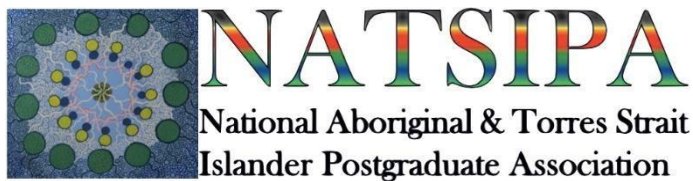


# **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) and Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)**

## **Response to: Postgraduate priorities in the University Accord**

May 2023

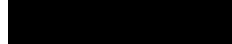


Compiled by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

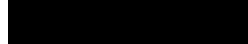
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NATSIPA and CAPA acknowledge the traditional custodians of these lands now called Australia. We pay our respects to Elders and those who have walked before us. We acknowledge that this land was stolen and Aboriginal sovereignty was never ceded. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples contribute significantly to the social, cultural and educational fabric of this nation.

## **Foreword**

This is a joint submission of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA).

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) is the peak representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students, representing almost 650 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students and over 2200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate coursework students.

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 455,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international postgraduates. We are comprised of 28 university and campus-based postgraduate associations and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA). CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.

NATSIPA and CAPA would like to express our disappointment that The Accord Discussion Paper has failed to Acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty and connection to Country. The discussion paper also fails to consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as a specific group, with a specific set of questions for this group and notes that there was a limited reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the paper. In addition, the discussion paper largely positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in terms of deficits that need to be remedied and pigeonholed in the equity and diversity sections of the paper alongside other marginal groups. We urge the Accord Panel to reverse this deficit-based approach. The discussion paper fails to Acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty and connection to Country.

CAPA and NATSIPA believe the Accord should be structured to address the existing higher education system's existing inequalities. Its focus should reflect on systemic inequalities within our current policies, attitudes and practices, which discriminate against different groups within our society. A key objective of the Accord ushers in a new system that increases choice and accessibility regardless of gender, race, ethnocultural background, age, socio-economic background, disability, mental health status and/or sexual identity. Successfully doing so would

enable greater participation and allow more people to reach their full potential as active contributors to our society. Any decisions that relate to higher education should clearly include meaningful consultation and discussion with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across universities, industry, and VET.

The current limitations of our higher education system include the neoliberal ideologies and corporatisation of our university institutions which have distracted them from their original purpose of pursuing the academic mission of teaching and research. In recent years, universities have also been increasingly dragged into political debates of foreign interference, used as the panacea for addressing skills shortages, as the fourth largest export vital to Australia's economy and national priorities. Our concern is that the politicisation of higher education and universities will ultimately degrade these institutions' intellectual integrity in maintaining rational bipartisanship in civil discourse.

As noted in the 1957 Murray Report, universities need environmental conditions where "no immediate practical aim or profit in view" with no other motives,

Apart from any desire for the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, university research is recognised as indispensable to the welfare of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst regional universities emphasise greater focus on the local community's needs, their mission (academic) and values remain the same. The current funding arrangements fail in the prioritisation to fund research based on social impact, which generally means research perceived to have national or global benefit will often be prioritised and funded more than research that supports local communities.

There is little differentiation between the institutions that educate most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. ISSP funding uses a formula based on student access, participation success and regionality. This funding is outcomes-based, and universities with higher numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students benefit most from this funding. Additional funding should be diverted to enhancing the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who did not do well at school and did not get marks that would allow them to enter university, such as the Yapug Program at the University of Newcastle. This pathways program

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<sup>1</sup> Murray K., Clunies-Ross I., Morris C., Reid A., Richards J. (1957), Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the Committee on Australian Universities, <https://vital.voced.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/ngv:53782/SOURCE2>

is specifically designed to ensure that those who did not qualify for university entry or have a high enough ATAR have access to higher education. Such is the success of the Yapug program that several students have not only obtained degrees but gone on to postgraduate studies, including PhDs, ensuring the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education researchers and educators.

As for long-term targets, the Accord should plan progressive steps to work towards free university education in Australia. We recognise this to be an ambitious undertaking which is why it should be a long-term goal that can be achieved through small but incremental increases to the government contributions for Commonwealth Supported Places. Such a policy would progressively lead towards maximising accessibility and eliminating discrimination.

