

COMMONWEALTH GRANTS COMMISSION

INDIGENOUS FUNDING INQUIRY

SUBMISSION

From: Reverend Steven J Etherington

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^^Kunbarllanjnja NT 0822
April 4th 2000

The Secretary
Commonwealth Grants Commission
5 Torrens St
Braddon ACT 2612

Submission to Indigenous Funding Inquiry

Dear Sir,

I am an Anglican Priest in a remote non English speaking Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land. I have worked here for a total of 22 years in various roles which have involved speaking the local indigenous language. I have worked as school teacher, Bilingual Programme Co-ordinator, Remote Area Teacher Education lecturer (attached to Batchelor College), Bible Translator, Language Centre Co-ordinator and recently mentor trainer within the Anglican Church. I am also a part time PhD (research) student collecting and analyzing interviews in the indigenous language about schooling, pedagogy, and teaching and learning issues.

This submission is written on short notice and therefore very much in "point form". I would be happy to speak in more detail with whoever visits the Kunbarllanjnja Community to conduct interviews.

I completely support the CGC's inquiry since
[1] indigeneity itself does not define the existence, nature of level of particular needs;
[2] remote groups such as the people I live and work with have often missed out accessing funding because they have insufficient English literacy to receive or pursue information, or to direct submissions on their behalf.

The following points are crucial to any attempt to make access to grant funds more equitable among indigenous groups.

Employment

Long term unemployment and underemployment lead to profound and destructive dependency among many Aboriginal people. Current CDEP programmes are problematic, providing meaningful employment only for the non Aboriginal personnel needed to run them. These issues are often spoken about by Aboriginal people with real distress. There is also evidence, in interviews I have collected, that the chronic nature of the employment situation has catastrophic impact on the effectiveness of schooling, removing the most important source of motivation for both parents and children.

There is current limited employment in areas of exportable culture, but this provides no incentive to become independent of non Aboriginal management in either financial administration or other job skills. As time goes by, fewer skilled young artists and people in other categories within the cultural domain, have the inclination or skills to participate.

I recommend that for communities with this kind of employment vacuum, consideration be given to moving to more proactive job creation approach. This will certainly involve significant infrastructure funding, and more importantly, some willingness to address the political cost of winding back CDEP.

Education

My research strongly suggests the need for a more carefully targetted approach to funding of indigenous education. Indigenous schooling in remoter areas, (typically non English speaking) suffers the combined effects of low or non existent motivation towards education among the parents, the second or foreign language status of English in such communities, and very high rates of professional staff turnover.

The Northern Territory government (across departments) is in the process of responding to the Collins report on Indigenous Education in the NT. There is a strong case for additional funding for initiatives of the kind recommended in the Collins report, especially strategies for attracting, training and retaining competent teachers, including especially those who can act as mentors for indigenous and less experienced non indigenous staff, English second language specialists and school based research staff. Quality staffing is expensive, but not as expensive as the sheer waste now evident. Further, a focus on quality personnel would allow a reduction in number of non Aboriginal staff overall in indigenous community schools.

My research strongly supports the need to provide sufficient funding to non English speaking (traditional) Aboriginal communities to allow an apparently disproportionately large pool of indigenous teachers for each school, since their involvement in school is often part-time due to the extraordinary social problems prevailing in these communities. The resultingly sporadic attendance of indigenous staff has disallowed on the job training, vernacular counselling and an effective point of contact between school and community. Funding directed to this problem would be strategic.

In summary, any requests for funding from indigenous communities should be carefully ranked, giving weight to those communities where English literacy and employment are very limited. Such weighting should be in proportion to the extent and especially the length of time of chronic unemployment and underemployment. Weighting should also be proportionate to indexes of school failure and non participation.

Yours sincerely,

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