Economic and Social Opportunity:
The Changing Lives of Aboriginal Victorians

by
Rosemary Anne Lever
Dip. Soc. Studies
Bachelor of Social Work

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts

Deakin University

August 2015
I am the author of the thesis entitled

Economic and Social Opportunity: the Changing Lives of Aboriginal Victorians

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This thesis examines Aboriginal social and economic advantage in Victoria, an important and frequently ignored topic. Advantage is defined in this study as those earning median weekly incomes or above. On this basis, 35% of Aboriginal Victorians have been identified as experiencing advantage. A demographic profile of this population group was developed based on a range of socio economic metrics. A group of Aboriginal leaders were then invited, based on the statistical analysis, and their own lived experiences, to identify the enablers of Indigenous advancement and achievement. This study demonstrates that Aboriginal advantage in Victoria has resulted from both Aboriginal agency and enabling structures and systems; the two are inextricably linked. The challenge now is to accelerate opportunity for the 65% of Aboriginal Victorians whose incomes fall below the median, and to facilitate continuing progress for future generations.

Terminology

The terms Aboriginal, Indigenous, Koori, Koorie, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are used throughout this document to describe the traditional inhabitants of Victoria and Australia.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I pay my respects to the original custodians of the land on which I researched and wrote this thesis, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, and to their Elders, past and present. I respectfully acknowledge my friend and colleague, the late Dr Alf Bamblett, a tireless activist, Elder, leader and visionary, who played a significant role in shaping my life choices and values. I am so sad that due to ill health, Alf was not one of those interviewed for this research, and that he did not live to see me complete what had begun with his blessings.

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This thesis is dedicated to the late Alf Bamblett, a man of immense courage and inspirational vision.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Objective

This research examines Victorian Aboriginal peoples’ present circumstances to determine whether Professor Marcia Langton’s claims of Indigenous social and economic advancement apply in this State.

The Context - Change and Continuity

In 1968, Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner presented the Boyer Lectures, a series of public radio broadcasts in which prominent Australians present their work and thinking on major social, scientific or cultural issues. Forty-four years later, Professor Marcia Langton, Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, presented the 2012 Lectures. Both Stanner’s and Langton’s lectures were grounded in a structural analysis of relationships between Aboriginal and European Australians. Langton’s perspective was contemporary, Stanner’s largely historical. Langton is of Aboriginal Australian heritage, and Stanner, of European Australian heritage.

In his five-part lecture series, Stanner chose to look ‘back a long way to the first five years of Australian history’, a time when he contended, ‘there came into existence between the two races a basic structure of relations which ever since has formed a part of the continuing anatomy of Australian life’ (Stanner 1991, p. 7). He considered that Governor Phillip’s attitudes and experiences were the key
determinant in shaping relations between European settlers and Aborigines in those first years, describing the new Governor as starting out with a ‘hopeful theory of human affairs’ (1991, p. 7) that eventually turned to frustration, anger, and even worse, a kind of blind indifference. Stanner returned to this notion in his second lecture, referring to what he called the ‘great Australian silence’, and a ‘cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale’ (1991, p. 25). He attributed lack of progress on crucially important Indigenous issues to this pervasive web of indifference.

In the 2012 Boyer Lecture series, Professor Langton explored a new set of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Northern Territorians that, in her view, offered the promise of increased individual and collective agency as well as social and economic advancement for the Indigenous population. Langton was seeking to ‘inject new ideas and ways of thinking...into the national conversation about Aboriginal people’ (Langton 2013, p. 12). For her, the Boyer Lectures provided a platform from which to highlight the emergence of a newly empowered middle class of Aboriginal Australians, something that to Stanner, in 1968, would have seemed almost inconceivable. She illustrated her proposition by examining the rising incomes, shifts in political leverage, status and power there were occurring for a section of the Northern Territory’s Indigenous population, suggesting that these changes were largely due to benefits that have accrued from Native Title and a mining boom (Langton 2013). She drew attention as well to the constructive partnerships that were developing between mining industry leaders and Indigenous communities, claiming that these could well prove to be exemplars for the future, with business enterprise, not welfare
dependency, the key. She argued that mining was providing the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population with an opportunity to move into a new middle class of wealth and opportunity. The particular factors that Langton identified as enablers of social and economic opportunity for Indigenous Territorians are largely different from those that exist in Victoria. The notion of an emerging and increasingly mobile Aboriginal ‘middle class’ is however, consistent with what the data are showing in Victoria (ABS 2006c; Lahn 2013; Bamblett & Lever 2012).

Langton’s lectures sparked fierce debate and rebuttals from some conservation groups and individuals who challenged her proposals in terms of the criticisms she levelled either at them personally, or their remit (Talbot & Sweeney 2012). There were others too, who questioned the benefits to be derived from mining (Frankel 2013).

Langton tends to be a controversial figure, and would no doubt have predicted some negative responses to the provocative criticisms in her Boyer Lecture series of those she referred to as environmentalists, wilderness campaigners and lefties. She even took a swipe at Aboriginal people from southern states, suggesting that they were overly focused on reconciliation and human rights at the expense of more practical issues such as business development. Noticeably absent in much of the subsequent debate and discussion that was sparked in sections of the media and academia, however, has been any suggestion that her comments about an emerging middle class of Aboriginal Australians were unfounded. Perhaps this is
due to the fact that she drew on publically available source material to establish this claim. It might also be due to her consideration of relationships between Aboriginal Territorians and mining companies rather than any detailed discussions of Indigenous status or class.

Victoria - the Vision for the Future Project

In the first decade and in the start of the second decade of the twenty first century, a beginning discussion of Indigenous advancement in Australia was occurring amongst a handful of Aboriginal Australian activists and academics (Holt 2011; Langton 2013; Pearson 2007 (b)). There was little or no reporting of this phenomenon in southern states such as Victoria however. In 2010, I was commissioned by a consortium of Victorian based Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to work on a project that involved developing a community-owned vision of the future – one that offered a positive and optimistic way forward and in which Aboriginal Victorians would be regarded as full and active participants. The intention was to develop a more informed understanding of Victorian Aboriginal peoples’ contemporary socio-economic circumstances, and from there to work with the Victorian Aboriginal community to create an aspirational vision for the future. The project commenced in 2010, and was titled, *A vision for the future: participants, not recipients*. A three part document was produced that was subsequently condensed into a shorter version (Bamblett & Lever 2012).
This thesis aims to further explore one of the most significant findings from the statistical analysis that was produced for that study: that almost 25% of Aboriginal Victorians were earning median incomes and above. The Bamblett and Lever report made the point, as Langton would later note in her Boyer Lectures, that these data provided a counter to public misconceptions of widespread Aboriginal disadvantage and dysfunction. The report also noted that these gains had occurred in a state where no wealth had flowed from mining royalties, where the handful of Indigenous land transfers that had been effected were made to collectives at Lake Tyers and Framlingham rather than individuals, and where no compensatory measures such as Indigenous Land Development Trusts had been established to support Indigenous business development and enterprise. What was clear was that against a backdrop of large scale population displacement, marginalisation and exclusion, significant social and economic gains had been achieved by Aboriginal Victorians. What were less clear, arguably because of time and resources, were the demographics, life experiences and socio-economic profile of this group. This was suggested as an important topic for further research and investigation.

**Research Objectives**

Professor Langton’s reference in the 2012 Boyer Lectures to the ‘emergence of a middle class of Aboriginal Australians’ (Langton 2013, p. 31) resonated with the findings from the 2012 Victorian study (Bamblett & Lever, 2012), sparking interest in further exploring the basis of Indigenous socio-economic advancement
and change, and testing the applicability of Langton’s proposition in a different context.

Chapter two includes an examination of the literature, looking back in history for about 150 years to identify the key factors that shaped the lives of Victorian Aboriginal people over that period. This particular analysis will draw on a distillation of concepts from scholars such as Stanner, Langton, Giddens and Attwood. It will inform a consideration of the particular challenges that have been experienced by Aboriginal Victorians in their struggle for land rights, contrasting their lack of success with Native Title claims with those in other states and territories. The impact of racism and discrimination will also be considered in the context of the lived experience of Aboriginal Victorians and their ancestors. An examination of those economic and social policy initiatives that have provided benefit and leverage to members of the Victorian Aboriginal community will also be undertaken.

Aboriginal voices in chapter three provide depth to the narrative, with autobiographical source material bringing an interactive quality to the context. This material has been particularly useful in elaborating the significant policy and legislative developments that occurred from the 1970s at both national and state level. A detailed examination of the establishment in Victoria of an extensive network of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) is included. Mollie Dyer, a pioneering Aboriginal social activist’s autobiography
has been quoted extensively because of its descriptions of the origins and early beginnings, history and legacy of the Victorian ACCOs.

Against this backdrop, an analysis of Victorian Aboriginal peoples’ present circumstances will be generated from statistical data sources that include the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). These findings are interrogated by a purposeful sample of Aboriginal Victorians experienced in Indigenous knowledge systems, social policy and research. A second group, whose life circumstances reflect the profile of social and economic advantage established in this research, are invited to discuss their views about an emerging middle class of Aboriginal Australians and its wider implications, with particular focus on exploring and identifying the enablers that have contributed to Indigenous economic and social progress in Victoria.

**The Findings**

This thesis provides an overview of Indigenous socio-economic advancement in Victoria. It proposes a definition and measure of Indigenous advantage that is followed by a description of the demographic profile of this population group; their socio-economic circumstances, occupations, education levels, gender, and geographic location. Consideration is given to the factors that have facilitated and enabled Indigenous opportunity and advancement in this State in interviews with a purposeful sample of Aboriginal participants.
CHAPTER TWO: POLICY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Pendulum of Public Opinion

The years that followed the arrival of Europeans in 1835 on the shores of what is now known as Port Phillip Bay were described to me in a conversation with the late Alf Bamblett, when he was Chief Executive of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd. (VACSAL) as ‘merely the blink of an eye in the history of our [Aboriginal Australians’] existence on this planet’. This ‘blink of an eye’ however, had a dramatic impact on the longest enduring culture in the world. Minority cultures are particularly vulnerable to the actions of the dominant culture, and dramatic swings in public perceptions and political agendas have had very direct impacts on the lives of Victorian Aboriginal people (Attwood 1989; Barwick 1963; Broome 2005; Langton 2013; Pepper 1980). It would be erroneous however, to assume that Aborigines were simply passive victims; their interactions with the European settler population are a central part of their history and of Victoria’s as well (Attwood 1989).

This chapter examines the impacts of early European settlement on the lives of Victorian Aboriginal people. It begins with European settlement and then tracks some of the most significant legislative changes, policies and public perceptions that have impacted on Indigenous peoples’ lives since. The extensive network of reserves and mission stations that were set up in Victoria, well before other parts of Australia, had a very direct impact on the lives of Aboriginal Victorians and receives detailed consideration. Also explored in this chapter is the emerging influence of the Commonwealth government and the impact this had on
Aboriginal affairs in Australia. Factors such as the importance to the Aboriginal population of pride and connections to culture, and some of the negative impacts of loss of traditional heritages such as language are also explored. The 1970s heralded a new era, and this period, and the decades that followed, are given particular consideration here because they involved what has been described as ‘an Aboriginal renaissance’ (Broome, 2005, p. 340) and provide an important context for this study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the contemporary challenges to Indigenous advancement, giving particular emphasis to the insidious and often unacknowledged impacts or racism and exclusion.

**Early Settlement – the first twenty years**

Aboriginal Australians’ experience is unique within this country because, whilst others have experienced discrimination and upheaval, Aboriginal history is a story of how the original inhabitants not only lost access to traditional lands, but through successive government policies to absorb, assimilate, and separate, many lost a sense of connectivity, purpose and belonging.

There is no doubt that the Indigenous population was at a disadvantage from the moment the first Europeans arrived, and, there is little doubt either that many settlers arrived with initially good, if perhaps naive, intentions (Attwood 1989; Broome 2005). The prevailing cultural views of the time were those of the British; Australia was a British frontier. Stanner’s attribution of Governor Phillip’s ‘hopeful theory of human affairs’ (Stanner 1991, p. 7) towards the
Aboriginal peoples he met on arrival was largely true as well for John Batman. Both men were motivated by a desire to make a success of settling the new colony, although Batman was primarily focused on a land deal, and that included a desire to treat the Indigenous population humanely (Broome 2005). In less than five years though, according to Stanner, Governor Phillip’s good intentions would turn to frustration and anger as the Aborigines refused to assimilate as he had hoped, resisting sometimes with violence, that eventually saw him, fearing for his life in one instance, losing patience, and, in Stanner’s view ‘pass[ing] beyond consideration of native policy’ (1991, p. 10).

Batman’s experiences were similar to Phillip’s; within a very short space of time he too demonstrated a growing indifference towards the Aborigines. The two treaties exchanged between the European settlers and local tribes, in which beads, blankets and flour were traded for tracts of land, have become legendary (Broome 2005, pp. 11-13). The trinkets that were exchanged, and the ceremonial aspects of the event, have often received more attention than the exchange of land, perhaps because the general public regarded the treaties as tokenism, since they gave little credence to the possibility of nomadic Aborigines actually owning land. Mutual fear, mistrust and then sporadic violence between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations soon emerged in the district that was to later be known as Port Phillip. These hostilities, Broome asserted, were based on differently held perceptions about land, the dramatic spread of the pastoral economy and an ideology dominant amongst Europeans that gave precedence to the right to property through ‘fruitful.... control of the earth and all its resources’ (Broome 2005, p. 73). This, Broome suggested, became the widely held justification for
further displacement of the apparently indigent Aboriginal population; he notes that from 1854 onwards, land was progressively alienated by freehold sale, putting it legally beyond Aboriginal control’ (Broome 2005, p. 97). The speed of pastoral settlement in the Port Phillip District, Broome asserted, was ‘one of the fastest land occupations in the history of the empires’ (Broome 2005, p. 54). The rapid spread of sheep and cattle runs initially created employment opportunities for Aboriginal males but this proved to be short-lived.

The extensive loss of the lands, that had provided the basis of Aboriginal social and economic life for millennia, would prove disastrous. The Port Phillip settlement was proclaimed in 1836, a little less than twenty years before the start of a Gold Rush in 1851 that was to change the face of central regional Victoria and boost the fledgling colony’s economy. Employment opportunities opened up for Aboriginal males, but once again proved to be short lived; with the influx of a migrant workforce, employment opportunities dried up as they had when equal wages were introduced in the pastoral industry.

**Population Decline**

The experience of Aboriginal Victorians is both similar to, and different from Indigenous populations in other parts of Australia. Victoria was settled well before the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia, and there was a rapid spread of pastoralism across tracts of land that had previously sustained Aboriginal life. The extensive system of mission stations and reserves that were
set up in Victoria from the 1860s also caused wide spread population displacement and dispersal.

When the Europeans arrived, the estimates of Victorian Aboriginal population numbers ranged between 5,000 and 10,000, with ‘thirty different cultural language groups and hundreds of clans, each with their own elders, ideas and strategies’ (Broome 2005, p. 54). Broome, however goes on to describe an ....almost literal decimation of Aboriginal people occur[ing] as two different peoples and their cultures clashed, and the more powerful invader, bearing unfamiliar diseases, dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their land.(Broome 2005, p. 92).

Between 1833 and 1853, it is estimated that Aboriginal numbers plummeted, with the population declining by eighty per cent (Broome 2005, p.91). From 1851 until 1861, the non-Aboriginal population numbers increased ninefold whilst Aboriginal population numbers fell a further 10% (Broome 2005, p. 97). Broome reports that by 1901 the Victorian census recorded just 652 Aboriginal peoples. By 1927, there were only 55 ‘full bloods’ and 459 people of ‘mixed descent’ recorded in Victoria (Broome 2005, p. 194).

**Reserves**

The decline in Aboriginal population numbers and general wellbeing was obvious to the early settlers and their British authorities. A government mission was set up in Melbourne, for example, as early as 1837. This was followed by a scattering of church-run mission stations in rural areas. The ostensible aim was to
help Aboriginal people make the transition to modern life and to protect them from the ‘worst efforts of colonisation’ (Broome 2005, p. 36). By the 1850s however, there was a growing recognition that earlier policies to 'civilise' Aborigines had failed. Something had to be done. In 1860, in response to the findings of a Select Committee that had been established two years before, the government set up ‘a reserve and rationing system under the control of a Central Board’ (Broome 2005, p. 125). By 1863, seven reserves, also called stations and missions, and 23 camping places and rations systems were in place.

In 1869, in response to pressure from the Central Board for greater control and management of the Aboriginal population, the Victorian *Aboriginal Protection Act 1869* was introduced with the objective of segregating Aborigines on reserves. New South Wales was to follow Victoria’s example some thirty years later, but the large scale population dispersions that occurred in Victoria would never again be repeated in other Australian states and territories.

**New Legislation**

The 1869 Act was the first of two that would profoundly affect the lives of the Victorian Aboriginal community. Its explicit purpose was to protect and care for an increasingly vulnerable and dwindling Indigenous population. Historical data suggest that there was no significant opposition from Aboriginal people to their establishment, especially since they were usually set up close to, or in, areas in
which ‘Aboriginal people [had] lobbied for reserve lands on sites meaningful to them’ (Broome 2005, p. 125).

**Supporters and Detractors**

Some families resisted the move to reserves, disappearing into the wider community where, in some cases, they would choose to forge a new identity. Attwood tells of how some like Billy McLeod, a Brabiralung man who was born in Gippsland in the early 1830s, resisted the pressure to move onto reserves, foreseeing challenges to ‘both their links with tribal land, kin and religion as well as their affiliation[s]’ (Attwood 1989, p. 70) to non-Aboriginal employees and families with whom they had forged strong loyalties and connections. There were those in the wider community who opposed the reserves, suggesting they did little to encourage independence or help residents make provision for the future. Later critics would refer to them as ‘self perpetuating ghettos’ (Attwood 1989, p. 86).

There were others however, who suggested that segregating most of the Aboriginal population on reserves and missions during the 1850s and 1860s may well have saved them from extinction (Rowley 1972 p. 183). Whilst each reserve or station had its own unique history, the experiences of the residents depended largely on their relationships with the managers and staff, the differential impacts of government policies, as well as geographic location, family ties and the composition of the resident population.
Enterprise and Resilience

There are examples during this period of breathtaking enterprise and personal resilience – the hop farms at Coranderrk and Ramanyuk are examples – as were the flourishing vegetable crops at Lake Tyers. These achievements were often stymied by crushing paternalism; political infighting and politicking (Barwick 1998). Phillip Pepper, a respected member of the Gippsland Aboriginal community whose father’s people belonged to the Wotjoballuk nation, and his mother’s to the Kurnai nation of Gippsland, described in his autobiography, the flourishing vegetable and bean crops that enterprising Lake Tyers residents ‘wanted to sell outside but had problems with the local farmers’. Pepper noted that there were plans ‘to catch and sell fish too and that was stopped’ (Pepper 1980, p. 83). Ideally, the government hoped that the reserves would become self-sufficient communities. Enterprising residents were constantly coming up with plans to create external markets for their produce. These were stamped on; the local farmers saw reserves as government subsidised enterprises and a threat to their livelihoods.

Pepper, when discussing the decision by authorities to prevent Lake Tyers residents’ plans to create new fishing and farming markets, commented that restricting the sale of crops and stopping fishing ‘…was a pity, because working like that showed them they could make something out of themselves, have a future for their families, something to aim for. Anyway that was that: they got stopped’ (Pepper 1980, p. 83). For many, these crushing examples of paternalism might well have been described in more emotive or inflammatory language.
Pepper’s description of the behaviour of the reserve managers and the collusion with local farmers as being, ‘a pity’, is typical of the measured, mild mannered and highly respected community leader he was acknowledged to be.

Pepper’s autobiography provides valuable insights into Aboriginal family life in East Gippsland from the mid 1800’s to 1980. He recalled the positive and the negative relationships that were developed with members of the local non-Aboriginal community, as well as some of the landmark changes that took place including world wars, the Depression and the State government’s decision to set up and then later close Aboriginal reserves.

**Corranderrk – ‘a little strip of land’**

Diane Barwick’s account of the struggles of a group of Victorian Aboriginal people to secure and then retain a portion of land near Healesville (Barwick 1998) provides a powerful illustration of the politics and vested interests involved in the fight to gain and then keep what was described by one resident as just ‘a little strip of land’ about twenty kilometres from Melbourne. The Aboriginal residents of Coranderrk demonstrated sophisticated lobbying tactics and political nous: they gained direct access to the Premier of the day, and had wealthy landowner Ann Bonn constantly championing their cause. The overwhelming impression of the history of this short chapter of just twelve years is one of futility and despair in the face of courage, patience and initial promise. It is impossible to learn of the strategies that were employed by the authorities to control and punish the
residents—holding back rations, reducing wages, bringing in European pickers on higher wages and banning former residents from returning to reserves—without reflecting on the impact this must have had on morale and wellbeing.

Coranderrk was, for a time, Victoria’s model reserve. According to Barwick, (1998) the residents were disciplined, regular workers; there were very few illegitimate births and little drinking. Rather than becoming the model of business enterprise, ingenuity and self sufficiency it might have been, Coranderrk would eventually fold, leaving a dwindling population of residents to be relocated elsewhere, and just the cemetery as a poignant reminder of those who had lived there. This was a monumental failure on the part of a government driven by short term financial imperatives, and an inability to withstand pressure from self interested land owners and public administrators.

Race and Class-based Categorisation

Times would become even tougher for Aboriginal Victorians from 1886, when the Victorian *Aboriginal Protection Act* 1886, was introduced. The Act was designed to merge those referred to at the time as half-castes into the general community, reducing their dependence on the State (Barwick 1963; Broome 2005). Now the language was biological, the inference being that genetic inheritance was the key determinant in influencing behaviour. Darwin’s theory of natural selection, coupled with growing frustration over the failure to solve ‘the Aboriginal problem’, provided a convenient rationale for a dramatic shift from segregation to absorption policies. Whilst varying views are held (Attwood 1989; Broome 2005)
regarding the intentions of the 1886 Act, and its implementation, there is consensus about the misery and dislocation that resulted (Broome 2005; Dyer 2003; Pepper 1980).

Aboriginal families were forced off reserves, in many cases totally unprepared for what was ahead. Many set up shanty homes not far from the reserves, others moved to cheap housing on the fringes of rural towns and the city. Many of those who were moved off the reserves kept contact with those who remained, and at least in the early years, there was movement back to them when people got sick or work prospects dried up (Atwood 1989; Broome 2005; Dyer 2003; Pepper 1980).

There are suggestions (Attwood 1989, p. 101) that the 1886 Act was administered inconsistently across the State, and so had varied impacts on Aboriginal populations. Attwood claimed too that the Act crystallised a set of race-based assumptions (Attwood 1989, p. 100) that are still evident today in public attitudes and discourse (Langton 2013; Paradies 2007). One of the more ominous elements of the new legislation was a narrowing of the definition of Aboriginality from the 1869 Act that had included ‘every Aboriginal native of Australia and every Aboriginal half caste or child from half caste, such child or half caste habitually associating and living with Aborigines’ (Barwick 1963 p. 18). The definition contained in the Victorian Aborigines Protection Act of 1886 included only ‘full bloods, half castes born before 1852, half caste women married before 1887 to Aborigines, and children of the above categories who were too young to earn their own living’ (Barwick 1963 p. 20), demonstrating the far reaching influence and
control government has, if it so chooses, to determine who is and who is not seen to be a legitimate or genuine member of a population group (Barwick 1963; McCorquodale 1986; Paradies 2007).

By 1886, the public mood had shifted dramatically from one of benign and hopeful paternalism to one that would become increasingly focused on the forcible management and control of Aboriginal Victorians. Academic Bain Attwood hypothesised that this shift may have been influenced by the reduction in face to face interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that resulted from the segregation of the Aboriginal population on reserves. According to Attwood, they were dehumanised, objectified and increasingly vulnerable to the more draconian policies being developed by an increasingly distant officialdom (Attwood 1989).

**Dismantling the Reserves**

The narrowing definition of those Aboriginal peoples who were officially eligible to remain living on reserves from 1889 saw a steady decline in publically recorded population numbers. Those who remained were subjected to increasingly stringent oversight and control (Broome 2005). They had to seek leave and travel permits. Visitors to the reserves were monitored and controlled, as were food rations. From that time onwards much of the public discussion about the future of reserves was framed in terms of their financial costs to the
wider community. There was an assumption that the numbers on reserves who were fully dependent on the state would soon reduce.

In 1916, the Central Board recommended that the majority of reserves should be closed. It was decided that Lake Tyers would remain, with the small numbers of residents who were living on other reserves to be relocated there. Transfers to Lake Tyers began in 1922 (Barwick 1963; Broome 2005; Pepper 1980). Some elderly folk remained at Coranderrk, Framlingham and Lake Condah to live out their days. The numbers of ‘full bloods’ continued to decline, whilst the numbers of those of ‘mixed descent’ were increasing (Broome 2005, p. 216).