Whilst some may view this as an unnecessary burden to taxpayers who will not benefit from funding such programs, we reflect on recent years with the rise of populism, misinformation and the rapid progress made in Artificial Intelligence. We would argue that an educated population is essential to protecting a healthy and functional democracy and the responsibility of everyone, not just those who can afford an education. Furthermore, Australia is one of the wealthiest countries in the world with enormous untapped potential that could fund free university education for as long as decision-makers are willing to engage in these conversations.

NATSIPA and CAPA believe that the government should fund and partner with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC) to provide advice to the Minister. This would enhance educational and research outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. In addition, we believe the government should review student access to support services to ensure that these cohorts are adequately funded. We are of the view that this is an area of major underfunding in relation to student demand. Students often have extremely long wait periods to access support, and often there are insufficient staff to support this cohort. In addition, there is an urgent need for increased funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support. ISSP funds have not kept up with demand, and under the previous coalition government, funding in real terms went backwards. There needs to be an increase in ISSP funding to incentivise higher education institutions to undertake holistic strategies to improve access and participation for these student groups across the student lifecycle.

## Challenges and Opportunities for Australia

As previously mentioned, the corporatisation of public universities is a significant challenge Australia faces in the higher education sector. The managerial culture at universities often diminishes any attempt to uphold academic values in teaching and learning. Consequently, universities are not providing the best quality education to their students. Overcoming this issue will require cooperation with the state government to overhaul the university legislation to restore the collegiate culture of universities and ensure management is held to account by both its community and the public. Perhaps greater accountability will also reveal how university expenditures and investments could be used to improve teaching and research outcomes.

Despite considerable efforts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes in higher education remain mostly below the non-Indigenous benchmarks commonly used to gauge success. Having more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples with university qualifications will improve our community's outcomes. It will assist in building much-needed national capacity. Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is crucial and should be a national priority.

Sustainable funding for universities will be a challenge in the future; CAPA and NATSIPA have always taken the stance that universities should be funded from the public purse through a progressive tax system. The push for universities to commercialise research to fund their own research impinges on academic values because it prioritises commercial outcomes over curiosity-driven research, where the most significant discoveries are made. International student fees have been a key source of income for universities, becoming Australia's fourth biggest export. However, we would argue that this industry has been built upon the exploitation of international students that has not gone unnoticed by a foreign allied nation.

The United State Department of State's 2017 Trafficking in Persons Report on Australia states:

Some identified victims are foreign citizens on student visas who pay significant placement and academic fees. Unscrupulous employers coerce students to work in excess of the terms of their visas, making them vulnerable to trafficking due to fears of deportation for immigration violations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> US Department of State 2017. *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2017. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/271339.pdf>.

The description mentioned in this report describes the familiar circumstances of many international students studying in Australia who experience wage theft working in retail, hospitality or sessional teaching at universities. Another section within the document would one descriptor of modern slavery as

Traffickers, labor agencies, recruiters, and employers in both the country of origin and the destination country can contribute to debt bondage by charging workers recruitment fees and exorbitant interest rates, making it difficult, if not impossible, to pay off the debt. Such circumstances may occur in the context of employment-based temporary work programs in which a worker's legal status in the destination country is tied to the employer so workers fear seeking redress.

This harrowing description is comparable to how Australian universities enrol international students using overseas recruiters. International students, especially from countries such as India, take on a student loan to study in Australia. They will often work during and after their study time on their Temporary Graduate Visa – 485 to work and pay off their student debt. Similarly, the circumstances of international students undertaking a PhD in Australia also eerily fit this description. When the description of modern slavery is so remarkably similar to the circumstances of international students in Australia, we have to question what level of social inequality we are willing to ignore or accept. Moreover, is this a new form of nationalism where social equality only extends to Australians and not to non-citizens? We would implore the government to pursue more ethical means of fully funding the cost of higher education.

When looking at what the higher education sector needs for the next 10 to 20 years, and focus should include the recruitment, development and support of Higher Degree Research (HDR) students who assist in driving the sector. While the role of HDRs in industry-university collaboration is an important focus, expanding the opportunities for HDR students, especially those undertaking PhDs, to ensure they have access to academic careers is vital. There is a real opportunity to comprehensively review the contribution of HDR graduates to academia, professions, innovation and translation of new knowledge. In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HDR students need to be adequately supported to ensure they have the same opportunities as domestic and international HDR students.

