IS SUCCESS A MATTER OF CHOICE?

Exploring Indigenous Australian notions of success within the context of the Australian university

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

July 2003
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma and is not being submitted for any other degree or diploma, at any other university or institute of tertiary education.

I declare that any information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references has been provided.

[Signature]

Heather Jeannie Herbert
Date: 16 November, 2003
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Terminology Used Throughout this Thesis

In this thesis the term ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Indigenous Australians’ with a capital ‘I’ has been used to include both Australian Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Island peoples. The upper case convention has been adopted to be consistent with the use of the upper case E in the collective adjective Europeans or A in Australians. The term Indigenous Australian/s does not indicate an homogenous group of people but rather should be seen as including the diversity of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural groups throughout the nation.

The term ‘Aborigine’ is used only when it is part of a direct quote.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all of the students and staff who participated in this study by contributing information and ideas about Indigenous engagement in the academe. It was their willingness to share their knowledge and understandings that made this thesis possible. I thank them for their time, but most of all I thank them just for being there and for sharing. Their efforts will help those Indigenous students who follow them into the academe in future years.

I wish to especially thank my principal supervisor, Professor Mary Kalantzis, for her unending patience, her ability to remain calm at all times and her skilful and much appreciated guidance in keeping me ‘on the track’ throughout this long and at times arduous journey. I particularly thank her for her understanding of my Aboriginality and her empathy in allowing me the space to work through the issues in my own way.

I gratefully acknowledge the companionship afforded by those fellow postgraduate students I have interacted with along the way, the guidance offered to me by Dr Sue McGinty, and the enthusiastic and on-going support I have received from my colleagues during the period of this journey.

I thank my family for their on-going support and faith in me — the words ‘You can do it, Mum’ have become very significant during this process. Most especially I thank my husband, Keiran Herbert, for his loving support in allowing me the time and space I needed and for his willingness to live amidst the chaos.
Abstract

This thesis is a study of success within an academic institution, a study of success from an Indigenous perspective. The study represents an educational journey that provided a site for the Aboriginal researcher to extrapolate knowledge and understanding from a range of educational intersections with her Indigenous and non-Indigenous informants as well as with the literature. The study was designed both to enable the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the reality of the university experience for Indigenous Australian students and to clarify Indigenous perceptions of success within the context of university studies. In examining these issues, the researcher sought to determine the degree of choice Indigenous Australians felt able to exercise in their engagement within the academe and the degree of compatibility between what Indigenous peoples want from their university education and what Australian universities and the Commonwealth Government expect of them.

The research findings indicate that, for those Indigenous Australians who participated in this study, perceptions of success within the context of university education are much broader than those associated with the Commonwealth Government's current focus on completion (of subjects and/or course), likely reflecting the respondents' preference for adopting a holistic approach in considering their university experience. While completion was seen as an important goal, respondents did indicate a concern with their overall quality of life, especially in terms of their desire to achieve greater control over their own lives through the educational process. This study revealed how, having developed the knowledge and skills they needed to engage in tertiary studies, these student respondents had come to realise that they were increasingly able to use that process to establish their own sense of place; to draw upon their own strengths in both a personal and professional sense, in order to achieve the outcomes they sought from their university experience — outcomes that better prepared them to make more effective life choices.
Preface

I commenced this research out of a desire to do something that I could dedicate to my mother to repay her, in some tangible way for her years of total commitment to her belief in the value of education. The initial dilemma I faced in embarking upon this study was one of recognition. My mother, due to her upbringing, viewed education as the western style programs that were delivered within educational institutions and that she perceived as the key to obtaining employment. I believe her convictions were influenced by the fact that her own mother was illiterate and that she, herself, had received a very limited formal education. My mother believed that by giving all of her children a secondary education, something that had been denied her, she was giving us all the capacity to obtain secure employment. At the time that I commenced this study, however, I had spent over thirty years working in education so my views of education were considerably different. While I could understand how the lack of formal education had served to marginalise women of my mother’s and grandmother’s eras, in particular Aboriginal women, my experience had also made me conscious of the complexities of educational provision. And because, my specific area of expertise was Indigenous education, I had also to acknowledge that my perspectives of what constitutes education and the ultimate purpose of education might be far different to the views my mother had held. For instance, while I would agree that we had held a shared view of education as the means to survival, my mother’s expectations would have been far simpler than mine, for, in a sense, I had become the product of my own education. My extensive experience in formal education, both as a learner and a teacher, has enabled me to recognise and accept the importance of learning as a lifelong process, a process that uses the learner’s experiences and interests as the basis for new learning that is relevant to the individual’s needs. It has also, over time, led me to understand the importance of education as the means of providing individual learners with “multifaceted ways of reading the world” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000: 241), an essential survival mechanism, in a modern capitalist society. Yet, as a result of my own education, I have also developed a deep insight into the difficulties that many Indigenous peoples must overcome in order to achieve an education that will enable them to operate effectively within the culture of modernity. This is a different world to the one in which an Aboriginal woman like my mother was able to achieve her vision of a “good” education for all of her children and, in reality, I wonder if it is still possible to achieve such visions. The journey I have embarked upon, in this study,
will enable me to explore such realities.

My mother spent most of her life believing that she had been very fortunate because she had received an education that enabled her to read and write. Against all the odds she sent every one of her eight children away to secondary school, determined that, to use her words, we would "all have the means to escape". In that sense, my mother's education had provided her with a conviction that there was a better way of life than the one we experienced within the narrow-minded confines of a small town in the Kimberley. She wanted us all to know what it might be like to live somewhere else; to be educated in a large school where there was greater choice; to be able to enjoy the freedom of being your own person. So completely committed was she to the belief that all education was valuable, that, when my father died in my first year away at high school, she managed to talk her way into his job as cook for the Public Works Department, so that she could continue to support and educate her large family. In reflecting upon those years, I have come to realise that it was my mother who planted the seeds of my lifelong involvement in education. It was my mother who convinced me that, in terms of academic ability, I was just as good as anybody else.

Two of us went on to complete secondary school and pursue higher education. After having completed our degrees at the Masters level, my sister and I both decided we had had enough of study. Our mother was very proud of our achievements. It seemed enough. Yet, two years later I felt the urge to take up the final challenge. I had some personal sense that I needed to do this for my mother. I could not convince my sister to join me. Perhaps it was my experience as an educator that drew me back into study, perhaps it was my sister's background in health that convinced her that, at the personal level, there were other less demanding options of paying our dues, so to speak.

Unfortunately, my mother succumbed to Alzheimers shortly after I had told her I was going to pursue the ultimate goal in my own education - a doctorate. I am not sure how much she really comprehended of what I was doing although my sister Margaret who cared for and nurtured Mum through her final years, assured me that she was very proud of the fact that I had set out on this final journey. I do know that Margaret was very proud of what I was trying to do and always wanted to talk about my progress. One of the reasons for her pride was her memory of being taken to Adelaide by our grandmother, when she was about 10 years of age. We never knew why Granny chose to take one of her younger grandchildren on such a trip except that they were close and Margaret could read. Suffice to say that as
Granny was illiterate, she needed someone to help her find her way around a strange city and to read to her from the daily newspaper she purchased every day. Margaret carried the memory of that trip, especially the excitement and the terror it held for her, as a young "kid from the bush", for the rest of her life. Whenever my commitment appeared to waver she would remind me of that trip, of our grandmother's illiteracy, and challenge me to keep going -- just to prove it could be done. In the simple retelling of the story, she also reminded me, of course, that our grandmother had set great store on the written word and, in this way she would bring me back on track. I only wish my sister Margaret had lived to see the fulfilment of this final goal.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of these three women each of whom, in her own way, has guided me in the choices I have made during my life's journey...they may never get to read this work but they have certainly spent many long hours with me in the writing. It is their strength that has inspired me to keep going in what has seemed, at times, a never-ending struggle to achieve my goal of making a worthwhile contribution to the knowledge system that underpins the operation of Australia's educational systems, with an Indigenous Australian perspective of what constitutes "success" in education.

But this thesis is also dedicated to all of those Indigenous students who have undertaken study within the academe in the past, who are currently enrolled in higher education programs and who will pursue university studies in the future. I hope that, as with some of the students involved in this study, you will experience a deep sense of achievement in undertaking your own educational journey, in positioning yourself for a different way of life, a new beginning.
Introduction

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind (Gibran, 1980: 67).

Intersections...

This thesis should be seen as a collection of intersections in education—intersections which have been drawn from both the literature and from people's life experiences. The consideration of these intersections, however, will lead to a greater understanding of Indigenous Australians and their journey into the higher education sector.

The journey begins...

I remember it was October, 1995 and I was in Alice Springs. I was sitting talking to Bev, an Aboriginal woman, daughter of a friend of mine. It was already hot, a promise of the scorching months to come, and we were sitting side-by-side on a stone bench under a stunted, scraggly tree looking out over the parched landscape while we talked. As usual, our conversation had been about schools and the endless struggle we all faced with trying to get kids to come to school every day. It was not a conversation full of hope, rather the contrary. Bev ended it with some words I have never forgotten. 'The problem for so many of our people is that they see schools as being the cause of all their problems. When they were kids, it was the school that took away their culture and their language. By the time the school had finished with them, they had nothing left. So many of them are still lost, still trying to find themselves...'

The sense of hopelessness that overwhelmed me at these words, haunted me for months. In fact, in retrospect, it seems that conversation had a singular impact upon me, inspiring me to undertake this study, for I know Aboriginal people who have overcome great adversity and hardship, people who may or may not have come through the schooling system yet have developed the capacity to get on with their lives. My own grandmother was a fiercely independent woman who, despite the fact that she had had no schooling, met life's challenges head on. Despite the restrictions she had faced as an Aboriginal woman under
constant surveillance, she had eluded authorities and managed a cattle station in the Kimberley. To the police she was the housekeeper; to the lessee, a linesman with the Postmaster General’s Department who spent most of his time travelling throughout the vast Kimberley area, she was the partner who managed the station; and to the Aboriginal people who lived and worked on the station, she was ‘the boss’. The white hair, the shy smile and the soft voice all contributed to an impression that belied her strength, and she knew it. She had learnt well from the lessons of her life. She relied on nobody else and what she wanted to do, she did. She regretted her inability to read and write but she found a way around that, especially in her later years when she had many grandchildren to call upon when she needed a reader or someone to write a letter.

I know of others who, as a result of their own life experiences, come to see education as the panacea; the one thing that will save them, that will raise them (or their children) out of the desperate quagmire of poverty and enable them to take control of their own life journey. My mother was one such person. As far as she was concerned education was the one thing that would give her children a future and she never let us forget it. She is the person who started me on my personal journey as an Aboriginal educator. It was inevitable then, that while working through what Bev had said to me in Alice Springs, I began to think about the reality of what she had said in the context of my own family. In reflecting upon my own family’s experience, I thought about how, across two generations, it had been the girls who had been removed from their respective families and I acknowledged how fortunate we had been that my grandmother, my mother and my aunts had not allowed the trauma of their earlier lives to destroy them. To my knowledge, my grandmother had had no relationship with her birth family once she had been removed from the station and, while my mother and her sisters had spent their very early childhood with their mother, that relationship had been fractured by their removal and the fact that they had no further contact with their mother until they returned to the north as women in their twenties. All of these women, then, had learned independence at a very early age. They did not appear to have a close relationship in terms of the way in which they talked or acted toward one another but the family bonds, in a cultural sense, survived their long separation. When my grandmother was present we all deferred to her, my mother included. In the normal course of events, when my mother had a problem — usually related to finding enough money to pay for something — she would share it with her daughters and we were expected, from an early age, to contribute to the solution. It is interesting that, while my oldest brother was expected to become as proficient as his sisters in the day-to-day domestic chores, he was not usually included in the problem-
solving discussions. They remained a female thing. Perhaps, my mother drew her daughters into this type of relationship as a result of her own experiences. As she and her sisters had had to struggle to survive in the alien environment of a girls’ institution while their brothers had remained safely at home in familiar surroundings, she may have felt the need to ensure that her daughters were prepared for any eventualities in their lives. Whatever the reason, it was a powerful bonding tool that ensured all of the girls in the family developed considerable personal strength in dealing with any family or life crises. Reflecting upon such practices helped me to understand the values and beliefs that had influenced my upbringing; that had led to employment, in my family at least, being perceived as the marker of success, especially where individuals were able to obtain jobs that offered future security. It also made me realise that in my immediate family, while we had all been educated to a certain point, such education had been enough to inspire some of us to want more; to aspire to professions that required us to move beyond the level of secondary schooling. In thinking through these issues I had to acknowledge that for me, personally, the opportunity to progress into the senior years of secondary schooling was one that may well have eluded me if, in my third year at high school, I had not been counselled by a vocational education officer who directed me toward the government funded teaching bursaries that were available at the time. My mother encouraged me to apply, for she perceived teaching as a profession that offered good working conditions and security of employment. There was no thought that I might not succeed in achieving my goal.

And in due course, following that 1995 conversation in Alice Springs, as my thoughts became more and more focused on the question of why some Indigenous Australian people who have experienced the trauma of dispossession seem able to move on while others remain lost, I increasingly found myself pondering the importance of education in people’s lives. I acknowledged that it had, over the years, become increasingly important in my own life. Indeed, without a postgraduate qualification I would not be employed at my current level within the university. But, more importantly, I began to reflect upon how important tertiary qualifications might be to Indigenous Australians, in general, and to what degree such qualifications were perceived as indicators of an individual’s potential for success. I asked myself what people really meant when they talked of success, particularly within the context of the university. I questioned whether it was ‘traditional’ academic success and deliberated over what that actually implied. In reflecting upon traditional mainstream notions of success, I contemplated why some students appeared to be able to achieve such success, while others did not. I acknowledged that some students had achieved success in
programs that were the embodiment of inclusive practice, while others had struggled through alien settings. I recognised that success in university could mean different things for different stakeholders, particularly when considered within an equity framework. Through this process, I began to wonder how other Indigenous Australians, especially those engaged in university studies, might define success in the university.

Inevitably, in the course of such reflection, I had to decide what success in university meant to me; a process that made me realise that my response would, without doubt, be influenced by my own experiences both as student and teacher within mainstream education systems. Hence, I aligned myself with the notion that success within a university context meant that students had passed all of the subjects in which they had been enrolled. Such an assumption took no account of who might have designed the individual subjects and the degree of choice students may have had in selecting subjects within their course. Initially, however, I was satisfied with the definition because, on the surface, it appeared to sanction notions of academic freedom and of individual ‘choice’. From within this context, I would likely have argued that individual Indigenous students participating in higher education programs were being offered the opportunity to make their own decisions about their studies; that subject choice and the length of time Indigenous students spent in the institution were simply a reflection of what they, the individuals, perceived their learning needs to be. In the mid-1990s, however, the federal government, in line with the policies of economic rationalism, began to pursue a higher education agenda that focussed on the need for accountability. As the debate evolved within Indigenous groups in the higher education sector, I began to appreciate the dimensions of this issue. I realised that defining success within the context of contemporary higher education, of necessity, narrowed the definition to one that required course completion. My dilemma was how making ‘completion’ a requirement of accountability could be justified within the context of an individual student’s right to freedom of choice. Pressuring students ‘to complete’ the course in which they had enrolled seemed to me to be at odds with government claims that modern education must cater for a diversity of learning needs.

Discussions with Indigenous colleagues revealed a common concern that the push for all students to complete a whole course, preferably a degree program, within a specific timeframe was being driven by expectations imposed by the commonwealth government rather than by the aspirations of individual Indigenous students. Of even greater concern was the recognition that, while agendas to do with completions, timelines and levels of courses
appeared to be driven by the commonwealth government, they were being implemented by the universities. While Indigenous units might protest over the unfairness of changes to ABSTUDY and other funding allocations that were being used to enforce the government policies, the wider university community remained silent, offering little or no support for the Indigenous position. Such silence said a lot about the degree to which most universities valued their Indigenous students or could be perceived as being sensitive to their learning needs. I contemplated the consequences of an assumption that the only students who are deemed to be successful in terms of their university studies will be those who have completed their undergraduate diploma or degree and felt uneasy that such thinking could have a negative impact upon student self-perception. It seemed to me that where Indigenous Australian students entered university with low self-esteem, non-completion of a university course might impact upon their capacity to achieve academic success in the longer term as it could automatically label them a failure. I concluded that we, as Indigenous peoples, were being forced to journey along a road that, although not of our choosing, would almost certainly be perceived by many in the educational communities as having been made for us, signposted as it is, 'Indigenous failure in education'.

It was through such contemplation that I began to think of education as a journey; to consider that my own life in education could be likened to a journey — a long and eventful journey. The longer I thought about this, the more I realized that, from my perspective, no educational journey is a singular activity. The mere act of learning requires us to engage in certain activities such as reading, talking, writing, observing, imitating, that enable us to absorb and process the knowledge and experiences that others wish to share with us. Having acknowledged my stance that learning (and by inference teaching) is an activity that is enriched through the process of reciprocity, I realized that, in drawing upon my own considerable experience as an Aboriginal educator, I might construct a more valuable interpretation of Indigenous success in the academy. Whilst mindful of the potential strengths and weaknesses implicit in my assuming an insider position in this inquiry, I would argue that the use of such an analytical device has the potential to deliver outcomes that will reflect uniquely Indigenous Australian viewpoints.

Essentially then, this thesis will provide a space for myself, as an Aboriginal educator, to analyse the intersection of my metaphorical journey in education with the journeys of some fellow travellers. So, who are these fellow travellers? The Indigenous Australian student and staff respondents and Aboriginal informants of this study have been drawn from the larger
group of Indigenous Australians who participate in university programs as either students or teachers. Their individual roles are of little moment. What is important is that each is pursuing his or her own educational journey within the academe, that temple of western knowledge, the sacred site of those who would see themselves as purveyors of all that is valued as knowledge, the non-Indigenous academics. This is an especially unique journey for most of the travellers have come but lately to academia and many still fear its mystique. Such travellers often interrupt their journey through the academe by suddenly taking a diversion along a sidetrack that can lead them in a different direction; perhaps even provide a degree of respite, for varying periods of time. As is always the case in such scenarios, some students, for reasons of their own, never return to the main route. There are, however, those who have overcome their fear, who set off along the main highway, pull over to engage in the discourses along the way and, ultimately, achieve that which they sought — the 'piece of paper' that may be a diploma, a degree or a record attesting to the successful completion of specific subjects. Whatever their individual learning goals, an inclusive educational environment should enable all students, including Indigenous Australians, to achieve the outcomes they want — to arrive at the destination they desire for themselves. That would seem to be a legitimate goal of education systems in a democratic society.

For those who complete their course, there is an expectation, at both an individual and a community level, that having established their competence, they will now have the attributes required to obtain employment. This does happen for some but not all and it is because some remain unemployed, despite having acquired an academic qualification, that there is a perception amongst some Indigenous individuals and groups that university education is not valuable; that it does not enable Indigenous Australians to achieve their goals in terms of employment. As with other groups within our society, out of the discussions surrounding such realities emerge other notions. For example, there is a view that people who acquire a university qualification somehow change in the process so that they no longer fit in with their 'mob', hence the emergence of derogatory terms such as 'flash black', 'uptown nigger' and so on. Often those who do succeed in obtaining employment are seen to have assimilated; to have sold out on their own identity, their qualification being seen as the symbol of their compliance to the dominant culture. At the same time there are those who also achieve their qualifications and obtain employment but are able to convince their community that such achievement should be seen as an act of resistance — as part of a larger plan to infiltrate societal structures to the ultimate benefit of Indigenous Australians. Such mixed reactions reveal that there are a range of expectations and perceptions regarding
Indigenous Australian participation within the academe from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

I acknowledge that this thesis, in providing an account of the intersection of our multiple journeys, will, of necessity, reflect much of what has been my own experience as an Aboriginal person who has been an undergraduate and postgraduate student and who has worked as an educator within the university. I perceive, however, that the strength of such experience will, in itself, make a positive contribution to this study in that it enhances my capacity to validate the knowledge that emerges out of these multiple intersections.

In justifying my claim that it is legitimate for me, as an experienced Aboriginal educator, to use my insider position in both a cultural and professional sense in undertaking this study, and, in observing Aboriginal communication protocols, it is important that I first introduce myself, in terms of both my Aboriginal identity and my professional credentials.

Both my mother and my grandmother were removed from their families at an early age. Family stories, gathered through word of mouth, indicate that my grandmother was removed from her maternal people's 'camp' as a very young child and raised in the station homestead to be trained as a domestic. While I have not been able to ascertain, with any certainty, whether my grandmother's people were Nkinja or Bunaba, I do know she was born on a cattle station somewhere out near Fitzroy Crossing. The family has assumed that she must have been somewhere between 12 and 14 years of age and pregnant, when she was abandoned by the station owners in Derby, the nearest coastal town. She subsequently had 6 children. As the father of her children, a teamster, was rarely in town and did not provide her with any financial support, she worked long hours to feed and clothe them all. Despite this, she lost her girls when they were removed as young children by the Native Welfare and taken to Perth to be raised in an institution.

My mother and her older sister finally made their way back to find their mother when, as young women in their twenties, they had been able to save enough money to pay their fares. My mother married a Scotsman she met on that trip and, when I was six weeks old, in accordance with the wartime instructions that governed the north at that time, they set out to travel south. They arrived at Broome one evening, just on dusk, to find the town gates closed and American soldiers in control. Broome had the only all-weather airstrip on the whole of the north-west coast and so was a vital link in the defence of northern Australia. The young
soldier who checked their credentials told them that they could enter only for the purpose of refueling and that they must leave again the following day. As they drove into town, my father was very vocal about the fact that an ‘outsider’ was telling them where they could go in their own country. They did not leave the next day and Broome, that little town where the tiny, tin houses hugged the seashore, shimmering in the heat haze of what, at times, seemed to be eternal summer, became the place where they both spent the remainder of their lives; the place where my seven siblings were born.

As my father’s family all lived in Scotland, my mother’s family had a major influence on our lives as we grew up. I was fortunate, as the oldest, to spend a lot of time ‘out bush’ with my grandmother and my uncles and aunts and their families and, like all of my girl cousins, I lived with my grandmother for some months when I was in my final year of primary school. These experiences gave me a strong sense of my identity as an Aboriginal person and the combined influences of my grandmother and mother provided me with a strong inclination for learning and, in time, for teaching.

Learning outcomes have always been important to me. As a young child, I was a ‘good’ student; that was one way to ensure my mother’s praise. We were a large family and my mother was a quiet woman. In addition to these factors, perhaps the effects of a childhood spent in an institution led to her reticence in dealing with her children. I learnt very early in life, however, that my mother was vitally interested in what we did at school. The day we brought home our school reports was always a significant event in our house. As I was the oldest, I was usually the first to race inside, yelling and waving my school report in the air, but I was always closely followed by the hot, sweaty, noisy mass that was the rest of my brothers and sisters who were at school. As we all tumbled into the house, my mother would stop whatever she was doing, sit in her chair at one end of the huge dining room table that was the centre of our family life, and proceed to pore over each of our reports in turn. We would take up our usual places along each side of the table and anxiously watch her face. You could read her pleasure there and we basked in it. She would glance up at you from time to time as she read your report and smile and nod her satisfaction. She would tell each person in turn how pleased she was with them and, where someone had an obvious problem, she would say, ‘We’ll have to do some work on that. But the main thing is that you did your best and you know that is all I ask of you’. The reports would then be stacked neatly in the centre of the table to await our father’s arrival home from work, whereupon my mother would read each of the reports out loud to him, emphasising the good bits so that each of us
was again rewarded with praise. I realise now that, in terms of academic achievement, those interludes were powerful motivators for me. In due course, I became a writer of school reports and, perhaps as a result of those childhood memories, I always made a point of writing something positive in every child’s report in the hope that their parents might make the most of the occasion.

From those early beginnings, my interest in learning outcomes has become a lifetime interest, doubtless fuelled by my own experiences. It is almost forty years since I graduated as a primary teacher. In those days, teachers were assessed every year by the Inspector of Schools for their region. Your work was ‘inspected’, at least twice a year and on each occasion minutely — your classroom, your teaching programs, and your records of students’ results. Students were asked a range of questions that enabled a check on the validity of your teaching programs and records. After school, the Inspector would meet with you to discuss his findings. It was a gruelling process but one I personally found to be both a challenge and a reward for I was young, conscientious and innovative. The challenge for me was not only to get through all that was required within the syllabus but also to do it in ways that were different and stimulating for the students. I wanted my students to get both fun and satisfaction out of their learning. The reward for me was the acknowledgement I received from my principal, parents, peers and the inspector that my work was of a high standard and that my students were achieving excellent results. And, the final challenge for all teachers during that era was to strive to improve your own performance so that you might keep your annual mark increasing. It didn’t matter how infinitesimal a percentage, sometimes it might be a mere quarter of a percent, you were perceived to be doing well if you could keep it rising. Amongst my peers, there was fierce competition to achieve this. Of course, the marking system for teachers disappeared within my first decade of teaching and, in hindsight, I might query its value. At the time, however, I found it to be a great motivator not only of personal achievement but also of striving to ensure that your students achieved academic success.

When I commenced my career in education there was no attempt to identify students as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and there were certainly no support mechanisms in place. Those who did not have the capacity to survive on their own simply disappeared. My first appointment was into a small, very isolated, northern fishing town, that was, in many ways similar to the one in which I had grown up. The population was predominantly Aboriginal, so I had no trouble fitting in and had two wonderful years there. The two-teacher
school perched atop the hill that formed a natural backdrop to the town, so our little school community was a continual observer of the panorama that was the on-going life of the town and the bay beyond. On Saturday mornings I would wait at the bottom of the jetty until 10 a.m. and then set out with whoever had turned up. It was an informal arrangement. Any of the students who felt like a day out were welcome to come along. Everybody brought their own water and food. Sometimes parents and other siblings would join the group. We wandered for miles on those weekend jaunts along the beach, wading through the shallows, floundering across mudflats, swimming in the translucent waters of the lagoon and finally trudging home again, sunburnt and exhausted, in the late afternoon. And those children taught me so much about life and their country. I can still hear their shrill, excited laughter and the frenzied yapping of their dogs, and see them streaming out in a ragged, splashing line, chasing stingrays through the shallows or birds along the water’s edge. I can still recall the quiet musings about the wonders of life, especially life in that place, that were interwoven into the relaxed somnolence of our after-lunch rest under the whispering casuarinas. In retrospect, I have realised that it was the community that made a difference to my life in that place. Whereas my term in that location as a young, single woman could easily have been a lonely and boring existence, my relationship with the community ensured that it wasn’t. Members of the community included me in everything that happened in the social life of the town and I enjoyed a hectic, action-packed life, full of people and learning. More importantly, however, I learnt the value of teachers being a part of the community in which they live and work. I have subsequently taught from pre-school through to the tertiary sector, mainly in rural and remote locations throughout Australia as well as in Papua New Guinea and Saudi Arabia, and have found that the skills I acquired in that first community provided me with a sound capacity to engage, and become a part of a new community of people, very quickly. Over time, I realised that the learning outcomes I achieved in that first community underpinned my ability to develop teaching programs that were both relevant and flexible to the needs of my students, in any location and at any level, for they provided me with the capacity to create a learning environment that enabled individual students to succeed.

For example, I returned to teach in my home town 25 years after I had been sent away to high school. The school had, at the time, been through a number of years of unprecedented and unrelenting growth and was having to cope with a range of problems associated with that growth. One of them was the apparent inability of some of the students to cope with the literacy and numeracy requirements of their particular year level and it was proposed that
another special class should be established to cater for these children. Staff, however, were concerned at this proposal as most felt that many of the students were not learning disabled but simply non-participants in the learning programs. These children tended to be either silent observers or noisy, disruptive members of their respective classes.

Through an extended discussion within the school and between school and community, it was determined that most of the students involved appeared to have very limited language skills and the decision was made to trial a language development program. Students were to be drawn from all classes in the early childhood sector of the school to provide a maximum of 25 children for the new class. I was asked to develop and teach the program for two reasons. Firstly, I had considerable experience teaching in places where children did not come from homes where standard English was the everyday spoken and written language of the family. Secondly, despite my long absence, I was still considered a ‘local’ — someone who had grown up in the town and was thus perceived as ‘belonging’ by the community. In fact, my intimate knowledge of, and capacity to operate within, the family networks that existed within the permanent, local community was considered a valuable asset for the job. For my part, I was extremely excited at the prospect of being freed from the usual constraints of teaching to the syllabus for a year. My brief was to do whatever needed to be done to enable the children to develop the language skills they needed to become effective learners. All students did have to be able to return to their original classes after one year.

What an experience! That year turned out to be one of the most satisfying periods in my long teaching career and, once again in retrospect, so much of the success of that year was due to the relationship I was able to establish, and within, the group of parents. As a local, I had no difficulties gaining access to all of the parents and was able to visit them at home, at times when I could sit and talk with both parents together. Through this consultative process, I developed and implemented a range of strategies that brought the families together on a regular basis, thus creating strong support networks that led to better communications between parent and student groups. The creation of a community support group was a valuable structure for all of the families concerned and proved particularly useful for the few sole parent families that were part of the group because, in general, they tended to be very marginalised within the wider community when it came to matters associated with their children’s education. In fact, the support group also served as a catalyst for the wider community developing a closer educational relationship with the school community. At the beginning of the following year every one of those children went back
into their original class. On-going monitoring of individuals throughout the year revealed they had all developed competency in the use of standard English, an achievement that demonstrated the value of building strong partnerships between school and community as a critical factor in establishing learning environments that are conducive to both school achievement and individual academic success.

Yet the converse also occurs. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many of the schools I visited as a consultant in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education complained about the lack of interest from Indigenous parents regarding the education of their children. The presumed lack of interest was attributed to the parents’ lack of involvement in the school community. I felt a deep concern about this, as many of the Aboriginal people with whom I interacted in the course of my work were beginning to argue that colonial practices remained embedded in the operation of many Queensland schools. As a part of the requirements for my Masters in Education, I decided to undertake a research project that would enable me to explore the validity of the assertions about Indigenous parents’ lack of interest in their children’s education. In the early 1990s I conducted a survey and interviewed several parents to investigate Indigenous parent involvement in their children’s schooling across the P–12 range. As a teacher, my initial interest was to ascertain the level of parent participation and, in the process, to identify possible strategies schools might use to increase Indigenous parent participation.

My findings were unexpected, both to myself and the Principals who attended the workshop I ran as a follow up to the study. The data revealed that the Indigenous parents who were interviewed in this project were involved in the education of their children. They attended all of the events and activities that make up the public life of a school; working in the tuckshops and the libraries; attending sporting events; and going on camps. Indigenous parents dropped their children at the classroom every morning and sat outside the classroom waiting for them every afternoon. Some even tried to make contact with the class teacher or the Principal to check on their child’s progress, especially when they had concerns of their own. Significantly, these parents reported that they were usually fobbed off with explanations that people were busy and there were no problems, and so on. Some of those parents who had been trying to gain access to their child’s teacher, also reported their anger and frustration when finally summoned to the school. On such occasions, a long lecture was usually delivered concerning their child’s poor performance, bad behaviour, etc. Probing questions indicated that this ‘sending for parents’ generally occurred at a time, late in the year, when
there was no time left to address the concerns, at least with that teacher. It became yet another negative comment on the child's school report. A few parents even attended Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) meetings—the Indigenous equivalent of Parents and Citizens or Parents and Friends meetings. Furthermore, the data suggested that, in terms of the comparative ratios, their interaction within their children's schools was very similar to that of non-Indigenous parents. My own experience, as a parent who had been a regular attender of Parents and Friends meetings, supported this finding. Nevertheless, one of the most strident and repetitive messages I have heard in schools is that Indigenous parents are not interested in their children's education because they never come to the school. Yet this study seemed to be suggesting that Indigenous parents were interested in their children's education and that they were present within the school environment to much the same degree as other parents. Most importantly, the study revealed that, as far as most school staff were concerned, Indigenous parents tended to be 'invisible' in the school landscape. While this is not an area that has attracted much interest in the past, Merridy Malin did identify 'invisibility' as an issue in her work in schools in the late 1980s (Malin, 1990). It may be that teachers are not skilled at 'seeing difference' within the school community and, if this is the reality, it could have serious implications for students from a range of equity groups. The findings are relevant within the context of this research because there is an implication that some educators operating in educational institutions do not seem to value the Indigenous Australian presence and may engage in behaviour that actually makes Indigenous peoples feel excluded. Such conduct would seem to suggest that in some educational institutions the legacy of the colonial past remains firmly embedded in the hegemonic structures that guide the everyday interactions of the various stakeholders. While it might be argued that this hegemony is simply a reflection of societal structures, it is generally perceived by Indigenous Australians that such behaviours reflect racist attitudes; the maintenance of the cultural domination of non-Indigenous Australians. This could be problematic for Indigenous Australian students endeavouring to operate in a learning environment where they are subjected to on-going exclusion and oppression.

Of course, the building of school/community relationships is not something of value only in primary schools. Having left the classroom almost twenty years ago, my career in education continued. I worked in the Northern Territory in the higher education sector as a program co-ordinator and curriculum developer for five years in the mid 1980s. The success of the programs I developed and implemented in the continuing education and training areas was
directly related to their relevance to the communities in which they were offered. I was considered successful within the institution in which I worked because the operation I ran achieved a profit over several years. 'Lifelong learning' was the latest buzz word in the educational community and my job was to devise programs that provided people with opportunities to pursue their individual learning needs at the time. My own pursuit of learning through distance education clearly demonstrated my commitment to the theory. So the challenge for me, personally, during this period, was to develop programs that were innovative and that, through their difference, attracted active learners, drawing them into learning situations that they found exciting and fulfilling, creating an ambience in which learning was highly valued. We celebrated success with a copious supply of certificates and an abundance of graduation ceremonies.

In terms of Indigenous Australian participation in higher education, there was a growing number of my own 'countrymen' from the Kimberley coming in to participate in the enabling programs offered through the institution in which I worked. Although I was employed in a different department, I spent a considerable amount of my time in the Indigenous unit, providing the occasional guest lecture or simply dropping in for a yarn. As an Aboriginal woman, I knew that, for many of those students, our shared memories of place meant I was a welcome link with 'home' and, as a teacher, I subscribed to the notion that helping students to feel a sense of 'belonging' within the learning environment was a key factor in improving their chances of remaining in the program and, ultimately, achieving their higher education goals. In fact, as a result of my own experience, I would argue that, in addition to the time spent on learning tasks, a sense of 'identity' is a critical element in student performance.

Toward the end of the 1980s I returned to Queensland and, having previously worked in the TAFE sector in northern Queensland, I found myself drawn back to the north. Initially, I worked as a student support officer for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a TAFE college but I subsequently took up a position in the Department of Education's northern region, as a consultant in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education across the P–12 range. In this role, I worked with schools in rural, remote and urban locations to increase educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in terms of access, participation, retention and success. I completed my Masters Degree in Education — guidance and counselling. Having achieved this qualification, my subsequent employment as a guidance officer, senior guidance officer, professional development officer
in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and acting principal in a large primary school, further enhanced my capacity to work effectively with the diversity of stakeholders engaging in school communities, including students, teachers and other staff, as well as parents and other community groups and organizations.

In deliberating over my choice of topic for this study, ‘Is Success a Matter of Choice?’, I realised that it was likely that my unique professional experiences had influenced my direction. Few teachers have the diversity of teaching experience that I have acquired both in Australia and overseas and few teachers have the depth of teaching and administrative experience that I built up in my roles as classroom teacher, consultant, curriculum developer, guidance officer and principal. I do not know of any other Aboriginal teacher who has been fortunate enough to have enjoyed a similar diversity of experience as an educator. This is a significant factor in this study, for in living and working in a range of remote, rural and urban locations throughout Australia as well as in Christmas Island, Papua New Guinea and Saudi Arabia, I have been able to develop valuable insights into the importance of establishing inclusive learning environments that cater for the issues of diversity that Kalantzis and Cope allude to in arguing the importance of addressing cultural diversity and linguistic diversity in every country of the world (Kalantzis & Cope, 1999: 246). From my perspective as an Aboriginal educator, it is my belief that the majority of non-Indigenous Australians have yet to appreciate the reality of Indigenous Australian diversity and most educators have yet to realise the implications of such diversity for their teaching practices.

Extensive experience in the school and adult education sectors has informed my understanding of the factors that contribute to, or facilitate, success in education. Hence, from a professional perspective, I consider that the teacher and the family are critical elements in a student’s capacity to succeed in the earlier years of schooling, for it is their combined skill, interest and encouragement that motivates and maintains commitment. If I reflect upon Indigenous student academic achievement as I have observed it over many years, then there are two factors that stand out. Firstly, the most successful teachers of Indigenous students appear to be those who are empathetic and have developed expertise in teaching Indigenous students. Secondly, the Indigenous families that are most effective in nurturing academic success in their children appear to be those who are not only interested in their children’s education but are also prepared to use the established protocols of the school to demonstrate that fact. It has been my personal, professional experience that, where teacher and family develop the capacity to work together with the student in creating an
effective educational partnership, issues associated with language, curriculum content and cultural affirmation are addressed as they arise. The importance of catering for cultural and language diversity in our learning environments has been highlighted through the collaborative efforts of members of the New London Group which, since the early 1990s, has worked on the development of a multiliteracies pedagogy. This pedagogy emphasises the need for educators to develop 'a teaching and learning relationship that creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation' (The New London Group, 2000: 9). Addressing the aspect of teacher/learner relationships has critical implications for Indigenous learners within our educational institutions. I have observed teachers who have negotiated sound educational partnerships with all stakeholders in their classroom community and I have been singularly impressed by the quality of the learning environments they have created. As a guidance officer and a school principal, my involvement with classroom teachers enabled me to appreciate that successful teachers create inclusive learning environments that are conducive to student success for all students. I have observed Indigenous students operating in those learning environments that affirm their cultural identity and provide them with a deep sense of security. Such observations have reinforced my own belief that good teachers do create learning environments that enable Indigenous students to respond in positive ways and to thrive on their own success.

In 1996, I returned to the higher education sector as the head of an Indigenous unit in a New South Wales regional university. A year later, I was drawn back to the north and a new set of challenges. The Indigenous unit in the university in which I first worked had been very small and focussed on the provision of support for Indigenous Australian students. In comparison, my next position was in an Indigenous unit in a regional university that, by virtue of its geographic location in northern Australia, attracted far greater numbers of Indigenous students. In fact, in terms of Indigenous student participation, this university was one of the largest in Australia. In addition, the Indigenous unit operated across two campuses, with additional operations in an Aboriginal community and a prison.

Apart from the challenges to be faced in managing such a complex operation, the Indigenous unit was dysfunctional at the time of my arrival. The conflict within and between students and staff, as well as between the unit and the rest of the university, was palpable and quite daunting. The immediate challenge was to establish some common ground; some means of bringing people together and re-building relationships. To do this, I created a vision. The vision was to establish an academic unit that replaced the existing support centre. The
purpose in proposing such a change in the future direction of the unit was to raise the profile of Indigenous Studies within the mainstream programs of the university as the catalyst for achieving a shift in the way in which Indigenous Australians were valued within the university. I knew that the majority of staff employed in the unit were deeply committed to the goals of Indigenous higher education and I believed that, by engaging staff in the process of building an inclusive educational environment that provided Indigenous students with a quality education, I would encourage people to work together as a team. This would also enable staff to model important values such as commitment and co-operation in terms of the achievement of goals. Furthermore, I perceived that, as the head of the unit having responsibility for the provision of support for Indigenous students enrolled across all discipline areas of the university, the creation of an Indigenous learning environment in which Indigenous student success was nurtured and promoted was quintessential to achieving broader attitudinal change amongst university staff. I also recognised the importance of my own role as the ‘leader’ of the team: the person who had to inspire staff and students. To demonstrate my own commitment to the process of establishing a positive profile for Indigenous Studies (and Indigenous peoples) within the wider university, therefore, I deliberately sought a high profile within the administrative structures of the university. Hence, as a member of Academic Board, the Human Ethics Research sub-Committee, the Faculty Executive and the Heads of School Committee within the Faculty, I ensured I attended all meetings unless I was absent from campus, whereupon I delegated a senior member of staff to attend in my place. In my first year in the university, I took a proactive approach and stood for University Council. I was elected for a three-year term, as one of three staff representatives. This carried a considerable additional workload, as I was subsequently appointed to several of the Council’s committees, including the Finance Committee. It was, however, an important move in terms of raising the profile of the unit, as it put me into regular contact with the Vice Chancellor and other members of University Council. I would argue that my presence within the Council, my visibility at the decision-making table, enabled me to insert Indigenous values and beliefs into the culture of the university, thus enhancing our sphere of influence within the wider university community. Direct access to the hierarchy of the university enabled me to promote the development of practices that created more inclusive learning environments for Indigenous students across all discipline areas. The professional networks and co-operative working relationships I have been able to establish through my deliberate involvement in the university’s decision-making processes have endured and staff from the unit are now regularly involved in various
academic committees and activities across the university. In addition, there has been a marked increase in the level of requests for assistance, especially in relation to cross-cultural issues, from academic staff in other schools. These are important signifiers of the attitudinal change that has begun to occur within the university community.

In my position I engage in a high level of interaction with Indigenous students. This is a critical factor in the context of this study as it means I have been able to maintain my deep insights into the issues that are of concern to students. It also means that, through discussions with students, I have been able to develop a better understanding of the diversity of learning environments that exist within the different discipline areas of the university and how these might impact upon Indigenous students. When I engage in discussions of this nature with students, I ensure they are aware of my role in the university and I ask very explicit questions to ensure my understanding of the information. My training as a guidance officer has enhanced my capacity to use probing techniques.

Within the context of this investigation my role in the university is important for another reason. Although I had commenced this study prior to taking up my current position, I have been very open about the project and openly discuss my reading and ideas with colleagues and students. Similarly, in all of the formal addresses I deliver to students, I talk about the research, explaining its purpose and urging the students to strive to reach their full potential.

As an Aboriginal person who has worked continuously in a full-time position in an Indigenous unit within a university environment for more than five years, I have become aware of a number of issues that are important in understanding the way in which Indigenous students operate within the university. For instance, I have come to understand that within the university environment there are few Indigenous Australians who would describe themselves as ‘successful’ in relation to their university studies. This appeared to be the case, even where students were completing subjects in the traditional academic sense. While at first I could relate to why those who had not ‘completed’ in the traditional sense might perceive of themselves as not having been ‘successful’, I was somewhat perplexed as to why those who were achieving success in the sense that they were passing and completing their courses did not see themselves as having been ‘successful’.

This issue of how people perceive themselves was one to which I had to give considerable thought, for it had serious implications in terms of my desire to obtain positive feedback
about Indigenous perceptions of success from Indigenous Australians themselves. It was through my observations and informal discussions with students that I came to recognise that the principles of ‘both ways’ education could be impacting upon the way in which students saw themselves within the context of the university. It seemed that many students did not feel that their ‘presence’ was valued by other students or staff and, hence, the majority were very reluctant to offer their own knowledge or opinions in learning situations. In reality, a majority of student respondents indicated that they found it very difficult to operate effectively within learning environments where they continually felt alienated, particularly during the first and second years of their undergraduate programs. Those who had the necessary skills to ‘go through the hoops’ often felt little satisfaction in their results as they experienced no sense of ownership. They felt they had not been able to contribute anything of their own to the achievement process. Such students usually indicated that they had wanted to speak out at times but were usually too slow to respond and, hence, missed the opportunity. This presented me with a considerable dilemma. I was encouraged to persist, however, after hearing an Elder from a nearby community talking to a group of students one day. They were having a conversation concerning how we, as a society, could begin to address the impact of colonialism upon Aboriginal people. The Elder explained that the subject they were doing was designed to provide the students with the understanding and the capacity to engage in effective communication with Indigenous Australians in the future. When some students indicated that they might find that difficult as it was something they had never done before, the Elder responded that as long as we all keep doing only those things that we have always done then we’ll keep getting what we’ve always got. I thought about those words in the context of Indigenous Australian students struggling to be recognised within an alien environment, seeking to be heard but not knowing when or how to speak, silenced by their own inexperience. I reflected upon my own life, remembering those earlier times when I had been similarly entrapped. It was at that point I realised that in order to increase Indigenous retention and success in the university, I had to persist with the study. I had to find a way to demonstrate to non-Indigenous members of the university community that Indigenous Australians do have a valuable contribution to make to the academy and that Indigenous ‘academic success’ does exist, although it may not conform to the Western perceptions of academic success so esteemed by most university lecturers. I needed to demonstrate that a willingness to open the mind as teachers who were also members of the dominant culture and to recognise and accept Indigenous diversity and to value the cultural and linguistic differences that exist within their student groups, would in
fact enhance their capacity as effective teachers. It was a first step in trying to ensure that Indigenous Australians within the university sector did not, in fact, continue to get what they had always got in terms of education.

During the past decade, I have conducted various studies related to Indigenous education. In undertaking these projects I have collected data from many Indigenous peoples, including students, parents and community members associated with P-12 school communities in urban, rural and remote locations throughout Australia and from regional and urban university communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales. In all of these places, I have been impressed by the co-operation of the Indigenous informants and by the apparent goodwill on the part of non-Indigenous staff to support these activities. I have noted that, in all of the educational communities in which I have conducted research, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff appeared to have a genuine interest in addressing issues associated with Indigenous education and have demonstrated this by a willingness to participate in the data collection process. In all situations, I demonstrated my respect for the established Aboriginal protocols and institutional protocols in attempting to gain access to research sites. My approach appeared to be viewed positively. School communities, in particular, seemed to be interested in engaging in consultative processes that they perceived might provide them with strategies to address the 'problems' they might be experiencing in terms of improving the provision of more effective education services to Indigenous students within their specific locality.

Yet, despite the apparent atmosphere of goodwill and co-operation and in spite of the fact that in many sites non-Indigenous staff were at pains to convince me that Indigenous staff were highly respected and indispensable members of the educational community, there were often times that I experienced a sense of unease. I explored that unease from within my own professional framework — the insights I have gained through a myriad of educational journeys over the last four decades — and I came to recognise that, despite all of the talk about change and, indeed, the change that has occurred in many workplaces, it would seem that, in some operational aspects, there has been little change. For instance, I would suggest that, in many of the schools I have visited in recent years, school hierarchies and their associated structures appear to have resisted much change. Most of those who operate within a school community appear to know and accept their 'place'.
Significantly, no Indigenous staff member I talked with in the process of undertaking these research projects had ever considered that they might have the ability to 'teach' the teachers in terms of creating more effective learning environments for their Indigenous students. Of even greater concern from my perspective, however, was the fact that the advocacy role of some Indigenous staff had been rendered ineffectual. This occurred when Indigenous staff adopted the language of the school, taking on the 'teacher talk' that is generally an identifier of 'belonging' in individual schools. In taking on the talk and ascribing the same negative thinking about Indigenous students that is expressed by many teachers, Indigenous staff were unwittingly contributing to the maintenance of the hegemonic structures that are a part of the colonial legacy in this country.

Similarly, in tertiary education institutions there is a great deal of rhetoric about the level of commitment the university community has toward achieving improved outcomes for Indigenous students across all discipline areas. In reality, however, there are few universities where such commitment amounts to more than 'talk'. It would appear that few are willing to allocate precious faculty or university resources specifically to Indigenous education. In fact, although most universities now allocate the total of the Indigenous Support funding from the Commonwealth Government directly to the Indigenous unit, there remain, in some universities, pockets of resistance, so that, for example, some of the more affluent faculties in some universities insist upon being allocated their 'fair share' of the Indigenous Support Funding for the 'additional' support they provide to their Indigenous students. Engaging in such parsimonious argument in order to grasp scant resources reveals the reality that, in most academic disciplines, there is a lack of genuine commitment to catering for the learning needs of Indigenous students as members of the total learning community. Such attitudes and actions make a mockery of claims that universities provide equitable learning opportunities for all students, demonstrating as they do the general expectation that the provision of learning programs that cater effectively for the specific learning needs of Indigenous Australian students requires an additional injection of funding.

Looking back upon my life as an educator within the context of this study, I realised that people like my grandmother and mother had a high level of commitment to achieving the goals they set themselves. They were quite tenacious in their pursuit of what they wanted. They simply got on with what they knew they had to do, quietly and unobtrusively and most of the time went unnoticed. They had learned how to work within the hegemonic structures
of the society in which they were raised in order to achieve their goals. They made their choice.

Of course, such people have their counterpart in the classroom. Over many years I have observed such students and, generally, they are highly self-motivated with the ability to set their own goals and remain focused. They are often extremely curious and may be very creative in finding ways to achieve their goals and normally achieve sound academic results. Although perceived by their teachers to be 'good' students, within our education systems they also often go unnoticed. I started to ask myself if, perhaps, this commitment to achieving one's own goals was an essential component of achieving success at school and if it was a similar situation in the higher education sector. I began to think that it might be possible to develop a better understanding of the current government concerns regarding Indigenous Australian students' apparent lack of success within the university through an investigation of student perceptions of success and through seeking to identify what students saw as the factors that enabled them to achieve success, within, or despite, the hegemonic structures that currently exist. I envisaged that the revelation of such insights could provide educators with the knowledge they need to achieve a transformation of existing structures, thus enabling Indigenous Australians to engage in an educational process that meets their needs and allows them to change their world; to achieve outcomes that satisfy their own goals.

These were the thoughts and experiences I brought with me to this study and I would suggest that these are worthwhile experiences when considered in the context of the research question, 'Is Success a Matter of Choice?' Such knowledge is valid in the context of considering whether or not success is a matter of choice for Indigenous students. Earlier, I referred to this thesis as being a 'metaphorical journey', the intersection of my personal journey as an Indigenous person who operates effectively within a western knowledge system, and the journeys of my respective respondents into the western knowledge system that lies at the core of the Australian university. This study will provide an opportunity for Indigenous people in higher education to talk about education and to identify those aspects of education that have been valued by Indigenous Australian university students. Out of the dialogue that encourages Indigenous students to focus on their strengths will emerge those factors that individuals perceive as having enabled them to maintain their commitment to achieving their goals and, hence, to perceiving of themselves as having succeeded in education. Engaging in the dialogue will enable students to transform their own thinking, not
only in terms of the inclusivity of the experience but also in relation to the way in which they think about success. Listening to the students exploring these issues will enable me to determine how effectively the university has catered for the learning needs of its Indigenous students while also providing me with valuable insights into whether or not an individual's success has been a matter of choice.

The structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of an introduction and six chapters. This introduction allowed me the space to introduce myself, as an integral part of this research, and to provide some insights into the purpose of this study—how it came about and what I have learnt through my life and professional experiences about what constitutes Indigenous 'success' in education.

Chapter One is the literature review. It is here that I establish the socio-historical framework through which I will analyse the data in this study. The use of such a framework will also allow the emergence of socio-cultural issues that have impacted upon Indigenous education within both historical and contemporary contexts. Hence, this chapter provides a brief examination of the realities of access, participation, apparent retention and success for Indigenous Australian students within the higher education sector. This chapter will also include a consideration of what the literature says about success, especially Indigenous success, within higher education.

In Chapter Two, I outline the research process and the methodology used in the project. In addition to an explanation of research protocols, the theoretical approach and ethical considerations, I consider strengths and weaknesses of the choice of methodology. Participant selection is described, together with procedures for data collection and analysis.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the institution called the Australian university. Using a socio-historic framework to locate universities within Australian society, it examines the higher education policies and practices that have impacted upon Indigenous Australian students in that community. This chapter includes my interpretation of the statistics that provide an insight into where Indigenous Australians have been situated within the university within historical and contemporary contexts.

Chapter Four contains biographical details of respondents, together with a brief description of the institutions in which they were located. This establishes the context in which this
study occurred and provides an opportunity to highlight the diversity of the cohort and to examine the degree to which it might be representative of that entity referred to as ‘Indigenous higher education students’.

In Chapter Five, I use thick descriptions to analyse the data collected from a range of sources. The focus of the analysis is to examine individual and group perceptions of success, experiences of success and outcomes of success in order to ascertain whether or not success is a matter of choice for Indigenous students enrolled in higher education courses. Analysis includes the use of frameworks identified through the literature review, and themes that emerge from the data to identify implications of the research for Australian universities.

In Chapter Six, I outline what happened at the interface—what I discovered at the intersection of my journey in education with the educational journeys of my fellow travellers. This allows me to discuss future directions, including what needs to happen and the role of universities in building appropriate pathways into the future for both their mainstream and minority group students.

Whilst the underlying purpose of my study is to explore Indigenous achievement in higher education, my particular focus is on student success within the context of the Australian university as a learning environment for Indigenous Australian students. The focal point of the research must be, therefore, those aspects of the university experience to which students attributed their success. Hence, it seemed to me that inviting students from across the university to participate as respondents, in either the individual interview or the focus group meetings, would increase the potential to sample the diversity of Indigenous student experience within the university. From my perspective, this was a critical factor for, in seeking to know what it takes to succeed, I was particularly interested in the student point of view. I needed to work with Indigenous students to ascertain their perceptions of themselves as ‘successful’ in terms of their university involvement. I would argue that this engagement with the student perspective will ensure that the findings of this study will be useful in providing future directions to academic staff in universities. An awareness of different perceptions of success could provide universities with the capacity for greater sensitivity in responding to what Indigenous Australians identify as their specific learning needs, hence improving their chances of achieving success in their higher education studies.
Chapter One

Literature Review

1.1: Background to the Research

As the specific focus of this study is Indigenous Australian student success within the Australian university, the logical place to begin would seem to be with a consideration of how those students are positioned within such institutions. Nakata (1997), in his PhD thesis, provides a critical and challenging account of his struggles, as a Torres Strait Island man, within the university, trying:

[...] to articulate what I thought people did not understand about the position of Islanders in relation to educational processes and institutions [...] Even with an Honours degree in Education, I felt completely alienated and isolated within the walls of an inclusive and enlightened Academy because I could not articulate my position in relation to these issues in a way that others could understand (Nakata, 1997: 8).

If Nakata, as a mature-age student with considerable experience working in the bureaucracy and an Honours degree, had difficulty in speaking out from “the interface of Islander experience and Western knowledge systems” (Nakata, 1997: 36), it would appear pertinent to explore how other Indigenous students deal with this issue? This is of particular relevance in questioning the implications of Sharpe’s claim that there is a legacy of the colonial past in our academic practice (1995: 99), if, as Tiffin indicates “white Australians, who, though still colonized by Europe and European ideas, are themselves the continuing colonizers of the original inhabitants” (1995:96)? The concept of ‘positionality’ (McConaghy, 2000: 39) when considered within the context of colonialism (past and present) and the racialised representations that ensure “a power-laden division” (McConaghy, 2000: 41) is complex enough, without the overlaying tensions and contradictions that accompany this nation’s “treatment of difference” (Ang cited in McConaghy, 2000: 41). Minh-ha questions the authenticity of those Western thinkers who, while claiming to support the concept of decolonization, reject it when confronted with it, thereby relegating it to the margins, rendering it to their “‘other’ category” (Minh-ha, 1995: 215). Significantly, however, Minh-ha reminds us that positioning is not necessarily a one-way process:
They? Yes, they. But, in the colonial periphery (as in elsewhere), we are often them as well. Coloured skins, white masks; coloured masks, white skins. Reversal strategies have reigned for some time. They accept the margins; so do we. For without the margin, there is no center, no heart . . . The margins, our sites of survival become our fighting grounds and their site for pilgrimage (Minh-ha, 1995: 215-6).

Within the context of this study, this notion of the centre and the margins has particular resonance for, as Minh-ha (1995: 216) implies, power relationships lie at the heart of the centres and margins and between the centres and margins. If Indigenous students achieving academic success developed the capacity to challenge the centre this could have serious implications for the university, for the consequences of what Minh-ha terms “displacement” (1995: 216) could change what happens at Nakata’s “interface” (1997: 36) because:

By displacing, it never allows this classifying world to exert its classificatory power without returning to its own ethnocentric classifications” (Minh-ha, 1995: 216).

It is within such a context, that the notion of ‘positioning’ is of particular relevance in this study for as McConaghy, revealed, in considering her time as an adult educator, ‘positionality’ had to do with the perceived degree of power and influence that attached to the role, or ‘the politics of our location as non-Indigenous adult educators in Indigenous communities’ (McConaghy, 2000: 176), and what that translated to in the socio-political aspects of life in a community. Of course, the notion of community is also problematic for it could well be a colonial construct (McConaghy, 2000: 11) or, where it is perceived by its members as a stratagem of resistance, it could be argued to be an integral component in the process of decolonization. Hence, this literature review, will provide vital insights into the issues that influence the position of Indigenous Australian students within Australian universities as this has critical implications regarding the degree of choice Indigenous students might have in relation to achieving success in university.

The idea for this study emerged during a period when there had been a prolonged focus on Indigenous Australian students’ lack of success and the factors that prevented them from succeeding in higher education (House, 1990: 76–77; Baumgart, 1995: 4–23; Lewis, 1994: 67–68; Abott-Chapman, 1991: 175; Bourke, 1996: 27–37; Ham, 1996: 21–40; Herbert, 1996: 34–55; Cobbin, 1993: 103–113). Interestingly, some of these writers provided alternative
viewpoints, acknowledging the need for improvement in the educational outcomes and suggesting that institutions should provide positive learning experiences that would encourage Indigenous student self-empowerment within a culturally affirmative environment. Such views implied that by enabling Indigenous students to exit tertiary studies with a strong sense of their individual cultural identity and a desire for self-determination, universities would make a valuable contribution to Australian society. This argument could be justified within a context of striving for reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, but would be difficult to sustain given the current demands for accountability in the form of Indigenous students satisfactorily completing their courses. Karmel has revealed some of the dangers associated with ‘performance-based funding’ (2000: 170) in higher education, arguing that the value of university education is not something that is measurable purely in terms of a person’s results at the end of their course. Yet the Howard Coalition Government applied performance-based criteria to the allocation of Indigenous support funding for universities in 1999, thus financially penalising universities, and hence Indigenous units, for Indigenous students who fail to complete the course of study in which they have enrolled or to obtain a pass grade or better in that course. While it might be argued that such policies reflect the present government’s desire to make Indigenous peoples more competitive in the labour market, there is a danger that the increasing focus on completion and results in universities will tend to penalise ‘the very people that the funding aims to support’ (Ham, 1996: 37). Despite the recommendations of both Martin (1994) and Ham (1996) that there was a need to negotiate appropriate qualitative measures in relation to Indigenous performance in universities, the current government relies predominantly on quantitative data as the criteria that determines funding allocations for Indigenous higher education. The Commonwealth Government’s apparent agenda for Indigenous participation in university programs is important in the context of this study, for it may be oppositional to what Indigenous Australians want from higher education. However, governments are not the sole arbiters in determining what Indigenous students achieve in higher education. Various Indigenous educators (Herbert, 1996; Bourke, 1996; Anderson, 1998; Weir, 2001) have argued that it is the totality of the Australian educational experience that ultimately determines the way in which Indigenous Australians are positioned within Australian society, including educational institutions.

While the literature on Indigenous involvement in the academy is relatively scarce, the Commonwealth Government has made some attempt in recent years to rectify this. During the past decade, a number of people (Anderson, 1998; Baumgart, 1995; Bourke, 1996; Ham,
1996) have been funded through the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) Evaluations and Investigations Programmes (EIP) to evaluate and report on a range of issues associated with Indigenous Australian participation, apparent retention and success in universities. The Higher Education Council (HEC) has reported on their review of the institutional use of Commonwealth funding for Indigenous Australian students (NBEET, 1997) and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) reported on the barriers faced by Indigenous postgraduate students (Herbert, 1996). The particular focus of this research, however, is Indigenous success in higher education and, in this regard, there is an even greater paucity of literature (Abbott-Chapman, 1991: 164-67; Bourke, 1996: 27-73; Cobbin, 1993: 96-97; Walker, 1997: 6-7; Walker, 2000: 1-5; Abbott-Chapman, 1999: 1-7).

While the main focus of this literature review will be the period since the 1967 referendum as that event is seen by most Australians as a watershed in Indigenous affairs in Australia, it does not mean that the consideration of educational issues will be confined to these decades. An interesting trend which has emerged in some of the more recent literature is that many of the writers (Anderson, 1998; Herbert, 1995; Lippmann, 1994; Partington, 1998) construct a sociohistorical framework and then use this framework to contextualise their findings or perspectives. This is the process that will be used in this thesis for, as Bennett argues:

An important requirement for the analyst is to establish how much advantage or disadvantage accrues to each interest due to its place in the society within which it is located. In the case of the Aboriginal interest, the social inequalities that they have suffered—are still suffering—have made the development of their political position extremely difficult. We cannot understand the place of the Aboriginal interest in the Australian political system without an appreciation of continuing Aboriginal inequality . . . (Bennett, 1999: vii).

