

# **Completion of twelve years of schooling or its equivalent.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The capacity of Indigenous peoples to reach their full potential, experience success and exercise control over their lives depends greatly on the level to which schooling provides them with the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to lead productive and fulfilled lives. It is widely known that students who complete Year 12 or its equivalent have better chances in life, and are more likely to gain employment and/or post-school qualifications than those who don't. This research project examines current programs and issues which impact on Indigenous outcomes in Queensland. This paper will present the results of the research carried out across twenty three State, Catholic and Independent schools. It investigated current practices in providing clear and recognized pathways to employment and life long learning, successes experienced by and alternative pathways for Indigenous learners. It also identified issues impacting on year 12 retention.

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## **Introduction**

The completion of 12 years of schooling or its equivalent study clearly demonstrated the importance of adopting an wholistic view in any consideration of Indigenous education. While this, on the surface does not appear to be problematic, some of the schools participating in this study, seemed to be suggesting that they cannot take Indigenous students, as their teachers don't have the skills they need to engage with them on a diversity of levels.

What a devastating thought - that we should have teachers in our schools who feel so unskilled, so inadequate that they could suggest that a whole cohort of students might be excluded from our education systems. But the sad thing about that suggestion is that it is likely that there are a number of Indigenous parents who wonder if their children are wasting their time in Australia's formal education systems. One of the issues that parents continually raise with members of the Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body (QIECB) is, "What's going on?" Parents want to know why it is that they can read and write when their children, being raised in what is supposedly a more advanced and informed society, appear, in many instances, to be leaving school without having acquired even the most basic literacy and numeracy skills. Just as frequently, we hear teachers and others lament the fact that the level of absenteeism is so high among Indigenous students that they simply can't learn. And, everyone, including Indigenous educators, agrees with that argument. For example, Bourke et al (2000) points out that the persistence of high rates of absenteeism amongst Aboriginal students is a major concern, as it is believed by educators that consistent school attendance

is essential for educational success. Low standards of achievement including low levels of English literacy skills are almost universally attributed by teaching staff to high levels of absenteeism among Indigenous students. And, as many of us will have heard Professor Paul Hughes argue, in past public forums, if a student is not at school he or she can't learn. Hence, increasing attendance and retention rates are seen to be crucial to obtaining successful outcomes. However, as Mander-Ross (1995) argues, it is debatable whether high absenteeism and low retention rates are the cause of low performance or whether low performance leads to non-attendance.

While we might all agree with the logic of such arguments, how do we then explain how people like my own mother, for instance, who, having received a total of four years of primary schooling, was able to acquire sound skills of literacy and numeracy. This is particularly puzzling when considered within a contemporary context. The majority of today's Indigenous students remain in school far longer than ever their parents did and are exposed to modern methods and the wonders of technology. Yet, many parents perceive that their children appear to be exiting school, some even having completed year 12, with a lower standard of literacy than they themselves possess. Could it be that even four years of schooling can enable people to acquire effective literacy and numeracy skills, so long as the child attends regularly? Is it likely that low levels of 'success' are attributable only to those who are not regular attenders? From this perspective, it can be seen that this issue is both critical and complex. It was within such a context, that the QIECB decided to commission a research project to investigate the issues associated with Indigenous students completing twelve years of schooling or its equivalent.

## Rationale

This paper seeks to provide an overview of current perceptions, in Queensland, regarding the degree to which Indigenous students are successfully completing twelve years of schooling or its equivalent. It could be argued that the Terms of Reference for the study, suggest that the QIECB were seeking to gain a deeper insight into the overall benefits that might accrue to Indigenous students who remain in education for twelve years, for researchers were required to identify current 'success experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' and effective practices that were deemed to be achieving improved retention and success rates for Indigenous students. Within this context, this project, might also be seen as attempting to shift the focus of thinking about education for Indigenous students, from a deficit model to a more positive approach focused on achievement.

In fact, the decision to focus on achievement was made after considerable deliberation, for members of the QIECB were sympathetic to the conundrum that Indigenous Australians appear to be faced with in the current situation. The statistical evidence may suggest that sound progress has been made in terms of Indigenous students continuing in school beyond the non-compulsory years, but the DEST Annual Report 2001-02, reveals that Year 12 "Indigenous enrolments in 2001 were less than half of the Indigenous Year 10 enrolments in 1999 (apparent retention rate of 43.6%). This was well below the non-Indigenous rate of 76.2%" (2002: 26). This is an issue of serious concern and yet the mere growth in real numbers tends to be enough to satisfy most stakeholders.