## **Quality teaching delivering quality learning**

AI technologies such as ChatGPT have demonstrated the ability to accomplish tasks we typically set out for students to examine their skills all within seconds. Therefore, future graduates must demonstrate skills that AI cannot overtake as easily, such as critical and lateral thinking skills and the ability to undertake self-guided learning.

Self-guided learning is essential for university graduates, or at least it should be. The agenda around lifelong learning is seemingly a product of imposition that students are not developing the soft skills that make them adaptable to the rapidly changing workplace and for transitioning into different professions. To achieve this, universities must be funded appropriately and remain faithful to academic values. Doing so will free up bureaucratic and financial constraints to allow greater emphasis on developing students to think differently while developing the technical skills for a professional career.

The other essential aspect is the freedom to engage in the university experience fully. It has become increasingly challenging for students to attend classes and lectures and participate in extracurricular activities due to the lack of financial support from the government. Many postgraduate students do not meet the eligibility criteria of Austudy, which forces some students to sacrifice time that could be used for learning to work instead. We know that ~40-50% of PhD students are not provided with a stipend scholarship, and those that do can receive as little as \$29,863 in 2023, below the poverty line. Working whilst studying should be an individual's choice. However, students' current financial plight necessitates working additional hours that are detrimental to their overall learning experience.

CAPA and NATSIPA recommend that all of the recommendations of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Review be implemented in full as a vital policy enabler to activate a strengthened, connected tertiary education and training system and underpin the effective operationalisation of the Accord Panel's findings and recommendations concerning meeting Australian (knowledge and) skills needs, lifelong learning, and to strengthen the tertiary system.

To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many are already studying in areas that align with where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience disadvantage, aligning with the needs of the economy and society. A high number and proportion of students seek work experience that aligns with their studies fields such as health, social work, justice, law



and education. There is a huge opportunity for governments to invest in aligning studies with the current and future needs of both undergraduate and postgraduate student cohorts. In addition, we believe that government should provide incentives for organisations to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to undertake higher education, particularly postgraduate degrees, and to allow adequate time release for the study, which will advance the organisation and provide skills development opportunities.

In relation to boosting demand to study in the higher education system, we believe the government should urgently increase funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support. ISSP funds have not kept up with demand. An urgent influx of funding is needed for undergraduate and postgraduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support, including increases to scholarship funding to complete university. NATSIPA believes that it is essential to demonstrate to future generations the impact and importance of tertiary study. Investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education ambassadors to encourage more university enrolments and mentors whilst at university to assist with completions and success. Current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, student completion rates, remain low compared to the rest of the student population; this requires further investigation as understanding and addressing low completion rates, in conjunction with increasing demand, are priorities.

The Accord could support cooperation between providers, accreditation bodies, government and industry to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates have relevant skills for the workforce in several ways. As discussed, mentors are a key ingredient for success. In addition to mentors, ensuring that we have a critical mass of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and professionals working in HE is vital. When it comes to work-integrated learning, there needs to be strong industry engagement - ensuring the workplace is culturally safe and strong mentoring support for students for work-integrated learning to be effective.

Within tertiary education, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to undertake VET studies (3.6%) than other Australians (1.6%)<sup>3</sup>. However, they are less likely to undertake university studies. There are several reasons for this. However, one strong reason is the availability of VET in regional communities. The VET system has greater delivery in

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<sup>3</sup> National Indigenous Australians Agency, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework, 2.06 Educational participation and attainment of adults, Australian Government: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-06-educational-participation>, last accessed 13th Mar 2023.

rural and remote areas, including a stronger connection to Community-Controlled Organisations. As a result, VET can be better positioned to develop partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and understand the needs of communities.

University studies remain inaccessible unless students relocate to a major centre to study. This remains a barrier to participation in higher education. In addition, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples go to university, they tend to be as mature age students. Pathways from VET to university are complex. VET can be a pathway to higher education. However, VET focuses on practical skill development, whereas university focuses on curricula and critical thinking. Completing VET study can provide a pathway to entry into the higher education system. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples can favour the TAFE pathway for its perceived work opportunities and practical training experience. An additional barrier is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in remote and very remote communities experience significant barriers to participating in contemporary Western society due to low levels of language and literacy skills<sup>4</sup>

Universities successfully implementing work-integrated learning is one way to bridge the gap between VET and HE. In addition, The inherent differences between the sectors, including the competency-based focus of VET compared with the curricula focus of higher education, means that transitioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have to adjust to different learning cultures, expectations and means of assessment. On top of this, there is a lack of cooperation between the two sectors, which makes transitioning for students difficult. Therefore, there needs to be better collaboration between the two sectors, including the development of a national widening participation program and strategy, which enables every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student to have access to participation in tertiary education through strong collaboration amongst schools, universities, vocational education providers and community groups.