Having established the positioning of Indigenous Australians in education generally in this chapter, the literature dealing with the higher education statistics and the contribution Australian universities have made to Indigenous higher education will be examined in Chapter Three.

1.2: History and politics

A basic premise in any study of Indigenous Australians is the need to acknowledge the impact of politics for, according to Brock:
Government policies and legislation towards Aborigines, influenced by similar attitudes, have controlled the lives of Aborigines since colonisation. These policies and legislation have varied from colony to colony and State to State, but their impact on Aborigines has been very similar (1993: 11).

Within this section of the chapter, policies have been grouped within a national context into an approximate periodisation. There is, however, a degree of complexity in this task for within the context of Indigenous education it is necessary to take into account both social policies and education policies. There may be some overlap in dates pertaining to social policies due to the fact that periods have been approximately defined by dates of policy implementation which varied from state to state. Eckermann highlights the impact of history in arguing that 'from 1788 to the 1890s there were no overarching policies but rather piece-meal, missionary inspired approaches within a general climate of neglect and "elimination..."' (1992: 34).

A number of writers (Rowley, 1986: 22, 103; Lippmann, 1994: 132–139; Broome, 1982: 106, 132; McConnachie, 1982: 17–80; Sherwood, 1982; Kidd, 1997: 189–182; Read, nd: 2; Haebich, 1992; Eckermann, 1992: 34-53) have referred to early government policies that have seriously impacted upon the education of Aboriginal students (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 26–28). For example, Read refers to a 1921 Report of the Aboriginal Protection Board that claimed that 'the continuation of this policy of dissociating the children from camp life must eventually solve the Aboriginal problem' (Read, nd: 2). The education delivered to children who were removed from their families served two purposes. It was intended to distance them from the influence of their families and to prepare them for a life of servitude (Read, nd: 18–22; Human Rights Commission, 1997: 27–28) as 'members of the working class' (Franklin, 1976: 99). Such thinking can be traced back to 1814, when Governor Macquarie established the Native Institution at Parramatta for the purpose of 'educating, Christianising and giving vocational training to Aboriginal children' (Broome, 1982: 31). This school actually produced the first academic success story for Aboriginal Australians. '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). As Broome (1982) and Harris (1990) imply, failing to take account of the aspirations of Aboriginal parents or students meant the school was doomed to failure and closed by 1823.

In the 1820s the missionaries began to assume the responsibility for Christianising the heathens. While it could be argued that their main aim, as with Macquarie, was to
Europeanise the Aborigines, there were some interesting differences in their approach. For example, the missionaries initially had little real interest in the Aborigines apart from the occasional urge to 'take them in' and raise them as they would their own, as befitted the romantic notion of civilising the heathen (Cleverley, 1971: 102–5; Harris, 1990: 42–6; Milliss, 1992: 116–7). The arrival of the London Missionary Society in the mid 1820s brought with it a different approach. These missionaries had been instructed ‘to learn the Aboriginal language, teach the Aborigines agriculture and carpentry, and commence a school’ (Harris, 1990: 55). Hence, language learning and bible translation became tasks that were undertaken prior to teaching Christianity (Milliss, 1992: 116; Harris, 1990: 55), incidentally enabling some Aboriginal people to participate in the preparation of written records of their own language. By 1835 church services were being conducted in the vernacular, i.e. the Aboriginal language in everyday use, and vernacular literacy had been introduced for the children. This was the first time anybody had used the Aboriginal people’s own language in an attempt to teach literacy skills.

Harris reveals that, by the mid-nineteenth century, missionaries had lost interest in bible translations (1990: 808–9). Despite the successes they had achieved through their efforts to engage with the Aborigines by the use of the vernacular, the ultimate goal for all of the missionaries was to civilise through spreading the gospel; through breaking the connection with 'Aboriginality and Aboriginal ways' (Finlayson, 1995: 3).

Unfortunately, over a number of years, the missionaries, through their own inability to appreciate Aboriginal culture as 'living, breathing, changing . . . a view of the world that has meaning' (Eckermann, 1992: 6) because it has evolved out of peoples’ shared understandings and experiences, failed to recognise genuine converts to Christianity. When they were unable to achieve the lifestyle changes they felt were required in order to demonstrate a true belief in God, the missionaries decided that Christianity needed to be taught in English. Harris argues that, in the end, 'none of the missionaries in the earliest era could claim to have fulfilled their civilising goals' (1990: 82), while Broome indicates they had never been particularly successful as they had only attracted minimal numbers of Aborigines into their operations (1982: 33). Such outcomes may reflect what Lippmann refers to as the Aboriginal 'resistance' (1994) strategies of the day. In addition, despite instructions from the Home Office, successive governments failed to allocate sufficient funding to the establishment and maintenance of the missions (Milliss, 1992: 31). This initial period of Christianising and protection, where the general focus was on vocational education
(Cannon, 1993: 257), lasted until approximately the 1880s. Despite the rhetoric, however, the reality, according to Eckermann et al, citing Hartwig’s (1973) work, was that this period saw the emergence of the ‘... “forgetfulness” and “disregard” of Aboriginal people [that] have been a feature of the Australian education and social, as well as legal and economic systems, for generations’ (1992: 28).

The second period of Aboriginal education, the 1860s to 1940s, was characterised by strategies that enabled a policy of protection to be maintained. This, the ‘first official, legally sanctioned policy’ (Eckermann, 1992: 35), is possibly the most well-known of the historical eras of Australia’s colonial past as this is the period during which the focus was on control or, as it was euphemistically called, the ‘protection’ of Aboriginal people (Reynolds, 2000: 277–279). These were the policies that enabled missions, settlements and, later, reserves to be built, usually on land the colonisers didn’t want, so people ‘could be housed and fed until their last remnants had disappeared. This has been termed the era of “smoothing the Dying Pillow”’ (Eckermann, 1992: 31; Foley, 1999: 1). Under these policies ‘institutionalisation’ flourished and ‘discriminatory legislation’ (Lippmann, 1994: 135) was put in place to satisfy demands from bodies such as the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (NSW) who wanted ‘powers of in loco parentis over Aboriginal children’ (Link-Up, 1997: 50). These were the policies that produced one of the most highly politicised and devastating events in this nation’s history — the separation of Indigenous Australian children from their families (Human Rights Commission, 1997: 153–232; Markus, 1994: 126 & 132–139; Read, nd: 17–70; Read, 200: xi; Link-Up, 1997; Aboriginal Legal Service, 1995; Austin, 1993; Brock, 1993: 14). This was the era that ensured:

State intervention in Aboriginal lives was systemic ... and enabled the state to scrutinise every aspect of Aboriginal peoples’ private and public lives. Colonial governments rationalised these actions by arguing that any abuse of human rights involved were the inevitable entailment of welfare policies ‘for the natives’ own good (Finlayson, 1995: 2).

It could also be argued that it has been the impact of this era more than any other that has contributed to the current positioning of Indigenous Australians within our society for, as Lippmann explains:

[i]he three to four years of education offered ensured that Aborigines would be trapped into the lowest socio-economic stream in too weak a situation to be able to demand anything like adequate pay or upward social mobility. Schooling was
to fit them to be members of a permanent underclass, to have them foreclose their language and culture, to ensure that they slotted into the lowest socio-economic stratum so that poverty and powerlessness would be their life-long lot (1994: 135).

McConnachie asserts that much of the official policy and practice of the ‘reserve’ era had evolved out of a belief in social Darwinism, thinking that continues to underpin contemporary racist attitudes and thinking that had a catastrophic impact upon the provision of education for Aboriginal students.

The little education that was provided during this period was the responsibility of government Departments of Aboriginal Affairs rather than state Departments of Education. The bulk of teachers were unqualified, inexperienced and overloaded with other administrative duties which placed them in the role of policemen rather than teachers (McConnachie, 1982: 22).

This argument is supported by Eckermann’s assertion that ‘[e]very Act imposed on Aboriginal people between the 1890s and the 1960s can be classified as an example of institutional racism’ (1992: 34). While Castles questions the value of defining racism at all, he does suggest it can be useful as ‘a valuable yardstick for analysis and political action, because it can help in assessing whether certain ideas, practices or situations can properly be seen as racist’ (1996: 31). He defines racism as:

... the process whereby social groups categorise other groups as different or inferior, on the basis of phenotypical characteristics, cultural markers or national origin. This process involves the use of economic, social or political power, and generally has the purpose of legitimating exploitation or exclusion of the group so defined. The dominant group constructs ideologies of the inherent difference and the inferiority of the dominated groups (1996: 31).

Institutional racism occurs when that dominant group uses its power to develop ‘structures (such as laws, policies and administrative practices) that exclude or discriminate against the dominated group’ (Castles, 1996: 31). This definition clearly supports Eckermann’s argument that the Acts that were imposed upon Aboriginal people were an outcome of institutional racism but Castles also indicates that, while there are various types of racism, one that is closely related to institutional racism is ‘informal racism’, which is the result of ‘more spontaneous types of prejudice or discrimination arising out of a racist culture' (1996:
While institutional racism is often embedded within the procedures and practices of our educational institutions — including universities — it is to informal racism that Indigenous students are regularly exposed within their learning environment. Castles argues that both types of racism are expressions of power, demonstrating the dominance of one group over the other and hence, 'racism always implies a group process . . . and . . . all forms of racism are essentially violent, for they reduce people’s life chances, and are ultimately based on the threat of physical harm' (1996: 32). It could be argued that racism is endemic to Australian society, for, according to Markus: '[a]t the mid-point of the twentieth century the Australian state unambiguously practised a policy of racial discrimination and exclusivity' (2001: 12). Castles and Vasta argue that, while racism shouldn't exist in a country that claims to embrace multiculturalism, it 'does exist in many sites, such as the labour market, education, the media and policing . . . racism is alive and strong in Australia' (1996: 13-4). Such assertions imply the need for Australian universities to proactively address the issue of racism to ensure they are providing safe learning environments that enable Indigenous Australian students to achieve success in higher education.

Throughout the protection period, there remained some interest in Aboriginal languages as a means of spreading the gospel, particularly in the more remote areas of central and northern Australia. The Lutheran ministry in central Australia was very active in this area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, in addition to their work on bible translations, Carl Strehlow became recognised as having established ‘anthropology at Hermannsburg’ (Kingston, 1988: 130). The linguist, Bob Love, following periods in Mapoon in Queensland and Kunnuny in the northwest of Western Australia, moved to Ernabella, in 1927, and worked with the Pitjantjatjara to develop a school curriculum based on Pitjantjatjara literacy (Harris, 1990: 883-4). Len and Nell Harris, who went to Oenpelli in the Northern Territory in 1933, were the first missionaries to recognise that 'Aboriginal people were naturally multilingual' (Harris, 1990: 815).

Significantly, the work of these missionaries, demonstrates the value of reciprocity in working with Indigenous peoples. The Aboriginal people involved as co-translators, although limited in number, experienced considerable pride in seeing the Bible translated into their own languages and the missionaries acquired considerable knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal cultures and languages. Unfortunately, however, it took many years for Aboriginal people to begin taking up decision-making roles in the churches and to begin replacing the missionaries. Harris suggests this was due to an overall failure on the
part of evangelists of all denominations to appreciate the importance of Bible translation and to recognise the leadership qualities of Aboriginal people. Furthermore, he suggests that there was some reluctance to give Aboriginal people access to the Bible in their own languages as they would then control it. For many missionaries, while they desired to convert Aborigines to Christianity, were unable to overcome their own prejudices for ‘the English language itself is not just the language of the missionary: it is also the language of oppression’ (Harris, 1990: 881) and ‘[m]inistry was also, regrettably, tied up with power’ (Harris, 1990: 885). Blake’s conclusion, that it was difficult for Indigenous languages and cultures to survive because ‘[a]lmost all Europeans thought Aboriginal culture to be of no value and educators, particularly religious ones, persistently tried to suppress Aboriginal vernaculars’ (Dixon, 1991: 44), supports Harris’ argument.

In considering Indigenous academic success within an historical context, Milliss’ reference to what happened in relation to the languages and customs of the Aborigines that constituted the northern tribes in New South Wales in the late nineteenth century is interesting. He cites the claim that this was the ‘golden age of amateur anthropologists and linguists’ (Dixon 1992: 31) and, in discussing Aboriginal customs, their kinship systems and the complexity of their languages provides a very positive view of Aboriginal people at the time of the invasion and in the early years of colonisation (Milliss, 1992: 21–43). For example, he cites Lang’s 1861 statement that ‘two monuments of the ancient civilization of the Australians have been preserved, amid the desolation of many generations; in the highly elaborate and symmetrical structure of their language, and the comprehensive social nomenclature on which their rules of marriage and descent are based’ (Milliss, 1992: 31). And in recording what happened to the Kamilaroi, Milliss presents a very different viewpoint to what has mainly been written about that period in Australian history. He indicates that they suffered

... the same fate that befell other tribes before them as the whites pushed steadily out from their enclave around Port Jackson, and still more after them until the entire continent was subjugated. But the No-sayers of the northern plains did not surrender their *ari* (district) or their *dheeh* (totem) meekly. They lived up to their name by meeting the invaders step by step across their territory with a determined guerrilla resistance for more than quarter of a century that flared into periodic uprisings to culminate in a valiant last stand on the Macintyre in 1848-9. They lost, but they went down fighting (1992: 43).

In the context of this study, this is a particularly fascinating view, for it reveals a strength
and tenacity within Aboriginal peoples that is missing from much of the colonial literature. The argument that Aboriginal Australians have engaged in a prolonged and tenacious struggle for rights has become an increasingly persistent one due to the work of Indigenous Australians such as Charles Perkins, Penny Tripony, Patrick Dodson, Michael Dodson, Lester Rigney, Jackie Huggins and Ruby Langford and non-Indigenous Australians such as Henry Reynolds, Anne-Katrin Eckermann, H.C. Coombs, Lorna Lippmann, Richard Broome and Scott Bennett. In fact, according to Godwell, the ‘popular beginning of the Aboriginal campaign for citizenship rights is the commemorative “Day Of Mourning” protest held in Sydney in 1938 . . . organised by Aboriginal people to protest the unequal treatment of Aboriginal peoples in their own land’ (2000: 7).

Yet, despite the acknowledgement that people did not give up without a fight, the ultimate outcome of the dispossession process was that ‘Aborigines do not own their own land; in the city and the country, traditional rituals, language and cultural patterns have almost disappeared’ (Wilson, 1985: 9) and:

These historical forces and present social conditions have led to what Aboriginal writer Kevin Gilbert calls ‘the human desolation of Aboriginal society’. This desolation exists not just in health, housing, education and employment, but, more importantly, in ‘what Aboriginal people have come to believe about themselves’.

In creating this desolation and powerlessness, white society has . . . taken . . . their self-esteem and identity (1985: 9).

And the desolation that Wilson (1985) argues is not complete occurred over considerable time, as can be seen in considering the issue of language. The demise of Aboriginal languages commenced with the ‘violent conflict and disease’ of the ‘initial stages of white contact’ (Schmidt, 1990: 11) and was later encouraged through the implementation of the dormitory system, which:

. . . had devastating consequences for Aboriginal language vitality. For many languages, it effectively destroyed the vital intergenerational language transmission link by severely disrupting family structure and parent-child relationships. Children were forcibly removed from the social structure and the set of primary role-relationships which enabled the acquisitions of Aboriginal language, sociocultural values, knowledge and skills. In effect they were denied the link with their cultural and linguistic heritage (Schmidt, 1990: 12).
In any study of Indigenous academic achievement, the reality of what happened to Aboriginal languages cannot be overlooked for, as Peile indicates, 'culture and communication are inseparable . . . Culture . . . is the foundation of communication' (1997: xv). Furthermore, Peile cites Porter and Samovar’s 1982 work that argues:

... communication is an intricate matrix of interacting social acts that occur in a complex social environment. This social environment reflects the way people live, how they come to interact with and get along in their world. This social environment is culture, and if we truly are to understand communication, we also must understand culture (1997: xv).

Such arguments imply that a capacity to acknowledge and understand the ramifications of dispossession and its long term impact upon Indigenous Australians, in terms of where they are currently located within the wider Australian society, is critical for teachers working with Indigenous students.

One of the most effective accounts of the impact of the protection era comes from a publication entitled Human Rights for Australian Aborigines (1957), in which Mary Bennett outlines the various state government policies that were used into the 1950s to deny Aborigines access to education. Most importantly, her book emphasises the recency of the experience. For example, she explains that in Queensland ‘the past policy has been that education from the Second to the Fourth Standard was sufficient for Aborigine children, but in 1955–56 the Department directed that Grades up to Seven and Eight should be created’ (Bennett, 1957: 43). Hence, the reality is that in Queensland many Aboriginal children were not able to access the final years of primary schooling until 1956, less than fifty years ago!

Archival records suggest similar situations existed in other States. For example, in the Western Australian records, correspondence concerning a Cabinet Decision of the 21st April, 1947, reveals that the decision to segregate native children into separate schools had been approved, although this would not apply to children whose parents held the Minister’s Certificate of Exemption or a Certificate of Citizenship (Pursuant to the Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act, 1944, and Regulations) (Act, 1944). In the Report of the Royal Commission (1974) that looked into matters pertaining to the well-being of Aboriginal peoples in Western Australia, it stated that:

One of the situations that has so hindered Aboriginal integration is the fact that, until 1948, it was not obligatory for Aboriginal children to attend school. When
this did become mandatory it took several years for effective control to be established (Furnell, 1974: 26).

An insight into the difficulties associated with this situation can be obtained through the archival records. An Education Department letter attesting to ‘natives’ in the Murchison area being ‘education conscious’ was attached to 1952 correspondence from the Commissioner for Native Affairs to the Director of Education in Western Australia. In this the value of Aboriginal children attending school is questioned because, it asks, if ‘. . . “education” is, in its truest sense, education for “living” then to what end are these children being educated? There is no foreseeable future or occupation for them on the Mission or in any employable sense in the surrounding country . . . ’ And, a year later, the Minister for Education responded to the Director of Education, concerning his query about a Cabinet decision of 1947 that had indicated that segregation was Government policy, by stating, ‘[t]he policy of this Government is non-segregation of school children and the principles of the Education Act are to be adhered to’ (Commonwealth Government, 1953: 2). Such statements reveal the lack of any intention to cater for the specific needs of Indigenous learners in ways that might improve their life chances and are a terrible indictment on the role played by the Departments of Native Affairs and Education in determining the way in which Aboriginal peoples were subsequently positioned within the educational systems of the various states and territories.

Furthermore, Armitage, in comparing the process of European colonisation in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, has demonstrated how the similarities of what was done to the Indigenous peoples in each of those countries could be argued to have contributed to their contemporary realities. In focusing on the policy of assimilation, he reveals how education was used as the tool to establish white dominance and black subordination. Armitage points out that by the 1960s there appeared to be a general assumption that the departments operating in each of these countries to ‘manage’ the affairs of their Indigenous peoples were ‘antiquated remnants of the colonial era' (1995: 229). Indeed, as:

... members of the United Nations and the British Commonwealth, the newly independent former colonies were critical of those countries which maintained a system of internal colonialism vis-à-vis aboriginal people. South Africa provided a particularly offensive example of such policies in the form of apartheid (1995: 229).
Significantly, however, Armitage reveals, 'the policies which these three countries had directed towards Aboriginal First Nations, and Maori peoples had many similarities to the internal colonial policies of South Africa' (1995: 230), even though their governments considered that their shift to policies of integration demonstrated their commitment to an acceptance that human rights should be extended to their Indigenous citizens, providing, of course, that they denied their Aboriginality and assumed the guise of whiteness.

In his recount of South African history, Nelson Mandela reveals that from a rights-based perspective there was considerable similarity between Australia and South Africa in terms of the educational provision for their Indigenous peoples, once the Bantu Education Act of 1953 'transferred control of African education from the Department of Education to the much loathed Native Affairs Department' (1995: 195). Mandela demonstrates these similarities by citing Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, Minister of Bantu Education in the South African Parliament, who, in arguing that the purpose of education was to teach and train people according to what they needed in their lives, questioned the reason for educating black South Africans because, '[t]here is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour' (1995: 195). Doubtless, the commonality of such thinking, both nationally and internationally (Brennan, 1998: 147–170; Munns, 1998: 171–188; Harris, 1990: 637–654; Herbert, 1999), impacted upon the educational, and subsequently, the societal positioning of many Indigenous Australians. This conclusion is supported by Bennett's revelations concerning the way in which the notorious 1937 Canberra Resolutions for full-Aborigines were used by the Department of Native Affairs to deny Aboriginal children access to education, thus violating 'the Declaration of Geneva' (1957: 46) that outlined people's human rights, including their right to education. Her concerns were validated by Biskup's report on education in Western Australia from the late nineteenth century through to the 1950s, in which he argued that both government and non-government educational provision for Indigenous Australians could justifiably be called a 'tragic legacy' (1973: 148–204).

Consulting the archival educational records of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided an additional dimension in understanding this 'legacy' — for me, a personal dimension. These were not 'form' letters or impersonal 'jargon-filled' reports. A parent writes to the Director-General of Education and the Director-General of Education responds to the parent (although notes in the margins indicate the path of the correspondence to various fact-finding members of staff prior to the penning of the reply). And, even with the
distance of time, the pain of the Aboriginal father asking why his children aren’t being permitted to attend the school when he has spent so much money on providing the right clothes, shoes, etc. and he and his wife are very particular about cleanliness and hygiene, is unmistakable. And the scribbled exchanges between various officers, in the margins of those old letters, tell their own story. Well-chosen words that implied understanding and sympathy, yet at the same time revealed an implacable opposition on the part of politicians and bureaucrats to the suggestion that these children might be permitted to attend the particular school.

Furthermore, these records provide a unique insight into the attitudes of teachers and parents toward Aborigines. For example, in the Education File 4259/14 held in the Battye Library in Perth, there exists a series of letters written during the period 1914-19 regarding the attendance of Aboriginal children at Quairading State School, that clearly demonstrates the Headmaster’s attitude to this cohort of students. Such records re-inforce what Stanner interpreted as the whites’ expression of ‘scorn and dislike of them, and the indifference to their fate, which were to become so strongly characteristic of the Australian mentality’ (cited in Lippmann, 1994: 5).

Reference to the collections of Education Acts in the various States revealed that most contained provisions to exclude children whose presence could be ‘deemed to be “injurious” to the health, welfare and morality of other children’ (Haebich, 2000: 252; Beresford, 1996: 53; Chesterman, 1999: 244). It could be assumed that, due to their living conditions, the wording of this regulation made it relatively easy to exclude Aboriginal children at will. The evidence of the archives indicates that headmasters of most schools were more than willing to comply with the demands of very vigilant, and often belligerent, white parents who took it upon themselves to ensure any ‘native’ child enrolling was immediately excluded. Beresford and Omaji argue that the policies of exclusion and assimilation ensured that ‘generations of Aboriginal parents were left ill-equipped to deal with the education of their own children . . . [and] a cross-generational pattern of alienation from schools as “white” institutions resulted’ (Beresford, 1996: 54). It has been argued that these policies reinforced notions of social Darwinism in Australian society, in that they encouraged practices of institutional racism (Eckermann, 1992: 31) that many claim persist, with devastating effects, in contemporary educational institutions (Beresford, 1996: 55). Such arguments serve to re-inforce Clignet’s claim that various theoretical frameworks contributed to the establishment and persistence of colonial practices. For example, up to the early 1950s the impact of colonialism was judged
in ‘historical, ethical, economic and political terms’ that enabled the colonisers to justify their actions on the basis of perceived ‘moral, physical or cultural superiority’ (Clignet, 1984: 77). Furthermore, Clignet argues that, from a Marxist viewpoint, colonial attitudes and behaviours were simply perceived as an inevitable outcome of economic determinism, meaning that the more privileged people became, the more likely they were to adopt prejudiced beliefs and expectations concerning those who were the exploited within the community. Clignet also suggested that the higher the involvement of an entire nation in a colonial enterprise, the more colonialist will be the outlook of its citizens. While economic determinism might be a significant factor, however, Clignet revealed that political determinism is another important element in deciding ‘the positions occupied by colonizers and colonized’ (1984: 77), thus implying that people’s attitudes and behaviours are shaped by the nature of the society in which they live and the position they occupy within the power structure underpinning that society and/or community.

Clignet’s arguments have obvious implications for education. For example, those groups or individuals who are economically or politically dominant within a given society have the capacity to maintain their power through their control of the major institutions, including educational institutions. From such a perspective it becomes possible to ignore the reality of the outcomes that are the result of the interaction between colonising teachers and colonised students. While such reasoning might seem to make it easier to understand the ultimate impact of colonialism upon the development of Australia’s education systems, the reality is not quite so simplistic, for as Clignet, citing Mannoni’s argument that ‘psychological motivations’ (Clignet, 1984: 79) cannot be overlooked, suggests:

Colonizers and colonized are prisoners of their past and more specifically of their childhood. Their interaction therefore follows patterns of developments that are independent of the political and economic components of the colonial situation (1984: 80).

If considered within the historical framework, this last point would seem to have particular resonance for the Australian situation as revealed through the Federal Government’s Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) which was set up to investigate the reasons for the disproportionate rate of imprisonment and deaths in custody of Indigenous Australians and was completed in 1991. In this report, and the subsequent implementation reports, it was revealed that Indigenous Australian disadvantage and ‘unequal position . . . within Australian society’ has been caused by the fact that they have
'been dominated to an extraordinary degree by non-Indigenous Australian society ... their ongoing disadvantage was a product of that domination' (Report, 1996: 93) and that 'sorry history of direction and coercion, of decisions imposed without any regard to the aspirations of the people themselves, leading inevitably to resentment, misunderstanding and bitter failure' (Australia, 1995: 3). In extrapolating Indigenous disadvantage, on-going RCIADIC reports linked the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in custody to the provision of education and training programs and emphasised the importance of implementing the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) Review (1995) recommendations as a means of redressing previous inequities. Contemporary calls for Indigenous self-determination in educational decision-making, as a means of effecting positive change, would seem to suggest such recommendations continue to be ignored. Yet, considering the availability of information from historians such as Reynolds and the autobiographical material produced by Indigenous writers such as Morgan, Huggins and Langford, there is no excuse for schools or individual teachers not appreciating the recency of the colonial experience for Aboriginal peoples nor the degree of neglect people have suffered at the hands of education authorities.

The historical records serve to demonstrate the way in which education became a powerful tool for the coloniser. Beresford and Omaji drew on such records to argue that during the 1940s in Western Australia, schools 'became the principal battleground over race' (1998: 82) because most non-Aboriginal people wanted to maintain practices of segregation. The precedence had been set by earlier policies that had allowed Aboriginal children to be excluded to such an extent that in his 1938 Annual Report A.O. Neville, the Protector of Aborigines, 'acknowledged that, throughout his period of service, “a whole generation of [Aboriginal] children has grown up who have missed being educated through natural prejudice”' (Beresford, 1998: 82). Those early records are particularly important as they expose, for example, the way in which strategies of dominance, such as surveillance, were used to subject the colonised to the 'imperial gaze' or the view from a particular way of thinking, that 'defines the identity of the subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalterneity and powerlessness' (Ashcroft, 1998: 226). Hence, descriptions such as the following from the Minutes of the Select Committee on Aborigines, New South Wales, 1845:

[i]he aboriginal native, as far as our observations extend, makes no effort to attain the advantage of civilisation; and it is extremely probable that no human
efforts, however well directed, will conquer the adult black's attachment to his wild though miserable mode of life. It does not appear to me that there is much hope of effecting any general improvement in the moral condition of so scattered, disunited and indolent people as the Papuas [sic] of Australia (cited in Lippmann, 1994: 133).

Despite such presumptions there remained a general assumption that education would serve as a civilising force for, according to Partington:

It was assumed that they [the Aborigines] would naturally desire to attain the status and way of life of the Europeans. So, when they failed to make progress in school and often left soon after starting, the explanation that was found was a belief in an inability to succeed due to lack of intelligence (1998: 33).

Such assumptions completely overlooked the fact that education was an integral and essential part of traditional lifestyles and survival (Partington, 1998: 28–9; Beresford, 1996: 52–3; Coombs, 1994: 7–12 & 190–1).

The 1940s to the mid 1960s have become known as the era of assimilation. This was a time of great change and education was seen as being one of the main agents of such change (Lippmann, 1994: 137; McConnochie, 1982: 23; Education, 1985: 26–7; Eckermann, 1992: 36–8). Hence the education program was intended to provide basic literacy and numeracy skills and inculcate children with 'appropriate roles, behaviour, attitude and loyalties' (McConnochie, 1982: 24). Aborigines were no longer to be excluded and herded away on reserves. They were to be included in the general population and treated the same as anybody else. 'Assimilation was proposed on both racial grounds (through interbreeding Aboriginal "blood" would disappear) and social grounds (Aborigines would be brought up to the "standard of western civilization")' (Brock, 1993: 15). The problem with this idea was the diversity of opinion on this subject existing amongst the various States and Territories and, the fact that, due to the war effort, a shortage of funds and trained personnel affected the capacity of the various departments to implement the necessary changes (McConnochie, 1982: 24). It was during this period that various provisions for 'exemption', a procedure intended to separate 'people of full descent from people of mixed descent' (Brock, 1993: 16), were put in place. In establishing rules concerning who could mix with whom on the basis of racial descent, this policy ignored the many family and social links that tie Aboriginal people together. Many pursued exemption, for the children of exempted parents
were able to attend a white school and education was perceived as a means of getting around discriminatory legislation (Lippmann, 1994: 137). Nevertheless, Lippmann reveals that assimilation was a difficult policy to pursue due to Aboriginal resistance to 'becoming second-class whites and abandoning their separate identity' (1994: 137) and the considerable bias and prejudice that existed within the minds of the white community (Eckermann, 1992: 37). Lippmann suggests that, despite apparent improvements and acceptance, the reality for Aboriginal peoples was that '... in the 1960s retention rates were low, absenteeism high and achievement levels accordingly poor' (1994: 137). Of course, such dismal educational outcomes were blamed on the Aboriginal people themselves. This was the era of the deficit approach to education (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 27; McConnachie, 1982: 26–7; Watts, 1976; Eckermann, 1994: 14–5), reflecting contemporary thinking that:

... children who came from homes which were economically poor or culturally different from the mainstream were seen as disadvantaged by their difference. According to this principle, it was not the school which was failing by its inappropriateness but the students and their families who were inadequate and therefore non-achieving (Lippmann, 1994: 137).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Aborigines had begun to mobilise in a deliberate move to effect change for, as Bennett indicates, at the time of the 1967 referendum 'there was... a rather unfocused approach to Aboriginal Policy' (Bennett, 1999: 60; Education, 1985: 46–7 & 59) with many states simply refusing to listen to their Aboriginal populations. This lack of interest on the part of governments may well have contributed to the situation in which Indigenous Australians find themselves today. A number of Aboriginal organisations were established with the aim of getting a better deal for Aborigines throughout the country. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSIs) was the body that 'linked the State “Advancement” organisations and gave them additional political thrust' (Lippmann, 1994: 30). Due to their strong lobbying:

... a referendum was held in May 1967 to change two clauses in the Federal Constitution discriminating against Aborigines: section 127, which excluded Aborigines of the full descent from national census counts and section 51 (XXVI), which prohibited the Federal government from passing laws relating to Aborigines living in the Australian States (Lippmann, 1994: 30).

By the time the Commonwealth Government acquired the power to intervene, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people were suffering a high degree of oppression. Bennett states:
It is possible to detect a change in this relationship which began with the entry of the Commonwealth government into this policy-making field as consequence of the 1967 amendment of the Constitution. Aborigines gradually found an increasing number of access points to government opening for them, where their views began (if slowly at first) to be heard (1999: 40).

There is a difference, however, between views being 'heard' and those views being heeded. Coombs suggested that through the referendum the 'Aboriginal population had been co-opted into the Australian nation!' (Coombs, 1994: 70) and the Commonwealth Government was forced to assume a new role in terms of taking on responsibility to ensure the rights of Indigenous Australians. This action also opened Australia to international scrutiny (Lippmann, 1994: 31), particularly once amendments to the Constitution following the referendum 'brought legal de-colonisation' (Rowley, 1986: 119). According to Brock:

... the 1960s saw a dramatic change in the legal status of Aborigines and in governmental involvement and financial commitment to Aboriginal affairs, both at the State and Federal level... many Aboriginal people moved away from segregated communities and into towns and cities, where they could now obtain housing and education for their children (1993: 17).

Yet, as the decade of the 1960s drew to a close, it seemed that in education nothing was working. Hence, educators, encouraged by educational psychologists (McConnochie, 1982: 27), gratefully clutched at the apparent hope offered by the deficit models of education and the subsequent compensatory programs that had been developed in the United States of America. Cultural deprivation, poor health and/or hygiene, low self-esteem, no English, were all excuses that circumvented any notion that 'the racist nature of society was to blame' and so 'attention could be turned away from discrimination and structured inequality as the real cause of educational disadvantage' and, hence, 'white society and its schools rendered themselves blameless' (Lippmann, 1994: 138).

Any real attempt to clarify the historical record in terms of Aboriginal education always comes up against the paucity of written records (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 31–2). While this state of affairs could be attributed to the colonial attitudes that have pervaded this country throughout its white history, Healy reveals a different reality, arguing that in the early years of colonisation Aboriginal peoples had a strong presence in the historical accounts provided by those living at the frontiers. The literature reveals the way in which Aboriginal peoples became marginalised, 'subjected to and subjects of 'the great Australian
silence”” (Healy, 1997: 44-5). This happened to such an extent that a leading anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner, in delivering his 1968 Boyer lecture on the ABC, took historians to task for their part in writing:

... a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale (1968: 25).

Reynolds takes up the theme in the introduction to his book Dispossession, suggesting that as long as there was some glory to be gained in writing home — to Britain — providing ‘the vicarious thrill of contact with “wild” landscapes, “primitive” people and “savage” customs’ (Reynolds, 1989: xii), there was considerable evidence of Aborigines in the Australian landscape. By the late nineteenth century, however, efforts were being made to maintain the myth that Australia had been settled peacefully and the colonists moved on to writing home about their own exploits in conquering the land. Furthermore, popular opinion that the ‘Aborigines were a dying race, condemned to extinction by the iron laws of evolution’ (Reynolds, 1989: xii), meant they could be eased out of the history (McGrath, 1995: 364-5).

McGrath (1995) argues that the lack of clarity in the disciplinary boundaries between history and anthropology contributed to the neglect, while Mulvaney suggests that the early written records about Aborigines were narratives written by the people, navigators, explorers and missionaries, who observed them. Such accounts were influenced by the attitudes people had developed toward Aborigines as a result of ‘the nature of colonial society... penal colonies with Europeans divided into gaolers and gaolers, a condition hardly conducive to the elevation of the dignity of any man’ (Mulvaney, 1990: 13). McGrath indicates that the ‘domination of the British structural-functionalist school of anthropology in Australia led to an emphasis on reconstructing past cultures, with its static cultural model deflecting attention altogether from processes of change’ (1995: 366). Furthermore, McGrath implies that, ‘anthropologists such as A.P. Elkin attempted to nurture cosy research relationships with government policy makers and the pastoralists upon whose land many Aborigines resided. To these men, such charged issues as colonialism and indigenous exploitation were anathema’ (1995: 366). Similarly, Finlayson cites Cowlishaw’s argument that ‘anthropologists unwittingly contributed to the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people as natural, primitive and authentic by accepting employment with State and Territory Governments as experts in Aboriginal culture’ (1995: 10), an argument supported by a 1954
archival entry indicating the Education Department in Western Australia was seeking the services of A.P. Elkin to conduct a much requested school of instruction for teachers of native children because, according to the Director of Education, he was ‘the world authority on the Australian Aborigine and knows our own North quite intimately’ — even though he would have needed to be brought over from the University of Sydney. Critically, the dominant culture remained ignorant of the reality of Aboriginal lives and the place to which they had been relegated within Australian society for the ‘anthropological establishment reinforced the notion that Aborigines, whilst having a static “past” to uncover and preserve, did not have a history’ (McGrath, 1995: 367) and, in the longer term, ‘they failed to argue for the human rights of Aboriginal people to self-determination’ (Finlayson, 1995: 11). Bird Rose, in discussing the need for ecological justice for Indigenous Australians as a result of their treatment by anthropologists in the past, cites Langton’s (1998) argument that Aboriginal people had ‘been rendered invisible in Australian landscapes, not only by legal but also by “science fictions” that arise from the assumption of superiority of Western knowledge over Indigenous knowledge systems’ (1998: 31). The contribution of the discipline was further tainted with the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, a research centre that opened in Canberra in 1963–64. A facility devoted to retrieving the past, where:

... anthropologists, linguists and experts in material culture dominated the establishment... a mere sprinkling of historians were members of the Institute... [and] [w]hen historians’ interest in ‘Aboriginal history’ strengthened, they were viewed as untrained and unsuitable for research on Aborigines... due to lack of anthropological training (McGrath, 1995: 367).

Mulvaney argues that it was the unfortunate ‘separation of the past into two sections, reclassified as separate disciplines’, that resulted in the neglect of Aboriginal history for as the proponents of the emerging prehistory ‘posed a challenging new version of history, they were edged out of their parent discipline’ — history — (1990: 156) and, as the focus shifted to prehistory, Aborigines, as individuals who lived personal lives, were increasingly unlikely to appear.

Unfortunately, the reality of the Aborigines' increasing invisibility may also have been simply a reflection of current government policies that, according to Haebich, were ‘... influenced by shifts in attitudes and practice abroad’ (2000: 144). The increasing use of legislative control and institutionalisation to achieve social control, mirrored models used in
Britain and, subsequently, the United States and Canada to deal with their 'problem populations' (Haebich, 2000: 145) by incarcerating them in institutions where they were effectively out of public sight. By the mid nineteenth century, education for many Aboriginal children throughout Australia, particularly those labelled “half-caste”, appears to have become a process that isolated them from their families and marginalised them from the wider society (Haebich, 2000: 149–150). The practice of institutionalisation flourished in Australia because there was no intention of preparing Aborigines for citizenship. Hiding ‘Aborigines away in institutions and forging permanent segregated communities’ not only satisfied demands for a White Australia but also helped accommodate employers’ interests by training ‘half-caste’ children to become ‘part of a state-controlled labour force’ (Haebich, 2000: 156).

Assimilation merged into the policy of integration in the late 1960s although, as McConnachie (1982) reveals, there was no real change of policy because Indigenous peoples were still expected to change themselves to become more acceptable to white society. McConnachie argues that, to this point, ‘assimilationist goals . . . excluded any consideration of the social implications of schooling in pluralistic societies’, pointing out that ‘[h]istorians have been widely criticized for writing Aborigines out of Australian history. If this is true of general histories of Australia, it is even more true of histories of Australian education’ (McConnachie, 1982: 28). Furthermore, while the social science disciplines may have been debating issues of equality and education, such discussions had little impact upon Aboriginal education because the debate had been 'conducted around the theoretical implications, interpreted within sociological theory, rather than in terms of any direct implications for education' and 'those concerned with Aboriginal education do not interpret their role within a socio-political framework and so find little of relevance in these discussions’ (McConnachie, 1982: 29). Although this might imply a very practical approach to the development of Aboriginal education, McConnachie claims otherwise, arguing instead that it has:

. . . been built on an implicit set of assumptions with a very solid ideological base, which has not been adequately identified or described by the participants. The nature of the ideological base can be recognised in a series of threads which have run through Aboriginal education from its inception to the present day (McConnachie, 1982: 29).

During the 1950s and 1960s, due to the civil rights movement in the United States of
America, there had been a growing awareness of Aboriginal rights as demonstrated by the Charles Perkins’ inspired ‘Freedom Rides’ in New South Wales in 1965. Such awareness culminated in the overwhelming YES vote given by the Australian public in the 1967 referendum. Whitlam and Cohen had argued strongly for a rights-based system of education throughout the 1960s and the policy of the Schools Commission, adopted in 1969 and refined in 1971, stated:

Everyone has the right to education. It is the obligation of the Commonwealth and the States in cooperation to provide and operate educational services, which shall be available to all without charge (Dudley, 1995: 60).

While the Schools Commission Policy was designed to address the needs of the schooling sector, including technical education, their stance on the achievement of equitable outcomes, was of particular value to Indigenous education. In arguing the importance of resourcing programs designed to address educational disadvantage, the Commission stated ‘Aboriginal people are such a group for whom different educational strategies and approaches are required’ (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 21).

Haebich, in asserting that under ‘Whitlam the nation moved away from the policies of White Australia and Aboriginal assimilation and the foundations of a multicultural nation were forged’ (2000: 572), reveals a shift that held considerable hope for the future of Indigenous educational achievement. The new Labor Government had such enthusiasm for reform that the changes in Aboriginal Affairs inferred in the 1967 referendum were accelerated to the extent that, ‘[b]y the early 1970s, functions such as education and housing had been transferred to relevant government departments’ (2000: 485). Social policy reflected the government’s replacement of ‘assimilation with self-determination as the primary emphasis in Aboriginal affairs’ (Finlayson, 1995: 7). According to Mickler, the ‘policy of self-determination adopted by the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 presumed a destination of distinct peoplehood for Aborigines, if not quasi-nation status’ (1998: 203). The Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), staffed with ‘key Aboriginal appointments’ and designed to provide ‘an innovative federal definition of Aboriginality’ and with ‘imperatives to consult with Aboriginal communities in all matters’ (Haebich, 2000: 572), was set up in 1972. ‘Unprecedented levels of funding (with significant flow-ons to the states) were allocated to bring Aboriginal housing, education, welfare, health, employment and legal aid in line with community standards’ (Haebich, 2000: 572).
In the early 1980s, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education gathered considerable information concerning Indigenous participation, retention and performance from various sources, including a range of Government reports; various research projects containing data that had been gathered prior to 1976; and Professor Watts’ 1981 review of Aboriginal Education (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 21–24). The data provided them with a stark insight into the inadequacies of the Australian education systems in providing meaningful education programs for Indigenous Australian students. Hence, the Select Committee, reporting in 1985, concluded that, despite the improvements of the past decade, Aboriginal educational outcomes continued to be significantly lower than those of the non-Indigenous community across all sectors of education. The Committee found that, while the Aboriginal voice had been created in the form of the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), ‘lack of co-ordination in the policy development and funding of Aboriginal education’ (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 2) had led to confusion and waste.

In the interests of Indigenous self-determination in education, the committee made a number of recommendations designed to strengthen the NAEC and the State and Territory Consultative Groups, as it was argued that due to the ‘tremendous diversity of Aboriginal society, it is at the local level that Aboriginal self-determination can be most significant’ (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 4). In summing up their concerns regarding Indigenous self-determination in education, the Select Committee stated that their overall strategy was meant to ensure the ‘Aboriginalisation of the process of education for Aboriginal people. It is only when this process is complete that one will be able to talk in a meaningful sense of Aboriginal self-determination in education’ (1985: 5). In his concluding statement, the Committee Chair, Allen Blanchard, MP, discussed the issues surrounding the question ‘education for what?’, highlighting the complexities inherent in the question and ending with the statement, ‘[t]he Committee is asking that educational authorities listen to what Aboriginal people are saying they want from education and respond to the needs expressed’ (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 203).

Despite the recommendations made in this report, it appears the ‘racist assumptions of the colonial era’ persisted for, in the 1987 report of the Western Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (WAAECG) it was stated that the ‘potential of Aboriginal students to succeed academically and to develop self-esteem and secure identity, is severely reduced’ because ‘Aboriginal children believe, in the broadest sense, that they do not belong
in schools’ (Group, 1987: 1). The WAAECG indicated that, from an Indigenous viewpoint, Aboriginal education — meaning education for Aboriginal people — was not on the schools’ agenda. Yet, the significance of Blanchard’s Report lay in the clear insight it provided into Indigenous aspirations for education.

Australian education systems have a poor record in this area. For example, Martin states that due to neglect from the Northern Territory Department of Education, ‘Aboriginal people are by and large illiterate in the language of power’ (Martin, 1990: 34). To demonstrate that Indigenous people are aware of the consequences of such neglect, he cites a response from Bain’s 1979 work:

We want them to learn. Not the kind of English you teach them in class, but your secret English. We don’t understand that English, but you do. To us you seem to say one thing and do another. That’s English we want our children to learn (Martin, 1990: 34).

Furthermore, Schwab’s research highlights an underlying concern regarding research into ‘Indigenous English literacy’ (1999) pointing out that:

While much attention has been given to promoting Indigenous literacy, and resources allocated to schools and communities, the outcomes of programs or strategies tend, at worst, to be assumed or, at best, they are merely stated or reported by the individuals or groups who implement them. There is little theoretical grounding in much of what is reported, and rigorous independent evaluations of Indigenous literacy programs appear to have been overlooked or displaced (Schwab, 1999: 34).

This would seem to suggest that the concerns voiced by so many Indigenous parents are legitimate, especially when considered in the historical context. Bain’s research was undertaken in 1979. Over twenty years later, it is revealed in the DETYA Annual Report that Indigenous Australians continue to perform at ‘markedly lower levels of literacy and numeracy’ (Department of Education, 2000: 17) in comparison with their non-Indigenous peers. Thus, it would appear that whatever has been done has had little affect in addressing the identified educational concerns of Indigenous parents.

Amongst the many changes that occurred during the decade of the 1970s was the establishment of consultative bodies in Aboriginal education. In 1977, the NAEC was
established as an advisory body to the Commonwealth Minister for Education to replace the Aboriginal Consultative Group (Sherwood, 1982: 36). The all-Indigenous Committee drew representation from all States and members were selected for their experience in formal education or for their value as community representatives. They accepted the definition that:

... an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he lives (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 228).

This was an important step in addressing the failure of the educational system to cater for the needs of Aboriginal students for it indicated an acknowledgement that non-Indigenous people were not necessarily the best people to speak about Indigenous educational needs and that it was critical to involve Indigenous people in educational decision-making at the highest levels (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 35). In highlighting the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their needs, the NAEC also supported the stance of the former Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission of 1975, that Aboriginal people want education that will enable them to operate successfully in both their own culture and the wider Australian society (1985: 36).

The 1970s also heralded the introduction of the bilingual programs, reflecting Whitlam's commitment to have 'Aboriginal children living in Aboriginal communities given their primary education in Aboriginal languages' (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 108). Bilingual education, according to Schmidt occurs when:

... children are taught in both their primary [Aboriginal] language and in English ... Because of the integral link between language, culture and learning, a sound bilingual program should also be bicultural, providing the opportunity of 'two-way learning'—educating in terms of both Aboriginal language, cultural values and traditions, and basic skills and knowledge of the English-speaking world (1990: 63).

Bilingual programs had first been established in South Australia in the late 1960s and were later adopted by the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland. Harris, from the Northern Territory Department of Education, called this 'two-way or both-way' teaching, a term that he reports was first documented by McConvell (1982) who had heard a Gurindji elder, Pincher Nyurriinyarry, use it as a means of contrasting his vision of education with that
taught in government schools. Nyurrmiyarri’s concept argued for education that 'would be a matter of fair representation of cultural content' with '[b]oth Aboriginal and Western culture' being taught, including the three Rs, with the school reflecting an equality in the power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and contributing to healthy relationships between older and younger generation of Gurindji (Harris, 1990: 13). In his discussion concerning the origins of the concept of two-way schooling, Harris also revealed that all of the Aborigines he had met perceived 'the three Rs as directly connected to Western political, technological and economic power', arguing that 'they want to have access to that power and they believe that schools are the source. European Australians have told them so often enough. They are also quite confused and sometime bitter and angry about why schools haven't given them that power' (Harris, 1990: 13). He suggested that this could explain why there was such widespread support for the proposed bilingual education. It was perceived as schools doing:

. . . something significant in terms of Aboriginal language and culture maintenance. . . One of the main features of a two-way school is that it recognises the idea of teaching Aboriginal language and culture as a legitimate end in itself, and not merely as a means of creating a more effective atmosphere for learning or a more efficient way to learn English (Harris, 1990: 14).

Considered within this context, two-way schooling clearly reflected Whitlam’s goals for Indigenous self-determination. There were over thirty bilingual schools at the beginning of the 1990s, by which time all of the Queensland programs had closed (Schmidt, 1990: 67). The majority of the remainder were located in the Northern Territory and most of these had been closed down, and the switch made to English-only classes by the end of 2000, on the basis that they were not achieving the English literacy and numeracy results that had been expected. This action would seem to support Schmidt’s assertion that while Australia has moved from the English monolingualism that existed in the post-war period to ‘an increased tolerance of other languages, Australia’s unique Aboriginal language heritage is still relatively neglected’ (Schmidt, 1990: 132). Hence, notions of Indigenous self-determination were shunned.

From an Indigenous perspective, the desire to make their own choices, in terms of what they want from education, has never wavered. The WAAECG, in its 1987 report argued that:

Aboriginal adults express a strong desire for their children to succeed in school.
On the other hand, Aboriginal people are neither willing nor able to discard their culture and language . . . they desire a situation wherein their Aboriginality is recognised, accepted and valued by mainstream society, its schools and other institutions (Group, 1987: 1).

Any in-depth study of educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians must also consider the issue of resource allocation. There are numerous historical accounts of how missions and reserves were starved of funding and Aboriginal people defrauded of their hard-earned wages (Kidd, 1997: 131–136; Murray, 1984: 254–56; Haebich, 2000: 217-25). The implementation of government policies and practices, in particular the apparent apathy of the States (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 55), relegated Aboriginal people to the lowest socioeconomic status in the country, subjecting them to the additional pressures that accompany extreme poverty: unemployment, lack of housing and poor health. Caught in the reality of their oppression, most Aboriginal people were pre-occupied with their day-by-day struggle for survival and would have had little time or energy to pursue an education, especially one that devalued their cultural identity (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 38-41). Coombs (1994) and Bennett (1989: 85–110) imply that the failure of ensuing governments to commit to Indigenous self-determination has ensured their on-going socio-economic positioning in contemporary Australia. John Herron, while Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, argued strongly that the economic status of Indigenous Australians had to be addressed because 'our sad legacy of 210 years of settlement is welfare dependency', citing Maloney's argument that 'our failure from the start to involve indigenous people in economic development is the basic cause of their reliance on welfare today' (1998: 2). Schwab implies that there is a tension between Indigenous needs in education and contemporary government approaches. While the government focus is on making education efficient, Indigenous education policies and strategies, designed to improve equity, are calling for the 'implementation of initiatives . . . [that need] . . . long-term commitments of additional resources, a major constraint in the current economic environment' (Schwab, 1997: 9). Furthermore, the 'dismantling of special programs' (1997: 11) does not encourage positive change in Indigenous academic achievement. Welch's argument concerning the 'emptiness' of the ideology of economic rationalism in catering for health needs is equally valid in comparing what has happened in Indigenous education and its continued use is:

. . . an ongoing indictment of the commitment of policy makers who operate according to its sway. The idea that economism, rather than social justice,
any kind of adequate response to two centuries of social and economic
discrimination against indigenous Australians is not merely an ongoing slap in
the face to all Aboriginal people, but arguably, the last gasp of colonialism

The 1980s marked a real change in the public profile of Indigenous Australians. The 1985 Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs, commonly known as the Miller Report, placed the issue of tertiary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples firmly on the public social policy agenda through an examination of the reasons why the Aboriginal unemployment rate in 1981 was 25% compared with a national rate, at that time, of under 6% (1985:24). The statistical evidence was vital in enabling Miller’s Committee to profile issues relating to the underlying causes of Aboriginal unemployment and joblessness, while also demonstrating the deplorable state of secondary and tertiary education for Indigenous Australians a mere twenty years ago. Such statistics also serve to re-inforce previous arguments pertaining to the way in which societal attitudes contributed to the positioning of Indigenous Australians in Australian society. Despite the findings of the Miller report and the subsequent Aboriginal Education Task Force (1988), it would seem little has changed for, in 1999, the then Minister for Education, Dr David Kemp, indicated that high Indigenous unemployment was due to their high level of educational disadvantage. Kemp also stated that, even when Indigenous people did achieve similar educational qualifications to their non-Indigenous counterparts, they continued to experience higher unemployment rates, the reason for which ‘I believe is largely due to racism’ (Kemp, 1999: 12). While this comment appears to have gone unchallenged, it is intriguing for the complexity of meanings it contains. While Kemp appears to imply that, regardless of their ability, Indigenous Australians will continue to be disadvantaged by the racist attitudes that permeate Australian society, his failure to implement strategies that would address the issue could be seen as demonstrating the Commonwealth Government’s real stance in this issue. It could be argued that Kemp’s words demonstrate an acceptance of discrimination against Indigenous Australians; a conclusion that questions the level of commitment the Howard government might have toward Indigenous peoples. In fact, considering its lack of response to the 1998 claim by Pauline Hanson, Member for the Federal seat of Oxley, that ATSIC was a corrupt organisation, it could be assumed that the Federal Government demonstrated its complicity in encouraging racist beliefs within the wider Australian community. Commissioner Dillon, in calling for support from John Herron, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Affairs, stated, 'ATSIC is one of the most accountable Government organisations in the country and the longer the Federal Government sits back and says nothing the more credence the ill-informed will place in what she [Hanson] is saying' (1998: 1). The public debate that surrounds such situations ensures that negative images of Indigenous Australians remain uppermost in the public perception. In perpetuating such images, Australian governments, at all levels, contribute to the maintenance of the status quo as it has developed through Australia’s settler history and ignore the reality of Indigenous achievement.
1.3: Education — policies, practices and theories

Within an educational context, policy is made up of the decisions or elements that provide a framework for institutions to use in developing appropriate learning environments for their students. In Australia, education policy is developed by government at both State/Territory and Federal levels and distributed to education providers across all systems to direct their practice. From the 1940s to the mid to late 1980s, education policy was developed through consultative processes that involved national committees and inquiries, later advisory committees, established for the purpose of bringing together educational experts and community leaders to advise government on policy formulation (Dudley, 1995: 34-5). However, according to Dudley and Vidovich, in 1987 there was a significant change in the way in which education policy was developed and the notion that education was a ‘professional, rather than a political concern . . . in which the criteria for policy decisions were principally educational rather than economic’ (1995: 35) was reversed. As Cope revealed in his article on the Dawkin’s Green Paper, the Labor Party introduced a new ‘language of educational policy’ that ‘puts education at the forefront of economic restructuring’ (1988: 16), thereby disempowering those leaders and educators who had previously contributed to the decision-making processes. A critical outcome of this was that ‘the minister and his/her department have become the sources of policy’ in line with the practices of corporatisation, thus ensuring ‘control of the education policy agenda remains with the minister’ (Dudley, 1995: 35), where tight fiscal control can be maintained (Cope, 1988: 16). Such controls are facilitated by the fact that, in overseeing policy development and implementation, governments are able to manipulate compliance by tying funding allocations to the achievement of specific outcomes.

[O]ne of the most consistent themes to emerge from a history of Aboriginal education is the close relationship between government policies towards Aborigines, and educational practices. Education has been regularly cited as ‘the solution’ to ‘the Aboriginal problem’, a practice based on the belief, still prevalent in Australian society, that education can serve as an agent of social and political change (McConnochie, 1982: 30).

Deficit theories, with their goal of changing Aboriginal children to fit into the white, middle-class image of the dominant culture, must be seen as a major factor in turning Indigenous students off education. In fact, Partington’s suggestion that teachers view the world from the
perspective of the dominant culture, hence, have only a limited understanding of the importance of taking account of 'sociocultural differences' in their teaching, is a likely outcome of assumptions that such difference reflects individual deficits, so that '[t]his view, that school failure is a consequence of deficits in the individual students, is still widely held today' (1998: 16). Partington argues that the 'educational performance of Indigenous people is often judged on such erroneous grounds' (1998: 16).

While much has been written about Indigenous education in terms of non-attendance, non-achievement, diversity and complexity (Lippmann, 1994; Herbert, 1999; McConaghy, 2000; Partington, 1998; Read, nd; Christie, 1985; Beresford, 1998; Kidd, 1997; Harris, 1990), little mention is made of Indigenous success or resilience in education, although there have been those who implied there may be hope for the future if only the underlying cause of Indigenous illiteracy could be identified. Seagrim et al, in reporting on their work in central and Northern Australia in the early 1970s, discussed the apparent conundrum of Aboriginal children on mission settlements attending school regularly, well supported by teachers and parents, yet failing to 'become literate or numerate' (1976: 223). Watts explored the significance of cognitive styles and cited a number of other writers (Gage, 1963; Sigel, 1963; Wallace, 1967; Havinghurst, 1970; Labov, 1970; White, 1971; Cole and Bruner, 1972) to support the argument that there was a need 'for more intensive and extensive research on the cognitive styles of Australian Aboriginal children, living in a wide variety of socio-cultural environments' (Watts, 1976: 152). Watts intimated the importance of the role of the teacher in promoting student achievement, with her argument that:

Educationists have, over the years, been able to interact with the child in the middle class mainstream culture in such a way as to promote his academic achievement. If minority children have distinctive cognitive styles, can these be utilised towards achievement of the same goals? (1976: 155).

The Cognition Symposium, held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra in May 1974, found that 't[he impact of Whites on Aboriginal wellbeing was disastrous though it did not occur evenly' (McElwain, 1976: 8). Kearney and McElwain's (1976) report revealed that Aborigines were 'severely under-represented in terms of the general population in secondary schools, and grossly so in tertiary educational institutions. The formal educational deficit is huge' (McElwain, 1976: 10–11). Their findings were supported by McConnachie's investigation of the historical factors that impacted upon Aboriginal education in the 1970s. In emphasising just how inappropriate and inadequate education had

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been for Indigenous students, McConnochies cited Coombs' condemnation of the Australian education system that had rendered Aborigines:

Utterly unequipped to deal with the paper and materials needed for an industrial democratic society; it has frozen them into the sector providing the limited kinds of unskilled labour capable of being performed by the illiterate and the near illiterate; as workers, as consumers, as industrial bargainers, as claimants for social welfare benefits, as citizens seeking the protection of the law or the enjoyment of civil liberties or redress through political action, it has left them hamstrung (Sherwood, 1982: 19).

In contending that educational provision is a political activity, McConnochies stated that: Aboriginal education is no exception; the education, which has been provided for Aboriginal children, has been developed in the light of clear political goals. Indeed the relationship between prevailing government policies and educational practices has often been very close (Sherwood, 1982: 20).

Such a statement highlights the tension that exists between Watts' (1976) assertion that the teacher's role is important in promoting academic achievement and McConnochies' (1982) intimation that many teachers lack a commitment to improving Aboriginal achievement. Almost a decade later, Harris (1990) further re-iterates the crucial role of teachers in Indigenous education.

One of the clearest signs of a normalising of relationships and true equality of status will be when European Australians really try to learn from Aboriginal people... Willingness to learn from Aboriginal people will in the future be one of the sociopolitical pre-requisites of being an effective non-Aboriginal teacher in the Western domain of an Aboriginal school (1990: 156).

This statement clearly supports the NAEC stance that teachers need to recognise and accept, 'that Aboriginal people should decide the extent of Western skills and knowledge they wish to be taught and that this will be related to the amount of participation they wish, or expect to have with the wider Australian community' (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 38-9).

More recently, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) reviewed the goals of the 1989 Common and Agreed Goals for Schooling in Australia (The Hobart Declaration), using a taskforce of State and Territory
Directors and Directors-General of Education across all systems, to ensure:

Australians in the 21st century will be active and informed citizens of complex and rapidly changing local and global communities. They will be enterprising, adaptable and socially responsible contributors to our democratic, cohesive, culturally-rich and diverse Australian society (MCEETYA, 1998: 7).

At this strategic level, focus is on the three broad themes of ‘students, curriculum and social justice’ (MCEETYA, 1998: 5). The goal of achieving socially just schooling, identified the need for Indigenous Australian students to have equitable access, participation and outcomes while also stating that all students need to develop an understanding of and respect for Indigenous Australian cultures to achieve reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. One of the agreed targets for achieving these goals was ‘[i]mproved achievement levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the key learning areas in schooling years and in priority subjects and disciplines in vocational education and training, and higher education’ (MCEETYA, 1998: 9). The Commonwealth Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs re-iterated the importance of these goals in a paper delivered to the Curriculum Corporation 6th National Conference in May 1999, stating that he had asked all state and territory education ministers to ‘reaffirm Indigenous education as an urgent national priority’ (Kemp, 1999: 10) and outlining strategies the various education providers might use to demonstrate their commitment to that priority. Accepting his argument that the Government’s vision was based on the ‘principles of diversity and choice’ (1999: 11), it could be assumed that the government supported notions of Indigenous self-determination in terms of students making decisions about their tertiary studies.

