowerment and esteem of Indigenous communities that such achievements be affirmed and recognised by Government and the whole Australian community.

2. Caution needs to be exercised in 'benchmarking' Indigenous educational participation and outcomes in higher education against those of other tertiary students, who generally come from much more advantaged socio-economic and educational backgrounds. While the long-term educational goals are appropriate, progress should be evaluated in the context of the overall socio-economic environment in which most Indigenous persons and communities exist. In particular, it should be recognised that participation and success in higher education will be greatly assisted by improved participation and outcomes by Indigenous students at primary and secondary levels of education.
3. There are four main 'partners' involved in the development and implementation of Indigenous higher education strategies, namely, Government, the universities, the wider community and the Indigenous communities themselves. The successes achieved in the last two decades owe much to the collaboration among the partners. A critical element of such strategies is that of financial resources, provided largely by the Commonwealth Government. ACU National emphasises that much has been achieved in a relatively short period with the availability of Government expenditures for the support of Indigenous education. It is most important that the current level of expenditure be maintained and increased if at all possible. At the same time, the input of experienced university personnel, including Heads of Indigenous support units, as well as representatives of Indigenous communities is essential in order to facilitate the most productive application of available Government funds.

4. Attitudes towards Indigenous Australians vary widely in the community, and there continue to exist negative and sometimes racist stances among some. Universities are not insulated from such community attitudes. The broader problem of racism, however, is not the fault alone of the educational settings as the Issues Paper at times implies. Where racism exists, responsibility for it is shared and must be seen to be shared in order that societal prevention by all concerned is genuinely remedial.

   The leadership provided to the wider community by political and community opinion leaders is very important in shaping public attitudes. ACU National recognizes the importance of leadership at all levels of the University in setting standards in this area. The University adopted a Statement of Reconciliation (1998) which committed the whole University community to a pro-active approach through its educational activities and the incorporation of Indigenous spirituality and cultural symbols on each campus. The value of awareness workshops directed to non-Indigenous staff has been shown to be very considerable. There is also much evidence of the efficacy of the compulsory unit in Indigenous Studies undertaken by all pre-service teacher education students at this University.

5. The role of Indigenous support units is central to the development of successful initiatives and support mechanisms for Indigenous students. ACU National has successfully engaged each of its Faculties in collaborative approaches with the University's Indigenous units. Such collaboration has proved very effective in gaining understanding and commitment of academic staff (and administrative personnel) for the provision of culturally sensitive teaching - learning programs, and for the recognition of the need to take into account the complex array of issues affecting student progression. The roles of academic and administrative managers are crucial in facilitating and encouraging collaboration between Indigenous support units and the major organizational arms of a university.
6. At the present time, the total number of university graduates from Indigenous communities is relatively modest. The demands placed on these persons in seeking to provide leadership within their communities is very high. Many Indigenous staff in support units become overwhelmed with the multiple demands placed on them, including that of representing the needs and cultural perspectives of Indigenous communities within institutions and in the wider community. Consideration should be given to ways in which these key individuals can be supported and given opportunities for further study, research and reflection.

Specific Comments and Suggestions for Change

- The majority of Indigenous Australians cannot afford to undertake higher education. Many commence as mature age students with a family and a financial context, which is not conducive to university study. Living allowances should be increased, and HECS scholarships made available to Indigenous higher education students so as to remove the disincentive associated with the debt burden.

- Additional funding for student support services including academic skills development would be of assistance for the achievement of increased participation and success rates for Indigenous students.

- Pressures on Indigenous staff of support units are leading to high staff-turnover rates and creating special difficulties in finding replacement Indigenous staff with the requisite qualifications and skills. Resources should be given to enable Indigenous staff to undertake study-leave and upgrade their qualifications, including postgraduate studies.

- The identification and development of educational pathways from school and VET studies to university courses require greater attention. Mechanisms should be established to facilitate and encourage better use of such pathways.

- The difficulties and associated resource needs of away-from-base programs have not been sufficiently acknowledged in funding models, despite the success and obvious advantages of such programs. Greater recognition of the high demands on staff, resources and administration for away-from-base programs should be manifested in the funding models for Indigenous education.

- The National Indigenous Higher Education Network (NIHEN) plays an important role within the higher education sector. The work of this Network should be assisted with funding for administrative costs, to enable the Network to carry out its tasks of liaison and consultation.

- Scholarships (see clause 102 of Issues Paper) should be seen as a positive incentive and ‘increased’ attention should be given to “mentoring” across the high education sector (see clause 103).
• It is recommended that more detailed research and evaluation of trends in Indigenous education in higher education be carried out to assist in decision-making about strategies and funding models.

• Data on both retention and commencement of Indigenous students are critical elements in a data-bank that should be accorded special national importance; it could be used to help guide the allocation of resources to the nation’s universities.

**Conclusion**

ACU National welcomes the publication of the discussion paper and the strong commitment expressed in the Minister's Foreword, and in the various sections of the paper, to the advancement of Educational achievement at all levels, and particularly in higher education, by Indigenous Australians.

The University shares the view of the Minister that access to purposeful education is critical to social, cultural, economic and health-related improvements for Indigenous Australians. Such improvements in the well-being of Indigenous communities in Australia must be among the highest priorities of Governments and the wider community if the goals of reconciliation are to be fully achieved. In particular, this University agrees with the Minister's view about the urgent need for more Indigenous leaders, with the best educational backgrounds that universities can offer, to provide ways forward for their communities, which continue to suffer despair, social deprivation and associated economic and other disadvantages. The suggestions for action contained in this submission are planned to lead to changes that would especially enhance the quality of Indigenous education in this country.

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