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NIAA Submission to Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper

# Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper (February 2023).

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) is committed to improving the lives of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The NIAA recognises that each community is unique. The agency includes people across Australia who work closely with communities to make sure policies, programs and services address these unique needs.

The NIAA plays an important role in leading the efforts of all Commonwealth agencies to contribute to better outcomes for First Nations Australians.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap is a new model of working together, where all governments work in partnership with First Nations stakeholders with an increased level of accountability, transparency and responsibility between all parties. The objective of the National Agreement is to enable First Nations peoples and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians.

The NIAA has a significant role in establishing mechanisms and processes that provide First Nations peoples and their communities opportunities to have a greater say in decisions that affect them and support First Nations self‑determination.

The Minister for Indigenous Australians, supported by the NIAA, is responsible for coordinating the delivery of the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan. All Commonwealth Ministers are responsible for taking action to achieve targets that sit within their portfolio. Importantly, all ministers, departments and agencies across the Commonwealth have a role to play to deliver the Priority Reforms, outcomes and targets in collaboration and partnership.

The NIAA works with the higher education sector and the Department of Education to improve Higher Education outcomes for First Nations Australians, particularly focused on achieving Targets 6 and 7 under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Recent data from the Productivity Commission and Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that both Targets 6 and 7 are not currently on track (further detail below).

# Current programs administered by the NIAA

The NIAA administer two programs that support First Nations students’ attainment in higher education:

* the [Indigenous Student Success Program](https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/education/indigenous-student-success-program) (ISSP); and
* the [Away from Base (AFB) Program](https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/education/away-base-program).

The ISSP is a flexible program that allows universities to determine how to best support First Nations students. First Nations students' enrolment, progression and completion of courses is the priority of ISSP. Universities are also required to support activities that promote cultural competency in Indigenous cultures, traditions and histories. Through the ISSP funding, universities provide students with scholarships, tutorial assistance, mentoring, safe cultural spaces and other support services.

* In 2023, ISSP provides $75.4 million to 40 universities, supporting over 21,000 First Nations students.
* ISSP is a **supplementary program** and is funded through the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA).
* Since the introduction of the ISSP in 2017:
  + The total number of First Nations students at ISSP participating universities has increased from 17,150 students in 2016 to 21,552 students in 2020.
  + More First Nations students are completing courses than in previous years. Since 2016, the number of First Nations people completing qualifications has grown from 2,166 to 2,833 in 2020 (for ISSP funded universities).
  + The most popular field of study for First Nations students is Society and Culture at 32 per cent, followed by Health at 21 per cent, Education 13 per cent and Management and Commerce at 10 per cent of students. The four most popular fields of education for First Nations students account for 75 per cent of course enrolments in 2020. First Nations people are underrepresented in natural and physical sciences, engineering and related technologies, information technology, agriculture environmental and related studies, as well as architecture and building.
  + The percentage of First Nations staff employed at university is increasing each year. Since 2016, the number of First Nations staff working at universities has increased from 1,223 to 1,711 in 2021 (an increase of around 40 per cent). More work is needed to meet the ISSP workforce target of 3 per cent.
* The NIAA also administers the AFB Program which assists higher education and training providers with the costs of meals, accommodation and travel to support First Nations students who study via mixed-mode or distance education who need to travel away from home for short periods to undertake their studies.
* In 2023, around $19.6 million has been allocated to 19 providers, to assist around 2,700 First Nations students.
* The AFB was evaluated in 2021 and the NIAA is considering the report in consultation with the Department of Social Services and Services Australia. The Evaluation Report for the AFB Programs is on the NIAA website.

# Response to Discussion Questions

#### 1. The role of higher education in Australia's future

Access to higher education is life changing for many First Nations Australians. Employment outcomes for First Nations Australians are strongly linked to education attainment. However, First Nations Australians do not access Higher Education at the same rate as Non-Indigenous Australians.

* Many universities have a First Nations workforce rate of under 2 per cent, with an average staffing level of 1.42 per cent.
* First Nations Australians make up 3.8% of the population but are less than 1.5% of higher education students.

The Australian Universities Accord can be a significant mechanism in achieving the Closing the Gap targets and priority reforms areas. As mentioned above, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap Targets 6 and 7 relate directly to further education outcomes for First Nations Australians and both are not on track. There is urgent need for more to be done to bring these targets back on track.