Significantly, the term ‘Indigenous education’ is in itself an issue, for Indigenous educators perceive this to be an on-going cause of confusion within the education community. Briefly, Indigenous education can mean:

- Education which relates to the education of Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students in terms of inclusiveness or appropriateness of overall curriculum content, and strategies that take into account students’ cultural and language backgrounds; and

- Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, which are studies for all students about Aboriginal societies and Torres Strait Islander societies.
In relation to this research, there are two relevant policies: the 1988 *Higher Education, A Policy Statement*, which provides the framework for program development within the higher education sector, and the 1989 *National Aboriginal Education Policy* (NAEP later NATSIEP), which provides specific guidelines about education for Indigenous Australians. The 1988 policy focuses on the themes of quality and diversity and outlines the Commonwealth Government's position on how Australian higher education institutions should accommodate the needs of a multicultural society. The critical aspect of this policy, within the context of this study, is its articulation of the responsibility universities have to play a leading role in addressing the need for 'changes in attitudes, practices and processes' (Dawkins, 1987: iii). Weir, in suggesting that this policy reflects a conceptual shift on the part of government, cites Markus' argument that there was a change from 'life style to life chances' (Weir, 2001: 35). Luke's argument of the need for educational institutions to address the issue of sharing cultural capital as a means of enabling Indigenous Australians to achieve more equitable access to Australian society and power structures (2000) would appear to support Weir's argument.

Relating cultural capital to the contemporary location of Indigenous peoples in higher education is worthy of consideration, especially within the context of Bourdieu's linking it with the way in which the uneven distribution of economic capital reflects class structures within the wider society (1986). If, as Cox interprets Bourdieu, cultural capital "is the know-how we have that allows us to operate effectively" (2000: 1), then the educational policies and practices discussed in this chapter, clearly indicate that our educational institutions have, to date, failed to ensure that the cultural capital of the dominant culture, especially in relation to literacy and social competence, has not been equitably shared between all students. While Frow (1996) might dispute Bourdieu's arguments regarding the existence of a dominant culture in contemporary society, the continuing concerns of Indigenous parents that their children were not receiving an equitable education, an education that enabled them to interpret the cultural codes of the educational programs in which they participated, has, in recent years, been increasingly documented by Indigenous educators, such as Tripony, Herbert, Bourke, Nakata, Dudgeon, Lane, Price and Anderson. If education is to remain relevant, then the importance of cultural capital, cannot be overlooked, as indicated in the work of The New London Group during the past decade, for, as argued by Kalantzis and
Cope, educators must address pluralism in order to ensure all students have “access to work and public participation” (2000: 147).

The strategies outlined for achieving national equity objectives were outlined in the document *A Fair Chance For All: National and Institutional Planning for Equity in Higher Education, a Discussion Paper* (DEET, 1990; Hester, 1994: 95–113). While there was much rhetoric during the early 1990s about the need to address issues of equity in universities, the concluding statement in a DEET paper entitled ‘Equity in Higher Education, A Summary Report’, seems somewhat ominous:

The next challenge is to look at ways to assess and measure the success of the participation of disadvantaged students. There is clearly little value in encouraging disadvantaged students to participate in higher education if they are not adequately prepared and supported so that successful outcomes can be achieved in terms of graduation and labour market participation (1993: 15).

The statement, that disadvantaged students without adequate levels of educational skills should not be participating in higher education, would seem to contradict the purpose of implementing strategies designed to address previous educational disadvantage within higher education institutions. In 1994, Martin identified Indigenous Australians as one of the six equity groups (Martin, 1994: 5–6) based on their low participation rates in tertiary education and it was envisaged that, with special provisions, people from such equity groups might be encouraged to come to the university, with the ultimate goal of achieving more equitable educational outcomes for all Australians.

Hester argued there was a need to understand what disadvantage constitutes within the context of educational service provision. For example, it may be that students must cope with ongoing and permanent disadvantage in their overall life, or it may mean that students are disadvantaged in terms of their capacity to access tertiary education, usually related to their previous educational experience. In order to highlight the need to cater for the range of disadvantage experienced within a society, he cited MacNamee’s 1993 argument, “[i]f, in any society, there is a group of people easily identifiable, for example, by racial type, who are grossly disadvantaged, simply to increase their opportunities of access to tertiary education is not enough” (Hester, 1994: 113). Hester asserts that, in some situations, it will be necessary to implement affirmative action strategies, such as introducing quotas and providing sufficient access programs and ongoing financial resources, to redress the
disadvantage suffered. While acknowledging the financial, personal and societal costs involved in such action, that have become evident in the USA, he suggests that there is a need to maintain the funding for special programs that cater for the learning needs of Indigenous Australian students, despite the fact that 'no system currently operating is likely to make any dramatic short-term impact on the well-attested socio-economic imbalances at Australian universities' (Hester, 1994: 113).

This may reflect the suggestion made by Foster et al that the 'diminishing salience of the problem of educational inequality in government policymaking... has been accompanied by a decline in the influence of sociological and other research' (Foster, 1996: 1–2), a reality that has meant that, since 1996, the Howard government has targeted funding allocated to Indigenous higher education and, through processes of on-going review and proposed change, have subjected students to a period of considerable uncertainty. As a result, in 2000, the access and participation rates for Indigenous Australian students, as a proportion of their ratio of the wider population, showed a marked decline.

During 1989, the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP later NATSIEP) was endorsed by all governments and implemented on January 1, 1990. Indigenous educators and communities around the country expressed considerable support for this policy, developed out of the recommendations of the 1988 Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force. The NATSIEP, the first policy developed in Australia to specifically address the needs of Indigenous education, established twenty-one long term goals designed to improve access, participation, retention and success rates for Indigenous Australian students across all levels of education. These goals — see Appendix One — were grouped under the four main themes: involvement in decision-making; equality of access to educational services; equity of educational participation; and equitable and appropriate educational outcomes. The NATSIEP presented the argument that a concentrated effort from pre-school through to the universities would ensure the achievement of more equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous Australian students (DEET, 1995: 10–11) and would complement the Aboriginal Economic Development Policy (AEDP) by enabling Indigenous Australians to achieve improved employment rates (Johnston 1991: 8). While the NATSIEP reflected the commitment of the Commonwealth Government at that time toward addressing issues associated with education for Indigenous Australians, it was valuable in that it focused attention on Indigenous education issues and reflected the Higher Education Policy's (1988) focus on equity provision as a means of achieving quality while catering for diversity. While
many educators may not have read the NATSIEP, most have heard of it, for its implementation and subsequent review contributed to raising the profile of Indigenous education across the education community and ensuring that Indigenous students were specifically identified within the annual institutional planning processes (Baldwin, 1991: 41).

In 1993, the Commonwealth Government set up a taskforce to review the NATSIEP across all sectors of education. Significantly, their final report found that "[t]wo principal themes emerge from the evidence presented to the Review — equity and reconciliation".

On the basis of the evidence presented to us we have no doubt that the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have improved over the last five years. More people than ever before are involved in educational decision-making and in the delivery of educational services. More have access to education facilities and participate in education, particularly in the technical and further education (TAFE) and higher education sectors. More use their knowledge and experiences of education to contribute both to their communities and to the wider Australian community (DEET, 1995: 14).

Yet, despite this, there was considerable concern expressed by respondents that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities are not achieving equitable outcomes — culturally, economically, or politically — from their education' (DEET, 1995: 14).

Parallels with the South African experience can be helpful, as Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane demonstrated when commenting on the educational positioning of black Africans in the 1990s.

I want to reflect on the whole agenda for education in South Africa and what I want to describe as cultural transformation. The education and training system under Apartheid resulted in the destruction, distortion and neglect of South Africa's human potential with devastating consequences for social and economic development. Apartheid education in particular produced fierce resistance among its recipients and the side effect was to undermine the culture of learning among disadvantaged and oppressed groups nationally. It also undermined any serious education among privileged groups as well, because what happened was both mis-education as well as outrageous programming masquerading as education (1995: 1).
When considered within the context of the long term impact of colonialism, the similarities are obvious. Australian higher education statistics reveal steady, though limited, growth in access and participation during the 1990s, a fact that Indigenous educators perceive as testament to the enduring qualities of perseverance and strength amongst Indigenous Australians, many of whom made considerable progress on their personal journey of education, in a very short period of time. Simultaneously, however, the statistics reveal retention and success rates that demonstrate the failure of the higher education sector to provide an education that meets the needs of the majority of Indigenous Australians; a sector that has not developed a culture of learning amongst an oppressed minority. Such failure could be attributed to ignorance within the sector or may be the direct outcome of government policies that reflect internal colonisation.

McConaghy cites Welch’s (1996) explanation of ‘internal colonisation’ (2000: 226), as what happens when a nation fails to become independent of those who colonised it, hence its people continue to be dominated. The important difference in relation to internal colonisation is that ‘both colonisers and colonised occupy the same territory’ (Welch, 1996: 34) and, according to Wolpe (1975) cited in Welch, the dominant culture continues to use ‘the same mechanisms of cultural domination, political oppression, and economic exploitation’ (1996: 34) to foster dependency. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report (2000) recognised this reality in examining the way in which structural violence was used in Australia as a tool of dispossession to achieve subordination and dependency. Most importantly, this report argues that the outcomes of colonisation, the inequalities and the dependency, continue, in part, because the long-term oppressed have come to ‘accept and adopt the identity, values, the beliefs and behaviours of their oppressors, or worse, are torn between the oppressor’s world and their own’ (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Taskforce, 2000: 56–7). Internal colonisation may explain the phenomenon, outlined in the introduction, where Indigenous people working in schools assume the behaviours of the dominant culture, eg. ‘teacher talk’ and subsequently appear to lose their capacity to provide an effective advocacy for Indigenous students.

Following the completion of the NATSIEP Review, MCEETYA established a Taskforce to develop a National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1996–2002, in which the twenty one goals of the NATSIEP were re-aggregated into eight priority areas — see Appendix Two — in accordance with the goals of the NATSIEP
(1996: 1–2). Thus, Indigenous education was identified as a priority for Commonwealth and State/Territory Departments of Education in 1996 and IESIP funded Strategic Results Projects focused on the need to achieve educational equity for Indigenous students.

The Commonwealth Government’s continuing prioritisation of Indigenous education resulted in the implementation of the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS), 2000–2004. This strategy defines six key elements to be addressed in order to enable Indigenous students to achieve English literacy and numeracy at levels comparable to those achieved by other Australians. The success of this strategy, which attempts to address the concerns outlined by Schwab regarding the limited resources and the lack of rigour attached to the delivery and evaluation of earlier programs designed to address Indigenous literacy (1999: 34), will depend upon the level of co-operation between ‘Commonwealth, State, Territory and local governments and communities’ (Department of Education, 2000: 27–8).

While the Commonwealth Government argues that this strategy has been designed to ‘close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children’ (Kemp, 2001: 1), it is worth considering the underlying intent of such a claim, given the elements that are to be addressed through the NIELNS. Over half of the elements being targeted — absenteeism, conductive hearing loss and other barriers to learning, and the provision of preschool opportunities — have been targeted for the past two decades and closely resemble issues previously identified as deficits. There is a sense of déjà vu — of Indigenous peoples simply getting more of the same. Furthermore, within the context of Osborne’s work on culturally responsive pedagogy, it is worth noting that the strategy articulates one of its aims as the need to ‘ensure teachers use the most effective, culturally appropriate teaching methods’ (Department of Education, 2000: 27). Osborne, however, suggests that:

... culturally appropriate teaching (Au and Jordan, 1981) — has the connotation of something being proper or correct. This implies that we know the right adjustments to make, that there is no subsequent room for modification/improvement. So, it is perhaps too powerful in its connotation for our purposes, given our lack of knowledge of the range of cultural differences (Osborne, 2001: 59).

From this perspective, it could be argued that culturally appropriate teaching seems not to have permeated all learning environments and that it is unrealistic to strive for such goals as
they are likely to remain unachievable without a concerted effort on the part of all systems to re-educate classroom teachers and universities to educate pre-service teachers in dealing with diversity in the classroom. These are critical concerns when considered within the overarching framework of *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* (1999) and, in particular, the social justice goals of this declaration.

In establishing the need for education that addresses both the education of Indigenous Australian students as well as the education of all students about Indigenous Australian cultures, societies and issues, members of MCEETYA have endeavoured to provide educational providers with clear directions regarding how to effectively prepare students as citizens of the future. However, the real dilemma may be the degree to which social justice is achievable in a society where successive governments ignore the continuing impact of their country’s racist culture upon specific groups within the society.

**1.4: Socio-cultural issues that impact upon Indigenous education**

At a 1999 conference, Geraldine Atkinson, President of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, called for a ‘relentless approach to improving outcomes for Indigenous students’, stressing the importance of partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups at all levels of education to ensure students ‘become engaged in, as well as challenged by schooling’ (1999: 40). Kevin Bromley, Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People’s Training Advisory Council, argued ‘there is a need for greater synergy in Indigenous education through the development of “equal partnerships”’ (1999: 46). Such demands imply that the goals of the 1990 NATSIEP, to achieve broad equity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by the year 2000, and the objectives of the various strategies that have followed the implementation of the NATSIEP, have not been achieved in the new century. This reality is reflected in the Report of the MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education (2000) which states that:

...the break-up of Indigenous families and communities, the loss of Indigenous cultures, the demise of many languages, racial harassment, violence and the impact of a culturally exclusive school curriculum have each contributed to the lack of interest and distrust of many Indigenous communities towards education. Furthermore, these factors have entrenched poor educational outcomes as an expectation for Indigenous peoples.
So what was meant by the term ‘equity’? Did Indigenous educators misread the Commonwealth Government’s real commitment to equity, for it would appear that offering equitable access to higher education was only ever intended to provide a very brief window of opportunity. As Marginson points out, ‘[t]he right to an equal start now became reduced simply to the right to enter the race’ (1997: 197), reflecting the shift in thinking that commitment to social justice had to become more pragmatic in its approach. Increasingly, under Dawkins, the politicisation of education policy led to the marginalisation of equity. This marked the emergence of the trend to use education as a tool of the economy in what Dudley and Vidovich term the ‘national interest’ (1995: 129).

The impact of such a shift in government thinking may well have contributed to the high level of concern about equity expressed by Indigenous respondents to the NATSIEP Review and the diversity of respondents’ opinions resulted in the inclusion of a summary of the perspectives in their report. Some respondents related equity to the achievement of goals that were considered desirable within ‘mainstream’ education (DEET, 1995: 14), thus arguing for an integrationist model in which individuals would need to change to fit themselves, as learners, to the requirements of mainstream programs. Others recognised the impact of past educational inequities suffered by Indigenous Australians and emphasised the importance of valuing diversity and providing Indigenous Australians with ‘opportunities for involvement in decision making, access, participation and quality of outcomes from education which are no less favourable than those for other Australians’ (DEET, 1995: 15). The proposed model sought to address different learning needs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, stating that ‘[e]quity is not just about the relative parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, it is also about achieving reasonable outcomes which are relevant to the individual students’ (DEET, 1995: 16). And, finally, equity was also perceived to be recognition that different outcomes are appropriate. This perspective is particularly important in the context of higher education for it argues ‘a more contextualised view of equity as “equality of regard”’ (DEET, 1995: 17), that recognises the specific learning needs of individuals and groups.

Hence, the MCEETYA Taskforce in December, 1995, argued that, in the interests of achieving equity, an outcomes focus in education and training was required, with outcomes to be related to culturally inclusive education, attendance targets, school retention and
completion rates. These are critical factors when considered in the context of the impact classroom teachers have through the use of pedagogical practices that ‘accomplish the age old purpose of enforcing the hidden curriculum of subjugating poor and minority children’ (Gee, 2001: 85), thus constructing ‘different people’, often related to the social class from which the children come (Gee, 2001: 89). In 1995, Kalantzis spoke out concerning the urgent need to address the issue of diversity within Australian society, arguing that the process of globalisation had made the management of diversity a critical issue because ‘no government can represent the interests of all Australians unless it pays critical attention to issues of the lifeworld. It must devote a part of its energies to imagining ways of ensuring cohesive sociality and the equitable distribution of resources and services in the context of diversity’ (1995: 32). There is a strong resonance between these arguments and those concerning the need for culturally affirmative learning environments that make a positive contribution toward the individual student’s sense of identity for, as Kalantzis points out, the ‘perennial struggle for access to wealth, power, and symbols of recognition is increasingly articulated through the discourse of identity and recognition’ (cited in The New London Group, 2000: 14).

The issue of ‘identity’ and its perceived importance in relation to Indigenous performance has emerged in various contexts within this chapter, primarily to demonstrate how, since the colonial era, it has been used as a tool of oppression. Ironically, it may now serve to enhance Indigenous students’ capacity to succeed in the new world order because Indigenous Australians have, over decades, been made aware of their difference and had to develop strategies that enabled them to cope with difference and to operate within a diversity of lifestyles. It could be argued that they do have the necessary life experience to deal with a curriculum that focuses on ‘diversity as a core cultural competence’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000: 12). Yet, to date, the literature seems to be suggesting that many Indigenous students have been denied access to such curriculum within their learning environments. There is a need for vigilance on the part of those who desire to see an end to racial oppression and want to guard against the ‘covert censorship’ that renders cultural criticism ineffectual, hooks argues (1990: 11). While there have always been black writers engaging in cultural critiques, the way this ‘has been constituted as a new field of discourse in the academy tends to overlook these contributions or, when they are recognized, they tend to be devalued’ (1990: 11). In suggesting that many people in today’s world are trapped in an endless state of not knowing what it is they want, hooks implies that these ‘yearnings’ are linked to ‘the longing— for liberation — the freedom to control one’s destiny’ (1990: 12). She raises the possibility
of the ‘shared space and feeling of “yearning”’ becoming the site for meaningful discourse between those who share ‘a concern for transforming oppressive structures of domination’ (hooks, 1990: 12). Similarly, Bird Rose, in describing her time with Aboriginal people in the field, said: ‘I am led into a world of connection and responsibility . . . Care of one’s country, one’s people, one’s Dreaming sites, and one’s non-human countrymen are just some of the actions which people engage in as part of living powerfully in the world . . . ’ (1998: 34). This implies an overwhelming sense of the power that emanates from people living harmoniously and responsibly within their environment. Such insights into the potential of cross-cultural interaction pose serious questions for universities. Significantly, Dudgeon et al warn that ‘we need to be careful that claims made in terms of the “common good” do not become a justification for silencing voices of groups that are only just starting to be heard’ (1998: 5) and Hughes asserts that the time for running ‘Indigenous projects . . . [as] optional extras, or nice things to be doing’ has passed, and that Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups must now work together to bring Indigenous perspectives into the mainstream education programs and Indigenous ways of doing things into the organisational structures of the institutions — the focus ‘should be on the universal development of comprehensive programs’ (1999: 39). Walker refers to the importance of addressing the cross-cultural issues by stating that:

> Universities have an important role to ensure all students have the opportunity in their professional and everyday lives to develop an international outlook and cross-cultural awareness and to develop a greater understanding and capacity to more confidently and competently embrace the changing face of Australia as a global society (1997: 6).

Such arguments would appear to be reinforced by Hunter and Schwab’s contention that:

> While education may be power, there appears to be several psychological prerequisites for people who want to avail themselves of that power. Two psychological hurdles for indigenous people are that they both understand and feel at home with the culture of the mainstream society and feel able to partake in the material benefits of that culture (1998: 15).

In the context of this study, there is a need to consider how universities, at the ‘macro level’, connect and maximise opportunities with Indigenous students at the ‘micro level’ in ways that will enhance Indigenous self-empowerment and enable individuals to overcome those ‘psychological hurdles’ (Hunter, 1998: 15).
Paternalism is often justified on the basis that people need to be protected from the harm they might bring upon themselves as a result of their own behaviour. There is usually an implication that such individuals do not have the understanding of the situation or the relevant expertise to anticipate the possible consequences of their behaviour. Campbell and Whitmore, cite John Stuart Mill's famous essay 'On Liberty', and the argument that 'every member of society in the maturity of his faculties must be presumed to be the best judge of his own interests' (Campbell, 1973: 6). While there are those who would argue that paternalism suggests a person who is caring about what happens to others, many Indigenous Australians would strongly disagree with such an interpretation, for, during the past two centuries, they have been repeatedly subjected to the version of paternalism 'which discounts what people want and which justifies social restraints in terms of what people ought to want, what ought to satisfy them, what is for their own good irrespective of how they see their good' (Campbell, 1973: 8). The consequences of such long-term thinking within Australian society has serious implications for the capacity of Indigenous students to exercise their right to choice in relation to their higher education. Bempechat contends that due to decades of educational theorising and implementing numerous 'intervention' programs (1998: 4) most educators now know a great deal more about 'the factors that foster under-achievement and school failure than those that contribute to academic success in poor and minority children' (1998: 4). She suggests that education has come to 'a crossroads' (1998: 4) in this respect. Recent research recommends that the most effective way to gain an understanding of academic success amongst students from minority groups or impoverished backgrounds is to study poor or minority group students who appear to be high achievers (Bempechat, 1998: 1–11); McGinty, 1999: 1–16). Both Bempechat and McGinty reveal the importance of teachers understanding diversity if they are to effectively teach students from different backgrounds. In fact, McGinty is quite explicit in stating that she places herself 'among the growing band of researchers who want to give voice to those who do not perceive themselves as belonging to the mainstream of society, those on the margins' (1999: 15). While acknowledgement of the existence of such voices might be seen as markers of change, the critical aspect of their role is that these researchers have contributed to the creation of a space in which those marginal voices might more effectively speak for themselves. And there is no doubt that Indigenous peoples are beginning to speak for themselves, through their research and writing. People such as Ray Barnhardt, Linda Tuhitiwai Smith, Graham Hingangaroa Smith, Kowagel, Penny Tripcony, Lillian Holt, Marcia Langton, Martin Nakata, Pat Dudgeon, Lester Irabinna Rigney and a growing
number of others, have become powerful voices for their people. And publications such as
the Curtin Indigenous Research Centre (CIRC) series provide an avenue for Indigenous
academics and community members to report on their research activities in ways that clearly
demonstrate Indigenous success in higher education. These Indigenous writers are engaging
in the discourse in their own right, taking up the challenge to move Indigenous knowledge
from the margins into the mainstream of public debate concerning Indigenous involvement
in higher education. Seeking to make a significant contribution to the field of Indigenous
higher education, editors of the CIRC series have encouraged authors to present information
in a way that allows Indigenous Australian cultures to emerge or, as Dudgeon *et al* state:

\[\ldots\] we seek to minimise the influence of the 'master narratives' — the theories
and perspectives of non-Aboriginal academics — which tend to dominate
writing in books such as this. We claim the right to speak in our own voice, to
have that voice accepted as legitimate and authentic, and, in the process, to
minimise the likelihood that our experience will be colonised by other
interpretations of our own experience (Dudgeon, 1997: 1-2).

Such an approach emphasises the need for Indigenous Australians to present knowledge in
their own way. For example, Dudgeon, Grogan and Oxenham contributed by establishing
the socio-historical context of how they came to be located as they were within Australian
society, and then explored their success as Aboriginal women in academia through the use of
their personal life stories. The subsequent weaving of their personal and professional lives
into the fabric of their shared colonial experiences as Aboriginal peoples reveals how they
developed the combined strength that was required to build an effective Indigenous unit
within a university dedicated to reproducing the cultural capital of western societies. Their
use of the genre of story-telling enabled them to acknowledge their identity as Aboriginal
people, while revealing the importance of the cultural values and beliefs that underpin the
way in which they operate as Aboriginal people. In demanding their rights as Indigenous
Australian scholars to make their own decisions about how to say what they want to say,
they have sent a powerful message to other Indigenous scholars about the importance of
coming to terms with and accepting their own difference. Those universities with a genuine
desire to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students must 'create a learning
environment that truly operates from an Aboriginal reality rather than from a modified non-
Aboriginal construct' (Dudgeon, 1997: 22). Indigenous peoples need to operate within an
holistic framework that acknowledges the importance of the Indigenous worldview. Arguing
the importance of Aboriginal autonomy in relation to contemporary identity, Coombs (1994)
used a paper presented by Patrick Dodson in 1990 in his role as a Commissioner in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Speaking about the importance of understanding how Aboriginal people had been socialised, Dodson said:

These socialisation processes are comprehensive and coherent, involve every activity of the group and are geared to the lifestyle needs and purposes of its members. They are not separated and devolved upon particular members of the group, or delegated to external authority. This close integration of the educational process with the life of the group meant that when the circumstances of the group are radically changed, the pattern of those processes adapts slowly (cited in Coombs, 1994: 66).

Further evidence that Indigenous Australian scholars are taking the initiative and making their own decisions about how to say what they want to say, was also demonstrated in an address delivered by Ken Wyatt, the Director of Aboriginal Education in the Education Department in Western Australia, when opening the 2000 Australian Indigenous Education Conference with a paper entitled ‘A Fateful Expedition or a Journey for Life’. In this Wyatt stated: ‘Let me tell you about my experiences of childhood and education and the effect it had on me and my involvement in Indigenous Education’ (1998: 1). He went on to weave his personal life history into his professional life, explaining that his ‘particular and unique characteristics’ had been developed through his ‘cultural socialisation process’ (Wyatt, 1998: 16). The storytelling genre enabled this successful Aboriginal man to demonstrate how coming to terms with his own difference underpinned his vision for the future of Indigenous education and allowed him to develop the commitment he needed to ensure his success.

Roberts used the same approach in developing her Keynote address entitled ‘Educatign for Creativity and Difference’ to the 1999 AARE Conference. In introducing her paper, she said:

To describe the Minimbah story, I’d like to invite you to walk with me through some of my personal history. As we walk, we will step through seven stages in my story of Learning and Education. . . (1999: 1).

In adopting an approach that made the sharing of their histories a focal point of their presentation, each of these Aboriginal scholars have demonstrated the value of using a sociohistorical framework in considering Indigenous success. Accepting the importance of
working from within that socio-historical framework clarifies the socio-cultural issues that all too often become the barriers to Indigenous academic achievement and makes it easier to understand why reconciliation emerged as the other principal theme from the NATSIEP Review. In arguing that Indigenous Australians have broken through what Stanner referred to as the ‘Great Australian Silence’, Pearson claims ‘[p]roper reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is fundamental if we are going to ensure that our future will not be as members of a nation of strangers’ (1995: 5). While indicating that there is still much to be done before Indigenous Australians are properly incorporated into the ‘economic and social life of the nation’ (1995: 5), Pearson suggests there have been ‘seminal moments’ that have helped Australians, in general, to make considerable progress towards reconciliation.

The reconciliation process was set up by the Hawke Labor Government in 1991 for the purpose of bringing white and black Australians closer together. Legislation was put in place in an attempt to obtain:

\[
\ldots \text{ an ongoing national commitment from governments at all levels to cooperate and coordinate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission as appropriate to address progressive Aboriginal disadvantage and aspirations in relation to land, housing, law, justice, cultural heritage, education, employment, health, infrastructure, economic development and other matters in the decade leading to the centenary of Federation, 2001 (DEET, 1995: 18).}
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As the official ten-year statutory reconciliation process is now over, it is timely to consider what was achieved in this country. Reflecting upon recent developments in the reconciliation process of other countries such as the USA, Canada and South Africa, it would appear to require ‘\ldots three components: acknowledgment of past wrongs; an official apology; and, significant compensation for past wrongs’ (Bourke, 1998: 53). While there has been considerable public acknowledgment of past wrongs, accompanied by apologies to Indigenous Australians by members of the Reconciliation Council and other prominent Australians such as the Governor-General, some State premiers, Government Ministers, Church Leaders, Judges and Magistrates, and so on, the Federal Government under the leadership of John Howard appears to be unable to commit itself to making a formal and public apology. It could be assumed that, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, they do believe many Australians have adopted a ‘“black armband view” of the past’ (Stratton, 1998: 122; Hall, 1998: 1) and that Aboriginal people who were removed from their families
really were better off for the experience. Or is it, as Hall suggests, that the:

...slogan 'black armband', originated by the historian and polemicist Geoffrey Blainey and repeated like a mantra by John Howard, is loaded with layers of meaning. There is, the phrase implies, something weak about the black armband people, something wimpish; there is something intellectually implausible about them. The historian who knows all about the past, gives the black armband people a bad mark, and fails them... you are either for it or against it — or you run away overwhelmed by the authority of the professor and the Prime Minister (1998: 1).

Reynolds suggests that 'Australians have difficulty with the idea of treaties with Indigenous people' (Reynolds, 1998: 5). This may be a reflection of racist attitudes embedded in the Australian psyche, or a demonstration of the reluctance of governments ideologically tied to economic rationalism, faced with the reality that they may have to make 'significant compensation for past wrongs' (Bourke, 1998: 53). Such issues have yet to be dealt with in Australia and, whilst there is no denying that this is a complex issue, it would seem that the reconciliation process will not be satisfactorily closed until the political debate has occurred. McGregor suggests that 'Howard's Government remains stuck in a state of denial — they refuse to believe, to accept, and yes, to 'own' the past — and the present... it is logical that such an acknowledgment will require an apology, and not only reparations, but also compensation' (McGregor, 1998: 19). Furthermore, he argues that apart from all levels of government, the churches and the education systems were also responsible for what he terms 'ideological oppression' (McGregor, 1998: 19). Bourke and Bourke suggest that a 'weakness of the Australian reconciliation process is that there appears no plan to handle the difficult topic of compensation for prior wrongs. Perhaps it is presumed that indigenous people are to be reconciled to their fate' (Bourke, 1998: 54).

In the interests of social justice for Indigenous Australians, then, it would appear that the onus is on the education systems, particularly universities, those arbiters of human rights, to demonstrate their commitment to the reconciliation process. The number of people who walked in Corroboree 2000 throughout Australia would seem to suggest that the time for the political debate is here. What better time for all universities to demonstrate leadership, to engage with their communities, to inform and progress the debate. In doing so, it should be recognised that there will be Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians who favour reconciliation just as there will be those who do not (Foley, 1999).
Dudgeon et al argue that ‘[r]econciliation must be seen within the demographic, socio-historical and political context of the uniqueness of the experience of Aboriginal people in this country’ (Dudgeon, 1997: 2), as it is a part of the ‘international and Australian social and legal framework that is developing to protect, respect, resource and work with the ways of life of Indigenous people everywhere, including Australia’ (Dudgeon, 1997: 3). Furthermore, they explicitly state that reconciliation does not mean ‘to reconcile to a position of injustice, to accept and acquiesce to an ongoing state of inequality/oppression/marginalisation/poverty and powerlessness’ (Dudgeon, 1997: 6), pointing out that while racism would appear to remain the major barrier to reconciliation in Australia, there is also a need to recognise the ‘pervasive and unrelenting persistence of the invasion of Aboriginal Australia’ (Dudgeon, 1997: 8) and the associated complexity of its impact. Hence, they indicate that implicit in the notion of reconciliation in Australia is an acceptance that the process must deal with the need to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous and Indigenous to Indigenous. The research undertaken by Dudgeon et al in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while directed toward the discipline of psychology, has, through its focus on the importance of Indigenous self-determination and its emphasis on the need to acknowledge Indigenous rights, important ramifications for Indigenous participation across all disciplines of the academe. In highlighting the centrality of human rights in any framework developed to achieve reconciliation, they draw attention to the responsibility universities must assume in taking an active role in the reconciliation process. The need for such an initiative is clearly demonstrated in the NATSIEP Review Committee’s revelation that respondents made continual reference to the concept of ‘respect’ which they argued as:

... giving people equal respect requires acknowledging and respecting what makes them different. This requires thinking not in ‘either/or’ terms, but in terms of ‘both/and’. It means rejecting the notion that equity can be achieved only within existing ‘mainstream’ ideas about the nature and purpose of education. It requires an acceptance of a broader conception of social justice that can accommodate differences of aspiration, experiences and culture of all Australians (DEET, 1995: 18-9).

The committee indicated that, in developing their report, they had ‘focused on the equity agenda created by previous disadvantage and the self-determination agenda created by future aspirations. Both aspects require urgent action in order to lay the foundations for the process of reconciliation’ (DEET, 1995: 19).
During the past decade, Australian universities have been particularly challenged to adapt their policies and practices to reflect the national priorities to respect cultural diversity and achieve national cohesion. Pearson argues that our development as a nation must embrace the principal of equality while respecting difference within the context of 'race, culture, religion, sex or sexual preference' (1995: 7) and is reminiscent of the call for an 'equality of regard' that emerged from the NATSIEP Review (DEET, 1995: 17). As Walker (2000) found in her study into Indigenous academic success, universities have a responsibility to assume a leadership role in affecting the change that is needed to improve Indigenous educational outcomes. It remains to be seen whether Australian universities have the capacity to meet that challenge.

1.5: Defining success

The concept of what constitutes 'success' is not a simple one to define. In fact, few writers actually explore or attempt to define the concept.

In the 1999 *Solid English* curriculum materials, produced as a result of a collaboration between the Education Department of Western Australia and the Centre for Applied Language Research at Edith Cowan University, the concept of success is raised but not defined.

Teachers in schools with a large proportion of Aboriginal students have observed that their most successful Aboriginal students tend to be those whose parents regularly attended school during their own childhood. Such generational continuity appears to be a factor in school success (Australia, 1999: 16).

Similarly, Lane implies but does not specify success when she points out that '[e]very year sees graduates in entirely new fields' and 'across Australia, Indigenous leaders and spokespeople now tend to be graduates' (1998: 27). McFadden et al argue that there are 'questions around whether there are cultural prices to pay for continued engagement and perhaps success in the *whitefella* world of education and what success in education has to offer' (1999: 16). Harkin says that, within universities, '[t]o argue, confront and debate is the valued way of operating which leads to success' (1998: 67), implying that, in this sense, universities are unfair to their Indigenous students as this is an alien way of operating for many of them. She reveals that many individuals come to realise that there is a price to pay, in a cultural sense, for achieving success in higher education. Significantly, Harkin
acknowledges the ‘increasingly competitive and economic rationalist approach to higher education’ (1998: 66) adopted by Australian Governments, implying statistical evidence relating to Indigenous involvement in higher education highlights the complexity of the issue. She asserts that ‘blame’ should not be apportioned either to the Indigenous Support Unit or the Indigenous students for ‘[ l]ow success rates by Indigenous students should surely indicate the need for increased funding and resources’ (1998: 66).

Malone, in seeking to define success for Indigenous students enrolled in higher education, suggests that this is a complex issue because it is linked to the requirements of the funding bodies and, hence, is not necessarily reflective of that which is valued by the students themselves. Having extrapolated factors that students identified as contributing to their non-completion of higher education programs, Malone concluded that:

The range of experiences was not conducive to success — of the course or the unit. As important was that the student’s definition of success did not fit into the mainstream definition of success — that is, to finish the degree as quickly as possible and get a job (1998: 34).

In considering DETYA’s suggestion that funding for bridging and degree programs should be provided at different rates, Malone referred to Martin’s work on the performance indicators for equity groups, arguing the need for different ways of measuring success for different peoples, pointing out that for Indigenous students:

Some of these students in enabling courses stated that they want to learn new skills to increase their employment opportunities, and others said that they would enter degree courses. Either of these outcomes should be seen as a measure of success and would benefit the community and the nation (1998: 36).

Ellis, while a Master’s student at the University of South Australia, undertook a study of the institutional influences upon Indigenous students participating in higher education. She defined success within the context of ‘successful study’ that is ‘equated with passing subjects and collecting the appropriate parchment at the end of the course’ (1998: 105). Significantly, however, Ellis also argues that:

... success may be measured in other ways. The potential honours student who coasts along and gains passes could be considered a failure when actual and potential achievements are compared. On the other hand a student who gains new skills and confidence while pursuing studies that are given up before any
award is earned may go on to achievements outside the university and be considered ‘successful’ . . . Successful participation can be equated with positive outcomes which may be of various kinds (1998: 105–6).

Ellis’ desire to define success is not new. While the Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force (1988) argued that the use of participation targets had proved to be a useful strategy in encouraging governments to focus on Indigenous education, it was not the only factor that needed to be taken into account in addressing educational inequity. In emphasising the importance of educational outcomes, it stated:

Evidence available on the reasons for low success rates among Aboriginal students, for example, emphasises the gap between schools which reflect the dominant Anglo-Australian culture and the students’ Aboriginal heritage. Aboriginal homes and communities strongly reflect Aboriginal cultures, values and lifestyles. When a school does not recognise these differences, or when a child can find little if any evidence of his or her own cultural background in the school or classroom, learning is impeded (Hughes, 1988: 19).

While this document implies the importance of addressing cultural difference as an essential element in Indigenous success, it appears to condone a definition of success that reflects the traditional Western viewpoint that perceives educational success as purely related to academic outcomes.

African-American academic, bell hooks, argues that, in her experience, ‘students are much more engaged when they are learning how to think critically and analytically by exploring concrete aspects of their reality’ (1990: 6). The assumption here is that black students need to be provided with opportunities to engage in academic or critical debate if they are to develop the capacity they need to hear a diversity of viewpoints.

In recent years, various researchers have undertaken specific projects designed to consider the issue of Indigenous Australian involvement in education with a particular focus on the achievement of effective outcomes (Harslett, 1999: 1–10; Parthington, 1999: 1–13; Parthington, 1997: 1–9; Wyatt, 1998: 1–12) with the emphasis on retention and success rates. However, tying funding to progress and success rates, demonstrates a lack of tolerance for the notion that some individuals may have different expectations of what they want out of higher education. For example, according to Anderson et al, equity initiatives in higher education provide access to an education that is culturally specific and focuses on preparing
people to be more competitive in the 'mainstream', whereas they interpret the NATSIEP Review to have indicated that 'equity should not be only about relative parity but about achieving outcomes more specifically related to the work, cultures and historical circumstances of Indigenous peoples' (Anderson, 1998: 3).

And despite the rhetoric from the Commonwealth Government that their vision is based upon the 'principles of diversity and choice' (Kemp, 1999: 11), what seems to be the real issue here is a question that was raised through the NATSIEP Review.

> Can public educational resources be applied differently to ensure Indigenous peoples have the opportunity both to achieve equitable outcomes and satisfy a right to have education delivered in more culturally appropriate ways? (DEET, 1995: 18).

The actions of the current Government leave little room for negotiating such issues and seems at odds with their espoused stance. Yet, in view of Martin's (1994) contention that it is difficult to establish performance criteria for equity groups, it would seem essential that Indigenous peoples be included in the negotiation process that determines how Indigenous success might be measured in higher education.

The legacy of limited educational opportunity means that many students entering access programs designed to provide them with the skills and understandings they will require to effectively engage in mainstream higher education programs, demonstrate very limited literacy and numeracy skills, despite having progressed through the primary and secondary levels of education. Lane suggests that there has been spectacular outcomes from tertiary support programs over the last fifteen years and attributes her own success in providing effective support programs for Indigenous students to the high level of commitment demonstrated by the University of South Australia to Indigenous higher education (1998: 21).

Other researchers have undertaken studies that focus on Indigenous achievement. These include a group of researchers at the University of Sydney, who conducted a study of students enrolled in the block mode health sciences program at Yoorang Garang, The School for Indigenous Health Studies. This study examined student participation and retention so as 'to refine and develop strategies which promote their academic success' (Farrington, nd: 3). Cobbin et al conducted a longitudinal survey, over the period 1985–1991, of the academic
performance of Aboriginal students at the University of Western Sydney, Nepean, finding that 'as a group, Aboriginal students at UWS Nepean show performance that is at least on par with the general student body. Attrition rates are similar and, even for the short period of the study, graduation rates are favourable' (1993: 96). Bourke et al conducted a study into the factors affecting the performance of Indigenous students at Australian universities in 1996 and, in categorising their student respondents, they identified almost 60% of their sample as successful because they were part of the group that included '14 completed and 34 current continuing students' (Bourke, Burden et al. 1996). Similarly, Walker's 2000 comprehensive study conducted in 'Western Australian universities to identify the reasons for the pervasiveness of lower retention and academic outcomes among Indigenous students' (Walker 2000) uses the notion of success within the DETYA context of a measurement of academic outcomes.

Of course, in recent years, with the advent of such regular events as the World Indigenous Peoples Conference, we have heard much talk of innovative programs established to enable native Americans and native Canadians to achieve success within universities. Ray Barnhardt of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, in a paper delivered to the 1994 Conference of the World Indigenous Peoples, argued the importance of teaching in 'a culturally considerate way' (1994: 1), demonstrating that his university has focused on the cultural needs of the students in order to ensure they enjoy a positive educational experience. Nuloo Yamba, the Indigenous unit at Central Queensland University, used this model as a basis for developing their Indigenous Learning Centre. Eber Hampton, in a paper presented as a part of his PhD requirements at Harvard Graduate School of Education, reasons that:

No aspect of a culture is more vital to its integrity than its means of education. . . I value aspects of my Anglo education and respect its necessity and power in this society, but my deepest values and my view of the world were formed within an Indian culture (1988: 13).


While some researchers are beginning to focus on the issue of success for Indigenous students, it is obvious that to date, this has not been an area of research interest. The current positioning of Indigenous Australian students in Australian universities, compounded by the
decreasing enrolments, would suggest it is time to address this issue. Most educators now acknowledge that we are living in a period of great change and that modern education systems, if they are to meet their responsibilities in terms of effectively preparing people for a global future, must develop the capacity to re-invent themselves in order to cater for the learning needs of their communities for their future viability depends upon it. If, as Kalantzis and Cope argue, '[e]ducation promises individuals a chance in the game of social mobility' (2000: 1), then it could be argued that universities have a particular responsibility to address the needs of the less advantaged for:

As different lifeworlds engage with education, one thing is certain: the process is one of more or less intended transformation . . . The problem is that the transformation by and large works better for some groups of people than it does for others (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000: 1).

In the past education for Indigenous people has been used as the tool of cultural destruction and the literature implies universities have a responsibility to lead the education community in addressing that reality. While that may well be seen as a legitimate role for Australian universities, it remains to be seen whether they are able to 'redress the fundamental premise upon which they are constructed. They must acknowledge their own position of privilege and the ways in which they naturalise selected bodies of knowledge and practice at the expense of other knowledges' (Anderson, 1998: 5). Without such acknowledgement, they will remain unable to understand and empathise with ‘different’ worldviews, hence, will render themselves incapable of affecting change and leading the Australian education community into a future where respect, tolerance and trust ensure equitable education outcomes for all peoples.
Chapter Two
Methodology

2.1: Preparing for the journey

Making choices about the way in which to undertake any research, Smith argues, is a critical process for the researcher (1990: 142) because it involves thinking about the most effective means of arriving at the truth and about how best to protect the subjects of the research while also taking account of the limitations associated with using a particular method. Selecting the research method was a particularly important challenge for this thesis because I needed to find a way to encourage respondents to think about their own education in positive terms; to ask themselves why they were pursuing university studies; and to reflect upon the value they, as individuals, derived from the study process. This was a deliberate strategy, for I was aware that many Indigenous Australian students lacked confidence in their own ability to achieve success, due, in part, to continuing literature reports of their on-going failure (Andrews, 1993: 16–31; Higgins, 1991: 3–20; Guider, 1991: 21–32; Collins, 1993: 3–16).

To determine how best to deal with this sensitive topic, I began with a personal reflection regarding the way in which I had framed my research problem. I wanted to explore aspects of Indigenous success in universities in order to draw out those qualities or conditions that students perceived as having contributed to their success. But, at the same time, I knew through my work over the past two decades, that there can be a resistance toward participating in research projects among many Indigenous Australians. I was also sensitive to the difficulties associated with this research, in particular the notion that “Exploitation involves questions of power” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 113), hence, I spent considerable time thinking about what the student respondents might get out of the study. It is likely that the idea of inviting students to think about and discuss success from various perspectives, their own and others, emerged out of my personal questioning of the ideal of Indigenous self-determination. I wondered to what degree students were influenced by the expectations of others and I was curious about the factors that may have influenced students in making the decision to undertake university studies. I cogitated over the way in which students might make decisions regarding their studies, including aspects such as possible directions, desired destination, choice of subjects, setting priorities, level of commitment and so on. Peshkin (1996: 3) argues that, as your research problem is generally related to your own
subjectivity, it is important to consider it in terms of direction and destination.

What we begin with, typically, is the research direction . . . a direction that has multiple points. Direction covers a lot of territory. By contrast, if I have the destination, then that is a point (Peshkin, 1996: 3).

Thus my direction or the activities I choose to use, such as interviewing respondents to explore Indigenous perceptions of success, collecting statistical data to demonstrate the positioning of Indigenous students within the university and discussing and reading about the use of structural power in universities, in particular the degree to which Indigenous students feel able to access "intellectual power" and "social power" (Northedge, 2003: 22), will enable me to become more informed about whether or not success actually is a matter of choice for Indigenous students. At the same time, I acknowledge that it could be more to do with Smith's suggestion that as Indigenous peoples throughout the world become more vocal in their criticism of Western research, both the ideals and the practices, an alternative story is emerging (2001: 2). Within this context, it could be that my direction may be influenced by another story, our history, for, as Smith argues:

History is also about power. In fact history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others. It is because of this relationship with power that we have been excluded, marginalized and 'Othered'. In this sense history is not important for indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of the 'truth' will not alter the 'fact' that indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to transform history into justice (Smith, 2001: 34).

Yet, Smith (2001) goes on to assert the importance of Indigenous peoples transforming the colonized versions of history as a "part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization" (2001: 34). I align myself with Smith's calls for decolonization methodologies that enable Indigenous peoples to "hold alternative knowledges" and thus find "alternative ways of doing things" (2001: 34). Perhaps it is the impetus of my own success has made me curious to engage in a dialectical relationship that will enable me to uncover alternative knowledges that might enhance my capacity for interpreting other perspectives of Indigenous success within the academy. It may be that the very act of attempting to define the meaning of success will not only clarify the degree to which success might be a matter of choice for many Indigenous higher education students, but could also provide opportunities for
individuals, including myself as researcher, to engage in our own process of decolonization.

2.1.1: Qualitative research

According to Denzin and Lincoln, ‘[q]ualitative research is many things to many people’ (Denzin, 2000: 8) because, essentially, the researcher is concerned with exploring and understanding the social experience of others. Hence they argue:

[q]ualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape the inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin, 2000: 8).

I align myself strongly with the notion that if we want to understand how others feel within specific social situations, then we need to ask them questions that will enable us to learn about both the experience and the way in which they dealt with it, and what they perceived themselves to have gained from it. In this study, where the target group was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, qualitative research with its emphasis on people’s lived experience presented as the most appropriate choice of methodology because it would allow me to draw upon the ‘experiences, ideas, traditions, dreams, interests, aspirations and struggles of Indigenous Australians’ (Rigney, 1996: 4) — those things that Rigney argues should be central to any research that is about Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, as an Aboriginal person, I strongly support Rigney’s contention that, given Australia’s colonial history, it is important that Indigenous Australians engage in research activities with their own people because ‘Indigenous Australians . . . do tend to be more aware and respectful of each other’s cultural traditions’ (Rigney, 1996: 4). I wanted to use an approach that would enable me to demonstrate my respect for the views of the respondents, as it seemed this would be fundamental to the achievement of what Van Manen terms as that ‘certain harmony’ (1990: 2). More importantly, however, I perceived such an approach would allow a space for respondents to make their own choices about the knowledge they wished to share, a critical element in a research agenda that reflects a commitment to the decolonization process that Smith argues “engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels” (2001: 20). In particular, I have aligned myself with Smith’s assertion that:

Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through
and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples (2001: 116).

Enabling people to reflect upon their lived experience is an important element in this process of decolonization for it enables ‘constant shifts’ (Feld, 1996: 93) in the way in which respondents interpret their memories of particular events or situations. Thus, as respondents tell their stories, within a context of focusing on how specific experiences may have impacted upon them, their capacity to attach other meanings to actual events may be expanded to provide deeper insights into important associated relationships.

The choice of a qualitative methodology allowed the construction of a framework of combined Indigenous experiences through which the data would be analysed. I perceived that this approach would not only enhance my capacity to understand the student’s perspective, while investigating a topic that was of considerable interest to me in both a personal and professional sense, but would also enable respondents to feel ‘a part’ of a dynamic decolonization process that would enable them to engage in their own transformation (Smith, 2001: 116-7).

Significantly, Hart and Whatman, cite Lui Jnr’s 1994 argument, that research needs to be recognised as a major contributor to community self-empowerment because it enables people to not only understand their community’s position within the wider global community but also enhances their capacity to effectively deal with the everyday events within their own communities (1998). I align myself with their argument that Indigenous communities need to understand that it is likely that their current situations are underpinned by the status of their health, education and employment. Universities can make an important contribution to those who wish to achieve more positive outcomes in these areas by providing Indigenous students with opportunities to succeed. In arguing that there is a need for Indigenous communities to take a more proactive role in the research process in order to maintain their ‘ownership’ of the knowledge and ensure the use of culturally appropriate protocols, Hart and Whatman state that:

[Qualitative research methodologies, in the form of ethnographic, intrinsic case study, provides a strong rationale for thorough community involvement to ensure the integrity of the research outcomes (1998: 8).]
Glesne and Peshkin suggest that ‘[q]ualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect’ (1992: 1). My life experience informed me that much of the data I was seeking would come in the form of personal stories, used as a tool to relay the individual’s response to the question. Having previously used my effective communication skills to establish a rapport with interviewees, I considered I would have the capacity to ‘make sense’ of the stories that would not only give me the knowledge I needed but would also provide students with ‘access to their own lives in a way that they might not have access otherwise’ (Peshkin, 1996: 6).

I also perceived a strong degree of fit between the way in which many Indigenous Australians share knowledge and develop understandings, and the methods qualitative researchers use in gathering their data. Tripcony, a respected Aboriginal researcher, cites Deborah Bird Rose’s description of her experience with the Yarralin people of Victoria River Downs, to demonstrate the importance to Aboriginal people of ‘story-telling’ as a means of sharing knowledge:

... I went to Yarralin with questions. Frequently I was told stories. Although I was initially unable to perceive many of the subtleties, it became clear that Yarralin people’s stories bring past and present, specific and general, individual and collective into a shared matrix. Stories are told by people who have particular interests with respect to the issues involved; they draw on shared memories and construct continuities between past, present and future, and between the specific and the general (Tripcony, 1996: 9).

Similarly, Richards, Hudson and Lowe, worked with the Walmajarri peoples in the Kimberley region of Western Australia to produce the Book “Out of the Desert”. In this instance, the use of story telling to share knowledge has provided individual rich accounts of the group’s exodus from the desert and revelations of the transition they made, as individuals and a collective, as they re-constructed their lives, for these stories were all “told by people whose lives straddled the traditional and modern world” (Richards et al, 2002: 4).

The recognition that qualitative research is underpinned by a belief that all reality is socially and systemically constructed (Glesne, 1992: 6–7; Denzin, 2000: 8), influenced my decision to use this approach in a study where the intention was to analyse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island student’ perceptions of success in relation to their university studies. My dilemma was how to address the diversity of the Indigenous experience. While there is a
tendency within the wider Australian society (including the academy) to refer to Indigenous Australians as if they constitute an homogenous group, this is not the reality. Indeed Eckernmann et al argue that the:

... pervading stereotype accords the existence of 'true' culture to those Aboriginal groups living a 'traditional lifestyle' but denies it to those who do not... It may equally be true that disciplinary arrogance has relegated research among Aboriginal people in rural-urban areas to a lower level of prestige and acceptability than that accorded to research among 'traditionally-oriented' groups (1992: 101).

Yet, Eckernmann et al, in their discussion of the notion that culture is ever-changing and people deal with this through 'adaptation which has its roots in cultural ecology' (1992: 102), assert that, within this framework, 'people are seen to interact with their social, economic, political and natural environments, to influence decision-making and consequently socio-cultural patterns' (1992: 102). I perceived that the use of a qualitative approach that allowed the researcher to 'become the main research instrument' (Glesne, 1992: 6) sets the stage for a dialectic that enhances the discovery process because it encourages the researched and the researcher to co-operate in investigating the complexities of ever-changing, socially-constructed realities, thus enhancing that 'certain harmony' (Van Manen, 1990: 1-2) that is critical in determining individual perceptions of truth. This aspect of the researcher as research instrument engaging in a dialectic with the researched was an important consideration for me as my purpose was not merely to describe people's experiences but to understand the meaning of those experiences in such a way that I might interpret them — that I might learn from them, for I am mindful of Peshkin’s argument that the worst thing a researcher can do 'is to not be available to be learning all the time' (1996: 8).

Originally, qualitative research emerged as a tool for sociologists and anthropologists to study the "other"... the exotic other, a primitive, nonwhite person from a foreign culture judged to be less civilized than that of the researcher" (Denzin, 2000: 2). For, as Denzin and Lincoln reveal, qualitative researchers, during the traditional period that encompasses the early 1900s to World War II:

... wrote 'objective' colonizing accounts of field experiences that were reflective of the positivist scientist paradigm. They were concerned with offering valid, reliable, and objective interpretations in their writings. The
The answer lies in distinguishing knowing from being. I may be myself but this doesn’t mean that I therefore know myself. Knowing an experience doesn’t just mean having it: it means being able to say what it is (in some broad sense which includes both discursive and non-discursive expressions). Knowledge consists not in the experience itself but in grasping the sense of this experience. For this reason knowledge is not psychic identification but interpretive understanding: knowing ourselves and others is an instance of decoding, classifying, and explicating rather than an instance of psychic union (Fay, 1996: 28).

In acknowledging that qualitative research initially emerged as a means for anthropologists and sociologists to undertake studies of the ‘other’, it must also be recognised that the ability to hear the emic voice is now a focal point of many of the techniques used in qualitative research. This has critical implications for Indigenous Australians in universities for, as argued by various writers (Jordan, 1994: 109–130; Coombs, 1994: 66–75 & 187–198; Rigney, 1999: 1–26; Nakata, 1997), it has not been the Indigenous voice that has directed their positioning in Australia’s educational institutions.

This study was designed to open up a space in which Indigenous Australian respondents
might speak back to non-Indigenous educators, thus becoming a part of the process that is needed to change the discourse about Indigenous Australian student achievement in higher education. This is not something that will be easily achieved, as is obvious in Nakata’s discussion concerning his frustration at reading old anthropological texts such as the Haddon Reports published over a number of decades—1901, 1904, 1907, 1908, 1912, 1935. He suggests that such tasks made him realise that, before Indigenous researchers can achieve change in the way in which research is conducted within the academy, they must first understand the intellectual issues that influenced the way in which non-Indigenous peoples constructed their views of Indigenous communities within an historical context. Nakata warns against complacency in accepting the view that:

... current systems of thinking are not the same as they once were — that the goal of academic inquiry is to challenge, improve, develop and ultimately change thinking, ideas, understanding and knowledge, and that this process has been occurring to the ultimate benefit of Indigenous peoples.

From here, Nakata goes on to say:

... I cannot dispute that changing ways of thinking have led to the improvement of the conditions of many Indigenous people. I would argue, however, that for an indigenous scholarship to develop, the argument does not rest there. The issue for indigenous scholars is one of how to speak back to the knowledges that have formed around what is perceived to be the Indigenous positions in the Western ‘order of things’ (Foucault 1970). This is a crucial point that I have always found difficult to articulate (1998: 2).


Nakata’s argument concerning the importance of creating a space — the interface — in which Indigenous scholars might begin to talk back is re-inforced by the arguments put forward by Roberts et al at the 1999 Umulliko Forum, in exploring notions of ‘interrogating positions, creating spaces and future possibilities’ (1999: 3) as critical aspects of Indigenous knowledge production. This chimes in with Smith’s reference to ‘spaces of marginalisation . . . [that] also become spaces of resistance and hope’ (2001: 4); and Barnhardt’s contention that it is difficult for native Alaskan students to settle into university studies because of their different ways of thinking. Barnhardt uses the ‘ivory tower’ analogy to demonstrate the difference between the knowledge that is valued within the university and ‘other kinds of
knowledge... variously characterised as traditional knowledge, oral knowledge, indigenous knowledge, or practical knowledge, depending on which body of literature you are reading’ (nd: 2).

Who confers this meaning? This is a contentious issue for many Indigenous Australians who, like Nakata, perceive there is a lack of Indigenous scholarship as a result of the way in which Indigenous knowledge has been positioned within the Western canon. Martin also expresses concern about this issue, suggesting that ‘research is an activity that draws upon frameworks, processes and practices of colonial, western worldviews; the knowledges, methods and beliefs of these’ (2001: 3). Again there is an implication that Indigenous Australians have been excluded from the process, especially in terms of establishing the rules. I had concerns of my own about the issue; concerns that emanated out of my recognition and acceptance of the diversity of the Indigenous experience. While acknowledging the importance of Indigenous scholars speaking out and claiming their own space so to speak, I was curious as to how important such positioning might be. I wanted to understand the degree to which their current positioning might impact upon individual Indigenous Australian students enrolled in university courses. How important is it for these students to understand their position within the academy? Is such knowledge an element in achieving success? I sought to collaborate with Indigenous Australian students in an attempt to understand the social process that has contributed to their current positioning within the university and to identify what circumstances in their lives have enabled these students to acquire the capacity for academic inquiry; to engage in a dialogue with non-Indigenous Australians. For, in reflecting upon the contemporary arguments emerging from the works of Indigenous Australian scholars (Roberts, 1999; Martin, 2001; Rigney, 1997; Rigney, 1999; Nakata, 1998), it seemed to me that such a dialogue could be the key to achieving the change that these scholars are struggling to achieve. Such dialogue, in opening up the discourse surrounding Indigenous involvement within Australian universities, would not only raise awareness of the issue but would also alert Indigenous students to the need to engage in a different discourse; one that is of their own making. Furthermore, if, as Indigenous scholars such as Nakata, Smith and Barnhardt argue, effective change cannot occur until Indigenous people begin to talk back to non-Indigenous peoples — correcting assumptions, re-defining beliefs and values, setting their own parameters concerning what is important knowledge — then the use of a qualitative methodology could allow that to happen. Access to Indigenous Australian perceptions and understanding and recognising the importance of contextualising meaning could provide tertiary educators with the potential to better understand what many
continue to see as Indigenous 'failure' to adequately 'perform' within the higher education system. Through this process of 'talking back' and 'listening', both Indigenous students and the people who deliver the teaching programs, would develop an enhanced capacity to 'reconstruct the "world..."' (Guba, 1990: 27) in terms of their own practices and procedures. It may also enable universities in the dawning of a new millennium to reflect upon their place in a modern society; to critically consider their own relevance in terms of their teaching and research programs; and to gauge their capacity to effectively cater for the cultural diversity of their student body. That there is a need for this process to occur is reflected in Bin-Sallik's call for universities to address curriculum content as a means of demonstrating their institutional commitment to the reconciliation process (1991: 53-63).

Finally, from an ethical viewpoint I would argue that qualitative research, based as it is on 'the principles of mutual respect, of noncoercion and nonmanipulation, and of support for democratic values and institutions' (House, 1990: 158), presented as an appropriate choice for this inquiry as it allowed room for respondents to look inwards, to consider their own achievements and to critically reflect upon the university's contribution to the educational process in which they have been engaged. Weir discusses the value of using a method that allowed her student respondents to 'make value judgements about the quality and adequacy of the educational program under investigation' (Weir, 2001: 92) when justifying her choice of Democratic Evaluation as the underlying discourse for her doctoral study into Indigenous 'postgraduate students' perceptions about the quality of their learning experiences' (Weir, 2001: 93). In choosing to use a qualitative approach, she sought to provide her respondents with the space to 'talk back' about the quality of the postgraduate learning experience in which they were involved. From my own perspective, as an Aboriginal researcher, I considered the creation of a democratic relationship with respondents was essential in the building of an effective researcher/researched relationship. I clearly located myself within the investigative process and then invited respondents to engage in the dialectic — to collaborate in the study. In this way I sought to encourage respondents to assume autonomy over their own thinking and decision-making about the knowledge they wished to share. I sought to provide respondents with a process that would enable them to speak out from a position of individual power.

