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Australian Government Department of Education

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Dear Mary O'Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper.

The Australian Pasifika Educators Network (APEN) is a network of Pasifika educators established to advance the educational experiences, opportunities and outcomes for Pasifika learners, educators and communities in Australia. We are teachers, school executives, university professors and professional staff, community educators and advocates who have a common purpose and goal to amplify the voices and experiences of Pasifika in Australia.

APEN defines "Pasifika" *as peoples and communities, who are genealogically, spiritually and culturally connected to the lands, the skies and seas of the Pacific region (including Aotearoa, New Zealand), and who have chosen to settle in and call Australia home.* For the purposes of this submission the terms Pacific will be used in reference to literature that uses the term and Pasifika in reference to peoples. We welcome the Accord's prioritisation to ensure that the opportunities and benefits of higher education (HE) are open to everyone. We submit our response to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper with recommendations for supporting Pasifika learners and communities in Australia.

Pasifika in Australia

Australia's relationship with the Pacific Island States and Pasifika people has been long and varied. As Australia's closest neighbouring countries, Pasifika people's migration commenced in the early 1860s through early labour schemes that saw thousands of Pacific people brought, many by force, to Australia to work in Queensland sugar plantations. A century later, various Australian multicultural policies of the 1960's prompted an increase of Pasifika peoples migration and Pasifika communities grew in Australia. It is important to note that whilst Pacific indigenous peoples share many commonalities in customs, values and some physical characteristics; they are separate peoples, with their own languages, cultures and traditions. Pasifika are recognized in Australia as a group of over 20 ethnicities from across the South Pacific regions and territories which also includes the indigenous people of New Zealand – Māori.

Pasifika communities have seen significant population growth in the last 10 years in Australia. An analysis of the 2021 census reveals that since 2006 there are almost twice as many people of Pacific heritage in Australia. The share in Australia's total population (including Māori) is now just under 2% with an approximate total population of 500,000.

NSW and QLD are home to over 70% of Australian Pasifika communities, with the highest concentrations living in identified socially disadvantaged suburbs such as Blacktown City in NSW and Logan in QLD. Almost 40% of the population with Pasifika ancestry are aged 19 years and under. Despite the high levels of high school completion for students from Pasifika communities, these

students are less likely to engage in tertiary study and are therefore underrepresented in HE in Australia. (Ravulo, 2015).

For Pasifika communities, education is a transformative vehicle to ensure greater opportunities in life can be realised. The expanding youthful Pasifika population signals the urgency for proactive approaches and provisions that address the needs of this growing community in Australia.

Equitable access

The 1990 Fair Chance For All Report identified six target equity groups to increase access and participation in HE. The equity groups are identified as the following: Indigenous Australians; people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; people from rural and isolated areas; people with disabilities; people of non-English speaking backgrounds, and women (especially women in non-traditional areas of study). Pasifika communities experience multi-faceted and interrelated structural, settlement and social issues that intersect multiple identified target equity groups. They experience compounding disadvantages associated with their low SES status and challenges associated with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Migrant background (CALDM). They are likely to experience Out-Of-Home-Care and are likely first-in-family to engage in HE.

Statistics show that young Pasifika people are over-represented in the NSW and QLD Juvenile Justice system. [Recent research](#) on exclusionary practices used in Australian high schools found overwhelming evidence that in the last 30 years suspensions and expulsions disproportionately target students from diverse or minority backgrounds. Potentially exacerbating the school to prison pipeline for Pasifika young people.

Additional factors such as familial and cultural obligations, needing to acquire employment immediately after high school completion and significant career responsibilities further contribute to Pasifika underrepresentation in HE. In order to meet and address their needs, Pasifika communities should be prioritised and recognised as a targeted equity group.

Recommendation

1. Expand equity group definitions and profiles to include Pasifika as a targeted equity group at the Australian higher education policy level.

