

# Make it a reality for the minority: Review and inspirations from Australia's Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan (2016 – 2026)

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*Focusing on higher education, this paper examines the theoretical underpinnings, policy participants, environmental factors, goals, and characteristics to establish connections with ethnic minority higher education in Australia during the period of "Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026". Subsequently, it delineates three key actions—constructing an educational environment, establishing key systems, and implementing practices at the grassroots level—as pivotal policy decisions and implementations. In the third stage, the paper delves into the process of "internalization," encompassing aspects such as policy and legal frameworks, oversight mechanisms, leadership structures, community involvement, student support, and vocational education. With an exploration of the backdrop of the "Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026" and a particular focus on higher education, the paper elucidates the policy components, guiding principles, actionable steps, and distinctive features, culminating in implications for ethnic minority higher education China.*

**Key words:** *Australia Education; International Minority Education; Higher Education; Education Policy; Comparative Education*

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## **Introduction**

The "Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026" (Marrung Plan) is the Victorian Government's policy on Aboriginal education that addresses the current state of education and the plight of Koorie people. The plan commits to strengthening the educational career development of the aboriginal Koorie people, to overcoming difficulties in social background and geography, to providing inclusive, respectful, and responsible education services, and to building a culturally safe environment to guarantee their learning opportunities, educational resources, and career development (Victoria State Government, 2016). Throughout this paper, the term 'Koorie' is used inclusively and refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria. At local level, "Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026" shares same position and associated content with other policies covering various aspects of economic, cultural, and social life, and can receive support from other areas like finance and social welfare. The plan endeavors to close the gap in educational achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous peers by focusing on several key areas, including cultural inclusivity; high expectations and achievement; quality teaching and learning; strong families and communities; early childhood education; and pathways to employment and further education.

As such, informed by Rose's "learning from experience" theory, which means getting theoretical inspiration and providing policy suggestions by discussing policy contents, policy consequences and differences between countries' educational situations (Rose, 1991) and the "Four stages" theory, which is simplified into three stages (common education background, policy content and possible suggestions) (Phillips & Ochs, 2003), the present paper answers the following research questions:

- a) What is "Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026" doing to local Koorie community?
- b) What optimization measures can China learn from it?

## **Literature Review**

### **Cross-national attraction: policy transfer**

Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000) believe that any policy transfer is a combination of transfer process and content, in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, systems, and ideas in a political

environment are used for the development of policies, administrative arrangements, systems and ideas in another political environment. Qualitative research protocol in this paper thus endorses interpretation, criticism and understanding to figure out the complex root causes and influencing factors behind the China-Australia policy transfer process. The social background and educational environment that the policy relies on become the priority in analysis (Han & Li, 2013).

In particular, this paper proposes suggestions for improving ethnic minority higher education in China, which accords with “internalization” (Chen & Zhao, 2019). Although China has launched evident initiatives for the past years. For example, China has established colleges and universities specifically tailored to the needs of ethnic minority students (Southwest Minzu University, Minzu University of China, etc.). Meanwhile, bilingual education programs have been implemented in regions with significant ethnic minority populations. These programs aim to ensure that ethnic minority students have access to education in both Mandarin Chinese and their local minority language and reserve minority languages and cultures while ensuring that students have the language skills needed to succeed in higher education and beyond. This paper believes policy transfer between Australia's Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016 – 2026 and China's ethnic higher education lies in the potential for cross-cultural learning and the adaptation of successful strategies to address challenges faced by indigenous and ethnic minority populations in both countries.

### **Weakness and solutions in RRR areas**

In Australia's regional, rural, and remote areas, schools grapple with distinct geographical challenges, with academic performance often declining as distance from urban centres increases. This trend is reflected in decreasing national benchmark scores and academic achievement levels as remoteness intensifies (Gonski et al., 2018; Halsey, 2019). Geographical disadvantages persist across all Australian states, highlighting the systemic weakness in the long-term performance of rural, regional, and remote (RRR) schools, which are often unfairly categorized (Roberts & Green, 2013). The poor academic outcomes stem from policy inadequacies and a failure to fully consider the unique circumstances of regions, rural areas, and remote communities (Herbert, 2020). The low enrolment rates of indigenous students and their persistent under-representation in higher education stem from a complex interplay of social, cultural, geographical, and economic factors (NCSHE, 2017).

