

## **See you(rself) at university**

Improving participation and capacity to succeed, with First Nations peer mentoring, on a national scale.

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### **Summary**



An accessible and scalable national solution would see a personal First Nations Undergraduate Mentor available year-round for **every First Nations high school student**, with results for: early awareness and participation in higher education, self-efficacy, opportunity for interpersonal connection and associated communication and feedback skills, practical guidance through consideration and enrolment, and sense of belonging in higher education spaces.

## **Introduction: Addressing First Peoples' sense of belonging in Higher Education, with a proven, quickly-implemented, and Australian-owned program, on a bold, national scale.**



We welcome this commitment by the Accord to move the needle on higher education attainment, undertaken in partnership with key stakeholders in education and in communities. We are prompted by the significant question and challenge that underpins future university enrolment and success: do all First Nations students feel like they belong at university? As a country, we can start doing more, faster, to strengthen the places of First Nations students in our higher education sector. This includes making undergraduate success meaningfully and personally visible to current secondary school students for a sustainable approach to future participation and success. **This can be most directly and immediately achieved by digitally connecting every First Nations secondary school student with a First Nations undergraduate as a Mentor.**

This submission addresses key challenges that the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper identifies, in relation to the academic preparedness of and participation in higher education by First Nations high school students in Australia. It proposes a way to deliver proven peer mentoring approaches at scale in order to address those issues, while simultaneously enhancing the skills and employability of current First Nations university students.

With twenty years of precedent for connecting a student with a more senior person via student-friendly synchronous and asynchronous online tools, the Studiosity platform is already available and extensively studied. Now partnering with 80% of universities in Australia as well as with higher education institutes globally, Studiosity - including team, management, and Academic Advisory Board composed of leadership within Australian Higher Education - are

aware of the potential to contribute and share our IP and to extend the service to facilitate significant change, on a national scale and with minimal delay for student outcomes.

Universities, Government, and educational bodies have been using and extensively measuring the Australian-owned Studiosity service these past decades with consistent results. Student confidence, satisfaction, academic success, aspiration, wellbeing, and the engagement of traditionally under-represented groups have been consistent findings by university administrators and educators (Dollinger, 2019; Gill, 2019; Lynch, 2017). Specifically, reports into Government programs to increase capability and participation at university found that: Studiosity's online academic feedback and interpersonal connection ensured diverse student populations could be served in the program; that improved skills development and academic performance were reported by students themselves; and, exposure to university life via interpersonal connections and tasks makes enrolment both attainable and desirable. (KPMG, 2015; Department of Education, 2015; Goodman, 2017).

Students who use Studiosity are consistently more likely to be more confident and perform better academically. A study at Western Sydney University found that academic confidence attributed to Studiosity positively accounted for 20% of the variance in students' self-reported grades (Lee and Hanham, 2017). A study at James Cook University showed that mean GPA is higher amongst students who used Studiosity's accessible, formative feedback and that this statistically-significant improvement in mean GPA was apparent regardless of gender, ethnicity, NESB, OP class, or mode of delivery (Lynch, 2017). Further, in the JCU study, student performance improved most significantly for the majority-middle cohorts, who left high school with lower scores, resulting in a higher performance closer to par with high-achievers who entered university in the same cohort. In January 2023, the National Student Wellbeing Study, conducted by Student Edge and Studiosity, revealed that students would participate in university life and visit campus if they had an existing relationship, and that regional, part-time, and online-only students didn't feel a strong sense of community, a data point correlated with increased stress levels. (See Appendix 1)

## **Peer-to-peer mentoring**

There is a well-established historical precedent for peer mentoring as a means to drive student success. Studies find that students who participate in peer mentoring programs are more likely to persist in their studies, have higher academic achievement, and have better overall well-being compared to students who do not participate in such programs (Tullis and Goldstone, 2022; Clarke, Kift, Nelson, 2010; McFarlane, Spes-Skrbis, Taib, 2017). Peer mentoring can provide a sense of community and support, as well as personalised guidance and advice from experienced students who understand the challenges of formal learning. Peer mentors can serve as role models and provide valuable insights into the academic and social expectations of university.

