

Aurora Education Foundation Submission on the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

Recommendations:

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

- Indigenous education policies must move beyond deficit discourses and more accurately define and measure unique Indigenous aspirations in education, as elicited by Aurora’s Redefining Indigenous Success in Education (RISE) Project.
- Indigenous education policies must adopt an evidence-based approach to address barriers faced by Indigenous students during critical transition points, including the middle years of high school and the first year of university.
- Further investigation is required to understand the formal and informal factors which contribute to low rates of Indigenous ATAR participation.
- Further investigation is required to understand the potential benefits of private tutoring for Indigenous high school students and the barriers to access, including financial barriers, low cultural competency and variable quality among providers and the effects of lack of regulation.

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?

- Further work is required to define ‘best practice’ learning and teaching for Indigenous students. This work must be informed by evidence and involve broad consultation with Indigenous stakeholders, including students and families. Aurora’s RISE Project provides a methodological blueprint for centering the perspectives of Indigenous students and families in education research.
- Continuous, culturally-informed and Indigenous-led support across critical transition points, including the middle years of high school and the high school to university transition, can significantly benefit education outcomes for Indigenous students.

Q33 What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from under-represented groups in higher education?

- In accordance with Closing the Gap Priority Reform 3 (‘Transforming Government Organisations’), increased levels of education funding should be directed to Indigenous organisations which provide education and support services.
- Access to scholarship and other financial support, delivered and supported by Indigenous-led and culturally-responsive organisations, can significantly ameliorate financial barriers to higher education for Indigenous students.

Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?

- Aurora’s research findings indicate that Indigenous students and families experience high levels of racism and are deeply aware of the ways in which the high school and higher education systems restrict opportunities for Indigenous students.
- High schools and higher education institutions must demonstrate a commitment to Indigenous cultural safety through strong leadership practices, staff cultural awareness training, and positive relationships with local Elders, community members and community organisations.
- Private tutoring can significantly benefit Indigenous students, but a lack of regulation, a shortage of Indigenous providers and low levels of cultural competency in the private tutoring market can expose Indigenous students to risks.
- Mentorship schemes involving current or former Indigenous university students are effective in addressing barriers to university retention and completion for Indigenous students.

About the Aurora Education Foundation

The Aurora Education Foundation (Aurora) is an Indigenous organisation which delivers education and career services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the beginning of high school through to post-graduate study. Aurora’s vision is a society in which Australia’s First Peoples determine their own aspirations through education and life-long learning.

Aurora delivers four unique programs which span the educational career of Indigenous students:

1. the High School Program (HSP) provides intensive academic, cultural and social and emotional wellbeing support for Indigenous students from Year 7 through to ‘Year 13’
2. the Indigenous Scholarships Portal is a central repository for information about Indigenous scholarships in higher education
3. the Internship Program provides Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with access to internships in Indigenous organisations across Australia
4. the International Study Tour and Scholarships Program supports Indigenous scholars to access post-graduate study at world leading universities

The Redefining Indigenous Success in Education (RISE) Project is Aurora’s new 5-year Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiative. The RISE Project is: (1) a large-sample, longitudinal and quasi-experimental evaluation of three Aurora high school program models; (2) grounded in Indigenous student and family definitions of ‘success’ in education; and (3) overseen by an Indigenous Data Governance framework.

This submission summarises some of the insights from Aurora's program delivery, RISE Project, and research and evaluation findings which are relevant to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper.

Indigenous students see university as an important pathway to achieving personal and career goals

One of the goals of Aurora's 'Redefining Indigenous Success in Education' (RISE) Project is to construct new measures of educational 'success' from an Indigenous perspective. As part of this work, Aurora has recently undertaken qualitative and participatory research with Indigenous high school students, their parents/carers and Aurora alumni investigating how Indigenous students and families define 'success' in education. Amongst students, 'attending university' was viewed as the most salient measure of 'success' in education. Students also identified attending university as closely tied to personal and career goals. Previous surveys that Aurora has undertaken with parents/carers of HSP students indicate that they are highly engaged in their children's schooling. In our most recent parent/carer survey, 95% of respondents reported talking to their child about school at least once or twice per week.

The aspirations of Indigenous students and their families relating to higher education are not adequately reflected in Indigenous education policy settings. We recently undertook a [literature review](#) on definitions and measures of 'success' in Indigenous high school education policies. This review found that Indigenous education policies are dominated by a focus on statistical parity in attendance and other narrowly defined outcomes. The review also found that policies perpetuate deficit discourses and do not reflect the unique strengths and values that Indigenous students bring to the learning process.

To support greater Indigenous participation in higher education, Indigenous education policies must more accurately define and measure unique Indigenous goals and values in education, including attending university.