This is not to deny the growth that has occurred as a positive outcome of strategies implemented by federal and state governments, particularly during the past decade. Yet, many Indigenous peoples, express a sense of unease about the fact that, while access and participation rates might be increasing, outcomes for Indigenous students continue to reflect very limited retention and success rates. What are the implications of this reality for

Indigenous students? Obviously, the critical issue that underpins this reality, relates to just what it is that Indigenous students are actually getting out of their education. And in seeking to determine that, it would seem there is also a need to question the concept of 'success' itself. What do the majority of educators mean when they refer to student 'success'? Is it possible that, within an educational context, 'success' might mean something different to students, especially Indigenous students? And is it possible that it could mean different things to different Indigenous students? While acknowledging that these are complex questions, the concern for the QIECB was to gain some understanding of how schools addressed them?

## Literature Review

Despite the attempt, through this research, to focus on Indigenous success and the implementation of policies and practices that are effective in enabling Indigenous students to achieve positive educational outcomes from schooling, the review of the literature provides an insight into the overall difficulty of this task. Hence, the literature review has been used to provide an overview of the current positioning of Indigenous students in Queensland schools and the issues that might be perceived as impacting upon their capacity for success.

The literature reveals that Indigenous students continue to be under represented in the secondary sector and that, despite a considerable focus on this area in terms of research, reports, policies and reviews of policies, over the last 20 years (Bourke 2000, and Schwab 1999), improvements have been limited. While the Commonwealth Government has implemented a range of initiatives designed to increase Indigenous Australian participation to Year 12 and to improve educational outcomes, this group fundamentally remains the most seriously educationally disadvantaged group within Australian society, consistently recording lower levels of academic achievement and higher rates of absenteeism than non-Indigenous students (Bourke 2000:1).

The literature also reveals that, within the context of Indigenous 'success' in education, research in this area has been a relatively recent phenomenon, despite the fact that the first recorded example of Indigenous academic 'success' has been traced back to Governor Macquarie's Native Institution at Parramatta, where, according to Broome, "In 1819 an Aboriginal girl of 14 won the first prize in the Anniversary Schools Examination, ahead of 20 Aboriginal and 100 European children" (Broome, 1982: 31). Unfortunately, as Broome (1982) and Harris (1990) have implied, the school was doomed to failure for it did not take account of the aspirations of Aboriginal parents or students. And, while there was obviously Indigenous achievement in education, in the intervening years, the written record reveals that most researchers, when they did become interested in the education of Indigenous students, appear to have been overly influenced by the societal thinking of the time, hence, Indigenous students were painted as failures and the blame for such failure was firmly located in either the individual student or his or her family. And, as educational outcomes for Indigenous students becomes an increasing concern for educators, the reality may be that on-going failure to take account of Indigenous aspirations underpins the failure of our systems to provide effective and relative education for Indigenous students. In recent years, several researchers, including Herbert (2000), Bourke (2000), Hunter and Schwab (1998), have written of determinants of Indigenous success although even where people are attempting to link the effective strategies with successful outcomes, the barriers that tend to prevent success inevitably tend to overshadow accounts of Indigenous student achievement.

## Methodology

The QIECB required the researchers to conduct interviews and focus group meetings with a variety of stakeholders across all sectors of education in Queensland from Early Childhood, Schools and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes and across all providers, Education Queensland (EQ), the Catholic Education System (CES) and Independent Schools, in a minimum of nine sites, throughout Queensland. The QIECB negotiated the sites with researchers in order to ensure the diversity of the Indigenous education experience within Queensland could be captured in the data collection process. Hence, in this study interviews and focus groups meetings were conducted in 27 locations: 24 school sites and 3 non school sites that included a TAFE institution and a private training provider.

A qualitative approach was used in undertaking this research, to ensure the Indigenous voice was heard. Semi-structured interviews and focus group meetings were conducted to gather data from a range of stakeholders, including students, parents, carers, etc., as well as teachers and other school staff members. The data gathering instruments were devised to encourage respondents to discuss the issue in such a way as to provide their views, aspirations and concerns on a range of issues relating to the completion of Year 12 or its equivalent. In this way, researchers sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues stakeholders perceived as having direct relevance to Indigenous students completing Year 12 or its equivalent.

Research protocols were observed in undertaking this study, thus, following the initial contact with the Principal, the Indigenous Education Worker (IEW) or Community Education Counsellor (CEC) was contacted and asked to assist with facilitation of the process at the school level. The data was analysed through the method of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967 cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 335).

Quantitative data was gathered from a range of national and statewide statistics available in various reports and departmental websites.

