

Australian Education Union

**Policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Education**

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Federal Office
120 Clarendon Street
Southbank 3006



“We see education as the most important strategy for achieving self-determination for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ peoples of Australia. We do not see education as a method of producing anglicised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples², but rather an instrument for creating an informed community with intellectual and technological skills, in harmony with our own cultural values and identity. We wish to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens in changing Australia.”³

¹ Torres Strait Islander has been added by the author

² Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples added by the author to replace the word Aborigine

³ Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (1975) Report to Schools Commission, as quoted in Egan, 1986:3.

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Policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

1. Preamble

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Nations peoples of Australia, and as such, have a distinct and inalienable set of rights. The right to education is one of these.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are living cultures. Despite hundreds of years of systemic oppression, colonisation, and racism, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to maintain a connection to their lands and surrounding waters.

The AEU recognises that as a consequence of the process of colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have come from a range of diverse circumstances, and have a range of knowledges and experiences in relation to their cultural backgrounds.

Further, the AEU acknowledges that the education system has played a crucial role in the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through the denial of opportunities, the reinforcement of racial stereotypes, the lowering of expectations and quality, the exclusion of participation, and the reinforcement of cultural and political values which are ultimately alien to the original inhabitants of this land.

The AEU is committed to rectifying this situation, through the implementation of this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy.

2. Principles

The AEU:

- 2.1 Is committed to ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to high quality education throughout their lives. Quality is characterised by appropriate student teacher ratios and group sizes, appropriately qualified and trained teachers and education workers, and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments.

- 2.2 Affirms its conviction to value the diversity of the cultures and forms of social organisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and commits its members to the educational development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in light of the imperative contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to the socio-economic, cultural and environmental advancement of Australian society.
- 2.3 Is dedicated to ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have local access to a free, publicly funded education system, which affirms cultural identity, and enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to contribute to, and participate in, their own, and broader society.
- 2.4 Is committed to the principles of self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and asserts the fundamental democratic right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be involved in decision making to enable them to attempt to rectify the history of neglect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by both Federal and State/Territory Governments. This right must be applied in all areas of decision making, including educational decision making.
- 2.5 Believes that proper health care is essential to the learning process and recognises that there is a disproportionately high incident of poor health amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Such ill-health has adverse impacts on the educational successes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Contributing to this situation is the socio-economic deprivation experienced by a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 2.6 Emphasises the important role of cooperation and partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in promoting and implementing the goals and activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 2.7 Is committed to ensuring that the above-mentioned principles and the whole of the AEU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy are implemented across the early childhood, compulsory and post-compulsory schooling and TAFE sectors.

3. Community Controlled Education

- 3.1 The AEU commits to:
 - (a) the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have an inalienable right to self-determination in maintaining their cultural identities and autonomy;

- (b) the recognition that the schooling system has a crucial role to play in the maintenance of cultural identity.
- 3.2 The AEU therefore upholds the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to determine the nature of schooling for their children.
- 3.3 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:
- (a) work with State/Territory AECGs in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in their efforts to achieve the type of schooling that each community deems appropriate;
 - (b) insist that Governments provide full funding for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools and will negotiate with ATSIC and State and Territories AECGs on the best sources of finance for this purpose;
 - (c) support the implementation of the principle of self-determination and negotiation, as appropriate, with employing authorities, AECGs and the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to address considerations as they emerge, and to safeguard the rights of teachers and students.

4. Curriculum

- 4.1 The AEU commits to:
- (a) the belief that schools play a significant role in the redefinition of the myths and stereotypes of disadvantage and racism;
 - (b) the belief that all Australian students have the right to learn about the true history of Australia in a way that promotes the secular, democratic and non-discriminatory principles and values of the public education system.
- 4.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:
- (a) advocate for the development of inclusive curricula either by, or in collaboration with relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and/or groups, which presents all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures from times prior to the invasion, to the present, across all curriculum areas;

- (b) work to ensure that materials are an accurate reflection of the true histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and free of racist and stereotypical connotations and representations;
- (c) promote to members the use of acceptable criterion for the development and use of such curricula;
- (d) lobby State and Territory Governments to ensure that Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies are implemented as core curriculum components.

5. Employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

5.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) increasing the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all public education sectors, across all levels of the sectors;
- (b) ensuring that Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs)⁴ are employed under an award structure which provides career path and professional development opportunities and employment security, and remunerates AIEWs for the specific sets of skills and knowledge that they bring to the educational setting;
- (c) ensuring that States and Territories make a commitment to ongoing resourcing and permanency of AIEW positions that is not dependent on supplementary educational funding provided by the Commonwealth, such as the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) or on other community-based Commonwealth provided fund sources, such as the Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP).

5.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) give immediate priority to the development of an equitable award structure for AIEWs;

⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Aides, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Assistants, Community Teachers, Home/School Liaison Officers, Homework Centre Workers and other workers as defined in the AEU federal AIEWs log of claims

- (b) lobby State/Territory Governments to ensure that AIEWs receive adequate, appropriate and recognised training to ensure the following aims:
- job competence;
 - personal growth and development including Standard Australian English literacy skills;
 - opportunities to obtain qualifications which will enable AIEWs to enter and successfully handle professional training;
- (c) lobby State/Territory Governments to develop and implement Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment strategies.