While education institutions have employed small-scale peer mentoring programs for decades to enhance the student experience and positively impact student achievement, one-to-one interpersonal peer connections have proven difficult to scale for the large cohorts of students required in Australian universities, and are difficult even in small programs to generate significant and consistent engagement from students. Using Studiosity for two decades to connect students to a subject-matter specialist, universities have also had access to Studiosity's peer-to-peer service since 2018, allowing for peer mentoring's benefits to be easily implemented and realised at any scale. The combination of the well-understood impacts of peer-to-peer and a way to enable this at a national scale presents an opportunity for a significant, evidence-based program that directly responds to the Accord's goals.

## Recommendations



The Panel should consider this program roll out as a measurable and time-sensitive approach to grow aspiration, normalise success, and enhance student confidence amongst First Nations high school students, while creating connection and professional development opportunities for the university-level Mentors.

### 3.5 Creating opportunity for all Australians

Ref	Discussion paper question	Recommendation
<b>3.5.1 Academic preparedness</b>		
<b>Q28</b>	What is needed to increase the number of people from underrepresented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?	<p>The Panel should consider matching every First Nations high school student with their own First Nations university student mentor via the existing and extensively-researched Studiosity platform.</p> <p>The program would match each of the approximately 90,000 First Nations high school students with a First Nations university student (from a population of approximately 22,000 First Nations university students).</p> <p>Mentors would be invited via their university to participate in the program, be matched with approximately 50 high school students and be paid for their time. The asynchronous nature of the platform means that mentors can comfortably manage these one-to-many relationships.</p>

<p><b>Q29</b></p>	<p>What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?</p>	<p>The project does not require any changes to university offerings, but professional development opportunities will be offered to First Nations undergraduates as paid Mentoring roles. This experience is also added to the undergraduate's Testamur. Student Mentors are also assigned their own professional mentor who is available to support them and to review their interactions with students.</p> <p>Providers do not need to engage in additional practices themselves to maintain quality assurance as this is managed in the platform. The feedback platform Studiosity allows one-to-one interactions to be recorded and available for review. Student Mentees are encouraged to provide their own feedback, all of which is also available for quality assurance purposes.</p>
<p><b>3.5.2 Addressing barriers to access</b></p>		
<p><b>Q30</b></p>	<p>How can governments, institutions, and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?</p>	<p>One barrier to participation is a sense of belonging at university, a perception that is cultivated well before enrolment or pre-enrolment. The reported success of widening participation programs using Studiosity are documented (KPMG, 2015; Department of Education, 2017).</p>
<p><b>Q31</b></p>	<p>How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?</p>	<p>Student Mentees do not pay to participate, access is always free for all students involved. Further, the University-level Mentors are paid for their professional development during their undergraduate degree.</p>

<b>3.5.3 System-wide approaches to increasing access and equity</b>		
<b>Q32</b>	How can best practice learning and teaching for students from underrepresented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning?	<p>One-to-one, interpersonal formative feedback, as well as the power of peer-to-peer learning, are both well-established as best practice in student learning. However, to-date, scaling access and outcomes have been logistical challenges. This project would see these powerful learning drivers distributed nationally.</p> <p>It is important that any large-scale program is measured against well-defined objectives. Key objectives of the program include high school completion and higher education participation which should be central outcomes measured in a formal evaluation to be undertaken by university researchers. Studiosity has worked with dozens of universities on studies evaluating the impact of its university partnerships and is well placed to deliver detailed data and to collaborate with researchers.</p>
<b>Q33</b>	What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from underrepresented groups in higher education?	<p>Studiosity's platform has facilitated millions of interactions with students, including tens of thousands of school age students, and is trusted by schools and universities across Australia. It has been used by universities for programs specifically designed to support First Nations university and school students, as well as by organisations like the GO Foundation and the Public Education Foundation.</p> <p>Strengthening the place of First Nations in our higher education sector, requires not just effective services and support, but the</p>