## 5.0 Key Findings

### Current Educational Infrastructure and provisions in Queensland

Education for students across the P-12 range, in Queensland, is provided by a network of government and non-government institutions. EQ is the major provider of public education while private education is offered through the CES and a number of Independent schools. Within the EQ system, a common curriculum, adapted to local needs is studied in each primary school, with students in Years 6 and 7, studying a language other than English. It is not until Year 9, the second year of high school that students have some choice in the subjects they will study. A range of subjects is offered to Years 11 and 12 students, from which they must study six. In 2001, a new subject, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, was offered to Year 11 and 12 students. TAFE institutes also make vocational subjects available for secondary school students. While schools in the Catholic and Independent systems offer a similar structure, the variations in their curricula will reflect the philosophical base of the particular school or system.

All secondary schools offering students the opportunity to complete Year 12 and obtain a Tertiary Entrance Score (TES), must offer a range of subjects that, in terms of knowledge and skills content, conform to the requirements of the Queensland studies Authority (QSA),

the body that monitors educational provision, including curriculum development and assessment, across all sectors, on behalf of the Queensland Government.

Source: <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/about/general.html>

### Current enrolment, attendance and retention statistics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland (including enrolment shares).

While the data about the school population in Queensland provides an insight into access, participation and retention trends, it needs to be understood that its **validity is questionable because identifying as an Indigenous person, is not mandatory for school students.**

Within such a context, the following statistics have been compiled from figures obtained from Education Queensland collections and DEST National Schools Collections, to provide a broad overview of the situation. Hence, it would appear that, across the P-12 range, in Queensland schools, approximately 28 000 (6%) students identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Approximately 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrol in Government schools, 11% in Catholic Education Schools and 9% in Independent schools. Steady growth was experienced in all education systems during the past 6 years.

The statistics would seem to indicate that, where Indigenous students are retained until Year 10, they not only have an increased chance of completing Year 12, but also shorten the gap between themselves and the cohort of non-Indigenous students completing Year 12. Despite this positive outcome, however, there remains a considerable margin in the apparent retention rates for Indigenous students in comparison with the general student population.

While the researchers were able to obtain data relating to retention and completion rates for various groups, from EQ, Queensland Catholic Secondary School data for 2001, will not be collected from schools until Semester 2 of 2002.

### Education Queensland: Student Disciplinary Absences (SDAs)

Forced absenteeism that occurs as a result of disciplinary action by schools, is a critical component in any study. The information gathered from EQ would seem to suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students constituted approximately 5% of the (P-12) EQ student body in 2001, yet were being subjected to disciplinary action at 2 to 3 times the rate of their non-indigenous peers. This would seem to suggest that many Queensland schools are not providing inclusive learning environments for Indigenous students. This argument is premised on the assumption that, if schools are providing Indigenous students with environments that are culturally affirmative, students would not be behaving in ways that require their exclusion from the school community. Furthermore, the use of suspensions, exclusions and cancellations of enrolment, as disciplinary actions, maintains Indigenous absenteeism and ensures that the status quo for many Indigenous students will be maintained. If children are not in school, they cannot be taught and neither can they learn what the education system wants them to learn. The long-term outcomes of such a situation, will mean that teachers will continue to see Indigenous students as non-performers and Indigenous peoples, both children and their parents, will continue to see schools as places that exclude and alienate them and that, ultimately, set them up for exclusion from the mainstream society.

**NB: The data is not reliable, given that the Indigenous identifier is not mandatory.**



## Current success experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

In the schools that were case studies, it was obvious that there is a growing level of successful achievement being enjoyed by Indigenous students in a number of Queensland schools. It did appear that many teachers were consciously seeking to be better teachers of Indigenous students and that this generally translated into improving their relationship with students. Unfortunately, it did not appear to translate into teachers becoming more demanding of students in terms of expecting them to achieve in ways that required intellectual or academic rigour. Teachers talked of students 'under-performing', of the test results not reflecting their real abilities, for various reasons, such as wanting to be with their friends, not wanting to stand out. It was disappointing that teachers did not appear to identify any concerns with the appropriateness of test instruments as a possible cause of students scoring poorly in tests. It was also suggested that for students being first in their family to move beyond Year 8, retention to Year 12 may not be an appropriate construct.

Often students who do work hard and achieve success appear to become isolated from their peers. The price of achievement may be giving up friends and family and this is a difficult decision for young adults to make. Yet, despite such outcomes, there are students who are choosing that option.

### **Effective practices in culturally inclusive curriculum;**

Few schools are providing students with access to Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, although there appears to be general agreement that '*... it would be a good thing to do*'. Most principals and teachers within the schools visited, demonstrated a very limited knowledge of Indigenous Studies and current policies and programs relating to Indigenous Education.