2.1.2: Indigenous methodologies

Personally, as an Aboriginal researcher, choosing the most appropriate methodological
approach to use in this study caused me considerable anxiety. While I had decided to use a qualitative approach for the reasons previously discussed, I was concerned that I should not dilute the respondents’ lived experience in interpreting the data. Engaging in an hermeneutic process enabled me to realise that, in essence, qualitative research would allow me to use ‘a research strategy that privileges my Indigenous experience (along with that of my Indigenous Australian respondents) that can be legitimated in the academy’ (Rigney, 1999: 6). I agree with Smith’s argument that Indigenous peoples must become active participants in the research act if the goals of Indigenous self-determination are to be realised (2001: 125). Hence, I sought to enable Indigenous respondents to engage in the research process in a way that would enable them ‘to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented’ (Smith, 2001: 16) and to gain an understanding of how they, as Indigenous peoples, might use this Western activity to achieve their own goals. I acknowledged the difficulties inherent in this approach that Smith describes as “struggling to make sense of our own world while also attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful” (2001: 39).

I considered the contention that many Indigenous peoples learn through listening, observing, imitating and participating (Boulton-Lewis, 2000: 1–20; Ninnes, 1996; Lave, 1982: 181–187). I reflected upon the importance of that sense of community in ensuring that Indigenous learners feel they are a valued part of the learning community, wherever it is situated (Herbert, 2000: 1–18; Rigney, 1999: 1–26; McTaggart, 1991: 297–325). I acknowledged the need for an approach that enables students to contextualise learning, to understand relationships between bodies of knowledge (Forrest, 2000: 1–11; Whelan, 1995: 1–8; Smith, 2001: 107-122). I acknowledged the need for decolonization and the importance of Indigenous peoples becoming researchers despite the challenges that might confront them in taking up such roles (Smith, 2001: 123-141). I heard Ernie Grant, an Elder of the Jirrbal people in north Queensland, delivering a lecture to a group of our students and talking about the importance of the ‘story-lore’ of his people in passing on knowledge (Grant, 2000). I explored Kawagley and Barnhardt’s ‘indigenous notions of an interdependent universe’ (Kawagley, 1997: 1) and identified with their argument about the importance of having a sense of place. Weir had also explained the importance of Indigenous students (the postgraduate students in her study) establishing their own ‘Sense of Place’ (Weir, 2001: 27) within the academy. In asking myself how Aboriginal Australians establish our space — place — and demonstrate our connections to our place, I realised that it was through story. In thinking about the approach I had used in undertaking previous research projects with
Aboriginal informants, it seemed to me that the most effective method I could use in this study would be one that effectively utilised a ‘storytelling’ style.

Based on this reasoning about the ways in which Aboriginal people share knowledge, I decided that an ethnographic approach would allow me to use techniques that would be suitable, in a cultural sense, for working with Indigenous Australians. I was also cognizant of the fact that adopting an holistic approach would help me to make sense of the various social events outlined by the respondents. For, as Neuman argues:

*e*thnography assumes that people make inferences — that is, go beyond what is explicitly seen or said to what is meant or implied. People display their culture (what people think, ponder believe) through behaviour (e.g. speech, actions) in specific social contexts. Displays of behaviour do not give meaning: rather, meaning is inferred, or someone figures out meaning. Moving from what is heard or observed to what is actually meant is at the center of ethnography (1994:333–4).

Another factor that interested me in this approach was Geertz’ explanation (1973), cited by Schwandt (1990: 266), that ethnography is ‘an interpretive science in search of meaning in contrast to an experimental science in search of law’. In adopting this ‘search of meaning’ stance in analysing the data, I aimed to enhance my own capacity to interpret the meaning of what was going on concerning Indigenous achievement in higher education. The interpretation of lived experience could thus be argued to be a critical factor in the validity of this research. Yet Clandinin and Connelly reveal, in their discussion concerning the validity of using people’s experience as the basis for legitimate academic inquiry, there has been considerable criticism of such approaches. There are those who argue that ‘experience cannot speak for itself and the focus needs to be on the meaning contained in texts and the forms by which they are constructed’ (Clandinin, 1994: 415). I would argue that the written text is not the only source of reality or truth. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity’s *Bringing Them Home Report* revealed the treatment that was meted out to Indigenous Australians during the colonial and post colonial periods and explained the fact that ‘[m]any relevant files have been lost or destroyed’ (Commission, 1997). Hence, the inquiry’s use of a qualitative methodology that enabled the researchers to access verbal accounts of individual’s personal experiences clearly demonstrated the reality that this is sometimes the only relevant record of the past. The legitimacy of this argument is clearly supported by the attempts of various bodies during the past decade to consult with Indigenous Australians and
record their stories of their life experiences. Hence, the *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity's *Bringing Them Home Report* have made a considerable contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the way in which the colonial policies and practices of the past have impacted upon people's lives and may continue to influence the way in which people live their lives today. Pearl Duncan, an Aboriginal teacher who graduated from Sydney Teachers' College in 1951, argued that 'it is necessary to study the past, because we are all products of our past' (White, 1985: 53). My dilemma was to do with the notion of how important is the past in terms of this particular inquiry into Indigenous academic achievement?

In recent years, various writers (Reynolds, 1987 & 1990; McGrath, 1995; Read, 1999; Kidd, 1997; Haebich, 2000; Elder, 1992) have re-written Australia's history to more clearly demonstrate the violence of the invasion and the utter despair of the dispossession upon Indigenous Australians. Many Australians have finally begun to comprehend the devastation that has been wrought by colonial practices such as 'forced family disintegration' (Read, 1999: 171) and the post colonial policies of 'segregation' and 'assimilation' (Commission, 1997: 250). In addition to the work of non-Indigenous writers, there has been an increasing number of Indigenous academics such as Mudrooroo, Morgan, Fourmile and Huggins contending that it is time other Australians listened and learnt from those past experiences. These writers have discussed various concerns that highlight the negative aspects of the historical representation of Indigenous Australians and provide valuable insights into the need to re-visit the past as a critical component in achieving decolonization and, through such opening of minds, enhance the inclusivity of educational programs and practices.

Mudrooroo refers to the practice of ignoring Indigenous Australians when he reveals that the Western Australian Department of Education, in planning a new Indigenous Studies course for Western Australian schools in 1993, invited 'Nyangars, Yamadjis and members of other Indigenous groups in the State' (1995: 113) to be on the advisory committee. Unfortunately, those who were invited 'soon found out that they were not being listened to — that the Masters knew better, and the course materials must reflect this bias' (Mudrooroo, 1995: 113). In suggesting that the end product, compiled by two non-Indigenous people, was no more than 'an amassing of facts from Master texts of anthropology, social science and history structured by modish theories of curriculum development' (Mudrooroo, 1995: 113), Mudrooroo emphasises the importance of Australian educators recognising and accepting
that it is ‘experience’ that lies at the heart of Indigenous Australian educational processes. Knowledge evolves out of experience and experience is valued as the source of knowledge and the means of passing knowledge on to future generations. By relying on the ‘expert Master’ and ‘scientific theories’ (Mudrooroo, 1995: 115), and ignoring the Indigenous ‘experience’ as a reflection of Indigenous reality in the development of the new course, the Western Australian Department of Education wasted valuable resources and produced a course that was subsequently abandoned (Mudrooroo, 1995: 119). This outcome suggests that to ensure its validity and usefulness for Indigenous students, future development of educational materials should reflect the reality of Indigenous Australian experiences. This can only be achieved by giving Indigenous Australians control of the decision-making process.

Sally Morgan, in discussing what motivated her to write her book My Place, reveals how, in coming to understand the pain and the rejection her grandmother had suffered as a result of the fact that ‘her life had been controlled by welfare and government authorities’, she was initially motivated by anger at what had happened. My Place was written because ‘I wanted a record for my children so they wouldn’t grow up ignorant. From talking to white Australians, I found that no-one knew what the history was — people were incredibly ignorant about Aboriginal people and I wanted to inform them in a personal way, so that they could understand’ (Morgan, 1990: 39). The use of My Place as a text in many Australian secondary schools has interesting connotations within the context of the dilemmas I faced, as an Indigenous researcher, determining the appropriate research methodology to use in undertaking this study. It would appear that, based on the widespread use of My Place, as a text, many educators could be assumed to be supporting Morgan’s use of [her family’s] ‘story’ as a means of ‘talking back’ — of exposing historical realities including Indigenous Australians’ educational experiences.

Henrietta Fourmile expresses her concern regarding the practice of non-Aboriginal people dominating the written record, suggesting that Aborigines have become ‘captives of the archives’ (1996: 16). She implies that the written record of Australia’s colonial history is not a truthful one as the Aboriginal voice has been denied. In support of her argument, Fourmile quotes the American historian, Professor W.T. Hagan’s 1978 publication, where he argued: ‘[i]t is having non-Indians control the documents from which other non-Indians write their version of your history . . . the historical Indian may be the captive of the archives, but the key to those archives is in the hands of non-Indian historians’ (Fourmile,
1996: 17). The focus of Fourmile's argument is that, just as Indigenous Australians had no control over what was written about them in the past, so their powerlessness continues to be maintained by a system that perpetuates the power of non-Indigenous Australians in the gatekeeping role. I perceive a degree of commonality between her concerns and Nakata's plea for the need to create a space from which Torres Strait Islanders might talk back to those non-Indigenous peoples who have been responsible for the creation of contemporary representations of Torres Strait Island peoples.

Huggins supports Fourmile's assertions in her revelation that 'Aboriginal people have been excluded from the pages of white history and denied access to the records of their own people' (1998: 2). Huggins argues that Aboriginal 'knowledge, thoughts and experiences . . . were passed on, in the normal course of social life, by word of mouth' (1998: 2), hence, it is important for Aboriginal people to take responsibility for recording their people's experiences because they bring understanding and a 'sense of purpose' (1998: 3) to the task. As such argument implies that the element of personal experience could be beneficial in uncovering the truth of Australia's colonial history, it could also provide a vital source of information concerning the way in which Indigenous Australians have been positioned within all sectors of our educational systems. In relation to my research question 'Is Success a Matter of Choice?', an approach that allows space for personal experience to be explored would be critical in ensuring the diversity of Indigenous representation.

The strong arguments offered by each of these Indigenous writers provided me with significant indicators in the choice of an appropriate methodology for this study. In their discussion of the validity of personal experience methods, Clandinin and Connelly cite Carr's 1986 work, stating that:

... when persons note something of their experience, either to themselves or to others, they do so not by the mere recording of experience over time, but in storied form. Story is, therefore, neither raw sensation nor cultural form; it is both and neither. In effect, stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history (Clandinin, 1994: 415).

I would argue that this validation of 'story' as a critical component of personal experience methodology is also useful within the context of undertaking research with Indigenous Australians for it enables a multiplicity of Indigenous Australian voices to be heard so that in
revealing differences in the socio-historical-cultural life experiences of respondents, the diversity of contemporary Indigenous Australian lifeworlds might be recognised. In listening to the respondents’ recounting their experiences in relation to academic success, I will use the process that Claxton and Connelly refer to as ‘narrative interpretation’ that ‘understand[s] the beliefs not so much as generalizations but as experiential artifacts’ (1994: 417); that attest to people’s experiences, personal and social histories and give meaning to the present situation. I am interested in Claxton and Connelly’s arguments justifying the study of experience, particularly in educational contexts, and support their notion that experience is the ultimate explanation for why ‘teachers, students, and others do what they do’ (1994: 414).

I align myself strongly with the concept of autoethnography because I perceive that it has close connections with personal life methodology. Ellis and Bochner indicate that the term is usually attributed to David Hayano (1979) who used it in referring to “cultural-level studies by anthropologists of their “own people”, in which the researcher is a full insider by virtue of being “native”, acquiring an intimate familiarity with the group, or achieving full membership in the group being studied” (cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739). In reflecting upon my decision to investigate the issue of Indigenous academic success, I acknowledge that it could be linked to a personal interest in using my experiences as an educator and as a student within the university, as a legitimate component of the research. This could be justified on the basis of Ellis and Bochner’s assertion that ‘autoethnography has become the term of choice in describing studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural’ (2000: 740).

I have considered Ellis and Bochner’s argument that reflexive ethnography is useful for those researchers from minority groups who wish ‘to write about and interpret their own cultures for others’ (2000: 740). Bochner and Ellis also argue that autoethnography impacts upon readers in that it enables ‘another person’s world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own’ (1996: 22). During the 1990s, a number of Indigenous Australians, such as Ruby Langford, Sally Morgan, Archie Weller, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Jack Davis, used a similar approach to begin the process of bringing Indigenous Australian knowledges and understandings of life into the public arena. The work of such writers has been critical in revealing the truth about Australia’s colonial history and the continuing impact that colonial policies and practices, or what Welch terms internal colonization (Welch, 1996: 33–4), has had, and continues to have, upon contemporary Australian life. The theory of internal
colonisation is particularly relevant to this study for, as Welch argues, it 'provides a useful framework within which to analyse the situation of Australian Aborigines, including in education. This is particularly so when class is integrated with race in the analysis, and not left to become a residual factor' because it 'may reveal important explanations' regarding why, around the world, so many Indigenous groups 'remain marginalized: fringe dwellers in more that the geographical sense' (1996: 52).

Another aspect of autoethnography that I will use in this thesis is personal narrative as I intend to draw upon my 'identities of academic and personal' self (Ellis, 2000: 740), when using my experiences as a research tool in the interpretation of the data. The validity of this approach would seem to be supported by Ellis' disclosure that:

[r]eflexive ethnographies range along a continuum from starting research from one's own experience to ethnographies where the researcher's experience is actually studied along with other participants. . . (2000: 740).

Peshkin suggests that researchers tend to choose research topics that reflect who they are because 'there is potency in having research that comes out of your life' although he warns that 'there is also the hazard of being blinded by what you care about so strongly that you are not taking account carefully of what you are hearing' (1996: 10). While acknowledging that it is likely that my experience as an Aboriginal person has influenced my choice of research methodology, I believe that my experience as an educator, will enable me to maintain the personal discipline required to overcome my own possible subjectivity within the context of Glesne's "researcher as instrument" (1992: 6). My interpretation of the data will be influenced both by my experiences as a higher education student and my achievements as an educator and I will recount some of those experiences in narrative form as 'narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself' (Ellis, 2000: 745). It is those stories that will contribute to and shape my interpretation of the data and, like many of my Indigenous colleagues who operate effectively within Australia's educational institutions, I have developed a capacity to operate across two cultures in ways that allow me to be aware of the issues that continually confront, and confound, Indigenous students. Whelan cites Weir's (1995) explanation of this phenomena:

The major difference I found was that in the western tradition there is a concentration on expanded levels of abstraction, whereas in my clan's learning system we work on expanded levels of consciousness, so the mind functions in

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a different way (Whelan, 1995: 4).

But, mindful of Fay's (1996) argument about solipsism, an aspect of autoethnography that I consider essential in terms of my role as an insider, in this study, is Ellis and Bochner's assertion concerning the need for introspection, for self-questioning, for confronting yourself regarding the honesty of your interpretation of the data so that "with understanding yourself comes understanding others" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000: 738).

Hence, in reflecting upon the characteristics of autoethnography, I would argue that in facilitating the hearing of the emic voice, it becomes a critical component of decolonization methodologies, hence, a focal point in this study. During the past decade, it has become obvious that, one of the critical elements in the process of effecting change in the academe are the emergent Indigenous voices (Nakata, Oxenham, Riney, Weir, Brady and Langton) of those who have successfully negotiated the western style of education that is offered in Australian universities. These are the voices that will serve to reveal the dangers inherent in an educational system where the reality is that students will be 'asked to master the knowledges of academic institutions and the knowledges of the western sciences without any discussion of the problematic and political nature of knowledges they need to acquire' (Nakata, 1997: 17) and also where it can be argued that research undertaken by the dominant culture has not always served the interests of Indigenous Australians. In fact, some of their findings support Hughes concern regarding the appropriateness of research about Indigenous issues/peoples that use 'theories and methodologies . . . designed by and for middle class Australians of Anglo-Saxon extraction' (Hughes, 1984: 20).

In acknowledging the importance of Smith's (2000) work for Indigenous Australian scholars, it would appear that a critical element in achieving change in Australian universities will be the development of an Indigenous Australian research agenda that "is very strategic in its purpose and activities and relentless in its pursuit of social justice" (Smith, 2000: 142). That there is an urgent need for the implementation of such a strategy is clearly demonstrated by the work of contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. For instance, Curthoys, (2000, 2003) and Ang (2003) provide a salient insight into the reasons why, for most Indigenous Australians and non-Anglo (especially Asian) immigrants, Australia is perceived to be a racialised society. Their discussions around the history of the White Australia Policy; the contemporary fears of many white Australians in relation to perceptions about potential loss of land and the conservatism of politicians such
as Howard and Hanson, clearly demonstrate why Indigenous Australians remain marginalized. Furthermore, in considering the impact of multiculturalism upon the nation, Curthoys argues that there is a “persistence of the structures and mentality of colonialism . . . (and that) . . . As long as multiculturalism continues to fail to recognize the continuing power and salience of colonialism, the latter will continue to exercise its power, and the former will remain an aspiration rather than a condition of life” (2000: 34).

And emerging from these persisting practices of colonialism, is the increasingly prominent (and problematic) issue of whiteness. Gale argues that:

In the Australian media the language and images of Pauline Hanson naturalise the privileges of whiteness. However, representations of Hanson as being part of a camp of ‘extreme whiteness’ also act as a distraction as ‘mainstream’ Australia takes comfort in being white and adds distance between ordinary whites and the privilege of whiteness” (2000: 265).

Indigenous Australian academics such as Lillian Holt and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, have become increasingly vocal about the issue of ‘white privilege’ in Australia, in particular the way in which it operates in universities. For example, Moreton-Robinson argues the importance of race in “shaping the meaning and experiences of the lives of white feminist academics” (2000: 252), so that they might continue to operate from a white cultural system that “confers on white people certain privileges and dominance” (2000: 252).

In order to achieve the change that is needed within the academe, Indigenous Australians must be able to negotiate new relationships with their non-Indigenous colleagues, they must be able to re-position themselves within the academe in a way that will privilege Indigenous voices, their rights as Indigenous peoples must be recognized. The problematic in achieving such outcomes lies in the racialised nature of Australian society as alluded to in the previous paragraphs. The implementation of an Indigenous Australian research agenda will enable Indigenous Australians to engage in the debate, to ensure their voices are heard in ways that will enable the transformation of Australian society.

In considering the problems inherent in taking up an insider’s position, prior to commencing this study, I examined the possible strengths and weaknesses of my assuming such a stance. For example, while I could argue the value of using my knowledge as an Indigenous person to establish a rapport with potential interviewees, I also had to consider how my role as head
of the Indigenous unit might have a deleterious effect in this regard. I acknowledged the difficulty some of the potential respondents might have in communicating openly with a person who was perceived to hold a position of authority within the system. In a previous research project, while a school principal, I had assumed a dual role as a researcher/principal to obtain information from Indigenous students and/or their families. In that instance, I dealt with the issue of the perceived authority of my role very directly. As I had successfully used that approach in the past and as there were certain similarities with this situation, I decided to use it again.

I compared this previous experience with what I was seeking to undertake in this study and acknowledged that there were several parallels. Within the university setting, I am the head of an academic unit that focuses on Indigenous Studies but Indigenous students being invited to participate in this study were enrolled in courses across a range of discipline areas. As the focus of my role as the head of the unit was administrative, I had no direct, regular, professional interaction with any Indigenous students. I did, however, have overall responsibility for the provision of a support service for Indigenous students so I did interact with individuals and/or groups, from time to time, either in the Indigenous unit or elsewhere in the university. Hence, I perceived that my capacity to collect useful data within the university in which I also worked would most likely depend upon my ability, as an Aboriginal person, to establish a meaningful dialogue with students. Ultimately, this proved to be the reality. Over half of the students commented that this 'duality' suited them for it offered them the opportunity to talk about their issues within two contexts. When they wanted to talk about their relationships with lecturers and other students, they found it useful to think of me as a fellow student and, as I did not have a relationship as either a lecturer or support person with any of the individual respondents, they appeared to experience no difficulty in discussing issues with me. Most did suggest, however, that my role as a head of department could be valuable because they perceived that this was a job that provided me with the capacity to develop an understanding of people's attitudes across all discipline areas of the university. Hence, most interviewees stated that they believed I would already be aware of many of the issues that caused them concern. Two students did attempt to use the interview as a means of clarifying how I would deal with their concerns, in regard to some particular issues, that emerged from our discussion, however, we negotiated another time for us to meet and resolve those issues. The degree of openness students displayed in the interviews made me feel they were able to trust me, despite the duality of my role.
In considering my choice of methodology for this study, I was particularly aware of the depth of my own experiences in this field and acknowledge that, upon reflection, I determined that such depth of experience could be extremely valuable and add another dimension to this study. Hence the decision to use my own experiences to enhance my analysis of the original data and provide a deeper insight into Indigenous Australian achievement in higher education. This could be a risky approach to adopt for, while I might argue that I am trying to understand the student experience within the context of my own, I am also aware of the biases this might bring to the student data within the context of Fay’.

Due to this concern, regarding the interpretation of the student information, within the framework of my own experience, I decided to introduce another dimension into this collaborative research act. In addition to the student informants, two key informants were used as another source of original data. Both were Aboriginal educators, one male and one female, who have had many years of experience working in the field of Indigenous higher education. Their views provided an additional layer of meaning to the analytical filter and are used to test the trustworthiness of my interpretations.

Having emphasised the supremacy of qualitative research in this study, the use of statistical data must not be overlooked. The increased availability of statistics in recent years in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island higher education outcomes may well have been the catalyst for the current government and academic focus on the issue of Indigenous student ‘retention and success’. The statistical data, presented in Chapter Three, will demonstrate that during the 1990s there was considerable growth in Indigenous participation in higher education and almost no improvement in student outcomes such as academic success. It seemed to me that reliance on the statistical evidence appeared to be re-inforcing the notion of Aboriginal failure for it has been my experience, that there are many Indigenous students, especially those from urban, middle class backgrounds, who are achieving successful academic outcomes. I would suggest that in combining the outcomes of Indigenous students from a diversity of remote, rural and urban backgrounds, the data is homogenized and masks performance differences associated with class and socio-economic background features.

In this inquiry, students would be invited to discuss the notion of ‘academic success’ from a variety of perspectives, including their own. My objective in pursuing this approach was to insert an opportunity for respondents to engage in a different discourse. My purpose in
focusing on success, rather than failure, in the data collection process was to reveal Indigenous Australian rather than non-Indigenous viewpoints regarding what constituted success within the university context: to highlight Indigenous achievement rather than non-achievement. As a part of this process, I will re-interpret some of the statistical information to provide a national overview of the positioning of Indigenous students within Australian universities, especially in regard to Indigenous academic success. I will use these statistics as a framework of objectivity through which I will analyse what the students present as their realities. The importance of developing an awareness of the way in which we, as researchers, interpret data is highlighted by Glesne and Peshkin’s description of qualitative inquiry as ‘an umbrella term for various philosophical orientations to interpretive research’ (1992: 9). To provide an enhanced understanding of Indigenous achievement in higher education, I will then infuse students’ stories into the statistical framework that will underpin my interpretation of the intersection of the students’ experiences with my own experiences and those of the key informants. This layering of experience will contribute to a more holistic understanding of Indigenous success in higher education.

2.1.3: Approvals and access

Having gained approval from the university’s Human Ethics Committee to undertake the research, my next step was to gain access to students to collect original data. I spent over twelve months discussing the proposed study with students who regularly visited the Indigenous unit in which I worked, and with colleagues in both my own university and other universities. I then posted notices explaining that I was an Indigenous researcher studying Indigenous academic success and that I sought ‘successful’ student volunteers to participate in individual interviews or focus group meetings. These notices were placed on student notice boards throughout the university and were also emailed to those Indigenous undergraduate and postgraduate students I knew, with a message asking them to spread the word within their networks. The weeks went by and I received no responses. This surprised me, as I knew there were students who were succeeding and, whenever I had discussed this project with students personally, they had expressed a willingness to be involved in the study. I kept asking myself if this was an example of students saying one thing while meaning another, as some Aboriginal people may do when confronted with direct questions or if it was simply that students were responding to me in the affirmative because I was the head of the unit. Yet, my daily interactions with the students made me feel that it was neither of these.
The more informal discussions I had with staff and students, the more convinced I became that there was some simple explanation for the lack of responses. And one day, a student provided the answer. I had asked one of the students, who had previously appeared very interested in the project, why she had not responded. She laughed at me and said, 'Well, you said you wanted people who were successful. I'm not successful.' She was in her third year in law. Following further discussion, I finally realised that, in this university, it appeared there were few Indigenous Australian students who would describe themselves as 'successful' in relation to their university studies.

I did come close to giving up when I came to the conclusion that, due to this, I might have difficulty finding informants. However, the research was worth doing in the long term interests of changing staff and student perceptions of Indigenous Australian achievement in the university and I thought it was important to obtain positive feedback about Indigenous success from Indigenous Australian students themselves. I decided I would change the criteria for inviting people to be interviewed. I would seek access to students who felt their progress was satisfactory. As time was becoming critical, I knew I could no longer wait for volunteers to respond to notices. I had to change the process for accessing respondents. Due to the pressures of my work, time was very limited, but, being aware of the dangers inherent in my insider position, I wanted to guard against any undue influence my position as head of the unit might have. I chose to use purposive sampling because I sought to interview people for a specific purpose — to ascertain the views of Indigenous students who perceived of themselves as making satisfactory progress in their university studies. The lack of response to my initial approach had suggested that members of this group might be 'a difficult-to-reach, specialized population' (Neuman, 1994: 198). In addition, purposive sampling, according to Neuman, would provide me with an approach that would enable me to 'gain a deeper understanding of types' (1994: 198). To avoid overly tainting the data, I limited myself to approaching only one student from each of the two courses that were taught out of the unit in which I worked and ensured that neither of those approached were students who had any direct teaching, or support contact with me. Apart from that restriction, whenever I knew I would have time available for interviewing, I approached any student with whom I came in contact and talked to them about the project. Such contact usually occurred in the courtyard and allowed me to ascertain whether the student was an undergraduate or postgraduate and whether they felt satisfied with what they were getting out of university. If they indicated that they did feel satisfied with their progress, I would invite them to participate in an interview or a focus group meeting. Thus, it is important to acknowledge
that all of the students who did participate in the research study as informants were, in fact, students who were identifying as being satisfied with their achievements or their progress within the university. At this stage, I made no attempt to clarify ‘progress’ or what ‘satisfied’ might mean. I did make an effort to contact some of the few Torres Strait Islander male students attending the university to arrange an interview but I was not able to achieve this as they were either absent or simply not coming into the unit at this particular time.

Once a student indicated an interest in participating, I would ascertain their preference for an individual interview or a focus group meeting. If they chose an individual interview, I would ask where they would like the interview to take place and arrange a time that suited them. I stressed that interviews could take place in whatever location the student chose, in their homes, at the unit, or elsewhere in the university. Ten chose to be interviewed in my office. When I queried that choice, most people indicated that it did not really matter to them where the interview took place, except that it should be somewhere quiet, private and free from possible interruptions. As my room is located at the rear of the building, looking out onto bushland and not easily accessible to people wishing to casually ‘drop in’, they felt it would provide a perfect location. Furthermore, I suspected that, as my room is situated next to the computer laboratory that is regularly used by all of the students who were interviewed, students were deliberately choosing a familiar outlook as the site for their interview. I have come to this conclusion because it was very noticeable that, upon entering the room, students immediately chose seating that would enable them to look out into the bush.

Two students chose to be interviewed in a student common room and two chose to be interviewed in an outdoors garden courtyard. As my office was situated just off an external garden where people tend to congregate, the reality often was that either the student or myself or both of us, would be participating in an informal conversation with other students or staff immediately prior to moving away for the interview. This tended to make it very easy to establish rapport, as the interview would begin almost as an extension of a previous conversation. Dexter, cited in (Lincoln, 1985: 268), argues that an interview ‘is a conversation with a purpose’. I personally found the use of a conversational approach useful in conducting data collection. Perhaps the use of a communicative style that is commonly used in the everyday formal and informal interactions of students, staff and visitors, within the unit, meant students were not confronted with the transitional difficulties that Malin’s research in schools (Harris & Malin, 1994) demonstrated many Indigenous students experience when having to engage in the more formal interactional patterns of western
education settings.

On a couple of occasions, students forgot their interview time due to pressure of their own work but, on each occasion, these students came back to the unit to negotiate another time for their interview. It would have been very easy for students to simply not turn up for the interview, as all but two of them only visited the unit on a casual basis, to socialize with friends or access some support service that is administered out of the unit. The fact that people did return to arrange alternative interview times was, in my opinion, a positive indication that these students were genuinely interested in participating in the study.

Some of the students indicated a preference to participate in a focus group meeting rather than a face-to-face interview. The focus group meetings were conducted in the student common room. At the request of a lecturer, who thought this would be a useful activity for her students, I invited a whole class to participate in one of the student focus group meetings. The ten students in this group, were enrolled in a course that was offered in intensive block mode and included local, regional and interstate students. This meeting was conducted in a lecture room that was continually used by these students. To access participants for the staff focus group meeting, I emailed staff asking for volunteers. Once people responded, I negotiated a time and place that suited everyone.

2.2: Setting out on the journey

Glesne and Peshkin attest to the value of using a number of research methods in qualitative research in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues (1992: 9). They state that ‘[t]hree data gathering techniques dominate in qualitative inquiry: participant observations, interviewing, and document collection’ (1992: 24). I observed, interviewed and collected documents to help me obtain an in-depth insight into the issues that were examined. Lincoln and Guba (1985), in arguing the importance of establishing trustworthiness, state that triangulation is one of the techniques researchers can use to improve the validity of their findings and interpretations. In this study I have sought to validate the data through what Denzin, cited in (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 305), termed ‘the use of multiple and different sources [and] methods’. Thus, I have made use of multiple data collection techniques, including interviews, focus group meetings, searches of archival and contemporary written and statistical materials, personal observations, field notes and conversations, to enhance the triangulation of data.
2.2.1: Observation

In the early stages of the study, I spent a considerable amount of time in observer mode (Glesne, 1992: 40) to gain an overall insight of the learning environment and of the relationships that existed between Indigenous students and their lecturers, administrative staff and fellow students. I began this observation in one university and then, upon taking up employment in another university, I continued the practice during my first four months there. To carry out these observations I sought permission from lecturers to sit in on lectures and tutorial sessions as just another student. It was easy to do this within the relative freedom allowed university students in terms of attendance at lectures. My presence went unnoticed within the overall class group.

Once I commenced interviewing students, the focus of my observations became the students who were respondents in either interviews or focus group meetings. I observed these students interacting with their peers and lecturers in various situations. Most times they were not aware of my presence due to the fact that I was inside the building and they were outside in the courtyard. During the twelve-month data collection period for this study, I recorded significant events by writing detailed notes of the setting, who was present, and what occurred. I added such notes to the student data files as I considered them an additional source of information that could contribute to my overall understanding of an individual's behaviour within an academic setting.

An unexpected outcome of the data collection process was that of student involvement. Six of the fourteen students who had been interviewed, and three of the students who had participated in a focus group meeting, subsequently returned to tell me about something they had observed, or heard, that they thought might be relevant to the research project. I perceived these individual interviewees as having assumed a role as observer and, on several occasions, their action in recounting their observations provided the catalyst for a further discussion of student achievement. Thus, in addition to my own observations, the project gained an added dimension of respondents as observers and informers. I made notes of these additional discussions and included them in the student data files.

While I talked openly of the purpose of the project, I did not reveal who was being interviewed. As the study progressed, however, it became obvious that some of the students were discussing it amongst themselves. I was approached, on several occasions, by students
who indicated that they hadn't been interviewed but were curious to know more about the purpose of the research. While most did not wish to be interviewed, two of the people who made such an approach did agree to participate in an individual interview and one person agreed to participate in a focus group meeting. I always responded to such queries as I considered they provided additional opportunities for discussing academic achievement with students thus enhancing my understanding of student perspectives concerning Indigenous academic success.

The courtyard was an important site for my observations. It is an area where students and staff tend to congregate for various purposes. For staff, it is a place to meet for an early morning coffee and discussion or a place to relax with staff and students during breaks. For students, it is a place to meet for coffee and a chat with friends or a place to catch up with staff they want to see or even, for a few, a place to meet and work with their tutors. It is also the place where meetings can be held or where social events such as student barbecues are held. In many ways the courtyard provides a focal point for the daily operations of the unit and staff take care to ensure it is seen as a welcoming environment. This is the place where students usually see me as I try to 'have a coffee out in the courtyard' at some stage during the day when I am on campus. In fact, mixing informally with some students in this environment over a long period of time enabled me to get to know them; to establish a relationship where we felt at ease with each other; to arrive at what Colorado calls 'the good feeling, you're at harmony with the one you're speaking with' (1988: 22). As an Aboriginal researcher, I perceived this as being critical to the success of a study that focused on Indigenous Australians and interviews with these students reflected the value of the closer relationship.

**2.2.2: Interviewing**

I interviewed students individually and in focus group meetings to gather data relevant to the research topic. To do this I designed different interview schedules for use with individuals, focus groups and key respondents. These instruments are located at Appendix Three to Five.

As the purpose of this study was to explore Indigenous Australian notions of success within the university context, the focus was on individual perceptions of success in terms of university studies. In the focus group meetings, in addition to defining perceptions of success, groups were also invited to consider broader issues such as the role of higher education in contemporary Australia and the ways in which the use of societal power
structures might impact upon Indigenous success in university. Such information has significant implications for universities for, as Neuman indicates:

Qualitative data give quantitative researchers rich information about the social processes in specific settings. They may also give critical researchers the potential to break through assumptions implicit in quantitative approaches (1994: 325).

The design of questions was a critical component of the methodology for, as Foddy indicates, qualitative researchers are:

... interested in how human beings 'experience' their worlds ... [and so] ... favour the use of data collecting procedures that they hold to be sensitive to the actors' meanings — for example, procedures that are based on prolonged, intimate immersion in the social interaction in question or the use of non-directive, open questions that respondents answer in their own words (1995: 14).

Thus, in designing questions that placed the respondents within the frame of inquiry, I was seeking information that would uncover the reality that is not always evident in the statistics, for I align myself strongly with Pawson's contention that the questions asked by qualitative researchers demonstrate that they are 'committed to understanding the respondent's "meaning" and so regard data collection as a task for inducing everyday talk within unstructured interviews in near-to-naturalistic settings' (1989: 292).

The first two questions in the interview schedule (Appendix Three) focused the student on why they had come to university and how well prepared they had been. These questions were presented in a written survey format that allowed respondents an opportunity to provide information anonymously while simultaneously establishing the context for the interview. The analysis of these written responses, together with the information gathered through the various documents collected, would also provide valuable insights into the degree of choice Indigenous students might be perceived to have in terms of achieving academic success. The rest of the questions on the interview schedule were designed to explore a range of the student's perspectives on success. Through comparing the various responses, I considered I would be able to ascertain any significant similarities and differences in the Indigenous perspective. The concentration on success was maintained throughout the individual interview activities to encourage respondents to examine various
factors that might affect their personal achievement.

I introduced some different questions into the focus group meetings (Appendix Four) and interviews with key informants (Appendix Five) in order to broaden the scope of the investigation. While these respondents were asked the questions pertaining to perspectives of what constitutes success in terms of what Indigenous students get out of university, they were also invited to consider the role of higher education in Australian society; the possible relationships between culture, power and education within a university community; and the way in which their university addressed culture in relation to student needs. This enabled them to reflect upon: why power may be a critical element in any consideration of education and culture; various policies and practices including aspects of teaching and learning, and the use of structural power, that appear to impact upon the effectiveness of the university as an Indigenous learning environment; and any current government policies that could be seen to have implications for the achievement of Indigenous success in universities. Additionally, key respondents were invited to discuss: government policies they perceived as having had an influence upon Indigenous students' achievement in university; what they think Indigenous students get out of coming to university; and to identify any specific barriers to Indigenous Australian students achieving success in university.

2.2.3: Conducting individual interviews

In undertaking individual interviews I sought students' opinions, their thoughts and feelings about success and the experiences they considered had enabled them to achieve their success. I used an interview schedule that would encourage maximum input from respondents. The purpose of the interviews was to provide a space for participants to relive their experiences and reflect upon their personal progress toward achieving their goals in higher education. I used open-ended questions and encouraged respondents to construct their own 'meanings' in relation to the social interactions and learning situations they had experienced within the university environment.

Fourteen students participated in the individual interviews. Twelve of these students (86%) came from a range of discipline areas across the universities. While I had hoped for a greater diversity of student representation, I was not able to achieve this. This may be a reflection of the purposive sampling process used to select students, for I was seeking students who fitted a specific criteria. Figures 1–7 provide a profile of the students interviewed.
Of the two students who were over 50 years of age, one was studying full-time and one part-time. Eleven students were internal undergraduate students, enrolled in a range of undergraduate programs including social work, education, law, science, medicine, Indigenous studies and archaeology.
The following figures provide further important details. Figure 6 gives an overview of the total university experience for the student cohort interviewed, including participation, attrition and completion details for those making up the group. As it has been my experience that Indigenous students often need additional time to complete a mainstream course, Figure 7 focuses on the completion statistics of interviewees. The data is based upon students’ achievement at the time of interview or within the twelve months following the interview. This data is interesting within the context that all of those interviewed considered themselves to be satisfied with their progress. Figure 7 includes the access student who was interviewed and then enrolled in an undergraduate program.
Each respondent was formally interviewed once. Respondents were told that their interview would take approximately one hour and while most took approximately one and a half hours, five ran over two hours. I ensured that, whenever I interviewed students, I had plenty of time available to me so that I never stopped a respondent who still had information to share.

I also realised that due to the early lack of response, I might have to use the interview situations to dig down and unearth examples of success stories from students. This was an important consideration of this research, as my capacity to pursue a process of digging down might also be seen as a reflection of the level of trust students were prepared to invest in me. Significantly, once students began to discuss the notion of success, to accept the validity of their personal views, and, ultimately, to consider their own outcomes within a personal framework of achievement, the quality and quantity of the information they provided increased noticeably. A useful addition to the planned research activities was the level of follow-up discussion initiated by six students who wished to provide additional information.
or to clarify specific issues. These discussions enhanced my capacity to build an holistic view of the Indigenous student achieving success within the university [Neuman, 1994: 319-320].

I found the role of interviewer in face-to-face interviews was, for me, a particularly challenging part of the data gathering process. As previously explained in the discussion concerning the problems inherent in taking up an insider’s position in any research, I was aware at the outset that I would need to combat the possible effects of what might be seen as unequal power relations in my interactions with students. Thus, I ensured that, prior to commencing the interview, all respondents were informed of my dual role and how I intended to use a role-switching technique to make it easier for me to talk with them as a fellow student. I did indicate that if a respondent felt uncomfortable with the approach I would not use it. All students indicated that they had no problems with the proposal.

I endeavoured to maintain a high level of vigilance throughout the interview process. In two interviews, I found myself consciously stepping back into the researcher’s role and reminding the respondents that it was their views that I wanted to hear and suggesting that, if they wanted me to respond at length, to a concern they were raising and wanting me to deal with, within the context of my role as head of the unit, then we should set another time for me to respond to them. This strategy, used to avoid coercion, did not appear to faze these respondents, we made a time for another meeting and they switched back into the interview mode. At the commencement of each interview, I explained the process I would use to maintain confidentiality and advised students that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Following a brief oral description of the study, I gave each respondant a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix Six and Seven), explaining the purpose of each and allowing time for students to attend to each. Prior to commencing the interview, I asked each respondent if I could tape the interview. All agreed to this.

The interview schedule guided the discussion. At the end of the interview, I explained to each respondent that they would receive a copy of the written transcript so they might change any of their responses or withdraw their transcript if they did not want me to use their information in the study. All were satisfied with this process.
2.2.4: Conducting focus group meetings

In addition to the individual interviews, I conducted three focus group meetings. One was a mixed group of eight staff, including five Indigenous and three non-Indigenous lecturers. All were over 30 years of age and included two males and six females.

The two student focus groups comprised a total of nineteen undergraduate volunteer students, enrolled in a range of levels of higher education courses. Figures 8–10 provide a profile of the students who participated in the focus group meetings. The ten students enrolled in the flexible delivery program, that comprised a full-time study load condensed into two seven-week blocks of on-campus study per year, came from other parts of Queensland and Australia. Of the other nine students, one was from New South Wales and eight from Queensland.

Figure 8: Cultural Backgrounds of students in focus groups as %.

Figure 9: Enrolment mode of students in focus groups as %.
Figure 10: Previous levels of schooling completed by students in focus groups, as % within age groups.

The focus group meetings were used to probe various issues, including people's perceptions of the role of higher education in our society; the use of power within the university context; and the meaning of the word success. While all groups were asked to define success from their own perspective, staff were also asked to discuss whether or not they thought Indigenous students would agree with their viewpoint. This process provided me with a triangulation that could then be used to support the student data in much the same way as I intended to use the key informant responses. Prior to commencing a focus group meeting, I briefly explained my position in terms of my dual role as researcher and head of department of the Indigenous unit. I assured participants that in this activity I was operating in my role as a researcher and that it was their opinions I wanted to hear. I explained the process I would use to ensure confidentiality and advised students that they could withdraw from the focus group meeting at any time. As with the interview process, I then provided a brief oral description of the study and gave each respondent a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix Six and Seven), explaining the purpose of each and allowing time for students to attend to each. I also sought permission to tape the meeting.

This was a new experience for all of the students and Indigenous members of staff. To begin, most Indigenous people were somewhat reticent in their responses so I used follow-up questions to clarify issues, draw people out and encourage discussion. As with the individual interviews, however, once participants understood the process, they participated with enthusiasm and the meetings were far longer than originally envisaged. I did not attempt to stop people as I thought it was important for them to have the opportunity to think about some of the issues and to express their opinions. The focus group meetings were recorded, with the permission of the participants, and the transcriptions typed for use in the data.
2.2.5: Interviewing key informants

In addition to gathering data from students and staff, I interviewed two Aboriginal people, one male and one female, who have had a long involvement in education and are currently managing Indigenous units within universities. Between them, they have a wealth of experience in Indigenous education and are highly respected by their colleagues in Indigenous education. Both were the first of their families to 'go to university' and, since that experience, have demonstrated a total dedication to the education of Indigenous Australians. I refer to these people as key informants. The purpose of these interviews was to gather information that would provide a means of validating my interpretation of the data. I asked questions (Appendix Five) that sought their opinions concerning the role of higher education, the impact of power structures on Indigenous students operating within the university, how their university catered for cultural needs of student groups, and their perceptions of what success might mean to Indigenous students and a range of other stakeholders.

I interviewed both informants while visiting their respective universities. While the interviews were conducted in an informal manner, I asked the same questions of both informants. One interview was recorded, with the informant's permission, while I simply took brief notes in the other interview. I followed up by using those notes to record my own outline of that interview, later the same day. Transcriptions from these recordings were then typed ready for analysis.

2.2.6: Document Collection

The research involves complex issues that needed to be examined through a socio-historical-cultural framework if they are to fairly reflect the reality of contemporary Indigenous Australians. Thus, the collection of relevant documents, including historical materials; relevant research related to Indigenous success in university; government and non-government policy documents and related reports; various statistical collections including DETYA annual collections since 1993; annual Indigenous Higher Education Strategies; along with the transcriptions of raw data collected through individual interviews with students and key informants, focus group meetings with staff and students and personal observations; was a critical component of the data collection process.
The initial focus of the document collection phase was to develop an historical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australian education. I visited State libraries including their archival collections; a number of university libraries and the DETYA and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) collections in Canberra to collect a range of historical materials — including parliamentary acts, letters and reports — that would enable me to investigate colonial policy and practices pertaining to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to access more recent policy documents, government reports and discussion papers and texts relating to government policy. Data gathering from policy documents and related materials complemented the historical data to provide a deeper insight into the way in which government policy tends to reflect the values and beliefs of the dominant culture at any given time. The purpose of gathering these materials was to investigate the way in which structural power operated in Australian society as I perceived this would be vital to any understanding of the position of Indigenous Australians in higher education institutions and the degree of choice they might feel they had in terms of achieving successful outcomes.

An additional significant source of information was found in statistical data. Statistics were collected from DETYA publications and websites and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census collections available on CD Roms in university libraries. I re-interpreted data from various statistical collections, including the DETYA annual statistics of Indigenous student access, participation, retention and success outcomes, to demonstrate the position of Indigenous students within Australian universities and to establish specific national trends and/or anomalies, especially in relation to student success rates. This also enabled me to ascertain possible correlation between course completion levels, success and retention rates. Unfortunately, historical statistics about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is scarce, possibly due to the fact that, as Triponcy reveals in her discussion of Australian citizenship, from 1829 until the introduction of the Commonwealth Constitution in 1901, Aborigines, like all other inhabitants were ‘deemed to be British subjects. Aborigines were not considered separately at that time, thus included in this definition’ (Triponcy, 1997: 2). Once disenfranchised through the passing of the Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902, Aboriginal people were not counted in the official population records until the 1970s. This has meant that there are no baseline statistics available to researchers wanting to develop profiles concerning Indigenous Australian involvement in any aspect of Australian life, including education. In fact, it was not until the Aboriginal Task Force of 1988 became the catalyst for the provision of specific statistics pertaining to Indigenous education that such
statistics were kept.

While the Commonwealth Government does appear to have tried to redress this lack of statistical information, especially during the past decade, even now the collection of comparative data remains a problem. Comparative collections that provided useful information about education and social issues in the early 1990s cannot be compared with more recent statistics as the way in which statistical data is now being presented has changed. Thus, for example, it is now very difficult to access data collections that can provide a national comparison of Indigenous higher educational achievement and the corresponding take-up in the labour market. Furthermore, the presentation of statistical data has become increasingly complex and difficult to interpret. Often the data presentation is not ‘userfriendly’ in that it does not provide information that can be easily understood or that is particularly relevant to the needs of educators operating in classrooms. This may reflect trends in government priorities in terms of the skills that are valued within a modern bureaucracy.

2.3: Journeying Sites

Neuman highlighted the importance of noticing the environment in which events occur, or being able to describe the physical appearance of participants as this constitutes an important part of their social interactions. He suggests that this is the way that the researcher demonstrates an understanding of the social world in which the research is occurring (Neuman, 1994: 334). In this study, all student respondents chose to be interviewed within their respective University’s Indigenous unit. In both locations, this was a purpose built facility, clearly identifiable through the use of external signs as a facility servicing Indigenous students. Indigenous identity was highlighted in both facilities through the use of posters, paintings, artefacts and photographs in all buildings and their immediate surrounds. In both locations the buildings were surrounded by gardens that had been designed to encourage people to linger.

I restricted my investigation to universities that were located in, and whose major focus was, northern Australia, where the ratio of Indigenous populations as compared to non-Indigenous populations is relatively high. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Website Statistics, the 1996 census revealed that Australia was estimated to have an Indigenous population of approximately 386,000 people, representing 2.1% of the total population (Statistics, 2001). The 1996 statistics show that more than a quarter of all
Indigenous Australians live in Queensland (27%) and the combination of Western Australia (14%) and the Northern Territory (13%) results in a similar total. While the Northern Territory has a low baseline population of approximately 182,000 — almost 1% of the total Australian population — it has a comparatively high Indigenous population, with more than a quarter (27%) of the population of the Northern Territory identifying as Indigenous Australians (ABS Website, accessed 2002: http://www.abs.gov.au/websitebs/D3310116.NSF/). The census statistics also provide comparative data for remote and rural areas of northern Australia. Hence, the Queensland Government’s Planning Information and Forecasting Unit has extrapolated the 1996 census data to demonstrate that while the Cooktown region (which includes Cape York) had the lowest share of Queensland’s Indigenous population (5.9%) with 5,635 people, Indigenous peoples accounted for more than two out of every five people residing in the area (Planning Information and Forecasting Unit, 2000: 3). In fact, the following statement provided by the planning unit supports my claim that the universities included in this study service areas of northern Australia where there exists a relatively high ratio of Indigenous populations, as compared to non-Indigenous populations.

In many remote locations, the population was made up of much higher proportions of Indigenous people. For example, in the Torres Strait ATSIC region, Indigenous people made up 97 per cent of the 408 people who lived in the Murray Islands Indigenous Area in 1996. There were 18 Indigenous Areas in Queensland in 1996 where the Indigenous population comprised more than nine out of every ten people (2000: 5).

Stevenson et al (1999), in their Occasional Paper on Regional Participation in Higher Education, calculated participation rates based on the 1996 data. In the context of the geographical location of the universities included in this study, their findings provide a valuable insight into the importance of the statistical data provided in the previous section.

For both university and TAFE participation rates are highest in metropolitan regions and decrease progressively as we move away from the metropolitan centres to regions in rural zones, regions straddling rural/remote zones and remote zone regions. The difference in participation rates in metropolitan zones and remote zones is greater for university than TAFE (Stevenson, 1999: 5).

The implications of these demographics in terms of Indigenous enrolment and success at the two universities included in this study are reflected in the Higher Education statistics
released by DEET in 1996 (DEET, 1996: 20) and 1999 (Division, 1999: 21). The 1996 census also revealed that 3.5% of all Australians attended university or other tertiary institution, while the corresponding figure for all those who identified as Indigenous Australians was 1.8% as a percentage of the total identifying Indigenous Australian population or 0.03% as a percentage of the total Australian population, thus revealing the very low rate of university participation of Indigenous Australians in terms of their ratio of the total Australian population. In considering the statistics for the two universities in which students were interviewed for this study, however, the statistics differ considerably. Thus, in 2000 at University One, Indigenous students accounted for approximately 4.8% of total enrolments; 5.1% of student load and 0.69% success rate. At University Two, Indigenous students represented 4.6% of student numbers; 5.2% of student load and 0.65% success rate. Thus while both universities achieved high participation rates in comparison with the rest of the country, their success rates were relatively low. It is important to recognise that these are regional universities, drawing Indigenous students from rural and remote areas where it is likely students have experienced considerable previous educational disadvantage. This reality could have serious implications in terms of the capacity of these students to achieve academic success at university level. As a major thrust of this study is to ascertain the reality for Indigenous students in relation to the question ‘Is Success a Matter of Choice?’, the situation revealed by these statistics highlighted the need to gain some insight into the effectiveness of each university as a learning environment for Indigenous Australian students.

To achieve this, I carried out a broad comparison of the goals of both universities in terms of both their mainstream and their Indigenous operations. This data was available through the strategic planning documents of both universities and in DETYA’s ‘Higher Education Indigenous Education Strategies’ annual publication.

There were a number of similarities between these universities. The Indigenous Education Strategies for the Year 2000 revealed that both universities had an established advisory committee that reported to the university on strategic issues and facilitated consultation with their Indigenous communities as a means of encouraging Indigenous involvement in educational decision-making. In both universities, there is Indigenous representation on University Council, as well as Indigenous representation on most of the key decision-making committees. In both universities, staff of the Indigenous unit are involved in the development and delivery of cross-cultural training programs for all Indigenous and non-
Indigenous staff and students are being targeted for training in undertaking research and enrolling in postgraduate programs. The Strategic Plans reveal both universities aspire to provide services to their local communities whilst also achieving national and international recognition for their programs.

2.3.1: University One

In its strategic planning document, University One makes clear, concise statements about what 'we' believe and what 'we' will do to provide high quality tertiary education that responds to the needs of the people and the region. It states its responsibility to cater for the needs of specific groups, including Indigenous Australians, and the importance of ensuring that all programs cater for cultural diversity in order to create a more informed and tolerant society. In terms of graduate outcomes, this university aims to have all graduates develop an awareness of Indigenous Australian cultures and an ability to operate effectively in a culturally diverse society. A stated priority of this university is to increase Indigenous participation over the next decade and to improve retention and success rates for Indigenous students through the implementation of strategies that will ensure a quality educational experience. The Indigenous unit is located within the mainstream academic structure of this university and is responsible for the provision of a support program that caters for the needs of Indigenous students enrolled in academic programs across all discipline areas of the university, while also fulfilling mainstream teaching and research roles similar to other schools within the university in terms of its own undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The focus in the Indigenous unit is on enabling students to become competitive in accessing non-traditional areas such as science, medicine, engineering, etc. while maintaining growth in the undergraduate and postgraduate programs that are designed to prepare students for employment upon completion of their degree program. Staff in this unit work toward creating a positive academic environment that encourages student achievement.

2.3.2: University Two

The strategic planning document for University Two is very different as the focus here is on creating the vision and establishing the guiding values and beliefs that will ensure a safe, secure working environment. Statements such as 'the strength of the organisation lies with its people . . . ' provide an insight into the university's collective thinking regarding the importance of ensuring staff and students feel respected while also recognising their own responsibilities in terms of maintaining a continual effort to improve performance across all
areas of the operation. The university aims for growth while recognising the need for flexibility, being responsive to change and the learning needs of all students; and of the qualities staff and students require to operate effectively in a competitive environment. Leadership is considered to be a key element in creating a successful learning environment that is client-focused with a teaching, training and research profile reflecting the needs of many groups. This university has developed a number of strategic themes designed to guide its on-going development and operation. One of these themes identifies areas of future development based on perceived strengths. There is an assumption that the university will attract Indigenous enrolment because understanding cultural diversity and a knowledge of Indigenous people were two areas of perceived strength. The Strategic Plan in this university was an overarching document that provided a thematic guide to the various teams responsible for managing the overall operation to ensure accountability and quality through the development of strategies in financial management, staffing, research, equity and higher education, together with Indigenous Education. It could be assumed from this list that Indigenous Education does not have an academic profile within University Two. The focus in the Indigenous unit would appear to be on the development and implementation of basic literacy and numeracy and other enabling programs that prepare students for higher education as well as the provision of relevant career counselling and special entry programs. The Indigenous unit facilitates a regular program of cultural events while also ensuring all students can access support in terms of the provision of childcare, finding accommodation, accessing student loans, etc.

In both universities, it is the Indigenous units that identify desired outcomes for Indigenous students and in both units strategy documents focus on the improvement of access, participation, retention and success for Indigenous students across all areas of the university. There is a simple explanation for this similarity. Each year, DETYA provides universities with a set of guidelines that clearly define the information required in the annual Indigenous Higher Education Strategy and the DETYA agenda is currently focused on improving Indigenous students’ access, participation, retention and success rates in higher education programs, particularly in terms of retention and completion.

2.4: Analysing the journey

I gathered the data and prepared written transcriptions that were returned to the individual respondents for their feedback prior to my beginning the data analysis. My first task was to
immerse myself in the data by reading through every transcript at least twice. As I read, I noted the themes that emerged as these would be critical in guiding the direction of my interpretation.

The literature had revealed a number of issues that could be perceived as having the potential to impact upon Indigenous achievement within the university. These included self-determination, power, policies, identity, gender issues, equity, reconciliation, colonisation, racism, diversity, culture, community, language and knowledge. The strongest themes to emerge from the raw data included power, knowledge, culture, community, diversity, language, policies and racism. I compared these themes with those that had emerged from the literature and found that not only were they all common to both lists but that there were strong connections between many of the concepts. For instance, the concept of power in terms of being in, or having, control, is an essential element in any consideration of self-determination, policies, identity, gender issues, equity, reconciliation, colonisation, racism and knowledge. Similarly, culture is a powerful aspect of self-determination, power, policies, identity, reconciliation, colonisation, racism, diversity, community, language and knowledge. Hence, I decided that, for the sake of conciseness, I would use the themes that had emerged from the student data as the analytical tools for my analysis.

The interviews were designed to define student’ perceptions of success within the context of their university studies and determine the degree of choice individuals felt they had over their studies, Hence, I used the socio-historical and socio-economic frameworks that had been established within the literature to extrapolate those issues respondents perceived as having affected what they felt able to do in higher education. Within the interview structure, three categories were apparent: the first was to do with individual motivation and preparation for university; the second focused on the individual’s university experience; and the third sought to clarify student outcomes within the context of what they perceived their success to be. In the early stages of the data analysis, I sought to identify the issues that students considered had most impacted upon their capacity to succeed, used the categories to set the parameters for my analysis, and used the themes as analytical tools within the categories.

In exploring success I decided to use thick description obtained from the transcriptions of the individual interviews and focus group meetings with students, staff and key informants, together with the detailed notes of the observations I have made, accounts of my own
experiences and the literature. In this way, I could contextualise the study by providing sufficient details of setting, purpose and relevant events to ‘facilitate transferability’ (Lincoln, 1985: 219). For example, through exploring respondents’ definitions and linking these to their stories of success through the lens of my own experience or the evidence provided in the literature, I could establish Indigenous perceptions of what constitutes success within the university. The use of thick description in ethnographical accounts is important, for, according to Geertz cited in Neuman, it provides:

... a rich, detailed description of specifics ... It captures the sense of what occurred and the drama of the events, thereby permitting multiple interpretations. It places events in a context so that the reader of an ethnographic report can infer cultural meaning (Neuman, 1994: 334).

Being prepared to seek and identify multiple stances caters for the diversity of the Indigenous experience and ensures that the voice of the individual is heard. The research methodology used in this study enables Indigenous peoples to engage with concepts of self-determination, power, and choice within both personal and systemic frameworks. Thus the data can present multiple layers of meaning, evidence of the degree of choice individuals perceived themselves as having had in regard to their studies.

2.5: Trustworthiness

In planning this research, I identified some of the assumptions I might make that could have the potential to influence my understanding and interpretation of the data gathered. I acknowledged the danger of allowing my own notions of reality as an Aboriginal woman who is also a higher education student and an experienced educator to dominate my interpretations of the data. I considered this to be especially important in relation to the use of an autoethnographical approach. By inserting my own experience into the analysis process, I recognised that it was critical, if this study was to be perceived as having any value by the target audience, that I establish my trustworthiness as a researcher. The audience should include Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics who work with Indigenous Australian students as well as others with an interest in Indigenous education. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that in seeking to determine the trustworthiness of an inquiry it is necessary to seek the answers to four questions. The first has to do with establishing the truth of the findings in relation to the respondents and the context in which the study was undertaken. The second represents the need to establish the applicability of the findings in
other contexts and with other groups. The third requires that the study is consistent in terms of it being possible to replicate if the research was conducted in a similar situation. And the fourth seeks to establish the neutrality of the researcher in terms of the findings reflecting the views of the respondents rather than those of the researcher (Lincoln, 1985: 290).

Mindful of the need to legitimise my stance as an ‘expert’ insider, I will now identify what I perceive as the particular strengths of such a situation. While I needed to be aware that my own realities are a potential weakness, they can also be a strength. From a western viewpoint, there is an assumption of power associated with being the head of an academic unit within the university and that power tends to insert some distancing, and deference, into the relationships students might have with the person occupying that position. Power is an integral part of most professional relationships in western society. That is not to say that power is not a factor in Indigenous societies. Rather that, even in modern Australia, Aboriginal society is bound more by relationships that were, in traditional times, organised on the basis of kinship. Thus, social transactions were based on reciprocity guided by the complex web of rights and obligations that guided family life. Despite the destruction of Aboriginal cultures, the principles of respect and reciprocity appear to have survived, indeed higher educational institutions in Australia could improve their educational programs for Indigenous students by considering the way in which Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) used the values of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity and Responsibility, as the basis of programs developed for Native American students. Significantly, wherever one is located within an Indigenous structure, relationships are critical. Hence, there is a difference between being the head of an Indigenous unit and being the head of other departments within the university. For instance, I would argue that the relationships I have with most Indigenous staff and students has more to do with the way in which we relate on a personal level, as opposed to being the result of any power I might be perceived to have due to the position I hold within the university. That is not to say that Indigenous staff and Indigenous students are not aware of the power structures that operate within the university and of my position within the university but, rather, that the fact that I am an Aboriginal person is more important to most of them. This could reflect Moreton-Robinson’s observation that “Universities in Australia are ‘places of whiteness’, where I can be assured that my identity will be racially constituted as ‘other’” (2000:240). Within many contemporary Indigenous organizations, it could be argued that the personal is an integral part of the professional; the relationships are synergistic in nature, providing a basis upon which respect and reciprocity are built. It is to
be expected, therefore, that within the framework of such cultural expectations, the behaviour of individuals is guided by established rules.

For example, a protocol that persists within many contemporary settings, is that of introducing yourself to the other person, to establish your 'place' in family/societal structures. Hence, in my first meeting with any student, whether in a group or an individual situation, I need to tell them who I am as an Aboriginal person. Again, the personal takes precedence over the professional in that sense. The purpose of this process is that it allows us to relate to that other person and to establish the possible links between our families. It has to do with belonging and identity and is a very powerful tool in establishing your credibility and gaining the trust of other Indigenous Australians. Thus, I would suggest that a strength in my stance as an insider in this study was the fact that, prior to the interviews and/or focus group meetings, I allowed time for us to observe the protocols and establish our Aboriginal connections. This enabled us to relate in a cultural sense and facilitated a more relaxed communication.

