

ATSIHEAC recommendations: accelerating the pace of change in Indigenous higher education

Context

The seventh Closing the Gap Report shows that although there has been some improvement in education and health outcomes for Indigenous Australians, most Closing the Gap targets are not on track to be met. Unfortunately, the Closing the Gap Report does not report on the performance of the higher education sector in lifting Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander participation in tertiary education. This is happening at a time when we know that the K-20 systems, kindergarten to the PhD, are all connected and what happens in one sector affects the others. The Report is focused on practical actions to get kids to school, adults into work, make communities safer and advance constitutional recognition. It is in essence a bottom-up approach to Australia's most compelling social challenge of improving the education, employment and wellbeing of the first Australians. The sad reality is that the collective performance of all indicators is less than optimal.

The 2012 *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (the Review) proposed a profound shift in the way that higher education institutions, governments and other education providers approach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education. Building on strengths, especially in areas like medical education, the Review envisaged a future with more Indigenous professionals in decision-making roles in government, industry and the academy and in which our higher education institutions value and embed Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. It challenged leaders and policy makers to lift their aspirations and work to establish higher education as a natural pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. That vision underpins Council's work over its term as well as the recommended priorities for action.

Council focussed its work around five strategic areas it felt were best placed to make a significant contribution to improving Indigenous higher education. These strategic areas were informed by the Review and are as follows:

- broadening the disciplines and professions in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participate
- developing an "all-of-institution" approach to improving access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at university
- developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and academic workforce;
- measuring progress towards achieving the Review's goals
- financing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education.

Council's activities have been based around progressing these priorities and have included:

- consultations with Indigenous and non-Indigenous leadership at every university
- convening roundtables on broadening Indigenous participation in disciplines focussed on science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) and business disciplines, and supporting commissioned research and analysis
- engagement with higher education leaders including through Deans councils and Universities Australia

- working with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) on a framework for measuring progress at the system level
- convening a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Policy Forum to discuss progress and priorities.

Key reflections

Council has worked closely with the Department of Education and Training to build a better statistical picture of the state of Indigenous higher education over the last ten years or so. That work shows us that while there is encouraging growth, it is not yet occurring at a sufficient pace to make real inroads into equal representation of Indigenous Australians enrolling and succeeding at university, across the full range of disciplines and moving into academic and industry leadership. Analysis of standardised testing in schools tells a similar story of some gains but scope for significant acceleration. It also reveals significant variations in test outcomes between remote and non-remote areas that would be worthy of further investigation. While we have a better evidence base now than at the outset of Council's term, difficulties in accessing good data is a common concern across the university sector. Notwithstanding the imperative to minimise the reporting burden on universities, Council considers that work towards a national minimum data set for Indigenous higher education could be effectively progressed by government and would provide critical support for assessment of progress at a system level.

Council's programme of visits with university leadership has uncovered emerging areas of good practice and a strong commitment across the board to improving opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These include strengthening the roles of Indigenous education units and their relationships with faculties; outreach initiatives; supporting students and especially in improving the cultural safety of Indigenous students. Good practices have also emerged in some areas of business practice such as contracting, key performance indicators and reporting. However, these practices and insights seem to be locally-focused and there are many opportunities to improve their dissemination. Feedback at many of the meetings also reinforced the value of requiring universities to set institutional-level targets for both student and staff participation and success.

The roundtable model which Council has used to progress its priorities in the STEM and business disciplines has proved a successful approach, in particular for engaging with Deans and facilitating better exchange of ideas and practices across institutions. This can be continued by government to good effect, both to progress work in areas already well-developed and to initiate work in emerging priority disciplines.

Finally, it is Council's observation that there remains a disconnect in the policy agendas and approaches that apply across the range of government priorities in the broader education and Indigenous Affairs portfolios. While Council has a strong view that universities cannot afford to wait for improved outcomes in the schools sector, acceleration of the pace of change will require both alignment of effort across the entire education continuum and increased visibility of higher education within the broader Indigenous affairs agenda.

Priority areas for action

Accountability

Some useful work has been done by the NCSEHE at Curtin University in the development of a framework to measure system performance for equity groups and Indigenous Australians. However, Council believes there is need for a longer term body of work to develop a sufficiently fine-grained framework focused specifically on Indigenous higher education. This should build on the work done to date.