With Indigenous languages dwindling to a mere 145, and a staggering 110 of them facing severe threats of extinction, the absence of robust indigenous language support services within higher education exacerbates the challenge (Neumann et al., 2012). These support services, once integrated into mainstream classroom instruction, have regrettably devolved into informal extracurricular activities due to the lack of community backing, rendering adaptation to this shifting context increasingly arduous. For instance, the extinction of the Wemba Wemba language, with efforts to revive the Nari Nari branch, leaves a void in cultural identity channels and communication assurances for Koorie individuals pursuing higher education (Welch, 2013).

Ultimately, the accumulation of educational disadvantages manifests in the indigenous higher education gap, with just over 30,000 indigenous individuals holding tertiary education diplomas, representing a disproportionately low percentage of the total indigenous population (Doolan, 2014). Indigenous students constitute only 1.4% of total university enrolment despite comprising 2.5% of the Australian population, underscoring a significant disparity (Behrendt et al., 2012). A mere 10% of Aboriginal students are eligible for higher education post-Grade 12, a rate 36% lower than that of non-Aboriginal students (Wilks & Wilson, 2015). Moreover, only 43% of Indigenous students who perform well on the NAPLAN exam are inclined to pursue higher education, a figure 29% lower than that of non-Indigenous students (Gore, 2017). Completion rates further underscore the gap, with 68.6% of non-Indigenous students completing higher education compared to only 40.8% of indigenous students, with a mere 0.5% of indigenous students attaining a PhD (Behrendt et al., 2012). Students from rural, regional, and remote (RRR) areas are less than half as likely as their metropolitan counterparts to attain university qualifications (NCSHE, 2017). Additionally, only 56.5% of school-aged Koorie individuals aged 25-34 have completed higher education, significantly lower than their non-Koorie counterparts (74.9%) (Australian Government, 2020). Addressing the inter-ethnic gap in higher education is thus both urgent and imperative.

### ***Policy principles: behavioural basis and ideological guidance***

The policy principles underpin the behavioural framework and provide ideological direction for the program, offering actionable guidance for its participants.

Firstly, the imperative lies in acknowledging and honouring the multifaceted diversity and intrinsic value of Koorie history, culture, and language within the realm of higher education. Secondly, it is incumbent upon stakeholders to fortify community partnerships, treating Koorie communities as equitable educational collaborators, and leveraging local wisdom and competencies to furnish pertinent information and expertise for effective implementation. Thirdly, there exists a mandate to maintain lofty aspirations for the professional advancement of Koorie learners, while concurrently facilitating their comprehensive engagement across the educational continuum. Fourthly, concerted efforts must be directed towards fostering collaborative synergies among educational stakeholders, accentuating the importance of cooperative endeavours, and fostering robust alliances among institutional entities such as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, Koorie communities, local governance bodies, and academic institutions. Fifthly,

there is a pressing need to delineate clear lines of accountability and establish a responsible oversight body tasked with propelling the program's progress forward.

This holistic approach not only aids Aboriginal students but also benefits their non-Aboriginal counterparts by nurturing ethnic confidence and fostering a robust social identity. Moreover, the discernible disparities in learning aptitudes and cognitive modalities stemming from ethnic variances become more pronounced within the higher education milieu. This exigency necessitates educators' adept integration of ethnic cultural elements into the fabric of higher education, encompassing both academic endeavours and communal interactions, through a spectrum of initiatives such as campus activities, lecture exchanges, and specialized certifications. Thus, educators must not only prioritize the honing of management acumen and professionalism within the leadership team but also underscore the imperative of cultivating cultural inclusivity competencies.