Decline into Poverty

One of the most pervasive consequences of colonisation has been the descent into poverty of successive generations of Aboriginal Victorians. Estimates of the extent of poverty in Australia vary, but a report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2005 estimated that 11.2 per cent of Australian children were living in relative poverty (OECD, 2005). Aboriginal Australian children were singled out as one of the most vulnerable groups. A more recent OECD report ranked Australia as the seventh most unequal country in the OECD. That particular report indicated that the gap between rich and poor has been growing in Australia over the last few decades (OECD 2011).
Closer to home, a report produced by the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC 2006) linked the disadvantage experienced by Victorian Aboriginal people to the history of intervention and disruption of family networks by the state, suggesting that:

Dispossession from lands, and the fragmentation of Indigenous family networks combined with racism and lack of cultural sensitivity in policy and service delivery…contribute to high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. (VIYAC 2006, p. 38).

**Removal of Aboriginal Children**

The separation of thousands of Victorian Aboriginal children from their families has been one of the most damaging consequences of colonisation. In Victoria, the impact of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children, coupled with the uprooting of many families onto reserves resulted in a cultural dispossession that forever altered the shape of Aboriginal communities. Reports, such as the *Bringing them home report*, that was released following an enquiry by the Human Rights Commission into the impact of the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, have highlighted the damage to self esteem and cultural identity that resulted as a consequence of the separation of Aboriginal children from their family, culture and community (HREOC 1997). Many Aboriginal people remain mistrustful of mainstream child and family welfare services due to the role child welfare authorities played in the removal of children. In Aboriginal activist, Mollie Dyer’s words, ‘Kooris were suspicious of welfare for so many years and had been kept in bondage by its policies’ (Dyer 2003, p. 154).
Early Activism – calls for reform

Victoria was the centre of early Aboriginal activism in Australia. In the late 1930s Shadrak James, an Indian school teacher who had married into the Cummeragunja community and taught there for 40 years, together with Doug Nicholls, petitioned the Aborigines Progressive Association of Victoria, of which Prime Minister Chifley was honorary secretary, to agree to Aboriginal representation in the Federal Parliament (Broome 2005, p. 308). Shadrak James formed the Victorian Aboriginal Progressive Association in 1946 to improve Aboriginal living standards and opportunities. At the same time, groups were also being formed by non-Aboriginal supporters who were concerned about seemingly intractable levels of Aboriginal poverty and disadvantage.

In Victoria, calls for reforms in Aboriginal affairs became increasingly fervent between 1943 and 1955. Victoria was experiencing a period of political instability, with ten governments between 1943 and 1955. In 1955 however, the newly elected Bolte Victorian state government announced a review of Aboriginal Affairs and new legislation was subsequently introduced, creating an Aboriginal Welfare Board with ten members, two of whom were Aboriginal.

The legislation reflected a shift away from the previous notions of management and control that had been such an integral part of previous Acts, with the government boasting that Aborigines had been given the right to own property and to enjoy freedom of movement. The Act was considered progressive for its time but the use of words such as ‘assimilation’ and ‘absorption’ underscored an
intention for Aboriginal people to blend into the wider community without acknowledging the importance of their cultural identity and heritage.

In 1957, the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) was formed, with the aim of building a broader base for political activity than had previously existed. The first executive committee members were influential non-Aboriginal community leaders. Aboriginal Victorian Doug Nicholls, who was subsequently to become a household name as a football hero, political activist and then Governor of South Australia, was appointed as the first field officer. The League emerged as a champion of the welfare needs of Indigenous Australians, moving in the late 1960’s to full Aboriginal control. It is the oldest Aboriginal organisation in Australia and has bred a generation of leaders who have played a key role in shaping the Indigenous agenda. The AAL was the forerunner of a raft of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that began to span out across Victoria from the 1970s onwards.

In 1968, the Aborigines Welfare Board was replaced by a new government department, the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. Two years later, the Victorian government provided statutory recognition of Aboriginal communal ownership of land in the Victorian Aboriginal Lands Act 1970. In a development that was ground breaking for Australia, the Act provided a shareholding structure for managing the granting of freehold title at Framlingham in south western Victoria and Lake Tyers in south eastern Victoria. It also granted ownership of land directly to several community based organisations.
The Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs was subsequently replaced by an Office of Aboriginal Affairs that was to be responsible for policy development and cross government co-coordination rather than direct service delivery. Individual government departments were to be accountable for delivering general and specific services to Aboriginal populations. At the time of writing, a review of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs has been commissioned by the newly elected Andrews’ government, with a media release announcing a review to ‘ensure Aboriginal Victorians get a real chance and a real say’, and stating an intention to ‘work with Aboriginal Victorians to improve their standard of living, maintain their culture and close the gap’ (Andrews 2015).

**A National Narrative**

Although Aboriginal Australians had been able to vote in State elections from 1929, they were excluded from the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth government. In 1944, legislation was enacted to extend eligibility for Commonwealth unemployment and sickness benefits to them. Previously they had only been eligible for State relief that before 1953 was denied to those living permanently on stations and reserves. Widows, age and invalid pensions had been extended to persons living away from reserves in the 1930s (Barwick 1963, p. 183).
The 1967 Referendum

The 1950s had seen a resurgence of humanitarian concerns in Australian society and this resulted in several decades of intensive campaigning for Indigenous rights that led to the 1967 Referendum. This was a landmark in Australian history, with a huge groundswell of public support for Indigenous Australians to be recognised more appropriately in the constitution, and by implication, included from then in the national census. From that time on, the Federal government became involved in issues that were considered to be of national, rather than local importance, and this created further momentum, especially in the provision of support for Indigenous participation in education, land rights and redressing disadvantage and inequality.

Land Rights

In 1982 Eddie Mabo and four other Merriam people challenged the annexation by Queensland in 1879 of the Murray Islands, claiming that traditional communal native title still existed. In 1992 the High Court upheld the communal native title of the Murray Islanders and discarded the doctrine of terra nullius. This led to the introduction by the Commonwealth government of the Native Title Act 1993. Eddie Mabo became a national hero.

The Native Title Act gave hope to Aboriginal communities across the nation that they would be able to regain land that had been lost following European settlement. In order to prove Native Title however, Indigenous communities needed to show an uninterrupted connection to the land and that traditional laws
and customs were observed on the land itself (Atkinson 2006). This was particularly difficult to prove in Victoria because of the extensive dislocation and dispossession that had occurred as the result of pastoralism and the extensive system of reserves and stations that had been set up, some as early as the 1830’s. As a consequence, as Dr Wayne Atkinson noted in *Balancing the scales of indigenous land justice in Victoria* (Atkinson 2006), Victorian Aboriginal peoples have achieved by far the lowest success with Native Title claims of any other Australian state or territory.

**The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission: A brave experiment**

The 1989 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC) Act was yet another landmark piece of legislation that aimed to strengthen opportunities for Indigenous self-determination and self-governance. A new national structure was to be set up to enable Indigenous communities, through their elected representatives, to make decisions about programs and policies for social, economic and cultural advancement at both national and regional level. The intentions behind this reform were enlightened for their time, but the outcomes were hampered by the ATSIC’s comparative lack of political clout and experience in dealing with national, state and local governments. Governance structures were complex and challenged by both internal and external expectations and obligations. ATSIC, the brave experiment, was dismantled fifteen years after it was first established.
Legal Reforms

In 1987, just two years prior to the establishment of ATSIC, the Commonwealth government set up a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in response to public concern about the numbers of Aboriginal people who were dying in custody. The Commission’s interim report was presented in 1988 revealing a picture of terrible suffering, as well as highlighting the discrimination and racism that underpinned many of the interactions between Indigenous Australians and the criminal justice system. The Commission’s final report contained 339 recommendations that led to a number of reforms being introduced nation-wide, including Aboriginal Justice Agreements that were put in place in Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland (RCIADIC 1998). New ways for governments to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities were established resulting in reductions in the number of deaths in custody, as well as some reshaping of the Australian justice system.

A Deepening Despair

Despite the progress that was being made on Native Title and a number of legal reforms, a plethora of reports were released between 1997 and 2007 (HREOC 1997; NT Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007) that continued to highlight the plight of sections of the Aboriginal Australian population. The international spotlight was also focused on Australia’s failures in Indigenous policy, with one OECD report comparing the socio-economic situation of Aboriginal Australians unfavourably with that of most other Indigenous populations (OECD 2005).
The *Bringing them home report* (HREOC 1997) had drawn attention to the trauma and loss experienced through the forced removal of generations of children from their families. It was, however, the report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse *Little children are sacred* (2007) that paradoxically resulted in federal intervention. Using references in the report to the sexual abuse of children in some remote communities as justification, the Commonwealth government took action. They set up an intervention team, deployed police into remote communities, and quarantined welfare payments from parents who were deemed to be neglectful. Reactions to these decisions were, and continue to be, divided between those who are strong supporters, and those who are equally strong opponents.

On coming to government, Prime Minister Rudd used the symbolism of the first day of the new Parliament in 2008 to make a formal apology to the Stolen Generations of Australia. The Apology is regarded as a landmark point along the path to reconciliation, with newspaper headlines commending the government on ‘*Rudd show[ing] that leadership can take Australians to new and better places*’ (Flanagan 2008). There were critics and sceptics however, with Indigenous leader Noel Pearson suggesting that without compensation, ‘black fellas will get the words, the white fellas will keep the money’ (Pearson 2008, p. 12). The Rudd government proclaimed that improved housing and 'Closing the Gap' in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in one generation were key priorities.
The report card on this and subsequent progress with these commitments has been mixed, with complaints about bureaucratic bungles, funding delays and difficulties with mobilising personnel and resources expressed by those who had firsthand experience, such as Bob Beadman, the Northern Territory government’s first Coordinator General for Remote Services in an interview with the Australian newspaper (Rothwell, N 2011, ‘Candid critic of indigenous welfare trap’, *The Australian*, 18 June).

**Tackling Disadvantage**

In 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to tackling Indigenous disadvantage, undertaking to monitor progress on a set of indicators that measure the wellbeing of Australia’s Indigenous peoples. Progress is reported, usually bi-annually, by the Productivity Commission’s Steering Committee for Reporting Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) in a report titled *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: key indicators*. In 2006, the Victorian government reflected its commitment to sustainable long-term improvements in Aboriginal people’s wellbeing, introducing what is referred to as the *Victorian Indigenous Affairs framework* (VIAF) that broadly mirrors the key indicators established in the Commonwealth government’s *Overcoming disadvantage* report.

There can be no argument about the importance of improving the circumstances of Aboriginal Australians, and no contention about the targets that have been set by governments, but the concerns expressed by Chairman of the Steering
Committee for Reporting Government Service Provision in his Foreword to the 2009 report remains relevant today:

While the gaps are narrowing in some areas, in too many cases outcomes are not improving, or are even deteriorating. We still have a long way to go to fulfil COAG’s commitment to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage (SCRGSP 2009, p.iii).

The Council of Australian Government’s (COAG) original commitment to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage has been revised. The aim now is to measure ‘change over time in outcomes not the gap to non-Indigenous Australians’ (SCRGSP 2014, p. 2). This may be a more achievable objective than the original one set by COAG in 2002. Alternatively, it could be viewed as a watering down of the original ambitious targets and objectives.

Frustration with the lack of progress in addressing many aspects of Indigenous social and economic disadvantage has increasingly been expressed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, activists, business and community leaders. A report titled Empowered communities: empowered peoples that was released in March 2015, for example, attempts to shift the debate, proposing radical changes to the planning, management and distribution of Aboriginal funding (https://www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/EC%20Report.pdf)

The report was prepared by a group of Indigenous leaders who represented eight regions across Australia. Their aim is for Indigenous peoples to lead their own plans for change and to ensure policies and programs address local priorities and needs and achieve meaningful and lasting outcomes. The model is premised on a theoretical and practical understanding of systemic change and reform and its relationship to individual and collective action and agency. It suggests a dramatic
reappraisal of ways of designing and delivering services to Indigenous communities in the 21st century.

**Culture and Identity**

Aboriginal Victorians have been fighting for cultural survival ever since European settlement. Their arguments have been shaped in part by the context of the times, with community leaders such as William Barak and William Cooper lobbying for equal rights, for the right to vote, to be represented in the Australian Parliament and for land rights (Broome 2005, pp. 300-1; Barwick 1998). From the mid-1930s, Aboriginal leaders such as Doug Nicholls were lobbying for Aboriginal parliamentary representation, and later, for more than token representation on key government advisory bodies (Broome 2005, p. 309).

By the 1980’s, pressure was mounting for Aboriginal Community Services Organisations to be community controlled and self-managing (Dyer 1983, pp. 158-162). Some of the arguments for reform were couched in terms of self-determination, but the underlying motivation was a concern for greater equality, cultural survival and expression. The inclusion in the Victorian Department of Community Service’s practice guidelines of an expectation that no Aboriginal child was to be moved to any out of home care placement without first consulting the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) (Dyer 2003, p. 124) was an extraordinary example of structural change being achieved following collective Aboriginal agency. This was well before contemporary child development theorists began emphasising the role culture plays in a child’s developing sense of identity and belonging (DHS 2008, p.12). Article 30 of the United Nations
Convention on the Rights of the Child also acknowledges the right of Indigenous children to enjoy their traditional culture, stating that cultural identity is a key facet of their development.

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) argued successfully for the right of Aboriginal children to be raised in their own culture, and for the role of their extended family, kinship and community to be recognised in legislation. This commitment was enshrined in the Victorian *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, and was a landmark achievement for the Victorian Aboriginal community in its interactions with government. Three years later, the VACCA developed a framework to guide the development of cultural competencies and awareness amongst staff employed in mainstream child and family welfare services (DHS 2008). The Framework includes a comprehensive discussion of what culture means from an Aboriginal perspective, highlighting how essential it is for the wider community to understand and acknowledge that the dynamics of culture are different for children of minority cultures and different again for children of Indigenous cultures. The report states:

.....for Aboriginal children, families and communities in Australia, unlike Western culture, the person is perceived not as an isolated, independent self but a self in relationships’ (DHS 2008, p. 12).

**Language**

In Victoria, the extensive dispossession of Aboriginal populations resulted in a loss of some traditional cultural practices and of languages. The loss of languages amongst populations that have traditionally relied on oral methods of knowledge
transmission can have devastating consequences for cultural survival and sustenance. When discussing the importance of language for Indigenous populations, the Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Cooperative for Languages (VACL), speaking at the Melbourne Museum’s Bunjilaka Centre on 29 October 2013, suggested that language offers a ‘treasure trove of information on literature, history, philosophy and art’. Language, VACL’s website suggests, ‘is the carrier of information about who we are, how we express ourselves and our culture...it is important for building knowledge, identity and connection’ (VACL 2015). Noel Pearson has argued for the preservation and maintenance of ‘Australia’s Indigenous languages...because they are inherently valuable as part of the country’s rich heritage...and are the primary words by which the Australian land and seascape is named’ (Pearson 2007a, p. 10). In exploring the trans-generational effects of trauma amongst Indigenous Australians, Dr Judy Atkinson emphasises the importance of cultural and spiritual identify, noting that:

Culture provides meaning and purpose to life (Atkinson 2009, p. 204).

In Victoria, there has been growing acknowledgement of the importance of sustaining, and in some cases, reviving Aboriginal languages. Some government support is being provided to organisations such as the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages to work with communities and in schools to revitalise Aboriginal languages and to build a stronger connectivity and pride in traditional culture. The VACCA’s emphasis on the importance of cultural attachment as a core element of Aboriginal children’s development has already been mentioned. Considerable work has also been undertaken in other sectors such as law – with
the establishment of the Koorie Courts, and in education, with examples such as the Wannik and YALCA Agreements (DEECD 2008, 2009). Cultural awareness training programs are provided by Koorie educators and some Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. National research standards and guidelines have been developed by bodies such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS 2012), and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2010) to inform the best standards of research with and about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

**Racism and Discrimination**

Professor Yin Paradies has published extensively on the topic of racism and discrimination (Paradies 2006, 2007), suggesting that the social construction of identity by the dominant culture has consequences, not only for community wellbeing, but also for the survival of cultural practices, traditional knowledge and languages. Paradies cites research by McCorquodale identifying that there have been ‘no less than 67 definitions of Indigenous people in Australian legislation’ (McCorquodale 1986, pp. 7-24). Attwood, too, discussed the impacts of racism, referring to a ‘diversity of racial ideas and attitudes’ that are influenced by ideology and also, he proposed, by the dominant discourse of the day (Attwood 1989, p. 82).

Racist ideologies and attitudes resulted in policies and laws that limited Aboriginal Victorians’ life opportunities, and in some cases, such as the forced removal of children and the wholesale removal onto, and then off reserves had
devastating effects on cultural sustenance and survival and the Indigenous economy. Institutional racism is still deeply entrenched in this country, as evidenced by the very public racist slurring of a previous Australian of the Year, Adam Goodes, an Aboriginal Australian, during a widely attended and televised football match in 2015 (The Age, 6 June 2015, p. 30).

A few months before this incident took place, in a feature article published in the Age newspaper in March 2015, journalist Michael Gordon talked with Paul Briggs, a Yorta Yorta man, about Briggs’s concerns about the continuing racism and exclusion being experienced by his people. Briggs explained the continuing hardships and challenges in the following way:

‘We walked off Cummeragunja mission in 1939, and came to the edge of town in Shepparton and we’re still sort of trying to come into town’ (Gordon, M 2015, Finding the right road to close the gap, The Age, 28 March, p.30). The article in which Briggs was featured had been produced in anticipation of the release of a new report Empowered communities: empowered peoples that had been formulated by eight Indigenous leaders, one of whom was Briggs, with the backing of both sides of politics. Ongoing frustrations with the lack of progress on COAG’s targets for redressing Indigenous disadvantage had resulted in the authors of this report proposing new ways of tackling Indigenous disadvantage, with Indigenous communities driving this change (Empowered Communities 2015).

Gordon’s article highlighted some of the significant hurdles Aboriginal Australians face in achieving opportunity and inclusion, basing his article on the
Goulburn Valley, the region in Victoria with the largest Indigenous population. A female champion netballer from the Goulburn Valley was interviewed for the same article, and she described an incident of blatant racism in which she:

...last year was playing [against] a girl who was 18 or 19, and she told me how disgusting and dirty we were and how we shouldn’t be playing in this league. She would have gone away and thought nothing more about it. I’ve thought about that almost every day since it happened’ (Gordon, M 2015).

Another whose views were reported in the same article echoed a similar theme. ‘I think right now when it comes to closing the gap, racism is the biggest barrier and people don’t want to hear or accept that’ (Gordon 2015, p.31).

Unlike the experience on the netball court, racism is not always overt. Policies may not be racist in intent but may have racist outcomes. This may be the case when even well intentioned reforms fail to take account of cultural factors, leading to outcomes that reinforce rather than reduce inequality. A key example of the failure to take account of this is the experience of Aboriginal Australians in many of their interactions with the criminal justice system, where, despite some impressive reforms, some researchers contend that:

...the justice system has played a direct role in imposing an alien set of values on Aboriginal people, then criminalizing when they will not, or cannot conform to them. Notions of acceptable behaviour are defined exclusively for and by the non-Indigenous community…while the values beliefs and practices of Indigenous people are marginalized or treated as forms of anti social behaviour’ (Blagg, Morgan & Cunneen 2005, pp. 13-15).
Whilst volumes of government publications identify a litany of problems experienced by Aboriginal communities, it is rare, although there are exceptions such as the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody, to find any reference to the nature and impact of racism and discrimination. Instead, it has largely been left to Aboriginal Australians to continue to build awareness and understanding in the wider community. Given what Stanner may well have labelled a ‘great Australian silence’ (Stanner 1991, p. 24) in Australia regarding the impacts of racial discrimination on generations of Indigenous Australians, it is significant that at the time of writing, the Australian Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition have met with 40 Indigenous leaders from around the country to discuss recognition of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders in the constitution. In 21st century Australia, one of the major planks of constitutional reform being proposed by these leaders is the inclusion of a racial non-discrimination clause. Indigenous activist and lawyer Noel Pearson was interviewed on the ABC’s *Lateline* on 7 July 2015, after the meeting of Indigenous and political leaders, and he was emphatic that ‘non discrimination [in a newly worded constitution] is an article of faith with our people’.

This crystallises an issue that is seen by a number of Indigenous leaders as fundamental to constitutional reform, and to what those who attended the meeting referred to in a subsequent joint statement as a ‘foundation for fair treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples into the future’ (Echo Netdaily, 7 July 2015 www.echo.net.au/2015/07/public-asked-to-
help-on-Indigenous-vote). The issue of racial discrimination it appears has now been placed squarely on the agenda for constitutional reform.
CHAPTER THREE: THE BEGINNINGS OF A NEW ERA

Improving Life Prospects

The life prospects for the Victorian Aboriginal population began to steadily improve from the 1970s, and this period deserves special attention when considering Aboriginal social and economic advancement; it has the advantage of being a period within the lived memories of a significant section of the population.

Whilst not wanting to single out particular individuals amongst a legion of Aboriginal activist heroes and heroines, Mollie Dyer’s role in the sweeping changes that took place in Victorian Aboriginal affairs, as documented in an autobiography that was released after her death in 1998, provides a valuable perspective, not just on her own life experiences, but also on events that were unfolding in Victoria, nationally and internationally. The autobiography provides a useful history of the establishment in Victoria of an extensive network of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and is drawn on to highlight the significant shifts that were occurring in Victoria from the 1970’s on. The focus then turns to a discussion of more contemporary initiatives and reforms, some driven by Indigenous leaders, and others by government. These provide the context for a subsequent discussion of the theoretical frameworks and research that inform this examination of Aboriginal social and economic advancement in Victoria.
Dyer’s Early Life

Dyer was born in Victoria in the late 1930s, and her mother, Margaret Tucker MBE, was one of the Stolen Generation. Tucker devoted much of her life to activist causes, and was, in 1957, one of the founders of the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL). The AAL would become the touchstone for political action in Australia in the 1950s, attracting a group of influential non-Aboriginal supporters, as well as becoming a platform for prominent Indigenous activists, and a training ground for a generation of new leaders. In 1965, Lin Onus was elected as the first Aboriginal President. Dyer noted at the time that there were ‘some mixed feelings about the pace at which we were moving. Some thought we should take it easy and phase in black control. Others were impatient and believed the time had come for us to determine our own future’ (Dyer 2003, p. 63).

Two Worlds

Mollie was less accepting than her mother had been of white patronage and paternalism. She chafed over the constraints, commenting that ‘[t]he older generation worked closely with non Koori sympathisers and supporters...as my generation came along we became strong in our belief that we were capable of determining the way we needed to go’ (Dyer 2003, p. 159). Mollie’s early school years were spent in country Victoria with her Scottish paternal grandparents though she retained a strong connection with her mother and her mother’s extended family on the Cummeragunja mission. She considered she had the best of both worlds: ‘My Aboriginal family gave me special treatment because my Dad
was white...the nuns at school gave me special treatment because I was an Aborigine...I was...twice blessed’ (Dyer 2003, p. 12).

Reforming Zeal

Dyer’s unstinting commitment to activism, especially her drive to reform the child welfare system was based on firsthand knowledge of what she regarded as the continuing injustices perpetuated through the State government’s removal of Aboriginal children from their families. This, Mollie believed, was tantamount to the creation of a new stolen generation. She fought, inspired by information gathered from firsthand experience. She was politically savvy and understood the ways of the bureaucracy, commenting ‘we would often put forward ideas that would turn out to be policy commentary.....it made them look good’ (Dyer 2003, p. 151). In 1976, the first Australian Indigenous Adoption conference was held at Victoria’s initiative. The conference proved a new experience for Mollie who ‘had never been exposed to the might of the system that had stolen our children. This was the first time we could raise our voices on a national level’ (Dyer 2003, p. 91).

The Victorian delegates argued for specialist services for Aboriginal children and families to be set up and managed by Aboriginal boards and staff. Following the conference, and after several stops and starts, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, or VACCA as it came to be known, was established with Commonwealth funding. This was an extraordinary example of structural change resulting from individual and collective Aboriginal activism or agency. Mollie Dyer was at the forefront of this movement in Australia and especially in her home state of
Victoria. The VACCA became the forerunner of a national network of Aboriginal childcare organisations, and so its importance is inestimable. The ACCAs’ mission went to the heart of Aboriginal concerns about their children’s care, and the importance of maintaining connections to Indigenous culture and heritage. Since their establishment, the various state ACCAs have been powerful examples of Aboriginal self-determination in action.