		<p>engagement of students and the participation and advice of communities. Studiosity has partnered with community-based organisations and undertaken extensive research into the triggers and barriers related to help-seeking.</p> <p>If implemented, the National First Nations Mentoring Program will be co-ordinated by an Program Manager hired from Australia's First Peoples, employed by Studiosity to ensure the program's successful implementation.</p> <p>The Program Manager will be accountable to a Steering Group made up of representatives from various stakeholders including the university sector and government funders.</p>
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## Next steps



We are at a unique moment in the journey towards reconciliation in Australia. We have a growing population of accomplished First Nations university students, a review of the higher education sector that has put widening participation at the centre of its aspirations, and the platform and IP of an Australian-owned Edtech organisation trusted in Australia, New Zealand, and growing quickly across the world. This solution is ready to deploy at scale - to not only serve First Nations students and future students, but to create another way for Australia's First Peoples to become the drivers of their own success.

### Proposed next steps:

Stage	Activity	Duration / timeline
<b>i.</b>	Draft program plan to be shared by Studiosity with the Accord Panel; identification and advice from Government, community, and industry stakeholders.	1 month
<b>ii.a</b>	Scope (a): State by state. For example, West Australian universities and West Australian high schools to launch.	2 months
<b>ii.b</b>	Scope (b): National program, including all universities and secondary schools with First Nations enrolments in years 9 - 12.	4 months
<b>iii.</b>	Onboarding and training of undergraduate Mentors, by Studiosity with Government and university key contacts.	4 months
<b>iv.</b>	Forum for university, school, Government, program leaders and contacts, for distribution of student directives and access.	2 months

<b>v.</b>	<b>First Nations Mentoring launched in the 2024 school year</b>	<b>Start of Term 2, 2024</b>
<b>vi.</b>	Measurement and reporting on student success metrics (confidence, academic success, post-secondary intent, enrolment behaviour).	24 months post-program start

## References



Clarke, J. A., Kiff, S., & Nelson, K. J. (2010). Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v1i1.13>

Department of Education. (2017). Evaluation Of The HEPPP Higher Education Participation And Partnerships Program. Acil Allen Consulting. <https://www.education.gov.au/download/3669/heppp-evaluation-final-report/18465/document/pdf>

Goodman, J (2017). *Submission and recommendations to the Higher Education Standards Panel*. Accessed: Australian Government Department of Education, Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, 11 April 2023: <https://www.education.gov.au/download/3893/no-14-your-tutor/5724/document/docx>

KPMG. (2015, April) Evaluation of Bridges to Higher Education, p. 56 <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/589264>

Lee, C.B, & Hanham, J. (2017, May). Interim Report No.2 - Evaluating the impact of online tutoring (Studiosity). Available at [studiosity.com/case-study-wsu](https://studiosity.com/case-study-wsu)

Lynch, A. (2017, March 29). The JCU Trial of Studiosity. Data presented at Universities UK Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning Conference, London. Accessed 11 April at: [studiosity.com/case-study-jcu-and-studiosity](https://studiosity.com/case-study-jcu-and-studiosity)

McFarlane, R., Spes-Skrbis, M., & Taib, A. (2017). Let's Chat – A fresh take on the invaluable role of peer-to-peer conversation in student engagement, participation and inclusion. *Student Success*, 8(2), 107–111. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v8i2.388>

Tullis, J.G., Goldstone, R.L. (2020). Why does peer instruction benefit student learning?. *Cogn. Research* 5, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-020-00218-5>

## Appendix 1



Student Edge - YouthInsight (2023). 2022 - 2023 Australian and New Zealand Student Wellbeing Survey, for Studiosity: Chapter 2 Connection & Support at University.