### **A system that delivers new knowledge, innovation and capability**

CAPA and NATSIPA hope the Accord process will highlight the inadequacies and policy missteps made over the decades in this area. Earlier this year, one of our submissions to the ARC Review panel highlighted the generic nature of the *Australian Research Council Act*

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission 2020, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report 2020*, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/wiyi-yanu-thangani>

2001, which we demonstrated to easily repurposed the Act by replacing the word 'research' with another noun (our example was charity).<sup>5</sup> Our findings highlighted that the purpose of the Act did not include any mention of new knowledge or an emphasis on academic values. Fundamentally, we concluded that the Federal Parliament of Australia had never mandated a research agency (ARC) based on academic principles and knowledge development. This discovery made clear to us that Australia needs to make progress in developing a research culture based on academic values. These values are essential for building trust with the industry because it helps define expectations of what we stand for and do not. Why would any industry invest in a research partnership with universities without trust?

As for reforms to funding, we highlight recommendations in our other reports where we critiqued the assessment criteria for peer-reviewing research grants that disadvantage early career researchers and small and regional universities.<sup>6 7</sup>

From the perspective of research training students, most disciplines will require a doctorate as the only pathway to undertaking independent research. However, this well-known fact is not recognised in the *Student Assistance (Education Institutions and Courses) Determination 2019* section of the *Social Security Act 1991*.<sup>8</sup> Instead, research degrees are explicitly excluded, as noted in Part 3 Ch 3. s4.10 of the Australian Government's *Social Security Guide* (v 1.304), as seen below.

Doctorate studies, or Masters courses that are not specified in the Schedule 3 of the Determination are NOT approved courses for Austudy purposes.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, we mentioned in an earlier section that the number of research students receiving a scholarship stipend and the minimum amount received is below the poverty line. We would also like to bring to the attention of the Accord panellist of the Organisation for Economic Co-

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<sup>5</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2023, *Comparative review of the ARC*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Comparative-review-of-the-ARC.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2023, *Aligning the ARC to serve the Public Good*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ARC-Public-Good.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2023, *Supporting Regional Universities*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CAPA-Supporting-Regional-Universities.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Social Services, Approved institutions and courses for student payments, Australian Government, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/student-payments/approved-institutions-and-courses-for-student-payments>, last accessed 10th March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Social Services 2023, *Social Security Guide* (Version 1.304), Australian Government, <https://guides.dss.gov.au/social-security-guide/3/3/4/10>, last accessed 12th Mar 2023.

operation and Development's (OECD) *Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*.<sup>10</sup> Within this document, it defines research as:

Research and experimental development (R&D) comprise creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge.

The term R&D covers three activities: basic research, applied research and experimental development.

1. Basic Research
2. Applied Research
3. Experimental Development

### **General exclusions**

Reference to the Frascati Manual should be made for detailed analysis of exclusions, but general exclusions to highlight are:

- education and training other than PhD research
- general purpose data collection (such as recording weather statistics) routine testing and analysis of materials, components, products, processes, etc.
- feasibility studies
- policy-related studies
- phase IV of clinical trials (unless they result in a further scientific or technological advance).

Here, research is defined as systematic work, making an exception to exclude education and training but not PhD research. The point is that PhD students' research activity is recognised as work by OECD standards. It would place doctorates in an arrangement analogous to an apprenticeship but for research and would mean research training for a PhD should be remunerated at a taxable salary above minimum wage. We acknowledge that one of our

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<sup>10</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2015, *Frascati Manual 2015 Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development*, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264239012-en.pdf?expires=1684117650&id=id&accname=ocid56022148&checksum=B3C1DF522FE71D0A5C641AC4B525814C>

legacies is lobbying against the taxation of PhD stipend allowances. However, in a better-off comparison, stipend allowance has barely kept up with the cost of living from decades of low indexation increase that PhDs are better off if their research were classified as work and taxed at a salary paid above minimum wage.