**Bouquets and Bats**

Mollie Dyer’s successes were due in part to her ability to tap into the Commonwealth and State governments’ reform agendas and also to bridge two cultures. Her proposals suited the times. She lobbied, built links with influential Commonwealth officials and was given almost unprecedented access to, and support from both Federal and State Ministers and bureaucrats. There were challenges though, and she encountered hostility, opposition and factional infighting from within her own community. As she headed into her sixties she began to feel sidelined by an increasingly professional, and younger, Aboriginal workforce (Dyer 2003, pp. 158-159). Her horizons were not just restricted to Victoria however. She pioneered an adoption service that would become a national template. She influenced the introduction of legislation that was, for its time, ground breaking. She helped set up and run a number of organisations that were community based and self-managing. She had a significant influence on non-Aboriginal leaders and she also built important international relationships and cross cultural programs.
Mollie lived through a period of rapid change and development in Aboriginal affairs, and hers is a story of that time. Her autobiography provides valuable insights, not just into the history and workings of the highly influential Aborigines Advancement League, but also the establishment of the next wave of Aboriginal controlled services Victoria. It demonstrates the immense personal challenges, pressures and conflicts, as well as the successes and achievements of organisations such as the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd, and pivotally, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

The Emergence of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

In the mid 1900’s, Victoria was the epicentre of Indigenous political activity in Australia, with the Aborigines Advancement League playing a pivotal role in international, national and local Indigenous activism. As the oldest Indigenous organisation in Australia, the AAL holds a special place in Australian history. About ten years after the AAL was established, several other Aboriginal controlled organisations were set up in Victoria. The first, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS), was formed because of concerns that Victorian Aboriginal people were not being adequately represented in the legal system. VALS was initially run by a mix of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal staff, though it moved later to full Aboriginal control. The organisation played a key role in pressuring for a Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody. In its early days, VALS also set up and ran a hostel.

A burst of organisational activity in Victoria from the 1970s saw the formation of a raft of ACCOs in Melbourne and later in some regional centres and country
towns. A description of the history of the first organisations can be found in Dyer’s autobiography (2003, pp. 154-155). These developments were supported by a State government that was increasingly prepared to test the possibility of Aboriginal self management and determination. The ACCOs became an important source of employment, service delivery and cultural sustenance as well as providing a platform for advocacy and political activity.

In Australia, a second wave feminist movement would develop in parallel with activist demands for Aboriginal self determination; both movements began to influence the development of separate service strands and programs. By the mid 1980s, a number of Victorian based Aboriginal organisations were setting up community controlled governance structures and employing Aboriginal staff. The Department of Human Service’s *Positioning Aboriginal Services for the Future Project* noted that by 2007, approximately 170 Aboriginal community controlled organisations were registered in Victoria with the report highlighting the diversity of scale, location and focus of these services (Effective Change 2007 p. 14).

**ACCOs - An expression of self determination**

ACCOs have been one of the most significant avenues through which the Victorian Aboriginal community has contributed to social, economic and political debate and dialogue; they provide a direct and powerful expression of the right to self determination and a forum for capturing and expressing community views. Without Aboriginal people generally having access to, or trust in conventional western European representational structures, ACCOs have played a pivotal role
in advocating for improved community outcomes and opportunities. Examples include YALCA, a policy framework designed by the Victorian State government in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, and the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreements phases 1, 2 and 3 that were launched in 2000, 2006 and 2013 respectively. In addition to their advocacy role, the ACCOs have provided employment and training opportunities that include the skilling of a mature aged workforce, some of whom had not progressed beyond the early years of secondary school. Education for this group was often not attainable. The ACCOs have also concentrated on providing skills development and training in settings that link cultural connectivity, a sense of pride, social purpose and identity. They are an important potential employment source and inspiration for younger Aboriginal people, as well as being a source of cultural sustenance.

As Mollie Dyer mentioned, Indigenous organisations often employ family members, thus ‘most Koori organisations have their family members involved with them in their work’ (Dyer 2003, p. 85). This can be greeted negatively by other community members, and as she acknowledged, criticism from the wider community, who identify the practice as nepotism. Dyer’s response to this was to point to its extent in the community generally. ‘If one wants to see wives, husbands and other relatives working in offices where security and reliability is demanded, the best place to look is the halls of government’ (Dyer 2003, p. 85). Dyer’s comments were backed up in a 2014 article in Victoria’s The Age newspaper, following the tabling in the Victorian Parliament of an inquiry by the Ombudsman, into the Victorian public service. The Age alleged, on the basis of
that report, that ‘Victoria’s public service continues to be littered with conflicts of interest, in particular, claims of nepotism and favouritism’ (Willingham, R 2014, Victoria’s public sector riddled with problems: Ombudsman George Brouer, The Age, 12 March, p.8).

Dyer suggested that in the Aboriginal domain, the basic rationale for employing relatives and family members in community controlled organisations was trust: those who are close to you share your values, attitudes and aspirations. There was also, she suggested, a concern to access resources and to keep them within the domain of the extended family (Dyer 2003). An analysis of the history of the management and oversight of Victorian ACCOs would potentially reveal complex networks of both familial and non-familial relationships.

Research conducted by a group of Victorian Aboriginal peak and state organisations (Victorian Aboriginal Peak and State Organisations 2007, p. 5), reported that many Aboriginal people expressed a preference for services run by their own people. ACCOs however have not been without their challenges and conflicts. Mollie Dyer, whilst providing a rich history of the development of Victorian ACCOs, and emphasising that she ‘was totally opposed to airing our internal grievances officially with non Kooris’ (Dyer 2003, p. 157), describes the developmental history of fledgling services that were battling to carve out a role in an increasingly complex network of services, with a relatively small and inexperienced pool of employees, and limited resources. She described bitter infighting, organisations ‘fraught with problems’, ‘warring factions’ and division within communities (and with her in some cases). She pointed as well to the
conflicting loyalties experienced by those Kooris who chose to work for the state government, remarking that some community members criticised them for ‘being sucked in’ (Dyer 2003, pp. 153-4).

As her time at the VACCA drew to a close, Dyer described feeling disillusioned with changes that were taking place; in her words, ‘professionalism was creeping in....emphasis was being placed on paper qualifications’ (2003, p. 139). She took on further challenges before retiring due to ill health. Her legacy includes an insightful and honest personal account of the excitement, challenge and extraordinary successes that were achieved by the first self-determining Aboriginal community services organisations in Victoria.

Challenges to Viability

Dyer described some of the challenges the ACCOs experienced in attempting to secure adequate funding. The majority continue to operate on small budgets, and are almost solely dependent on Commonwealth or State government funding (Effective Change 2007, p. 17). Board membership is generally drawn from the Aboriginal community, where a relatively small pool of stalwarts is heavily committed. As Dyer indicated, there can be significant challenges for Boards in balancing community expectations and contractual obligations with funding agencies. Those organisations that have been operating for twenty years or more however, have largely adapted to contractual and accountability requirements that initially seemed both onerous, and in some cases, contradictory to cultural values and practices. A number are now developing into multi sectoral service providers.
Relationships with Government - Changing the paradigm

The relationship between the Victorian Aboriginal community and government is complex and dynamic. Without access to many of the usual determinants of privilege and influence, including land, jobs, and political clout, until very recently, Aboriginal people were forced to rely on government for economic support and opportunity. The last couple of decades have seen a significant shift in Victoria, with a growing maturity in systemic relationships between the Aboriginal community and government. There is now an expressed intention to work in a more genuine partnership (DHS 2008; DEECD 2008). Structures such as a Premier’s Aboriginal Advisory Council and the Victorian Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees (RAJACs) have been designed to facilitate more genuine interaction. They offer the chance to pioneer models of Indigenous self determination that are unique to Victoria, contributing to the improvement of the health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal population, as well as benefiting the wider community. As previously mentioned, the network of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations has created a vital platform in Victoria from which to achieve greater equality.

Balancing Rights with Responsibilities

Indigenous activist and founder of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Noel Pearson, has had a significant impact on ways of thinking about Indigenous policy in Australia, arguing for a focus on Indigenous responsibility as well as personal action and agency (Pearson 2010, 2011, 2014). Tired of what he describes as the insidious and destructive impacts of welfare payments and joblessness for generations of Aboriginal Australians, Pearson is leading with new
theories and positions that have struck a chord with politicians and the general community. There are those who have criticised what they consider to be hard line positions, but references to individual responsibility and agency have become, almost imperceptibly in some cases, an accepted element of contemporary dialogue. A Victorian ACCO, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Inc, for example, has translated this principle into a client services charter that emphasises both rights and responsibilities. They have placed this sign in their reception area: NO RESPECT - NO SERVICE.

In the 21st century, Indigenous leaders are shaping the national social, political and policy agenda, not just following or resisting it. New political alliances are being forged and these are breaking down previous certainties and expectations. The historical alliance between the political left and Aboriginal politics that once seemed a natural fit is changing, with new alliances being forged with conservatives and national party agendas. Over the past fifty years in particular, there has been a huge shift in Aboriginal influence on Australian art, culture, music, public discourse and policy. There are Aboriginal poets, documentary film makers, politicians, musicians, sporting luminaries, activists, public servants and academics; a vastly different landscape from that of the 1960s and 70s.

**More Recent Initiatives and Policy Levers**

The 1970s saw a series of government initiatives being introduced to facilitate the increased participation by Aboriginal Victorians in housing, employment and education in particular. Some Aboriginal Elders credit ABSCHOL, an educational scholarship program that was initially set up by the
National Union of Australian University Students in the 1950s to support university scholarships for Aboriginal students, with having created significant and lasting educational opportunities for their community. ABSCHOL was before its time. Now there is financial support to help bridge Aboriginal youngsters into kindergarten, payments to help with school fees, scholarships to elite schools and universities, assistance with housing loans, especially earmarked public housing accommodation, and loans to assist with business development. A raft of public and private organisations has also committed to increasing Aboriginal employment opportunities. These include banks, government agencies and departments and universities. A number of philanthropic bodies are also increasingly supporting projects that advance Indigenous participation and progress. These include organisational and leadership capability building, educational scholarships, and funds to support and encourage business development. In the main, the philanthropic and corporate sectors are leaving the task of resolving social issues to government, where at both Commonwealth and State level there are macro policy commitments to reducing disadvantage and inequality, some of which were detailed in chapter two.

The second decade of the 21st century has so far seen a more positive interest in far reaching Indigenous reforms than the previous one. At the time of writing, the Australian government has just announced its support for increased Indigenous business development and employment growth in its initial repose to the Indigenous Jobs and Training Review chaired by Western Australian mining magnate, Andrew Forrest. The front cover of the report that was titled Creating parity: the Forrest review, contains a message from Forrest, calling for ‘seismic,
not incremental change’ in creating greater parity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (Forrest 2014). Mention has already been made of the Empowered communities: empowered people Design Report that proposes a radical new approach to the administration of Aboriginal funding through a set of new structures that involve Aboriginal Australians leading their own plans for change (Empowered communities 2015). Both these initiatives reflect the pressure that is being applied by Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders for a shift in the way government does business in the Indigenous domain. It is symptomatic of the volatility in Aboriginal affairs in this country however, that just weeks after the release of the Empowered communities: empowered people report, Australian cities were brought to a standstill, with rallies against the proposed closure of remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia (Dow, A 2015, ‘Protest brings city to standstill’, The Age, 2 May, p.1). This activity has been occurring as perhaps the backdrop to, or the forerunner of what may well be the most significant issue of this decade, the proposal for reform of the Australian constitution. The aim is to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ status as the First Australians, and to remove what Pearson referred to as the unacceptable characterisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the basis of race (Pearson 2014). There is bi-partisan support for constitutional reform that, if achieved this decade, will take Australia one step further to what Pearson holds out as ‘the true meaning of commonwealth’ (Pearson 2014, p. 36).
Indigenous Socio-Economic Advancement in a New Era

Influencing theoretical frameworks and research

In undertaking social enquiry into the contemporary circumstances of Aboriginal Victorians, this research draws first on British sociologist, Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (1984). Giddens’ examination of the dynamic relationship between societal structures and human agency provided a valuable conceptual framework to inform this study. In *The Making of the Aborigines*, Australian academic, Dr. Bain Attwood considers the notion of human agency in an Australian context. Like Giddens, Attwood emphasised the relationship between societal structures and human agency in creating social change. Attwood considers that human agency or action contributed to the shaping of an Aboriginal identity, proposing that Aboriginal Australians ‘played an important part in their own making’ (Attwood 1989, p. xi). In the 2012 Boyer Lecture series, Professor Marcia Langton presented a contemporary analysis of Aboriginal socio economic mobility that included an examination of the facilitators and enablers of these changes. She identified a set of factors that included both structural enablers such as employment opportunities and mining royalties, as well as examples of human agency such as the interest shown by Indigenous Northern Territorians in business enterprise and development, and the shifts in the balance of power between mining companies and Aboriginal communities. A detailed consideration of the contributions of these scholars to this research is outlined below:

*Anthony Giddens’ Theory of Structuration*

In the late 1960s, prominent UK sociologist Anthony Giddens broke away from influential structural functionalists, such as Parsons and Durkheim, rejecting an
emphasis on what he referred to as ‘structure...having primacy over action’ (Giddens 1984, p. 2). He proposed instead, a new theory of structuration that ‘focus[ed]...upon the understanding of human agency and of social institutions’ (Giddens 1984, p. xvii), suggesting that ‘the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given set of phenomena, but represent a duality’ (Giddens 1984, p. 23). He coined the expression ‘duality of structure’, a process in which ‘we create society at the same time as we are created by it’ (Giddens 1989, p. 11).

Giddens’ theory of structuration confirmed the importance of social research reflecting a commitment to human agency and this was translated in this research study into a commitment to ensure that Indigenous values, knowledge and perspectives were reflected in the research design, the data analysis and the reported outcomes and findings.

Giddens considered power to be a fundamental element of social theory, proposing that ‘the resources which constitute structures of domination are of two sorts: allocative and authoritative’ (Giddens 1984, p. 258). The first are those that ‘derive from human dominion over nature’, and the second, are those that ‘result from the dominion of some actors over others’ (1984, p. 373). He made the point too, that ‘domination and power...have to be recognised as inherent in social association (or, I would say, in human action as such)’ (1984, pp. 31-32). Giddens’ reference to authoritative structures of domination was of particular interest to this study of Aboriginal advancement.
Bain Attwood-The Making of the Aborigines

In 1989, five years after Giddens published *The Constitution of Society* (1984), one of his most acclaimed contributions to social science, Melbourne-based academic Professor Bain Attwood, published a series of essays in which he explored the formation of an Aboriginal identity (Attwood 1989). Attwood chose to frame this discussion in the context of the changing historical experiences of Aboriginal Australians since European settlement. He proposed that ‘the making of the Aborigines [was] a process which was determined more by Europeans than by Aborigines’. The coloniser’s power, he claimed ‘was derived from the expropriation of [their] land as an economic and cultural resource (Attwood 1989, p. x). Attwood considered that whilst colonial forces had played a large part in shaping Aborigines’ lives post settlement, it was erroneous to assume that Aborigines were simply passive victims. Attwood, as Giddens had before him, based his analysis on a conceptual framework that perceived a dynamic relationship between societal structures and human actions. In his view, the relationships that developed between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations were not just shaped by the dominant culture, but also through the actions of Aboriginal individuals and communities.

Marcia Langton’s 2012 Boyer Lectures

Professor Marcia Langton took up a similar theme when, in the 2012 Boyer lectures, she set out to ‘…inject new ideas and ways of thinking about the status of Indigenous people in twenty first century Australia’ (Langton 2013, p. 12). Langton chose to highlight the benefits that had accrued for Aboriginal Northern
Territorians from Native Title legislation that was introduced in 1993 following Eddy Mabo’s legendary activism; a powerful example of structural change resulting from personal action or agency. She highlighted too, the impact of the mining boom on Indigenous Territorians’ employment and financial opportunities, the increasingly productive engagement between Indigenous communities and mining industry executives, and a keen interest, she claimed, in business enterprise amongst Aboriginal Northern Territorians.

**Implications for this research**

As mentioned in chapter one, Stanner, in the 1968 Boyer lecture series, had proposed a more functional view of the structuring of relationships between the early Victorian settlers and the Aboriginal population than either Giddens, Langton or Atwood. He considered that the relationships that developed between the early Victorian settlers and the Aboriginal population in the first five years after European settlement had created ‘a basic structure of relations who ever since has formed a part of the continuing anatomy of Australian life’ (Stanner 1968, p. 7). Giddens (1984), Attwood (1989) and Langton (2013) gave greater credence to the power of human agency, proposing a dynamic interdependence and connection between societal structures and human actions. These theoretical contributions and research have informed the conceptual framework and methodological design for this research. Emphasis is placed on structuration rather than functionalism, and the ‘transformative capacity’ of what Giddens referred to as ‘the duality of structure’ (Giddens 1984, p. 25).
Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

The term middle class: how useful?

It is important to outline some of the theoretical and philosophical issues and challenges that were encountered when considering how to test and apply Langton’s claims of Indigenous socio-economic advancement (Langton 2013). Her reference in the Boyer Lectures to ‘a middle class of Aboriginal Australians’ may have been designed to capture the attention of what she considered to be a generally ill-informed and prejudiced Australian public (Langton 2013). She wanted to make a point, and in doing so, described the benefits that have accrued for Aboriginal Northern Territorians from Native Title and the resources boom. She was addressing an Australian public in terms they understood: economic prosperity, social status and enterprise. Having begun her first lecture with a reference to ‘the emergence of a new middle class of Aboriginal Australians’, Langton tended thereafter to shift away from this categorisation, drawing instead on statistical measures such as educational attainment, home ownership and employment status when framing her discussion of Indigenous progress and change.

Langton is not alone in using conventional socio-economic measures. Academics and social scientists, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, are using similar terms when framing commentary, discussion and analysis (Hunter 2006; Lahn 2013; Maddison 2009; Paradies 2006; Pearson 2007). Lahn has drawn attention as well to the increasing representation of Indigenous Australians in professional occupations, drawing an association between this development and Indigenous
social and economic mobility. She suggests that ‘the absence of attention to Aboriginal professionals as a group within Australian sociology and anthropology points to... a neglect of processes of transformation which are increasingly evident to Aboriginal people themselves’ (Lahn 2013, p. 7). This, she suggests, is in marked contrast to international studies where, in Canada in particular, studies ‘have been addressing this phenomenon, often linked to what is termed a ‘new’ or ‘emerging’ Aboriginal middle class’ (Lahn 2013, p. 7).

A contested area of Indigenous social policy

In 2011, Aboriginal poet and activist, Yvette Holt, published a blistering article in the Indigenous National Times following a reference to ‘…a growing middle class of Australian Aboriginal people’ by a non-Aboriginal speaker at a staff retreat she attended. Holt’s forceful repudiations related to a raft of issues that included the term being used as ‘back-handed compliments, as well as the concern that the progress achieved by families such as hers was overlaid with what she described as ‘…another label such as platinum members of an Aboriginal Middle Class Society’ (Holt 2011, p. 2).

Lahn’s 2013 article included a discussion of what she termed ‘Indigenous perspectives of middle classness’ (Lahn 2013, p. 10). She suggested that whilst growing attention was being devoted to this notion by Aboriginal people themselves (Holt 2011; Langton 2013; Paradies 2006; Pearson 2007b), there was still considerable ‘controversy and ambivalence surrounding the idea of an
Aboriginal middle class’ (Lahn 2013, p. 11). She noted that the label of middle class ‘can be viewed as strongly pejorative by Aboriginal people, an unwelcome imposed label’ (Lahn 2013, p. 11). She made the point too that ‘an Aboriginal middle class if it does exist may well be different in fundamental respects from its non-Indigenous equivalent’ (Lahn 2013 p. 7). She noted comments from Professor Larissa Behrendt who was quoted in an interview with Dr. Sarah Maddison, describing some of the ‘huge challenges to Indigenous politics and identity posed by the recent emergence of ‘a middle class black Australia’’ (Maddison 2009, p. 116).

**Relevance and applicability of mainstream outcome measures**

In 2012, Western Australian based academic Dr. Sarah Prout undertook a review of the literature on Indigenous wellbeing, and a stock take of existing data sources in Australia. At the conclusion of this exercise she grouped the data sources into three domains: wellbeing, demography and economic productivity and prosperity, concluding that each of these approaches underestimated ‘the significance of alternative Indigenous worldviews and perceptions’ (Prout 2012, p. 320). She considered that these approaches were limiting and reductionist since they did not take adequate account of Indigenous values or norms. Prout was particularly critical of the adoption of measures based on assumptions that wealth accumulation and economic productivity are the primary pathways to wellbeing. She was critical too of the focus on achieving equity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations according to a set of indicators derived from western conceptions of socio-economic wellbeing.
Others have expressed similar concerns about the relevance and applicability of outcome measures such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander home ownership rates and educational attainment (Silburn et al. 2006); the classification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life stages on the basis of western life stages (Taylor 2009); data interpreted through the lens of previous government policy (Taylor 2008), and the assumption that equality with the non-Indigenous population should be the ultimate goal for Indigenous populations (Taylor 2008) as well as financial obligations to extended kin, and the way in which financial resources are directed (Gibson 2010).

The foundational planks of wellbeing

There is a vast literature on wellbeing and its measurement, and an emerging discussion of how this concept is applied in Aboriginal contexts (AIHW 2009; Behrendt in Upton 2011; Biddle 2009, 2013b; Dockery 2010; Lahn 2013; Langton 2013; Prout 2012; Wotherspoon 2003). Whilst acknowledging that the definition of Indigenous wellbeing, and certainly any reference to an emerging middle class is a contested area, this thesis takes as its starting point Langton’s proposition that for Aboriginal Australians, ‘education, employment, income and home ownership are the foundational planks of general wellbeing and, the capacity to fully participate in the wider society’ (Langton 2013, p. 153).

This chapter began with a discussion of the shifts in public perceptions, legislation and policy initiatives that gathered momentum in Aboriginal affairs in Victoria...
from the 1970s onwards. The literature review provides the background to this study and identifies a range of factors that have influenced Aboriginal lives and circumstances in Victoria. It acknowledges the need for a more comprehensive examination of Indigenous social and economic advancement, and the enabling factors, in a Victorian context. The development of a raft of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations has been a crucial development in Victoria and is given particular attention, both in this chapter and in the interviews with Aboriginal participants that are reported in chapter six. The theoretical frameworks that emerged from a review of the literature that inform the research design were outlined in detail, as were some of the associated theoretical and methodological implications. Chapter four discusses the methodological approach, the challenges associated with defining a measure of Indigenous advantage and the development of an Inquiry Framework to guide the quantitative data analysis for this research.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The literature review established that the predominant reporting of the socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal Australians has largely been disadvantage and deficit focused. Before Professor Langton’s 2012 Boyer Lectures there had been little public recognition or discussion of Aboriginal socio-economic mobility in Australia. An article by Dr. Julie Lahn, a research fellow with the Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Policy in 2013 however, suggested that ‘the issue of an urban dwelling…new Aboriginal middle class is beginning to be raised, primarily…. among Aboriginal people themselves’ (Lahn 2013, p. 7). Lahn was referring here to references on this subject by Indigenous academics and activists such as Noel Pearson in 2007, Larissa Behrendt (in Maddison 2009), Yvette Holt in 2011 and Marcia Langton in 2008. The 2012 Boyer Lecture series however, provided the opportunity for Marcia Langton, an influential Aboriginal Australian to engage in a discourse on this topic with the wider Australian population.

The objective of this thesis is to examine whether Langton’s claims of Indigenous social and economic advancement, that she referred to in the Boyer Lectures as an ‘emerging Aboriginal middle class in Australia’ (Langton 2013, p. 31), apply in Victoria, and if so, to explore the factors that have facilitated and enabled social and economic opportunity.
The research will explore the following questions:

- What does the evidence reveal about Indigenous social and economic advantage in Victoria?
- What is the demographic profile of those who have been defined in this research as experiencing social and economic advantage?
- What are the influences and enablers that have shaped their life circumstances?

**Establishing the Methodological Approach**

The research methodology is designed to take account of, and attempt to make transparent, the theoretical and practical challenges associated with researching the contemporary socio-economic circumstances of a section of the Victorian Aboriginal population. It draws on Giddens’ theory of structuration, reflecting a commitment to the dynamic interdependence of societal structures and human agency in its construction and design. The research is designed to test and validate the analysis of statistical data and findings from Indigenous viewpoints, experience and perspectives, as well as responding to the concerns raised by Prout and others. A senior Aboriginal academic provided valuable input into the development of the research method and techniques. Aboriginal input and commentary was also sought in the reporting and interpretation of statistical data where participants were invited to discuss the cultural relevance of the range of indicators that had been included in the Inquiry Framework, to consider the preliminary findings from the statistical data analysis, and, importantly, to identify
any comments or cautions regarding the interpretations and reporting. In a second
engagement phase, in a series of face to face interviews, a group of Aboriginal
participants were invited to discuss the factors that, in their view had facilitated
and enabled Aboriginal advancement as demonstrated in the reported findings
from the statistical data analysis. The aim was to ensure that Indigenous values,
 norms, knowledge and understandings were reflected in both the research design
and the reported outcomes and findings.