#### ***Behind the Marrung plan***

While in fact, interconnected and complementary macro-strategic frameworks deliver the basis and policy support for the implementation of the Marrung plan. For example, the “Victorian Aboriginal Economic Strategy 2013 – 2020” identifies economic growth, social participation, and development as central priorities for Aboriginal affairs. This policy creates jobs and thriving community economy for Koorie and takes education and training as one of three priority objectives to develop strong foundation for economic development (Victoria State Government, 2013). Council of Australian Governments (COAG) introduced the “National Indigenous Reform Agreement 2020”, which commits to closing the Indigenous education gap by setting education and employment targets, applying itself to the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework, and emphasizing educational support, special needs, and community self-determination (Victoria State Government, 2020).

National-level education policies provide professional guidance in the field of education for program development. Australian government introduced “The Indigenous Education Targeted Assistance Act 2000” to provide equitable and good education and cultural education services for Aboriginal people (Office of Parliamentary Counsel, 2014; Smith et al., 2017). The government proposes “National Indigenous Literacy and Numeracy Strategy” (NILNS), which adopts instructional approaches like multicultural instruction and bilingualism to improve literacy and numeracy skills and attendance of indigenous students (DETYA, 2000). In higher education, The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (TEWR) is committed to improving indigenous higher education outcomes, aiming to increase the teaching of indigenous culture and knowledge in higher education, to encourage indigenous participation and to increase financial support (Wooltorton, 2022). The policy “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010 – 2014” advocates for increasing higher education opportunities for aboriginal students, enhancing teacher and principal training, and achieving dual academic proficiency and social welfare for aboriginal students (MCEECDYA, 2010). Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration promises to provide equal opportunities and educational outcomes for all students facing educational disadvantage, including students from RRR areas (Department of Education, 2019). To alleviate the educational disadvantage in rural and remote areas, the Australian Ministry of Education announced the Independent Review of Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRE) to consider the key issues, challenges and obstacles affecting RRR students (Halsey, 2019). An expert advisory group is established to address the challenges and issues raised in IRRRE and develop recommendations to improve RRR students’ performance.

At community level, government funds Koorie Liaison Officers, who work with educational institutions such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE), to provide training courses and advice on further education for Koorie students. Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc has funded Wurreker Brokers to facilitate community partnerships with training providers and businesses to improve infrastructure and education services.

While some recommendations from these surveys offer benefits to rural, regional, and remote (RRR) communities, the overarching policy framework remains disjointed from the RRR context. The services mentioned lack fundamental support at the grassroots level, are disconnected from Koorie communities, fail to address specific needs, and overlook systemic issues and core necessities. These programs often passively address educational deficits and serve as reactive solutions without proactive government commitment to indigenous education. A notable consequence is the challenge of transferring indigenous education data and the absence of comprehensive student records. This lack of mutual recognition and fragmented record-keeping system impedes efforts to deliver cohesive and enhanced indigenous education services, ultimately undermining educational equity and outcomes (Wilks & Wilson, 2015). Moreover, at the tertiary level, there has been a decline in the number of Koorie students engaging in Vocational Education Training (VET) with government funding, indicating persistent barriers to education that pose new challenges for expanding and enhancing training systems and learning environments.

#### ***Policy goals: expected effects and policy value***

The Murrung Plan underscores the pivotal significance of three key educational frameworks: ethnic cultural support, community engagement, and leadership team dynamics. This initiative leverages existing general education platforms alongside an array of preferential and specialized policies to unequivocally pledge those educational services must align with the learning and developmental requisites of Koorie individuals. Integrated with complementary reform initiatives such as the Lookout Proposal and the Navigator Proposal, it fortifies financial support for schools, augments funding appraisal mechanisms, and fosters a harmonized, all-encompassing policy synergy.

The core of Koorie higher education lies in the pursuit of educational excellence concomitant with the promotion of educational equity. Anchored within the four priority areas delineated by the Framework for Improving Student Outcomes, this plan revolves around the pursuit of a conducive learning environment. In operationalizing this objective, the plan endeavours to empower Koorie families with educational autonomy and facilitates dialogue between the two parties to optimize learning outcomes and educational well-being.