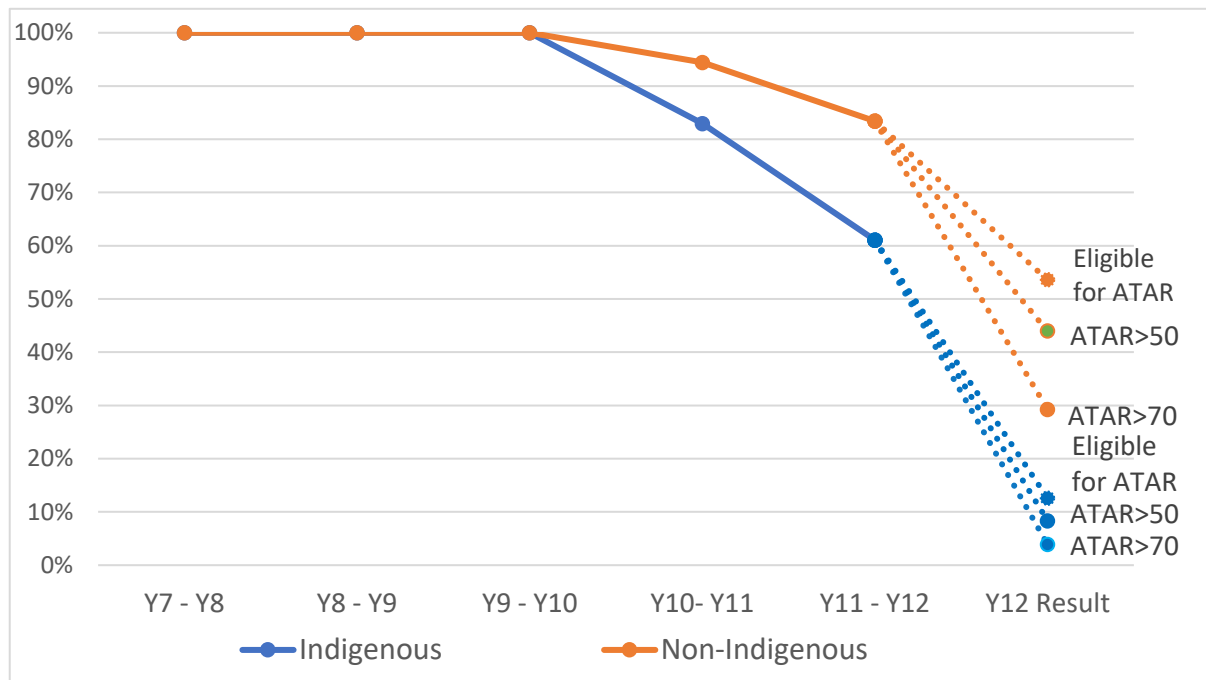
The high school environment does not support Indigenous students to academically thrive

Aurora's experience in program delivery and research strongly suggests that the high school system is failing to provide a learning environment that supports Indigenous students to academically thrive.

As part of our research into Indigenous definitions of educational 'success', participants reported that they experienced significant levels of racism in high school and higher education institutions. Aurora alumni narratives followed a consistent pattern of 'surviving' or 'getting by' in high school and later thriving at university in response to positive interactions with other Indigenous students, Indigenous higher education units, or Indigenous subject-matter. This pattern is consistent among the cohort of Aurora International Study Tour participants. Less than half of this cohort accessed university via an ATAR pathway yet all subsequently achieved outstanding academic results.

The scale of the exclusion of Indigenous high school students from conventional university pathways is shown in Figure 1. This chart is a survival analysis undertaken by Aurora of ‘apparent retention’ and ATAR data averaged out over recent available years comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous high school pathways. It shows that approximately 1 in 6 Indigenous students who commence high school will be eligible for an ATAR score in Year 12 and that approximately 1 in 20 will achieve an ATAR score above 70. This chart also reveals the middle years of high school to be a critical transition point for Indigenous students where additional support may be required.

Figure 1: Survival analysis of high school pathways by Indigenous status



Aurora’s experience suggests that high numbers of Indigenous students who are capable of attending university are being pushed away from conventional university pathways in the middle years of high school. Aurora recognises that an increasing proportion of students are accessing university via non-ATAR pathways. However, the extent to which alternative entry pathways are being accessed by students who nevertheless undertook an ATAR pathway is unclear in the available data.

To improve equity in university access, Aurora recommends that Indigenous students receive continuous, culturally-informed support from Indigenous service providers during critical transition points, such as that provided by the HSP. Aurora further recommends that both the formal and informal factors which contribute to unequal ATAR eligibility are reviewed and that Indigenous students and families are better supported to make informed choices in relation to ATAR participation.