* *Target 6 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent.* Nationally in 2021, 47 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–34 years had completed non-school qualifications of Certificate III or above. The Productivity Commission has highlighted a drop of around 16 per cent for First Nations students aged under 35 enrolling in a Certificate III or higher qualification (data to 2020). Increased First Nations student enrolments in Certificate III and above qualifications and improved completion rates will be needed to achieve this indicator.
* *Target 7 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are engaged in employment, education or training. By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent.* Nationally in 2021, 58 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15–24 years were fully engaged in employment, education or training.

The Closing the Gap priority reform areas encourage government and other institutions (such as Universities) to change the way they work with First Nations Australians to achieve better outcomes for First Nations Australians. The four priority reform areas should be considered by the higher education sector when developing policies, partnerships and courses.

The priority reform areas and related outcomes are:

1. Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making – First Nations people are empowered to share decision-making authority with governments to accelerate policy and place-based progress on Closing the Gap through formal partnership arrangements.
2. Building the Community-Controlled Sector - investing to ensure there is a strong and sustainable First Nations community-controlled sector delivering high quality services to meet the needs of First Nations people across Australia.
3. Transforming Government Organisations - governments, their organisations and their institutions are accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of First Nations people, including through the services they fund.
4. Shared access to Data and Information at a Regional Level – First Nations people have access to, and the capability to use, locally-relevant data and information to set and monitor the implementation of efforts to close the gap, their priorities and drive their own development.

The Accord should look at ways to meet the commitments under Closing the Gap, in particular:

* Priority Reform 1 (Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making). Ensuring further improvements to higher education outcomes through the development of partnerships between universities and First Nations communities and peak bodies. Working in partnership allows for deep engagement and ensures that the skills and training priorities, policies, programs and initiatives are designed with First Nations people.
* Priority Reform 3: (Transforming Institutions). To thrive in higher education, First Nations students and staff need to feel culturally safe in the higher education system. Cultural safety means that First Nations people are in an inherently safe and respectful environment. In order to provide cultural safety an organisation must be culturally competent. First Nations peoples’ beliefs and way of life differ according to geographical location, language, culture and history. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to every community or every situation. It is the responsibility of institutions to make efforts to understand First Nations communities and valuing their knowledge. Each community will have its own cultural authority, preferred protocols and their own ways of operating. Embedding and practicing meaningful cultural safety meets the outcome of Priority Reform 3.
* Priority Reform 4 (Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level). Consideration of how data relating to First Nations students and staff is collected, stored and used, and how this can be shared with First Nations Australians. Access to reliable and current data ensures policy advice and program development can be better targeted to: support institutional operation and sustainability and improve student participation, completion and attainment rates. Currently there are data lags of up to 20 months, which impact on the provision of current and responsive policy. Access to current and consistent data will assist in informing the development of policies and programs which will underpin the Accord.

#### 2. Challenges and opportunities for Australia

First Nations Australians are a younger population with a rich culture who have an important part to play in addressing Australia’s future skills and knowledge needs.

Education is a critical prerequisite to strong employment outcomes. The AIHW Health Performance Framework identified in 2018–19 the rate of employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians aged 20–64 who had attained a bachelor degree or higher qualification was 80% (26,120) compared with 86% and for an advanced diploma or diploma the rate was 76% (25,620) compared with 83%. However, recent data from the Productivity Commission has highlighted a drop of around 16 per cent for First Nations students aged under 35 enrolling in a Certificate III or higher qualification (data to 2020).

We also know that:

* First Nations peoples’ tertiary educational attainment remains lower than for non-Indigenous Australians. This increases with remoteness. However, First Nations people with qualifications of Certificate III and above in high-demand fields are more likely to be employed.
* Employment outcomes for First Nations people tended to be much more linked to their education background compared to non-Indigenous people. This highlights the importance of accessible and targeted education pathways to improve First Nations employment outcomes.
* First Nations people with qualifications in high-demand fields are likely to be employed. However, qualifications in high-demand fields are often not at a high enough level to result in employment in the fields. For example, First Nations people who studied information technology were unlikely to work in IT with over a third having completed Certificate II or lower.

We strongly suggest the Accord reference and build upon the in-depth findings presented in the   
*Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices) Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020[[1]](#footnote-1)) with particular reference to Chapter 14: ‘Learning and Education’ and Chapter 15: ‘Pathways to Employment and Empowerment’ of the Report. The voices and aspirations of women and girls, which the report reflects, are important to informing future policy direction under the Accord process.

[The Report](https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/wiyi-yani-u-thangani) explores the root causes and solutions to overcome the stark disadvantage of First Nations women and girls in the education sector. It considers the need for a shift in the way education systems operate, from a dependence on Western measures of success, towards embracing First Nations cultures and knowledges.