This thesis draws on conventional socio-economic indices and descriptors when
examining Indigenous social and economic advancement. It does not aim to
establish the existence or otherwise of middle class of Aboriginal Victorians. The
interviews that were conducted in the second engagement phase however,
cluded a discussion of participants’ perceptions about the existence of an
Aboriginal middle class, the implications for them personally, and for the broader
Aboriginal population.

**Defining and Measuring Indigenous Socio-Economic Advantage**

The challenges associated with defining and measuring socio-economic status are
not limited to the Aboriginal population. Much of the international and national
research and scholarship on this topic has tended to focus on disadvantage, rather
than economic and social advantage (ACOSS 2014; Organisation for Economic
Cooperation and Development, 2005, 2008, 2011; Steering Committee for the
In Australia, over the past two decades, there has been significant progress with measuring and reporting Indigenous socio-economic circumstances (ABS 2008; AIHW 2013; Biddle 2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). The Australian National University’s Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) has been an important source of analysis and reporting on a range of Indigenous socio-economic outcomes. In 2013, the CAEPR began publishing a series of discussion papers following the release of 2011 Census of Population and Housing data. These papers were produced as part of the CAEPR’s Indigenous Population Project, and several included references to, and examination of socio-economic measures and status, including the following:

- Paper 12, *Regional Centres*, examines the relative disadvantage and wellbeing of 43 regional centres with significant Indigenous populations (Biddle & Markham 2013)
- Paper 13, *Socioeconomic measures*, discusses the challenges associated with determining a single measure of Indigenous socio-economic status (Biddle 2013b)
- Paper 16, *Residential segregation: income and housing*, examines the relationship between residential segregation, income and housing (Biddle 2013c)
The author of Paper 13, Dr Nicholas Biddle, had published a set of measures of relative Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and advantage in an earlier study (Biddle 2009). In Paper 13, Biddle extended this research to include a broader set of variables that, in his view, ‘take us beyond simple measures of socio-economic status’ (Biddle 2013b, p. 10), producing an index that included twenty variables which were then grouped into five domains in a Suite of Indigenous Outcomes Indices (SIOI) as follows:

- SIO1 Index of income and wealth
- SIO2 Index of employment status
- SIO3 Index of education participation and employment
- SIO4 Index of child outcomes
- SIO5 Index of language, social and health maintenance.

Biddle’s 2009 study had demonstrated a link between Indigenous socio-economic status and better outcomes on measures such as educational attainment, occupation, and income (Biddle 2009). He acknowledged however, the importance of capturing broader notions of Indigenous wellbeing, and considered that the SIOI represented progress in this area, particularly with the inclusion of the fourth and fifth domains. His examination of the associations between the variables established that ‘there was a strong correlation...between the first three of the indices, with employment and education outcomes having the strongest correlation’ (Biddle 2013b, p. 12). This influenced the design and development of the Inquiry Framework for this research.
Defining the Research Sample and Parameters

Biddle proposed that ‘socio-economic status is an important measure, or set of measures, that captures a person’s access to economic resources both now and into the future, as well as their relative position within a society that values things like income, employment and education’. In his view, ‘it is still the case that those Indigenous Australians with higher levels of socio-economic status tend to have better outcomes across a range of subjective indicators’ (Biddle 2013b, p. 10). Building on from this proposition, socio-economic status was adopted in this research as a generic term for Aboriginal social and economic advantage.

Proxy Measures

Having established that socio-economic status would be used as a generic descriptor in this study, the next challenge was to determine a set of related, or, to quote Biddle, ‘proxy measures’ (Biddle 2013b, p. 1). Since the 2011 ABS Census of Population and Housing was to be the chief data source, an examination of a range of variables reported in the Census of Population and Housing was undertaken. The first variable to be selected was personal gross weekly income. This particular measure was chosen because it broadly reflects the financial resources available to an individual, and, in all likelihood, their occupational, housing and health status, as well as emotional wellbeing. Alternative measures, such as household income or average weekly earnings were considered, but since the research was primarily focused on exploring individual socio-economic advantage, personal weekly income was considered to more closely align with the research objectives. It was noted however, that the Australian Bureau of Statistics
(ABS) recommends that care should be taken when interpreting income data because of low response rates and difference in Census counts (ABS 2006a).

Setting a Benchmark Measure of Income Status

Having established individual weekly income as the key proxy measure of Indigenous socio-economic status, the next step was to decide how to give this a value or measure. The CAEPR’s Indigenous Population Project proved valuable once again. Paper 16 in this series had included a discussion of Indigenous household income in relation to the Australian median, classifying individuals into groups that were ‘based on the income of the household they live in relative to the Australian median’ (Biddle 2013c, p. 4). Biddle noted that ‘a standard relative poverty line is people who live in households with less than half median income’ (Biddle 2013c, p. 4). Whilst Biddle’s categorisations in this particular study were based on household rather than individual incomes, his use of median incomes to define relative advantage and disadvantage, and the categorisation of household income according to a set of income bands provided a useful model on which to base an analysis of Indigenous socio-economic status. Consequently, the population sample to be included in this study was determined to be those Aboriginal Victorians who were earning median Australian gross weekly incomes or above, as reported in the 2011 Census of Population and Housing.
Income Thresholds

The ABS classifies and reports individual weekly incomes according to a number of income bands (see ABS 2011a). For simplicity in this research, and to provide a structure for reporting income thresholds, these bands were collapsed into four sub-categories as detailed below. The categories were determined by their relationship to the Australian median weekly income. This was $592 per week rounded up to $600 for the purposes of this research. Those with incomes below $600 per week were classified as either in the lowest or low income brackets. Those who were earning $600 a week or more—in other words, median incomes and above—were classified as being in either the middle or high income brackets.

- Lowest ($399 per week and below)
- Low ($400-$599),
- Middle ($600- $999)
- High ($1000 plus)

Since the research objective was to examine Indigenous socio-economic advantage, Aboriginal Victorians who were either in the middle or high income brackets formed the research sample.

Some Qualifiers

Setting the median weekly income as the baseline measure of socio-economic advantage for this study meant that half of the overall Australian population aged 15 years and over were earning this amount when the latest ABS Census of Housing and Population was conducted. It did not mean that half the Victorian
Aboriginal population was earning this amount or more, because the median income of $392 for Aboriginal Victorians reported in the 2011 ABS Census falls well below the overall median of $592 per week. It is acknowledged too, that the selection of a mainstream indicator from a source such as the ABS Census is likely to be open to challenge, given the methodological problems inherent in absolute comparisons of Indigenous and mainstream data.

The debates about the choice of a measure such as individual weekly income, to define socio-economic status are not simply definitional: the concept can also be challenged by reference to Indigenous cultural values ‘surrounding money as a medium of relationship and obligation to kin and community’ and ‘the obligations to extended kin, and at times to broader forms of Aboriginal community’ (Lahn 2013, p. 2). This research did not include a measure of personal wealth as one of the elements of the Inquiry Framework. It remains to be emphasised however, that without taking account of other capital and financial assets and Indigenous values and norms, present day income is a somewhat narrow measure of socio-economic status.

**Constructing an Inquiry Framework**

Having identified median weekly income as one of the Inquiry Framework’s key component variables, a number of other measures were selected from the CAEPR’s Suite of Indigenous Outcomes Indices that were reported in Paper No 13 of the Indigenous Population Project series. Three of these, employment
status, home ownership and educational attainment corresponded with measures Langton had referred to as being associated with Indigenous socio-economic progress in the 2012 Boyer Lectures (Langton 2013, p.153). In addition, Lahn had produced research linking Indigenous socio-economic mobility to an occupational status (Lahn 2013), and so occupational category was included as one of the variables to be examined. Two wellbeing measures were also selected from an Indigenous specific ABS survey (AIHW 2013). It should be noted that, apart from the latter two variables the remainder were drawn from the 2011 Census of Population and Housing. A full description of these measures can be obtained by referring to the ABS Census Dictionary (http://abs.gov.au/). The information relating to occupations and the process used for coding are particularly relevant (ABS 2011c).

Component Elements of the Inquiry Framework

After an extensive review of potential socio-economic indicators, measures and data sources, a suite of indicators was developed to form the component elements of the Inquiry Framework. They were grouped into six domains as detailed below:

Population numbers and distribution

- National and Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population numbers
- Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population distribution
- National and Victorian Indigenous age structures
**Income and wealth**

- National and Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander home ownership rates
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander numbers on median incomes and above, and those on high incomes
- Numbers in Victoria on median weekly income and above
- Where they live, their age, gender and occupations
- Numbers in Victoria in the high income bracket ($1000 or above)
- Where they live, their age, gender and occupations
- Income levels and Year 12 completions

**Employment status**

- National Indigenous male/female employment numbers
- Victorian Indigenous employment status
- Occupational category, Aboriginal Victorians on median incomes and above
- Occupational category, Aboriginal Victorians on incomes of $1000 per week and above
- Post school qualifications and employment status

**Educational participation and attainment**

- Aboriginal Victorians with a post school qualification
- Year 12 completions, National and Victorian
- Year 12 completions and post school qualification
Estimates of future progress

- National and Victorian school retention rates
- National and Victorian numbers currently in school
- Type of Victorian educational institution attending
- 15-64 year old Aboriginal Victorians who are studying, urban/non urban

Wellbeing and associated measures

- Self assessed health status and associated outcome measures
- Social and emotional wellbeing and associated outcome measures.

Population data was produced as context for a detailed analysis of socio-economic measures. Numbers in school and studying, retention rates and educational institution attended were included to give some indication of the numbers of Aboriginal youth who will potentially form the nucleus of increasing Indigenous prosperity and advancement. Two additional measures, self assessed health status and social and emotional wellbeing were sourced directly from the AHIW’s detailed analysis of the 2012 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework (AIHW 2013). The Inquiry Framework’s component variables framed the analysis of statistical data, and were reported first at national level to allow broad comparisons between Victoria and other states and territories. A vertical analysis of specific indicators was then produced for Greater Melbourne and the rest of Victoria.
Data Limitations and Constraints

Before turning to a discussion of the application of the research methodology and the assumptions that underpinned its development, it is important to consider some of the specific challenges and limitations associated with reporting Indigenous socio-economic indicators that have been sourced from mainstream sources. Since the 1971 Census, when Indigenous Australians began being included in official estimates of the Australian population national reporting frameworks and statistical collections, a plethora of reports have been produced contrasting Aboriginal Australians’ socio-economic circumstances with those of the non-Aboriginal population. Whilst the range and specificity of Indigenous data has been expanding and improving, challenges remain regarding the quality of the count, collection procedures, small sample sizes, the comparability of particular variables and data quality (AIHW 2013, p. 6). There is also the challenge of overcoming still widely held suspicion and disassociation from data collection processes amongst sections of the Aboriginal population (Taylor 2008). There have been criticisms too of the way in which the data are reported, with suggestions that absolute comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations frequently reinforce racism and stereotyping (Bamblett & Lever 2012; Prout 2012).

The research methodology for this thesis has been constructed to take account of these concerns by:

- ensuring that Aboriginal input and commentary is included in the interpretation of the statistical analysis and findings;
producing relative comparisons of Indigenous data, not just comparisons with the non-Aboriginal population.

Methodology

Underlying Assumptions

The following assumptions underpin the methodology design:

- There is an established association between Indigenous socio-economic status and better outcomes on measures such as income, education and employment (Biddle 2013b).
- ‘Indigenous Australians with higher levels of socio-economic status tend to have better outcomes across a range of subjective wellbeing indicators’ (Biddle 2013b, p. 10).
- Aboriginal Victorians may hold different views about social and economic status and success than members of the non-Aboriginal population.
- Engaging with Indigenous knowledge is a fundamental element of authentic social research in a study such as this.

Researcher Perspective

This research is conducted by someone of European Australian background and heritage. I have worked in Aboriginal affairs for more than forty years, in both government and non-government settings, and more recently, as a consultant to Victorian based Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).
These various roles provided opportunities to develop both professional and personal relationships with Aboriginal people, initially as service users, but more frequently in their roles as advocates and activists, and most recently, as colleagues and employers. I have had the opportunity to be an observer of Aboriginal organisational experiences and of Aboriginal people in social contexts across Victoria. I have worked with Aboriginal people who are astute political advocates, smart, visionary and inspirational. They are active participants in their own and the wider society. This is a resilient population group that has survived and resisted: one that has shaped my life values and experiences.

**Research Design**

As a non-Aboriginal researcher, and one committed to producing social research that takes account of individual action and agency as well as societal structures, systems and institutions, it was important to ensure that the research methodology provided an opportunity to engage with Aboriginal knowledge, perspectives and experiences.

The research design included two specific phases in which input was invited from Aboriginal participants: the first sought feedback and commentary on the quantitative data analysis and preliminary interpretative findings. The second phase involved a series of individual interviews or conversations that were designed specifically to seek the views of a group of Aboriginal Victorians about the factors and influences that had facilitated Indigenous advancement in this
state. The interviews concentrated on capturing data about the interrelations between societal structures and institutions such as government, family, work and education, and individual or human actions or agency. The quantitative analysis focused more on structures such as employment, income and education.

As well as being informed by Giddens’ theory of structuration, the methodology and approaches utilised to engage with Aboriginal participants were informed by Indigenous theoretical frameworks and methodologies, research techniques and approaches (Chilisa 2012; Rose, Bamblett & Paton 2013; Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai-Smith 2008; Patton 2002) as well as recommended Aboriginal research protocols for non-Aboriginal researchers to follow (Benham 2007; Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai-Smith 2008; Harris 1984; Mahon & Cherednichenko 2007; McCaslin & Breton 2008).

Methods and Techniques

The study drew on both quantitative and qualitative research methods, first analysing and interrogating public administrative data, and then further testing the interpretation of the findings with reference to, and engagement with Indigenous knowledge and experience. The methodology involved both social enquiry and statistical analysis. It drew on a mixed method approach that compared and contrasted quantitative data analysis with the perspectives gained through qualitative approaches, through listening to, and learning from Indigenous knowledge and experiences (Clandinin 2007; Patton 2002).
Quantitative data is useful for gathering broad based trend information and for scoping and scanning an area of inquiry. Qualitative methods such as interviews, portraits, case studies, observational notes, journals and other narrative forms give depth and validity to quantitative data and are often collected alongside or following surveys (Bogdan & Biklen 1992). In this way the data can be tested and findings triangulated and validated (Trochim & Donnelly 2008), emphasising the interaction rather than ‘the idea that there is either a clear cut division or a necessary opposition between quantitative and qualitative methods’ (Giddens 1984, p. 333).

Criticism of qualitative methods include the possibility of researcher bias, the small number of participants, the generalisability and confidence in the findings, and the fact that methods of analysis are not well formulated (Miles & Huberman 1984, p. 2). There are considerable benefits however. By gathering descriptive experience and portraits of individuals in particular contexts, qualitative research is able to give voice to individuals and their knowledge, to establish tentative generalisations that can be tested via more broad based tools, to reflect on the data, to provide feedback on its accuracy, interpretations and cultural perspectives and to deepen and enrich knowledge and information (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai-Smith 2008; Le-Compte, Millroy & Preissle 1992).

This research methodology links both quantitative and qualitative data, refuting the debates that have waged over their distinctiveness and various benefits and
constraints. Instead, Miles and Huberman’s proposition, that ‘we have to face the fact that numbers and words are both needed if we are to understand the world’, has been adopted as a fundamental tenet of the research design and methodology (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 40). Indigenous perspectives and commentary serve to validate and triangulate the data reported elsewhere, as well as capturing the element of practical consciousness to which Giddens referred (1984, p. 328).

Engaging with Indigenous Knowledge Systems

The methodological techniques, principles and practices that inform the qualitative research design were drawn from Indigenous and non-Indigenous frameworks and methodologies. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s (1997) work in portraiture provided a useful theoretical model that was consistent with the research principles and objectives. These authors proposed that when drawing on portraiture’s frameworks and methods, the ‘person of the researcher...is more evident and more visible than in any other research form. She [the researcher] is seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry, but also in navigating the relationship with the subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action, in acting the emergent themes, and in creating the narrative’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p. 13).

Given this researcher’s long involvement with the Victorian Aboriginal community, and professional and personal connections with interview participants, this description resonated more closely with the research focus rather
than, say, that of an ethnographer, whose role is to ‘listen to a story while portraitists listen for a story’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p. 13).

Portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis suggest, is a method that shares ‘many of the techniques, standards and goals of ethnography. But it pushes against the constraints of those traditions and practices in its explicit effort to combine empirical and aesthetic description, in its focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p. 13).

In chapter one, the commitment to focus this study on an examination of Indigenous advancement rather than the scrutiny of failure and dysfunction that is so frequently the focus of media reporting and academic research was emphasised. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s reference to portraiture as a methodology that paid regard to resilience and positive wellbeing fitted these aims, as did their reference to the importance of ‘context’ and the dynamic interplay between researchers and actors. Portraiture, they suggested, is a ‘...narrative [that] is always embedded in a particular context...rich in cues about how the actors or subjects negotiate and understand their experience’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p. 12). They concluded that ‘the portraitist is very interested in the single case because she believes that embedded in it the reader will discover resonant universal themes’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p. 13). They proposed as well, that portraiture is as much an art as a science where ‘the writer was inside, not outside the work; the forbidden element of judgement was everywhere present...’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997, p. 21).
The following principles were drawn from portraiture and have influenced the research methodology and design:

- Portraits are constructed through the development of relationships; relationship building is at their core;
- Relationships that are shaped by both researchers and actors are likely to yield deeper data and better social science;
- Research relationships should be shaped by empathic regard; empathy grows out of knowledge of the actor’s world, out of mutuality of regard and leads to increasing trust, intimacy and understanding;
- The parameters of these relationships must be drawn; reciprocity is more likely to occur when the structure, boundaries and commitments of relationships are made explicit from the beginning; and
- Reciprocity can be achieved through confidentiality; actors see their experiences represented accurately and authentically, feel the satisfaction of a fair exchange.

As mentioned earlier, as well as drawing on portraiture as a theoretical construct, the methodology and approaches utilised to engage with Aboriginal knowledge systems also drew on Indigenous research techniques, approaches, research protocols and practices (Denzin, Lincoln & Tuhiwai-Smith 2008, Patton 2002; Rose 2011).
Research Plan

The research plan consisted of eight steps as outlined below:

**Step 1: Historical analysis, literature review and theoretical frameworks**

The historical and demographic analysis set the foundation for a consideration of the distinctive experiences of Aboriginal Victorians post European settlement. The research objective was to examine the contemporary circumstances of Victorian Aboriginal people, including the geographic dislocation and dispossession, damage to cultural traditions and low success rates with Native Title claims that appear to be in marked contrast to the experiences of the group of Aboriginal Northern Territorians Professor Langton referred to in her Boyer Lectures. In shaping an Inquiry Framework, a multi-disciplinary theoretical approach was used to draw on those concepts that emerged from the literature and which were subsequently identified as influencing structures. These included factors such as the impacts on generations of Aboriginal Victorians of racism and systemic discrimination, inequitable power relationships, marginalisation, and, importantly, those that fostered resilience and advancement. A wide range of source material was utilised, including Aboriginal biographical and research material, European Australian historical and government publications.

The historical reporting and associated analysis was essentially Eurocentric in focus, describing broad scale policies and legislation that had a very direct impact on the lives of Aboriginal Victorians. The historical analysis did not examine the complex relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, nor did it
take account of the diversity of Aboriginal population groups or the differential impacts of colonisation. For this, autobiographical histories and publications were utilised and analysed. These provided source material that was both contemporary and historical in nature. Their inclusion provided a more layered contextual analysis, one that defined Aboriginal people as Giddens, Attwood and Langton had, as active agents, not simply passive victims of an oppressive and paternalistic system. The methodology was similar to the ‘revisionist approach’ to historical scholarship Attwood examined and consistent with Giddens’ theory of structuration (Attwood 1983, p. 135; Giddens 1984).

**Step 2: Developing an Inquiry Framework**

Since the research objective was to establish the extent of Aboriginal socio-economic advantage in Victoria, a set of relevant measures were identified and selected to frame the statistical analysis. The majority were drawn from the CAEPR’s Suite of Indigenous Outcomes Index (Biddle 2013b). The number and geographic distribution of the sample population were also included in response to the first research question. A number of measures were also cross-tabulated for gender, age and geographic location. Data on numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in school and studying, retention rates and educational institution attended were included to assist with the consideration of future progress and advancement. Two additional measures were selected from the AIHW’s analysis of the 2012 Aboriginal Health Performance Framework (AIHW 2013); both of these measures had established correlations with Indigenous socio-economic status and well being.
Step 3: Statistical data analysis

Using the Inquiry Framework as the primary tool, a profile of those Aboriginal Victorians whose circumstances reflected the definition of Aboriginal socio-economic advantage developed in this research was constructed.

Step 4: Generalising the findings from the statistical data analysis

The data produced in step 3 were further interrogated and summarised into a set of preliminary findings in readiness for review by Aboriginal participants.

Step 5: Engaging with Aboriginal participants to review the data analysis and preliminary findings

In her essay, Indigenous knowledge: foundations for first nations, Canadian academic, Dr Marie Battiste highlights the importance of acknowledging, and engaging with Indigenous knowledge, proposing that:

Indigenous knowledge fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research and scholarship. ...it creates a new, balanced centre and a fresh vantage point from which to analyse Eurocentric...pedagogies (Battiste 2006, p.2).

Aboriginal Australians are involved in the development of an Indigenous knowledge system that is generating culturally authentic knowledge and information (Behrendt 2003; Dodson 1997; Nakata 2002; Pearson 2010, 2011;
Rose 2011). The Aboriginal participants who engaged in this first research phase were invited to participate on the basis of their expertise; they were skilled in policy analysis, research, advocacy, project and organisational management, and were also strongly connected to their communities. They came from a diverse range of backgrounds that included senior academics, senior public servants and managers of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. These participants were invited to comment on the cultural relevance of the indicators that were proposed to form the elements of the Inquiry Framework, the relevance and authenticity of the preliminary statistical analysis and overview, the benefits of the data, and any cautions regarding its interpretation and reporting. Invitation letters to participants outlining the areas to be covered and a copy of the Plain Language Statement were provided to participants beforehand.

These participants brought distinctive expertise and perspectives, and their feedback and commentary informed and broadened the quantitative analysis and interpretations beyond the limitations of the ethnocentric data sources and analysis. The aim was to capture what Prout referred to as ‘important aspects of Indigenous lived experience, and...potentially ground breaking alternative[s] of how Indigenous peoples articulate their conceptualisations of wellbeing’ (Prout 2012, p.330). The interviews were relatively straightforward, constrained primarily by time, and perhaps too, by the fact that none of the group had a specific background in statistical analysis; they provided instead, a broad overview and policy perspective as well as specific comments about the relevance and applicability of certain indicators.
**Step 6: Combining the quantitative and qualitative data**

The qualitative data captured in step 5 were incorporated into what became a revised version of the first report. In combining the quantitative and qualitative data, the aim was to provide a more complete and authentic understanding of Aboriginal Victorians’ present socio-economic circumstances.

**Step 7: Semi structured interviews**

The methodology included a second opportunity to engage with Indigenous knowledge and experience, this time in individual interviews with a purposeful sample of participants. Culturally appropriate research techniques and approaches were utilised in the development of the research instrument and when conducting the interviews (Rose, Bamblett & Paton 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997). The focus in this phase of the research was on exploring the enablers of Indigenous socio-economic advancement, and in doing so, to focus on both societal structures and human actions or agency. This was consistent with the approach and principles that underpinned Giddens’ (1984, 1989), Attwood’s (1989), and Langton’s (2013) research.

Three of those who participated in the first research phase agreed to be interviewed in the second phase. A fourth person, a contemporary colleague of the researcher also agreed to participate. Those who agreed to take part in the interviews were all employed in management or professional positions and were
on incomes above the Australian median. They were all based in Melbourne and over fifty years of age.

These participants were invited to discuss the analysis of socio-economic and well being measures, particularly those on which Victorian was performing relatively well or poorly, their general views and perspectives regarding Aboriginal advantage in Victoria, the existence of an Aboriginal middle class and, importantly, their views about the key enablers of Indigenous socio-economic advancement in Victoria.

*Principles that informed the interviews*

The following principles drawn from portraiture shaped the interviews:

- They were designed to allow for a free flowing discussion. A series of prompts had been developed and circulated to participants before the interviews;

- The Plain Language Statement was a useful way of clarifying the research objectives and the risks, boundaries and accountabilities for participants beforehand. Until they participated however, this was all largely theoretical;

- Participants were guaranteed confidentiality, and were provided with transcripts of their comments for their authorisation prior to inclusion as data in this study.
Interviews and analysis

- The semi structured interviews were based on an interview framework and a set of prompts;
- Data were captured through a process of deep attentiveness and empathetic listening;
- Each of the interviews was taped, and the sections that related to the key interview question, the factors that in participants’ views had facilitated and enabled Indigenous socio-economic advancement in Victoria, were transcribed into individual summaries;
- These summaries were then further analysed, and the key points in the text that related to the primary research objective were underlined and highlighted, thus beginning a process of selecting and focusing the data;
- The key points were then amalgamated onto one summary sheet, and examined for recurring features, repeatable regularities, patterns or themes;
- These data were then transcribed and presented as key phrases, in tabular form in what Miles and Huberman would describe as first level coding (Miles & Huberman 1994, p.69).

