

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

10th Session 16th – 27th May 2011

UN Headquarters, New York

Agenda Item 3:

Follow up to the recommendations of the Permanent Forum:

(a) Economic and social development;

STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF

The National Indigenous Higher Education Network (Australia)

Thank you Madam Chair

The National Indigenous Higher Education Network (NIHEN) of Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet today. We pay our respects to the wisdom of the Elders past and present and to our brothers and sisters from all of the Indigenous nations gathered here to raise concerns about issues that affect the people of their homelands. We bring greetings from our Elders and from our NIHEN colleagues, who share with them, our support for the ongoing work of the permanent forum.

We make this statement in reference to the rights to education enshrined in the UNDRIP and specifically to economic and social development within articles 18 (decision making), 21 (improvement in outcomes), 23 (active involvement in determining priorities).

Whilst there has been notable progress, significant challenges remain for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' effective engagement with education as determined and delivered by Australian governments.

The *Closing the Gap* agenda continues to provide a focus for institutions, governments and nongovernment sector in addressing the socio-economic and health disadvantages facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Notable progress within Australian Education includes:

- Development of the National Curriculum – Whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures have been included within the framework as a cross curriculum priority, the process for inclusion of the voices of Indigenous educators has been flawed. The presence of Indigenous Australian perspectives still faces contestation and in some instances has been rejected.

- The *Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council* to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the peak body for higher education *Universities Australia* have collaborated on two significant programs. Namely;
 - The *Indigenous Cultural Competency Framework* which aims to increase understanding of Indigenous cultures and peoples within Australian higher education institutions and
 - The *National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy* aiming to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are appropriately represented in the future Australian higher education workforce
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2010 – 2014 has articulated Indigenous competencies and standards as requirements for Teacher registration. These competencies articulate content knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and histories required by Australian teachers. By 2012 all pre-service teacher education will need to demonstrate how these competencies are developed within their teaching graduates.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students continue perform with increasing excellence; this year NIHEN celebrates Australia’s first Aboriginal Rhodes Scholar, Rebecca Richards.
- Australian education is being made stronger through emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders who are raising their voices for better outcomes and attention to the education of our children and young people.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges and Knowledge systems establishing a space within the western academy. Through the work of senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, our knowledges are being protected and promoted in ways which will benefit the Australian higher education system.
- Internationally, through NIHEN’s ongoing involvement and contributions to the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC) good practice from around the Indigenous higher education world is shared
- At the broader political level, NIHEN congratulates the inaugural board of the National Congress of First Nations Peoples. With the First Meeting of the Congress scheduled for June this year, NIHEN is encouraged by its potential as greater voice in engagement with governments

NIHEN acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders and leaders who have secured these gains through their commitment to self-determination and economic and social development. We also acknowledge our non-Indigenous partners who have supported and championed the Indigenous cause in education.

Challenges to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples fully exercising their rights to education as described in the UNDRIP include:

- The ever present spectre of racism in Australian society marginalizes our young people in their pursuit of educational success. This can be expressed through a culture of blame and viewing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families as not achieving due to irresponsibility.
- Where governments and other organisations have implemented good practices in Indigenous education there is a danger of complacency. There is still a long way to go and consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to be active, effective and valuable or it risks becoming a process of mere credentialism. Our participation in educational decision making needs to be broadened and deepened. This is particularly important as we seek a greater level of participation in the governance of our institutions.
- The fallout of the Northern Territory Intervention can be seen in educational outcomes for some of our most disadvantaged communities.
- The National Indigenous Education Action Plan whilst articulating a strategy for increasing participation and success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remains a plan for access to the Australian economy. It is silent on cultural integrity including the place of Indigenous languages and Indigenous cultures as an asset within Australia. The rhetoric is reminiscent of the *No Child Left Behind* agenda of the United States of which our Native American colleagues have been highly critical for its lack of respect to their cultures, families and children.

NIHEN makes the following recommendations

Recommendations

NIHEN asks members of the Permanent Forum to:

- 1. Urge nation states to implement their commitment to the principles of Indigenous sovereignty and social justice by ensuring Indigenous peoples are able to exercise their right to education without conditions, encumbrances or suspension of other rights guaranteed by the Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**
- 2. Invite UNESCO to report specifically on Indigenous peoples' access to and participation in Higher Education at a future session of the forum**

3. Direct the United Nations University, Institute of Advanced Studies' Traditional Knowledge Initiative to establish greater links with Indigenous people currently working in higher education within the Pacific region.

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