



Submission to MCEECDYA on the Draft Indigenous Education Action Plan

In preparing this submission on the Draft Indigenous Education Action Plan (IEAP), we have taken the advice provided on the MCEECDYA website. Therefore, our submission is presented against the questions proposed by MCEECDYA. As required, we have refrained from comment on Chapter 3 – Jurisdictional priorities.

1. What was your first impression of the draft IEAP when you read it?

We welcome the way in which the draft IEAP is aligned to the Closing the Gap targets. It is important that progress is measurable and that the overall approach is located within a national policy and strategic framework. The emphasis on workforce development, engagement, post-school pathways and readiness for school is valuable to the overall objectives of the IEAP.

The Plan illustrates the willingness of MCEECDYA to enter areas where it may be more difficult for government departments to achieve tangible success. Engagement, for example, and pathways to real school options, are challenging but important areas. The choice of themes for the plan is also well-considered and gives a sense of a rounded strategy rather than a set of disparate activities linked together. We also appreciate the emphasis on developmental change in education, rather than short-term fixes. Our conviction is that imposed change can only result in acquiescence, whereas building change in an inclusive manner leads to commitment locally, which is essential to better outcomes from education.

Overall, we value the aspirations represented by the plan and the practical drive for implementation implied by its focus and themes. As described in subsequent sections of this submission, we consider there to be scope for enhancing the analysis that underlies the Plan.

2. What questions, issues or concerns did the draft IEAP raise for you?

The six principles defined by the National Indigenous Reform Agreement are important, but we fear that government agencies will not have the capacity or capability to put them into action properly. This applies particularly to the principles on monitoring and evaluation and on engagement, both of which have been the subject of our own research in desert Australia.

We were disappointed that the targets provided at the policy level were not reflected in the individual action areas within the IEAP. Too many objectives commenced with the words ‘increasing’ or ‘better’ without defining what this means in practice. Perhaps MCEECDYA’s intention is to sharpen the performance indicators in the final version. We consider this to be essential.

We feel that improvements could be made to the Plan through greater depth of analysis on community engagement, preparedness of students for school and a more comprehensive systems approach to education and its component parts. This includes showing a willingness to tackle policy and professional rigidities in the way that education is planned and delivered as well as progressive approaches to working with sparse and highly mobile populations. There is scope for research to support the implementation of the IEAP. Our own plans for research under the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) are relevant to these aims.

3. Are there important issues that you feel have not been addressed in the draft IEAP?

The analysis in the IEAP favours action that is mainly confined to the delivery of education within the school. We would argue that this approach overlooks two critical factors in the progress that students make: the family and home setting, and the ‘demand-side’ of the education equation.

The family and home setting: Some students are unable to be adequately supported by their families to attend school consistently and to make the most of the opportunities available through the school. Our comments therefore relate to the ‘Readiness for school’ and ‘Engagement and connections’ themes on pp.7–10 of the IEAP. Many factors are at play in these situations, but we argue that readiness for school is about much more than early childhood development. It should also apply to the daily routine of making the most of the school experience. For example, the housing in which students live may be overcrowded or inadequate. The home or neighbouring houses may be noisy or affected by visitors who inadvertently disrupt the home environment, making it difficult for students to go to bed on time, sleep well and rise in good time for breakfast and the journey to school. It may be that other family members do not value school and do not consider that it leads to further training, work or a career.

We suggest that the IEAP emphasises the need for schools, education departments and professional staff to find effective ways to engage with families so that they build a relationship with staff and a commitment to the school and their child’s place within it. No lack of effort has been expended in this direction by many schools, but there is a shortfall of knowledge on techniques and good practice in this area. The end result is that initiatives to strengthen school communities as a whole are often ad hoc and dependent on the commitment of a few staff rather than being embedded in policy and practice. The research of the DKCRC on services more generally has identified a gap in understanding between service providers to Aboriginal communities on the one hand and service users on the other, with insufficient recognition on either side of the priorities of the other and therefore limited common ground on which to build shared goals (Porter et al. 2010, McGrath et al. 2010).

We support the general direction of the IEAP on engagement with families, but suggest that a more sophisticated approach is required to building understanding across this gap. Community partnership agreements, personalised learning plans and family forums are welcome contributions from the Plan, but it will also take skilled and flexible work to build engagement rather than a rigid and bureaucratic roll-out of government requirements. The flexibility described in some of the school-level actions on p.16 is a good example of the approach that is required. Government education departments will need to ensure they have the capacity to operate in this way, which means allowing for flexibility and also resourcing it. One approach would be to involve support teams drawn from community members. At DKCRC, we have had some positive experiences through employing community research teams made up of local residents, an approach that could be replicable. FaHCSIA is currently applying a similar approach to its initiatives in remote service delivery.

The demand side of education: This leads us to the second aspect of this section of the IEAP on which we wish to comment. As we have discovered through the research of DKCRC, government initiatives often concentrate on establishing a delivery system aimed at groups who are implicitly assumed to be passive recipients of the products of that system. The valuable components of the IEAP that address the needs and expectations of students, families and communities are important in recognising that families and students are also active choosers of services, but would benefit from a more in-depth analysis. For example, recent international research indicates that a key factor in the higher performance of private schools in many countries where school attendance and performance falls short of international benchmarks is that parents demand more of teachers and other education staff (Tooley 2008). This is an important pointer for the IEAP as it shows that engagement with

families is not just about getting them involved in supporting their children but also encouraging them to express their expectations of the education system.