Conclusions and verification

- The data were then reduced into a smaller set of clusters, primarily by reducing duplications
- These clusters were then grouped into meta clusters; in Miles and Huberman’s terms, this would be classified as pattern coding (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 69);
• The meta clusters included sub sets of responses that provided the capacity to gauge strength of responses;

• The final step was to develop a set of propositions or a set of generalizations from the meta clusters to inform the generation of the research findings. In the reporting of this data, the meta clusters were subsequently categorised as enablers of socio-economic advancement.

**Step 8: Final reporting, reflections and observations**

The final chapter presented an analysis of the dimensions of Indigenous social and economic advantage in Victoria. The objective was to describe the contemporary circumstances of those defined as experiencing socio-economic advantage; their occupations, education levels, gender, and geographic location, with particular focus on identifying and describing the factors and enablers that have supported Indigenous economic and social opportunity in Victoria.

**Summary**

The research methodology reflected a commitment to the interdependence or duality of structure and agency in creating processes or systems of social change as outlined in Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens 1984). The methodology was informed by Indigenous research protocols and guidelines and used a mixed methods approach to collect and capture the data. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data added new knowledge and information, notably because they reflected the life circumstances of a particular section of the Victorian Aboriginal
population. Langton’s Boyer lectures had mainly focused on the contemporaneous experiences of a section of the Indigenous Northern Territorian population. The objective of this research was to gain an understanding of the particular factors or enablers that had contributed to Indigenous social and economic advancement and achievement in a state where no direct economic benefits have been gained from a mining boom, mining royalties or Native Title claims.
CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

The research plan involved engaging Aboriginal participants in a review of the research design and a preliminary analysis of statistical data that was based on those measures included in the Inquiry Framework. The aim was to ensure that the research was informed by, and responsive to, Aboriginal knowledge, experience and agency. Section one of this chapter presents a summary of participant’s comments, input and suggestions, as well as the actions that were subsequently taken by the researcher to ensure that the research design, the Inquiry Framework and key recommendations reflected their contributions. Section two presents an analysis of Aboriginal Victorians’ contemporary socio-economic circumstances based on an analysis of the range of metrics that formed the component elements of the research Inquiry Framework.

SECTION 1: Reviewing the Statistical Data

Four Aboriginal Victorians who were experienced in Indigenous related social policy, research, program design and delivery were invited to review the statistical data analysis and a set of preliminary findings, as well as commenting on the research design. The data captured in this first engagement phase added greater depth and analysis to the reporting and interpretation of the statistical data. In some cases there were challenges to the data or the findings. In other cases, requests were made to highlight or strengthen particular issues, or to broaden the range of measures that had been proposed for inclusion in the Inquiry Framework. Participants were coded as numbers one, two, three and four for consistency of reporting but are only referred to here as ‘research participants’. Their feedback
and commentary are discussed below.

Participants were invited first to comment on the research design, and in particular, the component elements of the Inquiry Framework. There was general endorsement of the overall research design with comments such as:

Some of the data you produced showed significant improvements. There are really positive things happening.

There was a suggestion however, that consideration should be given to including a broader set of measures, with one participant recommending that the researcher

...think some more about wellbeing measures. It’s not so much about the quantitative data, there's also something around family, community, family connections and giving a leg up to other people around you; the ultimate question for this research design is whether it stands the test of good data capture.

Consideration was subsequently given to including a further set of wellbeing measures in the Inquiry Framework. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, for example, is developing an Indigenous Wellbeing Framework to provide a more holistic approach to the collection and analysis of Indigenous outcome measures (ABS 2010). This particular Framework lists a number of measures of Indigenous wellbeing, some of which corresponded to the indicators that had already been identified for inclusion in the Inquiry Framework. Several other measures from the Wellbeing Framework were identified as topics to be covered in the semi-structured interviews with Aboriginal participants; these included further information about participants’ family histories, cultural connections, support networks, mentors, educational and employment experiences. The objective was
to broaden the data analysis to include an exploration of qualitative data, of the factors that had fostered and enabled Indigenous socio-economic advantage and wellbeing.

Based on the advice received from participants, two additional wellbeing measures were subsequently selected from an AIHW publication for inclusion in the Inquiry Framework (AIHW 2013).

**Responding to the Inquiry Framework**

There was extensive discussion with the research participants of the suite of outcome measures proposed for inclusion in the Inquiry Framework. They all agreed with the specific measures that had been included, with one commenting ‘these criteria are all fine’. There was endorsement of the decision to use the overall Australian median weekly income as reported in the ABS Census of Population and Housing as a benchmark measure of Indigenous socio-economic advantage, rather than, say, the median weekly income for Aboriginal Australians or for Indigenous households. Participants acknowledged that the median weekly income for Aboriginal Victorians was significantly lower than that of the overall workforce, but there was no challenge to the use of this particular indicator in this study.

One participant explained it this way:

> When you go to your local grocery shop you don’t buy Aboriginal priced bread: you buy the same bread as the rest of the community, there’s no value in garnishing the statistics.
There was endorsement too of the reporting of the data on higher education, with one participant commenting:

Year 12 completion and income level are important measures. It’s also important to emphasise the exponential increase in numbers completing Year 12’.

In response to these comments and suggestions, the increases in Year 12 completions and the implications of this for future generations of Aboriginal youth were highlighted as issues that should receive particular attention when developing the final research findings and conclusions. The importance of providing appropriate and responsive educational pathways and employment opportunities were also identified as being crucial.

**Areas of Concern**

The comparatively low Indigenous employment rates reported in Victoria compared with a number of other Australian states and territories (the rates for the Australian Capital Territory are 72%, Tasmania 60%, Queensland 60% and Victoria 55%. (AIHW 2013) were singled out for particular attention. This was one indicator on which Victoria was seen to be performing comparatively poorly. One participant commented as follows:

The “sticky” issue is employment. The current data are not where it should be. I’ve observed programs such as the Victorian Public Service Graduate Recruitment Program, and basically that has delivered no Aboriginal employment outcomes over its 30 years plus life despite taking in around 100 graduates per year. The reaction from departments seems to have involved a sort of passive racism. Something is amiss. I’m not sure that it is racism in a service that you would generally describe as more progressive than others. Yet, when you are trying to raise recruitment levels, there just seem to be passive obstacles.
Aboriginal lawyer, activist and founder of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Noel Pearson, when commenting on the deleterious effects that unemployment has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders had this to say:

Apart from depriving people of a real income, unemployment has ...serious effects that ...include psychological harm, loss of work motivation, skills and confidence, an increase in sickness, and disruption of family and social life. Chronic unemployment of whole groups of people ....leads to social exclusion, loss of self reliance and self-confidence, and damage to psychological and physical health (Neill 2014).

Victoria’s comparatively low Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment rates have been highlighted in the research findings as a serious contemporary and future challenge to Indigenous socio-economic mobility and advancement in Victoria.

**Challenges to the Data**

The way in which occupational categories were reported in the preliminary data analysis was highlighted as an issue. One of the participants suggested that the ABS categories that had been used to report these data may have masked activity that is occurring in small business enterprises, where, anecdotally, an increasing number of Aboriginal Victorians are working. She remarked:

There’s no mention of private business, of the entrepreneurs who are the new dimension - the new frontier will be private businesses.
A subsequent review of 2011 census data indicated that 3.7% of Aboriginal Victorians were self-employed, and of these, 68% were male. Almost twice the number of the equivalent non-Aboriginal population was self-employed (5.7%).

When discussing the choice of median weekly income as a benchmark measure for this research, reference was made in chapter four to the value placed by many Aboriginal Australians on financial obligations to extended kin, and at times the broader Aboriginal community. It was anticipated therefore, that the proposal to use this particular measure in this research may well be challenged in terms of its relevance and applicability to Aboriginal cultural values and lived experiences. As anticipated, there was considerable discussion about the appropriateness and applicability of including individual weekly income, even as a proxy measure of Indigenous economic status. There was acknowledgement that Indigenous disposable incomes are influenced by a range of values and considerations, particularly in relation to family and community obligations. According to one interviewee, personal income has vastly different connotations for non-Aboriginal employees than for their Aboriginal counterparts.

A legacy of ill health and shorter life spans was highlighted by another participant as a major factor that has impacted on Aboriginal Victorian’s chances of wealth creation. He was more optimistic about future prosperity however, offering his reflections on increasing longevity, and the likelihood that superannuation benefits will become more widely available to Aboriginal people.
He commented:

Our people are living longer and retiring with benefits. People used to die in the saddle...now we have people retiring [gives some example of recent retirements]...to retire with an income is really huge. Until recently, blackfellas didn’t have to worry because they died before reaping the benefits of super. Retirement is a new concept for us.

Another participant highlighted that local data on Aboriginal Year 12 completions was showing a significant rise, with significantly more Aboriginal Victorian students completing Year 12 in 2013 in regional and rural areas than urban areas (VAEIA). These data broadly mirrored a 2008 AIHW report that showed higher proportions of Year 12 completions in inner and outer regional areas than major cities (41.8% and 30.1%). If remote areas were included, the numbers in non urban areas increased to 58.7% (AIHW 2013). Additional data was subsequently provided by the Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, Lionel Bamber in an interview with the researcher in 2015, indicating that there had been a significant jump in the numbers of Aboriginal Year 12 completions over the past two years: 384 in 2013 and 516 in 2014.

Research participants expressed considerable interest in the data on the numbers of students currently studying, especially the numbers of those in school and in vocational education and training (VET). There was some concern that if the Indigenous employment rate remains low in Victoria, pathways into employment may prove difficult for the increasing numbers of Aboriginal students who are
studying in secondary school and beyond. Employment attainment, it was pointed out, will be crucial to Indigenous advancement in this state. These comments and recommendations were included in the final reporting and conclusions.

The Value of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) were singled out for particular mention, both in terms of the employment opportunities they are providing and their role in service provision, advocacy and cultural sustenance. One participant commented:

I would argue that one working year in a community organisation is equal to four in study. The learning is immense. It’s not the glitzy learning of an MBA, it’s real...the people who run them are incredible individuals.

The important role of the Victorian ACCOs as enablers of both structural change and individual empowerment and agency is addressed in detail in the final chapter.

The Existence of an Aboriginal Middle Class in Victoria

Participants were asked to comment on Professor Langton’s reference in the Boyer Lectures to the emergence of what she had termed ‘an Aboriginal middle class in Australia’. (Langton 2013,p.31) One of the participants roundly rejected the use of the term, stating: ‘

I don’t like it. It sets up false barriers’.
Then he hesitated, adding:

The use of the term excellence though is a value to be strived for. I prefer to use the term successful for those who are getting ahead rather than middle class; for us, community recognition is also equated with status.

A second participant commented:

There are very few of us who fit into that loose umbrella. We don’t have cumulative knowledge and experience of being middle class. Those who are non-Indigenous may have five generations of experience of owning a house and passing it to someone else...there are also examples [amongst the non-Aboriginal population] of those who have got an education and moved up food chains. The so-called Victorian Aboriginal middle class of 2014 are people who have leapt to an opportunity. They are a focal point of might, of thought, of culture, of spirit, of energy, of commitment.

He continued:

Middle class is a western term...my aunt who has passed and lived in housing commission accommodation is high up there when it comes to status...one of the foundations of being middle class seems to me to involve a balanced raft of capacities. When I go to some of the ethnic events I attend and look across the table there’s a bishop, politician, radio announcer, and a couple of business leaders. I see them as a community. Over a couple of generations they’ve become very successful. If I was at Koori function I would look around and I would see community organisations, government, universities. That’s the sum of it. The other mob has a stronger based middle class.

A third participant commented:

We need to be aware of the emergence of a middle class. It’s a middle class of Aborigines...not an Aboriginal middle class...our social construct is families and also includes ancestors and Elders.
When referring to individual success or community standing, this group would not generally use the term middle class as an ascription. Their reluctance to do so relates in part, to a view that this is ‘a western term’; one that can be seen as divisive, and one that does not take adequate account of cultural values such as community respect and standing. There was, however, acknowledgement that Indigenous advancement needed a form of expression. For each of this group, success and achievement were considered to be multi factorial, with far broader meanings than just income status.

**Data sources**

The variables that formed the component elements of the Inquiry Framework were sourced from the 2011 ABS Census of Population and Housing (ABS 2011a) and an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare analysis of the 2012 ATSI Health Performance Framework (AIHW 2103).

The data are presented first at the national level, then for the State of Victoria, and then in detail for Greater Melbourne, and the rest of Victoria.

Before reporting the data analysis, some particular issues relating to data quality, approach and reliability are discussed below.

**Data Quality Issues**

The ABS produces extensive explanatory notes about the quality of Indigenous census data (see Population Distribution, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Australians, 2006b). The AIHW website also contains a useful overview of some of the issues relating to the quality and availability of Indigenous statistical data (http://www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous-statistics-quality-availability/). Some particular issues relating to this research are outlined below.

**Treatment of Non-responses**

In the majority of cases, the data analysis was limited to known responses only; when the level of non-response is low, the distribution of stated responses is reasonably assumed to be representative of the distributions which would have resulted from the whole population, or sub population. As non-response rates increase, this assumption becomes less valid. Discussion of non-response and editing procedures are available for all Census variables on the ABS website. The level of non-response is taken into account in the reporting of statistical data in this research.

**Rounding**

On occasions, discrepancies in tables between percentages and their sum total can be caused by rounding, random error adjustments, small cell sizes or building data sets from ABS micro data, for example, when using TableBuilder as a tool.

**Medians**

Income is an important determinant of a person’s economic and social wellbeing (AIHW 2013). Median personal income is the level of income that divides total income earners into two equal parts, one half having incomes above the median and the other half below. The medians reported in this research were based on the
median personal weekly income for the overall Australian population as reported in the 2011 ABS Census of Population and Housing.

Cautions

The ABS suggests that caution should be taken when interpreting income data because of low response rates causing problems with data bias, and differences between income data collected on the Census form and other surveys specifically designed to collect information on this topic. The ABS reports for example, that in the 2011 Census, 10.5% of Indigenous Victorians did not state their income compared with 7.9% of the overall number of respondents.

TableBuilder

TableBuilder, an online tool for creating tables and graphs from ABS micro data, has been used to construct a number of tables and cross tabulations for this research. Those tables where TableBuilder was used are identified. It should be noted that in some cases, data generated by TableBuilder may result in small differences from the raw data.

Comparability of Data

Data surveys are dependent on the timing and sourcing of the data collection. Some of the AIHW data used in this research dates back to 2008. Data sources and dates are reported for all figures. The section on geographic areas below discusses a specific issue relating to data comparability when reporting data sourced from different ABS geographical statistical structures.
Geographic Areas

The ABS utilises a range of approaches when reporting data according to geographic areas. One model is based on the 2011 Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). This standard includes seven component structures that have been designed to incorporate features such as population size, relative access to services, specific Indigenous populations, and predictions of likely population growth (ASGS 2011).

One of these, the Remoteness Areas (RA) structure classifies Australia into large regions that share common characteristics of remoteness. The issue of remoteness is less relevant in Victoria than some other Australian states and territories, but some of the data reported in this research has been generated using the Remoteness Areas classification structure, and others, the Greater Capital City Statistical Areas (GCCSA) structure. The latter defines a wider economic area for state and territory capitals than the RA index, and so there may be some variations in data counts depending which area based classification was used. As an example, Aboriginal population numbers in Melbourne may be reported as 47.4% of the overall population when using the Remoteness Areas index, or 48.8% when using the GCCSA. The tables that compare Indigenous Victorian urban and non urban population data in this research were built from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Profiles that are published as one component of the ABS’s Community Profiles series. These Profiles provide detailed cross tabulations for a selected area, and, in this case, a specific population group.
Figure 1 provides a visual representation of Australia and Victoria, according to the ASGS Remoteness Areas index as context for the detailed reporting of statistical data that follows.

**Figure 1. Remote Areas of Australia and Victoria**

Source: Data generated using TableBuilder, ABS 2011 Census, ASGSRA.
SECTION 2: Quantitative Data Analysis

This section reports on the analysis of socio-economic measures included in the research Inquiry Framework, elements of which were revised on the basis of input from Aboriginal research participants as discussed in section one of this chapter.

National context

The following section reports on a number of the relevant indicators included in the research Inquiry Framework.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population numbers and distribution

The ABS Census of Population and Housing provides the basis for estimating the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. According to the 2011 Census, 548,370 Australians identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage. This was 2.5% of the overall population. The highest numbers are living in NSW (172,624 residents who make up 2.5% of that State’s population) with the second highest numbers in Queensland (155,825 residents who make up 3.6% of the population). The numbers then drop to around 70,000 in Western Australia (where they account for roughly the same proportion as Queensland) and 56,778 in the Northern Territory (where they made up 26.8% of the total population). There are 37,990 Aboriginal people living in Victoria where they make up 0.7% of the population. The numbers of Australians identifying as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage in the 2011 Census of Housing and Population have increased since the 1991 Census, when the population was estimated to be less than 1.6% of the Australian population (ABS 1991). This is attributed to both population growth and improved identification.
Australian Bureau of Statistics projections suggest that by 2026 the Indigenous population will account for more than 3.2% of the overall Australian population (ABS 2014).

Figure 2 shows that the majority (78.1%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were living in major cities and non-remote regional areas when the 2011 Census was counted; a little over a third, (34.4%) were living in major cities, 22.1% in inner regional areas, and 21.6% in outer regional areas. Those living in remote or very remote areas accounted for 21.3% of the overall Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. It is significant that the proportion of non-Aboriginal people living in major cities is a little more than twice that of the Aboriginal population and that significantly more Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal Australians are living in outer regions, remote and very remote areas of Australia.
In the 2011 Census, 548,370 Australians identified as being of ATSI heritage - this was 2.5% of overall Australian population;

Victoria records by far the lowest proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders of any Australian State/Territory (0.7% of the overall population), with the highest proportions in the Northern Territory (26.8%);

The majority (75%) of Aboriginal Australians live in cities and non remote regional areas although there are significant differences across the nation;

About one third of the Aboriginal Australian population live in major cities (34.4%). This is in marked contrast to the non Aboriginal population, of whom 70.7% live in capital cities.
**Age structures**

The age structures of the Australian Aboriginal and non Aboriginal populations differ markedly amongst the 0-14 years and the 65 and over age groups. Figure 3 shows that more than a third (35.9%) of Indigenous Australians are under fourteen years compared to 18.8% of non Indigenous children, with significantly fewer Indigenous adults aged 65 years and over compared to the corresponding non Indigenous age group (3.8% compared to 14.3%).

**Figure 3. Age distribution, Indigenous status, Australia and Victoria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Australia Indigenous</th>
<th>Australia Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Victoria Indigenous</th>
<th>Victoria Non-Indigenous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-14 years</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 64 years</td>
<td>60.3%</td>
<td>66.9%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 &amp; above years</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>548,370</td>
<td>19,900,766</td>
<td>37,990</td>
<td>5,069,159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 Census

The comparative structures of the Victorian population are similar, with almost twice the numbers of Aboriginal youth aged fourteen years and under than non-Aboriginal children of the same age (35.2% compared to 18.5%) and far less of those aged 65 years and over (4.3% compared to 14.3%).

The proportion of Aboriginal Victorians aged 14 years and under (35.2%) is roughly the same as the Australian average (35.9%), as are the numbers of those aged 15-64 years (60.5% and 60.3%). The numbers of those aged 65 and over are higher (4.3% compared to 3.8%). The Victorian Aboriginal population demographic is skewed by the relatively high numbers of children and young people (almost twice the proportion of non-Aboriginal children), with the reverse
occurring amongst those aged 65 years and above. These differences in age structures can make absolute comparisons of some measures such as employment status difficult.

**Home ownership**

After the ACT and Tasmania, Victoria records the highest numbers of Aboriginal people, aged 18 years and over, who own or are buying their own homes: 52.7%, 51.6% and 44.0% respectively. (AIHW 2013, p. 933). The proportion of Aboriginal Australian home owners is highest amongst those aged 45-54 years (39.6%). In the wider population, home ownership rates increase over the life span, peaking at 83% for those aged 55 years and over. Up to 55 years of age, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population broadly mirrors this trend, although at significantly lower rates (22% of those aged 18-34 years; 32.4% of 35-44 year olds; 39.6% of 45-54 year olds). The numbers then begin to decline, dropping to 36% of those aged 55 years and over, compared with 82.7% for the non-Indigenous population.

Across all age groups, Indigenous Australians are more likely to be renting than non-Indigenous Australians. Home ownership rates are significantly higher for those who are working and those on higher incomes (38.3% compared with 19% and 64.4% compared with 15.4% respectively) (AIHW 2013, p.940). Research published by the AIHW has established an association between positive health status and home ownership, with higher proportions of Indigenous home owners
reporting excellent/good health than fair or poor health (38.6% and 25.6%) (AIHW 2013, p.938).

**Summary**

- Aboriginal home ownership rates are third highest in Victoria, with forty-four per cent (44%) of Aboriginal Victorians owning or in the process of buying their homes (the ACT records 52.7% and Tasmania 51.6%);
- Amongst the non-Indigenous population, home ownership rates increase with age; for the Indigenous population this is not the case as home ownership rates drop sharply after 55 years of age;
- Aboriginal home ownership rates are higher for those who are working, those on high incomes and those reporting excellent or good health.

**Income**

*Median weekly incomes*

Figure 4 shows that, in 2011, the median gross personal weekly income for the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was $362. In New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania these levels clustered around the high $300s, almost half of that recorded in the ACT ($644). The median recorded in the Northern Territory ($269) was significantly lower than that of any other Australian state or territory.
Median weekly incomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders remain considerably lower than those in the wider population in all Australian states and territories (ABS Various Indigenous Profiles, 2011). Median incomes for those living in the ACT are considerably higher than for any other state or territory. The median for the Victorian Aboriginal population ($390) is 7.7% higher than the Australian average, and almost a third (32.4%) less than that of the wider Victorian population.

*Median weekly income and population distribution*

Figure 5 reports that according to the 2011 Census, there were 99,363 Aboriginal Australians on or above the Australian weekly median of $600 per week. New South Wales and Queensland record the highest numbers (31,909 and 29,714 respectively), more than twice that of the Western Australia (12,441). The highest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders earning the median Australian weekly income or above, were found in the Australian Capital Territory.
Territory (49.5%), Queensland (33.6%), Tasmania (31.6%), and Victoria (30.5%).

Apart from the ACT, median Indigenous incomes are well below the overall Australian median. It should be noted that these figures are presented as proportions of the total population of those aged 15 years and over.
Figure 5. Median weekly incomes and above, Numbers and proportions, Indigenous status and state/territory, 15 years and over

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>% of 15+</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>% of 15+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>31,909</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>2,417,381</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>*7,775</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>1,905,859</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>29,714</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>1,530,143</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>5,135</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>551,720</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>12,441</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>859,461</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>4,016</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>156,256</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>6,632</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>74,262</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>1,715</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>174,350</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Territories</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>99,363</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>7,670,428</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 Census

**High Income Bracket**

As Figure 6 shows, in the 2011 Census, 14.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over reported gross weekly incomes of $1,000 or more compared to 28.6% of the non-Aboriginal population. Fifteen per cent of Victorian Aboriginal peoples reported these incomes compared to 27.1% of the non-Aboriginal population. By far the highest proportion of Aboriginal people who were in the top income bracket of $1,000 per week and over were living in the ACT (33.6%) followed by Western Australia (15.9%), Victoria (15.5%), and Queensland (14.7%). The lowest proportion was recorded in the Northern Territory (8.9%).
**Income and Gender**

As Figure 7 reveals, of those who stated their income in the 2011 Census, there were almost twice as many Aboriginal males than females on incomes of $1,000 per week or more (18.6% and 10.8% nationally; 20.3% and 11.1% in Victoria). In Victoria, the differences between the proportions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal males and females in this income bracket were marked (20.3% and 36.0% of males; 11.1% and 18.7% females).
Figure 7. High income bracket, gender, Indigenous status, Australia/Victoria, 15 years and over

Summary

- Close to 100,000 Aboriginal Australians were earning weekly incomes that were equal to, or above the Australian median, with the highest proportions recorded in the ACT (49.5%), followed by Queensland (33.6%); Tasmania (31.6%) and Victoria (30.5%);
- Of those on incomes of $1,000 per week and over, the highest proportion live in the Australian Capital Territory (33.6%) followed by Western Australia (15.9%), Victoria, (15.5%), and Queensland (14.7%). The lowest are reported in the Northern Territory (8.9%);
In the 2011 census, the numbers of the non-Aboriginal population in the top income bracket was almost twice those of the corresponding Aboriginal population (28.6% compared to 14.5%);

15.5% of the Victorian Aboriginal population are on incomes of $1,000 or more compared to 27.1% of the corresponding non-Aboriginal population;

Nationally, almost twice as many Aboriginal males than females were on incomes of $1000 per week or more (18.6% and 10.8%). The differences in Victoria were 20.3% and 11.1% respectively;

More non-Aboriginal males and females in Victoria were in this income bracket than Aboriginal Victorians (36% and 20.3% male; 18.7% and 11.1% female).