While there may not be a designated subject called Indigenous Studies, various issues, such as mandatory sentencing, may be integrated into other curriculum. Responses from teachers would seem to indicate that some schools are trying to provide their students with a better understanding of Indigenous Australians and an improved capacity for cross-cultural interaction. Overall, integration of Indigenous content into the school's curriculum is limited. The incorporation of Indigenous content into curriculum remains dependent upon the efforts of individual teachers rather than a school based approach to curriculum adaptation and reform. Several Principals provided some positive feedback concerning the value of New Basics and Productive Pedagogies, in terms of improving inclusivity in schools, whereas, most staff seem to equate culturally inclusive studies as focusing on English literacy and numeracy programs.

The Catholic Education Office has recently been increasingly active in its pursuit of effective practices in culturally inclusive curriculum and produced a range of curriculum materials to which teachers and other staff members have access. Not all staff are particularly supportive of such developments.

Despite the apparent paucity of Indigenous Studies programs being taught in schools, there were a number of teachers who were endeavouring to use more effective teaching practices with Indigenous students. Those who were achieving success in this regard, appeared to be those who had recognised the importance of the teacher-student relationship and experiential learning.

Those boarding schools where student feedback would seem to suggest that the school is developing an effective inclusive curriculum, would seem to be those where staff highlighted the importance of the total learning experience and the teacher-student relationship, in

making the school a positive learning environment for students, both during and after school hours.

Many teachers demonstrated a good knowledge and understanding of the available resources and support mechanisms to assist them with teaching Indigenous students. It was generally found that community controlled schools were more likely to offer a culturally inclusive curriculum than other schools.

Overall, it could be argued that a great deal of confusion exists in many schools as to what a culturally inclusive curriculum actually is. There remain many teachers in schools, who believe that a culturally inclusive education is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students only.

### **Current initiatives, programs and strategies which are effectively providing flexible, clear and recognised pathways to employment and life long learning.**

A number of schools were conducting school initiatives such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Aspirations Program (AITAP) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Career Aspirations Pathways (AICAP) programs to broaden student pathways to employment and lifelong learning. Various schools have also attempted to establish VET programs and other work skilling initiatives that enhance the level of choice for students. In addition, some schools were taking account of the employment and other opportunities available within the students' own communities, in order to ensure a 'fit' between senior schooling and the real options existing for students, in terms of pathways to future training, employment and education.

Establishing partnerships with community and industry groups is something 'new' for schools although the study revealed that there are some signs that progress is beginning to be made in this area, particularly in terms of schools engaging in agreements with Indigenous organisations.

### **Alternative pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners eg. School Based Apprenticeships, VET in Schools, alternative education sites and their outcomes**

Unfortunately, the perception persists among many teachers that an academic pathway is the only pathway. It was found that such attitudes can have a negative impact upon the way in which non-academic learning pathways such as trade certification, are valued within a school setting and, hence, may affect and/or influence students' choices and perceptions about viable and legitimate options. Furthermore, it was suggested that EQ's language and ways of perceiving and describing programs, appear weighted toward academia rather than trades, with the result that there is a devaluing of the trades that then tends to affect students' realistic career choices and their relative value.

In general, however, most schools appear to be making a genuine attempt to find options that are acceptable to student' needs and that will encourage them to stay at school. It would seem that it is in seeking to become more relevant to student learning needs, that there is the greatest potential for establishing innovative and worthwhile partnerships with community, other Government Departments and/or industry groups.

Some schools work on VET accreditation allied with the local TAFE. Students with low levels in English literacy can undertake VET courses that give them accreditation in basic literacy and numeracy. In addition, a number of schools and students have availed themselves of a broad range of VET courses, that are relevant to student' needs. Partnership agreements

that enable work placements in a range of VET areas provide another valuable option for many Indigenous students. The virtual classroom is another means of introducing VET studies into remote areas

The provision of traineeships has encouraged some students to remain at school because of potential career opportunities. Flexible learning pathway options, distance education and work placements in Indigenous businesses and departments, are also influencing students to remain at school.

Due to their close links with community and community organisations, Aboriginal community schools have the capacity to offer alternative curricula where the content can be determined through direct consultation with parents, students and the school board. This increases the likelihood of programs that cater directly to the learning and training needs of the individual student while also targeting the current and future education needs of the community.

While there is a perception that a high percentage of Indigenous students are choosing vocational education or VET subjects, the statistics in many schools reveal that participation by Indigenous students in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, is minimal. Such misconceptions may reflect the current practice of governments to "talk up" the degree of Indigenous participation in VET sector programs, the implication being that this is the level that is most appropriate for Indigenous students.