In terms of establishing my trustworthiness in the role of researcher, the greatest dilemma I faced in undertaking this study was related to the position I hold with the university. Critical to the success of this activity was how interviewees saw me in my role as head of the unit. While they might have accepted that I could assume a diversity of roles, it was the level of trust they were prepared to place in me as a 'gatherer of confidential information' that determined the ultimate value of the research. Interviewees were told that they could withdraw from the interviewing process at any time, if they did not wish to continue but none of them did this. Nor did any person withdraw their transcript, although four added some additional information before returning it to me.

Finally, I am mindful of the importance of qualitative researchers creating trust in their readers through the way in which they present their evidence. Neuman says it is critical that researchers provide sufficient explanation for the reader to feel a part of the ‘story’, because:

[a] qualitative researcher’s first-hand knowledge of events, people and situations cuts both ways. It raises questions of bias, but it also provides a sense of immediacy, direct contact, and intimate knowledge (1994: 322).
2.6: Ethical issues

There were ethical considerations involved in undertaking this particular study because it is possible that I can, at any time, access statistics and information about the academic performance of all Indigenous students, including those who might have been participants in the study. In consideration of the possibly negative impact of any such access, I discussed the matter with the Indigenous staff of the unit and some of the students who used the support service prior to seeking respondents. The general consensus of opinion that emerged from those discussions was that, in terms of achieving the national goals the government has set for Indigenous higher education, the possible outcomes of this research could provide valuable information about Indigenous achievement for all universities. People agreed that the perceived positive outcomes of the project should outweigh any negative effects. Without exception, those students who have been interviewed have been more than ready to talk openly about their progress and the current outcomes of their studies, regardless of whether they perceived those outcomes to be positive or negative.

In this study, a particular focus was the practices and procedures students perceived as being the ones that helped them achieve success. I did not use terms such as 'graduation' or 'passing' in the questions I put to respondents as my goal was to broaden the scope of the inquiry. Rather I used the term 'successful outcome/s'. If students responded without defining what they meant by 'successful outcome/s' I asked them to clarify what they thought the term meant. In addition to questions concerning specific university policies and practices, student perceptions of self-determination and the use of power within the university structure were also discussed. These topics were included in an attempt to ascertain what students perceived as their reality in terms of their capacity to be self-determining in relation to their studies.

Finally, respondents were asked to discuss their concept of success within the context of their participation and achievement in an academic program within the university. This was a particularly important component of the inquiry as I sought to gain an understanding of what students' perceptions of success might be. In addition to asking interviewees to discuss success from their own perspective, they were also asked to indicate how they thought the university, as an institution with responsibility for academic programs, and DETYA, as the funding body, might define as success in relation to students. By encouraging students to discuss these issues, I sought to ensure their views were fairly represented.
Essentially this was a study of a small group of Indigenous Australians journeying through the academe. By reflecting upon their journeys within their institutions, I sought to better understand how Indigenous Australian students might achieve success in their university studies, for I support the view that all knowledge is socially constructed. Hence, this inquiry 'focuses upon the words, actions and deeds of the participants and attends to the justice and democratic character of social institutions as those institutions have shaped and been shaped historically' (House, 1990: 163). Such information will enable me to make sense of the individual journeys and, in taking time to examine the intersections of these journeys with my own journey, I should have a better understanding of how far we, as Indigenous Australians, have now travelled and what choices we might have in determining our future direction.
Chapter Three
Australian universities

3.1: Contextualising Australian universities

According to Coady (2000), the modern idea of a university as an entity emerged almost 150 years ago out of a series of public lectures delivered by John Henry Newman, the principal founder and first rector of a new Catholic university in Dublin. In arguing the importance of Newman’s writing on the role of ‘change’ in society, Coady also suggests Newman’s work reveals the difficulty encountered in defining a university, for, if it is expected to reflect the ideals of the society in which it is located, it will, of necessity, be a dynamic and flexible operation, a body that by implication is not only able to change itself but has the capacity to lead societal change as inferred in Chapter One. Coady’s exploration of Newman’s ideal (2000: 3–10) is relevant to this study, for Australia, as a British colony, reflected the traditions of the coloniser, choosing to create ‘universities as facilitators of upward social mobility’ that complied with the ‘traditional or ‘qualified-entry’ settlement’ (Gale, 1999: 70), actually using examinations from universities such as Oxford and Cambridge as the means of determining students who could access Australian higher education institutions. Over time, private secondary and, later, public secondary schools directed their teaching to preparing students to sit for university controlled public examinations. While not all students who sat the examinations went on to university, there was widespread acceptance of the fact that the role of secondary schools, generally, was to prepare students for university, despite the fact that costs of attendance and frequent examinations ensured the exclusion of the majority of young people. Sponsorship was another form of ‘traditional settlement in accessing Australian higher education’ (Gale, 1999: 72) that ensured ‘membership of society’s elite tends to be completed early in life and on the basis of cultural privilege’ (Gale, 1999: 72).

MacIntyre and Marginson reveal that in Australia the ‘first universities were those of Sydney (established in 1850), Melbourne (1853), Adelaide (1874), Tasmania (1890), Queensland (1909) and Western Australia (1910)’ (2000: 54). Cochrane and Stedman explain that in the case of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide universities ‘the University of London and the Scottish universities tempered the influence of the old English and Irish universities’ whereas, in Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia ‘founders looked to the
progressive regional universities in Britain and, particularly in the case of Western Australia, to examples from the United States' (1998: 9). MacIntyre and Marginson point out that Sydney and Melbourne universities, while designed to cater for the needs of the upper class, survived by 'offering professional degrees, first in medicine and law, then science, engineering and later agriculture, commerce, architecture, education and other fields' (2000: 54). These early universities were small, secular, and inward looking, governed by a 'professional elite' that was determined to maintain control of operations, especially the behaviour of the teaching staff, in order to ensure government funding. They were also 'urban, largely non-residential and meritocratic' institutions with teachers offering a broad range of subjects and a generalist approach to 'a systematic body of knowledge' (MacIntyre, 2000: 55) that ensured the continued dominance of the Western knowledge paradigms even in professional courses. Due to their isolationist practices they were not popular within the community but, as MacIntyre and Marginson point out, this was of little moment in nineteenth century Australia where education was not considered a priority because the society of the day valued those who pursued wealth in practical ways due to the fact that the 'economy was based on the export of primary commodities and reliant on the importation of capital, labour and technology, which were adapted to local needs' (2000: 55).

It was between the two world wars that staff in universities became increasingly vocal about the need to exercise 'academic freedom' about a diversity of issues, including 'Aboriginal rights, immigration policy, the rise of facism and the dangers of appeasement' (MacIntyre, 2000: 59). This reflected the growing belief that universities were places of inquiry where people should be encouraged to engage in informed debate. The universities became centres of research and discussion, reflecting the intellectual connections between Australians and their international counterparts, especially in relation to human rights and international affairs. Molony suggests the universities of the 1950s catered for those who could afford to attend: the wealthy, those whose parents saved hard to get them there, and those who won scholarships (2000: 74). He implies that contemporary funding allocations will soon force universities to return to the 'full fee-paying student body' of the past (2000: 74).

In 1957, at the invitation of then Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Sir Keith Murray, head of the British University Grants Committee, conducted an inquiry into Australian universities. He found 'Australian universities to be short-staffed, poorly housed, badly equipped, with high student failure rates, and weak honours and postgraduate schools' (Maslen, 1994: 8). An important outcome of this was the establishment of the Australian Universities
Commission in 1959. Headed by Sir Lesley Martin, this body subsequently recommended an investigation into the future of tertiary education in Australia and it was the report of this study that ultimately led to a major shift in the structure of the system with the creation of the binary system. It was envisaged that, within a binary system, colleges of advanced education would provide courses with a strong vocational orientation and universities would continue to be places of scholarship and research (although, in fact, they were essentially teaching-only institutions). Menzies was well aware that, with the support of government funding, colleges of advanced education would likely grow and, in due course, provide a challenge to the universities but, as the binary system was much cheaper to run, it was a matter of political expediency (Maslen, 1994: 9), for he was not concerned with the long-term impact of his decision. Such decisions, of course, would have been of little interest to Aboriginal peoples who were still struggling to achieve even a basic education.

Following the turbulent decade of the 1960s, when social discontent and the civil rights movement in the US had engendered a re-think of the state of society, Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister when the Labor Government was elected in 1972. An immediate program of social change designed to create a more just and equal society had serious implications for universities because, in the interests of equity, all university tuition fees were abolished in 1974. Universities were no longer catering only for the elite and increasing student numbers meant academic staff had now to deal with a diversity of student educational experience.

This period marked the beginning of the enclave programs for Indigenous students in higher education, a major affirmative action within the equity strategy that focused on Indigenous access to education. Enclave programs were courses designed specifically for Indigenous Australian students — although non-Indigenous students could enrol in them — to prepare them for entry into mainstream programs. According to Jordan, enclaves provided Aboriginal students with 'additional support appropriate to their culture, lifestyle and educational background' (cited in Bin-Sallik, 1989: 22). There was little or no Indigenous content in the curriculum, although students often had the choice of taking mainstream subjects at a slower rate than normal whilst studying their bridging subjects. This enabled students studying mainstream subjects to access tuition, counselling, social and emotional support (Hester, 1994: 104). While providing special entry and a support system for Aboriginal students, these programs also maintained a focus on vocationally relevant courses such as education and social work programs; a reflection, perhaps, of the colonial mindset.
that saw education for Indigenous people purely as a preparation for work. Jordan (1985), in considering the effectiveness of the programs, suggested that the term ‘enclave’ was not helpful in projecting positive views and should be dropped (cited in Hester, 1994: 104). Such a suggestion implies that, within educational institutions, the negative attitudes toward Indigenous students, associated with colonial thinking, deficit theory and notions of cultural disadvantage discussed in Chapter One, persisted.

As the provision of support was generally seen to be the role of an ‘enclave’, it might be argued that they were the precursors of the Indigenous support units that exist in most universities today. The first enclave was established at the South Australian Institute of Technology (now the University of South Australia) in 1973, with the Aboriginal Task Force (ATF) nested within the School of Social Studies. This was followed by the Aboriginal Studies Unit at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University), which conducted a bridging program as well as providing support for Aboriginal students across the university. The Aboriginal Task Force program at the Darwin Institute of Technology (now the Northern Territory University) offered a Certificate in General Studies that enabled participants who completed the course to access jobs in the private sector or move on into further study in mainstream programs. In her 1985 report on the enclave programs, Jordan revealed that by 1984 ‘Aboriginal enclave programs located within 14 tertiary institutions across the country had assured a steady growth in Aboriginal tertiary education’ (cited in Bin-Sallik, 1989). While there can be no doubt that, at the time, these programs represented a considerable commitment to building an Indigenous presence within Australian universities, they also, as Bin-Sallik pointed out, ‘absolved institutions from the responsibility of incorporating enclave programs into their own financial and formal academic structures, which would have better ensured that courses were relevant to Aboriginal needs’ (1989: 2). In fact, Bin-Sallik cites Jordan’s report to argue that the major focus of Aboriginal tertiary education until 1984 had been teacher education. While this was no doubt related to the NAEC’s policy that aimed to have 1,000 teachers by 1990 (Hughes, 1988: 35; Bin-Sallik, 1989: 41), it did not mean that the twelve institutions that were committed to providing teacher education programs for Indigenous students were developing new courses.

Most teacher education programs already had subjects about Aborigines to prepare white teachers to work in Aboriginal communities. Therefore, with very little academic effort on the part of the institutions, Aboriginal students have
been encouraged to enrol in pre-existing white-oriented teacher training courses (Bin-Sallik, 1989: 41).

Failure to provide courses designed specifically for Indigenous Australian students represented an ideological position and tended to reflect a paternalistic view in terms of ‘what right have non-Aborigines, especially the Commonwealth Government, to dictate to Aborigines what they should study?’ (Hester, 1994: 104). Of course such attitudes also perpetuated education as a tool of colonisation by maintaining the sanctity of Western knowledges.

The 1970s may have been one of those periods Marginson had in mind, when he suggested that, while all things may not be possible, there would appear to be some times when there are greater possibilities than at other times. Researchers were beginning to investigate aspects of Indigenous education and a few Indigenous students were beginning to move through the university system. Charles Perkins, in 1967, was the first Aboriginal Australian to receive a university degree (Cope, 2000: 15 & 17) at the University of Sydney, closely followed by Eric Wilmott, who graduated with a science degree from Newcastle University in 1968 (Bin-Sallik, 1989). The Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme, better known as ABSTUDY, had been introduced by the Gorton Coalition Government in 1969, although at that time it was mainly used for apprenticeships and job training programs. The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme was introduced in 1970 to encourage Indigenous students to remain in education beyond the years of compulsory schooling (Bin-Sallik, 1989: 16; Stanley, 1998: 23–25) and this had serious, long-term implications for universities for they provided a visible symbol that higher education, previously the domain of non-Indigenous Australians, was now to be opened up to all Australians. While this implied a willingness on the part of universities to accept all comers, it also assumed that the conventional university could, in fact, cater for the learning needs of a diversity of people. And, for Indigenous Australians, it implied that they would now have access to the education that enabled non-Indigenous Australians to gain the type of employment that led to a more affluent and comfortable lifestyle. Such inferences may have reflected the growing awareness of, and commitment to, the principles of human rights that had occurred throughout all education sectors, during the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, in retrospect, from an Indigenous perspective, the most important effect of forcing universities to change their student selection processes was the hope this offered for future Indigenous engagement in the academe.
In 1983, the Hawke Labor Government came into power. Their administration was marked by a concern for equity that ran in parallel with more economically driven considerations — education, labour market and social policies. In fact, as Williams argues, the basis of Labor’s:

... higher education policy was concern about the capacity of the nation’s workforce to cope with technological change generally and, more specifically, with the fact of a changing occupational structure reflecting an economy in which the secondary sector was declining and the tertiary sector growing. Comparisons with Australia’s trading partners suggested that the nation’s store of educational capital may not have supported an adequate level of international competitiveness as these changes proceeded (1993: 2).

Within this political context, the increase in the number of places funded by government led to considerable growth in participation rates for young people, although, as Jordan reported (1985) only three of the enclave programs had implemented accredited courses designed specifically for Aborigines. These were the certificate course run by Darwin Institute of Technology; the Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Studies implemented by Armidale in 1984; and the linked Community Development Certificate, Associate Diploma in Community Development and the Bachelor’s degree in Aboriginal Affairs Administration offered by South Australian Institute of Technology. The South Australian College of Advanced Education had also implemented the Anangu Teacher Training program that enabled Aboriginal people who lived in remote locations to undertake teacher training within their communities (Bin-Sallik, 1989: 42). Such program offerings implied that universities perceived Indigenous Australians as needing education that would allow them to work with their own peoples, as opposed to moving out into mainstream occupations. From an Indigenous perspective, however, this practice might also be perceived as a means of encouraging the maintenance of the status quo by using Indigenous peoples to ensure the spread, and acceptance, of Western knowledge and epistemologies. Furthermore, in failing to make enclave programs an integral part of the university offering, these institutions could be seen as lacking a commitment to Indigenous peoples. With programs totally dependent on obtaining external funding, staff and students were forced to operate in a constant state of uncertainty regarding the future of the program. This situation also meant that staff of Indigenous units were excluded from the ‘formal institutional structure’, hence were unable to participate in ‘their institutions’ (sic) political and decision-making structures’ (Bin-Sallik, 1989: 43).
While this may have been the way things were done at that time, it also laid the foundation for the future marginalisation of Indigenous support units within universities at both individual and systemic levels. Indigenous Australians have now had a presence in tertiary institutions for almost thirty years, yet in most Australian universities the Indigenous unit remains essentially a support unit. The University of South Australia and the Northern Territory University are the only universities in Australia that have ever raised Indigenous Studies to the status of a faculty. The University of South Australia has since downgraded that standing and the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies within the Northern Territory University is so small, numerically, that it would be extremely difficult for it to achieve viability, either in terms of its financial independence or its sphere of influence within the wider university. At James Cook University and the University of South Australia, Indigenous Studies programs are now offered through Indigenous Schools that operate as academic units of equal status with other schools within the faculty structure of those universities. According to the *Indigenous Education Strategies in Higher Education, 2000–2002*, the major role of all other Indigenous units in Australian universities is the provision of a range of support services for Indigenous students, although it should be noted that in some institutions, staff of the unit have developed, and teach, Indigenous Studies subjects that are offered through other schools and some have established a strong research operation. Anderson *et al.*, in their 1997 study, examined the reality of universities' commitment to Indigenous peoples and the issues that most impact upon them in the pursuit of their tertiary studies, and concluded that there are some significant debates occurring in some universities concerning how best to cater for the needs and interests of Indigenous people (1998: 31).

The latter half of the 1980s was a period of considerable reform in the higher education sector. Senator Susan Ryan, Minister for Education in the first Hawke Government, was dumped following the furore over the government’s proposed policy on state aid (1983/84) and John Dawkins took over the portfolios of education, employment and training, following the 1987 election. Dawkins created a super department — the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) — so called because ‘the minister considered employment to be the natural focus and priority of education and hence of primary importance’ (Dudley, 1995: 97). Such thinking might be considered a paradigm shift in mainstream education in Australia, although employment had been the so-called priority of educational provision for Indigenous Australians over many decades. Ultimately, such an approach had been of little benefit to Indigenous Australians, most of whom remained unemployed. Dawkins, a
reformist and economic rationalist, said when taking over the education portfolio, that the
evidence the system was failing ‘was to be found in the fact that too few university courses
were directed to the needs of industry, that research successes often occurred more by
accident than design, and that the proportion of young adults in tertiary education was way
below nations with which Australia competed’ (Maslen, 1994: 6). These views, added to the
fact that the policy of students not paying tuition fees was beginning to impact upon the
government, should have been seen as portentous issues in terms of future government
policy.

In 1987, the Hawke Labor Government, in line with its principle of ‘user-pays’, introduced a
higher education administration charge (HEAC) of $250 for most full and part-time students.
In 1989, the administrative charge was abolished and the Higher Education Charges Scheme
(HECS), charging students approximately 20% of their tuition costs, was introduced. HECS
was actually established as an income contingent loan that would become repayable when a
person’s taxable income was about equal to average weekly earnings with repayment rates
linked to amount of income, thus creating a fund that would enable an increased number of
student places to be funded, without reducing incentives to undertake courses in higher
education.

Increasingly, following the removal of the ‘Federal-State match’ funding mechanism in
1974, universities, although coming under State and Territory jurisdiction constitutionally,
have tended to be ‘financially dependent on the Federal Government’ (Wu, 1996: 7). Hence,
the growing tendency for those in Federal Government to use funding as a major control
mechanism to exert influence on the way in which universities operate. While this might be
perceived as a positive factor for Indigenous students, given the outcomes of the 1967
referendum, successive federal governments have appeared reluctant to use the powers that
were vested in them or to be seen as in any way using funding for Indigenous education, to
influence the way in which universities cater for the needs of their Indigenous students.
Government respect for the autonomy of the institution is the standard response to
Indigenous requests for commonwealth support in effecting change in universities.

In addition to the funding reforms, the 1980s was also the decade in which ‘federally
initiated institutional reform had done away with the binary system through amalgamations,
replacing 68 colleges and 19 universities with a ‘unified national system’ of less that 40
universities’ (Williams, 1993: 5). Significantly, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) policies of
the late 1980s heralded increased government involvement or, at times, interference, in the operations of universities.

Whitlam, had valued intellectual thinking and the opinions of people with specific expertise, thus during the 1970s the Australian Schools Commission had been more a clearinghouse of ideas and policies than a policy initiator — a decentralised authority that became ‘an advisory body of educational experts’ able to produce ‘the beginnings of the concept of a policy based on needs and relative disadvantage’ (Tanner in Dudley, 1995: 60). The Fraser Government maintained this practice although, through the use of directional guidelines and ignoring the advice they were given, they effectively sidelined the Schools Commission. The demise of the commission was effected by the Hawke Labor Government for:

[the new, economically rationalist view supported a corporate model of direct control, guided by economic priorities rather than substantive education issues, and administered by experts in management. There is a consistency between the priorities of this administrative ideology and the priorities of the Hawke Government and later the Keating Government, with respect to education. Thus, both of these should be considered as reflections of a fundamental shift, or swing, in political ideology, from the welfarism and social democracy of the post Second World War era (particularly the 1960s and early 1970s) to the economic rationalism of the 1980s and 1990s (Dudley, 1995: 179).

Nowhere is this change of thinking more obvious than in the area of funding reforms. The Whitlam Labor Government, driven by a genuine commitment to equity, removed university tuition fees in 1974 in order to make university education available to all Australians. Fifteen years later, the Hawke Labor Government re-introduced tuition fees as a part of their total commitment to economic rationalism. In addition, the central plank of corporate management, tight control, was now evolving out of the government’s on-going reform activities. Hence, universities that had been treated as autonomous bodies in the past, now found, under the new unified system, that member universities (those seeking Commonwealth funding) had to meet certain requirements relating to size, teaching activities and accountability and that performance would be monitored on an annual basis.

By 1990 the participation rate — excluding nurses, who were not included in the university until 1985 — was 14.4% and this growth rate, according to the findings of Williams et al’s fourteen year longitudinal survey of higher education, was not likely to slow down because
demand was strong, due to the fact that the Year 12 retention rates had almost doubled from 34.5% (1980) to 60.3% (1989). This was helped by 'changing community expectations, an adverse labour market and government policies designed to encourage young people to stay at school longer' (1993: 3). The surge in numbers could not, however, be attributed only to school leavers, for, with growing acceptance of the concept of 'lifelong learning', mature age student enrolment was also increasing. By the end of the decade it was estimated that 7–10% of those who were eligible were unable to gain entry to university as the government was finding itself increasingly unable to keep up with funding the demand.

Despite criticism from the higher education community, the reforms continued. Some universities adapted more effectively than others, although most vice-chancellors had come to grips with the reality of the situation by the early 1990s. Maslen cites Professor John Maloney, Vice Chancellor of Curtin University of Technology in Perth, who, when suggesting it was time for universities to lose their ivory tower image, said:

> [e]ach university is very much a part of the society that nurtures it. It must therefore accept its enlarged mandate which states that along with its previous fundamental role in the realm of knowledge, it should turn its attention to wealth generation (1994: 20).

Yet, as Walker indicates, these 'economic imperatives' (2000: 1, section 12) have caused concern in terms of the capacity of many contemporary institutions to provide the types of opportunities that will contribute to the long term improvement of Indigenous participation and success in universities and, ultimately, provide a learning environment that will enable Indigenous scholars to build a corpus of Indigenous knowledge that is valued within the university. Nakata warns, however, that while it is critical that Indigenous academics 'engage with the corpus of knowledge to contest it conventionally and influence and shape thinking in relation to Indigenous issues' (2001: 112–3), it should be acknowledged that this is very difficult. Nakata highlights the cause of this difficulty as being that 'it requires the mastery of Western knowledge and thinking, mastery of logic and systems of thought and mastery of language, none of which comes easily without submerging Indigenous lifeworlds and experience' (2001: 113). If, as suggested, such dialogue that is essential to achieving change is beginning to happen, at least between Indigenous scholars, so the construction of an Indigenous corpus of knowledge within the academy is not inconceivable, although any university that takes up the Indigenous challenge by providing a space for the development of Indigenous epistemological stances might ultimately be contributing to their own demise.
— to the end of the university as we know it.

The Howard Coalition Government, which came into power in 1996, maintained the process of change in the higher education sector. The establishment of the Council for Reconciliation at the beginning of the 1990s had been intended to implement a reconciliation process that, philosophically, would bring people together, uniting the community and so achieve attitudinal change. By the end of the 1990s, however, Howard’s government had subtly shifted the focus back to one of addressing Indigenous disadvantage. They ensured acceptance of their views within the wider Australian community by linking all of their policies to their particular view of reconciliation, defined by Howard in his address at the Presentation of the National Reconciliation Documents at Corroboree 2000 in the following way.

Reconciliation will mean different things to different people. There is a spiritual component to reconciliation just as there is a practical component to it. And you cannot achieve reconciliation without acknowledging as I do and the Government I lead does, the self-evident fact that the Indigenous people of Australia are the most profoundly disadvantaged within our communities. And part of the process of reconciliation is to adopt practical measures to address that disadvantage (Reconciliation, 2000: 16).

When considered within the context of such empathy for the Indigenous plight and the professed preference for practical reconciliation, the changes that have been made in relation to the funding of Indigenous participation in education appear somewhat bewildering. With the lack of any real increase in funding for Indigenous support in higher education since 1996, the reality of how ‘practical reconciliation’ will be achieved is a concern, particularly from an equity perspective. Of even greater concern for Indigenous peoples within higher education has been the lack of reaction from Australia’s universities and few universities, as leaders in the Australian educational community, have made an official statement of apology for their failure to address the educational needs of Indigenous Australians, either within an historical or contemporary context.

3.2: Locating Indigenous education in the university sector

Nakata lists the various reviews undertaken into Indigenous education, training and employment during the 1980s that culminated in the Aboriginal Education Task Force
(1988) (1997: 18–19) and the subsequent development of the NATSIEP in 1995. In terms of structure, this policy encapsulated what many Indigenous people had long been demanding — an holistic approach to educational provision — and there was a high level of expectation that it was going to deliver an education that would enable Indigenous students across all sectors of education to achieve educational outcomes that would make them competitive in the labour market and, hence, provide them with access to a fairer share of employment opportunities. In terms of the process used in developing the policy and the intent of the policy itself, it was considered to be a watershed for it was the first time that ‘[s] formal agreement had been achieved with all States and Territories to join the Federal Government in a concerted effort to improve educational outcomes for indigenous peoples’ (Nakata, 1997: 19).

Within the particular context of higher education, it was envisaged the NATSIEP would ‘bring increased pressure on the universities and colleges to examine many of their fundamental practices and to implement changes which challenge some of the very basic assumptions which are enshrined in what is essentially an elitist system of higher education’ (Stringer, 1989: 13). According to Stringer, university programs had only ever been geared to the narrow interests of the upper social class and, in this way, had tended to exclude poor people or those who were culturally different. Hence, the Labor Government’s promise to implement the NATSIEP objectives was seen as providing the catalyst that would encourage the sector to address issues associated with making higher education more accessible to all groups within the community.

There were, however, some significant differences of opinion. For example, some Indigenous educators expressed distrust of the new policy and the fact that it did not address the power imbalance between white and black decision makers (Lippmann, 1994: 148). Concern was expressed regarding the apparent tension between the rhetoric of the NATSIEP that promoted ideals of Indigenous self-determination and then proceeded to direct policy implementation in ways that ensured the government was able to maintain control (Smith & Curtin, 1994: 33–42; Coombs, 1994: 71). Policy writers had constructed a universal ‘Indigenous person’ that personified notions of Indigenous unity rather than diversity, thus ignoring the reality of what educators were dealing with in their teaching environments (Smith, 1994: 33–41; McConaghy, 2000: 181; Luke, 1992: 143). Furthermore, the policy made much of the goal of achieving equity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as if the two were homogenous groups. The genuineness of this goal has been
questioned because 'the absences and aims of this [Indigenous] marginalised group are defined by reference to an imaginary centre, a mainstream Australian population whose educational, social justice and economic rights are presented as non-problematic, guaranteed and achieved' (Luke, 1992: 144).

The subsequent NATSI EP Review (1994) highlighted further concerns. The 'cultural agenda' (Nakata, 1997: 20) that was an integral part of the NATSI EP was being resisted by educators. The NATSI EP Review team was seen as having failed to address the diversity of Indigenous opinion by failing to give credence to some alternative proposals (McConaghy, 2000: 180), as McConaghy reveals in her discussion of various issues associated with the NATSI EP Review, that highlight the 'tensions which exist in the broader context of Indigenous social and political action . . . between the need to celebrate diversity within Indigenous Australia and the need to develop pan-Aboriginality as a strategy of strength and unity' (2000: 181). There is almost a suggestion that the impact of the NATSI EP Review was diminished because it:

. . . engaged in the same political project which its predecessors, the Hughes Report (Department of Education, Employment and Training 1988) and the NATSI EP (Department of Education, Employment and Training 1989) had engaged in; that is, the project of Indigenous unity. It did this at a time when the project of celebrating Indigenous diversity and the need to promote local negotiation was most needed. The result of these three projects, of consecutive recommendations . . . is a conformity which has the potential to be as oppressive as the earlier colonialist strategies which these projects seek to combat (2000: 181).

There are powerful messages for Indigenous Australians in the apparent ambivalence associated with the development and implementation of Indigenous education policy. Government support for higher education programs is intrinsically linked to what the government of the day wants out of it. There is little doubt that the actual level of resources allocated is critical to achieving a system that contributes effectively to the economic development of the country, but this belief is premised on the notion that strong economic growth will encourage higher education (Karmel, 1996: 10–11). It is critical that funding allocations to Indigenous higher education programs be maintained at levels that will allow time for Indigenous students to gain the higher education they need to be able to take up their share of the labour market and, hence, have the capacity to become economically
independent. As Minister for Higher Education and Employment Services, Baldwin’s argument that ‘social and economic objectives’ were ‘inter-related’ (1991: 13) and that the government, through the policy put forward in the 1988 White Paper, had highlighted the need for higher education institutions to contribute to Australia’s economic development, was of special interest to Indigenous peoples for it inferred that universities had a responsibility to provide higher education programs that better prepared all groups for participation in Australia’s future economic progress. Hence, Indigenous peoples during the 1990s, occupying the position at the lowest level of socio-economic status, could rightly expect universities to cater for their learning needs. Baldwin’s statement, with its focus on the importance of catering to diversity, further highlights the tensions implicit in the NATSIEP (1994) Review recommendations that imply there can be ‘an Indigenous’ approach that will suit all Indigenous students; a universal approach to the provision of appropriate and worthwhile Indigenous education, a “best approach” for all’ (McConaghy, 2000: 181).

In 1985, as part of their long-term plan to create a fairer society, the Hawke Labor Government had implemented the Higher Education Equity Program to ‘provide funding for innovative pilot projects aimed at increasing the participation of specific, disadvantaged groups in higher education. A range of other equity programs was also in place, including the Aboriginal Participation Initiative, which reserved places for Aboriginal students in higher education’ (Williams, 1993: 9).

In releasing the Federal Government’s policy statement, Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s, in October, 1991, Baldwin emphasised the importance of the 1990s as a period of systemic consolidation to absorb the unprecedented level of structural change that had occurred since the release of the Government’s 1988 White Paper (Baldwin, 1991: 12). In focusing on the issue of equity in Indigenous higher education, Baldwin said:

The Government has also introduced new arrangements to promote equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education. Each institution is now required to develop an Aboriginal education strategy in close consultation with the Aboriginal community. This is separate from, but obviously complementary to, the institutional equity plan. The Government has also recently boosted funding to support Aboriginal participation in higher education, with each Aboriginal student now attracting a one third loading over and above normal operating grant funding (1991: 2).
Once again, this expressed support for improving equity was argued within an economic framework. Baldwin argued that the sector’s over-enrolment in 1991 had placed considerable financial pressure on the government. He also raised concerns about the deteriorating quality of programs, although he did acknowledge that higher education had a vital role to play in addressing issues of social and economic progress and generally adding to the quality of life for all groups within society (1991: 13).

A critical element in the provision of equitable access is to ensure that students have the financial capacity to survive while studying. DEET commissioned an evaluation of the ABSTUDY program in 1984 and found that there had been a considerable rise in the number of Aboriginal people accessing the program to undertake special courses such as enclave programs and bridging and orientation programs. The report recommended a number of structural and administrative changes — the creation of an overarching body within Commonwealth Education that would administer ABSTUDY; that ABSTUDY revert to its original purpose of providing funding support for individual students; and that there be a substantial rise in the level of ABSTUDY allowance to achieve parity with DEIR formal training allowances (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 158). This was a key issue, given the low socio-economic status of Indigenous students. Miller, in his 1985 report, had focused on the findings of Williams and Chambers’ 1984 report to argue that ABSTUDY payments were lower than what people received on unemployment benefits and thus would not attract people into tertiary studies. Miller suggested that student allowances should be linked to unemployment benefits to ensure they could keep up with inflation (1985: 221) and that ‘special measures, such as ABSTUDY . . . [should] . . . continue until such time as the tertiary education attainments of Aboriginal people are significantly higher than is currently the case’ (1985: 223).

In addition, the Select Committee’s Report on Aboriginal Education, conducted during 1985, highlighted difficulties associated with the funding of university programs, pointing out that there were multiple agencies, all with their own guidelines and requirements, involved in the provision of funding of post-schooling programs. This added to the complexity of obtaining and acquitting funds. In addition, most schemes allocated funds on an annual basis, making it almost impossible for institutions to build continuity into their program planning (Commonwealth Government, 1985: 154–155). While the findings of these reports clearly indicated that there was a need to consider the way in which support funding was provided to both institutions and to individual students, it must be
acknowledged that the Federal Government, through the provision of these financial support programs for students in secondary and tertiary education, has made a positive contribution to providing equitable educational opportunities for Indigenous students in this country.

In August 1997, DEETYA commenced a review of the ABSTUDY program. Stanley and Hansen had already commenced a review of the ABSTUDY program for ATSIC in April of the same year. The aim of the ATSIC review was to examine ways in which ABSTUDY may have contributed to improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students and how those educational outcomes could be seen to be linked to improved employment outcomes.

The Stanley and Hansen review of ABSTUDY, however, revealed that a serious situation existed in relation to Indigenous education outcomes. This was attributed to the limited levels of literacy and numeracy skills of Indigenous students. In addition Indigenous students were registering a decrease in apparent retention rates at the Year 10 level and a much lower apparent retention rate for Year 12 in comparison with non-Indigenous students (the gap being 42.1% in 1996). Significantly, the review highlighted the fact that, due to the flow-on of Indigenous disadvantage from the primary and secondary levels through into the higher education sector, Indigenous students tend to enrol and graduate in lower level courses or basic education programs. Furthermore, the proportion of Indigenous higher education course completions in 1995, compared with all Australian completions, was about one-third of what it should be as a ratio of the Indigenous population overall and despite the higher rate of population growth for Indigenous people and their younger age distribution compared with the overall Australian population. The report also revealed that educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples were much worse in some regions of Australia than others. It was argued that such outcomes run contrary to the goals of NATSIEP (1989) and the MCEETYA priorities (1995), both of which had been endorsed by the Commonwealth, and all States and Territories (1998: 2). In addition, Stanley and Hansen’s report indicated that the proposed changes to ABSTUDY ‘are likely to disadvantage a significant proportion of mature age students’ (1998: 135).

The Howard Government, having already lowered the threshold for the commencement of the repayments in relation to HECS debts, also introduced means testing for ABSTUDY applicants. Such changes maintain tight government fiscal controls and place additional hardship on many Indigenous students, whose income is often a crucial component in the overall survival of a large extended family. Within the context of recent Government
actions, it would seem that Eckermann’s contentions regarding the persisting neglect of Aboriginal peoples within Australia’s education, social, legal and economic systems (1992: 28) remain relevant. Hence, to achieve the NATSIEP goals of more equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians, the willingness of universities to take responsibility and provide leadership will be crucial.

The importance of a more equitable allocation of resources in relation to the provision of educational opportunities for Indigenous Australians becomes obvious in any investigation of the situation that has begun to emerge in higher education since the Coalition Government took power in 1996. In late 2001, the Indigenous representatives of the Indigenous reference group to the National Tertiary Education Union issued a media release to voice their concern that contemporary Commonwealth policies have resulted in a decline of 15.2% in Indigenous enrolments in higher education between 1999 and 2000. Total Indigenous participation in the sector fell by 8.1% during the same period. According to Allport:

> [t]here are now less Indigenous Australians in higher education than there were in 1997, and commencements are now below 1995 levels. These abysmal figures stem directly from changes to ABSTUDY introduced by the Coalition Government which came into effect in January 2000 (Allport, 2001: media release).

Based on this evidence, it could be argued that federal governments appear to have learnt little from the historical experience or, alternatively, that internal colonisation/institutional racism, as defined in Chapter One, continues to dominate the development and implementation of government policies and practices, especially those that impact upon the lives of Indigenous peoples. Ignoring Miller’s advice concerning the critical need to maintain appropriate levels of ABSTUDY funding (Miller, 1985: 223) is a perfect example. An evaluation by Byrne et al (1995) had demonstrated that Indigenous secondary and tertiary students considered ABSTUDY critical in terms of their capacity to survive while studying, while various other Commonwealth reports had also highlighted the importance of ABSTUDY. In DEETYA’s Annual Report of 1995–96, it was reported:

> An evaluation of ABSTUDY was conducted in 1994–95. The review found that ABSTUDY was a major contributing factor to improving retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (DEET, 1996(a): 163).

Yet, in 1997, the Howard Coalition Government brought down:
a budget that was to address serious fiscal deficiencies in the Australian economy. It was continually stressed that all sectors of the Australian community must make a contribution for the greater good. All government departments were to implement measures that would assure savings. The Department of Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), after ‘consultation’ indicated that ABSTUDY would be cut to assist in fulfilling these departmental guidelines (Flood, 1998: 115).

As Flood (1998) indicates, Indigenous groups made strong representation to the government that ABSTUDY was a program that was achieving positive outcomes and there ‘appeared to be no obvious rationale for the savage cuts, other than those motivated by economic rationalisation’ (Flood, 1998: 115). Their protests were ignored. Perhaps this had more to do with internal colonisation than economic rationalism.

3.3: What the statistics say

The statistics provided in this chapter reveal the reality of where Indigenous Australians are located collectively within the Australian university sector. They represent a reinterpretation of statistics available in various Commonwealth Government or other educational publications. While acknowledging that the Australian Indigenous cohort of the total Australian population was less than 2% in 1996 (ABS, 1996: 13), Walker makes an important point in calling for caution in comparing Indigenous student outcomes with those of ‘non-Indigenous university student populations and other equity groups’ for ‘no other group has experienced the same historical and social influences as Indigenous Australians’ (2000: 1, Section 3). For example, the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force (1988) report stated there were less than 100 Aboriginal students participating in tertiary education in 1969 (Hughes, 1988: 11). It is likely that this figure included TAFE statistics, for the 1998 Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy reported that 72 Aboriginal students were enrolled in higher education programs in 1972. This had increased to 854 students or 0.3% of the total student population by 1982 (DEET, 1987: 102), and, by 1986, there were a total of 4,800 Aboriginal students in TAFE and higher education programs (Hughes, 1988: 11). The higher education component of this total was equivalent to 0.6% of the Aboriginal population although, at that time, approximately 2.5% of all Australians were studying in universities (Hughes, 1988: 12). The Task Force revealed that equivalent age participation rates in 1986 showed Aboriginal participation in higher education programs was from 3 to 8
times lower than that for other Australians:

The participation of Aboriginal people in all levels of education has increased markedly over the past two decades. The improvements are dramatic only because the level of Aboriginal participation in education was minuscule two decades ago (Hughes, 1988: 9).

The Task Force also reported such improvements were having the effect of hiding the real issue — the overwhelming educational disadvantage faced by Aboriginal people.

If there was parity in participation in education between Aboriginal people and the rest of the Australian community, another 23,000 Aborigines aged between 5 and 24 years would be enrolled in education in 1988. This represents a staggering 20% of all Aboriginal people aged 5 to 24 years (Hughes, 1988: 10).

Another critical finding of the Task Force focused on enrolment patterns, revealing that the majority of Aboriginal students enrolled in lower level programs and that 70% of Aboriginal enrolments favoured the arts, humanities, social science and teacher education, whereas, only 40% of all other students enrolled in these fields. While it is likely that there were complex issues underlying these patterns of enrolment, there are two obvious causes. Firstly, the tendency to enrol in lower level programs may have been caused by the limited educational background of most Indigenous students, while the preponderance of enrolments in the arts, humanities, social sciences and teacher education, may well have been linked, in part, to the establishment of the enclaves as discussed earlier in this chapter. While Figure 11 demonstrates the tendency to enrol in lower level programs, it also indicates that Indigenous peoples with higher level educational qualifications are likely to be employed at rates similar to those of all Australians.

Figure 11 also shows that the rates for those without qualifications were considerably poorer in 1981 and had declined even further by 1986. The decline in employment for unqualified people during this period was related to a number of issues. During the late 1960s and 1970s, structural change in the pastoral industry and the introduction of new technology to many workplaces, coinciding with legislative change requiring the compulsory payment of award wages from 1968, (Coombs, 1994: 87) resulted in hundreds of Indigenous peoples becoming unemployed. Furthermore, due to the geographic locations in which many Indigenous people had worked, the growing unemployment impacted most severely upon rural and remote towns across northern Australia.
Figure 11: Effect of education qualifications on employment rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, aged 15+, 1981 and 1986.

Source: The above figure was compiled from Australian Bureau of Statistics data collected in the 1986 national census, included in Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, Table 5, p.15, 1988.

As unemployment for unskilled, unqualified Indigenous peoples rose during the 1970s and 1980s, it was an obvious issue for the Task Force to target in its investigations. The Task Force finding that there was inequitable access to higher education for people living in small rural and remote locations (Hughes, 1988) was supported by the Dawkins 1987 Discussion Paper’ argument that:

... substantial inequities in access to higher education remain for some groups in the population, particularly:

- people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds;
- people from rural and isolated areas; and

Miller's (1985) assertion regarding the value of higher education in relation to subsequent employability is supported by statistics released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2002, showing that Indigenous students achieving higher education qualifications continue to be employed at a comparable rate to non-Indigenous Australians. Equally significant,
however, in view of the current Commonwealth Government's stance on the importance of vocational education for Indigenous students, is that these statistics reveal that Indigenous students who graduate through the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector are less likely to obtain employment than those who have graduated through the higher education sector and are also 'less likely to be employed than all VET graduates' (ABS, 2002: 113). These outcomes provide strong positive evidence of the value of higher education for Indigenous Australians.

Figure 12: Proportion of 1999 graduates employed in 2000.


The statistics in Figure 12 above are based on the population of graduates in labour force — either seeking employment or in employment. VET graduates have been surveyed in May; higher education graduates surveyed in April or October depending on whether completed studies in mid-year of end of year.

Figure 13 is based on the statistics pertaining to the gender ratios within the Indigenous and non-Indigenous higher education enrolment cohorts. The statistics show 22–26% more Indigenous females enrolled than Indigenous males and 6–8% more females to males in the non-Indigenous category. In providing comparisons of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous gendered cohorts, this figure demonstrates the considerable difference in actual enrolment numbers between these student cohorts.
Figure 13: Higher Education Students, showing gender ratios - Indigenous males as % of all male enrolments and all males as % of total enrolment plus Indigenous females as % of all female enrolments and all females as % of total student enrolment, 1991–2000.


To contextualise Figure 13 above, actual enrolment numbers for Indigenous students range from 5,105 (0.9%) of the non-Indigenous enrolment of 525,305 in 1992 to peak at 8,001 (1.17%) in 1999, and to decrease to to 7,342 (1.2%) of the non-Indigenous enrolment of 614,076, by 2001. There has been no decrease in non-Indigenous numbers even if the rate of growth may have slowed. In real terms, non-Indigenous student enrolments were almost 103 times greater than Indigenous enrolments in 1992 and over 83 times greater in 2001. These ratios concerning the data in Figure 13, demonstrate that, while Indigenous student numbers have increased, such growth is infinitesimal in comparison with the real numbers in the non-Indigenous student growth.

Figure 14 (below) extrapolates the gender statistics for Indigenous higher education students only in order to more clearly demonstrate the gender imbalance. The data presented in Figures 11 and 12 supports the arguments of the Miller Report (1985) and the Aboriginal Task Force (1988) by demonstrating the link between higher education courses and employment outcomes. Yet the data used in Figure 13 would seem to imply that, unless more Indigenous peoples participate in tertiary courses, they will, as a group, continue to be disadvantaged in the labour market. The gender imbalance demonstrated within the Indigenous student cohort indicates that more Indigenous women than men would have the higher qualifications needed to access more highly paid jobs. Figure 14, in particular, highlights the urgency for Indigenous males to engage in higher education in order to
improve their capacity to access more highly paid jobs. Furthermore, the importance of this issue is highlighted in Dudgeon, Garvey and Pickett’s (2000) seminal publication, Working with Indigenous Australians: A Handbook for Psychologists (Dudgeon, 2000: 88) and in the report of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence (2000: 58).

**Figure 14:** Male and female Indigenous students as % of total Indigenous Higher Education enrolments 1987-2001.


Such revelations further emphasise the importance of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force in the education history of this country. The establishment of the Task Force represents a turning point for Aboriginal education because it was the first time in ‘settlement history’ (Kalantzis, 1996) that a group of Aboriginal people had been given the responsibility for carrying out such significant research. The Task Force report clearly demonstrated that Aboriginal people understood the reasons for their socio-economic positioning within Australian society and recognised that the acquisition of non-Aboriginal knowledge and understandings could be critical to Aboriginal advancement. The Task Force used the truth about Aboriginal educational disadvantage to reveal that many Indigenous Australians were being denied their basic right to at least 10 years of education and, in forcing this issue of human rights into the public arena, inspired hope for the future in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples. In arguing the need for new policy, the Task Force made the important connection that without equitable educational opportunities Indigenous peoples would never be able to aspire to their rightful share of the jobs available.
within the labour market, a view that would seem aligned with the Hawke Government’s 1983 argument that to achieve its economic goals, ‘greater efficiency [in the education system] was required — along with a much closer integration of education, labour market and social policies’ (Williams, 1993: 2).

The 1990 implementation of the Commonwealth Government’s equity plan re-inforced the NATSIEP by clearly articulating the need for a concerted national effort to achieve balance in student populations with the following statement in the *Fair Chance For All* document:

> The overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole (DEET National Board of Employment, 1990: 2).

Accountability, in relation to Indigenous participation in higher education, was to be achieved through the preparation of the annual Indigenous Higher Education Strategy as outlined in Baldwin’s 1988 White Paper. Following the implementation of the equity strategy, participation rates did improve. In 1989 and 1990, the participation rates in universities held steady at approximately 0.8% of the total student enrolment and over the next 3 years steady growth occurred. Unfortunately, this growth was so limited that, by 1993, Indigenous students accounted for only 0.97% of the total student enrolment in higher education programs, insufficient to establish a ‘presence’ in the academy (DEET, 1993).

So, despite the optimism that had greeted the implementation of the NATSIEP policy in 1990, it soon became evident that the rhetoric did not match the reality. Amidst growing frustration within Indigenous communities, the Labor government set up a review into the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy in October 1993. As indicated in Chapter One, Indigenous people’s concerns about ‘equity and reconciliation’ (DEET, 1994: 14) was highlighted in the review report which insisted that ‘equity is not just a matter of numbers’ and that Indigenous people:

> . . .do not participate in education to the extent that other Australians participate, particularly in secondary education; in technical and further education and in higher education they participate only in particular and narrow fields of study. Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders still did not enjoy equitable and appropriate outcomes from education (DEET, 1995: 22).
Such findings were a clear indication that in a democratic society such as Australia it was time that universities accepted their responsibility to provide the support and leadership that was crucial in enabling Indigenous Australians to achieve the human rights that are fundamental to the creation of a socially just society. This is a complex task for, as Bird Rose, contends in discussing what she terms the 'entangled terrains' of today's Australians, '[s]ettlers are by no means a homogenous group; some seek reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, while others hold to the powerful view that Indigenous people will have to disappear (assimilate) in order to be accepted' (1998: 30).

Bennett, in arguing that the 'reconciliation process' was essentially concerned with 'increasing awareness in white Australians of Aboriginal people and their needs and hence bringing about attitudinal change in the majority of the population' (1999: 35), concludes that there have been mixed reactions to the issue of reconciliation within various sectors of the Australian community. One of the areas where this ambivalence has been most noticeable is within the higher education sector.

It is timely, at this point, to consider some of the strategies implemented by those universities wishing to demonstrate a commitment to the reconciliation process. The University of South Australia (UNISA) was the first university in Australia 'to adopt a policy of explicit affirmation for Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (Lane, 1998: 21), an act that clearly demonstrated their commitment to the education of Indigenous Australians and that was reflected in the activities of the Student Association at UniSA and the contribution of the U Animation School to curriculum review within all award programs at UniSA. Data regarding the commitment of other universities to reconciliation was gathered by writing to each university, requesting information concerning any strategies for reconciliation that they had put in place. The responses revealed that, while a few universities appear to have made a public commitment to the process — usually in the form of a Reconciliation Statement — others appear to have overlooked the whole event. The Queensland University of Technology developed a statement that outlines their responsibility as an educational institution toward achieving reconciliation. Other universities indicating that they did have Reconciliation Statements in place included Edith Cowan University, University of Wollongong and The University of Melbourne. These universities, apart from acknowledging the Indigenous peoples of their local areas, have committed to creating inclusive educational environments that encourage Indigenous enrolment and participation. Two other universities, La Trobe University and Charles Sturt
University, indicated that Reconciliation Statements were a 'work-in-progress', although the proposed date for completion of the statement was not provided. The University of Melbourne and James Cook University created Chairs of Indigenous Studies as a strategy toward reconciliation. The University of Notre Dame has called its Broome campus, the Reconciliation Campus. Three other universities responded with a promise to forward information concerning what they were doing but, subsequently, that information was never provided.

In a sense, this situation is a reflection of what happened within the wider community. While there were individuals and organisations engaged in the process in a highly visible way, there were many, including some Aboriginal people, who could best be described as 'onlookers'. This could reflect a degree of confusion within the broader community as to what reconciliation was really about. Reynolds, in discussing the process, stated:

> It is manifestly a worthy objective but it is not completely clear who is to be reconciled to what or to whom. Presumably Aborigines and Islanders are to be reconciled to loss of land and sovereignty. If that is the case they have already delivered.... It is not immediately apparent what non-indigenous Australians are expected to become reconciled with. It can't relate to the fact that they have started treating Aborigines with justice and fairness, belatedly they have begun to do the right thing. (Reynolds, 1996: 183-4).

Langton, in discussing the background to the establishment of the reconciliation process, believes that it evolved out of concerns emerging from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Langton, who had worked for the Royal Commission in the Northern Territory, argued that:

> There's a detumescence of the frontier taking place, a suppressed anger and rage amongst the white population. It's non-specific in a way — they themselves don't understand and can't deny the reasons for their rage against Aboriginal people — but it's expressed in a number of forms: one of them for instance, is the subtle, but nevertheless tangible, forms of apartheid existing in all rural and remote-area townships, the cultural regime of Them and Us (Langton, 1998: 231).

If this is the reality out of which the reconciliation process emerged, then universities have an enormous responsibility to work with the Australian community to bring about a situation
where all Australians become genuinely committed to the process of reconciliation for, as Dudgeon argues, it is time for a shift in thinking. She points out that Aboriginal people need to develop co-operative working relationships with non-Indigenous Australians in particular areas of expertise, if they are to achieve social and emotional well-being for the Indigenous peoples of this country. The implication that reconciliation is an essential part of the process of Indigenous empowerment and self-determination (Dudgeon, 1997: 5), coupled with Langton's argument that relationships between black and white in this country need to be resolved, provide universities with a valuable guide in terms of what needs to happen. It would seem that the time has come for universities to listen to these legitimate voices from inside the academe, to heed their call, and fulfil their obligations as leaders of the public debate process that usually precedes and accompanies societal change. Reconciliation must be taken up in the universities if it is to succeed.

In urging universities to engage in the process, however, it needs to be acknowledged that this may not be an easy goal to achieve. While many in the higher education sector have embraced change during the past decade, it is also obvious that there are those who continue to engage in the resistance movement, fighting for 'what universities [used to] stand for' (Molony, 2000: 72–84), or struggling to understand what innovation has meant in terms of creating learning institutions that cater for the needs of twenty-first century learners (Coady, 2000: 3–25). These are the people who seem to experience some difficulty in Marceau's contention that:

... knowledge generation and transmission can take many forms. We need to recognise that there is no one best way. Everything can and should be rethought as the social context and role of universities change. The essential thing is to rethink broadly enough (Marceau, 2000: 215–6).

But apart from their responsibility in taking the lead in the reconciliation debate, Walker cites McInnis et al and Western et al to remind universities that, in today's society, they have an additional responsibility.

... universities now have to cater for a much greater diversity between and within various groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Indigenous Australians are one of these groups... Several writers have emphasised the fact that if these students are to succeed, universities will need to adapt to meet the changing needs and expectations of these different groups within the student population (2000: 4, Section 2).
The reluctance of a university to engage in the reconciliation process as a pathway to providing more equitable opportunities for all students could indicate that staff, including senior management, fear change and lack the capacity to accept such an important challenge because of weak or incompetent leadership. Alternatively, failure to address issues of equity and reconciliation could well reflect the level of institutional racism embedded within an organisation, where staff, including senior management, use the process of internal colonisation to ignore the reality of what is being enacted in their university’s learning environment, thus choosing not to engage in what could well be a liberating process for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the university community.

Such inaction highlights the tension between the rhetoric attached to the Commonwealth’s equity policies and the reality of what is happening within universities. For example, the original NATSIEP documents set out twenty-one long term goals that were to be achieved through a range of strategies in the areas of access, participation, retention and success. Yet, since the implementation of these strategies, there has been continual change in the terminology used; change that creates confusion as educators endeavour to re-conceptualise the original goals in line with new performance indicators. Hence, retention became apparent retention and now appears to be attrition, while success was re-invented as progress which some perceive of as completion. While continual changes in terminology may reflect the complexity of trying to provide a more precise definition of the desired outcomes for the long-term NATSIEP goals, they could also demonstrate the political determinism (Cignetti, 1984: 77) of the Commonwealth Government to maintain control of the Indigenous education agenda.

That such determinism exists became apparent in a meeting between the Directors of Indigenous Units in universities and members of DETYA’s Higher Education staff in Canberra in late 1998. The purpose of the meeting was to inform the Directors of the proposed changes to funding allocations that were about to be implemented. In that meeting a number of Directors passionately questioned the decision to use performance indicators such as retention and success to determine funding allocations for an equity group with a prolonged history of educational disadvantage. Despite their concerns, their voices were ultimately ignored and the proposed model implemented. From an Indigenous perspective, such action renders questionable the Government’s stated commitment to the principles of social justice that it claims underpins the implementation of its equity strategies.
Undertaking this study also disclosed difficulties with the statistical data available. With earlier data collections, it was often difficult to determine exactly who was included in the higher education statistics and exactly what was being measured. This has been overcome, to some extent, with the DEET-funded publication *Equity and General Performance Indicators in Higher Education*, that provides various definitions and indicators to be used in determining an individual institution’s ‘performance against State and national reference values, and with the system as a whole’ (Martin, 1994: xv). It is these performance outcomes that determine the allocation of equity funding to institutions. Significantly, Martin’s research was undertaken within a university environment, Flinders University in South Australia, and the data used to establish definitions and indicators was gathered from universities. Involvement in this attempt to define equity groups, suggested some institutional commitment to equity, as catering for the learning needs of such groups had not been a concern of the traditional university. Furthermore, as membership of equity groups is dependent upon self-identification, most universities in Australia now include questions, such as ‘Are you of Australian Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander descent?’, that allow for self-identification in the data collection section of their enrolment forms. The real value of the indicators, however, is that they maintain an equity profile across the sector as a whole.

3.3.1: Access

As argued in Chapter One, the key to ensuring Indigenous Australian ‘self-determination’ is access to education: the type of education individuals want. Using Martin’s definition, access is calculated as the number of commencing students in an equity group as a percentage of the total commencing students. Figure 15 shows access rates for Indigenous Australian students in higher education during the 1990s and reveals that, although progress was slow, Indigenous Australians were accessing higher education in numbers very close to their proportion of the total Australian population. The plateau effect that emerges is the result of the low enrolment variance in the statistics being used in calculating the ratios. For example, while 1997, 1998 and 1999 appear as a similar ratio, the actual numbers were in fact gradually decreasing by a small amount each year. As revealed in this figure, the largest decrease occurred in the 2000 statistics. In a paper dealing with Indigenous participation and performance (2001), DETYA discussed the changes emerging in the make-up of the Indigenous student cohort since 1997, indicating that:

Numbers of full-time Indigenous commencing students peaked in 1997, then decreased in 1998 (nearly 6%) and again in 2000 (approximately 1%). A small
decrease in part-time commencing students was seen in 1999 (approximately 1%) and continues in 2000 (approximately 11%) (DETYA, 2001: 1).

The department’s reaction to the statistics revealed in this paper indicate a degree of ambivalence for, having acknowledged the decrease in Indigenous numbers in 2001, the crossroads publication seeking input to the higher education review of 2002/03 provides only a complicated positive spin on the decrease then simply glosses over it with statements about the increase in Indigenous access between 1989 and 2001.

Figure 15: Commencing Indigenous students, as % of all commencing students 1992–2001.

Source: Chart compiled from DEST National Higher Education Statistics Collection, 2002.

Figure 16 reveals that over half of the total Indigenous student body is made up of commencing students, a statistic which suggests a high attrition rate in subsequent years. The fluctuations in access, particularly the decrease in commencing students, are more obvious in this figure as the ratios are being calculated using only Indigenous students statistics, hence all numbers are smaller.

The statistics provided in Table 1 (see page 155) further support the analysis of Figure 16, demonstrating that Indigenous student enrolment peaked in 1997 at 54% of all Indigenous students, also resulting in a peak of student load (54.8%). Analysis also reveals a closer correlation between actual student numbers and load in both commencing and all male groups as compared with those of female students. This may indicate a preference for part-time study by female students.
According to DEST, the numbers of Indigenous students enrolling in full-time study through the external mode compared to the internal mode has continued to increase in recent years, with significant growth in the 1998 and 1999 years. For example, almost 200 students participated in external studies in 1997 with the number rising to almost 600 in 1999, before falling back to just over 400 students in 2000. In general, the number of part-time Indigenous students who study externally are greater than the number of full-time students (except in 1999) but there has not been as great a variation in this group. Approximately 500 part-time students were enrolled externally in 2000. There are, however, two areas of concern in relation to these statistics. In a paper on undergraduate completions published in 1999, Urban et al argued that the mode of study chosen by students is a critical one, for the data indicate that students ‘who studied full-time, irrespective of their basis of entry to university, had significantly higher completion rates than those who studied part-time or externally . . . [and] . . . part-time students had significantly higher completion rates than those who studied externally’ (1999: 11). DETYA, in a paper on Indigenous participation and performance, suggests that a possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that ‘[s]tudents studying externally often choose to do so because they have other commitments, and frequently their choice to study externally leaves them with less academic and peer support than those on campus’ (2001: 7). Interestingly, Bourke, in his 1996 study into factors that influence Indigenous Australian performance in universities, revealed that more students in his university were choosing to take up external studies and he attributed this trend to the fact that they were able to remain in their families and communities and, hence, continue to access valuable support and motivation (1996: 40).
Table 1 provides an overview of the actual numbers and comparative student load of commencing Indigenous students in higher education. Due to changes in the published DEST data collections, the student load data for Indigenous students as a separate group could not be located for 1999. A comparison of actual enrolments with load supports the argument that Indigenous students tend not to take a full load. While this may reflect a tendency to study part-time or externally, it does indicate that Indigenous students are likely to take longer to complete an undergraduate program than their non-Indigenous peers.

Table 1: Commencing and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students by gender and student load – 1995–2001.

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<tr>
<td>Commencing – Male</td>
<td>1386</td>
<td>1376</td>
<td>1556</td>
<td>1453</td>
<td>1543</td>
<td>1296</td>
<td>1247</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2237</td>
<td>2248</td>
<td>2472</td>
<td>2544</td>
<td>2597</td>
<td>2214</td>
<td>2319</td>
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<td>3624</td>
<td>4028</td>
<td>3997</td>
<td>4140</td>
<td>3510</td>
<td>3566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Indigenous – Male</td>
<td>2573</td>
<td>2604</td>
<td>2818</td>
<td>2812</td>
<td>2926</td>
<td>2610</td>
<td>2604</td>
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<td>4643</td>
<td>4977</td>
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<td>6956</td>
<td>7461</td>
<td>7789</td>
<td>8001</td>
<td>7350</td>
<td>7342</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Commencing – Male</td>
<td>1111</td>
<td>1105</td>
<td>1287</td>
<td>1174</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1778</td>
<td>1768</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1977</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2890</td>
<td>2873</td>
<td>3287</td>
<td>3151</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All Indigenous – Male</td>
<td>2029</td>
<td>2057</td>
<td>2292</td>
<td>2267</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>1142</td>
<td>1029</td>
<td>1026</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


The data used in Table 1 also demonstrates the continuing trend, previously discussed in relation to Figures 13 and 14, for more Indigenous females than Indigenous males to access university studies. Encel, in his paper on Indigenous participation in higher education,
reveals that since 1987 female higher education students as a proportion of all students have outnumbered male students but 't[he predominance of females among Indigenous students is much more marked. In 1987, 60.3 per cent of Indigenous students were female and in 1999, 63.4 per cent' (Encel, 2000: 4).