Employment status

According to the AIHW, in 2008, the highest proportions of Aboriginal Australians aged 15-64 years who were in the labour force were recorded in the ACT (72.1%), Tasmania (59.6%), and Queensland (59.5%). Victoria recorded 55.1% (AIHW 2013, p.1116). The proportion of Aboriginal Australians in employment increases with age (45% of 15-24 year olds; 58% of 25-34 year olds, 64% of 35-44 year olds and 62% of those 45-54 years), dropping steeply then to 39% for those aged 55 years and over. The comparative numbers for the non-Aboriginal population are 68%, 82.7%, 82.9%, 84.4% and 58.3% respectively. More Aboriginal males than females are employed (63% and 46%). There were significantly higher proportions of Aboriginal women not in the labour force than males (45% and 25%). Of significance was the finding that significantly more
employed Indigenous Australians aged 15-64 years reported excellent health (60%) compared with 11.5% of those who were unemployed and 28.8% of those who were not in the labour force.

SECTION 3: The Victorian Context

The Victorian data presented here is reported according to the component elements or sub elements of the research Inquiry Framework.

Population structure and distribution

As Figure 2 revealed, the Victorian Aboriginal population is comparatively urbanised, with 48.8% of the population living in Greater Melbourne, compared to the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) average of 34.4% in major cities. A significantly higher proportion of Aboriginal Victorians live in inner regional areas than either the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander average or the equivalent non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. There are no communities in Victoria that meet the Australian Statistical Geographical Standard 2011 (ASGS 2011) of very remote.

On Census night in 2011, there were 37,990 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders residing in Victoria. This was an increase of 26.0% on the previous Census (ABS 2006c). The ABS estimates that the most recent Census undercounted the Aboriginal population by about 17 per cent (17.2%), so on average, the
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is estimated to be about one-fifth larger than counted (ABS 2011b).

Figure 8 represents the distribution of Victorian Aboriginal population numbers based on the 2011 Census, showing the highest population numbers living in Greater Shepparton, Mildura, Greater Geelong, Greater Bendigo, East Gippsland, Ballarat and Latrobe.

Figure 8: Victorian Aboriginal population distribution

Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 Census, and GCCSA

Figure 9 shows that of the total Victorian Aboriginal population of 37,990, there were 18,022 Aboriginal people in Greater Melbourne and 19,968 in the rest of
Victoria: 47.4% of the Aboriginal population lived in Greater Melbourne compared with 74.8% of the non-Aboriginal population.

**Figure 9: Population distribution, urban/rest of Victoria, Indigenous status, persons aged 15 years and over**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Victorians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Melbourne</td>
<td>18,022</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>3,791,943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of Vic.</td>
<td>19,968</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>1,277,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37,990</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>5,069,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons 2006</td>
<td>30,142</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,902,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase 2006 – 2011</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 Census, and GCCSA

In summary, figures 8 and 9 reveal that:

- There were 37,990 Victorian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders counted in the 2011 Census;
- Of these, 18,022 were living in Greater Melbourne and 19,968 in the rest of Victoria;
- Victoria is comparatively urbanised, with 47.4% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander population living in Greater Melbourne compared with the Australian average of 32% and 74.8% of the non Aboriginal Victorian population.
SECTION 4: Contrasts and comparisons- Greater Melbourne and the Rest of Victoria:

Data sources and research sample

The data reported in this section have been sourced from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander profiles that are published as part of the ABS’s 2011 Community Profiles series. In most cases, the data presented for Greater Melbourne uses the Greater Capital City Statistical Areas structure.

Income cut-offs

The benchmark measure for the population sample to be included in this study of Aboriginal socio-economic advantage was determined to be the median gross weekly income for the Australian population as reported in the 2011 Census of Population and Housing. This was $577 per week and has been rounded up to $600 for the purposes of the research (ABS 2011a).

The population sample for this research study was therefore determined to be those Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and over who were in the middle ($600- $999 per week) and top income brackets ($1000 and above).

The data reported below follows the previous structures for National and Victorian data.
Demographics

*Aboriginal urban/rural population*

Figure 10 presents the Indigenous population distribution in Greater Melbourne, showing that the highest numbers (1,000 or more) are found in the northern and south eastern local government areas of Casey, Darebin, Wyndham, Whittlesea, Hume and Frankston.

**Figure 10: Aboriginal population distribution, Greater Melbourne**

Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder 2011 Census, GCCSA
Home ownership

According to the 2011 Census, in Victoria, 43.3% of Victorian Aboriginal households were either owned outright or being purchased. This compared with 72.3% of other households. The figures in Greater Melbourne were 45% and 72% respectively.

Income and wealth

Aboriginal Victorians on median incomes

According to the 2011 Census, there were 7,773 Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and over with incomes equal to or above the Australian median. This was a little over a third (35%) of those aged 15 years and over. The proportion for the equivalent non-Aboriginal population was 47.8%.

Of those Aboriginal people on these incomes, 4,616 (59.4%) were living in Greater Melbourne, and 3,157 (40.6%) in the rest of Victoria.

Aboriginal Victorians in the highest income bracket

Figure 11 shows that significantly more Aboriginal Victorians in the high income bracket ($1,000 gross per week or more) are living in Greater Melbourne than Regional Victoria (65% and 35% respectively). The difference in population distribution between those in the middle income bracket is less marked, with 55% living in Greater Melbourne and 45% in the rest of Victoria.
Figure 11. High income bracket, Indigenous status and Victoria urban/non urban, 15 years and over

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Greater Melbourne</th>
<th>Rest of Victoria</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Included</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest (under $399)</td>
<td>3,813</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>5,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low ($400 - $599)</td>
<td>1,448</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>1,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest to low</td>
<td>5,261</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
<td>6,768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle ($600 - $999)</td>
<td>2,383</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>1,956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High ($1,000 &amp; above)</td>
<td>2,231</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>1,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle to High</td>
<td>4614</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>3,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,875</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>9,945</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder 2011 census, GCCSA. Note: does not include negative incomes. Only includes those stating incomes.

Income and Age

Figure 12 demonstrates that the age distribution of Melbourne based Aboriginal people in the high income bracket is evenly spread, with 51.2% of 15-39 year olds and 48.8% of those aged 40-64 in this bracket. In rural Victoria, the proportion of those on high incomes is higher amongst those in the 40 to 64 year age group than those aged between 15 and 39 years of age (55.3% compared to 44.7%). Of those in the middle income bracket, the proportion of those aged 15-39 years are much higher than the older age group in both Greater Melbourne (61.5% compared to 38.5%) and regional Victoria (58.1% compared to 41.9%).
As Figure 13 shows, individual incomes are generally highest among Aboriginal Victorians of prime working age and lower for young people and those aged 65 years and over. The table shows marginally higher proportions of those aged between 25 and 44 years of age (28.8%), in the top income bracket and living in Greater Melbourne than those aged between 45 and 64 years (26.4%). The proportion of those in the high income bracket who are living in the rest of Victoria is slightly higher for those aged 45 to 64 years than those aged from 25 to 44 years (17.2% and 15.3% respectively).
The differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 25 to 44 year olds on high incomes are marked in both Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria (28.8% and 41.8%; 15.3% and 31.5% respectively). The most significant differences however are between those aged 65 years and above in regional Victoria, where only 1.8% of Aboriginal people are in the top income bracket compared to 5.4% of the non-Aboriginal population. The differences between those Aboriginal people in the middle income bracket and the corresponding non-Aboriginal population are less marked, particularly amongst those in Greater Melbourne.

The exceptions are amongst the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations aged between 15 and 24 years in regional Victoria (9.8% Aboriginal and 15.5% non-
Aboriginal respectively) and those aged 65 years and above (6.7% Aboriginal and 10.8% non-Aboriginal).

Income and Gender

Amongst those in the top income bracket, the relative proportion of Aboriginal males to females is roughly the same in Greater Melbourne and the rest of Victoria (62.1% males and 37.9% females; 62.9% males and 37.1% females respectively). The gender differences are less marked amongst those in the middle bracket ($600-$999) in either Greater Melbourne (53.5% males and 46.9% females) or Regional Victoria (51.3% males and 48.7% females).

Educational Attainment

Post school qualifications

There are similar proportions of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15-64 years with a post school qualification in Greater Melbourne and Regional Victoria (46.8% and 42.4% respectively). The proportions for the equivalent non-Aboriginal populations are 56% in Greater Melbourne and 50% in regional and rural Victoria.
According to the AIHW, during 2010, 3.8% of Aboriginal Australians aged 15 years and over completed courses in the vocational education sector compared to 2.1% of other Australians of the same age (AIHW 2013, p.1080). The proportion of Aboriginal Australians aged 15 years and over with a VET qualification was highest in the Australian Capital Territory (4.3%) and then New South Wales and Queensland. Along with the Northern Territory, Victoria recorded the second lowest proportion (2.1%) (AIHW 2013, p. 1080). More Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over had completed certificate 1, 11 and 111 courses than other Australians (1.9% and 0.5%; 1.1% and 0.8% respectively). Similar proportions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over had completed a certificate 1V course, diploma or higher (0.7% each) (AIHW 2013, p1080).
proportion of Indigenous Australians who had completed a course in the VET sector in 2010 was highest amongst those in outer regional areas (1.8%) followed by major cities and inner regional areas (1.2% and 1.2% respectively) (AIHW, 2013, p.1085). The proportion of Aboriginal Victorians with certificates was similar for those in Greater Melbourne and the rest of the State (19.5% and 19.3% respectively).

Higher Education

During 2010, approximately 0.4% of Indigenous Australians completed a course in the higher education sector compared to 1.6% of other Australians. About 0.3% completed an undergraduate degree and 0.1% completed a postgraduate degree compared to 0.6% and 0.7% of other Australians. A higher proportion of Indigenous Australians aged 22-24 years had completed higher education courses than other age groups (AIHW 2013, p. 1090). The proportion of Indigenous students obtaining a higher education qualification in 2010 was highest in the ACT (1.4%) and then Victoria (0.7%). The Northern Territory recorded the lowest (0.2%) (AIHW 2013, pp. 1095-1099).

Summary

- The proportion of Victorian Aboriginal people aged 15 years and over with a post school qualification is roughly the same in Regional Victoria, and in Greater Melbourne (42.4% and 46.8% respectively);
- Significantly more Aboriginal Victorians had completed certificates than other Victorians (61% compared to 36%);
The numbers of Victorian Aboriginal people with certificates is roughly the same in Greater Melbourne and the rest of the state (19.5% and 19.3%) respectively;

About two-thirds (65%) of Aboriginal Victorians with a bachelor degree, graduate and advanced diplomas or postgraduate degrees live in Melbourne, and 35% in regional Victoria, where certificates are more common;

The proportion of those in the equivalent non-Aboriginal population with these qualifications is significantly higher in Greater Melbourne (83%) than the rest of Victoria (17%);

These data confirm that geographic location significantly influences Aboriginal educational participation and attainment.

School Completions

Year 12 completions, urban/non urban comparisons

Figure 15 reports that in 2011, more Aboriginal people aged 15 to 64 years who had completed Year 12 were living in Greater Melbourne than the rest of Victoria (39.8% and 25%). The chief executive officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) has drawn attention to more recent trends however, where, in 2013, almost two-thirds (66%) of Year 12 completions were in regional and rural Victoria and 30% in Greater Melbourne (VAEAI 2013).
Figure 15. Secondary school completion, Indigenous status, location, persons aged 15 - 64 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Greater Melbourne</th>
<th>Rest of Victoria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>Non Indigenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>61.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10/11</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 8/9</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not go to school</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count*</td>
<td>10,352</td>
<td>2,832,134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 Census. Excludes those who did not state educational completions

*Year 12 completions, income levels, geographic location*

Figure 16 shows that of those Aboriginal people who were living in Greater Melbourne and who had completed Year 12, 31.5% were in the high income bracket, and 22.8% in the next highest. In other words, 54.3% of the urban Victorian Aboriginal population who had completed Year 12 were on incomes of $600 per week or more. The corresponding proportions for the non-Aboriginal population were 37.8% and 21.4% respectively, a total of 59.2%. The proportions of regionally based Aboriginal residents in the high and middle income brackets were lower than those of the urban population (19.3% and 23.8% respectively); those for the corresponding non Aboriginal population were 30.6% and 24.7%.

The proportion of Aboriginal people who had completed Year 12, who were on incomes of $1,000 or more per week, and living in Regional Victoria was significantly lower for than for those who were urban based (19.3% compared with 31.5%). The proportions of the Aboriginal population in the middle bracket
were similar for those in regional Victoria and in Greater Melbourne (23.8% and 22.8%). Overall, there were higher numbers in both brackets in Greater Melbourne than regional Victoria (54.3% and 43.2%).

**Figure 16. Year 12 completion, income levels, Indigenous status, Victorian urban/non urban, persons aged 15 years and over**

Source: Data generated using TableBuilder, 2011 Census, GCCSA

**School completion and attainment of post school qualifications**

The data presented in Figure 17 shows a relationship between school completions and the attainment of post school qualifications, demonstrating that only 3.8% of Aboriginal students with Year 11 as their highest level of secondary school attained a university qualification. This increased to 22.2% with Year 12 completion. Of the non-Aboriginal population, 4.4% of those who completed Year 11 went on to get a university qualification. A significantly higher proportion (42.0%) of those who had completed Year 12 went on to gain a university qualification. This was almost double the rates of the corresponding
Aboriginal population. Significantly higher proportions of Aboriginal students went on to complete certificates after Year 12 (24.3% compared with 13.8% of the equivalent non-Aboriginal population).

**Figure 17: School completion, post school qualification, Indigenous status, persons aged 15-64 years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Did not go to school</th>
<th>Year 8 – 10</th>
<th>Year 11 or equivalent</th>
<th>Year 12 or equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indigenous</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Diploma</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
<td>70.9%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non Indigenous</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Diploma</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>93.6%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 Census

*Year 12 completions and employment status*

Figure 18 demonstrates that there is a strong association between secondary school attainment and getting a job for both the Victorian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. The benefits for the Indigenous population of Year 11 completion are significantly higher than for those who only completed Years 8-10, and higher again for those who completed Year 12. There was a difference however between the proportion of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Victorians
who had obtained employment after having completed Years 12 and 11 (82.3% and 73.5%; 78.1% and 62.1% respectively). The difference in employment rates for those who had only completed Year 11 were most marked.

**Figure 18: School completions, employment status, Indigenous status, 15 - 64 year olds who are not currently studying**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Non- Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Year 8 - 10</td>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Year 8 - 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>82.3%</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in LF</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 Census

**Employment status**

Employment rates for both Aboriginal males and females are significantly lower in regional Victoria than in Greater Melbourne and lowest amongst Aboriginal females in regional and rural Victoria. A higher proportion of males than females were employed in both Greater Melbourne and regional Victoria (60.0% and 50%; 45% and 39% respectively). The numbers of women not in the labour force were higher in both Greater Melbourne and Regional Victoria (43.4% compared to 33% of males and 53.4% compared to 44.2% respectively).
Occasionally more Aboriginal males than females in Greater Melbourne were employed as managers (53.2% compared to 46.8%). More females than males were employed in professional roles (55.2% and 44.8%) and community and personal services (66.8% compared to 33.2%). Significantly more males (90.6%)
were employed in technical and trade positions. In Regional and rural Victoria, the proportions of females in professional roles and in community and personal care were significantly higher than males (63% compared to 37%; 71.9% and 28.1% respectively).

SECTION 5: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students Currently in School

National data

According to the AIHW, in 2008, in all Australian states and territories except the Northern Territory, there were a higher proportion of Indigenous than non-Indigenous students aged 15 years and over studying at secondary school and TAFE. The Australian Capital Territory had the highest proportion (27%), with Victoria the second highest (25.0%) (AIHW 2013, pp. 1051-1052). The proportion of Aboriginal secondary school students was highest in Tasmania (11%) followed by Victoria (9.3%). The highest proportions attending Technical or Further Educational Institutions were reported in the ACT (10%) and then Victoria (8.1%). This applied as well to the numbers in university or other higher education institutions, where the Australian Capital Territory recorded the highest proportions (8%) followed by Victoria (5%). In Australia, the ratio of Indigenous students at both secondary school and TAFE exceeded that of the non-Indigenous population by rates of 2 and 1.3 respectively. The rates in 2008 of university enrolments were, however, half that of the non-Indigenous population (AIHW 2013, p. 1052).
**Victorian data**

According to the 2011 Census, eighty six per cent of Victorian Aboriginal 5-14 year olds were attending school. This was one per cent more than the Indigenous Australian average and 6 per cent less than the corresponding non-Aboriginal population. Sixty per cent of Victorian Aboriginal people aged between 15 and 19 years were in school compared with the Indigenous Australian average of 52 per cent, and the non-Indigenous average of 80 per cent.

The AIHW reports little shift in the numbers of 5-14 year olds in education between 2001 and 2011, but a steady increase (6%) in those completing Year 12. An article in The Age newspaper (Marshall K, 2014, ‘Victoria’s Koorie students graduate in record numbers’, The Age, 17 February), confirmed this data, reporting a record number of Aboriginal Victorians completing Year 12 in 2013, and an increase from 22% to 40% over the past five years.

**Numbers at TAFE**

In the 2011 Census, 9.1% of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15-24 years were at Technical or Further Education (TAFE) institutions compared with 8.4% of the equivalent non-Aboriginal population. The proportions for both population groups were similar in Greater Melbourne and the rest of Victoria (9% Aboriginal and 8.4% non-Aboriginal; 9.2% Aboriginal and 9.5% non-Aboriginal). The proportions of Aboriginal TAFE students aged 25 and over were significantly
higher than for the equivalent non-Aboriginal population; 7% and 1.6% in Greater Melbourne; 8.2% and 1.7% in the rest of Victoria respectively.

**University enrolments**

A little over ten per cent (10.3%) of Aboriginal Melbournians aged 15-24 years, and 4.1% of those aged 25 years and over were enrolled at university when the 2011 Census count was taken. The proportions for the equivalent non-Aboriginal populations were 25% and 3.1% respectively. The proportions of Aboriginal students enrolled in university and living in regional Victoria are much lower; 3.3% of those aged between 15 and 24 years and 2.5% of those aged 25 years and over are at university. The proportions for the equivalent non-Aboriginal population age groups are 11.2% and 1.7% respectively.

**Numbers currently studying**

Figure 19 shows that the proportion (not the numbers) of Aboriginal people aged between 15 and 64 years identifying in the 2011 Census as currently studying and living in Greater Melbourne was higher than that of the equivalent non-Aboriginal population (21.7% compared with 18.7%) and significantly higher amongst Aboriginal people in the rest of the state (20.8% compared to 15.1%). If the high proportions of the Aboriginal population currently studying in regional Victoria continue, this will have significant implications for the provision of appropriate educational and training pathways and subsequent employment opportunities. This may be challenging, because this population distribution is significantly different from the trend that is occurring in the corresponding non-Aboriginal
population where much higher numbers are studying in Greater Melbourne than the rest of Victoria. The consequences for regional and rural Victoria may be felt more keenly too if, as some forecasters are predicting, the Victorian economy declines (Martin 2014).

**Figure 19. Attending an educational institution, Indigenous status and Victorian urban/non urban persons aged 15 - 64 year olds**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indigenous Greater Melbourne</th>
<th>21.7%</th>
<th>Non Indigenous Greater Melbourne</th>
<th>18.7%</th>
<th>Indigenous Rest of Victoria</th>
<th>20.8%</th>
<th>Non Indigenous Rest of Victoria</th>
<th>15.1%</th>
<th>Indigenous Victoria</th>
<th>21.3%</th>
<th>Non Indigenous Victoria</th>
<th>17.8%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Source: Table generated using ABS TableBuilder, 2011 census, GCCSA.

Note: Attending an educational institution includes from secondary school to university.

**SECTION 6: Broadening the Measures**

In addition to the Census of Population and Housing, the ABS conducts other more specialised surveys that include the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) (ABS 2013), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) (ABS 2008) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Survey (Department of Prime
Minister and Cabinet 2015). Surveys such as these are producing more detailed reporting of Indigenous socio-economic and wellbeing measures.

In extending the statistical analysis to include sources other than the ABS’s 2011 Census of Population and Housing, the research objective was to move, in Proust’s terms, beyond a consideration of conventional socio-economic measures. This decision was also based on the Aboriginal research participants’ suggestions about broadening the Inquiry Framework to include a series of wellbeing measures as reported earlier in this chapter. The two measures that were subsequently included were drawn from an analysis by the AIHW of the 2012 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework (AIHW 2013). Of particular interest were the established associations between these variables and a number of other indicators of Indigenous socio-economic advantage. The two measures that were included in the Inquiry Framework are discussed below.

**Self Assessed Health Status**

*Geographic location and health status*

The AIHW report indicated that the highest proportions of Aboriginal Australians aged 15 years and over reporting their health as excellent or very good were living in Tasmania (48.4%) followed by Victoria (43.6%). It should be noted however, that the numbers of those reporting fair or poor health were higher in Victoria than the Northern Territory, the ACT, WA or Queensland (AIHW 2013, p.605). Those Aboriginal people who were living in inner regional areas and in major cities
reported higher rates of excellent/very good health than those in outer regional areas (41.9%, 37.2% and 35.5% respectively). There were significant disparities between these rates and those for the corresponding non-Indigenous populations (56.1%, 57.1% and 53.3% respectively).

*Educational attainment and health status*

Aboriginal Australians 15 years and over and who had completed Year 9 or below, reported both the highest (37.3%) and the lowest levels of self assessed health status (47.4%). Those with Year 10 also reported better health (28.2%) than those who had completed Year 12 (22.3%). The data reported for Indigenous Australians were in marked contrast to the non-Indigenous population where reported health status was strongly associated with educational status; those who had completed Year 12 reported levels of excellent/very good health that were five times greater than those with Year 9 (58.3% compared with 10.6%).

Of those Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over who did not have a post school qualification, the picture once again was the reverse of what might be expected. This group reported higher levels of excellent health (61.2%) than those with post school qualifications (38.3%). The numbers who did not have a post school qualification and who reported experiencing fair/poor health were much higher (68.9%) than those with a post school qualification (31.1%). The differential was not as marked amongst the non-Indigenous population, with 57% of those with a post school qualification reporting their health as excellent/very good compared to 43% of those who did not have post school qualifications.
Employment and health status

The relationship between perceived health status and employment status was unequivocal; Aboriginal Australians who were in the labour force reported significantly higher levels of excellent/very good health (60.9%) than those who were not (7.0%). Once again however, the differential between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations was marked; 72.6% of the employed non-Aboriginal population rated their health as excellent or very good compared with only 2.0% who were not employed.

These data suggest that there is no apparent correlation between the self reported health status of Aboriginal Australians and their educational attainment. There is however, a strong association between perceived health status and employment status.

Household income and health status

Household income was strongly associated with self reported health status. More of those living in Aboriginal households with incomes in the highest quintile reported excellent or good health (6.1% compared to 2.5% reporting fair/poor health). Significantly higher numbers of those who were in the lowest household income quintile reported fair/poor health than those who were in the highest (61.7% compared to 2.5%). The proportions of those with fair/poor health were highest amongst those in the lowest weekly household income quintile (AIHW 2013, p. 610). Marginally higher proportions of those Aboriginal Australians reporting fair or poor health were living in the major cities than either regional or
remote areas. This suggests a growing differential in socio-economic and health status in urban areas.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing

The AIHW’s 2013 report includes a measure of social and emotional wellbeing. A summary of the most relevant findings relating to this measure are presented below (AIHW 2013, pp. 618-634).

About two-thirds of Aboriginal females and males reported experiencing low to moderate psychological stress, with about one-third reporting high or very high levels. This was twice the rate reported by non-Indigenous respondents. The highest levels were reported in outer regional areas where 2.3 Indigenous adults reported high or very high level of psychological stress for every non-Indigenous respondent (AIHW 2013, p.623). Higher proportions of those reporting fair or poor health also reported experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress compared to those reporting good or excellent health. Levels of psychological distress increased with the number of life stresses experienced (AIHW 2013, p. 623). Of significance was the number of those in the lowest income quintile reporting high or very high levels of psychological distress compared to those in the highest income quintile (59.9% and 20.5%). Higher levels of psychological distress were reported by those who were renting than by those who owned or were purchasing their own homes.
Levels of reported distress were highest amongst those with nine years of secondary schooling or less. This was also the case for those with non school qualifications, and seems to contradict the apparent disconnect in associations between perceived health status and school completion that was reported earlier. As might be expected, levels of reported stress were twice as high for those who were unemployed. There was a strong correlation between Indigenous emotional wellbeing, income status, housing, educational attainment, employment status and self reported physical health.