An Indigenous Higher Education Performance Framework, modelled on the highly successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework, could include indicators that capture the performance of governments and the higher education sector in supporting and enabling Indigenous students to reach their full potential in higher education. The framework would monitor, over time, progress towards significantly improving educational participation, attainment and employment for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders. Indicators should be sufficiently granular to ensure discipline as well as institutional performance is transparent, measurable and provides a mechanism for justifying ongoing support.

Policy alignment and priority

Council has observed some key policy challenges which pose a significant barrier to the realisation of the vision outlined in the Review:

- The need for better connections between policies and programme responses across the education cycle from early childhood, through schooling and post-school education which clearly place higher education as a natural post-school destination for Indigenous people.
- The need for better connections between higher education and other Indigenous policy priorities. For example, higher education is the critical component for Indigenous economic development and governance but is not highly visible in a policy agenda centred on training and employment.

The current disconnect poses the risk that efforts to grow the pipeline of Indigenous students aiming and prepared for higher education are either dissipated or duplicated, that these efforts require more costly remediation after students have fallen behind and involve a cost-shift from the schools sector to higher education.

There is also a risk to the achievement of other policy priorities – for example, improving governance of Indigenous enterprises and organisations is dependent on increasing the number of Indigenous people graduating with qualifications in business disciplines. Indigenous economic development is equally dependent on higher education as the key to full economic participation. Effective policy alignment will leverage these powerful ‘pull’ factors.

Within higher education, the internationalisation agenda provides opportunities to improve the education quality and experience of Indigenous students once they are at university by ensuring that Indigenous students take up international mobility experiences in greater numbers.

Building the academic workforce

The 2011 National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy (NIHEWS) noted that Indigenous people are dramatically underrepresented as employees in Australian universities at all levels (IHEAC, 2011, p9). While Indigenous academic staff numbers have been increasing steadily, this remains the case today. The Review identified growing the Indigenous academic workforce as a key priority, as did a quarter of all submissions to that review (Australian Government, 2012, p101). Recent data shows that Indigenous academic staff represent less than one per cent of all academic staff in Australian universities, with this proportion lower at more senior levels.

As outlined in the NIHEWS, this underrepresentation impacts in many ways, including by sending a negative message to students about the place of Indigenous people in universities; denying Indigenous people rewarding career opportunities; and undermining other strategies aimed at increasing access and success for Indigenous students (IHEAC, 2011, p11). Further, this underrepresentation robs the sector of a unique and valuable educational resource. Indigenous academics are often concentrated in Indigenous-specific areas with over 30 per cent of all Indigenous academics teaching and researching in the humanities and social sciences.

It is critical to increasing the number of Indigenous Australians participating and succeeding in higher education that more Indigenous academics are employed and retained by Australian universities. This will have a number of positive outcomes, including by increasing the cultural competence of institutions (especially where Indigenous people are employed in senior leadership positions); helping Indigenous students feel that university is a place where they can belong; and by amplifying the voice of Indigenous Australia in the national conversation across all fields.

Broadening the disciplines: STEM and Business

The Review articulated as part of the vision of its expert panel that the sector should “produce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates across the spectrum of academic disciplines who are equipped to enter professional practice, build the capacity of their communities and revitalise professions through their involvement” (Australian Government, 2012, p52). STEM disciplines are the gateway to many professions and Indigenous people are consistently underrepresented in these disciplines as students at all levels.

Indigenous students continue to prefer to study a small number of fields, particularly society and culture, health and medicine, and education. Like the growth in Indigenous enrolments in all higher education fields, growth in Indigenous participation in STEM disciplines in higher education is strong but is coming off a very low base. The Indigenous share of enrolments in STEM subjects is under one per cent in the natural and physical sciences, IT, and engineering disciplines in 2013 – well below the total Indigenous share of enrolments of 1.4 per cent.

The Australian Government, the business community, and Australia’s Chief Scientist have all recognised that increasing STEM participation and success is key to increasing Australia’s competitiveness as we move from a mining investment-driven economy to one that relies on contributions from other industries, particularly the services industry, for growth. However it is vital that work is done to ensure the best evidence underpins this work for increasing success for Indigenous students. The potential benefit to the Australian economy and to Indigenous communities of increasing Indigenous representations in the professions is significant: The Centre

for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research estimated the benefits to the Australian economy of reaching parity in professional representation for Indigenous Australians at over \$1 billion per annum (CAEPR, 2012, p8).