Figure 17 demonstrates Indigenous access in the broad fields of study in 2001, showing the continuing trend for Indigenous students to focus on undergraduate studies in the humanities, especially in the Arts and Education. There has been some growth in access to health studies following a decrease in 1997.

Figure 17: Comparison of commencing and all Indigenous student enrolments in broad field of study, 2001.

![Bar chart showing enrollment by field of study for commencing and all Indigenous students in 2001.]

Source: Adapted from DEST Selected Higher Education Statistics 2001.

Figure 18 reveals that Indigenous students continue to access university through enabling programs. While there has been a decline in numbers in recent years, it is worth noting that the beginning of the decline in enabling course numbers was reflected by a drop in commencing numbers in 1998. While DEST suggests this may have been the result of a sudden move into the VET sector by Indigenous students, the reality is that two reviews into the ABSTUDY scheme had been conducted the previous year. Anecdotal evidence that emerged from Indigenous units around the country indicated that students were concerned that their allowances would be cut as a result of the reviews. DEST, in its 2002 Higher Education Report for the 2002–2004 Triennium, indicates 't[here have been claims that changes to ABSTUDY have deterred Indigenous students from higher education. Initial
Departmental investigation does not substantiate these claims, although it may be the case that community perceptions have been affected' (2002, p. 10, Section 1). Considering the evidence of these statistics, it would appear that 'community perceptions' were affected to the extent that this sudden decrease in commencing numbers for access programs, against the previous growth trends, heralded the more serious decline over subsequent years, to the extent that, by 1999, enrolment numbers had decreased to 1995 levels. This decline could also reflect a tightening of entry requirements in access programs around the country. There has been increasing pressure from the commonwealth government for TAFE and universities to build closer relationships so that students might have improved pathways within the areas of training and higher education. Hence, in some locations, Indigenous units in universities and TAFE institutions, have sought to collaborate in the provision of access programs, rationalizing course offerings so that the load is more evenly shared between the partner institutions and students, ultimately, have greater choice.

Figure 18: Indigenous students enrolled in enabling programs, 1995–2001.


Interestingly, the 2001 and 2002 commencing statistics would seem to indicate that, despite the financial hardship, Indigenous students realise the value of access programs in preparing them for university mainstream studies and, hence, are re-entering these programs. Unfortunately, the continuing decline in overall numbers would seem to support the argument that, ultimately, the financial burden becomes overwhelming, forcing students to drop out of their course.

The DETYA Equity in Higher Education Occasional Paper (1999) reveals that in 1997 Indigenous Australians made up only 1% of all students commencing undergraduate degree courses, although their proportion of commencing students was 1.5% (1.7% if Batchelor
College was included in the statistics). Hence, they argue that, as Indigenous people made up 1.7% of the population aged 15 to 64 at the 1996 census, this group has achieved an equitable representation among commencing students (DETYA, 1999: 22).

3.3.2: Participation

There is a natural progression from access to participation. Figure 19 reflects trends similar to those portrayed in Figure 15 and re-inforces the reality that Indigenous student cohorts are very small in comparison to total higher education student cohorts. While acknowledging that the numbers are relatively small — just over 1% of the total student population — the decrease in 2000 does indicate that participation has fallen below the 1995 figures. Despite concerns regarding the validity of data interpretation when applied to such small numbers, these statistics do appear to demonstrate the failure to achieve the equity which was the cornerstone of the ‘A Fair Chance For All’ policy. To have achieved the goal of equity, the national participation rate for Indigenous Australians in higher education should have been approximately 1.5% of the total higher education student participation rate.

Figure 19: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student participation as % of all students in higher education, 1992-2000.


Figure 20 is an overview of participation for all equity groups that not only provides an important comparative analysis but also reveals the lack of any ‘real’ increase in the Indigenous sector during the 1990s, despite steady growth in student enrolment for much of this period. The statistical basis for Figure 20 justifies the concern expressed by the NATSIEP Review Reference Group that ‘[e]quity is the yet-to-be-finished business of the twentieth century’ (DEET, 1994: 23).
The increased complexity of the data provided by DEST makes it difficult to collate comparative equity data over a period of time, although a consideration of the actual enrolments in the various groups between 1999 and 2001 reveals a decline in numbers of students in the equity areas — students from non-English speaking backgrounds; Indigenous Australians; and students from rural areas.

Figure 20 does reveal that, during the second half of the 1990s, women in non-traditional areas increased their participation rate to 20%; students in rural areas maintained a participation rate of between 18–19%; and those from low socio-economic backgrounds did increase to almost 16% before dropping back to 15.2%. While the participation rates for Indigenous students during this 8 year period show little change, increasing to just over 1% of the total student enrolment in higher education, the real concern regarding this set of statistics is that some Indigenous Australians may belong to several of these equity groups. The multiple disadvantage suffered by such students may seriously effect their capacity in terms of participation, retention and success.

Figure 20: Equity groups participation rates as % of all students, 1991-1998.


Interestingly, during this period, a degree of confusion crept into the allocation of equity funds in some universities. Although Indigenous peoples continued to be included in statistical representations of the equity groups identified by Martin, they were no longer included as an equity group within the Commonwealth Government’s guidelines for those able to access higher education equity funding. Those interpreting the guidelines argued that the equity needs of Indigenous students should be deemed to have been catered for within the funding allocated for Indigenous support. This caused concern in some universities as it
appeared that, regardless of any multiple disadvantage Indigenous students might suffer, they would be denied access to the possibility of any additional funding sources on the basis of having identified as Indigenous Australians.

In commenting on the extent to which Indigenous students participated in specific, narrow fields of study such as the Arts, Humanities, Education, etc., the NATSIEP Review stated that 'almost two thirds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are studying Arts, Humanities or the Social Sciences (34.6 per cent) and Education (30.6 per cent)' (DEET, 1994: 75). Despite some decrease in participation in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Figure 21 indicates there has been no significant change in this trend since the NATSIEP Review was completed. In highlighting the concentration of Indigenous enrolments in Health, Social Work and Education, Figure 21 may reflect the tendency of many Indigenous women to pursue studies in areas they perceive contribute to the well-being of their communities. Further comparison of these trends was not possible as terminology applying to disciplinary groupings previously used in the statistical collections was changed in 2001. For example, Law or Legal Studies did not appear as a field in the 2001 collection for Indigenous students.

Figure 21: Indigenous students by broad field of study, 1997–2000


Despite a recent focus on encouraging Indigenous students to pursue careers in what are generally perceived to be the more difficult disciplines such as law, business, engineering, science and medicine, progress has been limited. A number of universities are now offering special programs designed to provide opportunities for Indigenous students to acquire the knowledge and skills they would need to access these fields of study. For example, SciTAC,
a tertiary access program at James Cook University, enables students to select a range of language, science and mathematics subjects designed to prepare them for entry into mainstream studies in engineering, science and medicine (SIAS Course Outline Flyer, JCU, 2000). A similar strategy was also highlighted in Walker’s *Indigenous Performance in Western Australian Universities: Reframing Retention and Success* (2000).

The statistics in Figure 22 reveal the level of growth that has occurred in Indigenous participation in both the TAFE and university sectors in recent years. Indigenous peoples have had a very visible presence within the TAFE sector over a number of years and this may reflect the vocational orientation of the programs offered there. While growth within the university sector has been slower, there had been gradual progress until the late 1990s. Despite the Commonwealth Government’s suggestion that Indigenous people appear to have changed direction and taken up VET as opposed to university studies, the explanation that ‘vocational education is becoming relatively more attractive to Indigenous students’ (DETYA, 2001: 16) smacks of the paternalistic attitudes of the past when, due to notions that Aboriginal people lacked intelligence, vocational education that fitted people for lower status jobs was the only educational option available to them. There is considerable rhetoric concerning the current situation but, while the statistics might imply that Indigenous Australians are not getting what they want from the university sector, they could also indicate that Indigenous peoples are being financially squeezed out of the sector by the changes that occurred in various funding programs during the late 1990s. In the interests of equity and social justice, it is the responsibility of the universities to address these issues and advocate the continued involvement of Indigenous students in the academe.
Figure 22: Indigenous participation in VET and higher education 1996–2000.


3.3.3: Retention

Simply providing people with opportunities for access and participation in higher education courses is not enough. If students are to succeed in achieving their individual goals, retention is equally important across all areas, from enabling programs for those still attempting to overcome previous educational disadvantage, to postgraduate research for those who have achieved success in their undergraduate studies.

The dilemma facing many universities is not only one of bringing Indigenous students into the university but of keeping them there — of ensuring that the experience is challenging, valuable and achievable. To date, the statistics seem to be suggesting otherwise. This is a critical issue as retention measures the university's ability to hold students while they continue tertiary studies (even if changing courses) and includes allowing students to pursue various options by permitting a degree of movement within the institution (Andrews, nd: 24).

The DETYA Equity in Higher Education Occasional Paper (1999) suggests that, in general, Indigenous Australians are less likely to remain in their university studies than other students. In 1997, the apparent national retention rate for Indigenous students was 0.78%. This is a critical concern for universities and studies, such as those undertaken by Indigenous educators Bourke (1996) and Herbert (1996) to consider factors that influence Indigenous Australian performance in universities, provide valuable insights for addressing this issue. DETYA also argued that a major cause for concern was that, despite the implementation of
the equity policy 'A Fair Chance for All' in 1990, low retention and success rates for Indigenous students in higher education persist. Yet the statistics demonstrate that people in some equity groups have been able to achieve more equitable outcomes. In addition, the results of a longitudinal study at the Flinders University in South Australia are being interpreted as demonstrating that increasing access for disadvantaged groups does not lead to lowered academic standards. Such findings imply that, given time and an appropriate learning environment, Indigenous retention and success rates in higher education, are likely to change (DETYA, 1999: 61).

3.3.4: Success

According to Martin (1994), success is the proportion of units passed by members of the equity group compared with the proportion passed by other students. In relation to the Federal Government's allocation of Indigenous Student Support Funding, the formula is complex as it takes into account individual subject outcomes as well as course graduations. The student progress rate is a term that appears to have come into DEST usage more recently. According to Andrews et al, it 'provides a measure of educational achievement and effectiveness of educational delivery' (nd: 25). This statement would seem to imply that a welcome shift is occurring in higher education — a change in thinking that suggests students and teachers have a shared responsibility for student outcomes.

Urban et al, in their paper on undergraduate completions (1999), reported on completion rates for cohorts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who had commenced university studies in 1992. Figure 23 demonstrates that, by 1997, the completion rates for Indigenous students were considerably lower than for non-Indigenous students.
Figure 23: Undergraduate Academic Outcomes for 1992 commencing student cohort.

These statistics reveal that 32% of Indigenous students, as compared to over 60% of non-Indigenous students, completed their course in the expected time. More importantly, they show that almost 62% of Indigenous students, as compared to almost 34% of non-Indigenous students, had apparently left university and were no longer studying and that approximately the same proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (5–6%) were still participating, although they had not completed a course. Unfortunately, the large numbers of students about whom there is no information — over half the student cohort in terms of completions and over 40% of non-completions — suggests that, at best, these statistics should only be seen as providing an insight into trends.

While providing a record, the statistics do not reveal the complexity of tracking Indigenous students, or any students for that matter, within the higher education sector. There is often no indication that a student is about to ‘drop out’ and often students from rural or remote locations will have returned to their home location before their absence is noted. While such events have implications for retention and success rates, they should not necessarily be labelled ‘failure’ for there are many reasons why people choose to withdraw from their studies. Bourke et al, in their study into the factors that affect Indigenous performance at university, found that almost 70% of students who ‘dropped out’ before completing their studies left for personal reasons, such as needing a break or feeling their life goals had
changed. Almost 65% left because they could not afford to continue studying or had a major unexpected expense and almost 55% left because they either found employment or the pressures of work became too great for them to continue their study. Bourke *et al* interpreted this data, in conjunction with anecdotal evidence, to mean ‘that some indigenous (sic) students leave university because they have achieved their goal before graduating, have been offered employment, or enrol at another educational institution’ (1996: 54).

Of particular interest to this study, was Bourke *et al*’s work with ‘successful’ students. In responding to a question about why they might have contemplated withdrawing from their studies, more than 50% of students identified health (62.2%); finances (60%); personal decision (57.8%); family tensions (55.6%); fear of failing course (52.2%) and feedback on progress as a student (51.1%), as being ‘important factors that had led them to consider withdrawal from university at some time’ (Bourke, 1996: 56).

Figure 24 demonstrates that, despite the low level of award course completions for Indigenous Australians in comparison with non-Indigenous students, there had been gradual improvement between 1994 and 1998, with the decrease in 2000 reflecting the declining access and participation rates of the late 1990s.

Figure 24: Award Course completions for Indigenous Australian students as % of award course completions for all students, 1988 to 2001.

The statistical data concerning tertiary entrance rankings in Figure 25 provides an insight into the previous educational experiences of students coming to university. This is important information as it is an indicator of the academic preparedness of students to participate in university programs. It may also have implications for the capacity of students to persist with their studies, in the longer term. Urban et al report that:

... adjusted completion rates indicate that Indigenous women complete at a higher rate in both the groups with and without a TER. For those students with a TER, however, non-Indigenous women are one and one half times more likely to complete than Indigenous women. Male non-Indigenous students are almost twice as likely to complete than male Indigenous students ... Furthermore, there is an increased variance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous completion rates for students without a TER, hence non-Indigenous women without a TER have completion rates 1.7 times that of their Indigenous counterparts while non-Indigenous men are 2.3 times more likely to complete (1999: 20).

Figure 25: 1992 commencing students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, gender, with and without TER, completions – adjusted.


Figure 26 has been compiled from data drawn from DETYA Selected Statistics Collections over the years 1991–2000 to demonstrate the ratios between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students within universities. This demonstrates the reality that, while Indigenous students are counted in thousands, the cohort referred to as 'non-Indigenous' numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

In 1999, there was a change in the way in which Indigenous support funding was allocated
to universities. Previously, allocation had been based on access and participation but at that time the formula for allocation was altered to include retention and success rates. Few would disagree with the need to improve retention and success rates but an important finding of Walker's study was that the policy makers need to shift their focus from one of equal academic outcomes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to one which focuses on 'appropriate outcomes' (2000: 4, Executive Summary) as a more effective means of measuring Indigenous retention and success. Walker also emphasised the importance of Indigenous involvement in the decision-making processes that determine future directions.

Figure 26: Award course completions for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, 1991-2000.


In an attempt to gauge the relevance of the current system of allocating funding, the following institutional comparison is provided. Bachelor College was not included in identifying universities for this exercise as it is an institution that caters entirely for Indigenous students, whereas this comparative analysis focuses on possible differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous performance within a traditional university learning environment. Encel suggests that the universities likely to have the highest Indigenous student populations are those located within areas of high Indigenous population, such as Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and the Northern Territory University (Northern Territory), James Cook University (Queensland) and Edith Cowan University (Western Australia) (Encel, 2000: 19).

Figure 27 was to have been compiled from data relating to the five universities with the highest levels of Indigenous student participation and the five universities with the highest
share of Indigenous completion rates to provide a comparison of the figures. Three of the universities, University of Western Sydney, James Cook University and Curtin University of Technology, fell into both categories. Thus, the ten universities with the highest percentages of either participation or completion were used and the apparent retention rates for each of those institutions were added to check any apparent links. This figure demonstrates that, regardless of the varying participation rates, there is limited variance in retention rates between universities. In interpreting these statistics, reference was made to the 2000 Indigenous Higher Education strategies published by DETYA.

Figure 27: Comparison of award course completions, participation and apparent retention rates in 10 institutions — 1998.

Key:
1. Edith Cowan University
2. Curtin University of Technology
3. University of Western Sydney
4. James Cook University
5. University of South Australia
6. University of Technology, Sydney
7. University of Sydney
8. Macquarie University
9. Charles Sturt University
10. University of Tasmania

Source: Chart is a compilation of data from Table 20, p.25 and Table 21, p.27, Encel, 2000.

Edith Cowan University had the highest number of Indigenous students enrolled in enabling programs in the country. This figure reflects the fact that this university actively recruits throughout the entire state of Western Australia and, in fact, maintains an extensive network of support facilities in various locations throughout the state. The University of Western Sydney, the University of Technology in Sydney and the Curtin University of Technology in
Perth achieved the highest completion rates for all universities. The strategy documents did not reveal any element common to the three institutions, although the embeddedness of the Indigenous unit within the university could be an important factor. In particular, Curtin University of Technology, in exposing every student in the university to units of Aboriginal culture and history, demonstrated a high level of institutional commitment to providing an inclusive learning environment for Indigenous students. In addition, all three universities had integrated support services across all faculties through the development of partnership agreements. They all provided cross-cultural awareness and training for all non-Indigenous staff and encouraged a focus on Indigenous access, participation, retention and success throughout all discipline areas.

Similarly, Figure 28 has been developed using data from the five universities with the highest apparent retention rates of Indigenous students for 1999 and the five universities with the highest student progress rate for 1998. Participation rates were added to check if there was any apparent correlation.

Figure 28: Comparison of apparent retention (1999), student progress (1998) and participation (1998) rates in 10 institutions.

Key:
1. The University of Queensland
2. University of Western Sydney
3. University of Wollongong
4. Australian Catholic University
5. University of Ballarat
6. Swinburne University of Technology
7. The Australian National University
8. The University of Sydney
9. La Trobe University
10. Macquarie University

Source: Chart is a compilation of data from Table 20, p.25 and Table 21, p.27, Encel, 2000.
None of the universities included in Figure 28 were amongst the top five universities in terms of actual student enrolments. In fact, four of these universities — University of Ballarat (18), Swinburne University of Technology (34), The Australian National University (72) and La Trobe University (62) — have very low enrolments of Indigenous students. A number of these institutions also operate across a number of campuses. It could be that low numbers may be a contributing factor in achieving improved rates of retention and success. Based on the assumption that there would be less competition for the support services provided by the Indigenous unit, it could be expected that students in these universities would have the opportunity to access higher levels of individual support. Alternatively, anecdotal evidence suggests that some universities actually allocate funding, additional to the Indigenous support funding provided by the commonwealth government, to ensure the Indigenous unit is able to cater for the specific learning needs of all Indigenous students across the university. Other universities work with secondary schools and community groups to identify high achieving secondary students. Recruitment efforts are then targeted at encouraging these students to enrol in courses in the non-traditional areas such as medicine, engineering, science, and so on.

Figure 29 is based upon the National and State Indicators provided annually to universities with the guidelines for the preparation of the Indigenous Australian Higher Education Strategy. It demonstrates that while universities may have been successful in increasing Indigenous access rates, they have not achieved a similar increase in terms of participation, retention and success rates.
Figure 29: National Indigenous higher education indicators

Source: This chart has been compiled from a set of statistics provided by AVCC Advisory Group on Indigenous Higher Education and the DEST prepared State and National Performance Indicators for Indigenous Higher Education Students in 2001.

In the 1996 census, Indigenous Australians were 1.7% of the total Australian population in the 15–64 years age range. Figure 29 demonstrates that by 1997 Indigenous peoples could be seen to have achieved equitable access within the higher education sector (Equity in Australia, 1999, p. 22), although participation, retention and success rates remained virtually unchanged. By 2001, however, Indigenous Australians made up 2.2% of the Australian population and, having a younger age profile than the rest of the population, they had a relatively higher proportion of the total population aged 15–24 years (3%). Thus it could be expected that the number of students enrolled in higher education courses would reflect this higher proportion (ABS, 2002: 110). Figure 29 demonstrates that this is not the case; rather access has declined, although there is growing participation. Retention and success rates have remained relatively static in recent years.

The DETYA Equity in Higher Education Occasional Paper (1999) revealed that, in general, Indigenous students have substantially lower success rates than non-Indigenous students. Those universities with the highest success rates tend to also be those with very low access rates. Edith Cowan University has very high access and participation levels with the second lowest success rate of all institutions (DETYA, 1999: 23).

3.4: Future directions — which way?

In recent years, the Commonwealth Government has manifested its concerns regarding the
continuing failure of Indigenous Australian students to successfully complete their tertiary studies by tying funding allocations to retention and success levels. While this decision may reflect the Government’s belief that a ‘key measure of academic success is award course completion’ (DEST, 2003: 3, Section 4), it has considerable implications for the future of Indigenous Australian students within the tertiary sector.

In arguing for a paradigm shift in terms of how Indigenous students are judged within the academe, Walker reveals two critical issues that need to be addressed. The first is that staff in universities must develop an understanding of where Indigenous Australian students are coming from in order to appreciate the considerable achievements they have made. Secondly, there needs to be a move toward opening universities up in ways that enable them to recognise and value other knowledges and ways of knowing. The statistical evidence provided in this chapter endorses her arguments, particularly within a context of addressing the issues of equity and reconciliation in education — issues that have been clearly articulated, within the literature, as a concern to Indigenous Australians.

Significantly, Alcock et al (1997) conducted a study at Central Queensland University to identify possible reasons for the poor retention and success rates for Indigenous Australian students undertaking studies in the Bachelor of Business. A critical finding of this study was the very high attrition rates for first year students which appeared linked to first year subjects that acted as the ‘gatekeeper’ that, in relation to ‘longer term success is devastating both in the wastage of student numbers and in the effect it has in reinforcing the failure Australian Indigenous people experience in their attempts to share in some of the capital of the education system’ (Alcock et al, 1997: 30).

Roberts points out that it is generally accepted that Indigenous students are disadvantaged by various external factors, including family and community ties and commitments, finance and housing issues, all of which have a major impact upon their capacity to cope with university life. Yet, although such factors may contribute significantly to their lower outcomes, it is the extent of the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes, that is the real concern (Roberts, 1998).

During the 1990s most Australian universities established units to provide a range of support programs designed for the needs of Indigenous Australian students. Most universities would also argue that, in addition to these units, considerable planning has gone into the
development and implementation of various strategies designed to improve educational outcomes for their Indigenous students. Many Indigenous staff in universities would support such claims, for, as Dudgeon et al suggest, in encouraging their university 'to recognise and act on its corporate responsibility to improve Indigenous participation at Curtin' they would have to acknowledge that the university 'has made unprecedented commitments to Indigenous higher education' (1998: 3). Yet, it was stated in the 1998 Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy, that 'in terms of outcomes, the picture is much less impressive. Almost a half of Indigenous students are enrolled in sub-degree courses and their success rate has been disappointing...' (West, 1998: 138). It is tensions such as these that need to be examined and understood as the first step in determining the way forward. It may be that the procedures and practices being implemented in many universities are perceived by many Indigenous students as yet another attempt at using education to assimilate them into the mainstream culture (Dudgeon, 1998: 4).

The challenge emerging from the literature cited in this chapter is a complex one. It is the role of governments to develop policies to achieve outcomes that are relevant to the needs of specific groups within society. Yet, it is evident that the NATSIEP, developed by the Commonwealth Government in consultation with Indigenous peoples, is perceived by many to be high on rhetoric and good intentions but short on deliverables. There are those who view it as an example of political expediency, particularly in terms of the underlying intent of the policy. And, in retrospect, at the higher education level, the statistical evidence would seem to suggest that the initial focus on simply getting Indigenous peoples into universities may not have been the best approach. This deduction raises two concerns. Firstly, how useful is the NATSIEP and its review documents in guiding the higher education process and, secondly, if the initial focus on increasing access has not achieved the desired goals, is it fair for the Commonwealth Government to impose an outcomes agenda that, in its implementation, appears to be penalising Indigenous students seeking a university education.

It is the role of the universities to effectively implement the policy and, in the case of the NATSIEP, the government laid down very clear guidelines for educational institutions regarding what needed to happen to achieve more equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous students. However, in extrapolating the issues from within the framework established by Martin’s equity indicators, the suitability of the academe, as we know it, to actually cater for diversity, particularly cultural diversity, becomes questionable. What is
more, the statistical evidence highlights the importance of the historical, social, cultural and economic issues that emerged in Chapter One — issues that may impact upon Indigenous student achievement. The socio-historical framework commenced in Chapter One and continued throughout this chapter has allowed a deeper insight into Australia’s ‘settlement history’ (Kalantzis, 1996), its long-term impact upon Indigenous lives, and its influence in shaping the Australian university. Such knowledge and understanding is critical to appreciating where Indigenous Australian students are located within the contemporary university.

But perhaps, the most important function of the statistical evidence included in this chapter, has been that it might justifiably serve as a warning to universities. While the statistical data is limited, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that in those universities prepared to make a commitment to equity and reconciliation positive change has occurred and Indigenous students are achieving more equitable outcomes — a reality that suggests some universities do have the capacity to make the much needed paradigm shift advocated by Dudgeon (1997: 5). This is a critical element in this study for, as Postle et al argued:

[a] university qualification provides one basis for success in our society. As a result it is a right of all within society to have fair access to such a qualification. It is also to the benefit of society that the potential available to it through its citizens is fully utilised. Mass higher education brings with it the means to raise the overall level of education and skills development within society, while a greater diversity in the student body serves both to enrich the educational experience for all and to provide the basis for a more diverse and enriched society. Equity represents a sound investment in society’s human capital . . . Meeting the challenges created by mass higher education and student diversity should be seen as a means of enhancing the quality of universities, not detracting from it (Postle, 1997: 151).

Postle’s argument legitimises the work of those Indigenous educators who aspire to maintaining the educational community’s awareness of, and commitment to, the principles of human rights by continuing to argue for a rights-based education provision (Lane, 1998: 20; Hosch, 1998: 148; Arbon, 1998: 125–131; Anderson, 1998: 4-5; Scott, 1999; Anderson, 1999) that includes university programs. Inherent in such argument is the issue of fairness.

From a perspective of social justice, the statistical evidence provided in this chapter divulges a range of issues associated with Indigenous involvement in the higher education sector that
will need to be elucidated through the raw data that represents the student voice, for some of these issues may well impact upon the capacity of individual students to make choices in relation to their university studies. Ultimately, some of the issues discussed in this chapter may need to be re-visited by governments and/or universities if students are to exercise their right to access the education they want from the academe. Hence, the real challenge that has emerged out of this consideration of the literature is: can Indigenous students achieve the success they seek within our universities? The literature reveals that many Indigenous students have travelled a different route into the university from that taken by their non-Indigenous peers and lecturers and for many their journey has led them into a dead end. However, the literature also discloses that there are some who have made it; some who have negotiated their way along their personal pathway to success. It may be a slow and hazardous journey but the growing body of Indigenous Australian scholars, such as Nakata, Langton, Dudgeon, Rigney and Oxenham, prove that it can be done. All have engaged at the interface. All have challenged the dominant culture and the apparent exclusivity of the Western knowledge paradigms. It is to this position at the intersection that the literature I have examined in Chapters One and Three has brought me. And it is from this place, using the raw data as the crosswalk, that I will move the debate forward.
Chapter Four

Fellow travellers

4.1: Introducing the travellers

This chapter contains biographical overviews of the Indigenous students who participated as respondents to the individual interviews — a profile of this group is provided in Figures 1–7, Chapter Two. Although I did not ask specific questions seeking biographical data in the interview, all had used a ‘story-telling’ technique to answering the questions, thus making the ‘personal’ experience, much of it biographical in nature, an integral part of the knowledge they shared. These responses, in retrospect, reflected the approach used by a number of the Indigenous Australian researchers and writers whose contributions were discussed in Chapter One. Within that context, such biographical information often provided valuable insights into the notion of ‘success’ and people’s perceptions of the whole higher education process. Hence, I inserted an additional activity into the data collection process and wrote to interviewees explaining that I had decided to use an ethnographical approach in the research because I considered this would increase the power of the Indigenous voice underpinning it.

I sought to use their ‘stories’ in my thesis, inviting them to provide additional biographical information if they so desired, which four students did. The following is a compilation of biographical data about those who worked with me on a one-to-one basis in this study. Using the analogy of a journey to describe the educational pathways along which we have moved and the crosswalks that have enabled us to move back and forth at the intersections in this study, I refer to these respondents as my ‘fellow travellers’.

While I had not intended to examine individual performance outcomes for each of the interviewees, academic achievement as a marker of success was raised as an issue by all interviewees. As it was obviously a factor that influenced students’ perceptions of themselves, I obtained copies of academic transcripts and have used these to provide an overall view of each individual’s progress in academic terms. The following is a brief description of each of the interviewees, using their aliases.
4.2: Individual interviewees

4.2.1: Rosita

Rosita is a Torres Strait Islander woman in her late 30s. Her family moved from a remote island in the Torres Strait to mainland Australia when she was a young child. She was raised in the urban location where her father found work. Her mother died some years ago and, as the only female in her family and the youngest, she is very close to her father and her seven brothers, all of whom are married with children of their own. Her father saw no need for her to go to university but told her that, if that was what she wanted, he would support her. Her brothers didn’t think she would stick it out but all supported her in her decision. She has two teenage daughters, both of whom are very supportive. At the time of interview, her eldest daughter, who had completed Year Twelve, was working and contributing to the family finances so that her mother could continue at university. Rosita worked part-time as a homework co-ordinator in a local school. When Rosita completes her course, she will get a job and her older daughter will enrol at university. As a result of the role model she has provided, others in her family are now contemplating university study. Rosita appreciated the support she had received from staff within the Indigenous unit. Ultimately, Rosita completed three years of university, the first year in a tertiary access course followed by two years of an undergraduate program. She commenced her undergraduate studies as a part-time student and then enrolled as a full-time student over the next two semesters. In that time, she passed eight subjects, obtaining a credit, distinction and high distinction amongst these results. She became very active in the Indigenous Student Association and ended up withdrawing from three subjects when she couldn’t keep up with her assignments. In the fourth semester she dropped back to a part-time enrolment because she had to take on additional hours of work to survive financially. Unfortunately, Rosita did not complete any of her subjects in that semester and has failed to re-enrol.

4.2.2: Jo

Jo is an older Aboriginal woman, in her 60s, who spent her early childhood in a semi-traditional lifestyle in the bush — a very hard life but a happy one. She was a young teenager who already had her first baby when they came in from the bush. They lived in a fringe camp for several years until the authorities closed the camps and they were forced to move back into the bush where they managed to eke out a living. Jo had ten children all of whom now have their own families. She lives alone because she enjoys her independence.
and is a respected Elder in the Aboriginal community. Jo is the first of her family to go to university. She originally enrolled in a mainstream program in the early 1980s but had no idea what she was supposed to do and so withdrew from the course. She returned in 1990, enrolled in a tertiary access program and a year later, having successfully completed that, she enrolled in a mainstream undergraduate program. Jo maintains she would not have completed her access studies if it had not been for the support provided by staff in the unit. She took five years to complete her degree program, successfully passing six out of the eight subjects she took in her first two years. She failed one subject in her first year and withdrew from one subject in each of her second, third and fourth years. She was awarded a credit grade for an independent study she undertook in her fifth year, although she withdrew from three subjects and failed in another two subjects. She recalled finding the university experience very satisfying, especially the social aspects of interacting with other students both within the unit and across the wider university. Two years after being awarded her degree, Jo enrolled in a masters program. Despite her initial enthusiasm for postgraduate studies, however, she was unable to maintain her commitment to her studies. This may have been due to the fact that during this period she became very involved in the university’s student association, providing a passionate and vocal advocacy at several national forums before deciding once again to withdraw from her studies. Her decision was influenced by community demands upon her time. Jo is a strong advocate for tertiary education as she has found her qualifications as an historian have been extremely valuable in her desire to help her people and her desire to pursue postgraduate studies was premised on a belief that Indigenous people need to have greater involvement in the research that is conducted about Indigenous people and issues.

4.2.3: Clarrie

Clarrie is an Aboriginal man in his mid 40s who was raised in the outback, the oldest of six boys. He obtained his early education by correspondence because his father was the manager on a cattle station. He went to boarding school for a few years but managed to get an apprenticeship with a mining company in a nearby town as soon as he was old enough. He knew that money was very tight and that his parents had to educate his younger brothers so he worked at his trade for several years and then went into the public service. When he tired of that, he returned to his trade. Once he turned forty, however, he decided that he needed to do something that would enable him to get out of the mining industry, where, like many others, he was employed on a fly-in/fly-out basis, as he felt the need to spend more time at
home with his family. He lives in a rural setting where his family can be self-sufficient, although they are close enough to a regional city to be able to access any services they may require, including education. Clarrie enrolled as a full-time student in university and was the first of his family to go to university, although he has now been joined by his youngest daughter. Clarrie believes that he enjoys his university studies because he is a very well organised person who enjoys the structured learning environment and has no difficulty coping with the academic requirements of his course. Clarrie enrolled in an undergraduate program and, in his first year, passed half of the subjects in which he had enrolled. He obtained excellent grades for the four subjects he completed. His failures were the result of failing to submit assessment tasks. Clarrie enrolled in second year but withdrew after a few weeks because he obtained what he considered a good job. He has subsequently enrolled in an external program through another university although he still visits this unit from time to time to talk with staff and other students, about his current studies. He enrols in two subjects each semester, indicating that this suits him as he does not feel too pressured and is able to cope with this workload. He considers he is on target to achieve his goal of completing an undergraduate degree.

4.2.4: Mary

Mary is an Aboriginal woman in her late 40s who grew up in a small rural town, leaving school at the end of Year Ten because 'that was what happened to Aboriginal people'. There was no expectation that they would stay on beyond that level, either from her teachers or parents, even though her father always told them 'just because you're black, doesn't mean to say you're not as good as anyone else. If you study hard and work hard you can be just like anyone else'. After living down south for many years, she returned to work in the north because she was very lonely away from her people. One day, she saw an advertisement for a pre-law program offered at the university and decided she would go and do the course as she had always had an interest in law. She did not have any ideas of going to university — she was simply interested in knowing a little more about the law. Within the first week, however, they were told that if they did well in this intensive program they could apply to study law. She decided that, as she had no other commitments such as children, she would put some effort into it and see what happened. She gained entry to the law program and became the first of her family to come to university. She has not regretted her decision, although she is quite emphatic that she wouldn't have made it without the Indigenous unit. Mary wants qualifications so she can go and work for her people. She completed seven years
of university, the first six years as a full-time student and the last year as a part-time student to complete her final two subjects. She performed well in her first year, obtaining two credits and a distinction amongst her results. From then on she progressed slowly but steadily. When she failed a subject, she would re-enrol in it the following year. She transferred to another university in her fifth year to complete some subjects that were not offered in her university. Mary returned to University One in the sixth year of her studies and has successfully completed her degree program. She has maintained her commitment to completing her course, despite having to work part-time throughout her studies in order to survive financially. Mary is now working in a university, supporting Indigenous students. This is her way of giving something back to her people for the support she received during her years of studying.

4.2.5: Ben

Ben is an Aboriginal man who is in his late 40s. He was the youngest child in a large family that lived in an urban setting. At an early age, however, Ben was taken from his family and placed in an institution that was located in a remote, rural location. He describes his childhood as 'very disruptive'. He moved interstate as a young man and has spent many years working in remote locations. Ben was previously married and has 4 children, all of whom are now young adults. He is very proud of the fact that he is a grandfather. Ben lives with his partner, who works while he attends university. Ben is not only the first of his family to go to university but also gained some wider understanding of university life by spending some time in a southern university. He is articulate and gregarious, with strong networks with people across all areas of the university as well as in the wider community. He has a passion for human rights and fighting for a better deal for his people and has a habit of disappearing for weeks at a time, usually to help some minority group prepare themselves for a court case. Ben justifies such absences on the basis of his age and his choice of career, arguing that, because he is older, he feels that he must make the most of the opportunities as they arise. As a result of this tendency to intersperse his studies with frequent engagements in the real world, Ben has often had to repeat subjects. Ben indicates that the pace of his progress may have frustrated some of his lecturers, but that most appeared to recognise his ability and admire his tenacity. Ben finally completed his degree after eight years of study, although he experienced considerable difficulty in maintaining his focus during the last three years of his course and failed and/or withdrew from a number of subjects that would then need to be repeated the following year. Ben spent a considerable amount of time in the unit.
being tutored, socialising or encouraging younger students in their studies. He always recommended the support services and offered himself as a model of persistence. Ben has now been admitted to the bar and is enrolled in a postgraduate program while working full-time in the legal area.

4.2.6: Steve

Steve is a young Aboriginal man who was the second child in a family of five children. He described his childhood, in a small country town, as being a very disciplined and enjoyable time in his life. Both of his parents were very committed to ensuring that their children all had a sound education. His father ensured that all of his children had a good work ethic by giving them all daily and weekly chores that had to be done. Steve got a job straight after Year Twelve and spent almost ten years travelling around Australia, picking up whatever work he could. At the end of that time, he took a job in the information technology industry, saved until he thought he had enough to get through university and then enrolled in education. He knew what he wanted for he says ‘teaching is probably the number one profession in Australia’. At university, he shared a flat with another university student, put a lot of time into his studies and generally socialised with friends from university. To date, Steve has completed a total of six years as a full-time student and has still to complete his degree. He made an excellent start in higher education studies but by the second year of his undergraduate studies he had to repeat two subjects and in the fourth year he had to repeat three subjects. Two of these subjects were repeated three times. Steve withdrew from one of these before completing so will need to re-enrol in this subject, as it is a core unit. In order to survive financially, he has been working as a tutor in a high school for the past three years.

4.2.7: Lorraine

Lorraine is a young Aboriginal woman, born and bred in a large regional city. She is a member of a very large extended family and also has four young children of her own. It has been a real struggle for Lorraine as she is very close to her parents and all of her brothers and sisters, including cousins. During the first semester she attempted to maintain the heavy family visiting rituals but soon realised that she had to make some hard decisions if she was going to continue her university studies. The members of her family were very supportive, telling her how proud they were of her and that they understood. She is determined, however, that her own children will not miss out on her time as a result of her decision to
study. This places considerable stress on her, although she appreciates the difficulties associated with going to university for both her mother and her aunt have been to university. Lorraine finds the course challenging although, as an Aboriginal woman she is not always comfortable with the way in which content is taught, for she is in a class that consists mainly of young, single, people who, she believes, demonstrate no respect for others in the way they communicate within the learning environment. Yet this apparent disrespect is ignored by the lecturers, something she sees as a contradiction, in preparing students to work in a profession that continually claims to be premised on principles of ‘caring for people’. Lorraine failed her first year subjects at the first attempt but managed to pass all the supplementary examinations and had to repeat her second year. Despite the difficulties she is experiencing, however, Lorraine believes her persistence will enable her to complete her studies.

4.2.8: Bill

Bill is an Aboriginal man in his early 40s who grew up in small rural town and moved north with his five young children because he thought it might be cheaper to live in a warmer climate. He has a part time job with a mining company and that will become a full time position once he graduates. Bill has had some serious problems in relation to his participation in university, especially in terms of being given incorrect information and/or course guidance by lecturers in the mainstream science program in which he has been enrolled. He has never felt as though he was valued as a person in his own right and has almost given up his studies on two occasions. Bill is the first in his family to go to university and although his initial impetus was driven by his family situation and the belief that a university qualification would enable him to get a better paying job, he now perceives that the only thing that has kept him there is the fact that he has discovered a genuine love of learning. Bill is very concerned at the thought of graduating and having to take up a full time position, as he feels a real sense of conflict between his own feelings about the land and his responsibility to look after it, and the job that he will be expected to do with the mining company that he works for. He indicated that he continually visits the Indigenous unit for moral support because he feels very isolated in the mainstream learning environment in which he has to operate. He feels he has received little academic support within the mainstream learning environment, and has only succeeded because of his own ability to pace himself in terms of meeting the requirements of his study and work commitments and because of the tutoring he was able to access through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Academic Support (ATAS) program. Despite the struggle of studying while having a young family, Bill has never failed a subject, although he did withdraw from two subjects in his second year. He is now completing honours.

4.2.9: Margaret

Margaret is an Aboriginal woman, in her late 40s, who was raised in an urban location. The oldest of fourteen children, she did not enjoy her schooling, only staying because it was compulsory. As soon as she turned 15 years of age, she went out to work and helped her mother to raise her younger brothers and sisters. She believes the quality of her childhood experience was excellent as it was very family orientated and, being the oldest, she had more chores and greater responsibility to help her mother than her siblings. Margaret believes this experience has been invaluable in enabling her to maintain a high level of discipline in relation to her study schedules. She was the first in her family to go to university and made the decision to pursue higher education because she had been doing community work for many years and was tired of always being the volunteer or the lowest paid person in the organisation while still being expected, as an Aboriginal person, to carry a heavy workload and a high level of responsibility for the client group, mostly Indigenous peoples. She wanted to be recognised for her skills and understanding. Her father was very resistant to the idea of her going to university, often ringing her during her early years and telling her to come home. Despite his opposition, she persisted and, eventually, as she began to achieve good results, his attitude changed. Unfortunately, he died just before she graduated but, by that time, he had acknowledged that she had done the right thing and told her how proud of her he was. After completing a year’s access course in which she obtained excellent academic results, Margaret enrolled as a full-time student in a social work course. She completed her course in the minimum time and, having achieved high level results throughout her course, was invited to take honours. Margaret has moved on into postgraduate studies because, as she says, she is ‘hungry for learning’. She is immensely proud of her achievements and perceives of herself as a positive role model both for her family and other Indigenous peoples. She now works full-time while continuing to study.

4.2.10: Len

Len is an Aboriginal man in his late 40s, the fifth child in a family of eight children who were raised in a tin shack on the outskirts of a very small, outback town. As a young man, he
moved into an urban location to improve his chances of finding work. Len has four children, with the oldest now also enrolled in a university course. Len has had a number of jobs over the years but decided to study because he wanted a better class of job that would pay higher wages and give him some security. He considered enrolling at TAFE but decided the choices there were too limited, so he opted for university instead. A number of Len’s sisters had been to university and their opinions did influence his thinking. He indicates that he has never felt particularly comfortable in the university environment and admits that this may be due to the fact that he believes most Australians do not want to mix with Aboriginal people as they still consider them to be inferior. Len has spent a total of nine years at university. During his early years he enrolled in education and then transferred to nursing. He was unsuccessful in both, withdrawing from almost all of the subjects in which he had enrolled and failing the others. After a break of some five years, Len returned to enrol in a tertiary access program, while also re-enrolling in education at the undergraduate level. He passed three subjects but withdrew from all of the tertiary access subjects. In the following year, his fifth at university, Len focused on education. He obtained a credit in one subject, withdrew from six subjects and failed five. At this point in time, he decided to begin again. He enrolled in a tertiary access program only and obtained excellent outcomes, thus building his confidence in his ability to achieve his goal of a university degree. Having prepared for a career in a health-related field through his tertiary access studies, Len changed his mind and enrolled in journalism, where he appears to be doing well, achieving grades that include credits and distinctions as well as passes. He continues to enrol as a full-time student despite the fact that he has always had to work part-time in order to survive financially.

4.2.11: Ted

Ted is an Aboriginal man in his late 40s who spent most of his earlier childhood in a very remote, small town. He attended boarding school for his secondary schooling and, after leaving school, worked in various labouring jobs for a number of years. As he had always been good at art, however, he eventually enrolled in a two-year Art course in TAFE. One of his lecturers saw his potential and convinced him that he should go on to university. He was also encouraged to take this direction by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) field officer at the time. Initially, Ted completed a year in the tertiary access program to prepare him for university study. He planned to enrol in a Visual Arts program but, due to some confusion, ended up in the Bachelor of Arts program. It was as a result of this error that he ended up enrolling in anthropology and archaeology. He found the
subjects so interesting he remained in the program, eventually being invited to take Honours. Ted reveals that, as the first of his family to come to university, he would have had great difficulty in coping with the academic rigours of his course if he had not first studied in the tertiary access program. Ted’s academic results in his early years of study were not good but the support he obtained from the Indigenous unit enabled him to persist. His results began to improve in the third year of his study. Ted is now enrolled in a doctorate program.

4.2.12: Yvonne

Yvonne is a woman of mixed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island descent in her late 40s who grew up in a small coastal town. She felt her previous educational experience was not satisfactory because, even though she had been one of the top students in the class in primary school, when she went on to secondary school, she was, like all of the other Aboriginal students in her school, only permitted to take the general program. This reflected the lack of expectation regarding Aboriginal student achievement in education. Yvonne has recently gone through a divorce and is now a sole parent raising her two children, one who has just gone to high school and a younger one in middle primary school. She has lived down south for many years but returned to the north after her divorce so that she could access her family for emotional support. She felt somewhat lost when she returned, however a friend had enrolled in the mainstream preparatory program for students interested in going to university and convinced Yvonne to join her. Having completed the preparatory program, Yvonne enrolled in the tertiary access program conducted by the Indigenous unit. She enjoyed the experience and the fact that people were willing to listen to her in the tertiary access program, making her feel that she was worth something as a person and as an individual. Yvonne indicated that that was very important because ‘even though we are all Indigenous peoples, we are all different.’ Even though she was the first of her family to go to university, she obtained excellent grades in the access program and enrolled in undergraduate studies in education. As a result of what she felt was the ‘negative and unhelpful attitude’ of her lecturers, however, she decided education was not the right learning environment for her. She believed her lecturers had set themselves up as gatekeepers, employing strategies that ensured a number of students, especially those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, would not be able to succeed. She moved to Social Work where she achieved sound results and completed her degree in the minimum time.
4.2.13: Annie

Annie is an Aboriginal woman in her 50s who spent her childhood in a remote location and moved to town, as a young woman, to find work. She started her large family when she was very young and has worked hard to raise her children. Annie feels very bitter about the treatment she perceives she has received as an Indigenous student within a university, saying there is no real support for Indigenous students in the university, either from the universities themselves or from the Federal Government. The only time she has ever felt included is when lecturers ask for her opinion as an Indigenous person. She objects to such questioning, however, as she considers that a lecturer treating Indigenous peoples as if they were 'experts' is somehow demeaning. Annie came to the university as a virtually illiterate grandmother, who felt she now had the time to do something about her own education. She began with the simple goal of being able to read and write, so enrolled in basic literacy and numeracy programs. This was an important decision for she was the first of her family to come to university and, as her skills improved, her goals changed. In fact, she became so dedicated to learning that she is now enrolled in a PhD program. She has also, as a result of her studies, earned herself a well-deserved reputation in her region, as an informed and dedicated, local historian. She is a staunch advocate for Indigenous education and the need to find ways of improving Indigenous attainment. She believes that Indigenous Australians would not have been able to achieve the outcomes that many have achieved in universities without the support of the Indigenous units.

4.2.14: Lena

Lena is a young Aboriginal woman who has been raised in an urban setting by foster parents who give her a very hard time. Her foster parents did not have children, so she was raised on her own. As they did not value education, Lena was forced to leave school when she was in Year 8 because her foster mother had a stroke and she was required to help run the family business. Lena points out that they are both very negative in their approach to life and never provide her with any positive feedback. Every time she achieves a good result, they do not believe it until they see it in the lecturer's writing and, having been presented with the proof, they then remind Lena that she still has a long way to go, implying that she is not going to make it. Lena is a sole parent with a highly active son who is almost school age. Despite the demands of this relationship, she completed a tertiary access program in which she obtained excellent grades and then enrolled in law. Lena is a complex person who, in a personal
sense, has grown immensely during her time in the university. Initially, she was very vocal, usually in a negative sense, a fact that led to a number of disputes with fellow students. She was also perceived as having identity problems by many staff in the unit. Gaining entry to law, however, appears to have been a real boost for her sense of self-worth, although she did admit to some staff in the unit that she was scared as to whether or not she could do it. She worked very hard as a full-time student, however, and obtained sound results in the law subjects she took during the first two years of her course. Unfortunately, Lena had difficulty coping with a full-time load and withdrew from four subjects in her first year; two in her second year; and eight in her third year of study. During her third year, Lena’s personal life began to interfere with her studies as she became pregnant and decided to move to another university. She was accepted into law but by this time her second child had been born and she appears to have settled back into the hectic routine of raising a baby alone. Her oldest child is now at school. This is a shame as Lena’s approach to life had undergone a very positive change during the two years she was achieving academic success.

4.3: Key informants

As previously mentioned, individual interviews were also conducted with two senior key respondents — a female Aboriginal academic and a male Aboriginal academic, both of whom were the first of their families to ‘go to university’. Since that experience, both have demonstrated a total dedication to the education of Indigenous Australians. As a signifier of their importance within the field it is worth noting that both are shown the deference normally accorded to the status of ‘Elder’ within Indigenous Australian groups by members of the group that is known as the Directors of the Indigenous Higher Education Network (DIHEN).

In addition to the individual interviews, three focus group meetings were conducted, two meetings with students and one with staff. A detailed profile of the students who participated in the focus group meetings is provided in Figures 8–10, Chapter Two.
Chapter Five
Making the Journey

5.1: Preparedness for the journey

The first two questions in the interview schedule were intended to establish why the student respondents in this study made the decision to go to university and how well prepared they were to embark on such a journey. When considered within the socio-historical and socio-economic frameworks established in Chapters One and Three, such information is critical to gaining a deeper insight into Indigenous Australian participation in the academy. It should be acknowledged, however, that the raw data in this study was gathered from a small group of students in two universities in a specific geographic region of Australia and that the realities expressed by individuals may be specific to the research sites. Alternatively, however, it might be expected that there may be some commonality of experiences and outcomes, due to the shared socio-cultural-historic experiences of many Indigenous Australians, the uniqueness of each university, as a result of differences in size, geographic location, disciplinary focus and student demographics, means that, within a national context, there will be a greater diversity of experiences than will emerge from this study. Significantly, this study might be seen as providing a snapshot of a particular group of students, at a particular time in their journey through higher education, some of whom are likely to have had similar experiences and outcomes to those of Indigenous Australian students in other Australian universities.

In 2000, the period during which the raw data was gathered, Indigenous students, according to data from the DEST national statistical collection, represented 1% of all student enrolments in higher education. Trying to determine what might constitute a representative group from within such a small proportion of the higher education population was further complicated by the considerable variation in the size and composition of Indigenous student cohorts in the various universities. For instance, in 2000, actual numbers in terms of Indigenous student enrolments, ranged from as low as 17 (0.6%) to as high as 323 (3.1%) in individual regional universities and from as low as 27 (0.08%) to as high as 767 (4.0%) in different metropolitan universities (DEST Statistical Collection, 2000, Tables 26 & 67). As indicated in Chapter Three, such variance also makes the value of any comparison between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups questionable. Furthermore, in view of the diversity
of Indigenous learning needs discussed in Chapter Three, it was important that respondents to the data gathering process enabled me to capture the essence of diversity.

In 2000, the students from University One who participated in this study represented 9.6% of all Indigenous students enrolled in University One and 4.4% of the national Indigenous student enrolment in university programs (DEST Statistical Collection, 2000, Tables 26 & 67). Figure 30 provides a comparative overview of gender ratios of respondents in this study in comparison with the 2000 enrolments for University One and nationally.

Figure 30: Comparative overview of gender ratios for 2000.

A. Indigenous female respondents as ratio of total Indigenous females enrolled at University One.
B. All Indigenous female students as ratio of total female enrolment at University One.
C. All female students as ratio of total student enrolment at University One.
D. All female students enrolled at University One as ratio of national female university enrolment.
E. Indigenous male respondents as ratio of total Indigenous males enrolled at University One.
F. All Indigenous male students as ratio of total male enrolment at University One.
G. All male students as ratio of total student enrolment at University One.
H. All male students enrolled at University One as ratio of national male university enrolment.


In an attempt to determine the degree to which the student cohort was representative of the diversity of Indigenous student enrolment, I also identified student origins. Using the remote, rural and urban categories that the Commonwealth Government uses to ensure research outcomes reflect the diversity of Indigenous peoples, I asked students to indicate what they considered to be their place of origin and to discuss their perception of ‘community’, a term that is frequently used by many Indigenous Australians. This revealed
the complexity of trying to define 'community' within an Indigenous context and further highlights the diversity of Indigenous Australians. Students from remote or rural areas appeared to have less difficulty defining the concept as their perceptions were often linked to geographic boundaries. It should be noted, however, that, within these groups, there were respondents who acknowledged the existence of urban communities. In all cases, the students who acknowledged urban communities, explained their family connections within the urban community. Most relied on these family links for accommodation, especially when they first came to university. Approximately half of the urban-based students tied the notion of community back to the place where their families had originally come from with the result that some saw themselves as having links to two, sometimes three, distinct communities. Approximately two thirds of respondents argued that communities existed in urban locations with approximately 60% of these respondents indicating such communities had their links in traditional owner groups. Approximately 30% of respondents indicated that their community reflected their religious affiliations. Some urban students indicated that their family had strong links with community in both their place of origin and the urban location in which they now lived. Other students perceived community as consisting of many layers—those families with whom they socialized and communities within a broader sense that might exist within local, regional, state and national contexts. While all of the students perceived 'community' as being 'supportive', perceptions of how this might happen were vague. Approximately two thirds of students believed the community would support them in times of need while one third had never sought support from community so were noncommittal in suggesting how the community might help them. Of the students who believed the community would support them in times of need, approximately one half indicated they had no expectations of community providing them with support. All but three students, indicated that they considered it was their family that would support them in times of need rather than the community. All students indicated that what they gained from community was a sense of belonging—just knowing that the community was made up of people who you could talk to, people who would understand your concerns, helped.
The urban category included students who had grown up in large regional towns/cities and capital cities; the rural category included those who had come from small rural towns; and the remote category included people from isolated geographic locations. While the groups were similar in size, the complexity of this issue became evident when discussion revealed high levels of mobility within the groups. For example, many students who identified themselves as urban, explained how their families had moved to an urban area for employment and education opportunities when they were children but they returned annually in order to fulfil family and/or cultural responsibilities. Approximately one half of the student cohort said that their early lives had involved continual movement between remote and rural locations; remote and urban locations; or remote, rural and urban locations. Apart from family and cultural responsibilities, this mobility was also attributed to education and/or employment needs. Another issue that emerged from discussions about place of origin was the fact that 70% of all respondents had come from large (5+ children) to very large (10+ children) families, where poverty in a financial sense, had contributed to continual family mobility.

Most (75%) of the students interviewed in this study were also the first of their family to attend university. Respondents did not identify this factor as a barrier to their studies but most used it to explain why their families opposed or supported their decision to go to university or why they, personally, considered they had been significant role models in their family. Fourteen percent of respondents suggested they experienced some difficulties when they first came into the university because they had no idea of what to expect.

The first two questions in the interview schedule were presented to the student interviewees as written questions that provided opportunities for multiple choice responses to be rated as per a Lickert Scale. Students only responded to those parts of the questions that they
perceived were applicable to them. Hence, some received multiple responses while others only very limited responses and it might be assumed from this that those issues that received the highest level of response could be issues that are important to Indigenous university students. Figure 32 provides an overview of those factors that might be perceived to influence students in deciding to come to university in the first place. The responses to the survey reveal that approximately 80% of those interviewed identified factors associated with obtaining or maintaining employment as the greatest influences in their decision to undertake a higher education course. Such responses revealed a degree of ambiguity, however, as over half of those who responded in this way did not have permanent employment.

Figure 32: Factors that influenced interviewees to come to university.

A. Family expectations.
B. Community expectations.
C. A way to obtain employment.
D. A way to get a better job.
E. Needed this qualification in my present job.
F. Wanted to be with my friends.
G. Interested in the field of study.
H. Didn't know what else to do.
I. Other.

Further questions revealed that they had perceived the term ‘better’ to imply the class of job or job security. The unemployment factor could also be the reason why so few students considered that university study might have some influence on their capacity to maintain their current job. In asking students who responded to the category ‘other’ in the questionnaire (35%) to elaborate on their choice, they provided explanations that were linked to various aspects of employment. For example, three respondents explained that, due
to their age, they needed qualifications to make better decisions in their field of work or to provide them with greater job security. The five students who responded to this category stated that they had wanted to provide a role model for younger members of their family to encourage them to go to university so that they could obtain a better job. Interestingly, 10 of the 14 students interviewed referred to themselves as role models; seven of those from rural/remote origins came to university because they wanted to do something that would help their people; while three of those from urban origins sought a better understanding of the way in which the wider society works so that they could become more involved in decision-making. Walker’s report validates this finding, for her study found that Indigenous students perceived university study as important in terms of being a role model; seeking to do something for your people; developing a better understanding of how society works; and gaining the skills and knowledge needed to obtain employment or a leadership role within the workplace (2000). This finding was also validated by the focus groups. All groups indicated that a critical element in the role of higher education in contemporary society is for it to be employment related — a view that is closely aligned to the current government focus on the employability of graduates. This consensus may have reflected the composition of the focus group cohorts for there were more school leavers in these groups than amongst those students who were interviewed individually; a supposition that is supported by the senior female key respondent who pointed out that, in her experience, younger students appear more accepting of current government expectations than do older students. The staff focus group further validated the importance of employment in arguing that the university should provide students with educational opportunities that will enable them to get more interesting work, a career or higher pay; to or gain knowledge and skill in a specific area of interest; or to provide a positive role model for younger siblings, the family or clan, or other group.

Walker’s study acknowledges the importance of study in terms of enhancing Indigenous employability, alluding to institutional responsibilities by stating that ‘culturally specific and mainstream courses need to ensure that students’ employment goals are being met’ (2000: 4, Section 6) and Bourke’s study revealed that ‘deciding to study at university in order to “get a better job” was more important for indigenous than for non-indigenous students’ (1996: 41). Alcock et al’s study provides further validation from the literature. Respondents’ perceptions in relation to the notion that university studies provide Indigenous peoples with a means of enhancing their job prospects, reflects the continuing importance of Miller’s (1985) argument that involvement in higher education was critical to improving employment rates for Indigenous peoples, as discussed in Chapter One. Furthermore, they also highlight the
critical role of the Aboriginal Task Force (1988) in arguing for a national Aboriginal Education Policy and making the important connection that, without equitable educational opportunities, Indigenous peoples would never achieve parity in the labour market. Significantly, the evidence of the value of higher education for Indigenous employment outcomes provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) data (Figure 12, Chapter Three), (Australian, 2002: 113) demonstrates that the students’ perceptions revealed through this study are well founded.

Almost a half of the students identified family expectations as a factor in influencing their decision to come to university, whilst less than one-fifth felt they had responded to Community expectations. This is an interesting outcome when considered within the context that this study targeted students who perceived themselves to be making satisfactory progress at university, for it would seem to endorse Bourke’s finding that ‘those who came to university to “meet Community expectations” had a significantly higher attrition rate from their courses than those students who rated “Community expectations” as an unimportant factor in their decision to study at university’ (1996: 40). Bourke concluded that this may have been due to the fact that many ‘indigenous students moved away from their family and Community so that they could attend university’ and thus ‘distanced themselves from an important source of motivation for their undertaking university studies in the first place’ (1996: 40).

While students may not have identified Community expectations as influencing them in their decision to come to university, responses indicated that many retained strong links with their Community. For example, Ben explained how responding to requests for help from his Community had often taken him out of the university at critical times to the detriment of his own academic schedules and results. He did not see this as failure, however, because he argued that the knowledge and understanding that he gained through his engagement with his ‘real’ world would, in the longer term, better equip him to be a more effective lawyer. He suggested that he was not bound by time to the extent that the government, and hence the university, would prefer him to be. He stated that meeting his responsibilities to Community is important to him but neither does he avoid his responsibility to achieve the academic results required to successfully complete his course. He simply needs more time to do it. This response articulates the obligation some students experience in terms of their membership of an Indigenous Community. This finding is supported by Hunter and Schwab’s contention that their study in an Aboriginal Community, cited in Chapter One,
indicated that Indigenous peoples engage in education for purposes other than purely academic outcomes and that education is perceived to be an integral part of the socialisation process (1998: 7).

The influence of Community was also disclosed by the senior female key respondent who indicated that, in her experience, the capacity of many mature age students to participate in higher education is often determined by external factors such as family and/or Community responsibilities. She had also observed that Community could influence students’ choice, explaining that some people come into the university seeking specific skills and knowledge, and may not actually want a particular qualification. For example, an individual working in a Community or workplace that does not rely on western qualifications may only require knowledge that is needed for a specific situation. In such a context, acquiring and being able to use the knowledge that the Community wants would make that person very powerful within that Community and that person would be perceived as having achieved success. The literature supports this argument for Walker’s study found that ‘...course non-completion is not necessarily an unsuccessful outcome for some students’ (2000: 6, Section 6).