This chapter commenced with an overview of qualitative data captured through engagement with a group of Aboriginal Victorians who were invited to comment on the proposed research design, and the preliminary analysis of the metrics that had been included in the research Inquiry Framework. Their comments and responses resulted in adjustments to the research design and some elements of the Inquiry Framework. A number of their comments and suggestions were also flagged for inclusion in the final reporting, observations and conclusions. Section two presented a detailed analysis of the demographic characteristics of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and over who, according to the 2011 Census, were earning median weekly incomes and above; in other words, those who were defined in this research as experiencing social and economic advantage. The data reported for this population groups included their ages, gender, occupations, employment and educational status and geographic location. Using TableBuilder as an analytical tool, associations between some of the variables were also developed and reported. The statistical analysis was combined with the
qualitative data captured in the interviews with a purposeful sample of Aboriginal participants as outlined in the following chapter.
CHAPTER SIX: ENGAGING WITH ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDINGS

‘The trick is not to be seduced by the trappings of a middle class, but to rejoice in the success you have had; the opportunities that you are providing to the ones coming behind you

This is a quote from one of the interviews conducted in the second engagement phase with Aboriginal research participants. It was selected because it so aptly captures the views expressed by each of the participants: pride in their own and their community’s achievements, and a collective responsibility for ensuring that progress continues for future generations.

This chapter reports the outcome of semi structured interviews that were designed to seek the views of a group of Aboriginal Victorians regarding the facilitators and enablers of the socio-economic advancement that had been identified in the analysis of quantitative data. The inclusion of qualitative data captured from the semi structured interviews produced a more rounded understanding of the current social and economic circumstances of Aboriginal Victorians, reflecting Giddens’ theoretical proposition that social change occurs through the dynamic interdependence of both human agency and societal systems and structures.
Those who agreed to take part in the interviews were well known in their own and the wider community. In order to protect their confidentiality, personal details have been changed, as have names in the reporting of the data that follows. The participants were provided with any extracts from their interviews that were proposed for inclusion in the reporting of quantitative data. They were invited to verify and where necessary, amend the data. All quotes are taken directly from recorded conversations, but any errors in interpretation are the researcher’s.

Three of those interviewed were working in Indigenous-specific positions; Lisa in an ACCO, John in a senior role in a large mainstream organisation and Joy in a mainstream not for profit organisation. The fourth, Tony, is employed as an executive in a mainstream industry, having previously held positions in Indigenous specific and other mainstream industries. Prior to their interview, each of the participants had been provided with an overview of the analysis of outcome measures, as well as a set of preliminary findings. In correspondence outlining the aims of the interviews, participants were invited to ‘explore the factors or enablers that in your view have contributed to Indigenous socio-economic advancement and progress in this State’ as reflected in the quantitative data analysis.

The methodology section describes how the data were analysed and classified after having first been transcribed from audiotapes. This resulted in sifting and sorting the data to identify a set of what could broadly be defined as emerging
themes or factors that were nominated by interviewees as having facilitated or enabled Aboriginal socio-economic advancement. These broad themes were subsequently grouped into six categories and are discussed below, where they have been described as enablers of Aboriginal advantage. Additional commentary captured from the interviews with participants regarding future enablers of progress and prosperity for successive generations is also included.

Before presenting the outcomes of discussions with participants it is worth noting that the original research objective was to interview a sample of up to five participants. Four were subsequently invited to participate. The sample size however, is relatively small, and the findings from these data should be treated as indicative only.

**The Key Enablers of Aboriginal Advancement**

**Educational support**

Government support for educational opportunity was identified as a significant enabler of progress by each of the participants. Tony’s personal recollections from when he was at secondary school, for example, were of the Commonwealth Government having been the key player in terms of providing leverage and support for educational achievement. He considered that the Federal Government ‘had more clout and more comprehensive geographic cover’. His recollection of ‘times back then was that the State was snoozing - happy for the federal government to become involved in an area that had been difficult and
problematic.’ He suggested however, that from the early 1980’s, the Victorian state government began to take on a more prominent role in Aboriginal affairs, noting a change in community views and attitudes that he referred to as a ‘milieu that was moving from protection to supporting Aboriginal self determination’.

There were particular public servants too, whose relationships, personalities and connections were seen as crucial to assisting Aboriginal educational opportunity. John, for example, remembers ‘a guy who worked in the Commonwealth Education Department in the 1970’s. He ‘interacted with all Aboriginal students, knew them and their families personally and was watching attendance records: he was a significant person in our peoples’ lives in terms of promoting educational achievement’. John was encouraged to apply for assistance with higher education fees by ‘a bureaucrat from the Federal Education Department. She argued that ‘if you go onto ABSTUDY you can tell the tax man that there’s a need for it’. This helpful bureaucrat seemed to appreciate that John, who until then had not received financial assistance as an Aboriginal student, could be convinced to apply by appealing to his altruistic, rather than personal interests.

Before the Commonwealth took on a more significant role in Aboriginal affairs, the Victorian government provided some financial assistance to students. ABSCHOL, an educational scholarship program that was initially set up by the National Union of Australian University Students in the 1950s to support scholarships for Aboriginal students, was identified by all participants as being of crucial assistance for struggling families in the 1960’s and 70’s.
Lisa received assistance from ABSCHOL for high school and ‘that helped a lot. We got upfront payment for uniforms and books - $2 a fortnight arrived by cheque. That was real money back then’. She also identified assistance with home loans as being of major assistance in leveraging families from poverty: ‘Home loans make a difference if you get them, but they’ve been hard to get’.

Tony had benefited from a number of government initiatives that were designed to support Aboriginal students to attend university. As one of only a handful of Victorian Aboriginal university graduates in the 1970’s he was quickly recruited after graduation, and has, over a number of decades, transitioned through a series of diverse and challenging mainstream executive positions.

**Cultural and Community Connections**

Support from Elders, mentors and advisers were identified as a key source of cultural nourishment and an enabler of progress and success. Tony explained as follows:

In the 1970’s students were well known within their communities where they were mentored, supported and encouraged by a network of Elders who were interested in bringing out the best in us. They didn’t just focus on merit though, but encouraged aspiration, the value of education and applying oneself.

Two of those interviewed had actively searched for community connections. Lisa, on arriving in Melbourne from interstate, had checked the phone book to find a Koorie education unit, found a TAFE college that had one, begun a business
course, and had then obtained employment in an ACCO, where she rose into management ranks.

John had found connections with Elders and community leaders to be both emotionally and intellectually nourishing. He described a deep connection with an Elder who remembered his father’s traumatic removal as a child. The Elder later counselled him about the importance of connecting with his community:

......he used the words *sleeping* when talking about my experience of being brought up in mainstream Victoria; that I was sleeping and learning.

John has also been encouraged and supported by a community leader in Melbourne who has helped to foster his career, helping to craft career opportunities that have involved giving back to, and connecting with the Aboriginal community.

Lisa’s career progression has largely been supported from within the Aboriginal community—first by those who encouraged academic aspirations, and second by those who recognised her talents and provided her with a range of on-the-job training experiences and further educational opportunities.

Each of those who were interviewed emphasised the importance of giving back to the community. Apart from Tony, they were all working in Aboriginal specific roles. Tony, however, spoke about the importance to him of continuing
community connections and the potential value of translating the skills he had honed in previous Aboriginal related areas into mainstream roles. He described it this way:

Working in Aboriginal affairs involved negotiating with the most powerless part of the community. If you negotiate, the power is split; powerless becomes powerful. I’ve generally had a view that it wasn’t about telling the community what they had to step over: it was about getting them by the arm and helping them to jump over the hurdles together. And by applying that in the right mainstream industry it’s appreciated as well.

**Educational Attainment**

Educational attainment has been one of the chief factors in facilitating progress and advancement for each of the male participants, and key also to the progress achieved by Lisa in attaining a management position. John and Tony achieved academic success at a time when this was more the exception rather than the rule. This singled them out at a time when government and some employers were seeking to promote and encourage Aboriginal talent and opportunity. Education has provided opportunities for most of these participants to move to middle or high incomes, and to participate in the associated social and economic benefits. It seems from the data gathered in these interviews that education was transformational.

Support from non-Aboriginal colleagues and mentors has been particularly crucial to Tony, John and Joy all of whom have benefited from contacts with key figures in either industry, education, law, sport, the public service or government. For Tony, there was not only encouragement and support from within the Aboriginal
community but also from a range of influential non-Aboriginal people. He could identify considerable numbers of Aboriginal mentors and supporters, and the same number of non-Aboriginal people who had nurtured and supported his talents and abilities.

John’s story is equally powerful. He now has relationships with some of the most influential members of his profession both in Australia and internationally. He has worldwide connections with Indigenous leaders that have developed through travel and employment opportunities. He attracted the notice of leaders in his field from an early age, and this support, combined with a thirst for learning and progress has culminated in him achieving senior professional status.

**Employment Opportunities**

Both John and Tony benefited from employment arrangements in which their managers acknowledged their community commitments and obligations as well as their expert knowledge and experience in Indigenous affairs. Tony, for example, has been invited to head up task forces, oversee Indigenous employment strategies and has significant influence with politicians and senior public service officials.

John cited one particular example where he

...was helping out at an ACCO, and working full time in another organisation, when my senior manager called me in and said, 'I hear about all the work you are doing in the Aboriginal world, what would you think about us paying for you five days a week work,
but give you a .4 work load so that you can use that day a week to support the work you are doing for the Aboriginal community?’

He went on to explain how he had been trying to balance community obligations with a full time job:

All I ever wanted was...free me up and I’ll do a good job. I’ll work like two people. I’ll do a good job for the organisation in my day job, but then I’ll hang out around country and create change.

He added however that:

The arrangement worked because I was performing in my day job; if I wasn’t, it would have changed really quickly.

It is worth noting that these interviews were designed to focus on positive achievement and success; several of those interviewed alluded, as Mollie Dyer had in her autobiography, to some personal challenges and pressures that had been associated with rising affluence and status. It is acknowledged that a consideration of these issues may have presented a more complete understanding of their present life stories and circumstances.

**Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations**

The extensive and mature network of Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations was singled out by each of the participants as crucial to developing and nurturing on the job training for a population that until recently has largely been locked out of educational and employment opportunities.
John considers that ACCOs have played a similar role in Victoria to that attributed to the mining industry by Marcia Langton, commenting that Langton had:

...suggested that there was a nexus between the mining industry and the rise of an Aboriginal middle class. We know that there have been massive developments...over the last twenty or thirty years for Aboriginal people in income, but I said recently at a public event "Can you tell me what mines in Victoria have contributed to me fitting into that category of middle class?" Then I said, "Our gold mines have been the state-wide organisations". The Legal Service, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Health Services, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd, they’ve been the foundation of our shift from Struggle Street to Main Street. In my opinion, [Langton’s focus on mining and Indigenous success] dilutes the enterprise that happened in this state; behind everyone on Main Street there’s a story, and the story goes back to a transition from often a very impoverished state to Main Street.

John continued to discuss the longevity of the ACCOs and their role in fostering Indigenous talent and opportunity noting:

It’s the state-wides and Aboriginal people coming together to...the only other concept I can come up with is from a Chinese concept called “guanxi”. That is...when a group of people...the English equivalent is network. It’s about people co-investing in each other for the good. In the West you invest in someone to get a return. In our world, and the Chinese world, it’s the investment and the leadership of individuals, families, groups who’ve got together...to drive improvement, and in driving it they have developed along the way an incredible amount of IP. Having worked where the cracks are, they’ve got insights into health, education, justice. Community controlled services have matured. The health services we have access to provide the equivalent of the highest quality services available to the wider community.

He went on to describe the significant benefits in skill development and training provided by the ACCOs that:

...help to spin people who’ve worked in them into other contexts. I would argue that one year of working in an ACCO is equal to four in study. The learning is immense. It’s not
the glitzy learning of an MBA, it’s real... the people who run them are incredible individuals.

One largely unrecognised benefit of the skills developed in Aboriginal specific workplaces and contexts is the potential for these to be translated into mainstream contexts. Tony remarked, for example, when reflecting on his moves from senior roles in Aboriginal affairs into mainstream executive positions:

.....here I am (in his current job) doing what I did in Aboriginal affairs...bringing how I worked and did business in Aboriginal affairs into a mainstream role and it has really helped me achieve.

The range of factors identified above as enablers of Aboriginal advantage could be classified in Giddens’ terms as societal structures or systems; the personal qualities and characteristics listed below however, are about personal agency, how individuals shape their worlds.

**Personal values and individual agency**

Personal values and qualities were evidenced in many of the discussions with interviewees of Aboriginal success and achievement in Victoria. Participants were not specifically asked to identify the qualities and characteristics of success, but those presented below were gleaned from interviews.

**Open to and seeking opportunity**

John signed up for a long distance post graduate course after being appointed to a management role. He had at that stage been working for only five years. He
subsequently completed three other higher degrees. Lisa enrolled at university on arrival in Melbourne and has subsequently completed two advanced diplomas. Tony is a senior executive with one of Australia’s largest employers. He benefited from a decision to enrol in university after completing secondary school in the early 1970’s; it was rare to finish Year 12 and continue to university in the 1970’s.

*High achievers with aspirations*

John achieved professional success and then began to connect back with the Victorian Aboriginal community where this success is linked now not only to individual talent and experience, but an acknowledged position within the senior professional ranks of Aboriginal Australians. Tony showed early promise at university and was marked for success. He immediately gained employment after graduating from university, and has risen through the ranks of the public service to senior executive positions. Lisa has steadily built a career base in management in Aboriginal community controlled organisations, explaining too, that her husband had always ‘wanted to achieve; he had ambitions’.

*Adaptable and self-reliant*

Adaptability featured as a key quality of those who were interviewed. Lisa, for example, although very close to her parents, was prepared to move interstate for her husband’s work. After completing an advanced diploma she was offered a position in an area she had not worked before; ‘it was something different and I thought why not?’ Tony, having finished Year 12, was prepared to cross Victoria,
many kilometres from home, to board with a family he did not know and to attend a university where he had no personal contact or networks.

**Strong work ethic**

Each of those interviewed mentioned a strong work ethic having been present in their families of origin. In John’s case, there was ongoing family violence from his broken father who, his son, reminded me carefully, ‘was always a regular worker’. For Joy, ‘Elders were important, and how I was brought up. Mum and Dad worked for the community. Mum was a businesswoman and she paid for the land for us to build our home’. John showed an early maturity and work ethic, working part time to pay board to his grandparents when he lived with them, and to get through Year 12.

**Ability to navigate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal contexts**

All of those who were interviewed, whilst retaining strong cultural foundations and connectivity, were also active participants in the wider community. The interview with John provided an evocative visual image of this connectivity. When we met, his desk based laptop was open to show separate images running down two halves of the screen. On the right of the screen was an image of his Aboriginal mother, her parents and siblings. They were dressed in the fashion of the early nineteen twenties or thirties, the girls in billowy dresses clipped at the waist by wide belts. The young male, her brother, was dapper in a dark suit with his hair slicked back. The image on the other side of the screen was of a middle
Australian non-Aboriginal family. Four young boys in private school uniforms, with wide brimmed hats made up the foreground. In the background were their mother and a diminutive grandmother. Tony had created these images of his non-Aboriginal mother’s and Aboriginal father’s families as a screen saver, a visual representation of the separate but joined halves of his life.

Lisa is one of the youngest in a family of eight children; her mother was Aboriginal and her father was non-Aboriginal. She and her siblings attended the local state school and participated in the local community where they were all encouraged to play sport. Initially they all crowded into a two bedroom house but moved from there to purchase their own four bedroom accommodation. ABSCHOL helped with school fees. The children were encouraged to identify with their mother’s heritage and Lisa has repeated this, marrying a non-Aboriginal, with their children identifying as being of Aboriginal heritage.

*Family support and connections*

Family connections and support were nominated as crucial facilitators of progress and achievement. In some cases it was parents. Lisa, for example felt she could always rely on her parent’s support, and Joy credits her parents with the extensive contacts she has forged in the wider community, and the personal values she inherited. She sees herself as privileged by her parents’ community standing and personal values.
John identified his grandfather as having been a strong presence, describing him proudly as having been ‘entrepreneurial’, but acknowledging at the same time that his grandmother was the stalwart; his grandparents provided a secure base while he was growing up. Tony’s grandmother selected a non-Aboriginal family for him to board with when he first enrolled at university. Grandparents, for two of this group, provided stability and encouragement to aspire and progress. They stand out as having been influential, and were identified as a key source of motivation and influence. Tony credits his grandmother with being the driver, quite literally, behind his decision to study at university.

Lisa describes herself as being very self-sufficient, putting this down to family support and a sense that all of her is not invested- either her ego, or her family connections in what she does. Her parents’ and her husband’s work ethics and aspirations have also been key motivators and influences for her. Joy’s parents were high profile activists and community figures and she is following in their footsteps. She has been appointed to a number of roles in recognition of her status as an Elder.

**Enablers of Future Progress**

As well as examining factors that have influenced Indigenous socio-economic advancement in Victoria, participants were invited to consider whether circumstances would be similar or different for future generations of Aboriginal youth. They spoke first of the strong sense of confidence displayed by many
young people. Tony shared his pride in seeing ‘…lots of younger people stepping up. This gives me a lot of confidence about the future. They are so clear and strong in their identities; such confident talkers’. He commented further that:

The landscape has changed considerably since the 1970’s, with high proportions of kids in school. There are support centres in most universities: the numbers of Year 12 completions are increasing, career opportunities are opening up, some private companies and public sector organisations are establishing Indigenous employment targets…..

Participants expressed concerns about racism and discrimination continuing to impact on future generations. As John commented:

One of the really sad bits to me is that one of the most recently arrived migrants has got more chance to break into the real economy than the sons and daughters of 40,000 year of Dreaming. This is one of the biggest challenges we have…in my heart of hearts I say to the kids..."go out, become successful and we’ll buy back the land and it will never be taken again".

In referring to the challenges ahead for Aboriginal youth, he had this to say:

I think in their world there will still be discrimination. It will be highly tuned, or differently tuned than it is now. They will face challenges that are harder than any of the challenges that have been faced by my generation.

Participants were asked to nominate the factors that in their view would be important enablers of social and economic progress for future generations of Aboriginal Victorians. Tony suggested that:
....they have to learn their craft and then to make themselves indispensable; they've also
got to resist the notion of becoming a Black handbag - not becoming the token.’

He predicted a continuing role for existing ACCOs and a raft of new ones as well,
explaining that:

....the biggest group of young kids that I am involved with at the moment are at the
Koorie Academy of Excellence, and there we’ve got a range of well known families,
grass roots through to kids where they are the only Aboriginal person in their family. The
Koorie Academy recognises the primacy of state wide organisations; the kids do some of
their training at the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd, some at
the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. Previously when we spoke I said
that when Marcia [Langton], in the Boyer lectures, said that mining had been the chief
contributor to progress, well, in Victoria; our state wides are that for us.

The importance of education

John referred to previous research that had established that educational attainment
greatly increased the likelihood of future Aboriginal employment rates:

I’ve heard it said that Aboriginal kids have less chance of getting a good job than non-
Aboriginal, but the moment an Aboriginal kid gets a degree, then they have 7 or 8 times
the chance...

Whilst confirming that ‘education is crucial’, he was concerned about some of the
low ATAR scores recorded amongst those who completed year twelve in 2014.
He explained as follows:

We’ve just had ATAR scores out this week and we’re not getting the scores. There’s still
a lot of work to do. We are asking ourselves what is causing Aboriginal kids to get the
low scores? In our view, it’s back to things like the system, institutional racism at a
subliminal level and lack of trans-generational education.
The response to these concerns he suggests is to:

.....develop strategies to teach university stuff to kids before they come to university. It happens in America where universities that became frustrated with the education system started new bridging courses. We are looking at something like that...you see; kids just have their heart broken with a low ATAR score. The average for Aboriginal kids currently is much lower than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. We’ve seen some wonderful changes in school retentions and completions: now we’ve got to double our kids’ ATAR scores. I don’t care if kids go off and do an apprenticeship, but I want them to have every opportunity. So we’ve still got a load of work to do. Year 12 is the epicentre.

Targeting employment opportunities

Both Lisa and Tony endorsed the value of employment targets and affirmative action employment policies. Tony believes that given ‘the masses of Aboriginal kids in school and post secondary, some of the things that will influence their progress will be the inclusion of Aboriginal employment targets in major new infrastructure developments’. Lisa credits the support provided by university Koori education support centres and Indigenous employment strategies as having provided opportunities for Aboriginal youth to achieve economic and personal success.

Cultural pride and identity

Self-respect and pride were seen as important qualities to be fostered in future generations. John spoke poignantly about the importance for him of cultural pride and identity:
There’s some collective consciousness of being a blackfella. I’ve grown up with this arrogance. I know I’m good...I go home to a good house, I go home to a couple of cars...I live a good life. I collect all those trappings and trimmings, but if you took away my cultural being, I’d be nothing.

For Joy, ‘Education and on the job training are important, as well as self esteem’. She smiled as she described herself as ‘always [having] thought: I’m just as good as you’, in her interactions with the wider population. John is keen to encourage young Kooris to retain their cultural links and pride, at the same time;

.....instilling the value of western education - not to cut off their own cultural knowledge but to learn the way the west works.

Lisa nominated connection with culture, a pride in who you are, family support, including wider networks and having a goal as some of the factors that in her view would facilitate progress and success for future generations of Aboriginal youth.

The qualitative data captured in these interviews provided additional insights into the structural enablers of Indigenous progress, as well as powerful examples of individual and collective agency. The consideration by this group of some of the challenges and opportunities facing future generations of Indigenous youth provided valuable insights into future enablers, and potential constrainers of progress and advancement. The next chapter combines the quantitative data reported in chapter five and the qualitative data and findings reported here, to present a set of research findings and conclusions.
CHAPTER SEVEN: FINDINGS, REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Prompted by Professor Marcia Langton’s references to an ‘emerging middle class of Aboriginal Australians’ in the 2012 Boyer Lectures (Langton 2013), this research examines evidence of Indigenous social and economic advantage in Victoria, establishes the demographic profile of those Aboriginal Victorians defined in this research as experiencing social and economic advantage, and, finally, explores the influences and enablers that have shaped this population group’s life circumstances. Giddens’ theory of structuration and more contemporary contributions by Attwood and Langton frame an examination of both structural and human enablers of Indigenous advancement. The focus is on the positive and often unrecognised economic and social changes that are occurring for increasing numbers of Aboriginal Australians, exploring in particular, the dimensions and enablers of Indigenous socio-economic advantage in Victoria.

Chapters one to three provide the context for a subsequent analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, beginning with European Settlement and then tracking some of the more significant changes in legislation, policy and public perceptions that have impacted on Aboriginal Victorians’ lives. The 1970s heralded a new era in Aboriginal affairs, and this period, and the decades that followed are given particular attention. The network of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that span Victoria has played a pivotal role in advocating for improved community outcomes and opportunities, and their role in the
advancement of Aboriginal Victorians is explored in some detail. The ACCOs are an important employment source and inspiration for Aboriginal youth, as well as a source of cultural sustenance. The discussion of the role of the ACCOs leads then to a contemporaneous exploration of the theoretical frameworks and guidance from significant academics that influenced the research design and methodology. Anthony Giddens’ Theory of Structuration provided a valuable framework to inform an analysis of the present circumstances of Aboriginal Victorian people – a population group that has historically experienced significant power differentials in their interactions with mainstream structures and institutions. The work of Attwood and Langton in highlighting the critical and dynamic relationship between societal structures and Aboriginal agency (Attwood 1989; Langton 2013) further informed and extended the research.

Chapter four includes a detailed discussion of the challenges and complexities associated with defining and measuring Indigenous socio-economic advantage. It outlines the rationale for choosing the Australian median weekly income as a proxy measure of income status and discusses some qualifications and constraints.

Chapter five presents an analysis of statistical data that was undertaken using the Inquiry Framework developed for this purpose. This analysis established the existence of a population group of Aboriginal Victorians who met the definition of social and economic advantage established for this research, that is, they had personal weekly incomes equal to or above, the Australian median. A number of other socio-economic measures with established associations with Indigenous socio-economic status and well being were also reported, along with a set of preliminary findings.
Chapter six presents an analysis of qualitative data generated from interviews with a purposeful sample of Aboriginal participants. Extensive consideration was given in these interviews to an examination of the factors and influences that have enabled and facilitated Aboriginal advancement in Victoria.