The report highlights the importance of culturally responsive, accessible, and affordable educational services to improve life outcomes and to close the gap.

* Various structural barriers impede access to education, training and pathways into employment for First Nations women and girls. Barriers include affordability, local availability, inadequate supports and lack of cultural representation and inclusivity. School-based engagement and mentoring programs have been found to foster a culturally safe and inclusive environments to increase access to education and training opportunities for First Nations women and girls.
* Investing in First Nations women and girls using a foundation of place-based, culturally safe, healing‑oriented and trauma-informed policies will see more women and girls have improved life choices and outcomes, engaged in leadership roles and become role models in their communities.

#### 3. Challenges and opportunities for the higher education system

First Nations young people's engagement with education is impacted by a range of factors, including racism, discrimination and intergenerational trauma – creating barriers to completing school or accessing higher education pathways.

Education alone is not sufficient; a culturally appropriate, holistic, community supported, strengths-based approach will provide the best foundation for young First Nations people to prosper and succeed in higher education. There is a need for initiatives that engage First Nations people through culturally appropriate support to address barriers and the creation of pathways to enable education and meaningful employment outcomes.

Academic self-concept, cultural connectedness, relationship networks, educational culture and teachers, and regionality influence Indigenous student aspiration and motivation (Howard et al., 2020). Briggs (2017) demonstrated a need to provide alternative pathways such as TAFE to disengaged students. First Nations young people can favour the TAFE pathway for its perceived work opportunities and its practical training pathway (Gore et al., 2017a). Better pathways between the VET and higher education systems will be important for lifting the educational attainment of First Nations students, including to support lifelong learning.

The higher education system needs to better engage with First Nations people from regional and remote areas. There is an over-representation of young First Nations people in regional areas who are not fully engaged in post school education and/or training or employment (at least 72.9 per cent), which is double the rate of non-Indigenous youth (34.2 per cent) (Productivity Commission, 2020). They are at risk of continuing long-term unemployment and long-term welfare dependency.

Consultations associated with development of the First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan found that First Nations students who were studying remotely frequently experienced challenges in accessing an appropriate device and an affordable and reliable internet connection to support their studies. Some training organisations indicated they would provide direct support for students to ensure digital connectivity.

The provision of culturally safe environments for First Nations Australians should be a priority for higher education. Universities can provide culturally safe environments through culturally safe spaces, culturally appropriate curriculum, support services and investment in First Nations academics and staff.

The NIAA recently undertook consultation with the Higher Education sector on the ISSP Guidelines. Through these consultations a number of issues were raised that highlight some of the factors impacting on First Nations Australians participation and success in higher education.

Participants in the consultations suggested:

* First Nations students’ field of study was often linked to the presence of First Nations staff/academics in that area. To increase diversity of field of study there needs to be recruitment and retention of First Nations academics and staff across all schools at universities.
* There is a need for universities to value Indigenous knowledge.
* First Nations students’ outcomes are impacted by the level of support they receive from the institution they are studying with. Universities need flexibility and capability to respond to First Nations students support needs. In particular, the need for:
  + place-based support for the student to enable their success, and
  + data to enable early identification of those at risk of not succeeding in their study to allow additional support to be provided.
* Enrolment of First Nations students has improved as a result of the availability of demand driven places for regional and remote First Nations students. Expanded access to demand driven places could further increase First Nations students’ enrolments and assist with progressing towards Closing the Gap Targets 6 and 7.
* The need for flexibility in requirements for study such as number of units needing to study, mode of study, as well as cultural appropriateness. For example, participants indicated there can be a negative impact from the ABSTUDY rule that students must enrol in three courses as many can realistically only successfully complete two courses in a semester. Students who drop back to two course lose ABSTUDY which leads to difficulty of juggling work and study, as well as family responsibilities and cultural obligations. Requirements around timeframes for completing courses and permitted number of fails were also creating barriers for First Nations students’ participation in higher education as they often need longer times to complete their study due to family responsibilities and cultural obligations.
* Universities should improve the understanding of the geographic and cultural footprints of students living and studying off Country, and their family responsibilities and cultural obligations.
* Cost of living pressures are detrimental to First Nations Australians’ ability to study, mental health and wellbeing.
* More courses are now requiring students to participate in a workplace placement prior to finishing their course. These placements are often unpaid, and create further financial pressure. This is impacting on First Nations student completion rates.
* There is need to support postgraduate students who often have family responsibilities, cost of living pressures and, for some, the need to travel to collect data for their PhD requiring international study.