Improved data collection

Understanding the experience and needs of Pasifika learners is critical and there is an urgent need to review current admission and enrolment processes to better identify and monitor students across the education sector. A coordinated approach in the collection of ethnicity identifiers for Pasifika communities in education is necessary to ensure greater clarity around the diverse cohorts across Australian schools and universities. At present an ad hoc approach is taken to identifying Pasifika students both in schools and universities which presents complexities in attempting to undertake appropriate support measures for these learners.

Western Sydney University (WSU) is one of the few known universities that has embedded the collection of Pasifika (including Māori) enrolment data since 2011. This is strategically important to ensure accurate tracking of enrolment, retention and completion rates of such an equity group, target support when required, and track growth in enrolment at the university, and continue to create visibility and representation for Pasifika communities in Western Sydney. As of 2022, Pasifika students make up 3% of the student body at WSU. The ability to identify Pasifika students at this level

enables tailored support for current university students which substantiates the need for collection of this important ethnicity data.

> **Recommendation**
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> 2. Establish a coordinated and connected approach to identifying ethnicity in admissions and enrolment students in both compulsory education with State Departments of Education and higher education with Federal Department of Education.

Further to this is the need to undertake robust research around the needs of Pasifika communities. It is evident that there is an immediate need for targeted research to facilitate better understanding of the needs of Pasifika learners in the Australian context. Pasifika learners in HE is an area which remains under-researched, and the number of research studies that have sought to identify factors that impact on the experience and academic performance of Pasifika students in Australia at a university is minimal (Pale, 2023).

Consequently, research and analysis of Pasifika communities in Australia needs to be conducted in collaboration with communities. In line with Pacific research principles - Pacific research should adhere to the following: Respect for relationships; Respect for knowledge holders; Reciprocity; Holism and using research to do good ensuring the wellbeing of Pasifika and pacific communities. This can be accomplished through collaborative approaches such as ensuring cultural protocols and processes are being followed, safeguarding Pacific knowledge and aspirations in the research design, process, outcomes and output and ensuring the interconnected nature of the physical, social, environmental, cultural and spiritual aspects of research with Pasifika and Pacific communities is understood and acknowledged. This will maintain scholarly rigor to preserve the integrity of the research outcomes and impact for Pasifika communities here in Australia.

> **Recommendation**
>
> 3. Increase targeted funding and opportunities for research into the experiences, educational aspirations and outcomes of Pasifika learners and communities in Australia.

Community led solutions

We recommend the coordination and design of a national Pasifika Education Strategy in Australia to increase awareness, understanding and access to HE through coordinated outreach and engagement for participation and success. Blake et al. (2015) suggests that education providers and community services should confront issues to engagement and success by better understanding the challenges Pasifika young people face, and develop strategies for educational pursuits, with a more integrated and coordinated approach to policy and program development rather than a one size fits all approach. This will allow for a nationally coordinated approach to programs, activities, evaluations and policies to better engage Pasifika communities and learners. Critical to success, is harnessing the collective expertise and lived experiences of Pasifika community, leaders and stakeholders and the empowerment of Pasifika people to lead, co-design, and implement their own educational solutions for success.

Effective collaborative partnerships between universities, local communities and other stakeholders can enable educational success for Pasifika learners in Australia (Cuthill & Scull, 2011). These partnerships are more effective when they enable Pacific cultural perspectives such as the Niu

Framework (Fa'avale et al., 2016) which outlines how universities can use cultural knowledge systems to support students' academic identities, performance and success.

Subsequently, to support current HE students in their education journey - student engagement can also be fostered via Pasifika student societies, clubs and associations. The annual Australian Universities Pacific Associations Conference (AUPAC) is an initiative that brings together Pasifika students to discuss Pasifika advancement and success in HE. The conference provides an opportunity for the co-creation of retention activities between university staff and students with a view to engaging the wider community and students from a number of Australian universities attend annually. To encourage inter-university collaboration AUPAC is hosted by a different university each year further cementing AUPAC as an annual university conference for Pasifika university students in Australia. We recommend that institutions allocate strategic funding to support these types of initiatives to ensure long term sustainability for a culturally responsive opportunity for students who are underrepresented in HE.

