

Indigenous Education Priorities for the University Sector

Submission to Accord Panel from the Senior Indigenous Leaders in the Sector who gather under the umbrella of the *Universities Australia Deputy/Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Group*.

The Federal Minister for Education has challenged Accord members to come up with “**bold long-term changes**” to “**drive lasting reform in Australia’s higher education system.. [and] to deliver a higher education system that meets the current and future needs of the Nations**”. A specific aspect of the Accord Panel’s vision thus is to ensure: “**First Nations students ¹who seek higher education to transform their lives and communities have the opportunity to do so and to find a place in Australia’s workforce**”. This is signaled in the interim report of the Accord as **a national priority** due to the slow progress across the education sector. The Interim Report notes the “smaller student population **manifests as fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and academics**, and in the broader community, **where Australia misses out on the knowledge, expertise and talent of First Nations people across our society and the economy**” (p. 35). For these reasons, and to make ground, “[t]he government hopes that **the new measures will double the number of Indigenous university students in the next 10 years.**”³

What is now needed is **a plan** to double the First Nations enrolment base from 24,000 to 48,000 in ten years. The plan should have a substantive focus on students and their capacities to function effectively in learning engagements in both the school and university sectors.

The first step of a plan is to establish a national priority at policy and program levels focused on self-determination agendas of the First Peoples, with attainment measures and levels to meet both Australia’s future skills needs as well as First Nations communities’ capacities to determine their own futures. Australia needs to achieve an attainment rate of 55% by 2050. For this, enrolments need to increase by around 33% from 2021 levels by 2035. If Australia was to achieve population parity by 2035, 60% of the additional students would need to be from low SES groups, and 11% of these would need be from First Nations communities⁴. The sector will then need specific measures to help secure growth. We suggest growth in enrolment, progression (subject pass/fail rates), and completion rates, with a bonus scheme to secure the additional numbers. The self-determination policy goal would also add incentive for First Nations communities, families, and their children.

The second step is to set policy and funding drivers to incentivize the sector to use evidence-based approaches to the learning needs of First Nations students. Longitudinal work (2017-2022) undertaken with First Nations students in a regional university found that when individual learning strategies reached high levels of self-efficacy, students consistently show a positive correlation with academic performance, doubling the graduate numbers at this university in the fifth year. This work targets areas known to inhibit progression and completion rates of First Nations students⁵, and responses to these were recently shared at a national conference with a 110+ delegates from 27 universities⁶. As a result, the Indigenous Collegiate is establishing a professional support network to focus the sector’s work on evidence-based approaches to learning needs of Indigenous students, so that graduate numbers can progressively be doubled across the country. There needs to be better and more timely accessibility to national data to allow for informed decisions to be made in relation to successful investment and good practice.

Policy and funding programs can assist with a concerted effort to double Indigenous graduations by addressing three known factors that create bottlenecks in the education system. A five-year case study in a regional university has shown that when all three factors are at optimum levels there is a higher progression and completion rate for First Nations students. Aligned to the interim report recommendation the introduction

¹ The term First Nations or Indigenous refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

³https://www.einnews.com/pr_news/645412832/australia-better-access-to-higher-education-for-indigenous-students-in-major-reform-of-the-sector

⁴ See p. 48 of the Interim Report

⁵ ARC study on Indigenous academic persistence.

⁶ Nakata, M. & Nakata, V. (2022). Supporting Indigenous students to succeed at university. Routledge.

of demand-driven places for all First Nations students will require clear goals within CSP contracts so that universities undertake positive investment.

Student Capacity. The low numbers and the under-preparation of First Nations students to complete degree programs is a significant issue. This begins from the earliest years of school⁷, losing 2/3 of students by Year 10, and with just 17% of the remaining few who complete Year 12 enrolling in universities. The remaining First Nations enrolments at university are non-school leavers who present with varying levels of capacity. The HEPPP program has been the primary means for collaborative work across schools and universities over the past 15 years to increase access for people from regional and remote areas, low SES backgrounds and Indigenous Peoples; however, the focus on aspiration programs did not deliver the desired learning capacities or First Nations enrolment numbers⁸. A key policy shift would be to focus the next phase of the HEPPP program, or its replacement, on the preparation and readiness of students to engage with the teaching in both schools as well as universities. There is now, for instance, good empirical work on First Nations performance in Mathematics and Science in schools to rely upon, as well as collaborative work in progress on building engaged learners with capacities to function effectively in any classroom. Both have shown to build the right knowledge and skills set for First Nations success. Additionally, developing more high school pathways, current initiatives such as obtaining vocational qualifications at school should be expanded to include university options (for example, board endorsed courses for specific units). To fund this, scholarships to equity students should cover the student contributions to universities.