Either, the plan is attuned to identifying and addressing special educational needs, crafting bespoke educational services and support programs, and valorizing Koorie culture as a salient social and cultural asset. It underscores the significance of ethnic history and cultural courses in elucidating the nuances of ethnic thought, thereby consolidating Koorie individuals' sense of cultural identity, agency, and decision-making prowess.

In tandem, it augments the Koorie education database, enhances data availability, and elucidates access criteria for services under the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework, alongside delineating principles governing financial support and educational resource allocation.

Additionally, the establishment of the Koorie Education Governance Committee, operating under the aegis of the state-level education committee, represents a pivotal institutional structure tasked with overseeing the implementation of the state's educational agenda. Co-chaired by the Department of Education and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association and comprising representatives from pertinent government agencies and organizations such as the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), this committee accords paramount importance to Koorie higher education as a core agenda item. It furnishes regular feedback on policy progress, integrates higher education outcomes for Koorie students into performance accountability frameworks and service agreements with funding agencies, and champions specific policies such as the "Lookout Proposal".

## **Situations and inspirations for China**

### ***China's ethnic minority education***

In China, ethnic minority higher education encounters parallel challenges and issues. Generally, the disadvantaged natural and educational environment translates into limited educational resources, inadequate infrastructure, subpar schools, and a scarcity of high-quality teachers. Various factors influence academic choices, including lengthy travel distances, cultural dissonance, national ideologies, socio-economic status, as well as the interplay between rural upbringing and college location (Clothey, et al., 2018).

Minority students contend with an unequal enrolment quota system during the administrative process, disparities in the regional distribution of educational resources, and regional discrimination. The participation rate of students from remote or rural areas and local communities in higher education still falls below the global average. Consequently, the overall representation of ethnic minority populations in China, particularly in rural areas, remains inadequate (Liu, 2012). Moreover, the unemployment rate among college-educated individuals, especially from minority backgrounds, is relatively high (Ma, 2009). Furthermore, the personal preferences of teachers contribute to an uneven distribution of experienced educators.

In the realm of major selection, a confluence of achievements and dilemmas emerges. Minority students find themselves both beneficiaries of preferential policies, such as the national language examination, preparatory courses, tuition fee reductions, and plus points policies, and beset by language and cultural obstacles that can diminish their prospects for admission (Clothey, et al., 2018). Notably, the presence of these barriers often impedes access to quality courses in Remote, Rural, and Resource-poor (RRR) areas, where language courses and cultural disparities act as formidable barriers (Clothey, et al., 2018; Wang, 2011).

Moreover, universities situated in RRR regions, particularly those within ethnic minority enclaves, face a dearth of policy support for collegiate infrastructure development. Notably, the criteria for allocating resources for college construction often prioritize political and strategic considerations over academic merit (Clothey, et al., 2018). The reliance solely on ethnic identity as a determinant for decision-making fails to elucidate the variances in educational access both between and within ethnic cohorts, rendering it an inadequate tool for fostering educational equity. Consequently, institutional reform is imperative to redress the glaring disparities stemming from geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors, thereby offering a more nuanced reflection of educational opportunities in China (Leibold & Yangbin, 2014).

Calls for reform frequently underscore the necessity for targeted policymaking aimed at impoverished students in rural locales, with a concerted emphasis on personal narratives. Meanwhile, emerging trends, such as the ascent of the urban middle class, shifts in gender dynamics, resurgent nationalistic sentiments, rural-to-urban migration patterns, disparities between Han Chinese and ethnic minority groups, and the enduring spectre of poverty in remote regions, further complicate the educational landscape. Furthermore, certain ethnic minority students, particularly those hailing from economically disadvantaged rural areas, find themselves disproportionately assimilated into urban environments and enrolled in prestigious universities owing to preferential policies. This dichotomy between ingrained customs and newly acquired institutional norms exerts a profound impact on the socio-cultural, individual, national, and ethnic identity formation of minority students, thus exacerbating educational inequities rooted in multifaceted social hierarchies and power dynamics within higher education (Qi, 2021).