The grants provided to universities through ISSP are supplementary funding to support First Nations students. During the recent ISSP Guidelines review consultations participants suggested moving to one source of adequate mainstream funding to support First Nations students would be more efficient from an administration perspective. Participants also suggested annual funding allocation (like the ISSP) impacts on the ability to recruit and retain qualified senior staff as institutions are unable to commit to contracts/employment beyond one year. Multi-year funding would allow them to offer valued staff greater security of employment.

#### 4. Connection between VET and higher education systems

The Australian Government provides $1.6 billion annually as a contribution to states and territories for each jurisdiction’s Vocational Education and Training (VET) delivery. Responsibility for VET delivery rests with the states and territories through the National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development (NASWD).

Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community‑Controlled sector, and strengthening and establishing formal partnerships and shared decision making are two of the four priority reforms committed to by all governments.

The VET system has greater delivery in rural and remote areas, including a stronger connection to Community-Controlled Organisations. As a result VET can be better positioned to develop partnerships with First Nations Australians and understand the needs of communities.

Completion of VET study can provide a pathway to entry into higher education system and First Nations young people can favour the TAFE pathway for its perceived work opportunities and its practical training experience (Gore et al., 2017a).

The *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices) Securing Our Rights, Securing Our Future Report* (2020)discusses how women and girls felt conflicted between staying on Country or leaving to pursue further training opportunities. Practical and financial barriers prevented women and girls from participating in training, such as distance, caring responsibilities, coming out of care and seeking education in usually male-dominated fields. Women and girls found that there was not the same financial support available for VET compared to those seeking higher education. It also notes:

1. First Nations women and girls in more remote and very remote communities who experience significant barriers to participating in contemporary Western society due to low levels of language and literacy skills.
2. Working in genuine partnership with First Nations women to co-design a culturally safe and inclusive approach to increase literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills to address specific needs identified by the community to enhance economic safety and security.
3. There is high demand from First Nations women and girls across all states and territories to address a gap in literacy skills including language, literacy, financial literacy, digital literacy, and system and process literacy. These are essential skill sets to ensure First Nations women and girls can engage with existing systems and participate effectively in employment and other opportunities*.*
4. Data from the Commonwealth’s Community Development Program supports the evidence of need; 24 per cent of participants self-identify as having English language needs or have completed less than year 10 schooling. This compares to 16 per cent for the general employment services caseload.
5. First Nations women and girls will remain disadvantaged without the opportunity to develop confidence through building their foundation skills, and creating pathways to employment opportunities and pursing leadership in social change.

Digital skills is an important component of foundational skills. They are also a priority under Target 17 (Access to Information) under the Closing the Gap National Agreement. This Target considers improvements to digital inclusion which comprises access, affordability and digital ability (skills).

* The First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Board has been recently established and would be useful for the Accord Panel to engage with.
* Digital skills training is already being delivered by a range of organisations in First Nations communities, including InDigiMOB.
* Advice from First Nations stakeholders indicates a preference to support and expand coverage of existing successful digital skills development activities rather than resourcing new activities.
* Given the specialist nature of digital skills training, we encourage the Accord Panel to engage with organisations such as First Nations Media Australia on the most appropriate and efficient options to integrate foundational skills with existing community-based activities.

Research by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) suggests that Indigenous students are more successful when they are taught by local trainers and are able to engage in their learning on country and in their own language[[2]](#footnote-2). This suggests that efforts to expand and grow the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Registered Training Organisations (ACCRTOs) sector and other Indigenous organisations providing training and support services, will provide the cultural settings and learning styles needed to improve outcomes for First Nations people in the VET sector.

The Australian Government is committed to helping and assisting ACCRTOs in the delivery of services and support to First Nations communities. A strong and thriving ACCRTO sector is critical to achieving Priority Reform 2 – Building the Community-Controlled Sector, and Targets 6 and 7.

# Conclusion

The NIAA encourages the Accord process to continue to prioritise activities that assist with the improved enrolment, retention and completion of First Nations higher education students, focusing on their educational needs with a view to empowering them with the skills and confidence to find meaningful employment.

The NIAA thanks the Accord Panel for the opportunity to contribute to this important body of work.

We also encourage the Accord process to bear in mind the parallel Employment White Paper process being led by Treasury, which is considering educational attainment as one of many factors that lead to meaningful employment for all Australians, including First Nations people.

1. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/wiyi-yani-u-thangani> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Guenther, J, Bat, M, Stephens, A, Skewes, J, Boughton, B, Williamson, F, Wooltorton, S, Marshall, M & Dwyer, A 2017, Enhancing training advantage for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, NCVER, Adelaide. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)