The success of current Pasifika focussed programs, initiatives and activities for access and success are increasingly due to them being community led, designed and implemented by and for Pasifika staff. Therefore, the commitment to continued engagement can also be facilitated by creating identified Pasifika positions in tertiary education, working in student equity, engagement and support roles. Examples of best practise institutional programs and initiatives which increase Pasifika learners' access and engagement in HE include:

- Pasifika Achievement To Higher Education (PATHE) at Western Sydney University
- Widening Participation Programs at QUT for Pasifika students
- Pacific Islander and Māori Outreach Griffith University
- Pasifika Programs at University of Technology Sydney.
- Pasifika programs at ANU
- Australian Universities Pacific Associations Conference

Recommendation

4. Support the development of a sustainable, strengths-based and community-led national Pasifika education strategy in Australia in collaboration with Pasifika stakeholders, institution partners and Pasifika community.

5. Engage Pasifika experts and Pasifika communities to identify and understand Pasifika cultural needs and strengths to co-design and deliver educational solutions.

6. Establish Pasifika identified roles to drive the design and delivery of Pasifika outreach, access retention and success initiatives and activities for Pasifika learners.

Financial barriers to participation

In addition to aforementioned barriers many students face financial challenges while studying in HE. The financial pressures for university study has often been a major barrier for Pasifika people accessing HE. Many Pasifika students, whose families migrated to Australia via New Zealand, have been disadvantaged and unable to access HECS-HELP as a direct result of holding an unprotected Special Category Visas (SCV), which are regarded as temporary residents, and do not qualify for full social security benefits until they have obtained a permanent visa and met the two-year waiting period for newly arrived residents. Although a welcomed change, announced in April 2023, will allow New Zealanders a faster pathway to Australian citizenship, the legacy of compounding disadvantage

remains for many Pasifika people, who despite the changes may still not be able to access citizenship and therefore HECS-HELP as a result.

Similarly, Pasifika students who do access HECS-HELP, as a community concentrated in identified Low SES areas, reports indicate that students from low SES backgrounds defer higher amounts of fees to HECS-HELP, impacting their future income when compared to students from higher SES backgrounds. Therefore, students from low SES backgrounds may continually experience financial hardship and compounding disadvantaged despite attaining similar qualifications.

Recommendation

7. Review of HECS-HELP loan to enable equitable access for Pasifika people with New Zealand citizenship and not continue to deter financially disadvantaged students from accessing higher education.

Increasing targeted financial support for students through a range of mechanisms, such as scholarships, bursaries, subsidies and grants, can help to alleviate the costs of participation in tertiary education. These supports should be targeted to ensure that Pasifika students are not disproportionately affected by financial barriers. Providing support for necessities such as living costs and transport and accommodation can be a significant expense for students, particularly those from rural or remote areas.

Recommendation

8. Review current financial assistance strategies to allow for targeted financial assistance such as scholarships, grants, bursaries and subsidies.

Culturally responsive practices

Pasifika students may face multiple complex barriers when transitioning to HE in Australia. Targeted, culturally responsive programs are proven to have significant impact in improving outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. HE providers need to adopt culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and respect the cultural backgrounds of all students. To formalise this competency, culturally responsive curriculum, policy and values need to be established or reviewed at the institutionalised level.

Recommendation

9. Review institutional practices, policies and curriculum to ensure that they meet best practice models of culturally inclusive, relevant and responsive pedagogy and practise standards.

Industry partnerships

The establishment of partnerships with industries and employers is needed to ensure that HE graduates can meet industry needs. These partnerships will help to increase the employability and career readiness of Pasifika graduates and ensure they have the skills and knowledge required for

the workforce. HE providers should seek to offer opportunities that are culturally responsive, accessible and targeted for Pasifika learners.