### ***Emphasis on ethnic history and culture***

The Marrung plan serves as an inspiration for China to cultivate cultural inclusivity within ethnic higher education teams, fostering diversity in university leadership and promoting mutual respect and understanding across cultures. This vision is actualized through targeted initiatives such as providing training on ethnic history and culture for school administrators and faculty, recruiting minority faculty members, and improving faculty welfare to encourage their retention in ethnic regions (Liu et al., 2022).

In educational policy, there is a need to elevate the significance of ethnic history and culture within higher education, harnessing its potential to enhance the well-being of ethnic students, alleviate anxiety, and foster a sense of unity and identity. School-based education plays a crucial role in transmitting ethnic culture, offering systematic courses and lectures at the university level to facilitate learning and appreciation of one's cultural heritage among ethnic minorities, thereby promoting the preservation and innovation of their cultural traditions (Winter et al., 2006). Cultural exchange activities further promote ethnic unity and mutual recognition among students, fostering a sense of security and belonging.

To reinforce bilingual education in higher education, policies should integrate ethnic history and culture into curriculum planning and campus activities, while also developing flexible and diverse training programs tailored to the unique perspectives of ethnic students. These efforts aim to foster mutual respect and understanding among students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, creating a pluralistic and inclusive learning environment (Xue & Li, 2020).

#### ***Enhancing community engagement at the higher education level***

Higher education encompasses not only academic knowledge but also career planning and the development of social-emotional competence, necessitating universities to comprehend the backgrounds and unique educational needs of ethnic students through classroom instruction, counselling services, and communication initiatives. Establishing connections between universities and ethnic communities is vital to foster a collaborative environment for knowledge dissemination and talent cultivation (Dempsey, 2010). Drawing lessons from the Marrung plan, China strengthens its engagement with educational stakeholders such as ethnic minority families, agencies with ethnic-specific educational management, government departments focusing on ethnic affairs, and local businesses. These connections are facilitated through various channels, including online platforms, interviews, reports from family committees, internships in ethnic enterprises, and partnerships with community libraries, museums, and educational institutions to provide students with opportunities to immerse themselves in ethnic customs and culture (Zhu, 2010).

Regional university centres serve as effective platforms enabling local individuals to access higher education courses remotely while offering essential administrative, academic, and student support services (Behrendt et al., 2012; Van den Broeck et al., 2020). Thus, addressing the disparity in college readiness between rural and urban areas is essential for higher education reform, as policy changes at the university level alone cannot fully address the potential of disadvantaged students. And with the guidance of teachers, these centres assist students in decision-making processes and support their aspirations with cultural sensitivity and high expectations, particularly benefiting indigenous students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Comprehensive approaches are needed, including interventions from birth to adolescence, improvements in the educational environment, early interventions in learning opportunities, mitigating intergenerational poverty and inequality, nutritional support, and promoting cognitive and social skills development through structured interactions with adults (Yang, 2010).

#### **Conclusion And Discussion**

Overall, this paper explores the potential for education policy transfer between Australia's Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 and China's ethnic higher education context, which combines policy transfer theory and educational policy logic system to discuss the possibility of transferring the plan to higher education of ethnic minorities in four aspects (policy participants, policy environment, policy goals and policy features). On top of that, this paper analyses key actions in the plan, including construction of education environment, three key systems (cultural ecology, community engagement and professional leadership team) and practices. It enriches the research on aboriginal higher education policy and clarifies policy reform fields that are effective in ethnic minority higher education in China.

However, limitations of this research include the complexity of cultural and contextual differences between the two countries, as well as potential challenges in adapting policies to fit diverse educational landscapes. Future research directions may involve in-depth case studies, longitudinal analyses, and stakeholder engagement to further explore policy transfer mechanisms and their impact on educational equity and social justice for ethnic minority populations in both countries.

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