This chapter draws these threads together, responding to the research questions by presenting first, statistical confirmation of Aboriginal advancement in Victoria and second, the demographic profile and characteristics of those Aboriginal Victorians who have been defined as experiencing socio-economic advantage. The factors and influences that were identified in the quantitative and qualitative data analysis as enablers of Aboriginal advancement and advantage in this State are then explored and discussed.

Before presenting details of the analysis of statistical outcome measures that informed the Inquiry Framework, some contextual demographic data is provided.

**Victoria’s performance on a range of socio economic metrics**

This research has established that Victoria is performing comparatively well on a number of Indigenous socio-economic measures such as higher education participation and completion rates, numbers with post school qualifications, home ownership rates and those in the higher income brackets.
**Population Distribution**

Victoria has the second most urbanised Aboriginal population in Australia after South Australia, with 47.4% of the population living in Greater Melbourne compared to the Australian average of 32%. The remaining population is spread across regional and rural Victoria. There are no communities in Victoria that meet the Australian Statistical Geographical Standard (ASGS 2011) definition of very remote. It is worthy of noting that in Victoria, the distribution of the Aboriginal population is significantly different than that of the non-Aboriginal population, of whom a significant majority (74.8%) are living in Greater Melbourne.

**Population numbers**

There were 37,990 Victorian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders counted in the 2011 Census. Of these, 18,022 (47.4%) were living in Greater Melbourne and 19,968 (52.6%) in the rest of Victoria. The highest population numbers were reported in regional areas of Greater Shepparton, Mildura, Greater Geelong, Greater Bendigo, East Gippsland, Ballarat and Latrobe. In Greater Melbourne, the highest numbers were reported in the cities of Casey, Darebin, Wyndham, Whittlesea, Hume and Frankston.

**Age Structures**

The Victorian Aboriginal population demographic is skewed by relatively high numbers of children and young people aged seventeen years and under, which is almost twice the proportion of the corresponding non-Aboriginal population, with
the reverse occurring amongst those aged 65 years and above (14.3% non-Aboriginal and 4.3% Aboriginal).

**Home Ownership**

Based on 2008 data, the AIHW reported that Indigenous home ownership rates were third highest in Victoria of all Australian States and Territories, with forty-four per cent (44%) of Aboriginal Victorians owning or in the process of buying their own home. The ACT recorded 52.7% and Tasmania 51.6% (AIHW, 2013, p.933). In Greater Melbourne, 45% of Indigenous households were owned compared to 71.5% of non-Indigenous households.

**Employment Status**

The comparatively low proportions of older Aboriginal Australians in employment is of concern; employment rates for those aged 55 years and over are significantly lower than for the corresponding non-Aboriginal population (39% compared to 58.3% respectively) and this has considerable implications for both current and future wealth generation, income status and general well being. The AIHW analysis of the 2012 Aboriginal Health Performance Framework demonstrated a strong association between employment and health status, with significantly more employed Indigenous Australians aged 15-64 years reporting excellent health (60%) compared to 11.5% who were unemployed and 28.8% of those not in the labour force (AIHW 2013).
The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a consideration of the research findings, a set of recommendations and reflections.

**Evidence of Indigenous socio-economic advantage in Victoria**

For the purposes of this study, Indigenous social and economic advantage was defined as those Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and over who are on median gross weekly incomes and above, as reported in the 2011 Census of Population and Housing. The analysis of 2011 Census data that was undertaken for this research established that there were 7,773 Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and over on incomes equal to, or above, the Australian median weekly income. This was 35% of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and over.

**Demographic profile of Aboriginal Victorians experiencing social and economic advantage**

**Geographic distribution**

Almost two thirds (59.4%) of those on median incomes and above were living in Greater Melbourne, with 40.6% living in rural or regional Victoria. In Victoria, 3,146 (15.5%) of Aboriginal Victorians aged 15 years and over were on incomes of $1,000 or more compared with 27.1% of the corresponding non-Aboriginal population. About two thirds (65%) of Aboriginal Victorians in the high income bracket were living in Greater Melbourne.

As well as geographic differences, there were marked gender differences amongst those who were in the high income bracket, with significantly more Aboriginal
males on these incomes in both Greater Melbourne and Regional Victoria than females (62% and 38%; 62.6% and 37.4% respectively).

**Age structures**

Age was less of a factor, with half of those on high incomes and living in Greater Melbourne aged between 15 and 39 years, and a further 49% aged between 40 and 59 years. The numbers in the rest of Victoria were marginally higher in the 40 to 59 year age group (54%).

**Occupation**

This research confirmed what previous research had revealed, that is, that Indigenous income status is strongly associated with occupation (Lahn 2013). Almost a third (27.1%) of Aboriginal people who were living in Greater Melbourne and in the top income bracket ($1,000 per week and over) were employed in professional positions, with the next highest numbers employed as technicians and trades workers (15%), managers (14%) and in clerical positions (13.6%). In the rest of Victoria, the highest numbers are employed in professional positions (21.4%), then community and personal services (14.4%), management (13.3%) and as technicians and trades workers (12.7%). The spread of occupational categories was different for those in the middle income bracket where significantly higher numbers in Greater Melbourne were employed in clerical and administrative positions (18%), as technicians and trades workers (14%), as community and personal services staff (13.2%) and professionals (11%). In Regional Victoria, the highest numbers were employed in community and personal services (16.7%), as labourers (13.7%) and in professional roles (13.5%).
For Aboriginal Australians, Year 12 completion is strongly associated with employment; according to the AIHW, 75% of Aboriginal Australians who were employed had completed Year 12 compared with 8% of those who were unemployed and 18% of those not in the work force (AIHW 2013, p. 1061). The statistical analysis undertaken for this research revealed higher numbers of Indigenous Year 12 completions in Greater Melbourne than Regional Victoria, with 61.8% of those aged 15 years and over who had completed Year 12 living in Greater Melbourne. Whilst Year 12 completion is related to Indigenous employment status, it does not necessarily equate to income status. In Greater Melbourne for example, about the same numbers who had completed Year 12 were in the high and middle income brackets (54.3%) as those in the lowest (46%). In Regional Victoria, the numbers in the high and middle brackets bracket were significantly lower than those in the lowest brackets (42.5% in the high/middle and 57.5% in the lowest). It is worthy of noting that the proportions of Aboriginal peoples in the high income bracket who had completed Year 12 were significantly higher amongst the urban based population than the rest of Victoria (31.5% compared to 19.3%).

These data confirm that Year 12 completion does not necessarily translate into income status; comparatively high numbers of Aboriginal Victorians with Year 12 are still on very low wages, especially those who are not urban based. Indigenous income status is however, strongly associated with an occupational category. This research has established that more Aboriginal Victorians in the top income
bracket are employed as professionals than any other occupational category. These positions generally require post school qualifications, although this may not always be the case, particularly for some Aboriginal Victorians who may have advanced to these positions through on the job training and development opportunities. The data reveal that Victoria performs well in this domain, recording in 2008, the seconded highest proportion (57%) of Indigenous Australians aged 25-64 years with a post school qualification (AIHW 2013). The proportions of those with these qualifications are roughly the same in Regional Victoria and in Greater Melbourne (42.4% and 46.8% respectively) and significantly different from the corresponding non-Aboriginal population where 77% of those with a non school qualification are living in Greater Melbourne.

It is of significance that higher proportions of Aboriginal students had completed a vocational education and training (VET) course in 2010 than other students in all Australian States and Territory apart from Tasmania and the Northern Territory (AIHW 2013). These rates represent a significant achievement for Aboriginal Australians, with unprecedented numbers entering an education sector that provides skills based training and potential pathways into higher education. This research established also that those working as technicians and trades workers were amongst the highest income earners in Greater Melbourne. Vocational education appears to be an accessible post secondary option, especially for Aboriginal people aged 25 years and over who are living in regional and rural areas. The numbers of Aboriginal students at TAFE in Victoria are higher in regional Victoria than Greater Melbourne.
According to the AIHW, the proportion of Aboriginal Australians who completed a course in the higher education sector was second highest in Victoria after the ACT (0.7% and 1.4% respectively). The Northern Territory recorded the lowest (0.2%). The numbers of Aboriginal Victorians with a degree and living in Greater Melbourne are significantly higher than in the rest of Victoria (10% and 5%), where certificate courses are more common. It can be concluded from this analysis that geography is a factor influencing Indigenous higher education opportunity and attainment.

The proportion of Aboriginal students who are currently enrolled in higher education courses remains considerably lower than the corresponding non-Aboriginal population. Creating effective pathways into higher education is an important priority; future employment opportunities are likely to be significant for those Aboriginal Victorians with university qualifications. There will be high demand and a relatively small pool of potential employees. The representation of those employed as technicians and trades workers amongst the highest income earners in Greater Melbourne suggests too, that vocational education attainment may also be an important future enabler of economic advancement.

In summary, if you are Aboriginal and living in Victoria, as a general principle, where you live and your gender will affect your income and occupational status; almost twice the numbers of those in the top income bracket ($1,000 per week or more) are urban based, and significantly more males than females are on these salaries. The highest income earners are working as professionals, and, in
Melbourne, as technicians and traders workers. In the rest of Victoria, those on
the highest incomes are employed as professionals and in community and
personal services.

**Broadening the Inquiry Framework**

The Aboriginal participants who participated in the first research engagement
phase suggested that a broader set of well being measures should be included in
the Inquiry Framework than just those sourced from the 2011 Census of
Population and Housing. Two particular measures, self reported physical health
and emotional well being were subsequently included to round out the
consideration of those factors that enable or impede Indigenous socio-economic
progress. These measures were drawn from the AIHW’s detailed analysis of the
2012 Aboriginal Health Performance Framework (AIHW 2013). The AIHW’s
analysis and reporting of these measures demonstrated no apparent correlation
between the self-reported health status of Aboriginal Australians and their
educational attainment. There was, however, a strong association between
perceived health status and employment status. By contrast, emotional wellbeing
was strongly associated with educational attainment, income, home ownership,
education and employment status.

**Enablers of Aboriginal advantage and advancement**

Having ascertained that more than one third of the Victorian Aboriginal
population could be described as socio-economically advantaged, and then
determining the social, economic, geographic, and educational and employment profiles of this population segment, it was time to address the final research issue: the factors or enablers that had influenced this change. The statistical analysis had established associations between income status and a range of other variables or outcome measures. AIHW research had also established correlations between income and self-reported health status and emotional wellbeing. The personal interviews however, provided valuable qualitative data and perspectives regarding the factors that, in the view of those interviewed, had facilitated Indigenous socio-economic advancement in Victoria. These enablers are reported below.

**Family and Community Support and Strong Cultural Connections**

Family connections and support were nominated as crucial facilitators of individual agency, advancement and achievement. In some cases it was parents, in others it was grandparents and Elders, who had supported and encouraged success. The Elders in particular were credited with identifying and encouraging talent and aspiration amongst younger generations. They were seen as a crucial source of cultural nourishment, and an enabler of transformative change. Each of those interviewed emphasised the importance of remaining connected to, and giving back to their community. Three of the four participants were currently working in Aboriginal specific roles. Tony, the fourth, who is employed as an industry executive, spoke about the importance to him of continuing community connections and the potential value of translating the skills he had developed in previous Aboriginal domains into mainstream roles - a largely unacknowledged value proposition for mainstream employers.
Support from non-Aboriginal colleagues and mentors was identified by interviewees as having significantly benefited their careers; key figures in industry, education, law, sport and the public service were singled out for mention. Reference has previously been made to the mature and genuine partnerships that have developed between government officials and Aboriginal community leaders in Victoria. Significant systemic change has been achieved through long standing relationships and demonstrated respect for Indigenous knowledge and agency. Whilst there has been no mining boom in Victoria, a readiness amongst politicians and government officials to engage in a more genuine partnership with the Aboriginal community has shifted the balance to one of greater equality. Aboriginal Victorians have long been acknowledged as agents of change; individual and collective agency is not a new concept to this community.

**Education: A pathway to advancement**

Educational attainment was identified as one of the chief structural enablers of advancement for each of the male participants, and had also facilitated one of the female participant's career in management. The two males who were interviewed for this research had achieved academic success in the 1970’s and 80’s when this was more the exception than the rule for Aboriginal Victorians. This singled them out at a time when government and some employers were beginning to more actively promote and encourage Aboriginal talent and opportunity. Education provided opportunities for the majority of participants to move into higher income brackets and to participate in the associated social and economic benefits. It
seems from the data gathered in these interviews that education was transformational.

Employment Opportunity

Employment was identified as one of the key structural enablers of socio-economic advancement; three of those who were interviewed reported having benefited from employment arrangements in mainstream organisations where their expert knowledge and experience in Indigenous affairs as well as their community commitments and obligations were acknowledged. An as yet largely unrecognised benefit of the skills and capabilities that are developed in Aboriginal specific workplaces is the potential for these to be translated into mainstream contexts.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

The extensive and mature network of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that is a feature of the Victorian landscape, was singled out by each of those interviewed as having been crucial enablers of work based skill development and training for a population that until recently has largely been locked out of educational and employment opportunities. Their geographic span, political history and legacy as well as extensive service networks reflect considerable enterprise and business acumen that would, in Giddens’ terms be defined as human action or agency. Aboriginal Community Controlled
Organisations have become an important source of social and financial capital for Aboriginal Victorians.

The earlier Victorian ACCO’s were established in very different social, economic and political context than those described by Langton in the 2012 Boyer Lectures (Langton 2013). Some of the features of the social and economic changes she described as occurring in the Northern Territory have, however, been similar for both populations. The key factors have included a growing equality in interactions between Indigenous communities and non Indigenous employers, a keen interest in Indigenous enterprise and business development, and new forms of engagement and partnership between Aboriginal communities and the wider population. These changes involve increased agency for Aboriginal populations in their interactions with non Aboriginal societal structures and institutions. It is worth noting however, that Aboriginal Victorians’ strong performances on a wide range of educational, employment and income measures has occurred in the absence of significant injections of funds from sources such as mining royalties, and comparatively low success rates with Native Title claims.

**Policy Levers and Initiatives**

It is life, not government policy that is seen to shape and influence peoples’ lives; those interviewed for this research were no exception. Their initial responses, when asked to discuss Indigenous advancement focused first on personal factors:
their families, those who had encouraged and supported them, and, in some cases, their own personal goals and aspirations.

When prompted to consider whether any particular government initiatives had facilitated or enabled progress and advancement, each one mentioned financial assistance and support with education as having been important structural enablers. Some of their recollections were about help with education fees and pathways into tertiary education. Others were more personal, with particular bureaucrats remembered fondly for their wise counsel, support and encouragement. Assistance with home loans was also identified as a major source of assistance in leveraging families out of poverty.

These examples confirm the importance of ensuring that structural enablers such as financial assistance with education fees and costs continues for the very high proportions of Aboriginal students now studying in Victoria. Pathways into employment through graduate employment programs, a commitment to Indigenous employment targets and closer links between industry and educational institutions will be important enablers of future progress. Mature ACCO’s have an important part to play as well, extending opportunities for integrated workplace training and development as well as cultural connectivity and sustenance.

**Personal Qualities and Attributes**

Participants were not specifically asked to identify any personal qualities, values or characteristics that had contributed to their own and others success. There were
consistent themes however in each of the interviews that reflected personal agency in the ways these individuals had shaped their worlds, confirming Giddens’, Langton’s and Attwood’s propositions and perspectives.

Each of those interviewed for example, described themselves as having been open to opportunity. They were high achievers with aspirations and a strong work ethic that had been encouraged in their families of origin. A noticeable feature was their strong connections to, and with, the Victorian Aboriginal community. They were deeply embedded in their own communities, whilst at the same time fully participating in the wider community. From Pearson’s perspective, their life experiences could well be described as exemplifying the bi-cultural future that he suggests ‘Aboriginal people desire’ (Pearson 2014, p. 36).

**Looking to the Future**

Victoria records the second highest proportions of Aboriginal Australian secondary school students, the second highest numbers enrolled in Vocational Education and the second highest proportions attending University. The proportion, not the actual numbers, of Aboriginal people aged between 15 and 64 years currently studying in Greater Melbourne is higher than that of the equivalent non-Aboriginal population (21.7% compared with 18.7%) and significantly higher amongst Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people in the rest of the State (20.8% compared with 15.1%). There are challenges still to be addressed including the need to raise ATAR scores, improve retention rates and overall school participation rates, in addition to focusing on the provision of appropriate educational and training pathways and subsequent employment opportunities for
the comparatively high numbers currently studying in regional and rural Victoria. This is likely to be particularly challenging because the numbers, rather than proportions, are comparatively small, and the population distribution between urban and non urban areas differs so markedly from that of the corresponding non Aboriginal population. Dramatic increases in Indigenous Year 12 completions and the unprecedented movement of Aboriginal Australian students into the VET sector over the past two decades are indicators of significant educational change and progress. With a comparatively urbanised Aboriginal population, Victoria is well placed to design educational pathways and employment opportunities for future generations of Aboriginal youth. The Aboriginal community, educational institutions, governments, philanthropists and the business sector all have important contributions to make in ensuring that structural enablers such as education and employment facilitate future Indigenous agency, success and achievement.

Reflections

Enablers and Constraints

The conversations with Indigenous participants confirmed the importance of enabling societal structures, such as employment and education in their own and others’ advancement and success. Special mention was made of the important role the ACCOs have played in providing a combination of both structure: jobs, services programs and agency, through advocacy and community empowerment. The ACCOs are just one demonstration of the significant enablers of socio-economic advancement that have been provided from within the Victorian
Aboriginal community. The role of family and Elders has been crucial, as has the leadership and mentoring provided by a range of adults and community leaders. A number of personal qualities that could be defined in Giddens’ terms as reflecting individual agency were also considered to be fundamental ingredients of success and achievement. These included being open to and seeking opportunity, having a strong work ethic, being adaptable and self reliant, and importantly, successfully navigating Aboriginal and non Aboriginal contexts.

Aspirations for future generations

It was with great pride that those who were interviewed for this research reflected on the dramatic changes that have occurred over the past fifty years; a time in all of their lived memories. Increases in educational participation and attainment, rising employment numbers, an increasing presence in professions requiring post school qualifications and rising incomes were singled out as crucial markers of this success, as were on the job training and development opportunities.

Participants were invited to identify factors that, in their view, would be important enablers of progress for future generations. Learning a craft was considered vitally important, as was the ability to retain a pride in culture and community connections. A continuing role for the ACCO’s was highlighted as crucial to future generations, as were the value of Indigenous employment targets and affirmative action strategies to build effective pathways into employment. Self-respect and pride were seen as important qualities to be fostered in future
generations as was the importance of young people successfully navigating two cultures.

The optimism expressed in these conversations was tempered however, with concern about ongoing racism and its potentially demoralising and insidious effects on future generations. To quote one of the participants:

This is one of the biggest challenges we have...in their [Aboriginal youths’] world, there will still be discrimination. It will be highly tuned, or differently tuned than it is now. They will face challenges that are harder than any of the challenges that have been faced by my generation.

Racism is a live and continuing issue in Australia. At the time of writing, Adam Goodes, a former Australian of the Year and Aboriginal AFL football hero, was heckled and booed by sections of the crowd in a 2015 AFL match. A subsequent newspaper article by Martin Flanagan, suggested that ‘Aboriginal people believe he has been booed at AFL games because he spoke out on Aboriginal matters’.

The issue continued to spark intense media and public debate and controversy, with Flanagan commenting in the same article that ‘now everyone has an opinion on it’ (Flanagan, M 2015, ‘Adam Goodes’ war dance must provoke conversation, not confrontation’, The Age, 6 June, p. 50). These words would prove to be almost prophetic, with the antagonism towards Goodes culminating in him taking time away from the game and flaring into an Australia-wide debate that ‘touched a raw nerve divid[ing] Australia’ in what reporter Rick Feneley dubbed a ‘chorus of disapproval [that] ...echoed through stadiums with the contagion of a Mexican wave’ (Feneley, R 2015, ‘In a dark place’, The Age, 1 August, Insight, p. 24).

The antagonism towards Goodes was played out on a very public platform and whilst this had dramatic effects on him as an individual, it highlighted an ugly
side of relations in Australia; one that goes largely unchallenged in what Stanner referred to as the ‘great Australian silence’ (Stanner 1991, p. 25). It worthy of noting however, that racism and discrimination were singled out by those who were interviewed for this research as one of the most significant obstacles to the advancement of future generations of Aboriginal youth.

The Term Middle Class

None of those who participated in this research were prepared to ascribe a middle class status to themselves or others, as Langton had in her discussion of Indigenous ‘economic success’ (Langton 2013, p.13). According to them, the term could be seen as divisive: a Western term that focuses on individual income status rather than broader notions of wellbeing or community standing. Examples were provided of individuals who were respected (had status) within the Aboriginal community, but who were not homeowners or financially well off. Participants preferred other terms such as ‘getting ahead’, ‘personal success’ and ‘aiming for excellence’ to describe social and economic advantage and achievement. Their reasons for rejecting the term were first cultural; it was seen as a western term that embraces individualism rather than collectivism. There were some concerns expressed as well about a potential backlash from the wider community if Aboriginal Victorians are seen to have bridged the inequality gap. These concerns related to this success being used as a reason to reduce services and support and possibly, to fuel further racism and discrimination.
Future Challenges

It was pointed out in the interviews with Aboriginal participants that continuing the rapid progress that has occurred in Victoria, particularly over the past twenty or thirty years is by no means assured. The shift in focus towards redressing disadvantage in the north of Australia poses challenges for a Victorian population that is small in numbers, comparatively urbanised and now seen to be performing well on many of the indicators associated with socio-economic advantage.

At 55.1%, Aboriginal Victorian employment rates are well below Indigenous employment rates in the ACT (72.1%), and, marginally lower than either Tasmania (59.6%) or Queensland (59.5%). Since having a job is unequivocally related to Indigenous socio-economic advantage, scoping future employment markets and opportunities and getting young Aboriginal people work ready will be crucial, as will be the construction of practical and effective education pathways that result in jobs. This is particularly important because of the unprecedented numbers of Aboriginal youth who are currently studying in Victoria.

More Aboriginal Victorians are living in regional and rural areas than the rest of the population, and as previously mentioned, this is a key consideration if social and economic momentum is to be maintained. There is still a wide gap in home ownership rates, with almost twice as many of the non-Aboriginal population owing their own home than the Aboriginal population. Since home ownership is the chief source of wealth generation in Australia, these figures reveal the considerable disparities between these population groups.
More needs to be done to create an enabling environment; continued government support with education costs, careful analysis of future employment markets, and initiatives such as Indigenous employment targets have been identified as structural enablers of future Indigenous social and economic progress. According to Macroeconomics, a Canberra based consulting firm, Victoria, is experiencing comparatively high rates of overall unemployment, with an Age article report based on this analysis forecasting that ‘Victoria’s unemployment rate is on track to exceed Tasmania’s, peaking at 7.3% in 2016-17’. Only South Australia, the forecasters predict, will have higher unemployment levels (Martin, P 2014, ‘Victoria’s unemployment rate on track to exceed Tasmania’s’, *The Age*, 10 November). This is an issue that could impact on the future employment prospects for all Victorians, and requires careful monitoring in terms of the potential impact on employment opportunities for future generations of Aboriginal Victorians.

**Conclusions**

The analysis of statistical data undertaken for this research study established that 35% of Aboriginal Victorians were earning median weekly incomes or above; this group were defined in this study as experiencing social and economic advantage. A range of socio-economic and wellbeing measures were demonstrated to be associated with Indigenous advantage: educational attainment, occupation, home ownership and emotional health are examples. The interviews with Aboriginal community leaders confirmed these to be enablers of economic and social advancement. The interviewees identified an additional range of factors however,
many of which were associated with individual or collective agency: personal resilience, support from family and Elders, cultural pride and connectedness, strong work ethics and a thirst for learning are examples. There are spectacular systemic reforms in Victoria that exemplify the interdependence and interconnectedness of Aboriginal agency and action in shaping social processes and change. Examples include the inclusion in the Victorian Families, Child and Youth Act, 2005, of a requirement to consult the Aboriginal community prior to placing Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and the establishment of a network of Koorie courts.

This research confirmed that Langton’s claims of rising Indigenous incomes, influence and empowerment are, in fact, occurring in Victoria, but in a very different context from those described in the Northern Territory, in the 2012 Boyer Lectures. This thesis provides a powerful demonstration of the social and economic advancement that has been achieved for 35% of Aboriginal Victorians through a combination of Aboriginal agency and enterprise, and enabling societal structures and systems. The challenge now is to use the findings from this research to accelerate opportunity for the 65% of Aboriginal Victorians whose incomes fall below the median, and to ensure that momentum is maintained for future generations.
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**LEGISLATION**

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission Act 1989* (Cth)

*Aboriginal Land Rights* (Northern Territory)

*Aboriginal Protection Act 1869* (Vic)

*Aboriginal Protection Act 1886* (Vic)

*Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* (Vic)

*Native Title Act 1993* (Cth)

*Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* (Vic)