

11 April 2023

Professor Mary O'Kane
Chair, Universities Accord Panel
via Online Submission

Response to Universities Accord Panel Discussion Panel

Dear Professor O'Kane,

CareerTrackers is pleased to provide a response to the questions and issues raised in the recently released Discussion Paper by the Australian University's Accord Panel. CareerTrackers is a national purpose-driven organisation that supports pre-professional Indigenous university students and links them with employers to participate in paid, multi-year internships. We also believe Indigenous people should have the opportunity and freedom to choose and be represented across all levels and in all occupations, industries and workplaces. We support students to succeed across a broad range of disciplines and industries. An overview of [CareerTrackers](http://www.careertrackers.org.au) is provided below. As provided in our responses, at the core of achieving a range of outcomes highlighted in the Discussion Paper, we highlight the following focus areas:

The role of mentoring: personal mentoring and support is an integral part of our program and in student success. Our model has changed the lives of hundreds of Indigenous students through year round mentoring, advice and preparation for the world of work. Applying our methods of support for non-Indigenous students in key skills shortage is also worth exploring.

Early introduction of students to the world of work: we support students from high school onwards, and our experience has shown that those students who engage early in work (via an internship), even before commencing university, go on to achieve better results and completion rates at university.

The importance of a sense of connection and community: the CareerTrackers community includes a network of 200 employment partners, 1100 program alumni and around 700 high school and university students annually. Each year we celebrate this community through recognition and networking to share, learn and grow. Ours is the largest professional network of its kind in the country.

Further research and understanding what works: CareerTrackers have over 1100 Indigenous students who are part of a collective with the potential to be a powerful voice for change to determine what works for Indigenous students and to understand opportunities, barriers to leadership and closing critical skills gaps.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute. If you would like to discuss any of the information raised, please feel free to contact me on jennifer.maryoung@careertrackers.org.au.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Mar Young
Chief Executive Officer
CareerTracker

CareerTrackers response to the Discussion Paper.

The response provided below relates to our experience in providing a leading employment pathway program for Indigenous Australians in collaboration with our 200 industry and 28 universities. We invite the panel to consider this in the context of what works with Indigenous students, but you may also consider some of our experiences as having broader application.

Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?

In the context of Indigenous students, many are already studying in areas that align with areas where Indigenous peoples experience disadvantage, under and over representation. The areas of study highlighted in the Discussion Paper confirm this. Our experience, as the largest provider of Indigenous student internships highlights that there is a high number and proportion of students seeking work experience aligned with their studies in health related, justice, social work and education disciplines. The key employment partners for such opportunities are commonwealth and state and territory governments.

The implications are that there are a relatively large number of students who are currently delayed from contributing to key areas of need. There is also a risk that they will lose interest or be attracted to other areas if we do not provide early opportunities to engage and contribute and build skills, experience and capabilities. There is also the opportunity to engage students early so that their contribution to need is greater when they graduate and positively impact their likelihood of remaining and progressing to leadership roles in industries where needed.

There is a huge opportunity for governments to invest in aligning studies with current and future needs. There are only two ways of meeting current needs – recruitment or growing your own pipeline. Unfortunately, governments have focused mostly on recruitment, and further investment and focus is needed on developing the talent pipeline and creating culturally safe environments. This is a relatively straightforward opportunity for governments across the country, but requires government agencies to make space for students in the workplace and provide meaningful and engaging experiences.

We have many corporate partners who are leading the way in this regard, and over the last decade, made the space for student contributions and engagements and we currently have some corporate employment partners who will welcome in excess of 40 Indigenous students into their workplaces each year. In contrast, many of our state and territory government employment partners (some of the biggest workplaces in the southern hemisphere) may only welcome 0-10 students per year. There is clearly a significant amount of untapped talent for governments to meet current and future needs.

Q11 How should Australia boost demand from people to study in the higher education system?

CareerTrackers has over 13 years experience in working with Indigenous students to achieve success. We have over 1100 Indigenous professionals who are now part of the CareerTrackers alumni community, who have studied across a wide range of industries, sectors, locations and universities across Australia. During this time, CareerTrackers has successfully supported students to complete university, achieve high marks and complete studies sooner. Our experience has also highlighted the importance of demonstrating to future generations the impact and importance of tertiary study. We achieve this through our alumni who are key ambassadors for the CareerTrackers community of current students at high school and university.

If the panel were interested, further research into the decision-making and experience of this cohort may be useful to explore what works and what is needed to encourage more enrolments from Indigenous students. More evidence is needed to determine where the greatest investment is needed to encourage further university enrolments. As one [recent study](#) has highlighted, current Indigenous students' completion rates remain low compared to the rest of the student population and require further investigation. Arguably, understanding and addressing completion rates as well as increased demand are key priorities.

Q13 How could an Accord support cooperation between providers, accreditation bodies, government and industry to ensure graduates have relevant skills for the workforce?