UNESCO has also studied the reasons for low attendance in schools in India, providing insight on the value that families place on education and the influence that this has on the encouragement they provide to their children (Watkins 2010). Again, this is relevant to the situation of many Aboriginal families in Australia, who consider that investing in education does not provide a way to achieve their aspirations.

Other areas:

Improved performance also features in our perspective on the section on leadership on pp.15–16. During CRC-REP workshops, participants described how responsibility for school performance can become unclear at the interface between the school principal, the education authority and the school council, with Education department staff and chairs of school councils both being reluctant to manage the school principal. The plan would be strengthened by clarity on these arrangements so that a vital link in the chain of accountability for IEAP results is not diluted.

In considering the section on pathways to real post-school options (pp.17–18), the research of DKCRC is relevant, most notably *Growing the Desert: effective educational pathways for remote Indigenous peoples* (Young et al. 2007). A key message from the research is that transitions from education to work are particularly challenging for people living in locations where opportunities are limited. This presents obvious limitations to the ‘learn or earn’ concept, as suitable openings for either may be scarce. Effective transitions from education to work depend on systems that recognise the high levels of mobility of Aboriginal people within regions and the value of social networks as a means of people building and sustaining a livelihood.

We feel that the IEAP lacks a comprehensive systems approach to analysing education. Lasting change is best achieved by understanding the factors that support and hinder systems from functioning. As AusAID has concluded in its latest strategy paper for investment in rural development, systems are best understood with respect to their multi-function and multi-player character (Gibson 2009). Our own research uses a soft-systems methodology to deal with situations where human perceptions, behaviour and actions are the dominating factors, frequently the case in education in remote communities.

Our overall reaction to this section of the IEAP is that it would benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the issues affecting post-school transitions. The collaborative effort of partners to the new CRC-REP is relevant here, since we have developed a major research program in remote education that will commence this year. We would be pleased to facilitate discussions between the CRC-REP and MCEECDYA in order to strengthen this section and other parts of the IEAP.

4. What do you like about the draft IEAP?

The systemic and school-level actions defined on p.10 of the IEAP show determination to engage with families and to build confidence that high educational outcomes can be achieved. At the same time, these aims will need to be backed by staff who have the skills and knowledge to work effectively outside the school environment. Techniques will be required to engage reluctant families and to address underlying issues that hamper progress, such as disruptive classroom environments and poor living conditions at home.

We like the description in the Plan of the need for research to support its aims. It is important for educators to gain a better understanding of the complex factors affecting attendance and to gather information they require for this work. A measured, systemic understanding, backed by a sound conceptual framework, would give the IEAP the best chance of achieving its objectives.

The section on post-school options is a valuable inclusion. During development workshops for the Education component of the CRC-REP, stakeholders expressed concern that their children may not find work when they leave school. It is vital that young Aboriginal people see opportunities for themselves and which act as an incentive to complete their school education.

Our other positive reflections on the IEAP are included in our responses to the first question in this submission.

5. Have you any further advice that you feel might strengthen the Plan?

There are complex challenges in improving pathways for Aboriginal people through education and training to employment and enterprise. We are committed to a program of research under the new CRC-REP that we believe will contribute to better outcomes in this area. The research commences in the second half of 2010 and aims to:

- Understand the factors that support transition into sustainable employment
- Identify the barriers to effective transition
- Compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches
- Document Aboriginal job seekers' perspectives and experiences in order to identify key factors in particular results being achieved.

The research will build a picture of the system that supports pathways into work and enterprise, analysing the connections between different parts of the system, the behaviours that influence its effectiveness and the areas where specific improvements could be made that enhance the system as a whole. The methodology will draw greater attention to elements of the system that have not received consideration before, including conventions and standards in policy and professional practice and the engagement of family and community members.

The CRC-REP will identify how education systems can be redesigned to better suit the needs of communities in remote regions by examining demand (what students, carers and the local economy need), supply (what systems need to provide, including better staff recruitment and retention), policy issues and alternative delivery models. For example, an area of focus is the idea that remote education systems would be more effective if they were constructed around social networks based on sparseness and high mobility, as well as taking into account the cultural and social practices of Aboriginal people.

We would like to see the IEAP take into account this research as it develops, as we believe it will make an important contribution to the development of policy and practice in this area over time. With 52 partners drawn from State and Territory Governments, Aboriginal and non-government organisations, research institutions and private sector businesses, the CRC-REP represents a strong consortium committed to addressing economic disadvantage in remote Australia, in which better outcomes from education is a key element.

References

Gibson A. 2009. *Investing in rural development – a strategic review*. AusAID, Canberra.

McGrath N, Moran M and Anda M. 2010. 'The boundaries of representation: Exploring the bordering of Martu governance in Australia'. Forthcoming DKCRC Working Paper 70, Desert Knowledge CRC, Alice Springs.

Porter R, Peter S, Elvin R and Young M. 2010. 'Discordance, mobility and agency: Dilemmas for housing reform in Northern Territory Aboriginal settlements'. Forthcoming research report, Desert Knowledge CRC, Alice Springs.

Tooley J. 2008. *E.G. West: Economic Liberalism and the Role of Government in Education*, Continuum, New York and London (Continuum Library of Educational Thought).

Watkins K. 2010. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the marginalized*. UNESCO, Paris.

Young M, Guenther J and Boyle A. 2007. *Growing the Desert: Educational pathways for remote Indigenous peoples*, NCVET, Adelaide and Desert Knowledge CRC, Alice Springs.