Furthermore, the research training policy's most striking inconsistency is the taxation arrangement between part-time and full-time research students. There has been no explanation for why part-time stipends are taxed. However, this policy has significantly affected various disadvantaged groups. Students often undertake a part-time student load to better manage challenges in other aspects of their lives, including those with young families, carer responsibilities, disabilities, regional students and first nation students.

Some universities have a grow-your-own approach to academia, in which students undertaking a PhD are placed on five year Level A academic contract and are expected to do their PhD and do a small portion (one day a week) of teaching. We see this as a step in the right direction to assist PhD students in earning a better income than what is afforded with an APA scholarship. It also assists PhD students in gaining skills in teaching and other research. The downside is that once the five-year contract ceases, so does the work, and people are again left in precarious positions concerning employment. We believe that these 'academics in training' contracts have merit; however, there needs to be a conversion to full-time permanent employment at the end of the five-year period.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples completing postgraduate master's and doctoral qualifications has increased significantly over the last two decades. It should be a priority of the ARC to consider this growth and account for the increased number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars eligible when apportioning research funding. We believe that all research grants, whether they be ARC or NHMRC, that have Indigenous research components be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led and that at least 50% of CI's must be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. In addition, these grants should have Indigenous governance mechanisms and identified employment strategies to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander PhD and research assistants are engaged in funding the grants.

To complete our response on research training and career pathways, we highlight the various challenges associated with early career researchers (ECR). When most students agree to undertake a PhD, we idealise that we will graduate and continue onwards to a comfortable research career. However, after years of arduous research for a PhD and learning about the

precarious path ahead of us, most are often disenchanted by the prospect of pursuing research and academia. It is a shame that most of us only learn partway through our PhD; we will likely have several years of short-term contracts and sessional teaching appointments ahead of us that MAY eventuate into a full-time position. Furthermore, most graduates that have taught as sessionals during their PhD would also be well accustomed to that this will likely include years of wage theft and further exploitation during their time as an ECR.<sup>11</sup>

One approach some ECRs take to securing a full-time position is to have their position partly funded from project-based funding from research grants by engaging with industry, not-for-profits, and government(s). However, we note that this approach does not apply to all research disciplines.

More broadly, successful grant applications from the Australian Research Council (ARC) or National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) would also improve full-time conversion opportunities. However, in our recent reports to the ARC Review panel, *Comparative Review of the ARC*<sup>12</sup> and *Aligning the ARC to Serve the Public Good*,<sup>13</sup> we highlight the assessment criteria of competitive research funding weighted heavily towards individual merit (65%) and past outcomes. This is where the financial barriers affecting research students (for example, not receiving a stipend scholarship) can be detrimental to the publication record later when competing for Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards or the Discovery Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awards. Realistically, most ECRs cannot compete for these research grants. They will spend years shadowing senior academics creating research fellowship positions to gradually build up their publication record or until they are offered a permanent position.

What we have described is a clear advantage for ECRs to publish their postgraduate research. However, their ability to publish can be dependent on the resources made available to them. Academic support, access to sophisticated instruments and supervisors with significant research funding will improve the postgraduate experience and boost their publishing ability.

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson A. 2022, Universities on workplace watchdog's wage theft priority list, *Sydney Morning Herald*, (last updated: 21<sup>st</sup> Jun 2022), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/universities-on-workplace-watchdog-s-wage-theft-priority-list-20220617-p5aulu.html>

<sup>12</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2023, *Comparative Review of the ARC*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Comparative-review-of-the-ARC.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2023, *Aligning the ARC to Serve the Public Good*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ARC-Public-Good.pdf>

Likewise, limited access to funding, support and resources can harm students' ability to publish their postgraduate research. While expecting all research students to receive the same opportunities during their doctorate is unrealistic, the lack of mobility to overcome these postgraduate inequalities as an ECR is most concerning, particularly for women that are returning to work after taking time off to raise their families or for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who suffer intersectional disadvantage.

## **Creating opportunities for all Australians**

We believe that greater support in early-age education and improvements to public schools is essential for ensuring greater participation and preparation for higher education. We agree in principle that a proper vocational pathway into university should be made available. The benefits of having the shared experience from family members that have attended university are invaluable and often overlooked. Students that can readily access advice and develop positive habits early on in life will enter the system with greater preparedness for navigating the university environment. This includes:

- Knowing how to balance study and work.
- How to access university support.
- Coping with academic stresses and networking.
- Insights into planning a career pathway.