Developing good practice models for whole of university approaches

Council's programme of visits to universities highlighted examples of good practice in combining strong Indigenous Education Units with support and leadership at the highest levels, including university Councils, Chancellors, Vice Chancellors, senior academic staff, and clear faculty ownership of outcomes. These models have been documented in a working paper which can be used in further consultations with the sector.

Sharing information and good practice

In meetings, roundtables and other forums, stakeholders consistently observe that better mechanisms for sharing information and good practice are needed. There is an important role for government in facilitating such exchanges in a range of ways including through roundtables and workshops around specific issues, in convening broader policy forums and in developing mechanisms for ongoing, sector-led collaboration and exchange.

There is also an important role for Government in improving access to data, removing any duplication and identifying any data gaps. Good quality, accessible data is an essential tool for policy makers inside government and in universities. It also provides the foundation for effective monitoring of progress at the system wide level.

Recommendations

Council recommends that the Minister for Education develop a National Indigenous Higher Education Strategy to progress the following priority areas: growing the Indigenous academic workforce; increasing Indigenous participation in a broader range of disciplines focusing initially on STEM and business as well as increasing participation in international mobility programmes; facilitating the development of a whole of university approach; working towards stronger alignment across policy priorities; and longer term work to develop a framework for assessing performance at a system level. That strategy should include the following actions for implementation:

Increasing the academic workforce

- The Minister for Education and Training to introduce changes to the Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs) and the Research Training Scheme (RTS) which would earmark a portion of APAs for Indigenous students and introduce a weighting for Indigenous postgraduates under the RTS.
- The Minister for Education and Training convene a group of experts to discuss and monitor progress, commencing with: work to identify what drives change at all points in the pipeline; and how to retain Indigenous academics in the academy.
- Government to explore whether there is a need to align the conditions for ABSTUDY for students undertaking higher Degrees by Research with Australian Postgraduate Awards with respect to taxation treatment and as to the effect of earnings by the student and their

partners and dependents, or to provide other support to Indigenous research students not in receipt of an APA.

Broadening disciplines and increasing international mobility

- Government to work with the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Industry Group, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Australian Council of Business Deans to develop a forward work programme for increasing Indigenous participation in business disciplines.
- The Minister for Education and Training to convene a group of experts to advise on: integration of Indigenous STEM priorities in the broader STEM agenda; strategies to make highly qualified STEM teachers available to schools with high numbers of Indigenous students; opportunities to leverage efforts of bodies like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mathematics Alliance and the Australian Council of Deans of Education.
- Government to build on the success of the roundtable approach and continue it in other priority disciplines, focusing on engagement with Deans in the first instance to identify priorities for this agenda through negotiation with the sector.
- Minister for Education and Training to develop programme reforms that give clear signals for universities to prioritise Indigenous students for mobility experiences, for example the New Colombo Plan.

Facilitating a whole of university approach

- The Government to work in collaboration with Universities Australia and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium to facilitate progress on principles for whole of university approaches and to enable the exchange of best practice.

Alignment of policy and strategy

- The Minister for Education and Training to work with State and Territory Ministers to ensure that higher education is visible in Indigenous education policy initiatives.
- The proposed Indigenous Higher Education Strategy should include a focus on interventions that grow the pipeline of university-ready school leavers, including improved teacher training, professional leadership, and development of evidence-based practice.
- The Minister for Education and Training work over the longer term with Commonwealth and State and Territory colleagues to develop an integrated Indigenous education strategy which embraces Indigenous education across early childhood, schools and tertiary education including VET and higher education.

Monitoring progress and sharing good practice

- Government should develop a framework for measuring progress at the higher education system level, building on the work to date undertaken by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education on an Indigenous and Equity performance framework; and a mechanism for collation, reporting, and integration into policy. The framework and reports could be modelled on the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework*.
- Government should continue efforts to improve the quality of and access to data, research, analysis and other resources and establish an ongoing mechanism for sharing information and good practice.

Financing

- Council notes that Indigenous specific supplementary higher education programmes sit within the Indigenous Affairs portfolio and that a process has commenced to consult with stakeholders on their reform. Programme reforms should be designed to improve flexibility, reduce administrative burdens and support a focus on excellence.