### Excerpt from 2023 survey:

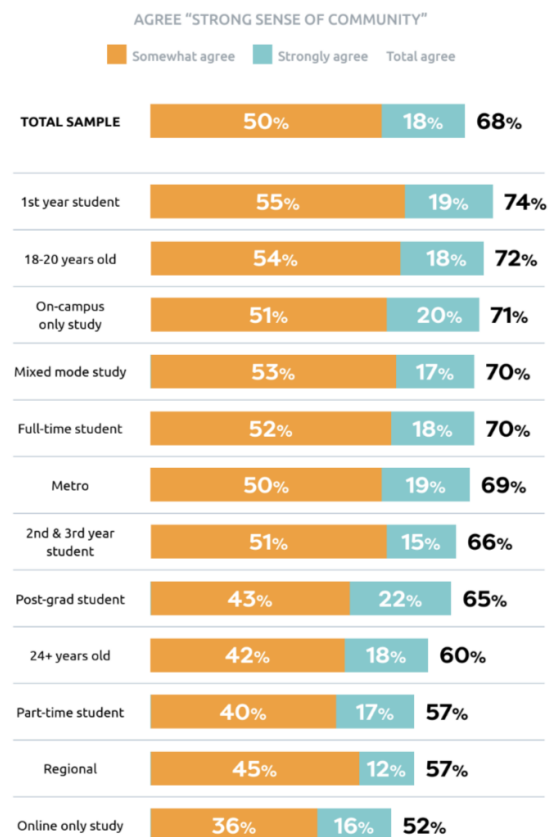
Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: "There is a strong sense of community at my university"? Two thirds (68%) agree that there is a sense of community at their university. This is in line with the 66% of students who felt they were part of a learning community in 2019. As shown in the chart on the next page, those who agreed they had a strong sense of community were most likely to be:

- 1st year students
- 18-23 year olds
- Those studying on-campus or mixed mode
- Full-time students
- Those studying in metro areas

Many factors contribute to a sense of community at university, but it is clear from the results that the on-campus experience and full-time engagement correlate strongly with feelings of community.

Sense of community was also found to be related to levels of stress, with those who felt they had a strong sense of community slightly less likely to be stressed weekly or more (69%) than those who did not have this community sense (77%).

The challenge for universities, as the student population and their study methods diversify, is how to engage audiences other than the full-time, on-campus, undergrad cohort with the university community and provide a sense of



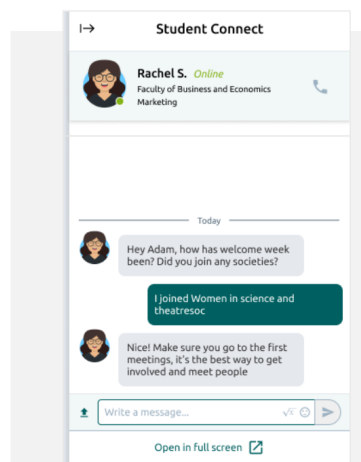
*place and connection. Students were more likely to feel a greater sense of community if they also felt that their university makes it easy to connect with other students. Sense of community was also higher for those with a greater sense of support, in particular mental health support, 24/7 study support and also scheduled workshops to improve referencing skills.*

## Appendix 2

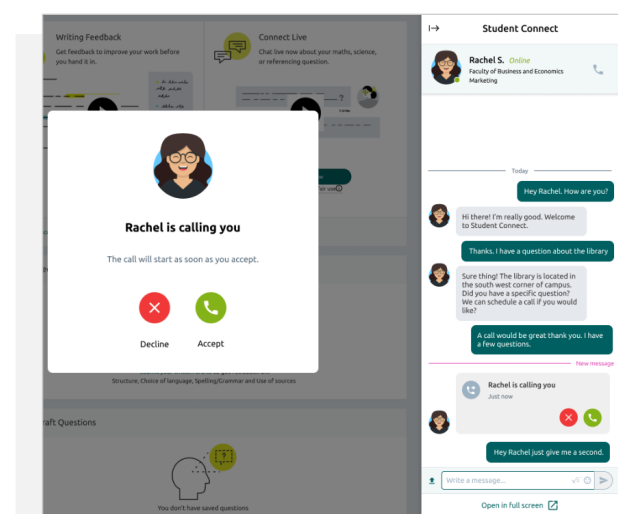


Visuals of the synchronous and asynchronous chat user-interface. Students can initiate a conversation or question, and will be prompted by their Mentor as well.

Beneath the user interface, quality assurances include session recording, administrator reporting and access, scaled onboarding and training and professional management and development for Mentors, end-user engagement and satisfaction, as well as technology storage, maintenance, and continual development.



**Asynchronous Chat: Mentors prompt conversations, alleviating the pressure on a younger student to reach out with a question first.**



**Live Chat: One-to-one, synchronous, audio or chat session anytime.**