

Dear Professor O’Kane and Australian Universities Accord Panel,

On behalf of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium, and its members, the NATSIHEC Executive submit our response to the Accord Interim Report.

NATSIHEC as the representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff across the higher education sector welcomes the Interim report that addresses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, expertise, and self-determination.

1.4 First Nations at the heart of Australia’s higher education system

As the Report addresses there is a vital need ‘to centre the experience of First Nations peoples in higher education’. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bring profound knowledge and expertise to the spaces they engage. Holders of cultural knowledge, handed down from generation to generation and disciplinary expertise, learnt through hard work and a passion for positive change, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander changemakers in Higher Education are still battling a system that does not understand the importance of Indigenous knowledge from a foundation of self-determination. However, this space is always forward moving, with the guidance of Elders and for the love of generations still to come.

On the 31st July at the NATSIHEC Elders’ Summit at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, on the Traditional Lands of the Kungarakan and Warai Peoples, Elders speaking as Knowledge Holders of their communities from across Australia called for recognising and reaffirming the sovereignty and the educational rights of all First Nations Peoples.

After advice from our Elders, dually respected and acknowledged as our sovereign leaders, knowledge holders and scholars the ‘The Batchelor Statement’ was created. The Batchelor Statement seeks higher education providers to move forward together to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and knowledges are the core: the heart of our education system.

Through the strength of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, underpinned by Section B1.3 Point 13 of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021, higher education providers commitment to social responsibility must be through the empowerment and self-determination of the peoples on whose Country they are founded.

a) creating a new First Nations Higher Education Council to give voice to the needs, aspirations and know-how of community

NATSIHEC **supports** the creation of a First Nations Higher Education Council. The Council will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination.

NATSIHEC also **recommends** that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation is assured on all bodies that engage with or have oversight of the higher education sector. This includes the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP). Since its inception the HESP has only had one Indigenous panel member. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise within the

sector would be of huge benefit to the decision-making processes of the HESP and other such bodies.

b) moving towards a self-determined approach to national funding and policy settings in relation to First Nations students, employment, teaching, research and engagement, with universities mirroring this approach within their institutions, as is the case in some institutions today

As '2.3.1.1 A new funding system to support students from all backgrounds' notes, current funding does not adequately support successful and long-term access to higher education for students of diverse backgrounds. Students from, or identify as, being from Low Socio Economic, Rural/Regional/Remote and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander still struggle with the financial, geographical and technological requirements of obtaining a higher education qualification.

- Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) funding: Designed as supplementary funding ISSP is currently used by universities as the primary, or in some cases sole, financial underpinning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student services and engagement.
- Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP): HEPPP initiatives are vital to the growth and engagement of prioritised student cohorts. With ten per cent of funds allocated based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments (as per the legislated formula) the impact of HEPPP cannot be underestimated. Unfortunately, there are still a number of higher education providers who give little, or no, control of identified HEPPP funds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander portfolios.

NATSIHEC **recommends** greater accountability for institutions that under invest in their Indigenous staff, students or community engagements.

NATSIHEC **recommends** greater oversight of HEPPP funding distribution.

c) supporting a First Nations-led review of access, participation and outcomes for First Nations students and staff, research, teaching, use of First Nations knowledges, and First Nations governance and leadership within universities

NATSIHEC **supports** a First Nations led review process. It is vital that we have a sector wide view of current trends in Indigenous education through the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education experts.

Within higher education we know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is growing. Universities are identifying the expertise these positions bring to their environment and are appointing Pro Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor Indigenous positions. However, even with the increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and leadership in higher education we realise that our education environments are still being challenged by a lack of broader engagement across the governance mechanisms in universities.

- Not all universities, nor broader higher education providers, have Indigenous representations, either academic or community, within their governing Council. An

oversight and sad lack of connection to cultural expertise and greater connection to local, regional, national and international Indigenous communities.

- Not all universities have independent elected Indigenous representation. Many PVC/DVC Indigenous roles have ex officio positions on institutional academic boards/senates, ensuring portfolio expertise is included within the academic function of the institutions. However, identified Indigenous staff positions are not as common. Allowing for a diversity of perspective and a greater voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, this opportunity also grows leadership and policy expertise. Such inclusion of identified positions ensures that Indigenous knowledge is built into the governance of the institution.

NATSIHEC **recommends** that a review is undertaken of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation within higher education governance mechanisms.

d) enhancing research capability for First Nations knowledges and for collaboration and partnerships between First Nations communities, governments, universities and industry.

Research with Indigenous peoples and research conducted using Indigenous knowledges needs to be led by, and in collaboration with, Indigenous people themselves. (UNDRIP, 2007, Article 31:1). With the introduction of the *2020 Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) Division Code 45 'Indigenous Studies'* and Socio-economic Objective 21 'Indigenous', the sector has seen an increase in the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and researchers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers have expertise in many fields and collaboration between Indigenous scholars, communities, universities and industry is vital. The sector must invest in Indigenous talent through an increase in staffing initiatives such as the *2023 Universities Australia Indigenous Employment Guidelines*, student HDR scholarships and research pre-doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships.

Further, while the majority of Indigenous research is still being conducted by non-Indigenous researchers the sector must address how we engage researchers and institutions to be more ethical and construct projects with co-design, leadership and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We must:

- Ensure Indigenous leadership and governance is a core competency in projects.
- Provide institutional research training for those seeking Indigenous research projects.
- Embed national codes of practice within institutions research culture.
- Ensure Indigenous 'expert readers' are full members of Ethics Committees.
- Establish Indigenous research strategies at all institutions.

NATSIHEC **recommends** that institutions invest a percentage of research funds into Indigenous identified research positions or projects.

NATSIHEC **recommends** that stronger processes are established within institutions to ensure ethical research is being conducted and researchers are being appropriately trained.

The NATSIHEC Executive submits this feedback for the final report and thanks the Australian Universities Accord Panel for the ability to do so.