Alternatively, the senior female key respondent has observed that many of the mature age students, especially female students, come to university seeking a university qualification that will enable them to fulfil a personal desire to give something back to their communities; to contribute to the re-building of a strong, healthy future for all Indigenous Australians. These students simply want the qualifications they need to get them a job back in their communities and, she suggests, many pursue a career in health or teaching because they feel a need to ‘know how to care for members of their own Communities’ and have a desire to work in a field that ‘takes them back to work in their Community ... to give back to Community ... [They] want to take something back to earlier generations.’ Her argument validates the finding that most (75%) of the respondents had made the decision to come to university and pursue studies in a particular field, especially law, social work, health and education, because they perceived that was one way in which they could help their people. These findings align with Walker’s 2000 study in which respondents surveyed cited ‘[f]amily reasons, including their expectations’ (95%) and the desire ‘to be able to work for their Community’ (93%) as important reasons for studying (2000: 2, Section 6). Interestingly, Walker found that ‘[m]ore students living in rural and isolated areas than in urban areas rated being able “to work for Community” as an important reason for studying’ (2000: 7, Section 6).
While one student indicated they had a friend enrolled at the university when they decided to study, 92% of respondents knew nobody at university when they first enrolled. Hence, it would appear that wanting to be with friends (or family) was not a factor for these students, a finding that appears to support Bourke’s (1996) finding that friends attending university was not a significant factor for successful Indigenous students. A similarly response rate indicates that coming to university because you did not know what else to do was not a significant factor.

The second question required individuals to reflect upon the time they commenced their studies and to give their perceptions of how well they were prepared for university life at the time they commenced their journey. Again, all students did not respond to all questions.

Interestingly, only two thirds of students responded to the question regarding how well people thought they had fitted into university life, perhaps reflecting that most students had never thought about this issue before; were not especially interested in this issue; experienced a degree of discomfort in thinking about it and so tended to avoid it; or did not agree with the statement. The following table provides an overview of student responses.

Figure 33: How well-prepared were you for university life?

A. I had problems organising my time.
B. My study skills were appropriate for university.
C. I had the pre-requisites I needed.
D. I found it difficult to fit into university life.
E. I made good use of the Indigenous support services provided by the university.
F. I made good use of the mainstream support services provided by the university.
G. I found other students were friendly.
H. I felt comfortable within the university.

Significantly, responses to the first two issues provide some insight into the complexity of providing relevant support programs to cater for the diversity of Indigenous student needs within a university. Figure 33 demonstrates that more than half of the group thought they were able to organise their own time effectively whilst almost half saw that as a weakness. Similarly, almost half of the group perceived their study skills to be appropriate to undertaking university studies while almost the same number felt their level of skills were inappropriate and over half of the students were adamant that they did not have the necessary pre-requisites for their course when they enrolled at university. The degree of ambiguity evident in these responses could have been an outcome of the fact that the majority of students had participated in an access program in their first year of university, so that there may have been some confusion as to what they perceived as their point of entry: the access course or their undergraduate program.

The senior male key respondent indicated that, from his experience, Indigenous students, generally speaking, and especially those returning to education, often have special learning needs and tend to work better in smaller groups or require considerable one-on-one support. Furthermore, he indicated that many of these students need considerable time to develop the level of skills and understandings necessary to operate effectively and competitively within mainstream programs. Hence, he argued, within the current funding rationale, such students are likely to be perceived as those who cost an institution money. But, more importantly, he argued that an Indigenous student's perspective of success may not necessarily be related to course completion. He explained a phenomenon he has termed 'fear of success', in which Indigenous students who have stayed in the university for a long period of time choose to enrol in courses year after year, even after they had successfully completed specific qualifications. From his observations, it is as though the individuals do not have the strength within themselves to move beyond the university.

He cited a particular student who spent almost ten years, between two universities, completing a number of bridging subjects and acquiring various disciplinary qualifications. At the end of this time, having obtained an undergraduate degree and commenced postgraduate studies, he suddenly left to take up a job on a fishing boat, explaining that he had stuck around for so long because he simply didn't know what to do. He had found his studies interesting and, although they had not inspired him in terms of employment, they had enabled him to develop a sense of his own worth as a person. Ultimately, it was this outcome
that had empowered him to make a decision about what he wanted to do in life. The senior male key respondent argues that ‘fear of success’ is what happens when people don’t have a certain level of self-esteem or any real faith in themselves and actually come into Indigenous programs for the support that is provided there, doing everything they can to remain in that structure for as long as they need it. He revealed that such a scenario was not uncommon and he believes that, when considered within a socio-historical context, this might well be viewed as simply a part of a ‘catching up in education’ process for Indigenous peoples.

While his argument justifies the importance of educational provision for Indigenous Australians being based on equity principles, as discussed in Chapters One and Three, it also indicates such need still exists and is often an important process for those who have suffered previous educational disadvantage to go through as a preparation for employment. The validity of his argument is supported by Figure 34, which reveals that student respondents in this study clearly considered the provision of support programs as an important factor in catering for the specific learning needs of Indigenous students in universities.

Figure 34: Ways in which student respondents utilise support services provided within their university.

A. Regularly visited Indigenous Support Unit to maintain connections with Indigenous peoples.
B. Visited Indigenous Support Unit from time to time, to maintain contact with Indigenous peoples.
C. Regularly accessed formal support programs provided by Indigenous Support Unit.
D. Accessed formal support programs provided by mainstream Support Unit.

This finding is further validated by Bourke’s study where approximately 60% of respondents indicated that the support services available within the Indigenous support unit had helped them a lot (1996: 47). Similarly, Walker’s study refers to the need for students who have suffered ‘historical, socio-economic and educational disadvantage’ (2000: 1,
Exec. Summary) to enrol in a program that will enable them to catch up with their non-Indigenous peers and reported that most of her respondents indicated ‘... “they felt a sense of belonging and welcome at their Indigenous Centre” irrespective of the course in which they were enrolled’ (2000: 11, Section 8). Significantly, Alcock et al argued the importance of Indigenous units providing support that is ‘driven from within the students’ own cultures, so that they reaffirm such cultures and empower the students to access the tools to problematise the political nature of the acquisition of knowledge’ (1997: 30). My observations of Indigenous students studying across the university confirm that the Indigenous unit does provide a positive site for students seeking to address aspects of their own previous educational disadvantage. For example, I have observed that many Indigenous students interact regularly with unit staff and have noted that their self-confidence increases with continuing engagement. Most students will, in time, return to the unit with a story of how they finally found the courage to question issues and argue their own position within a mainstream lecture. At least a third of the students interviewed described how they had used a similar process, with most indicating that they were usually into the second year of their undergraduate program before they felt confident enough to engage in academic debate with their lecturers and peers. This process of self-empowerment appears as something of a paradox when considered within the context that two thirds of the students indicated that they had found other students friendly and felt comfortable within the university. This response may, however, reflect their previous experience in tertiary access programs that had provided opportunities or the space they needed to familiarise themselves with the university environment to the extent that, on a surface level, they could feel comfortable. Similarly, prior experience in tertiary access might explain why almost half of the respondents disagreed with the statement that they found it difficult to fit into university life. Bourke’s 1996 findings that almost 60% of his student cohort said they fitted in well with other students also support this argument.

5.2: A circuitous route

Having clarified the above, this section of this chapter will provide an analysis of the university experience — what happened at the ‘interface’ (Nakata, nd: 17). I began by posing questions designed to probe the issue of how effectively Indigenous students felt able to function within the university environment as this should inform my understanding of the degree of choice individuals felt they had over their studies and, ultimately, the outcomes they would be able to achieve.
Respondents were asked to identify factors, including policies and practices, that they considered influenced their involvement within the particular context of making them feel valued or not valued and to discuss those they perceived had impacted upon the outcomes they were able to achieve. While I had realised that there might be some overlap between the responses to these questions and those provided in the previous survey activity, I had felt it important to provide respondents with the opportunity to explore issues from within their own framework of concerns. Hence, this process would allow validation of previous issues and possible emergence of others. It was from these discussions that the issues I have identified as themes began to emerge. These were issues that were often referred to by participants as a means of explaining a point they were making and so, in collating the responses, I identified those themes as power, knowledge, culture, community, diversity, language, policies and racism, and subsequently used them as analytical tools to examine the university experience.

In addition to providing deeper insights into the degree to which University One catered for the needs of Indigenous students and Indigenous perceptions of success within the context of higher education, the focus group meetings also enabled me to obtain information about Indigenous perspectives of the role of higher education in Australian society and possible links between the terms education, power and culture within the context of Indigenous achievement in higher education. In opening each session, I provided participants with three questions and asked them to write some ideas in response to each. These ideas were used to initiate group discussion, thus contextualising the focus group activity. The data obtained through the focus group sessions contributed to the validation of data gathered through the interviews.

The responses to the open ended questions re-inforced the survey findings that the most positive form of support for Indigenous students on their journey through the university is provided by the Indigenous units. Almost 90% of student participants saw the Indigenous unit as an extremely important strategy enabling them not only to succeed but also to ‘survive’ within the mainstream programs. Survival was attributed to the high level of personal support provided, particularly during students’ first year in the university. In addition to the academic support provided through the ATAS program and the cultural camaraderie that came from making contact with your own people, students acquired the skills they needed to operate within the university. Such interaction appears to improve motivation and the student’s sense of purpose and self-worth. In fact, the use of the
Indigenous unit was such a recurring theme in discussions that it positively re-inforces the argument that universities must provide a culturally affirmative learning environment if they are to achieve improved retention and success rates for these students. Margaret explained:

I have always felt that I belonged here [in the Indigenous unit] and that's why, throughout my university life, that's why I have always come back here. You see a lot of students who don't come back here and when you talk to them, when you see them over there, they say how they feel really, really lonely. That's when I realise that success in your study has also got to do with your academic and emotional support . . . You get that support from talking to the staff here, from being with your own.

Mary argued that if the Indigenous unit had not existed, she and many other students would never have been given the opportunity to even come to university for, as she pointed out, the access programs are all designed and offered through the unit. She revealed that, in their conversations, students often acknowledge the fact that if it hadn't been for the access program they did, they would never have gained entry to university. Mary emphasised the importance of the emotional support provided through the Indigenous unit.

I consider this very important, because this Centre . . . even though you're in the mainstream and get on with quite a lot of the people over there — to actually go to the Library and study, well . . . I found that I couldn't, it's too clinical over there. You're on your own, you can't talk. There's a lot of young people go there and they just chat. It wasn't somewhere I could study. But to come over here, where you're mixing with your own . . . and we all support each other . . . and help the younger ones, the ones in the lower levels. So it's really important, I think, for us to have this Centre. We've come here for the last four years . . . it's the place we head for when we've finished our lectures.

In fact, Mary revealed the value of the Indigenous Unit in terms of breaking down cultural barriers, explaining that she had enjoyed being able to invite her non-Indigenous peers to join her at the Indigenous unit for socialising and learning activities that she considered demonstrated an attitude of mutual respect.

I've got nothing against those people, the white people over there. It's just that there's so many of them, so many students. You go over there to have your lunch and you can't — you can't be yourself over there. You've got to watch yourself - it's a different way of speaking and looking at things. Most people
over there know that if I’m not at lectures, I’m over here. I tell them where I’ll be if they’re ever looking for me. I’ve brought people over here and we’ve studied together. I enjoyed those times, it made it easier somehow.

And, for Len, a student who throughout the many years he has been at the university has had to cope with racist attitudes:

... this Centre is vital for Indigenous people, because without it we would feel pretty lost. To us it’s a bit of a safe haven — you come over here and feel accepted, we’re all equal. I think that without this place I would find it very difficult to be at university. This place is paramount to Indigenous people being successful here [in this university] ... they all come over here. You come over here, put your feet up and feel you belong.

Walker’s study also highlights the importance of the Indigenous unit and the teaching staff employed in that facility, saying that, ‘students were more satisfied with Indigenous Centre staff than mainstream staff’ and that several ‘students indicated that they found Indigenous Centres helpful even though they were studying in mainstream courses’ (2000: 4, Section 8).

Len, who had attempted two mainstream programs prior to enrolling in the tertiary access program, was particularly adamant that most Indigenous students could not have survived at university without the support programs provided by the Indigenous support unit.

When I first came to university, I went straight into a mainstream program. I thought I could handle that. My self-esteem was pretty low and I found it extremely hard to build my confidence. You put in assignments and just get over the line or go into exams and just get through or fail ... It was just one big struggle all the time. But finally coming into the access has made a big difference. I’m getting good marks because I’m getting encouragement and I’m talking with the lecturers because over here they have an interest in their students. In mainstream, no-one cares if you’re struggling, it’s like ‘so what if you drop out!’.

With this access course, regardless of whether you’re going into science or education or law or whatever, lots of our students wouldn’t be where they are today without it. They would never have made it if they went straight into mainstream.

And Len was not alone in such thinking. Two-thirds of those interviewed indicated that they
would not have been able to cope with mainstream undergraduate studies without having first completed the tertiary access program conducted by the Indigenous unit. Two students had commenced their university experience with a basic literacy and numeracy program prior to enrolling in the tertiary access course, while half of those interviewed had also participated in specialist tertiary access courses that offered a maths and science focus or prepared students for entry to a specific discipline — for example, one-third of the students interviewed had participated in an intensive six-week preparatory program called Pre-Law. Students also stressed the importance of the tertiary access programs as allowing a space for those students who have been out of education for many years to adjust to the university environment and gain valuable insights into the expectations that will be placed upon them as students. Jo, the oldest student interviewed, explained that she had initially enrolled directly into a mainstream program but hadn’t been able to cope and subsequently dropped out. Some years later, she tried again but this time enrolled in the access program first.

It was those support systems that you set up over this side that helped me get through the bridging — I wouldn’t have been able to do it without that. I mean when you come in, as mature age students you know, I’d been a long time out of the classroom, only went to grade four education . . . I wanted to succeed but I needed all the help I could get. When I went into mainstream next time, I knew how to get the other support.

And Yvonne stated:

The TAC course was very helpful in getting me into the mainstream . . . geared me up for study because I had been out of school for like, thirty years or something — ages — and I hadn’t studied since I left school at Year Ten. I did the mainstream prep course first and then came and did twelve months of TAC and then by that time I felt comfortable and secure enough to go into mainstream.

Margaret identified the access course as an opportunity to ‘be with your own [people] while you are getting grounded . . . it’s been such an advantage doing the TAC course and then being able to go straight on, out into the mainstream’.

Margaret’s sentiments are validated by the staff focus group’s argument that a critical component in the role of the Indigenous unit is to provide an environment that enables students to develop and/or maintain a strong sense of their own cultural identity as the
foundation for their evolving sense of autonomy.

In focusing on outcomes students argued that, as many mature age Indigenous peoples undertake university studies, tertiary access programs remain a priority. There was a strong perception among students that access programs provide them with opportunities to develop the academic skills, including literacy and language, they need to operate within the university system and/or in specific disciplines, including access to information technology training and mainstream access programs, and time for building confidence in their interactions with others and self-esteem in regard to their own abilities. Walker's study validates these arguments, for, in exploring issues related to how welcome students felt in the university, she found that, in addition to their strong support for the Indigenous unit, over 80% of students indicated that participating in a culturally specific course had given them confidence in linking into the wider mainstream university (Walker 2000: 11, Section 8).

Almost 80% of respondents suggested that the quality of relationships with teaching staff was a critical factor for Indigenous students and, in particular, the capacity of lecturers and tutors to provide support and demonstrate respect for students was considered to be paramount for students seeking success. Yvonne revealed that one of the things that made her feel valued in the university was ‘having people willing to listen, having the lecturers make time for me . . . I had a big fear about that. When they gave me their time it made me feel I was worth something’.

Margaret, while indicating that many of her recollections of the people she has worked with are positive, reveals how damaging negative experiences can be.

I remember in a first year lecture . . . I put my hand up and asked a question and the lecturer yelled at me that there was no such thing. The lecture theatre was full and she nearly killed me with that. About six weeks later, we had a lecture on the very thing I had asked about. That really killed me. I never had any input into her lectures after that, I wasn’t game to speak.

This comment encapsulates the sense of powerlessness that many students appeared to have experienced during their initial engagement in mainstream studies, an experience that is validated by focus group discussions concerning why ‘power’ might be a critical element to consider when thinking of education for cultural groups such as Indigenous Australians. A younger participant, in one of the focus groups, suggested that, for her, ‘knowledge of the
education culture [within the university] was empowering' but half of the group disagreed, explaining the 'intimidation' they felt in educational institutions, often at the hands of teachers:

'They're just teachers and have been for a long time';

'They've got an attitude ... real condescending and questioning, especially about Indigenous Studies';

'I would have to explain the culture...but then they would give the impression that I was just talking a lot of rubbish'; or

'They look at you like you're stupid or something'.

Len's experience provides another insight into this issue of the way in which teachers use power. While talking of the positive experiences he had with his lecturers in the access program, Len also remembered his earlier frustration with a particular lecturer in his education course. When asked to provide some guidance in relation to tasks he had set, he would simply tell students to get on with it as there were no right or wrong answers. Len saw himself as needing further information in order to be able to complete the task. While he perceived the lecturer's response as that of 'a man who had knowledge that he should have been sharing with the students. He was not sharing his knowledge, it was staying with him.' Len suggested that such an approach was actually detrimental to students' progress, particularly in relation to students who had suffered previous educational disadvantage. It could be assumed that the ongoing equity policies of successive commonwealth governments, that have been implemented since the 1970s, were intended to ensure that all educational institutions, including universities, developed the capacity, and the commitment, to address the specific learning needs of such students. The data would seem to suggest this may not have happened.

The staff focus group discussion highlighted the complexities of this issue for it was argued that educators cannot empower others, their role is to provide opportunities for people to empower themselves. All agreed, however, that people cannot make use of their education unless they feel in some way empowered by it. Hence, education should be a comprehensive process that provides people with opportunities to gain competencies in specific skills while also teaching them how to think and express their ideas. However, they also agreed that education is a two-way process where the sensitive teacher understands and appreciates the
importance of the process and has the capacity to accept student input in ways that make
each feel valued for their contribution. They determined that, for the process to be
empowering, education is also about how people in the group, including the lecturer,
demonstrate their ‘listening’ skills.

Lorraine, a first year student of urban origin, was not finding her educational experience
empowering due to her difficulties with the way in which lecturers used language:

. . . they either talk over your head or they talk to you or they talk down to you
and you can either pick it up or you can’t. And if you’re not looking at them
and understanding them, if you can’t talk back to them in the same lingo, then
they should know that you can’t understand.

A number of students raised the issue of language, explaining how some lecturers tended to
speak only in the ‘jargon’ that was associated with their discipline. While students
recognised that it was necessary to learn that language, they felt that some lecturers needed
to find better ways to teach it so that they could ensure all students understood their
discipline-specific language. There was a tendency for students to view lecturers who only
communicated in the language of their discipline as somehow ignorant, unable to
communicate in the everyday language used by most people. Such behaviour reflects the
concern Indigenous peoples have previously voiced regarding their exclusion from education
through teacher use of the ‘language of power’ (Martin, 1990: 34).

But, the concerns do not apply only to spoken language. Margaret explains:

It didn’t matter what I did she would write comments all over it. I know I
probably didn’t have good writing skills but she would write ‘you need to go
and learn to talk proper English’ . . . that sort of thing.

The Aboriginal key respondents revealed the diversity of needs in this area, suggesting that
Indigenous students growing up in urban locations tend to have better English language
skills than those students who are raised in rural locations or remote communities, a reality
that is not always recognised by university teaching staff. Some students may require
learning environments that cater for their needs as English as Second Language speakers or
English as Foreign Language speakers but few university teaching environments appear to
cater for the needs of Indigenous Australians in this regard, the assumption being that, as
they are Australians, they speak English.
The focus group discussions considered how power can also be linked to language, deciding that people who have sound English language skills are much more able to access the power structures of Australian society than those who do not have those skills. It was agreed that this could impact upon an individual's ability to access cultural capital. This finding is validated by Luke's (Luke, 2000) argument that a major barrier to the achievement of equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians lies in the fact that the educational institutions in this country have never accepted their responsibility for sharing knowledge of cultural capital with Indigenous peoples. Dudgeon et al (1997) argued that universities have a responsibility to address the educational disadvantage suffered by Indigenous Australians as a result of the long-term denial of their basic human rights. How this situation manifests itself within the learning environment is clearly demonstrated by an incident that occurred with three first year education students — one being an interviewee in this study — who came to discuss a problem they were having with a particular lecturer. They were experiencing difficulty with the subject content because they could not understand the theoretical language the lecturer used so one of them requested that more lecture time be allocated to discussing theoretical terms. She was told that it was her responsibility to learn the language and if she couldn't do that, she shouldn't be doing education. They decided they would come to see me to seek assistance as they felt the lecturer was displaying a racist attitude. They didn't want a tutor for the subject, simply an opportunity to talk about the terms a little more so that they could develop greater confidence in using them. We arranged a suitable time for such a session and they arrived with an additional four, non-Indigenous students who were also experiencing similar difficulties. The Indigenous students indicated that, having discovered they were not alone, they thought they might have been wrong in making their assumption about racism. Rather, they had concluded between themselves, refusing to engage in discussions about theoretical terms might be a strategy this lecturer used to get rid of any first year students he considered may not have had the ‘right language’ or ‘satisfactory academic levels’. Other students had told them that he was much more approachable with his second year students and, hence, they had decided that if they could get through their first year examination in this subject, it was likely they would become more acceptable. We discussed the situation within the context of catering for diversity, so they might better understand how to create inclusive learning environments. In recognising that this could be an example of a lecturer who was either not willing, or able, to acknowledge the validity of other epistemologies, we considered how they, as teachers, might cater for individual student needs within their future
classrooms. Through this process we established the procedure we would use to achieve their desired outcomes. We met three times and, subsequently, all but one of these students passed the subject. This example legitimises the notion that Indigenous Support Units are a valuable form of support for Indigenous students within Australian universities because it demonstrates that Indigenous students do have a sense of belonging in such units. Two of the Indigenous students who came to seek my support had not met me previously but had no difficulty in discussing their issues with me.

Ted had enjoyed a positive experience, explaining that he had found the lecturers to be very supportive of him and they had all encouraged him to persevere. He also revealed that he had had a very good tutor for two years of his program, during which time they got to know one another very well so it had been easy to talk with him. Having observed Ted’s interaction with other students and staff over the past three years, I believe this was would have been a significant factor, for he is a very quiet student who needs to feel a high level of trust in a person before he will speak freely to them. In addition, he indicated that whenever he had any problems, he would have a ‘yarn’ with the lecturers at the Indigenous unit and that helped him to sort things out for himself.

While these students’ responses demonstrate the diversity of the student experience, they also reveal the diversity that teachers must cater for in their courses. There is no doubt that ‘good’ teachers exist because two-thirds of the respondents commended the efforts of lecturers who provide positive feedback; who make themselves very accessible to their students; who keep track of individual student progress; and who demonstrate a genuine commitment by ensuring students understand the content of the subject and know what they are supposed to be doing in terms of assessment tasks. Such lecturers, who also tend to have an interest and understanding of Indigenous affairs, were perceived as making the difference between success and failure. Students indicated that, in response to such positive treatment, they tend to work hard and, thus, achieve sound results.

Unfortunately, most respondents (80%) were also able to demonstrate the negative impact that lecturers can have upon Indigenous students. They revealed that some lecturers discriminate against Indigenous students by talking down to them; by using stereotypical labelling in referring to them and, thus, denigrating or ridiculing them; or by demonstrating a very limited commitment to equity provisions. Such lecturers can make Indigenous students feel devalued and excluded, hence, four of the students said they stopped going to their
lectures because they felt so much 'shame', even though this meant they failed the subject. On the other hand, another five students stated that such treatment made them all the more determined that they were not going to let this lecturer’s attitude cost them a subject (or more). Approximately one-third of students, in both interview and focus groups, described lecturers who didn’t care about students but these students indicated that such behaviour was ‘acceptable’ due to the fact that those lecturers treated everybody the same.

While the level of response to these questions appears to support the argument that lecturers’ attitudes can have a critical impact upon student outcomes, it is worth noting that the response level for both positive and negative perceptions was almost equal. The data revealed that student responses were linked to the personal experiences of individual students. In my experience, students who perceive they are being subjected to discrimination are likely to develop a negative attitude toward the lecturer, or even the university, and if the situation remains unresolved this will ultimately impact upon student achievement.

Ben, who had come so enthusiastically to learn, summed up a concern that most students expressed about discriminatory factors that can have implications for the learning outcomes Indigenous students are able to achieve.

... the first year was difficult. I remember that because you become very aware that you’re different. Once people picked up that you were Aboriginal you became different. It hasn’t changed much and it’s still this attitude in university that if you’re black and you’re in university, then you’re on a free ride.

They still believe that there’s ‘them’ and there’s ‘us’. That attitude is there and you accept it, you challenge it where you can... so you’re defending yourself in culture mostly all the time. Means you’re constantly on your guard. That’s been the main pressure, I think.

These findings are validated by the literature. Bourke’s study found that, while the majority of Indigenous respondents found staff in the Indigenous unit to be proactive, supportive and generally helpful, this 'does not appear to be related to outcome of study' (1996: 57). Where students develop negative attitudes, there is a need for change in the learning environment, including attention to curriculum, to ensure it is culturally relevant to the needs of Indigenous learners. Walker’s study supports these arguments for, in highlighting the importance of teaching in terms of Indigenous education, she states that most student comment about cultural insensitivity appeared to be directed at non-Indigenous staff.
teaching in mainstream programs, although she emphasises the complexities by citing Morgan's (1992) argument that, due to current practice in teacher education programs, even being Indigenous does not guarantee greater cultural sensitivity. Walker's study also revealed negative comment was mostly directed at mainstream programs where students questioned the relevance of their course, curriculum content, and the lack of Indigenous staff involvement, especially in relation to the insertion of Indigenous perspectives both within the curriculum and the teaching of subjects (2000: 2, Section 7).

In addition to naming positive relationships with lecturers as a key element in ensuring their sense of feeling valued within the university environment, over half of the students also highlighted the importance of their relationship with other (non-Indigenous) students in their field of study. For example, Ted summarises it as 'I've found most of them [the students] are pretty good there. We stick together — that sort of thing'.

While these were the major factors identified by the student sample as contributing to their capacity to operate effectively within the university environment, students also identified other factors that they considered had enhanced their capacity to succeed.

A third of the cohort suggested that being a mature age student had helped them to develop more co-operative and beneficial relationships with both staff and students in the university. They stated that, due to their life experience, they were more confident in dealing with others and, because they perceived they had no time to waste in getting what they had come for, they tended to be more assertive in having their learning needs met by lecturers and tutors. Ted explained that most lecturers are not really concerned about student needs as half of the students don't even bother to turn up to the lectures because they're not compulsory. Ted's approach, which he perceived was easier for him as a mature age student, was to take the lecturers up on their request for people to pull them up if they had questions:

... I'd sort of have a word to them after the lecture and most of them had the time for me. The young ones may be a bit shy to do that but for me it definitely helped because, you know, most of the lecturers would probably be about the same age as me.

Similarly, Margaret's experiences suggest that the quality of the learning experience may well be related to the individual's capacity to demand the support they require. For, as she indicated:
Toward the end of my first semester in mainstream, it hit me that I had access to tutors and lecturers... I knew that I could go at anytime... this wasn't like school. I saw it as a more natural relationship. Not that I was pulling down their status but, as a student, I really did need to have it in my head that I could get help at anytime. I think my maturity had a lot to do with the approach I used... whether they were professors or doctors — I didn’t let that stop me. I had respect for them, but I had to think about how I was going to get through. Was I going to try and do my own stuff, struggle alone or... I took the approach that we’re all equal and they want to see us get through university... it’s in their best interest.

Ben had a different perspective on how the practice of including mature age students in the various subjects could lead to positive outcomes for the whole group.

I think it’s necessary to have that degree of balance in there... it helps the lecturers — trying to talk to a bunch of young high school leavers starting out in law — it’s hard for them to talk to that level. Discussions become more interesting when there’s some mature age students sitting in the class... they’re more challenged by what is being said and the lecturers know the mature age students will challenge them so that inspires them to lift their game.

It helps to get the discussion going in a way that everyone gets to understand what is being said. That’s beneficial to the lecturer and the students.

Walker’s (2000) findings validated Ted and Margaret’s perceptions concerning the value of being a mature-aged student and Bourke’s 1996 study, while supporting the notion that ‘maturity and life experience are generally thought to increase motivation and persistence’, also found that ‘for indigenous students in the sample, age was not significantly related to outcome’, although it was the case that ‘older indigenous students out performed their younger counterparts’ (Bourke, 1996: 34). Bourke did caution that staff in universities should recognise the problems associated with people coming in to study when they have had many years out of education. He suggests that a useful strategy might be to advise these students to commence at a lower level than their assessment scores would seem to indicate (Bourke, 1996: 37). These findings also validate the arguments that have been raised by mature age students in this study, regarding the value of participation in tertiary access programs as a forerunner to study in mainstream programs. The value of these programs is further validated by the fact that while three-quarters of the students interviewed had completed a tertiary access course prior to enrolling in mainstream studies, only two students...
had changed disciplines once they had commenced their undergraduate program. This would seem to reinforce Bourke’s finding that successful students were more likely to perceive that a course had been relevant to their needs or that they had enjoyed studying, than were students who dropped out of university (1996: 43).

Almost one-quarter of the sample revealed that they enjoyed the challenge of university study, including examinations. One-third of respondents gained positive motivation through being asked their opinion as an Indigenous person, although almost one quarter of the group commented negatively upon this aspect of their learning interactions.

Rosita was one of those who enjoyed being asked her opinion:

I felt valued in the way that when Torres Strait [Island] words came up, I could help by saying them in language. I could also help to inform students who lacked knowledge about Torres Strait [Island] culture and traditions. If it’s anything to do with Indigenous issues like reconciliation and the stolen generation, I voice my opinion and I know a lot of the students actually appreciate getting the feedback.

Margaret found being asked by the lecturer to provide her opinion could present her with a positive or a negative experience.

. . . sometimes I think they thought that we were the experts but many times when they asked me about specific things, I realised that we’re not experts at all. We can’t know all about it but they don’t see that aspect of it. Yet, when we had cross-cultural awareness and had to identify where we were from and talk a bit, when I had to verbalise that I was a mature age, Indigenous student, I felt they really valued my input — they didn’t feel threatened then.

Yet for Ted, he perceives no problem because:

. . . we’re all sort of equal, learning the same thing. We all have this same knowledge you know, which is true because there isn’t much that I really know in relation to what they’re teaching. Most of the stuff we’re learning is just theory and practice and method. A couple of times lecturers have stopped and asked me what I think, if what they were saying was correct . . . that’s okay.

The high correlation between these responses and those that were provided in the survey question, further attests to the importance of culturally affirmative learning environments for
Indigenous students. The following factors were identified by individual students as contributing to their feeling valued within the learning environment. They included: involvement as student representatives on University committees; the availability of lecturers and/or tutors when support was needed; their capacity, as individuals, to respond to challenges; the services provided by the university’s Student Association; the enjoyment derived from socialising with other students; the benefits derived from having older students to provide advice; and the motivation provided by other students who demonstrated their empathy with students through their ongoing interest and support. These elements further validate the importance of a culturally affirmative learning environment.

These views give the impression that there are many Indigenous students who feel comfortable within the university but, equally important, are the experiences of those who do not feel comfortable within the university. Hence, I asked students to identify those practices that made them feel they did not belong. The behaviour that appeared to cause the highest level of distress was racism. Students attributed much of their sense of alienation or exclusion to racist attitudes, especially where such behaviour emanates from staff.

Len argued that it is often the attitude of the teacher that determines the student’s behaviour, explaining that if a teacher infers that an Indigenous student is dumb, then that student will tend to act dumb. Len considers that this was his problem because, ‘I've always had a feeling of not belonging in the university to be quite honest, never had any feelings of acceptance’. He argued that it was only since he had been in the tertiary access program and begun to feel good about himself, that he has finally been able to comprehend his previous failure to achieve academic success.

Margaret explained that she had come to university, thinking of herself simply as ‘Margaret’ but suddenly she became ‘black’, ‘female’ and ‘disadvantaged’. She was shocked by this and had to go and talk to the Professor to try and sort out how to deal with these labels. She also experienced considerable conflict as a result of people in her classes — both lecturers and students — referring to Indigenous peoples in what she considered to be derogatory terms. She had put up with it as long as she could but was finally unable to remain silent.

The word ‘black’ was used really openly and I felt that some students didn’t want to be . . . to participate in your group. I mean it was not done in an ‘in your face way’ but you can read the body language. I remember one day this guy was raving on about ‘blacks’ and I just said, ‘I don’t appreciate your approach
to this. You can change your attitude, I can’t change my colour.’ We became really good friends after that. I think we needed to set the boundaries, you know, where does this person fit, how do I relate or talk to these people. They just didn’t know. They need to do an Indigenous Studies subject, you know, every year.

One day, in a group discussion, I just got sick of them using the word ‘black’ so I stood up and said, ‘Excuse me, using the word ‘black’ like this upsets me. We’re future social workers, we’re going out to work with different people — Indigenous peoples and ethnic groups. I think that we should be thinking about how to get on with these people, how to relate to them. I think it’s time you left that word ‘black’ out of your vocabulary.’ Then the lecturer turned around to me and said, ‘So, what do we call them?’ I said, ‘Everybody has a name. Why can’t you use people’s names? And why can’t we refer to Aboriginal people or Indigenous people?’

Student explanations demonstrated that racism could be overt or covert, blatant or subtle, as Margaret demonstrates:

There were a couple of lecturers who, it didn’t matter how hard I tried, it was never good enough. In my third year, for instance, I was doing a theory subject and it didn’t matter what I did, I would only get a pass. It was like there was a ceiling put there. Other students would read my assignments and wouldn’t be able to see anything different to their assignments yet they would get distinctions and I would get passes . . . sometimes I think there are lecturers out there who . . . maybe it’s their attitudes towards — I want to believe everybody wants us to succeed but I don’t know if that’s true. Cross-cultural training should be mandatory for all lecturers, I reckon.

Ben encapsulated the concerns many of the respondents raised.

Racism is one of those things that people confront when they have to or when it’s easy . . . but for Indigenous students, they’re still, they’re still wary of it, they’re pretty awake up to the fact that it’s there, but they often misunderstand the position as far as getting into university. It’s still there! That was my biggest — you know, you see it outside in the mainstream and you think — well it doesn’t mean that people who study are any more intellectually-minded than the bloke out on the street who’s digging the ditch. When it suits them they will both fall into the same pit. It’s a lot to do with peer pressure, we know that and
accept it but we also have to confront it when we have to. Henry was here a couple of years ago, a pale faced bloke, and a group of them were criticising him for saying he was an Aboriginal. The next day I gave the four of them a heap of material on Aboriginality. A week later they handed it back to me. They didn’t say nothing but they stopped calling Henry the ‘white Aboriginal’. That’s how we dealt with it. Henry was pretty upset but I said, ‘It’s something we know is there, it’s a part of life and the university is just a part of the community so it’s no different to life anywhere’.

Following lengthy discussion, most students in the focus groups concluded that their university education had helped them develop a capacity to ignore a lot of the discrimination they encountered. They felt that they no longer allowed themselves to be affected by the ignorant or to be intimidated by racist behaviours displayed by people who they now perceive to be bullies.

My observations suggest that institutional racism continues to permeate our educational institutions and the fact that little is done to acknowledge and address it is validated by Walker’s findings regarding the impact of ‘racism and discrimination’ and ‘insensitivity to cultural issues’. She cited Anderson et al’s work on institutional racism that revealed ‘university policies “showed little concern for sustaining and advancing Australia’s anti-racist heritage, or engaging in the complex and contradictory issues surrounding racism”…’ (2000: 13, Section 8).

Other students talked of having to cope with paternalism. Steve demonstrates that Indigenous students are often highly attuned to this behaviour.

Most lecturers come up — they know you by face — and have a bit of a talk . . . but then, you have lecturers like _______ over there. They do a lot for Indigenous students, they’re nice to you but then they start to try and push you in a certain direction — where they think you should go. I can see that coming though, I can see where they are coming from and it’s not what I want. I won’t go there.

The focus group discussions argued the value of the cross cultural training the Indigenous unit offers to interested groups across all discipline areas of the university and the cultural and academic activities they provide for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff. It was asserted that cross-cultural interaction is a critical element in the development of
more effective communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, an essential component in the reconciliation process that the report on the NATSIEP Review (1995) implied was so important in improving Indigenous educational outcomes. Yet, as the staff focus group revealed, staff across all discipline areas of the university show little interest in availing themselves of the opportunities offered by the Indigenous unit. Furthermore, it was noted that despite the Indigenous unit offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate subjects as electives for all students, a number of discipline areas actively discourage this by limiting student choice to electives from their own faculty or discipline. While this reality may be driven by financial factors, it does little to ensure a ‘university culture’ that reflects an appreciation of cross-cultural understanding. This was identified as an issue of grave concern, particularly within the context of preparing graduates for employment in a diversity of locations where their capacity to interact effectively with Indigenous Australians will be crucial. In fact, it was noted that one of the graduate outcomes identified in the Strategic Plan for University One is to have all graduates develop an awareness of Indigenous Australian cultures and an ability to operate effectively in a culturally diverse society. The data gathered from University One students would seem to suggest that in 2000 this outcome was not likely to be achievable. University Two listed understanding cultural diversity and a knowledge of Indigenous people as two areas of perceived strength but, again, the data gathered from students in this university in 2000 would indicate that the perceived strengths may not be apparent to their Indigenous students.

The importance of these issues are validated by Bourke’s concerns regarding the failure to include Indigenous Studies in teacher education programs (Bourke, 1999: 21) and by the NATSIEP review report of 1995, in which the importance of reconciliation was used to justify the argument that Indigenous Studies should be made a mandatory subject for education students in universities (DEET, 1995: 44). Walker’s study also highlighted student concerns that a number of university courses lacked Indigenous content, pointing out that students had been particularly concerned that in areas such as nursing and Community health, mental health, psychology, medicine, law, journalism, teaching, human resource management, Community development and social work, there was virtually no attempt to prepare people for working within cross-cultural contexts so that, as one student argued, the outcome can be that people such as nurses can be sent to work on Indigenous communities and ‘appear to be cold towards Aboriginal people’ (2000: 12, Section 7).

Some students (21%) stated that they had never felt valued within the university
environment although they were determined to succeed just 'to show' non-Indigenous people that they could do it. While Annie is spurred on by her 'need to compete and complete', she is very scathing about the way she has been treated in the 'western academic setting where I am regularly reminded that I don't have the three little letters after my name'. Bill has also had his problems with the university, explaining how, in his first year, a course coordinator to whom he had gone for advice, had:

'. . . just judged me on looks alone. . . told me I had to do these two bridging subjects. At the time, I felt like he was treating me 'special' and I was right. It turned out later that I didn't have to do those subjects at all because they were covered in the subjects I'd done. I'd been doing them for over two months when I found this out, so I refused to continue with them. Of course, that got me into a lot of trouble with DETYA. He may have been trying to help me but he was more of a hindrance than a help and he made me feel that I wasn't seen as being in mainstream, even though that was where I was. It was a bad experience for me and I nearly gave up my studies.

Other factors that caused a minority of the students interviewed to feel they were not valued included: getting the run around from staff; administrative errors, caused by a breakdown in communications between DETYA and the university, that can take considerable time to resolve and that usually result in the student suffering financial hardship over an extended period; and the failure of the university to acknowledge other than Western cultures in university ceremonies. Viewing these issues within the context of the socio-historical framework established within Chapter One helps explain why so many Indigenous students are very easily reduced to perceiving of themselves as invisible or inferior in some way. This reality appears to be implicit in Walker's finding that a number of students considered their university 'courses are still based on dominant mainstream values and lack regard for Indigenous terms of reference' (2000: 2, Section 7). Students in the study, while valuing their achievements in terms of their course outcomes, implied that they would have found their course of greater value, personally, if it had included other course outcomes such as 'the affirmation and recognition of Indigenous knowledge, skills and experience' (Walker, 2000: 5, Section 7). These findings are further validated by Alcock et al's report that stated:

The dilemma for many Australian Indigenous students who choose to study business is how do you maintain and validate your own cultural values and knowledges whilst having to learn and appreciate knowledge that is constructed and underpinned by western values? For example, when students attempt to
incorporate their own culture within academic practices such as assignments, what provision or expectations are there for the lecturers and tutors to understand or appreciate a different or alternative view? (1997: 20)

In focusing on the factors that may have impacted upon the outcomes they were able to achieve at university, the majority of respondents identified issues associated with their academic progress. Several students revealed that the academic aspect of university life held no fears for them. Ben recounted his first visit to the university.

I came down and had a look at it. Then I got excited. Saw the library, thought about the whole concept of learning and applying my experiences and said, 'Oh, I can do that'. Really confident, and I haven’t looked back since.

Similarly, even though Bill had experienced some problems with operating in the mainstream, he said 'Actually, I find the academic side of it reasonably easy — I’ve had a few HDs. What annoys me is the repetition in subjects — it’s like you’re being made to jump through hoops...' Clarrie considered ‘there is nothing hard about it — it just flows on’. Steve believes that:

If you do the work the stuff is there in your head. It’s as simple as that. I do pick up knowledge fairly easily but that’s because I’ve done the work.

Annie, who began her university career in basic literacy and numeracy classes, spoke of her need to compete with non-Indigenous people so that she could achieve some degree of equality.

I feel I’m better than most of them. I think I’m smarter... I’m a mother and a grandmother. I’ve got a lot of things going for me and so getting that Western degree [PhD] is just a few more notches on my belt. I guess, it’s about competing and me feeling as though I’m getting on the same footing as a non-Aboriginal person.

And for Lena, the academic outcomes depend upon the individual: ‘You just have to put the work in. If you want it badly enough, you will do it.’ This argument tends to be backed up by Jo’s words:

When I came into access, there were twenty-five of us, mostly young ones, wanting to get an education... there was six that finally did graduate — that’s a big dropout rate but I think all of those people who did drop out were under
the illusion that access was going to be easy, it was going to be a breeze. When they came down to the hard work, they weren’t prepared to put in the hard work.

While these responses focus on the acquisition of western knowledge, students also indicated the importance of lecturers ensuring the relevance of course content in terms both of knowledge being imparted and whether or not it was being imparted in ways that were appropriate. Student explanations concerning lecturers with whom they are able to develop positive relationships highlight the value of lecturers ensuring that their subjects are culturally affirmative by including Indigenous perspectives and demonstrating that they value Indigenous knowledges, values and beliefs. The focus group discussions validated these responses and argued that, in a global society, knowledge is a valuable commodity.

Knowledge is creating its own culture/s and, hence, modern universities must be accountable for their practices to ensure all students have access to knowledge that is worthwhile and has transferability. It was argued that in University One, as in most Australian universities, Western knowledge is what is being imparted and, thus, is the only culture being fostered. As discussed in Chapter One, Indigenous Australian culture continues to be overlooked in educational institutions so that Indigenous Australian students feel that the only knowledge valued is that which reflects the lecturers’ cultural capital. Yet, staff argued that the level of inquiry from many non-Indigenous students studying education, law, nursing, medicine, social work, journalism, environmental science and so on, clearly indicates these contemporary students also seek knowledge about Australia’s Indigenous peoples and they want that knowledge to be imparted by Indigenous people. My own experience in the university validates this finding.

Significantly, the literature appears to be suggesting that Indigenous Australians from their current situation within the academy are becoming increasingly able to respond to such needs. Publications such as the CIRC series produced by the Indigenous research unit at Curtin University in Western Australia and the increasing number of Indigenous educators employed in Australian universities all contribute to the growing body of knowledge about Indigenous Australian peoples and their higher education needs, thus enhancing the capacity of universities to become inclusive learning environments for Indigenous students.

Most respondents had, at various times throughout their course, used ATAS support, indicating that it was very effective when you got a tutor you could get on with, someone
you could trust, who knew the subject. Margaret had said, 'one of my first tasks each semester is to apply for ATAS tutoring'. My own experience validates this argument for I have observed students who, when under stress due to 'fear of failure', become most abusive toward staff in the Indigenous unit because they cannot access an appropriate, qualified tutor immediately. This usually occurs toward the end of semester when they suddenly realise they are not prepared for their examinations.

One-third of students indicated that their capacity to survive financially had had a considerable impact upon their ability to achieve success. There was a strong message concerning financial survival. Two-thirds of respondents had some form of part-time work while trying to undertake full-time study because all indicated that they could not rely upon their families to provide financial support while they studied. This was particularly so for that 30% of students who indicated that they had come to university against their family's wishes. In addition, almost 80% of students revealed that throughout their time at university they are, and expect to be, subjected to on-going negative comment from non-Indigenous staff and students about the high levels of financial support they supposedly receive from governments. This places an additional pressure upon them when they are trying to study.

Mary explains the reality of her financial situation.

We did some social welfare subjects in our first year, so we could understand the welfare structure. I thought, 'Wow, what am I doing here?' I had no idea. But then it all started falling into place, the ideology and the issues ... it was very interesting ... you can imagine me, an Indigenous person, IN the welfare state. I mean, I'm not like on the poverty line, I'm UNDER it! Anyway, I felt like I actually taught them something. I mean, these people are in their thirties and forties, and they had NO idea about Indigenous people and the socio-economic realities of our lives — absolutely none!

Ted also talks about how he has managed to survive on his ABSTUDY allowance while at university.

I've got to say that, with myself being a single person and independent, with no family ... in that sense it's been easier for me. I just concentrate on my studies. I don't know how people survive if they've got children and a partner to worry about and all that sort of stuff. If I starve well, it's only me.

Steve, the only other respondent who was single with no dependents, told how he had
worked for several years 'until I had enough of a nest egg to go to university full-time — I knew I would need some money tucked away for books and things. I'm glad I did that as I couldn't have survived on the ABSTUDY'.

Lorraine suggests the Commonwealth Government probably would like to see Indigenous students:

'... going through uni with no supports, working three jobs to survive and pay for your university degree ... doesn't matter if you come out at the end of it with stress and a heart attack.'

The student focus group discussions on the policies and practices that may have impacted upon Indigenous students reinforced these findings with positive comments about lecturers who made time to support students and who showed their commitment by learning about students' backgrounds as well as the value of the support provided through the Indigenous unit and the ATAS program. The focus groups also concluded that support was virtually nonexistent in mainstream programs where 'some lecturers may not want to be seen as giving Indigenous students special treatment'. The reality that students must take the initiative in pursuing support is validated by Walker's report that some 'staff had a ... “sink or swim” approach in their attitudes toward Indigenous students' (2000: 5, Section 8) and Whatman's (1995) finding that 'the quality of experience for Indigenous students at university depends upon whether university operations are assimilationalist or culturally affirming' (cited by Walker, 2000: 5, Section 8).

University facilities are important places in terms of breaking down barriers, according to a third of the student respondents. There is a need for universities to become culturally welcoming by employing Indigenous peoples in all areas of the university, including student administration, student services, student association facilities, etc. It was asserted that, while Indigenous units endeavour to provide culturally welcoming learning environments by employing Indigenous lecturers and providing cultural affirmation in their programs, they cannot achieve all of the changes that are needed on their own.

Students expressed an appreciation of being in classes where there were other Indigenous students and of being able to access facilities, such as the library, where Indigenous staff were employed. In University One, the library employs an Indigenous person who participates in the induction programs the Indigenous unit conducts for new students, thus
providing students with a contact person in the library from the time they commence their studies. She is positioned at an inquiries desk within the library, so that all students can readily access her services whenever they visit the library. Walker’s study highlights the importance of cultural affirmation in terms of student empowerment and self-determination, pointing out that education will be ‘dismantling if institutionalised knowledge systems and practices serve to erode or undervalue those of a marginalised cultural group’ (2000: 1, Section 10). The staff focus group further validated these findings.

The data analysed in this section of the chapter indicates that the overall learning environment in both of these universities is lacking in cultural affirmation for its Indigenous students. Significantly, Bourke cites Hampton’s (1993) work with Native American students to emphasise the importance of cultural affirmation rather than assimilation as a means of improving retention rates and to argue that ‘the goal of the education system, including universities, should be to determine what institutional changes need to be instituted in order to improve tertiary educational persistence among indigenous students’ (1996: 6). Anderson et al in their report on their 1998 study into equity in universities, also highlighted the importance of institutional change, concluding that a ‘deconstructive analysis of university structures and the interests they serve is essential if Indigenous peoples are to be included as equal stakeholders’ (1998: xv).

5.3: Who chooses the route?

Through my engagement with respondents at the various moments of intersection throughout this journey, I have gained valuable insights into the level of choice Indigenous Australian students perceive they have at the interface within the academe. In this section of the chapter, I intend to extrapolate that information to determine how they make use of that choice.

The student responses highlighted the difficulty of defining choice. Two of the students interviewed have achieved considerable success in their studies, have a high profile in their communities and are highly esteemed within their university’s Indigenous academic community. Yet they were consistently negative in their responses, frequently stating that they lacked trust in most of their non-Indigenous lecturers. In discussing this issue, they decided that their attitudes could reflect the socio-historical factors that had impacted upon their earlier lives or their fear of moving beyond the supportive structure of the university learning environment at this point in time. Bill states that he is due to graduate:

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I already have a job. I mean you could say that that is pretty successful but I still don’t feel like a scientist. That’s something lacking maybe I’ve just done the wrong units, maybe I should have done some other field of study, I don’t know what it is.

Bill feels trapped and powerless. He enrolled in his course because he wanted to care for the environment, commenced studying on ABSTUDY and was then awarded a scholarship that enabled him to complete his degree, free of financial concerns, despite having a number of children to support. He now feels he compromised himself by taking up the scholarship because upon graduating he will be expected to move from part-time to full-time employment with the company that sponsored him. This is causing him considerable personal conflict for he has come to realise that this job will require him to adhere to the company policy on issues pertaining to the environment — a policy that he will have difficulty implementing as it runs contrary to many of his ideals as an Aboriginal person.

Margaret explored the notion of choice within the context of a practice that was common in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She explained how Indigenous students were often enticed into jobs, especially with the commonwealth government, prior to completion of their degrees.

I used to get lots of job offers, you know like an Indigenous person, you get a couple of years into your degree and they want to take you out. He [a fellow student who was a friend] would say, ‘finish your degree, just finish your degree’.

Margaret indicated that some of the offers made to her were very attractive to a person who had never earned a decent wage and she may well have succumbed but for her friend’s continual exhortations to continue with her studies. She is now very thankful that she did remain in her course, because her earning potential now exceeds what she would have been earning in any of the jobs she was offered. Margaret warns of the danger inherent in the notion of choice, indicating that too often it is associated with the notion of freedom and the desire to fulfill personal and immediate wants. She argues that the problem for many people, especially those who experienced long-term oppression, is that they are unable to consider the implication of the choices they make within the longer-term context of their lives. Margaret explained that she knows several Indigenous people who took up those jobs that were offered prior to having completed their university qualifications and who have now, a
decade or more after they left, returned to university, either as full-time or part-time students, trying to complete their original course or studying a different course that is more relevant to their current position. They have now discovered the reality of the choice they made in taking those jobs because promotion into decision-making levels within their organisations is usually tied to qualifications. Margaret questions whether or not this is another strategy designed to deny Indigenous peoples access to the power structures that control this country.

Margaret’s dilemma is reflected in the focus group discussion that determined ‘power’ as a concept that has different connotations. For instance, it was argued that, while individuals might have personal power that enables them to make decisions about their own lives, such power is different to that needed to change things at a government level. The latter is often the power that is assumed by people who have been born into families that possess wealth or inherited status. It is the power society allows them to assume through acts of subservience or obedience and represents the remnants of the colonisation process in this country. The focus group decided it was this power that maintains colonial cultural hegemonies and denies Indigenous Australians a respected place in Australian society. It is the power Len claims is ‘used by lecturers to keep us in our place’.

Indigenous staff spoke of the importance for universities to learn from the historical experience and to ensure all students engage in studies that will enable them not only to recognise the persistence of colonial practices but to also empower them to resist or to accept the necessity for societal change. In reaching a consensus that power is difficult to define because it relates to individual perceptions, the focus group determined that, within the context of Indigenous education, power might be seen as being able to make decisions about what happens in your life and about your lifestyle. The group emphasised, however, that due to past policies and practices this may present difficulties for many Indigenous students. Hence, it was suggested that academic staff in universities had a responsibility to provide learning opportunities that enabled Indigenous students to acquire the skills that would enable them to make choices. These arguments are validated by the literature in Chapters One and Three, in particular the discussion on Welch’s notion of internal colonisation.

A pre-occupation with the notion of power permeated many of the discussions in this study. For example, Annie’s responses to questions invariably came back to the impact of
colonialism and the maintenance of the status quo. She began her journey in the university with basic literacy and numeracy classes and, at the time of interview, was completing her PhD because she wanted to compete and to show ‘white people’ that Aboriginal people could do these things. Annie’s experience at the interface has not been positive, although she perceives it as having empowered her to ‘to take on the system’ to prove she could achieve what she believes is the pinnacle of success within the academy — the PhD. Annie did not believe, however, that such achievement would automatically guarantee her ‘equality’ in the eyes of white academics. Annie’s views would seem to be aligned to the growing number of Indigenous academics in this country, including Holt and Langton, who are beginning to speak out about ‘white privilege’ (Jensen, nd: 1). Significantly, Jensen, in his article on white privilege, implies that people have to be in control of their own lives if they are, in reality, to have the capacity to choose. The truth of this argument is borne out in a recent publication “Legacies of White Australia” (Jayasuriya, Walker & Gothard (eds), 2003) in which a number of writers extrapolate the historical context and the lasting legacy of the White Australia Policy upon Australian society and, in so doing, reveal the way in which those in power manipulated the populace to ‘keep Australia secure as a white sanctuary for civilization” (Carey, 2003: 83).

For Jo, power manifested itself in the way it impinged upon her endeavours to achieve her academic goals:

...it's hard to describe, but it's like everything we receive from the government, everything we do at university, you know, we've always got to prove something. I guess the mainstream students have to do the same thing but for us it always seems like there's that bit more, like we always are made to go that extra hard yard.

While many of these responses validate interviewee responses concerning issues that might make a student feel valued or impact upon his/her outcomes, they also provide an insight into the lingering influence of colonial policies and practices on the individual’s capacity for choice. In discussing what they perceived they were getting out of university, in terms of being empowered through education, a degree of confusion and conflict emerged.

I thought I liked to be asked questions about culture, to really think and focus on what I know myself. But this discussion has made me think that, well, I'm not really thinking am I? How can I have power in education if I am just focussed on one part of culture — my own? I'm not making a contribution or
learning. Now I’m thinking that I’ve been a bit blinded by just looking at Indigenous perspectives, and I’m not getting what I should out of university.

This statement highlights the anxiety that confronts some Indigenous students in their engagement with the academe. The dilemma for these students is alluded to in Bourke’s reference to the pressure ‘of either assimilating into the dominant culture . . . or rejecting assimilation’ (1996: 6) and participation in Western style education. And, while such a response could be argued to reveal a growing awareness amongst these students of the need to acquire, as a part of their higher education, the cultural capital that Luke (2000) implies will enable them to access and participate in the mainstream power structures, it also hints at the vulnerability of the individual; the ease with which they might be subsumed by the dominant culture. In particular, this student’s dilemma highlights the possible truth of Luke’s assertion. Such a reaction does not suggest that there is much “dialogue and negotiation” or “reciprocity of benefit in every study” (Gregory, 1990: 165), happening for these students in their university learning environment.

Fortunately, some students are dealing with this. Ben, a long-term student who has undertaken his study through enrolments in two universities, says the Indigenous unit allowed him to pursue his own interests.

. . . while we are over there learning mainstream stuff all the time, we can come back over here and get involved in some of the more pressing issues [for us]. We talk about native title issues, nobody talks about native title issues over there; half the class were doing land law and still hadn’t read Mabo . . .

Ben’s statement, while providing insights into why many students continue to use the Indigenous units, demonstrates what happens when the value of Indigenous knowledge is not acknowledged in mainstream disciplines, thus confirming the importance of cultural affirmation. He reinforced his argument by explaining the terms ‘over there’ and ‘over here’, that were frequently used by most students. Ben suggested that while these terms might imply a physical separation, implicit within them is the notion of a separation that is in the mind; a separation that is embedded in culture for it reflects the different worldviews of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Student responses in this chapter show that many Indigenous students choose to exercise their right to maintain a strong sense of their individual identity as Indigenous Australians through frequent engagement within the Indigenous unit. And others, like Steve who regularly visits the unit, find its presence
I had no problem in coping with university studies but I must admit, coming here, to this unit here, has been very helpful. It was more to do with — not that I ever really hung around with a lot of Indigenous people before — except for relatives and such, but I felt good knowing there was a place I could go if I had any troubles. I didn’t actually have any trouble, but at least I knew this place was here.

The validity of the issues raised by the interviewees was confirmed by the outcomes of the focus group discussions. For example, the majority of participants in the student focus group meetings agreed that ‘education’, ‘culture’ and ‘power’ were linked, for most perceived that their university education had opened up their thinking about themselves, their identity and their position as Indigenous Australians within their own communities and the wider society. The groups also indicated that higher education courses should be employment related.

The staff focus group meeting provided an additional layer of meaning to many of the views expressed by the student focus groups concerning the links between ‘education’, ‘culture’ and ‘power’. They argued that higher education should enable students to reach their highest potential in their chosen area; produce our leaders of the future; equip people to deal with change such as information technology; provide a place where people acquire cultural capital; help students understand and appreciate diversity so that they become more sensitive, flexible and empathetic to people from other cultures; and demonstrate that they recognise and accept different cultures by not trying to change people to fit a university culture. Such arguments would seem to be aligned to the principles of Civic Pluralism that, according to Kalantzis, offer contemporary society a way forward (1995: 30–31).

While recognition of their culture and their cultural identity were important influences upon the choices these students felt able to make at the interface of their engagement with others in the academy, discussion during interviews suggests that it was recognition of personal agency that ultimately enabled individuals to determine their pathways through the academy. Over 70% of the interview cohort in this study have completed the course in which they were enrolled at the time of interview and 40% of those students have progressed to higher level studies. In addition, over 20% of these students have now gained full-time employment as academics in universities. These outcomes would appear to support the argument that personal achievement was a critical element in enabling these individuals to develop the
high level of personal agency required to make their own choices and to maintain their commitment to those choices.

5.4: Defining success

Having determined that success is a critical element in enabling Indigenous Australian students to develop the capacity for choice at the interface, this section focuses on examining Indigenous perceptions of success.

5.4.1: Family perspectives of success

As a means of defining success and understanding how it might be linked to expectations, I asked questions that enabled students to focus on what they perceived those individuals and/or groups that were in some way connected to them might consider to constitute success within the context of their university studies. All but one of the respondents confined themselves to discussing what their immediate family and community might expect.

In discussing what their family might perceive as achieving success in relation to their university studies, half of the respondents indicated that gaining employment or obtaining the qualifications needed to ensure job security were the vital signifiers of having succeeded. The other half argued that, in their family, completion of the course in which they had enrolled would be sufficient, although completion was acknowledged as an essential aspect of optimising their future job prospects. And almost half of those interviewed indicated that their family considered that they had already achieved success by simply being accepted into a university program.

This focus on security of employment as an indicator of success further validates the earlier findings pertaining to the reasons Indigenous peoples undertake university studies. The focus on course completion may reflect community concerns about the tendency for students to take up job offers before gaining their qualifications.

Some respondents suggested their families would also perceive success as getting a qualification that would enable you to help your people; passing examinations; achieving pass — or better — grades; having the ability to be competitive — equal — with non-Indigenous people; maintaining family and/or cultural commitments; or undertaking postgraduate studies.
It was interesting to note the ease with which many respondents answered this question. In fact, responses indicated that family ideals might have been previously discussed within the family. For example, Mary said, "My father used to say "just because you’re black doesn’t mean to say you’re not as good as anyone else. It’s up to you – if you study hard, work hard, you can be anything you want"."

And, Steve said:

My mum’s success is that when you actually finish, that’s when your success is . . . when you finish you will be a teacher.