Student Success. Work that contributes to student success in the university sector is largely performed by First Nations staff in Indigenous Centres. These Centres can play a crucial role in higher number of students progressing and completing degrees. Student advancement can be vastly improved by ensuring that the ISSP funds are fully committed to their services rather than be spread across the universities; and could be leveraged if universities committed an additional 20% of the funds received from ISSP, to constitute a strong base to perform much more progressive learning support services. This will require some tightening in the conditions of the ISSP funds to ensure a stronger commitment from universities as well as increasing the ISSP pool of funds available beyond indexation levels to match the increased numbers of students. There must be some consistency across the sector about what ISSP funds can be assigned to avoid rudimentary interpretations from university finance divisions that don't align with the vision of the Indigenous Governance Mechanism, thereby placing senior Indigenous leaders at some institutions in difficult positions. Increased First Nations enrolments and completions will achieve higher return in EFTSL load for universities, and this should in turn see universities playing a more-invested role to ensure greater numbers of First Nations students succeed at every point.

The introduction of 'intermediate qualifications' points within a longer academic program where students can receive a qualification (such as a diploma or certificate) and then have the option to re-enter the program at a later point to continue their studies towards a higher qualification (such as a degree) would prove beneficial. These intermediate qualifications acknowledge the completion of a certain level of study and allow students to exit the program with a credential before completing the entire degree program. This would be positive for First Nations students that often have many disruptions during their studies.

Student Finance. The amount of time students spend learning has always been key to success in education. An early 2006 Universities Australia (UA) survey showed First Nations students worried about their financial situation more than their non-Indigenous peers, were twice as likely to go without food and other necessities, worked on average three hours more in paid employment than others, regularly missed classes because of this work commitment, were more reliant on the student association's subsidized services, and had taken out loans at rates higher than other students. Many who were studying part time indicated they would much prefer to study full-time if their finances circumstances permitted it (2006, pp. 55-6). In 2017, UA's Student Finances Survey found First Nations students, and students from the poorest quarter of Australian households, were still more likely to experience financial hardship. The most efficient fix is to return ABSTUDY entitlements to their original levels, not income or asset tested, and with full allowances for living costs. Further to this ABSTUDY should be accessible for First Nations Students studying part-time (2 units) load in their first year to allow for a more successful transition into higher education. This would be an important gesture of reparation

⁷ Groves, O & Lu, L., 2023. <https://theconversation.com/fewer-than-1-in-5-students-who-are-behind-in-year-3-catch-up-and-stay-caught-up-211516>

⁸ See Napthine report on regional education.

to those who have been disenfranchised of their own lands and where many others continue to benefit from their presence on it.

Another step for the plan is to set clear guidance for the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee into 2024 and 2025 for universities to quarantine commensurate levels of funding for First Nations priorities. Funding received for First Nations priorities should be utilized to focus on innovative and systemic arrangements between schools and universities to ensure high flows of students beyond the expiration of the funds at the end of 2025. That is, it should be used as an investment to leverage infrastructure that can sustain much more volume and capacity of students coming through to university studies. Sponsorship of data sharing facilities and co-designing evidence-based practice to improve academic performance should be a key focal point if we are to double First Nations numbers at university levels in ten years.

Another step is to set a national priority area for the ARC to advance progressive research agendas in Indigenous Education, and for ARC to match NHMRC quarantining 5% of their total funds to Indigenous priorities. The first problem to address is the low numbers of research proposals in the education space. If we are to double the numbers with university degrees, this should be an area of significance for research projects. There are two additional problems: the amount of funds available each year for the Indigenous schemes, and the urgent need to increase numbers in the HDR pipeline. While universities are doing their best in the education and training of First Nations HDR students, the numbers flowing into research courses are still far too low. This is, as stated earlier, the result of low numbers completing degrees in the undergraduate space. The low rate of funding set for stipends has also not been an incentive. The high employment environment has also contributed to the numbers opting for jobs rather than studying research degrees. The quantum of funding needed to drive both the pipeline work and a national priority in Indigenous education could be achieved if ARC was to quarantine 5% of its total funds for this strategic work.

Another step is to add units of study in Indigenous Education to Funding Cluster 2 to attract higher contributions from the Commonwealth. This would enable universities to invest in extending the suite of courses offering studies of histories, cultures and languages to the type of skills and knowledge for instance graduate teachers will need to improve their practice in Indigenous communities. Directly affecting the professional qualities of graduate teachers in these ways will help First Nations students to experience success at everyday tasks as well as in the formal classroom engagements. This will impact both the volume of Indigenous students being retained in the school system as well as gain the requisite capacity for them to be successful in university.

A final step is to set the policy and funding arrangements with universities where there is a percentage in the formula that rewards the employment of First Nations staff, where it is in the interest of the executives to ensure employment numbers grows annually in the sector. In the last 10 years, First Nations employment numbers have crept along at a rate of 0.4% each year. At this rate, it should take about 70 years to get First Nations employment to 3.3%. If we are to double our enrolment base in the university sector, there needs to be deeper considerations, at the level of the base funding to universities, the means for universities to adopt a core business priority for First Nations employment. Business as usual will not get us there, and without these numbers we will struggle to double our enrolment numbers in ten years.

There is now an urgent need to amplify Indigenous Leadership voices and Governance models across the sector, however, there needs to be significant work undertaken to determine the most appropriate models. Many support the addition of an Indigenous Education Council aligned to the Tertiary Education Commission. However, universal support was not achieved within this group, particularly as there are concerns about the Council being deemed tokenistic. It is therefore appropriate that Indigenous leadership be embedded starting with the appointment of an Indigenous Commissioner. The Indigenous Education Council can play a key role in the Compact Agreements with a clear focus on Indigenous outcomes and partnerships (i.e. vocational, industry, Indigenous organisations and professional organisations). Further, an Indigenous Higher Education Review must shift from only focusing on access and participation to one that is broader and inclusive of leadership and governance. Indigenous self-determination must incorporate Indigenous voice, authority and governance in order to succeed.

Please refer to appendix 1 for a detailed summary of the recommendations outlined in this submission.

Appendix 1 – Proposed recommendations

In summary the Universities Australia Deputy and Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Group recommends the following:

- Establish a national priority at policy and program levels focused on self-determination agendas of Indigenous Australians, with attainment measures and levels that meet the future skills needs of Indigenous Nations peoples and communities.
- Indigenous leadership and Self-Determination – appointment of an Indigenous Commissioner and Indigenous Education Council.
- Indigenous education and research to be a priority of proposed Compacts.
- Accessibility of national data to allow informed evidence-based decisions in relation to successful investment and good practice.
- Refocusing HEPPP as it relates to First Nations tertiary preparation within high schools.
- Investigating pathways from high school that increases successful transition to higher education with appropriate funding.
- Transparent reporting of the funding outcomes for Demand Driven places for all Indigenous students in CSP contracts to allow for positive investment.
- Policy and funding that incentivizes Indigenous success – transparent funding that aligns to the Accords aspirations for Indigenous growth and success, including Higher Education Continuity Guarantee into 2024 and 2025 for universities to quarantine commensurate levels of funding for Indigenous priorities.
- Review of ABSTUDY measures and entitlements.
- Required minimum university contributions aligned to supplementary ISSP funding.
- Introduction of 'intermediate qualifications' where students can receive a qualification having the option to re-enter the program at a later point to continue their studies.
- Funding formula to include Indigenous staffing within universities.
- Indigenous Education to Funding Cluster 2 to attract higher contributions from the Commonwealth.
- ARC to match NHMRC quarantining 5% of their total funds to Indigenous priorities.