Students without these shared experiences, such as those who are first in family or from low SES groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples can find some of these new experiences overwhelming, affecting academic performance or preventing them from enrolling altogether. Easier access to ongoing careers guidance, counselling and mentorship will benefit these students by supporting them and helping normalise these experiences.

Some of the most significant barriers in higher education are related to the cost associated with pursuing a higher education degree which we highlighted extensively in our submission to the ongoing senate inquiry into the Cost of Living.<sup>14</sup> Our key concerns raised in our submission included the current indexation increase aligned to the consumer price index (CPI), the inaccessibility of Austudy to most postgraduate students and all research students, the current stipend rate that currently sits at a minimum of \$29,863 is currently below the poverty line (see

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<sup>14</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2023, *Comparative Review of the ARC*, <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/CAPA-Cost-of-living-inquiry-submission.pdf>

previous section) and the inequality that comes with the taxation of PhD stipends for part-time students.<sup>15</sup>

A recent development proposed by the University of Sydney Enterprise Bargaining Agreement is that of a teaching PhD Scholarship. We have heard it to be a .2 FTE at a rate of a level A academic for teaching up to six tutorials, including marking and admin, for \$19,000 per annum (p.a). Apart from being akin to slave labour, the conditions would also prevent the PhD candidate from pursuing additional teaching opportunities at the University of Sydney or any other university. Not only is this workload under the current sessional arrangement worth \$27,000 p.a., but we are also concerned that this will set a new precedence for universities to offer fewer PhD stipend scholarships and to encourage student reliability on these teaching scholarships. In doing so, we are concerned that this will lead to universities exploiting PhD students by paying them to teach and research all for .2 FTE level A academic rates.

Our experience highlights that financial stability is a key barrier to realising the benefits of tertiary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Therefore, scholarships are critical to student success and completion and significantly impact postgraduate student outcomes. A high correlation exists between students receiving the scholarship and those who could engage successfully with study commitments<sup>16</sup>.

When it comes to what changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study, as outlined elsewhere in this submission, mentoring and tailored student support play an important role in ensuring Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander students reach their potential, in whatever area of study undertaken. We also believe targeted funding should be for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching, learning and research development.

On student debt, many are concerned about the amount they are incurring from undertaking a university degree. Studies have shown that students of lower SES backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples perceive higher education as unattainable due to

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> National Indigenous Australians Agency, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework, 2.06 Educational participation and attainment of adults, Australian Government: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-06-educational-participation>, last accessed 13th Mar 2023.



the inherent risk of accumulating student debt.<sup>17</sup> The 'job-ready' guarantee has had seemingly little effect on improving these outcomes. Further efforts to de-risk the opportunity cost of a higher degree education should directly address student debt. We believe successive increases in government contributions for CSPs over the long term will reduce and eventually eliminate student debt.

Previous attempts have been made to target students of lower SES groups using incentives and creating more CSP places for courses in professions that are in national demand. The rationale behind these policies is made with good intentions to improve social mobility. However, it can also have perverse effects on our society, dividing Australians into a new class system. Those with the financially privileged have the freedom to pursue career ambitions and an underclass that is left to backfill the skills shortage in the less appealing or low-paying careers. The significance of this divide should not be understated, as we are only now beginning to understand the negative impact of working in an unfulfilling profession on one's mental health. The lack of motivation and feeling of accomplishment are all factors that lead to poorer health, happiness, and productivity.

In principle, any reforms must ensure all students are free to choose an area of study whilst devolved from any political influences. Ideally, we should aim to ensure the following:

1. The student contribution in the CSP should be the same in every discipline band.
2. All students receive a liveable allowance from youth allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY.
3. All postgraduate students can access Austudy irrespective of the course they have undertaken.
4. All research students can access support to living allowance, whether Austudy or a scholarship stipend.
5. The stipend of part-time PhD students is not taxed to be consistent with students undertaking full-time research.

Additional measures that should be undertaken for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

1. Postgraduate CSP places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

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<sup>17</sup> Quin, R., Stone, C. and Trinidad, S., 2017. *Low Rates of Transition to University for High Achieving Students in Regional NSW*. Report for NSW Department of Education. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education: Curtin University, Perth.