Dad would call it success if I were working. I remember when I first told him I wasn’t going to go to university straight away, he was that disappointed in me because he knew that I had the potential to do it, but he was okay when I got a job. He’s very proud that all of his kids have always been able to get well-paid jobs. And now, he’s got two of us studying and he knows we will have secure jobs in the future. That’s success to him.

And Annie articulated her family’s view in this way:

My family saw it as, that I would be able to get out of there and compete, and become . . . believe it or not they used the term ‘equal’. I let them believe that if it makes them happy.

In discussing Community perceptions of what might be perceived as success, some respondents saw Community as supportive but with no specific expectations of the students. Most students had claimed not to have considered what Community might expect of them, although over half of the interviewees indicated that they wanted to do something that would help their people. This is an interesting outcome in relation to other research projects where Community expectations are often argued to be critical motivators in terms of the decisions people make regarding their educational directions. Perhaps this response indicates that students committed to achieving success in the university have become more focussed on individual as opposed to collective goals, at least in the short term. Walker found that studying at university was an important motivator for many students, who identified that they wanted to help their people or work in their Community (2000: 3, Section 8), a finding that is supported by the senior female key respondent.

5.4.2: Personal perspectives of success
Personal perceptions of success were less precise, although over 80% of students indicated that they had never thought of success in terms of what it might mean in relation to themselves or of why they might consider themselves ‘successful’. Two-thirds of respondents came to university with some idea of the field of study they wanted to pursue to improve their chances of employment but none appeared to have had any other aspirations apart from simply wanting to pass the course. Such responses reflect the socio-historic framework that was established in the literature, for, as Mary suggested, ‘We weren’t expected to go to Year 12 — the white people didn’t expect you to — so to me success is, well to all those people who thought we wouldn’t be anything, just to be here is success to me’. Within this context it is interesting that approximately one-third of students considered that their academic success had made them more effective in challenging and changing the racist attitudes of others.

Bill argued that he did not perceive of himself as successful, due to the conflict between his ideals and the reality of having to feed his family. He felt that he was becoming increasingly self-critical as a result of the whole university experience but acknowledged that his increasing personal conflict might be caused by the fact that he did not want to leave university. He said that, while he enjoyed studying and learning, he had no desire to excel and felt confused because, although his education had changed him, he didn’t feel any different. He wasn’t sure what success really meant for him because it could be applied to simply ‘being at university’ or to what he would do ‘after he’d been there’.

Mary had no doubts that her education had changed her:

I’ve changed for the better because I’m no longer that meek, shy little person . . . I’m much more outspoken, not in a bad way, but more confident, especially about taking on Indigenous issues and putting my point across. I’ve sort of had to change the way I saw the political arena — I never really saw it all but now I’ve become more aware.

Figure 35 provides an overview of the analysis of student responses concerning personal perceptions of success and demonstrates the diversity of people’s views.
Figure 35: Student respondent perceptions of success within the context of their university studies.

A. Success not only related to academic outcomes.
B. Success makes person more effective communicator.
C. Success makes person more critical thinker.
D. Success changes person in positive way.
E. Success is only related to academic outcomes.
F. Success is related to achieving higher marks.
G. Success is only related to completion.
H. Success is related to the total university experience.

Even while collating the data on an issue with such a narrow focus, the diversity of Indigenous views becomes obvious. Within the student cohort that concluded success was not only related to academic outcomes, half of the students thought it had more to do with becoming a better communicator, whilst a similar ratio suggested success meant becoming a more effective thinker. Significantly, almost half of the student cohort considered that success had changed them in positive ways. These were also the students who perceived success at university as being related to the total university experience, arguing that it was the combination of everything people experienced in the learning environment that enabled them to deal more effectively with their lives, including coping with societal attitudes such as racism; becoming effective role models; and developing a commitment to achieving your goals through completion. Half of the student cohort considered success was to do with being able to make your own decisions about your studies.

'It's about being able to change your mind and do something else.'

'It's coming out and doing the subjects you want and then leaving — it's your decision.'

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‘People must do what they need to do. Some will drop out to do something else and some will come back to complete and others will move on. Everyone is responsible for their own actions.’

‘It’s not about finishing the degree — it’s about people feeling empowered to move on and pursue their dream when they are ready to do that.’

Margaret perceived success as meaning different things to different people. She attributed her success to having developed a high level of personal power, saying she no longer felt she was at the ‘bottom of the pile’, subject to the vagaries of others. Furthermore, she believed success bred success but found it difficult to actually define success, choosing instead to describe what she perceived to be the successful outcomes she has achieved.

Success is to do with striking a balance in your life. The experiences that come through interaction with others are important because university is not all about theory. It all adds to the success.

Success strengthens your commitment. I don’t like failure so I will pass.

Success has resulted in people wanting to do things with me because I’m Indigenous, not because I’m me. I find this hurtful and I tell them so.

Interestingly, her final comment hints at the possible fragility of her self-control, perhaps containing vestiges of the previous sense of powerlessness she had felt as an Aboriginal woman.

Annie acknowledged that her personal view of success for herself is:

. . . being able to compete on the same level as white fellas and that means being successful in your studies and the goals that you set. But at the same time that success is also seen as you moving away from your mob.

Despite her ‘hunger to have that success’ she suggests that the PhD was an extra step that she didn’t need to be seen as a success within the Aboriginal Community but she believed it was good to show that Aboriginal people can achieve it. Annie’s comments reflect her pride in her identity as an Aboriginal woman yet also imply that her sense of personal power continues to be threatened by what she perceives to be the intractability of the dominant culture, personified within the university by non-Indigenous staff.
Students' responses suggested successful people might be seen as those who have the capacity to make the right decisions for themselves; who can overcome the challenges, in both a personal and professional sense, that allow them to lead a balanced life in terms of family, work and social commitments; and who can maintain a commitment to hard work — study — and to being a successful role model. Lorraine says:

For me, success is doing the best I can, being able to obtain the information, to say I have tried my hardest but at the same time not letting it interfere with my children. That is success when you have a balanced life at home with the kids, with your mum and your family and then come to uni and say, ‘This is my goal for the day and I’m going to get there’. If I can give my nieces and nephews, if I can give them hope out of this . . . then that will be my success.

But other views of success included: simply being at university; being able to compete as an equal; having a commitment to developing skills such as planning, time management, study skills and sound work habits, that were perceived as necessary in achieving success; and getting the most out of university, academically, socially and emotionally.

Ted had an interesting view of success.

I’d like to think, from everything I’ve learned here — geography, politics, sociology — if I could take something away from the experience, something that comes from all the little bits of things that I have learned, that would be success.

One-third of students interviewed, considered that success in relation to university studies was only related to academic outcomes with Ben describing this as the ‘albatross around the neck’ of all Indigenous students who were pursuing university studies. The students who perceived success as obtaining higher marks were generally those (21%) who had begun to achieve higher grades. Students who perceived success as being purely related to academic outcomes tended to be the older students (21%) who had a history of trying to effect change in Aboriginal communities through involvement as activists. They wanted an academic qualification because they perceive that ‘piece of paper’ will provide them with the means of increasing their effectiveness and legitimacy as advocates for their people, both within and beyond their own communities.

Almost 60% of respondents identified success as completion, whether in terms of subjects,
different year levels or the whole course; the completion of a degree, either undergraduate or, ultimately, postgraduate. These students saw completion as giving them the capacity to be financially independent, to be able to achieve a secure job. Yvonne sums this up:

For me, to achieve success would be to graduate and have employment, secure employment, security. To get that I also need good results.

And Mary spoke of her need to complete:

I actually don’t finish next year because my workload, I had to withdraw from a subject last year and I failed one so now I have to do two again — it’s just too much. But I know my capabilities and I’ve had to extend it to another year. When I came to that realisation, I was devastated because, in my mind, I wanted to finish in the four years, I felt I had to, you know. If I didn’t, people would say, ‘What are you? Dumb or something?’ You see yourself as a failure. But once I got through that . . . I’m okay now . . . I figure I’ve come too far to give it up. If I were struggling by the end of my first year, I might have thought . . . but I did it and that kind of spurs you on. When you get to third or fourth year, you’ve just come too far to let it go because if I did, what would I have?

This finding is aligned to Bourke’s definition of students who fell into the ‘successful category’ in his study as those who had either completed their course or who were current continuing students (1996: 16).

The diversity of the student response indicates that Indigenous students do not perceive of success as being linked only to notions of academic achievement. Significantly, 70% of respondents reflected an holistic view, a concern with the quality of people’s lives. Student responses indicated that, where individual students perceived themselves as continually subjected to negative scrutiny within the university learning environment (28%), their capacity to articulate personal perceptions of success in relation to themselves appeared to be diminished. Eighty percent of students admitted that coming to university had changed them in a positive way.
Figure 36: Student respondent' perceptions of the positive aspects of their university studies.

A. University studies have given them skills that have made them more open minded and flexible in their thinking.

B. University studies have challenged them to want to insert themselves into academic discourses.

C. University studies have made them feel they can make their own choices.

The Aboriginal key respondents also discussed their perceptions of success. According to the senior female key respondent:

... success is almost impossible to define. It means different things to different people and is also dependent upon the context in which you are looking at it. When we talk of success, we are, in fact, usually referring to the actual signs of success — something a person has done that enables us to ascribe success to them for doing it... reflects our own preconceptions of what we actually hope to accomplish out of some particular exercise which is why we perceive of a person as being successful, when they achieve the outcome we wanted.

The senior female key respondent also explored possible explanations as to why different students may have different notions of success, pointing out that those coming out of schools will tend to think along current government lines because they are likely to be used to the government setting the rules, whereas mature age students may tend to see success in terms of the profession they are pursuing. Their need is more urgent. They are not interested in the marks as such. They just want to get through the course and get the job they want. And there's a real mix of what people perceive as success amongst those who live in the larger urban locations, especially the capital cities.

There are students who come in seeking some very specific skills and
knowledge that they require to do a better job or achieve a specific goal. They will often enrol only in those subjects in which they have an interest and when they have finished that they will leave. The university records that as a failure but the student sees it as a success — he or she has acquired the knowledge they wanted and can now use that to do a better job back in the workplace or community or whatever situation it is . . . For instance, a Torres Strait man came to university, enrolled in an art course and quickly built a considerable reputation for his artwork. He is now very successful, but not in terms of completing the course for which he enrolled. He has a choice now. He can still do the course or he can achieve financial security via a different road. Nevertheless, it could be legitimately argued that he is on a journey into higher education. In addition to his paintings, he now has to acquire a range of skills to conduct his business. Thus, it needs to be recognised by universities and governments that success that emerges out of higher education can take many forms.

The senior female key respondent shared her personal view of success as being:

. . . success is the feeling that you have something of value, knowing that you have something of value. It doesn't matter whether it's a qualification in nursing that will take you back to your community; whether it's achieving recognition in a field that you had not really considered as a career option; whether it's acquiring some specific knowledge and skills that are relevant to your goals; or whatever — so long as it is of value to the person, as an individual, or to the collective, in terms of their community. It's to do with feeling useful because you have something of value.

The focus group meetings validated these findings. Participants explained that, while the priority should be to successfully complete a degree, it was important to acknowledge that success in university studies can mean different things for different people. Other indicators of success identified by these groups included: getting high marks and being able to speak out from an informed position; individuals being able to take what they wanted from their course, such as completing two subjects, a two year program or whatever combination of subjects they perceived as relevant to their learning needs; developing the skills to move on to higher levels of study; developing the capacity for more sensitive interaction with other people; and acquiring the capacity to make your own decisions.
5.4.3: Other perspectives of success

Respondents were asked to describe how they thought the university might define success and to indicate whether or not they perceived that the university had different expectations for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

While Annie considered that the university would perceive the ultimate success to be the PhD, all other respondents indicated that the focus for universities is definitely academic results, with 30% of students perceiving that, from a university perspective, the higher your marks the more successful you would be seen to be. In addition, 30% of respondents believed the university would also perceive success as being the completion of a degree course program. These viewpoints were supported by students in the focus group meetings who argued that, essentially, universities just want all students to graduate. Ben explains it as:

There’s still a slightly prestigious feeling to the university but they are a part of the community and they define success as getting people through. They employ people to do just that. So, if their employers are doing their job people will go through – they follow the buck stops here thing. But when it comes to Indigenous people – why aren’t Indigenous people going through – then it’s your fault. There’s no looking at the university as a whole to sort the problem.

Most respondents did not have an opinion on whether or not universities had different expectations of Indigenous students in comparison with expectations of non-Indigenous students, although 21% of interviewees suggested there appeared to be a lesser expectation of Indigenous students to achieve high marks or engage in higher level studies. For example, Len indicated that the outcomes for courses that focused on providing programs for Aboriginal students tended to be diploma level. Fourteen percent of students indicated that they did not consider that the university defines success differently for different groups, all students are treated the same and that’s how it should be. In general, however, most students, indicated that there is a widespread expectation that Indigenous students will pass while non-Indigenous students will do very well. This perception may underpin the contentions of almost one-quarter of respondents that, regardless of how much time and effort they put into assignments, they never seemed able to achieve grades as high as their non-Indigenous peers.
Those enrolled in postgraduate studies tended to think lecturer expectations of students was a personal issue. Jo and Sue believed their supervisors placed high expectations on them because they believed in their ability to achieve and knew they were committed to doing the hard work. It has been my observation that Indigenous students undertaking postgraduate studies must have a strong commitment to achieving their goals if they are to remain in their program. Most Indigenous students, due to their family commitments, must continue to work either in a full or part-time position while participating in their postgraduate studies. This makes it extremely difficult for them to cope with the workload of a postgraduate program. This finding is validated by Weir’s 2001 study of the barriers facing Indigenous students engaged in postgraduate studies. The senior Aboriginal respondents also raised this issue and both expressed concerns that those endeavouring to combine work and part-time study, especially at the postgraduate level, may find it extremely stressful due to the reality of having to deal with the heavy, very political workloads that exist in most Indigenous areas.

Finally, students discussed how they thought DEST, as the department responsible for allocating Commonwealth Funding to universities, might define success. Annie suggested that, in view of recent policies concerning funding for Indigenous students, Indigenous success in education was not an issue that DEST appeared to be contemplating or, indeed, to have even been preparing for, arguing that it was impossible for Indigenous students to acquire funding to undertake research overseas as there were no guidelines pertaining to this type of funding. Without guidelines, of course, it is impossible to acquire funding from government sources.

Half of the student cohort responded that DEST, in its current strategy for allocating Indigenous Support Funding, could be argued to be simply maintaining the status quo and, hence, supporting the universities’ continuing focus on the value of Western knowledge paradigms to the exclusion of all others. Within that context, it could be assumed that passing subjects and/or completing courses (graduating) could be justified as the only legitimate indicators of Indigenous success. Thirty-five percent of respondents stated that they perceived ‘course completion’ as DEST’s preferred measure of success.

Most students were somewhat cynical in their attitude toward the discussion on DEST. A number suggested that the current pressures being applied in relation to Indigenous people’s capacity to ‘complete’ their courses — hence, achieve success in higher education — would appear to be connected to the Federal Government’s economic policies, as discussed in
Chapter Two. Hence, the focus on outcomes might simply reflect the need for accountability. Some students suggested it is more to do with the Government wanting results for its money.

‘They don’t want you to waste too much time [repeating years], or take up too much tutoring — the most successful student to DETYA is the student who does it with no support, works three jobs to pay for it, and comes out at the end with stress and heart attack, and is no good for the job.’

‘They are really only interested in statistics. We’re not real to them. All they do is put in the data and use that to make decisions about how they can cut the funding.’

‘I don’t think they should be making decisions about education because they are really only interested in the funding. That is what drives their operation. I don’t want them making choices for me. I can make better choices for myself.’

Ben provided a slightly different viewpoint:

They’re the funding body and they’re just interested in the numbers. Just get people into the university, they haven’t taken account of — I don’t think they realise the pressure that’s on the Indigenous community to stay in the system — it’s like they’ve opened the door and said, ‘Well the door is opened and why aren’t you walking through the other end?’ Simply denying what is happening on the other side of the door. They still judge it on how many graduates come through — there’s more to it than that.

And these views appear to be supported by students in the focus group meetings who agreed that DEST wants them to successfully complete their course in as short a time as possible with no wasting of money by repeating subjects or changing courses.

While students perceived DEST’s focus to be outcomes-based as a result of current government policy, the senior female key respondent argued that:

Students who have come straight from school for the most part seem to accept that the government or DETYA line on success means passing all the right subjects and passing them as well as you can, to get whatever piece of paper — the outward sign of a university qualification. Of course, government definitions are critical, for they measure success and pay on that success and, as
they pay the institutions, so the institutions are going to accept that notion of success.

Both the senior female key respondent and the senior male key respondent agreed that, in terms of the university and DEST, success is linked to academic outcomes. While this may have always been the goal of universities, there had also been an appreciation of the importance of providing a liberal education — one that catered for student interests in acquiring knowledge in specific disciplines that prepared students for life in the society in which they lived. With the increasing government focus on accountability within the context of the labour market, of providing university programs that cater for the specific skills and knowledge bases that are relevant to industry needs, however, universities are under increasing pressure to achieve outcomes that directly improve the employability of individual students. In the context of Indigenous higher education, it could be argued that this study appears to demonstrate that, at this point in time, such a focus is clearly aligned with what students perceive to be their main purpose in coming to university.

Yet, this study also reveals the reality that, while many students are able to enrol directly into mainstream programs on entering university, there remain many, particularly in remote and rural communities, who, due to having suffered considerable previous educational disadvantage, require access to programs that will provide them with the time and the opportunity to acquire the specific knowledge and skills they need to enable them to successfully engage in higher education. These findings align with Walker’s argument that there are many factors that might intervene to prevent an Indigenous person from completing their course. In identifying personal, employment and study goals as being the incentives to go to university, she implies that these same factors might just as well ‘work against the achievement of successful academic outcomes . . . [while indicating that] . . . some key Indigenous stakeholders contend that course non-completion is not necessarily an unsuccessful outcome for some students . . . [and that] . . . voluntary withdrawal may indicate that students have gained what they needed or wanted from a course in order to pursue their personal goals and aspirations’ (2000: 6, Section 6).

This analysis of the data has revealed that people such as Annie, Margaret, Ben, Clarrie, Ted, Steve, Yvonne and Mary clearly demonstrated that once students had recognised and accepted that ‘my success in life was due solely to my individual talent and effort’ (Jensen, nd: 1), they could take control of their lives and achieve the goals they had set for
themselves in coming to the university. While I would argue that all of the students interviewed have the potential to ultimately achieve successful academic outcomes, there are a number who have yet to make the transition to taking control of their own lives. For these students, life can be difficult at times, particularly when they are subjected to racist behaviours within their learning environments. And because their own sense of well-being is dependent upon the behaviour of others, I would argue that, for them, success is not necessarily a matter of choice.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

6.1: Discoveries along the way

In the section on history and politics in Chapter One, the literature reveals that, having survived the invasion, Indigenous Australians have been subjected to on-going and unrelenting oppression at the hands of the dominant cultures in this country. The work of Eckermann (1992), Castles (1996) and Markus (2001) clearly indicate that the foundations of a racist culture were established through the colonial policies and practices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, as indicated by the responses from student respondents in this study, persist in contemporary Australian society. In fact, as revealed in Chapter One, the social and education policies of successive state and federal governments served not only to marginalise Indigenous peoples within Australian society but to maintain that marginalisation to such an extent that Indigenous Australians suffered an extraordinarily high level of social disadvantage, a reality that saw them relegated to the lowest socio-economic status within Australian society. As argued in the section on educational policies, in Chapter One, this situation was compounded by the fact that until the mid 1970s in terms of education, Indigenous peoples were, by and large, denied access or received only such basic instruction as would fit them for a life of virtual slavery in the service of others. Hence, as discussed in Chapter Three, their presence in the university sector was virtually non-existent until the Whitlam government’s equity policies of the 1970s forced universities to admit people from disadvantaged groups — including Indigenous Australians. However, despite government rhetoric regarding the creation of a more socially just Australia throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it is revealed in the discussion on equity in Chapter One that the politicisation of education policy, particularly under Dawkins, led to the marginalisation of equity and marked the emergence of the trend to use education as a tool of the economy in the ‘national interest’ (Dudley and Vidovich, 1995: 129), Marginson (1997). Indigenous concerns regarding this shift in government thinking were reflected in the Indigenous responses to the NATSIEP Review (DEET, 1995).

As indicated in Chapters One and Three, subsequent MCEETYA strategies would appear to support the argument that, in general, education and equity policies, to date, have had a
limited affect in altering the status quo of Indigenous Australians within Australian society — a reality that is further highlighted by this study in the students’ revelations concerning their financial situation. This is a significant observation for the underlying intent of the policies discussed in Chapter Three was to re-position Indigenous Australians within education systems so that they could develop the knowledge and skills they might need in order to obtain the sort of employment that would enable them to improve their socio-economic status. In a country that is characterised by its cultural diversity, the on-going failure of government policies to redress the continuing impoverishment of its Indigenous peoples is a critical concern — a concern that implies the urgent need for an alternative approach. The solution to such an approach may be implicit in Kalantzis’ argument regarding the need to prepare citizens for the new world order by focusing on ‘diversity as a core cultural competence’ (2000: 12) and hooks’ call for vigilance on the part of those who desire to see an end to racial oppression (1990). In arguing for meaningful discourse that will lead to a transformation of societal power structures, they imply a responsibility on the part of universities to engage in a process of cross-cultural interaction that will enable them to effect the change that is needed to overcome racist attitudes and create learning environments that are inclusive of all students. This position is further supported by the views of Walker (2000) as well as those of the Indigenous scholars Dudgeon et al (1998) and Hughes (1999), as discussed in Chapter One.

The reality that emerges from the literature review in Chapter One and the statistical evidence in Chapter Three indicates that, whilst actual numbers have increased during the past three decades, real progress, in terms of Indigenous Australian achievement, has been limited and many Australian universities have yet to demonstrate a genuine commitment to providing the inclusive learning environments that would enable Indigenous Australians to take advantage of educational opportunities that would improve their chances of enhancing the quality of their lives. This reality was examined in Chapter One and Chapter Three. For example, in Chapter One, it was indicated that Hughes (1999) has called for Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups to work together to bring Indigenous perspectives into the mainstream education programs and Indigenous ways of doing things into the organisational structures of the institutions. And the discussion on reconciliation in Chapter Three highlights the ambivalence that plagues the university sector in relation to the education of Indigenous peoples. The complexity of the issue becomes obvious in a consideration of the tensions that appear in some of the literature. For example, in Chapter Three, Dudgeon et al’s commendation of their university’s commitment to Indigenous education is used to
demonstrate the degree to which some universities have taken a leadership role in the reconciliation process. Yet, in Chapter One, their concerns for the future of Indigenous higher education are voiced in their warning that 'we need to be careful that claims made in terms of the "common good" do not become a justification for silencing voices of groups that are only just starting to be heard' (1998: 5). These tensions are further evidenced in this study by the findings of the raw data, outlined in Chapter Five. Hence, it could be argued that whilst changes in universities and student populations appear to have evolved out of the government policies, as outlined in Chapter Three, the evidence provided from the literature, in Chapters One and Three, and from the student data in Chapter Five, suggest that there is an underlying and pervasive culture of racism that has resulted in misunderstanding, discrimination, anxiety, frustration, mistrust and epistemological gaps. For Indigenous students, this has led to uneven access and participation, high drop-out rates, unsustainable learning experiences, uneven and unpredictable performance outcomes and, at times, disconcerting doubts concerning the value of university education, as is evidenced by the data discussed in Chapter Five.

While it is acknowledged that, in terms of actual numbers, the raw data was obtained from a very small cohort of the total population of Indigenous higher education students, it can be argued that they were representative of the larger cohort, as was demonstrated in the profiles provided in Chapter Two and Chapter Five, and in the biographical details provided in Chapter Four. A critical aspect of the findings of this study is its focus on Indigenous success within the context of university studies. As explained in Chapter Two, the interviewee cohort comprised only those students who had indicated that they were satisfied with their progress in terms of their university studies. Thus, in considering the educational outcomes achieved by the group and outlined in Chapter Five, it might appear that a high proportion of Indigenous students are achieving academic success within the university. This was not the intent of this study. It was merely an attempt to demonstrate the reality that individual Indigenous Australian students are achieving their goals and can be identified as successful. This argument is supported by studies previously undertaken by Bourke (1996) and Walker (2000) and discussed in Chapter One. In using an holistic approach of summarising the data collected and discussed in Chapters One, Three and Four and comparing it with the evidence provided by the raw data discussed in Chapter Five, several major findings emerged.

The overarching finding of this study is that Indigenous Australian students in universities
consider higher education to have a critical role in enabling them to gain the knowledge and skills they need to access the labour market, particularly in terms of enhancing their ability to obtain and maintain employment in higher level jobs that offer increased job security as the evidence in Chapter Five demonstrates. In addition, Indigenous respondents indicated that there is a strong desire to pursue studies in disciplines that will enable them to contribute, in the longer term, to the re-building of a strong, healthy future for their peoples. This could explain the continuing tendency of students to focus on studies in health, teaching or social work. Furthermore, the evidence suggested that mature-age students, particularly women, often experience a sense of urgency in acquiring qualifications that will enable them to get a job back in their communities, where they perceive they might fulfil a worthwhile role helping their people.

The desire on the part of all respondents, outlined in Chapter Five, to improve their own lives in order to meet family expectations or to provide positive role models for both their own family and other young Indigenous peoples, highlights the importance of family connections. The evidence also reveals that, while family expectations were generally well understood, they did not appear to directly influence a student’s choice of discipline, although family issues could influence student decision-making in other ways such as the mode of study chosen and an individual’s capacity to persist with studies.

The evidence in Chapters Four and Five revealed the degree of diversity that exists within the cohort of Indigenous peoples participating in university studies. For example, students’ responses in Chapter Five demonstrated how differences in age, place of origin, educational and life experiences could impact upon a student’s capacity to engage in university studies and affect their expectations of what they want out of their university experience. Furthermore, the evidence in Chapter Five demonstrated the need for higher education to be a two-way process that allows students to gain competency in skills associated with multiliteracies, together with the critical cognitive skills required to effectively undertake tertiary studies, while enabling the teacher to develop an acceptance of, and increased capacity to teach to, diversity. Student feedback highlighted the importance of such an approach as a means of enabling education to become more empowering for students while also enhancing the reconciliation process within universities. The evidence in Chapters Four and Five revealed the desire for societal change.

This study found there is a need for universities to attend to the language of instruction.
Evidence in Chapter Five suggested that lecturers who do not provide activities or sufficient time to ensure that students know and understand the language, both words and concepts, of their discipline, were failing to fulfil the responsibilities that are an inherent component of universities enrolling students from equity groups, including those from different language backgrounds.

The evidence provided in Chapter Five demonstrated the importance of the learning environment to Indigenous students. The student responses indicated that the provision of culturally affirmative academic, emotional and social support are a critical factor in terms of Indigenous survival, retention and achievement within the university.

The evidence in Chapter Five revealed that tertiary access courses offered within the university environment and designed to prepare Indigenous students for participation in mainstream university programs are considered to be a vital and valued component of Indigenous support provision. This evidence further emphasised the importance of cultural affirmation for Indigenous students operating in learning environments that are steeped in the Western knowledge paradigms of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture.

The evidence, provided in Chapter Five, demonstrated that where Indigenous Australian students are struggling to overcome previous educational disadvantage, the amount of time permitted for them to complete their courses is critical. This evidence implies that equality of outcomes, in terms of course completion, will not be achieved without governments and institutions recognising the need to allow Indigenous students greater flexibility in the time taken to complete their courses. In fact, it could be argued that this evidence suggests that the current pressure being exerted upon universities by the commonwealth government to have students complete their courses within a designated timeframe, disadvantages many Indigenous students and limits their choice in the type of higher education program they might pursue.

The degree to which students are able to develop positive relationships with others, including lecturers, tutors and peers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, is a significant factor in enabling Indigenous Australian students to develop a sense of belonging within the university according to the evidence in Chapter Five. In fact, it implies this could be an essential element in building student’ commitment and the desire to achieve successful outcomes.
Furthermore, the evidence in Chapter Five revealed that academic staff working in contemporary universities, particularly those who deliver programs to students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, must have the capacity in terms of interpersonal skills and the ability in terms of teaching skills to design, develop and deliver innovative, high quality learning programs that cater for a diversity of learning needs while ensuring course content and delivery reflect an equality of regard for Indigenous knowledges, values and epistemological stances. This further re-inforces the evidence concerning the importance of the provision of culturally affirmative learning environments.

The evidence provided in Chapter Five indicates that some staff, both academic and general, demonstrate a limited awareness and/or commitment to equity principles. This manifests itself within the learning environment when certain individuals or groups are subjected to discriminatory treatment by other students and/or staff. For example, this study found that racism is the major cause of Indigenous students feeling devalued and excluded within the university learning environment. The evidence highlighted the perception that this situation persists because universities favour Western cultural traditions that ensure the maintenance of colonial cultural hegemonies. Furthermore, the data revealed that many Indigenous students lack self-esteem and a sense of their worth as an Indigenous Australian, particularly during their first year in mainstream programs. Student responses indicated that during this period they are particularly vulnerable to discriminatory behaviours and are easily reduced to perceiving themselves as inferior in some way, a situation that appeared to be compounded where individual lecturers contributed to the discrimination through their own ignorance or disinterest. The evidence indicated that cross-cultural awareness and training programs delivered by qualified Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff are a key strategy in universities striving to provide inclusive learning environments for students from a diversity of cultural backgrounds.

The evidence presented in Chapter Five, demonstrated that financial survival was a major concern for Indigenous students and could severely impede student progress and their ability to achieve success. Without exception, in terms of their disposable income, the Indigenous students who participated in this study exist below the poverty line.

Student responses in Chapter Five, suggested that Australian universities value Western knowledge and culture, often to the exclusion of all others and there was a perception that this situation reflected the lecturers’ cultural capital. The evidence suggests that failure to
share knowledge of this cultural capital with students from different cultural traditions results in students feeling unable to operate effectively within the dominant culture. Moreover, the evidence also indicates that Indigenous students want universities to acknowledge the validity of Indigenous Australian knowledges, values and beliefs by making them a part of university course offerings, for they perceive that, in order to achieve self-determination, they need an education that demonstrates a respect for Indigenous peoples, their knowledges and epistemologies.

Respondents argued the need for universities to become culturally welcoming by employing Indigenous peoples in various employment levels, in both academic and general staff positions, across all areas of the university, including student administration, student services and student association facilities.

The evidence provided in Chapter Five indicates that students believe universities have a responsibility to society to provide leadership in the creation of a fairer and more harmonious society and it was argued that this could be achieved through enhancing cross-cultural understanding across all discipline areas of the university. Respondents indicated that an Indigenous Studies program, consisting of a minimum of one subject per year, should be mandatory for all graduates of Australian universities.

6.2: Journeying from the margins to the centre

Having considered ways in which universities might contribute to enhancing Indigenous performance within the context of their university studies, this section of the chapter will focus on the notion of success from Indigenous perspectives. This is an important component of this study, for the review of the literature in Chapter One and Three reveals that, apart from the studies by Bourke (1996) and Walker (2000) which focus on Indigenous performance in terms of the resilience of Indigenous students in higher education, there has been no attempt to explore Indigenous perception of success within the context of university studies. Illuminating Indigenous perspectives of the notion of success and building on what is currently known about the western framework for Indigenous success in higher education before moving beyond this to provide an Indigenous framework of what constitutes success within the university, enables this study to make an important contribution to the literature.

As previously mentioned, the evidence in Chapter Five suggests that family viewpoints of what constituted success in terms of university studies were well understood. These
generally related to access, participation and ultimately the completion of qualifications that would enable the individual to optimise his or her future job prospects.

Similarly, the evidence provided in Chapter Five suggests that these students considered the university perception of success to be aligned with academic outcomes, in particular the completion of a degree course program that allows students to graduate. In addition, the evidence implies that university staff have lower expectations of Indigenous students in comparison with their expectations of non-Indigenous students in terms of their capacity to achieve high marks or engage in higher level studies.

The evidence presented in Chapter Five relating to DEST perceptions of Indigenous success within the context of university studies revealed that the current focus on improving academic outcomes and increasing course completions for all students was seen to be strongly linked to the government’s economic policies. It was argued that, by making completion and success the most important indicators of Indigenous success in university, the government was demonstrating its commitment to maintaining the status quo in Australian society. This was perceived as the government aligning with the universities’ stance in valuing Western knowledge paradigms to the exclusion of all others. These findings agree with the literature regarding Walker’s (2000) study as discussed in Chapter One.

In considering success from a personal perspective, Indigenous respondents posited a far broader view of success than those used by the universities and the commonwealth government. The evidence provided in Chapter Five demonstrated that, within the context of their university studies, the Indigenous students who participated in this study perceived success as being not only related to academic outcomes such as course completion or achieving high marks but also to developing the skills needed to take responsibility for their own actions and, hence, being able to make their own decisions about their studies and their lives. Success in this context also describes the effect of changing a person in a positive way; being able to relate to the total university experience; or making a person a more effective communicator or a more critical thinker.

The evidence suggests that for these Indigenous students success was predominantly to do with the notion of empowering themselves in terms of their future life choices and enhancing the quality of their lives, although it was readily acknowledged that it can mean different
things for different people. Significantly, the responses highlighted the importance of the personal power individuals perceived their academic success as giving them. This is an important finding because the evidence in Chapter Five suggested that respondents did not perceive that Indigenous students, as a collective cohort within their university, were considered to be successful achievers — a judgement that would appear to be aligned with the literature in Chapter One and the literature and statistical interpretations in Chapter Three.

Furthermore, the evidence in Chapter Five suggests that success breeds success for it enabled these students to feel confident about competing and achieving their goals. However, the evidence also revealed a concern that, in striving to achieve success in university, individuals could experience a degree of alienation from their people. The evidence suggests that this can cause anxiety for individuals, in particular those who feel their cultural identity may be threatened by their immersion in the dominant culture of the university. Those who raised this concern, however, ultimately revealed that the greater their success in terms of what they wanted out of the university, the more effectively they had been able to confront their fears and personally deal with the issue. Significantly, such students argued that as their acquisition of Western knowledge and understanding increased, so they felt a deeper sense of their own identity as Indigenous Australians and the more articulate they became in operating from within their own worldviews.

In addition, the evidence in Chapter Five reveals that the students participating in this study had also recognised that, ultimately, their success was up to them — to their ability to develop the skills and understandings required to overcome the challenges and maintain their own commitment to their goals. All acknowledged that this had proved to be a difficult task but their capacity to work hard, to study and remain focused had enabled them to achieve it.

Finally, the evidence presented in Chapter Five outlined some of the specific qualities these students perceived they had gained from their university studies; qualities they perceived as both indicators and enablers of their success. In arguing that their university studies had given them skills that have made them more open minded and flexible in their thinking, that had challenged them to want to insert themselves into academic discourses, and that had made them feel they could make their own choices, these students were indicating that they felt competent to operate within western knowledge frameworks. In particular, however, in view of the previous evidence discussed concerning the importance of their personal growth
in terms of their cultural identity, these qualities must also be seen as providing evidence of their competence to operate within both, or either, western and Indigenous frameworks. Using this evidence, it could be argued that these students are seeking to create new discourses rather than simply engaging at the interface to buy into the discourses of the other. They are moving from the margins of the university to take their place at the centre and, in so doing, they have developed the potential to change the western historical model. They are beginning to articulate what they want from the university.

6.3: The road ahead

In the introduction to this thesis, I suggested that this research would provide a space for me, as an Aboriginal educator, to analyse the intersection of my metaphorical journey in education with the journeys of some fellow travellers, namely Indigenous Australian student and staff respondents and Aboriginal informants, drawn from the larger group of Indigenous Australians who participate in university programs as either students or teachers. Having scrutinised the experiences of my informants at the interface, I now move on to conceptualise the learnings that have emerged through our intersections.

In combining the socio-historical and socio-economic frameworks established in Chapters One and Three with the evidence established in Chapter Five, I would argue that this study has revealed that Indigenous academic success tends to be underrated, actively devalued or ignored. Yet, the evidence presented in Chapter Five reveals that the Indigenous student participants in this study are achieving success within the context of their university studies. Furthermore, this evidence indicates that these students do come to the university to achieve success in the western sense; they come seeking the western qualification that will, in their view, provide access to employment and an improved quality of life in an economic sense. Likewise, the evidence also reveals that they may come with unreal expectations of what the university expects of them, for the evidence suggests that they are expected to assimilate into lower level mainstream programs, accepting without question the supposed supremacy of the western knowledge, values and beliefs that underpin all university learning situations. Furthermore, the evidence also implies that these students come to the university expecting to be valued for who they are as Indigenous Australians; expecting to find that the principles of respect and reciprocity will underpin their interactions with others; expecting to escape the racist attitudes that are a normal part of their everyday life in the wider community.
Instead, the evidence reveals that, as Indigenous Australians, these students did not feel valued in their university; they experienced little, if anything, in the way of respect and reciprocity from either fellow students or staff, particularly during their early years of participation; and they rapidly learnt that their university was no different to the wider community in terms of their exposure to racist attitudes and behaviours.

But significantly, the evidence also suggests that, for the students involved in this study, their capacity to overcome the adversity they experienced in their early years, in time, provided its own rewards. As the evidence reveals, the students in this study who achieved success in terms of the outcomes they wanted from their university experience discovered that, as they began to achieve success, their hunger for learning increased, they became self-motivated and, in time, realised they had achieved self-determination. Furthermore, the evidence in Chapter Five, suggests that as their independence increased, they discovered they had developed a capacity to adopt multiple stances in their approach to their studies for they could place themselves within western or Indigenous knowledge frameworks. They argued that this had added another dimension to their desire to achieve success in their academic studies for they were now able to articulate those things that were missing from their university experience. It was from this position that the students in this study identified the need for their university to become more open, more inclusive of other peoples, more willing to cater for the cultural diversity that exists within the student body.

From this evidence, therefore, I surmised that the first step towards enabling these students to achieve their ultimate goal was to identify a way in which Indigenous students might establish a sense of their own place within the university; to build a university that has the capacity to cater for the learning needs of Indigenous students. From the evidence, in Chapter Five, I reflected upon the elements that made Indigenous students feeling devalued and excluded within the university learning environment. In acknowledging that the students involved in this study had named racism as the greatest cause for their feeling they did not belong in their university, I noted that the student feedback had suggested that this situation existed because the university valued only western cultural traditions, thus ensuring the maintenance of the colonial power structures and the associated dominance of western knowledge. This implied the need to create a place for Indigenous knowledge within the university.

In using the evidence in Chapter Five to clarify what informants meant when they argued the
need for the university to demonstrate a valuing of Indigenous knowledges, I ascertained that the term had a multiplicity of meanings embracing course content; epistemological stance; Indigenous values and beliefs to do with the way in which peoples know their world, their cosmology, their spirituality and the practices that had ensured their on-going survival as Indigenous Australians. Due to fact that feedback evolved out of the views of individuals as well as focus groups, I acknowledged that this multiplicity of meanings would also have to reflect contemporary viewpoints that emerged out of the diversity of the respondent cohort: their ages, different lifestyles and life experiences. Out of the evidence provided in Chapter Five, I realised that a critical concept that was linked to this desire to have Indigenous knowledges, values and beliefs validated within the university was that of freedom. Such a move would enable Indigenous students to maintain and validate their own cultural values and knowledges through studying programs that not only reflected an appreciation of Indigenous knowledges and epistemological stances but were also constructed and underpinned by Indigenous values. That this was a legitimate desire was evidenced by the argument in Chapter Five that, in a global society, knowledge is a valuable commodity and that modern universities must be accountable for their practices in ensuring that all students have access to knowledge that is worthwhile and has transferability. The literature in Chapter One provided evidence that Indigenous Australians are becoming increasingly able to contribute to the growing body of Indigenous knowledge and to respond to the needs of universities seeking to legitimate Indigenous knowledge within their existing knowledge frameworks. While this does not deny the evidence that indicates the desire of these students to acquire the western cultural capital that Luke (2000) maintains is essential knowledge for operating effectively within contemporary Australian society, it also acknowledges the evidence that the students in this study also sought to operate from within the own knowledge frameworks. Embedding Indigenous knowledges within the university would allow for a coming together of thinking that would enable university education to reflect the different, yet equally legitimate, worldviews of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; that would align it with the principles of Civic Pluralism and, thus, offer Australian university students a way forward into the global society (Kalantzis, 1995: 30–31).

From this position, it is important that the success achieved by the students in this study is recognised and accepted within the university and, ultimately, the wider society. I perceive that it will be through such acceptance that the corpus of Indigenous knowledge discussed in Chapter Three (Nakata, 2001) will become privileged within the academy; sharing the space
that, to date, has belonged exclusively to western knowledge; encouraging collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in ways that will enable partnerships, such as those discussed as essential to the reconciliation process in Chapter Three, to evolve. Through the emergence of such partnerships, based on the notion of an equality of regard that emerged out of the NATSIEP Review and was discussed in the section on equity in Chapter One, new synergies will be created for the mutual benefit of all students. Critically, however, such partnerships can only be successful when those universities implementing them accept the need to ensure that both the Indigenous Australian and western corpus of knowledge are given equal recognition within the academe; that while they will overlap and inevitably influence each other, this should be perceived as a synergistic process. The student data has informed this conceptualization, for it has revealed the importance of students locating themselves strategically as intellectuals within the university, within the Indigenous community and within the wider society. The realities that have been expressed by the students who participated in this study have indicated that the key to academic success for Indigenous students is related to their capacity to ensure their voices are heard and that someone is listening (Spivak cited in Smith, 2001: 71). As demonstrated by the students in this study, there are Indigenous students who, having recognised their personal strength through the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, will not be denied. It has not been an easy journey for the students involved in this study, for, having gained entry to the highway of Western knowledge, they have hit the wall at what Nakata terms the interface. And it is the way in which they have dealt with that collision that demonstrates the strength of diversity; the strength of their identity as Indigenous Australians. There are those who have taken a stand and engaged at the wall; those who have fought for their right to scale the wall; and there are some who have won, while others have lost; some who have gained strength through the encounter while others have been seriously wounded. There are those who have resisted, have put their backs to the wall and not yielded to the pressures for change, and some have been able to find a crack in the wall through which they have been able to slip, often unnoticed, while others have despaired of where the journey is taking them and have abandoned it. And, there are the persisters, those who have the perseverance to maintain their commitment, steadfastly continuing on their journey, finding ways around any opposition they meet along the way. And while all have the capacity to achieve success, it was the persisters in the student cohort who were most often successful.

In reflecting upon the qualities that enabled the persisters to achieve success in the academe, I determined that they were the students who were able to accept that the learning process in
which they engage will inevitably change them in some ways but that such change can be positive for it will empower them to take control of their own lives and to make their own choices. I cogitated over their journeys and realised that they were the people who seized opportunities, who took risks, who valued their own strengths. But they were also the people who were grounded in reality, acknowledging that the journey was not easy and that they had to be prepared to work hard to achieve their success and who realized that learning was a two-way process. In the course of analysing the intersections that occurred between us during this journey, I came to understand that there are students who have found ways to take what knowledge they want from both of their worlds — from their Indigenous world and from the Western world into which they have journeyed. And I perceived that, to do this, they have found multiple pathways to negotiate their way through the often unfamiliar terrain at the interface; pathways that have enabled them to locate the crosswalks that allow them to cross back and forth between their two worlds of knowledge — crosswalks that grant them safe passage on their journey. Most importantly, however, I realised that these students were not diminished through such acts. Rather, they had enriched the quality of their own lives through the process; they had discovered new depths in their identity as Indigenous Australians and they liked what they had become. These students proved to me that it is possible for Indigenous Australian and Western knowledges to co-exist in the university.

This is not to imply that the position of Indigenous scholarship within the university is not problematic but rather to argue that it has gained a foothold. As the literature in Chapters One and Three demonstrated, Indigenous scholars are stating their case unequivocally and demanding recognition for the legitimacy of their learning journeys — for the importance of their knowledges and epistemologies. And there is a sense that they have no time to waste for they have already been too long denied their rightful place in the academe. The evidence in Chapter Five shows that the students in this study who achieved success within the context of their university studies have discovered that they do not have to give up one, namely their identity as Indigenous Australians, to be a part of the other, to be recognised as scholars within the academe. But they will need persistence.

And it is persistence that will enable Indigenous scholars, such as those who contributed to the literature cited in this thesis, to achieve their goal of recognition of the value of the corpus of Indigenous knowledges within the university, for, as increasing numbers of Indigenous people such as those who participated in this study come into the universities and
achieve their own success, they will establish a place for Indigenous scholars within the university. As the students in this study proved, success breeds success, and as Indigenous scholars grow both in numbers and standing, they will become a valued part of the university system. Indigenous peoples cannot be denied in this regard for, as this study has demonstrated, the process has already commenced, albeit slowly. And, as the survival history of Indigenous Australians revealed in Chapter One clearly demonstrates, they will persist until they achieve the changes they desire.

It is somewhat ironical that, in promoting the benefits of globalisation and in their commitment to policies of economic rationalism, as revealed in Chapters One and Three, contemporary Australian governments will, ultimately, assist Indigenous Australians to achieve their goal of equality within the university. For, as discussed in Chapter Three, in the evolution of higher education in this country, governments have increased their influence within the university and assumed greater control of the way in which universities operate. Hence, as the discussion in Chapter Three revealed, universities have had to open their doors to cohorts of students, including Indigenous students, who, in the past, would not have been able to access university. Within this context the very notion of what the traditional university stood for has already been challenged and forced to change. And, having now established their place in the university, Indigenous Australians will persist in challenging the university to accommodate their goals, to build different pathways into the future for all Australians for that is the destination that the students in this study articulated as the ultimate goal of their journey into higher education.


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Appendix One

Goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy 1989 (NATSIEP)

Major Goal 1: Involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Educational Decision-Making

Long Term Goals

1. To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of pre-school, primary and secondary education services for their children.

2. To increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teachers assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers, including community people engaged in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, history and contemporary society, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

3. To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of post-school education services, including technical and further education colleges and higher education institutions.

4. To increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed as administrators, teachers, researchers and student services officers in technical and further education colleges and higher education institutions.

5. To provide education and training services to develop the skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in educational decision-making.
6. To develop arrangements for the provisions of independent advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities regarding educational decisions at regional, State, Territory and National levels.

Major Goal 2: Equality of Access to Education Services

Long Term Goals

To ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of pre-primary school have access to pre-school services on a basis comparable to that available to other Australian children of the same age.

7. To ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have local access to primary and secondary schooling.

8. To ensure equitable access of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to post-compulsory secondary schooling, to technical and further education, and to higher education.

Major Goal 3: Equity of Educational Participation

Long Term Goals

9. To achieve the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in pre-school education for a period similar to that for other Australian children.

10. To achieve the participation of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in compulsory schooling.

11. To achieve the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in post-secondary education, in technical and further education, and in higher education, at rates commensurate with those of other Australians in those sectors.
Major Goal 4: Equitable and Appropriate Educational Outcomes

Long Term Goals

To provide adequate preparation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through pre-school education for the schooling years ahead.

12. To enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander attainment of skills to the same standard as other Australian students throughout the compulsory schooling years.

13. To enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to attain the successful completion of Year 12 or equivalent at the same rates as for other Australian students.

14. To enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to attain the same graduation rates from award courses in technical and further education, and in higher education, as for other Australians.

15. To develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages.

16. To provide community education services which enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to develop the skills to manage the development of their communities.

17. To enable the attainment of proficiency in English language and numeracy competencies by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults with limited or no educational experience.

18. To enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity.

19. To provide all Australians students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary cultures.

Appendix Two

MCEETYA National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996–2002

The MCEETYA Taskforce considering education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, began with the recommendations from the National Review for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1994) and cross-referenced these recommendations to the 21 goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) (see Appendix One). Due to the repetitive nature of the 21 goals of the NATSIEP, the taskforce aggregated them into seven priorities for action. The seven priorities are based on the framework set by the Commonwealth for reporting on State and Territory Strategic Plans. The seven priorities are:

1: to establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision-making

2: to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples employed in education and training;

3: to ensure equitable access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to education and training services;

4: to ensure participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education and training;

5: to ensure equitable and appropriate educational achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

6: to promote, maintain and support the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, cultures and languages to all Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; and

7: to provide community development training services including proficiency in English literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults.

An eighth priority is:

8: to improve NATSIEP implementation, evaluation and resourcing arrangements.
Appendix Three

"Is Success A Matter Of Choice?"

Individual Interview Schedule

Semi-structured interview key questions for individual face-to-face interviews.

1. Consider why you decided to come to university. Indicate the level of influence posed by each of the following and circle the number you agree with beside each issue:

1 = extremely important  
2 = important  
3 = minor importance  
4 = not considered at all

a. family expectations 1 2 3 4 
b. community expectations 1 2 3 4 
c. a way to obtain employment 1 2 3 4 
d. a way to get a better job 1 2 3 4 
e. needed this qualification in my present job 1 2 3 4 
f. wanted to be with my friends 1 2 3 4 
g. interested in the field of study 1 2 3 4 
h. didn’t know what else to do 1 2 3 4 
i. other (please specify) 1 2 3 4

Would you like to provide some details about any of these issues?

2. Think about how well prepared you were to undertake university studies and rate yourself on the following issues.

1 = strongly agree  
2 = agree  
3 = uncertain  
4 = disagree  
5 = strongly disagree

a. I had problems organising my time. 1 2 3 4 5 
b. My study skills were appropriate for university. 1 2 3 4 5 
c. I had the pre-requisites I needed. 1 2 3 4 5 
d. I found it difficult to fit into university life. 1 2 3 4 5 
e. I made good use of the Indigenous support services provided by the university. 1 2 3 4 5
f. I made good use of the mainstream support services provided by the university. 1 2 3 4 5
g. I found other students were friendly. 1 2 3 4 5
h. I felt comfortable within the university. 1 2 3 4 5

Would you like to provide some details about any of these issues?

3. Can you identify those factors (policies and practices) which had an impact on the way in which you were able to operate within the university?

You might like to consider these factors from two viewpoints:
- those which you believe made you feel valued within the university; and
- those which made you feel you did not really belong in the university.

4. Which of these factors do you perceive as having an impact upon the outcomes you are/were able to achieve at university. Explain the impact they had.

5. People (including family, community members, lecturers, fellow students, etc.) often talk about the need to achieve 'success' in your university studies.

Think about the people in your life — what do you think they might mean when they talk about this 'success'?

6. From your personal perspective, what do you perceive of as 'success' in terms of your university studies?

Is it only related to academic outcomes?

Is it relevant to other aspects of your life at university? If yes, please explain.

7. How do you think your university might define student “success”? Is there any difference in the way they might define "success" for different groups within the university, eg. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students?

8. How do you think the Federal Government (as the major funding body for universities) defines student “success”?
Interviewee Data Form

Your responses to the following questions will assist the researcher in ensuring information is gathered from a representative sample of the student body.

Please circle the correct responses:

I am: Aboriginal
Torres Strait Islander
Male
Female

Less than 30 years of age.
More than 30 years of age.

Enrolled as an internal undergraduate student.
Enrolled as an external undergraduate student.
Enrolled as an internal postgraduate student.
Enrolled as an external postgraduate student.

I have: Achieved satisfactory (or pass) outcomes in (___ out of ___ / all) of my units for this semester.
Graduated from my course.
Deferred my studies.
Withdrawn from my course.

I came to university as: a school leaver.

a mature age student.

When I left school I had completed: Year ___ in primary school.

OR Year ___ in secondary school.
Appendix Four

“Is Success A Matter Of Choice?”

Focus Group Interview Schedule

As people who have volunteered to participate in a focus group established to gather data for a project which is exploring issues related to educational outcomes for Indigenous students undertaking university studies, it might be assumed that, as individuals, you have some interest in education and its role in our society. This could be an interesting area in which to begin our discussion because Keefe suggests that there is a need to focus on the ‘ambiguities and contradictions’ (1992:5) of the terms ‘education, culture and power’ (1992:4) in order to begin to develop an understanding of the often opposing viewpoints which Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have of education.

I have provided each of you with three questions. Please write your own responses to these questions before we proceed with the oral discussion. You should answer in the context of higher education.

1: What is your view of the role higher education in today’s society?

2: Currently, there is a considerable focus on cultural matters in Australia. How does this university address ‘culture’ in relation to student needs?

3: Why do you think Keefe perceived of ‘power’ as being a critical element to consider in conjunction with ‘education’ and ‘culture’?

(Once volunteers have written their responses, open the discussion and encourage the group to work through the three questions. When the discussion is finished, summarise group responses to the three questions. It could be assumed that the first three questions will have raised a number of concerns regarding the way in which:

- universities deal with cultural issues in the context of teaching and learning; and
- existing power structures might influence student outcomes.)

Having considered these concepts in the context of higher education in general, we need to shift our focus to Indigenous higher education.)
4: Consider the implications of current practices and procedures, within the university, in terms of ensuring culturally appropriate teaching for Indigenous students? You might like to provide examples of situations which you consider clarify your response.

5: How would you see the power structures that operate within this university, impacting upon the participation of Indigenous students within mainstream courses?

6: What other factors might affect Indigenous student participation in university life? These factors may lead to positive or negative outcomes.

7: What is your perception of ‘success’ within the context of higher education? Do you consider that Indigenous students, generally speaking, would share your viewpoint?

8: How do you think your university might define student “success”? Is there any difference in the way they might define “success” for different groups within the university, eg. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students?

9: How do you think the Federal government (as the major funding body for universities) defines student ‘success’?

10: What are the implications of current government policies in the context of Indigenous students success rates in universities?
Student Volunteers (Focus Groups) Data Form

Your responses to the following questions will enable the researcher to establish a profile of students participating in the focus groups.

Please circle the correct responses:

I am:  
Aboriginal
Torres Strait Islander
Male
Female
Less than 30 years of age.
More than 30 years of age.
Enrolled as an internal undergraduate student.
Enrolled as an external undergraduate student.
Enrolled as an internal postgraduate student.
Enrolled as an external postgraduate student.

I came to university as: a school leaver.

a mature age student.

When I left school I
had completed: Year ____ in primary school.
OR  Year ____ in secondary school.
Appendix Five

“Is Success A Matter Of Choice?”

Key Respondent Interview Schedule

Semi-structured interview key questions for individual interviews.

1: What contribution do you see past policies having made to the contemporary positioning of Indigenous students in higher education?

2: From your perspective, as an Indigenous person, what do you consider is the role of higher education in Australian society?


4: What do you think Indigenous students get out of university? You might like to reflect upon aspects of the university culture and the power structures that operate within the institution, in answering this question.

5: Are there any particular issues that, in your experience, seem to present real barriers to Indigenous students achieving success in university?
Appendix Six

"Is Success A Matter Of Choice?"

Information Sheet for Individual Interviewees

I am undertaking my PhD. at RMIT, Victoria and seek Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student volunteers to cooperatively participate in my research study. I am interested in examining the commitment of Australian universities to providing Indigenous students with a range of opportunities relevant to their needs in achieving success. I plan to gather my data from a number of sources such as policy documents relevant to higher education; focus group meetings with student and staff participants of some universities; individual student interviews with students of some universities and interviews with key Indigenous respondents.

In the individual student interview, I will be inviting you to talk about your experiences in an informal but semi-structured interview. Given that discussion of experiences may be unsettling, I will undertake a de-briefing activity at the end of each interview.

In due course, I will provide you with a copy of the written transcript of your interview. Once you have had time to read the transcript, I will invite you to return for another interview if you would like the opportunity to provide additional feedback or clarify any issues which you consider are not clear in the transcript of the interview.

Participation is voluntary and volunteers are free to withdraw at any time. To this end, a consent form outlining this proviso is attached for your signature. Strict confidentiality will be maintained to protect identification of participants and their places of study.

I anticipate the study will produce useful information concerning various procedures or practices used within universities, at both the systems and operational levels, which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will have identified as having impacted upon them in terms of their university studies. The identification of such factors will provide a research base for further studies and possibly, bring about changes in the system of higher education.

The outcomes of this study will be written in the form of a thesis and will include both positive and negative aspects of students' experiences as well as the perceived impact of these experiences on:

- Indigenous students involved in university studies; and
- the wider Indigenous Australian community.

Your participation in this study would greatly assist understanding of Indigenous Australian perceptions of what constitutes 'success' in terms of what they get out of university. Interview time is estimated to be approximately two hours for the initial interview with a follow up interview, if sought, of one hour.

If you decide to participate in this study, and/or have any further questions, I can be contacted at the School of Indigenous Australian Studies at James Cook University or by telephoning me on (07) 4781 4386.

I look forward to hearing from you.
Jeannie Herbert

"Is Success A Matter Of Choice?"

Information Sheet for Student Volunteers in Focus Group Discussions

I am undertaking my PhD. at RMIT, Victoria and seek Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student volunteers to cooperatively participate in my research study.

I am interested in examining the commitment of Australian universities to providing Indigenous students with a range of opportunities relevant to their needs in achieving success. I plan to gather my data from a number of sources such as policy documents relevant to higher education; focus group meetings with student and staff participants of some universities; individual student interviews with students of some universities and interviews with some key Indigenous respondents.

In the student focus groups, I would be inviting you, with a group of your peers, to discuss a number of issues which might impact upon the way in which Indigenous students operate within the university. While I will use focus questions to begin the discussion, I am seeking participants who are willing to offer their opinions in relation to their perceptions of how universities enable them to achieve their goals.

Participation is voluntary and volunteers are free to leave the group at any time. Strict confidentiality will be maintained to protect identification of participants and their places of study.

I anticipate the study will produce useful information concerning various procedures or practices used within universities, at both the systems and operational levels, which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will have identified as having impacted upon them in terms of their university studies. The identification of such factors will provide a research base for further studies and possibly, bring about changes in the system of higher education.

The outcomes of this study will be written in the form of a thesis and will include both positive and negative aspects of students’ experiences as well as the perceived impact of these experiences on:

- Indigenous students involved in university studies; and
- the wider Indigenous Australian community.

Your participation in this study would greatly assist understanding of Indigenous Australian perceptions of what constitutes ‘success’ in terms of what they get out of university. If you decide you would like to participate in this study, and/or have any further questions, I can be contacted at the School of Indigenous Australian Studies at James Cook University or by telephoning me on (07) 4781 4386.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Jeannie Herbert
"Is Success A Matter Of Choice?"

Information Sheet for Key Respondents

I am undertaking my PhD at RMIT, Victoria and would like to invite you, as an Indigenous person who has worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to cooperatively participate in my research study.

I am interested in examining the commitment of Australian universities to providing Indigenous students with a range of opportunities relevant to their needs in achieving success. I plan to gather my data from a number of sources such as policy documents relevant to higher education; focus group meetings with student and staff participants at some universities; individual student interviews with students at some universities and key Indigenous respondents.

I would like to invite you to discuss any issues that you consider impact upon the way in which Indigenous students operate within the university. While I might ask some specific questions to focus the discussion, the main purpose of this interview is to obtain your opinion of how you think universities provide opportunities for Indigenous students to achieve successful outcomes in their university studies.

Strict confidentiality will be maintained to protect your identity.

I anticipate the study will produce useful information concerning various procedures or practices used within universities, at both systems and operational levels, which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will have identified as having impacted upon them in terms of their university studies. The identification of such factors will provide a research base for further studies and possibly, bring about changes in the system of higher education.

The outcomes of this study will be written in the form of a thesis and will include both positive and negative aspects of students’ experiences as well as the perceived impact of these experiences on:

- Indigenous students involved in university studies; and
- the wider Indigenous Australian community.

Your participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of Indigenous Australian perceptions of what constitutes ‘success’ in terms of what Indigenous students get out of university and will also assist in the validation of the data analysis process.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Jeannie Herbert
Appendix Seven

"Is Success A Matter Of Choice?"

Consent Form (for use with all Informants)

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this research and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction, by the researcher.

I agree to participate in this activity, knowing that I may withdraw at any time.

I understand that I may not directly benefit from participating in this study.

I agree that the research data gathered may be published, provided confidentiality concerning sources is maintained. It has been made clear to me that my name, personal responses and place of study will remain confidential.

I am over 18 years of age.

__________________________________________
(Name of participant. Please print.)

__________________________________________   (Dated)
(Signature of participant.)

I certify that I have explained the study to the participant and consider that he/she understands what is involved.

__________________________________________
(Name of investigator. Please print.)

__________________________________________   (Dated)
(Signature of investigator.)