

Engineer ended decades of neglect

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Educator ... Jeff Dobell opened doors at universities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

Jeff Dobell, 1939-2010

A vision of nation building, community by community, with every young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning how to shape their own future, inspired Jeff Dobell's blueprint for university summer schools for indigenous students.

A retired engineer, Dobell saw the decades of neglect of remote communities and in 1995 created a not-for-profit organisation, Engineering Aid Australia (EAA), to send volunteers to remote communities. It became clear that deeply impoverished people in small and extremely isolated places needed indigenous community builders. Dobell's plan was to create a pathway for bright and enthusiastic young men and women in the final years of high school.

At the time, Australia had no more than a handful of indigenous engineers equipped for the challenge of tackling leaking sewage systems, flood control, the urgent upgrading of water and energy supplies and repair of thousands of decaying and substandard houses.

In 1998, EAA enlisted some of Australia's leading engineering corporations and launched a week-long summer school at the University of Sydney. The following year the University of NSW, in partnership with Nura Gili Indigenous Programs, took up the project and attracted students from around the country. Newcastle University joined in, and Curtin University of Technology in Perth held its first engineering summer school in January this year.

With a great sense of fun and purpose, hundreds of indigenous students have explored solar power, water treatment and catchment, computer planning and spatial information systems that can help create healthier communities.

From the 2007 Engineering Aid Summer School at UNSW, 65 per cent of the students have gone on to university, with most aiming for engineering degrees.

The former prime minister Bob Hawke needed little persuasion to become patron of the summer school program: "In my 50 years of public service, Jeff would have to be one of the finest men I have met. His legacy to the indigenous communities will be a compounding one and will never be forgotten."

In 2004 there was a moment of great personal satisfaction for Hawke and Dobell as they celebrated Ben Lange's graduation as the first indigenous electrical engineering graduate in NSW and the first indigenous engineering graduate at UNSW. Ben had attended the summer school in 1999 as a year 11 student. Now working for Energy Australia, Ben is also a summer school mentor, along with Leon Oriti, also pursuing an engineering degree at UNSW.

A former governor-general, Michael Jeffery, and the NSW Governor, Marie Bashir, became passionate supporters of Dobell, often hosting visiting students.

A former federal education minister, Brendan Nelson, said: "If I were to make a list of the top 100 Australians to have touched, changed and inspired the lives of young Australians, Jeff would be on it ... here is a man who made a difference to the lives of others, his profession and his country."

The elder of two sons of Dorothy and Albert Dobell, Jeffrey Dobell was born in 1939 in Bentleigh, Victoria. From a young age he spoke of becoming an engineer and began a civil engineering apprenticeship with the Victorian Railways before completing his tertiary studies at Chisholm Institute of Technology. He worked on Tasmania's Hydro-Electric Commission Laboratory, Western Australia's Reserve Bank in Perth, Sydney's Port Botany container terminal, coalmines in the Hunter Valley and goldmines at Palmer River in far north Queensland.

His conviction that engineers could contribute much to society shone through in his five-year term as director of the Institute of Engineers (Sydney). As a director of The Earth Exchange (Sydney's Geological Mining Museum at The Rocks) he pursued the passion for connecting young Australians to science and engineering.

His awareness of the need for engineers in disaster zones prompted Dobell to establish an Australian version of Europe's RedR (Registered Engineers for Disaster Relief). RedR Australia's first contribution was to support the Fred Hollows Foundation's construction of an intraocular lens laboratory in Eritrea.

Dobell died after a fall from the roof of his home. He had been working with a neighbour on top of a carport and pitched head-first into the concrete below, never regaining consciousness. Many indigenous people attended his funeral. The coffin was draped in the Australian and Aboriginal flags and the service began with music from a didgeridoo.

Jeff Dobell is survived by his wife, Anne Vans-Colina, children Elizabeth and Adrian and their partners, stepchildren Simon, Emma and Alex, former wife Kaye and grandchildren Archie and Jonah.

Jeff McMullen