Reference No. 112

Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
Indigenous Participation in Higher Education: Culture, Choice and Human Capital Theory

Research Publication:
CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 122/1996

Name of Researcher(s):
R.G. Schwab

Time period:
1996

Geographic location:
National, State and Territory and urban level information

Methodology:
Statistical analysis of 1996 Higher Education administrative data held by the (then) Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Aims:
This paper aims to identify patterns of Indigenous participation in higher education and the underlying cultural and individual reasons for student choice of their area of study.

Selected findings and insights:
In identifying the significant increase in Indigenous higher education enrolments between 1988 and 1996, the study noted that, unlike non-Indigenous enrolments which proportionately followed State population size, the proportion of higher education students was slightly higher in NSW, Vic, WA, SA and the ACT than might be expected. The proportion was lower than might be expected in the NT, Qld and Tasman, based upon the relative Indigenous population distribution across Australia.

Against this background, the study found that:

- just over 50% of all higher education Indigenous enrolments were either generally at the newer universities that had previously been Colleges of Advanced Education or at Batchelor College. These same universities enrolled 27.7% of all non-Indigenous higher education students; and

- as a comparison, the study found that in 1996, 15.6% of all Indigenous enrolments were at the Go8 universities compared to 30.5% of all non-Indigenous enrolments.

The study also tracked type of higher education enrolment and found, in stark contrast to non-Indigenous enrolments, that 19.4% of Indigenous students were enrolled in one- and two-year associate diploma courses and 20.1% were enrolled in ‘enabling’ or ‘non-award’ courses. The respective percentages for non-Indigenous enrolments were 2.6% and 1.4%. In terms of course completions:

- Most completions were in the fields of education, the arts (especially Aboriginal studies), health and business studies.
This CAEPR Discussion Paper argues that with such different patterns of university enrolment, choice of study and completion rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, quite different influences will be operating which are not readily explained by human capital theory, which underpins much of Australian education policy. For example:

• the higher proportion of enrolments in disciplines associated with lower paying occupations.

The paper rather argues that significant cultural factors influence Indigenous participation in higher education:

• The skills, competencies, general understandings of the underlying assumptions and processes of the higher educational enterprise and contextual confidence required to effectively participate in or ‘navigate through’ higher education may not be as well developed among Indigenous students.

• In addition Indigenous students may not hold the necessary values and strong expectations of success based upon the ‘western’ notions of education as both an economic investment and the gaining of a qualification as some form of cultural capital, that typify non-Indigenous higher education students.

• Rather, Indigenous students will bring their own form of cultural capital based upon their knowledge of and familiarity with Indigenous culture and its institutions.

There are other cultural obstacles identified in the paper:

• Household living conditions and general crowdedness do not facilitate home study;

• Family support typically required for higher education students may not be forthcoming simply because they are likely to be the first of the family to undertake tertiary study;

• Family commitments and customary requirements may often interrupt studies, leading to reduced attendance and lower performance;

• For some, higher education may not be as highly valued back in their own community as for non-Indigenous students and, in fact, may represent a threat to the community. For others there may be strong expectations for their involvement in the social and political structures of their communities, lessening their focus upon their academic studies.

Commitment to community may be an important influence on choice of study, with enrolments in areas such as education, Aboriginal studies and health often seen as of benefit to the community rather than for individual gain.

Educational implications:

This study suggests several interventions to ensure continued increases in Indigenous participation in higher education, including:

• Recognising the level of support required by Indigenous students, especially in the early periods of their studies and for those who have had to move away from their community; [support services]

• Modifications to course structures to encourage greater participation by providing increased flexibility through a modular approach, with opportunities for block study programs at both graduate and post-graduate levels. This could involve intensive study and field-based research, enabling continued involvement with their own communities and in areas of value to both the student and the community; [curriculum]
Developing stronger pathways between TAFE, other training providers and secondary education and universities to promote Indigenous enrolments in other disciplines such as science and environmental studies, information communication technology, and engineering and accounting, where future demand and community benefit may be high. [pathways]

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life

Domain 2: School and Community Educational Partnerships

- Cross-cultural understanding of purposes and value of education

Domain 5: Pathways to training, employment and higher education

- Student aspirations and key transition points
- Participation, retention and achievement in post-compulsory schooling, training and higher education

Related papers:
