

EDUCATION REPORT

Aboriginals return to school

CLASSROOM

Aboriginals now have more say in their education, reports VINCENT RYAN

FROM primary schools to universities, Aboriginals are now being given control of their own education, plus the support they need. The growing numbers of Aboriginals working and studying in education also means Aboriginals are feeling more comfortable about pursuing education options.

A previously unsuccessful Ministry of Education Aboriginal mentor program — where older Aboriginals were to help younger students — is now being run by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI).

Aboriginal lecturers revised the program and local communities helped VAEAI to institute it.

Among the increasing number of education institutions throughout Victoria providing counselling, tutoring and financial advice to help Aboriginal students is Monash University.

ITS Monash Orientation Scheme for Aboriginals (MOSA) is helping to train Aboriginal lawyers, doctors, economists and arts graduates. This scheme, which started in early 1983, is also about providing support, crucial to any successful education, says MOSA director Mr Isaac Brown.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal studies are being designed by Kooris — Victorian Aboriginals — and introduced into schools, TAFE colleges and universities.

Aboriginal educators and cultural liaison officers, employed by the Ministry, are supporting individual Koori students and also giving non-Aboriginal teachers information and curriculum advice to help them teach all students, including Kooris.

Even access to computers and counsellors at the University of Melbourne's Aboriginal



"If we had at least 2000 black lawyers out there, there would be no need for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody," says MOSA director Isaac Brown (above).

Aboriginals are often victims of poor legal representation, he says. Until more black lawyers are educated to fight for the rights of

Liaison office are a great boon to Aboriginal students.

VAEAI chairman Phil Cooper says many Aboriginals who were earlier disillusioned by school are now returning to study.

Mrs Esme Saunders, one of two Ministry-employed Aboriginal education consultants, tries to stop the disillusionment before it sets in.

She helps schools in the Shepparton region incorporate Aboriginal studies into the curriculum and helps teachers in conflict with students to resolve their differences.

As Isaac Brown's recent book *Koori English* stresses, friction often results when teachers fail to understand Aboriginal culture.

For example, he says, when Aboriginal children do not say please and thank you, they are

not being impolite but reflecting a culture where things are owned collectively and it is impertinent to suggest that someone has a right to give you something.

Victoria's Kooris believe growing recognition of Aboriginal culture in schools will solve a lot of the problems of disillusionment among students.

VAEAI's Mr Cooper points to the social panels established by the Royal Commission into black deaths which stressed the importance of Aboriginal education.

He says the Royal Commission found that better education for Aboriginal students was crucial to prevent the incidence of Aboriginal imprisonment.

The Minister for Education, Mrs Kirner, says the government recognises the right of

their community, discrimination will continue.

"Black lawyers better understand the cultural background of Kooris and can well and truly represent blacks in the legal system. And in the longer term it will probably have some effect on the drafting of laws."

PICTURE: STEPHEN HENDERSON

the Aboriginal community to have a real say in the way their education is run but admits things still have a "way to go".

She says the Ministry's new career structure will allow Aboriginal educators to become teachers.

"Increasingly, I'm transferring things across to VAEAI... it's part of a concept about Aboriginal people establishing their own programs," she says.

A longtime fighter for Aboriginal rights, Mr Alf Bamblett, says it's all about assisting the community to have a choice.

Ask Mr Bamblett about the dominance of women (see below) in education and he shrugs his shoulders. He says it's the women who are leading the way because of their concern about giving their children a better chance.

Mr Bamblett's brother, Lio-

nel, who is VAEAI general manager, says Aboriginals are working hard to build on community-inspired education programs.

"In the last five years Aboriginal education has gone ahead in leaps and bounds," he says. "While a lot of our work has gone on older Aboriginals, we are now putting more time into younger children."

Like many Aboriginals, Mr Bamblett says ideas such as the mentor program will support the young and help continue the growth and improvement of education.

The Aboriginal liaison officer at Gippsland Institute of Technology, Mr Albert Mullett, is pushing for an Aboriginal perspective for his community in everything from kindergartens to tertiary institutes.

As that push continues throughout Victoria, Aboriginals are confident their successes will continue to grow.