Work-integrated learning opportunities, such as mentoring, career development, internships and work placements will support Pasifika students' transition from study to work and ensure that Pasifika students develop the practical skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their chosen professions. Additionally, HE should seek to partner with culturally responsive and relevant employment providers who can support successful graduate outcomes for Pasifika learners. This year, the Pasifika Programs at the University of Technology Sydney commenced a Career and Industry mentoring pilot program, working in collaboration with the Pacific Professionals Network (PPN). Pasifika scholars, industry professionals and experts were carefully matched with Pasifika university students to support their career goals, graduate attributes and employability outcomes through a 6-month mentoring program. These types of programs can provide students with guidance on career options, job search strategies, and networking opportunities.

Furthermore, community-led solutions can help address disparity and could include the establishment of cultural innovation hubs. Cultural innovation hubs can reimagine physical spaces for HE institutions. These hubs can bring together the community, academics, NGOs, government, public and private sectors for problem solving, ideas generation and innovation. These spaces enable learners to take advantage of opportunities to improve their skills and encourage the development of innovative approaches and ideas. These hubs can provide access to Pasifika communities who may be struggling to engage in HE and could follow in similar vein to the recent Parramatta Engineering Innovation Hub co-developed by WSU and UNSW.

Recommendation

10. Develop culturally responsive work-integrated learning opportunities that are accessible, targeted for Pasifika learners.

11. Establish cultural innovation hubs that are accessible for Pasifika communities and assist in higher education enrichment activities.

The Australian Universities Accord has the potential to play a crucial role in supporting learners of Pasifika backgrounds and in promoting equity in HE. Pasifika students face unique, multi-faceted and interrelated challenges as well as barriers that can make it difficult to access and succeed in higher education. These challenges often relate to structural, settlement and social issues. By taking concrete steps to support these students, universities can help to create a more equitable and inclusive system that benefits all students and Australia.

Thank you for your time to consider APEN's submission. If you have any questions or require further information, please feel free to contact Co-Chair on the details below.

Kind regards

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APPENDIX: Recommendations mapped to questions posed in Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper

Recommendation	Question
1. Expand equity group definitions and profiles to include Pasifika as a targeted equity group at the Australian Higher Education policy level.	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? Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?
2. Establish a coordinated and connected approach to identifying ethnicity in admissions and enrolment students in both compulsory education with State Departments of Education and Higher Education with Federal Department of Education.	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? Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?
3. Increase targeted funding and opportunities for research into the experiences, educational aspirations and outcomes of Pasifika learners and communities in Australia.	Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated? Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?
4. Support the development of a sustainable, strengths-based and community-led national Pasifika education strategy in Australia in collaboration with Pasifika stakeholders, institution partners and Pasifika community.	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? Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education? Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying? Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience? Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are

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	necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?
5. Engage Pasifika experts and Pasifika communities to identify and understand Pasifika cultural needs and strengths to co-design and deliver educational solutions.	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? Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education? Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying? Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience? Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of 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?
6. Establish Pasifika identified roles to drive the design and delivery of Pasifika outreach, access retention and success initiatives and activities for Pasifika learners.	Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education? Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying? Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience? Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of 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?
7. Review of HECS-HELP loan to enable equitable access for Pasifika people with New Zealand citizenship and not continue to deter financially	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?

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disadvantaged students from accessing higher education.	Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?
8. Review current financial assistance strategies to allow for targeted financial assistance such as scholarships, grants, bursaries and subsidies.	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? Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?
9. Review institutional practices, policies and curriculum to ensure that they meet best practice models of culturally inclusive, relevant and responsive pedagogy and practise standards.	Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education? Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying? Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience? Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study? Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need? 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?
10. Establish culturally responsive work-integrated opportunities for Pasifika learners	Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study? Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?
11. Establish cultural innovation hubs that are accessible for Pasifika communities and assist in higher education enrichment activities.	Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education? Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the

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