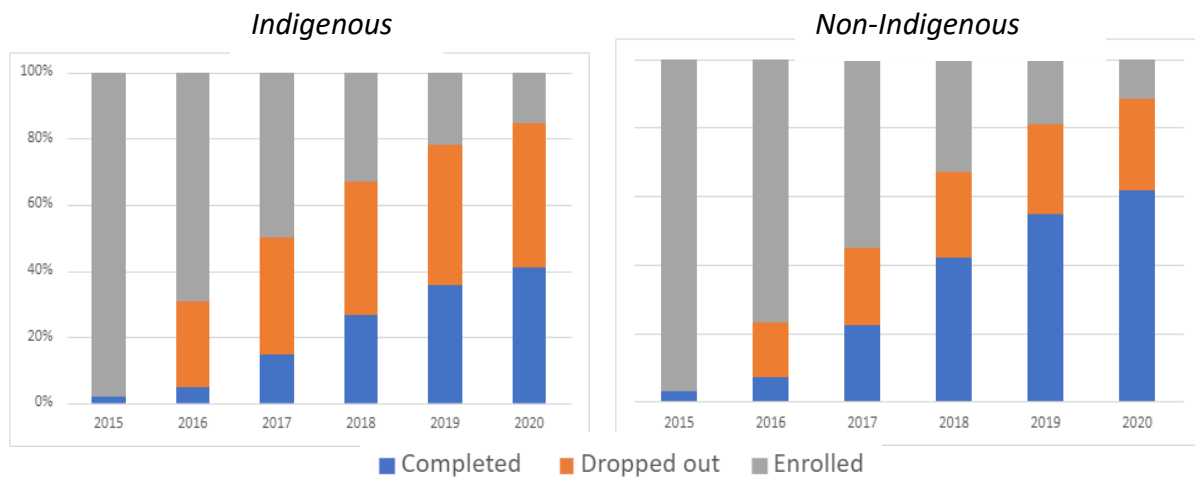
As part of the HSP, Aurora offers students access to private tutoring throughout their high school career. Consistent with the observations of other commentators, such as the [Grattan](#)

[Institute](#), Aurora has identified that private tutoring can significantly benefit the academic growth of Indigenous high school students. The full extent of this impact will be explored in future reporting on the HSP. At the same time, in the process of recruiting and engaging private tutoring providers, Aurora has observed significant issues in the private tutoring market, some of which have the potential to disproportionately impact Indigenous students. The private tutoring market is unregulated, and Aurora has observed that there is significant variation in quality and pricing. Further, there are limited Indigenous-owned providers and cultural competency is generally low. Aurora recommends that further investigation is undertaken into the potential benefits of private tutoring for Indigenous high school students and the barriers to accessing these benefits.

The Higher Education system needs to do more to support Indigenous retention

Aurora analysis of Department of Education data at Figure 2 shows that approximately 1 in 4 Indigenous students drop out of undergraduate study in the first year. Indigenous students are also much less likely to complete their undergraduate studies within 6 years (41%) compared to non-Indigenous students (62%). This experience is reflected among Aurora Study Tour participants. Despite completing their studies with outstanding academic results, approximately half of this cohort seriously considered leaving university at some point.

Figure 2: Enrolment status of undergraduate students commencing in 2015 by Indigenous status



Data collected through the International Study Tour and Scholarships program suggests that Indigenous students face several significant barriers to participation in higher education. A significant proportion of Aurora participants identify a lack of financial capital as a barrier to higher education. These financial barriers have various sources, including the costs of relocation and limited access to parental or other familial financial support. Access to scholarship and other financial support can significantly ameliorate financial barriers to higher education for Indigenous students.

The same data also highlights that a lack of ‘bridging’ social capital – including limited access to family members or other close peers who have attended university – can serve as a barrier to higher education for Indigenous students. The high proportion of Indigenous students in these circumstances have restricted access to mentorships and guidance which can help to set expectations for higher education and support them to complete their studies. Mentorship schemes involving current or former Indigenous university students can help to address these barriers.

The HSP provides students with continuity of academic, cultural, and social and emotional wellbeing support from the end of Year 12 and into the first year of university. There is no data on the impact of this support as the first HSP cohort is set to commence ‘Year 13’ in 2024. Nevertheless, Aurora submits that continuous and culturally-informed support across the high school to university transition is an appropriate response to promoting Indigenous university retention, particularly in the first year, and options for ‘scaling up’ this support should be explored.

Indigenous scholars are world-beaters when given the opportunity

The International Study Tour and Scholarships program has supported almost 100 Indigenous scholars to undertake post-graduate study at some of the world’s leading universities, including Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard. The completion rate among this cohort is 100%. Aurora’s high-achieving scholars become role models for the next generation of Indigenous leadership across a variety of disciplines and sectors, including law, politics, philosophy and the arts. The many achievements among this cohort include the following:

- A Kamilaroi scholar who studied both neuroscience and oncology at Oxford. Currently working to tackle the challenges of childhood brain cancer research
- A Yawuru woman from Broome, employed by Collingwood Football Club as General Manager, Social Impact and Policy. Currently working on organisational change to address racism
- The first Indigenous Australian to graduate from Cambridge, completing a MPhil, with Distinction, in Politics, Development and Democratic Education at Trinity College. Now an Executive Director at headspace.

The experience of the International Study Tour and Scholarship program is confirmation that there is enormous unrealised academic potential within the Indigenous community. This experience provides impetus for the high school and higher education system to address barriers to participation faced by Indigenous students and create opportunities for Indigenous students to help realise this potential.

To discuss this submission further, please contact Jarrod Hughes, Aurora’s Monitoring and Evaluation Manager, at jarrod.hughes@aurorafoundation.com.au.