As our experience has demonstrated over the last 13 years, a key ingredient for success is the availability and quality of student advisors and mentors. Our model, which we can describe for you as working on a microscale for Indigenous students, enables us to support students to prepare and navigate the world of work in a way that universities have been unable to. As a purpose driven organisation, we straddle the space between industry, student and university to act as a key conduit for students between these three areas. In our experience, university relationships and industry relationships are pivotal to successful student outcomes and we play a key role in

- ensuring students have the necessary skills and advice to navigate those first critical career steps
- engage with industry employment partners to ensure they are supported and prepared to support students and set clear expectations for students and employment partners
- make sure that students understand the role that universities can play to provide a wide range of additional supports that lie outside our remit and capacity.

We support students from across multiple locations, disciplines, industries and universities. Based on our experience, and using this as a microcosm for what is possible, it is clear that having a central resource dedicated to shared success across the various stakeholders is achievable and desirable.

Q14 How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning (WIL) in higher education change in the decades ahead?

We are increasingly finding that the most successful outcomes are achieved when students are engaged very early, as young as high school. We've found that introducing high school students to the world of work via an internship before they commence study leads to much greater engagement, connection between studies and its practical application and course results.

The requirements and processes for internships to contribute towards degrees varies. While some of the university students we support have the opportunity for their internships to count towards their degrees, many do not. Students supported through internships with our employment partners are engaged in paid work for up to 12 weeks per year, and in some degrees, this counts towards 2 subjects, and for others it does not receive any recognition towards their degrees.

As our experience shows, there is opportunity for WIL to be a core element of any degree, so long as there is industry engagement, strong mentoring support for students, and a clearly and simply articulated mechanism to make it happen. Curtin University's 'Bring Your Own Internship' program is one such example. There is also an enormous opportunity to encourage increased university enrolments through early engagement with students in WIL as young as high school.

Q20 How can pathways between VET and higher education be improved, and how can students be helped to navigate these pathways?

At CareerTrackers, we partner with the CSIRO to deliver the Young Indigenous Women's STEM Academy. This involves supporting young girls from as early as Year 8 to encourage them to take on STEM studies and careers. The remit for the Academy is 'tertiary study'. So we are not confined to supporting students studying at university only. As part of the Academy, we also keep options relatively wide for students, to accommodate changes of mind and circumstances.

The key take away for the panel is that dedicated student mentoring, experiential learning and advice is critical to supporting students to make decisions on their studies. This is particularly the case for Indigenous students in the Academy, but may also be applicable more broadly. Our positioning, straddling that place between education, employment and with student success at our core, gives us the ability to tailor our support and assist students to navigate these highly complex and varied institutional environments that may be difficult for even the most experienced and accomplished adults.

Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

Our experience highlights that financial stability is a key barrier to realising the benefits of tertiary education. Thankfully, for a number of years, up to 275 students in the CareerTrackers program have benefited from the Indigenous Cadetships scholarships. CareerTrackers are the leading provider of these scholarships for the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). These scholarships are due to end at the end of 2023. The continuation of scholarships is critical to student success and completion. Since 2018, the financial support provided to Indigenous students through ICS has had a significant impact on student outcomes, their ability to continue and complete tertiary study and gain valuable industry experience through our internship program. The winding back of scholarships, that have had proven success would be premature given:

- other existing scholarships provided do not support students for professional life and the world of work, providing a unique and valuable experience
- the level of investment is relatively small, being broadly consistent with the provision of Abstudy support, but for an additional \$628 per student per year
- the success of this initiative as evidenced by NIAA's own independent ICS Evaluation Report
- the lack of consistent and positive outcomes in successive Closing the Gap Reports regarding education and employment
- uncertainty and continued unfolding of the impacts of the pandemic and the biggest disruption to education and employment that we're likely to see in our lifetime
- there is a risk that a reduction in this program will impact student's ability to complete studies, leading to a longer term impact on Indigenous education and employment outcomes.

We note that in the past 12 months, there was a high correlation between students receiving the scholarship and those who were able to engage successfully with work and study commitments within the CareerTrackers program. During this time, of the students who left the program, only a small percentage were receiving ICS funding. Note that at the time of providing this submission, CareerTrackers has submitted a business case for the continuation of scholarships and is awaiting a response from NIAA.

Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?

As outlined elsewhere in this submission, as our success over the last 13 years has demonstrated - mentoring and tailored student support and professional learning play an important role in ensuring students reach their potential, in whatever area of study undertaken. CareerTrackers has a proven track record of supporting students from a range of disciplines such as aviation, construction, infrastructure, technology, finance, government, law, environmental science, architecture, urban planning, to name a few. As highlighted in the Inaugural [Indigenous Employment Index](#) released in May 2022, CareerTrackers program was named the preferred pathway program by participating employers, with 97% of survey respondents highlighting the importance of our program in supporting student achievement and work readiness.

Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

See response above to Q28 and the provision of effective scholarships that support professional life as well as study.

Q32 How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning?

As outlined elsewhere, the experience and impact generated through CareerTrackers is a useful model that could be applied broadly. Rather than reinvent the wheel, there is an opportunity to harness the learning and success applied to Indigenous students for further application.

CareerTrackers Overview

[CareerTrackers](#) was established in 2009 and connects Indigenous tertiary students to multi-year paid internships with corporate Australia, government and other organisations. Since that time, CareerTrackers has supported over 8000 internships, up to almost 700 students each year, and there are over 1100 Indigenous professionals who have completed the internship program. The program is delivered through relationships with over 200 employers and 28 universities. Some of the benefits of the CareerTrackers includes:

- CareerTrackers interns are more likely to complete their degrees
- CareerTrackers interns are complete their degrees quicker
- CareerTrackers interns gain full-time employment within 3 months

In the inaugural [Indigenous Employment Index](#) released in May 2022, 97% of respondents (41 of 42 employers that took part in the study) named CareerTrackers as their preferred pathway for Indigenous employment. A list of our employment and university partners is provided below.

CareerTrackers contribution to Closing the Gap

In the [2020 Closing the Gap Report](#), the Government noted that “For Indigenous Australians with higher levels of education, there is virtually no gap in employment rates”.

The [2019 Closing the Gap Report](#) notes that “the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education award courses has more than doubled, from 9,329 in 2007 to 19,237 in 2017”, and “There has also been a 69 per cent increase in the number of Indigenous higher education completions between 2007 and 2017”. These improvements in Indigenous education and employment outcomes directly align with

CareerTrackers’ work beginning in 2009, which focuses on higher education enrolment and completion, and employment following higher education.

Over 80% of CareerTrackers interns are in full-time employment within 3 months of completing their university studies, 89% of CareerTrackers students graduate university, and 88% of CareerTrackers’ alumni have encouraged other Indigenous Australians to pursue further education. These figures indicate that CareerTrackers has contributed significantly to the Governments’ success in the education and employment goals of Closing the Gap, particularly in the tertiary education space as noted above. CareerTrackers has also been explicitly recognised as a catalytic organisation in achieving positive employment and education outcomes in various Closing the Gap Reports, as follows:

[Closing the Gap Report 2019](#)

“This year the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), in partnership with CareerTrackers, launched an Indigenous Girls’ Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Academy for high-achieving female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who aspire to pursue education and careers in STEM professions. CSIRO also offers exciting traineeships and cadetships to tertiary students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to gain real experience in a scientific environment that will kick start their career” (page 65).

[Closing the Gap Report 2018](#)

Features a case study on Todd Crawford, a CareerTrackers participant, as evidence of ‘Outstanding Local Solutions Delivering Exciting Outcomes’. Todd is currently on the CT Board. The Report states that “CareerTrackers is funded through the Australian Government’s Tailored Assistance Employment Grants” and “The Australian Government announced last year it was investing up to an additional \$13.46 million in CareerTrackers to deliver their Indigenous Internship program for up to 275 interns over three years. Ninety-four per cent of CareerTrackers’ interns complete their university studies, compared with 63 per cent for Australian students in general and 40 per cent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Of these, 89 per cent convert into full-time graduate employment upon completion of their university degree” (page 85)

[Closing the Gap Report 2017](#)

CareerTrackers was again mentioned under the ‘Outstanding Local Solutions Delivering Exciting Outcomes’ section, which stated “Twins Barbie-Lee and John Kirby have been supported by CareerTrackers to undertake their undergraduate degrees. Barbie-Lee secured a cadetship with Qantas and upon graduation from university in 2015, earned a position in the Qantas graduate program. John’s cadetship is with CPB Contractors and he expects to graduate from university in 2017” (page 65).

Employment partners

CareerTrackers enjoys broad support from a wide range of corporate, government and non-profit organisations. A full list is provided on our [website](#). Our long term partners are those that have committed to a 10 year partnership and include:

CPB Contractors	IAG	Westpac Banking Group
Lendlease	Qantas	Herbert Smith Freehills

CBA	Telstra	GHD
Indigenous Business Australia	Origin Energy	Norton Rose Fulbright
NAB	Dentons	Gadens
Bupa	Ventia	AECOM
Aurizon	EDL	BAE Systems
GPT	Moody's	SJB Architects
Thales	Laing O' Rourke	

Universities

CareerTrackers interns are enrolled in almost all Australian universities. In particular, around a third of interns are from Go8 universities. We have MOUs with the following universities:

Queensland University of Technology	Charles Darwin University	Curtin University
Griffith University	Monash University	University of Canberra
The University of Melbourne	The University of Newcastle	UTS
University of Southern Queensland	University of South Australia	RMIT University