6. Employment of Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

6.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) ensuring that all teachers and other education workers have undertaken Cross-Cultural Awareness Training, as it relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, pedagogies and epistemologies;
- (b) ensuring that all teachers employed in community schools are supported adequately (with professional development, remuneration, housing and other issues as per AEU policy) during their employment, and following their departure from these schools.

6.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and State and Territory Governments to develop appropriate recruitment and selection processes for teachers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- (b) work with the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to lobby Universities and the Federal Government to develop and implement Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies in all undergraduate teaching programs;
- (c) work with State and Territory Governments to ensure that Cross-Cultural Awareness packages are developed and delivered to all teachers, prioritising those who teach large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

7. Professional Development

7.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) monitoring the public education system to ensure that it provides high quality, relevant, up-to-date, and appropriate professional development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and other staff working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- (b) monitoring the public education system to ensure that access to this professional development is available to all;
- (c) monitoring the public education system to ensure that appropriately qualified people (including people recognised by their communities as such) are providing professional development, and are remunerated appropriately for their time and knowledge.

7.2 In relation to professional development for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the AEU is committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities delivering this professional development.

7.3 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) continue to provide professional development, such as Trade Union Training Courses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Union members;
- (b) continue to provide professional development to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members in areas pertinent to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for example, Anti-racism;
- (c) work with State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments to ensure that professional development is provided in an high quality, relevant, up-to-date, and appropriate way.

8. Qualifications

8.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) the principle of articulated and accredited pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers to seek further relevant qualifications, and improve their career development opportunities;

- (b) the principle of scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples working in the public education system, to aim towards social parity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment numbers across education systems in Australia.

8.3 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) work with peak bodies and agencies in the development and implementation of programs which achieve an increase in qualified, capable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers, including teachers, AIEWs, principals, and other people under various state and territory awards.

9. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages

9.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to access an education that provides recognition and affirmation of the cultural knowledge, language and values that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples bring to mainstream education;
- (b) supporting the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as a part of the curriculum for all Australians, but particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

9.2 Further, the AEU recognises the right to maintain and speak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages as a fundamental right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to maintain their cultural knowledges and values.

9.3 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) work with peak bodies and agencies in the development and implementation of programs which achieve an increase in the use and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

10. Standard Australian English

10.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to participate in broader Australian society, and understands that the acquisition and use of Standard Australian English (SAE) is essential to this right.

10.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) work with peak bodies and agencies in the development and implementation of programs which achieve an increase in the proficiency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the use of SAE.

11. Students with Additional Educational Needs

11.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with additional educational needs have the right to participate in a full educational program;
- (b) lobbying Governments to ensure that appropriate, and in many cases, additional resources are made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with additional needs, including: access to specialised services; professional support staff; professional development; and appropriate industrial support.

11.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) work with peak bodies and agencies in the development and implementation of programs which will ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with additional educational needs are met, within the broader policy context of the AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies.

12. **Information Technology**

12.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the same right to access and use Information Technology (IT) as all other Australians.

12.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) advocate for improved access to IT for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- (b) ensure that this advocacy is aligned with protocols and access needs, as defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

13. **Resourcing and Funding**

13.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) the principle that additional funding principles can and should be applied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in order to redress the serious disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in today's society;
- (b) the principle that this funding should not act as a substitute for existing funding arrangements;
- (c) the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be involved in decisions about allocation of resources within their communities;
- (d) the principle that funding alone is not the answer to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, and that community capacity building should be the underlying basis of all Government programs delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

13.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities and other peak bodies and agencies to develop and implement funding models which enhance educational and life opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

14. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unionism

14.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) maintaining the AEU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Committee and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander TAFE committee;
- (b) maintaining the position of the Federal Aboriginal Education Officer;
- (c) working with the broader union movement to promote, enhance and increase further Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation at all levels.

14.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) conduct formal consultations with peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Government agencies;
- (b) support AEU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegations to appropriate forums;
- (c) commit to further the employment and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the AEU;
- (d) ensure participation in appropriate national and international delegations;
- (e) participate in the ACTU Indigenous committee meetings.

15. Industrial Issues

15.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) working to ensure that the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and other education workers are protected and will seek to co-operate with all unions involved where there is a need for common bargaining;
- (b) the maintenance and improvements of Award wages and conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education workers. Provision should be based upon the AEU's National Claim Framework.

15.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) continue to work in conjunction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, agencies and communities to ensure that issues held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are identified, and that the rights and conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are protected.

16. Social Justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

16.1 The AEU commits to:

- (a) the principle that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners have the right to a high quality education;
- (b) the inalienable rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Nations peoples of this country, and therefore the protection of their rights as Native Title holders, and custodians of country;
- (c) the principle of reconciliation;
- (d) the process of Treaty discussions and forums, as outlined by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC);
- (e) the protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and intellectual property rights;
- (f) the preservation of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols.

16.2 The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies will:

- (a) apply the appropriate acknowledgement of Traditional Owners at all gatherings, meetings and conferences;
- (b) pursue the implementation of the appropriate recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody;
- (c) follow appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols in all dealings with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;

- (d) work to ensure that the cultural and intellectual property rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are protected and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are appropriately remunerated for their cultural and intellectual knowledge;
- (e) work to support the processes of Reconciliation and Treaty.