The PLUS Program at the University of Queensland (Positive Links between Universities and Schools) is of interest. EQ approached the University of Queensland with an offer of funds to focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' numeracy and English literacy. The PLUS program has a focus on cyber literacy and involves upper primary and lower secondary students from the Ipswich area, attending classes on the UQ campus at Ipswich. The possibility of extending this kind of program to rural areas may not have been explored, but could offer another valuable option.

Guidance officers may need to offer a more proactive career's information service. While guidance officers may claim that Indigenous students do not seek assistance, students, when interviewed, were obviously unaware of many of the pathway options that were actually available to them in their schools.

In general, this study found that a high percentage of students would prefer alternate, as compared to academic, pathways. The underlying reasons for such preferences are complex. For example, students may perceive that:

- following an academic pathway would take them away from home and their family;
- their strengths lie in a different direction and they wish to take an option that enables them to pursue a future in an area in which they are capable; and
- education is simply irrelevant and unattainable.

### **Identified issues impacting on year 12 retention.**

The motivating factors for Indigenous students staying on to complete year 12 appeared to vary significantly between junior and senior years with younger students identifying sports and friends as their major considerations for staying at school while Year 12 students were more future/goal oriented. Both groups recognised the importance of completing year 12 in order to pursue university studies, access career opportunities and more importantly, obtain financial security. Additional influences cited for deciding to complete Year 12, ranged from positive role models (including family, community and teachers) to the desire to have a better life.



The students had a good knowledge and understanding of the support mechanisms available to them through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, especially the IEWs. Many students stated that Indigenous workers in the school provided strong, positive role models and somebody to talk to. Many teachers also commented positively on the importance of the work of the IEWs, and suggested there was a need to raise their profile so that non-Indigenous teachers in particular, might access their services (and support) on a more regular basis. The employment of Indigenous staff would appear to be a very significant factor in retaining students to year 12, as the IEWs appeared to be the primary link between the school and the community. Indigenous Student Support and Parent Awareness Program (ASSPA) members believed that parents and the community also had a key role to play in encouraging and supporting Indigenous students at the school. However, they reported less direct involvement/influence over curriculum content (with the exception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) and professional development of staff in relation to teaching Indigenous students.

Students at boarding schools also identified issues of safety, identity, consistency, and the desire to complete senior schooling. There was also more to do, in a social sense, than in many of their remote communities. This is an issue for many students in remote areas because their local school only offers courses to Year 10, so they must leave their communities to complete Year 12. Some boarding schools now work hard to make contact with communities so that there is a seamless progression from the community school to the boarding school. These schools recognise the importance of support from family and friends, hence, community input into the school was considered a critical aspect of improving retention and success rates for Indigenous students.

There were various views expressed in relation to overall curriculum structure and the impact, if any, this has on the retention and success rates of Indigenous students at the school. Some schools offer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies as a board subject, but apart from that there is often no other evidence to suggest that Indigenous content is integrated into the school's broader curriculum, particularly at the senior schooling level. It was noted that the availability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and resource materials, at a school does not necessarily improve overall retention rates for Indigenous students.

From the teachers' perspective, it was suggested that success and achievement were closely related to the retention of Indigenous students. Perhaps the growing practice of setting goals and striving to achieve them has improved local students' retention rates by correspondingly improving individual achievement levels. Both Indigenous parents and students recalled their own personal experiences, which supported these views. Family and cultural obligations were cited as reasons for non-attendance

Significantly, although many of the students had positive experiences overall at the school, many had encountered racism either from their peers and / or teachers. In some circumstances, this had a significant impact on the levels of absenteeism (and subsequent retention) of Indigenous students.

A number of schools implement specific policies and practices in an endeavour to provide a more culturally affirmative learning environment for their Indigenous students. These support initiatives were intended to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students and enhance their retention rates within the school system. Both students and teachers identified some of these initiatives as key factors in the retention of Indigenous students.

Some students suggested that peer pressure is often an important influence in dropping out of school. Historically, many Indigenous students have left the system at the end of year 10 -

returning 1-2 years later to enrol in TAFE courses. Perceived reasons were immaturity coupled with lack of interest and needing a break after many years of study.

None of the schools visited appeared to have any formal policy regarding encouragement of retention to year 12 for Indigenous students.

Some teachers highlighted the impact that absences have on progressing through Years 11 and 12. Other attendance issues include:

- lateness
- racism
- student motivation; and,
- family finances.

Absenteeism and its implications for retention to Year 12 frustrated everyone who participated in this project.

From these findings and the recommendations provided by the research teams, the QIECB will make recommendations to the State and Federal Ministers for Education.

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