2. Targeted financial support for accommodation costs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that goes beyond ISSP

## **Governance, accountability and community**

NATSIPA and CAPA believe that community engagement must be encouraged and promoted within higher education. This includes mandated funding to ensure universities adequately remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and community representatives for their time.

Concerning Q35, Indigenous procurement under the IPP is a national objective, and this needs to be supported by universities. The government must ensure that all tertiary education providers have % investment in Indigenous procurement. In addition, the government and tertiary education providers should develop micro-credentials for Indigenous businesses at no cost to assist with building the capacity of Indigenous businesses to deliver goods and services under the IPP. It has been more than ten years since the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Hence, it is timely that a new review be commissioned to look at retention, success and the future of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

In most organisations, an annual general meeting serves as the mechanism for executives and board members to be held accountable to stakeholders. The governance structure of universities instead has academic boards and university councils where most members have often appointed positions and do not interact with the broader stakeholder community. Also, unlike other types of organisations, there is no mechanism by which university councils are publicly accountable to stakeholders, as noted in our submission to an inquiry into the University of Tasmania Act 1992.<sup>18</sup> Instead, universities have elected student and staff representatives that sit on the university council and academic boards but are often outnumbered by managerial appointees to hold management to account in meetings.

We are also concerned that council members are often bound to non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), which prevents them from raising any concerns they may have outside council meetings. These mechanisms contribute to the insular environment (an echo chamber) that

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<sup>18</sup> Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2022, *Response to the 'Inquiry into the Provisions of the University of Tasmania Act 1992'*; <http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/58-CAPA-and-NATSIPA.pdf>

separate university decision-makers from organic and meaningful interactions with the community. If the council is where universities discuss their big strategic plans, then improve transparency within council meetings and allow greater staff and student representation on these councils.

Governance structures of universities expose an additional problem, as over the past 20-odd years, student representation in these governance bodies has decreased. CAPA and NATSIPA believe there needs to be a greater balance of staff, student and private sector appointments and that State and Federal governments need to work together to ensure that students have a greater say in our universities. After all, universities are primarily teaching and research space, and without adequate student input into our universities' governance, those who are intended to benefit from universities do not have a say in how the education and research are being delivered and conducted.

We would welcome ideas of a national governance system that could handle matters such as:

- pricing of postgraduate tuition fees
- monitoring and regulating how Student Services Amenities Fees (SSAF) funding is allocated.
- external reviews of sexual harassment and bully complaints
- professional guidelines for academic integrity and conduct

The Accord supports higher education providers to adopt sector-leading employment practices in several ways. As previously mentioned, growing-your-own academic schemes are important and must include secure, ongoing, full-time employment. Additionally, a strategic focus must be placed on developing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce within tertiary education. For instance, the NTEU, for several years, has bargained around Enterprise Agreements having a target for Indigenous employment. Universities Australia also support this, and indeed most governments do as well. However, there is no action for those who do not meet or even try to meet these targets. Strategies are often seen as a 'tack on' to equity measures and do not address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples seeking employment.

For instance, The University of Queensland has instigated the Academic Pathways program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples<sup>19</sup>, which aims to build and develop academic capability through an individualised program structure specifically designed to develop the necessary skills to succeed in an academic role. The program employs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples seeking to undertake a PhD, at a level A academic rate, with a 20% teaching load and 80% PhD research load. The program provides career support through training and mentorship and a culturally inclusive space for staff and students, where diversity contributes to learning outcomes. Employment practices such as this lead the section and should become standard practice at other tertiary institutions.

## **Quality and sustainability**

Some of the necessary reforms fall within social services, ensuring universities can focus on embracing academic values in teaching and research and ensuring a student voice on campus that is independent and speaks freely without fear of being defunded. The first two points have already been addressed in the previous sections, so that this next section will focus on the student voice and experience.

Postgraduate organisations are essential for protecting students' welfare and rights and providing services specifically relatable to postgraduate students. Voluntary student unionism (VSU) in 2006 hurt postgraduate associations significantly by reducing their revenue when students unaware of the importance of representation did not renew their membership. The collapse of many postgraduate associations and the loss of autonomy of postgraduate representation in combined student organisations have only led to greater focus on undergraduate issues and postgraduates losing their voice.

Today both postgraduate and combined student organisations operate primarily from the negotiation for a percentage of the student fees collected by the university known as Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF). However, our concern is that this current SSAF arrangement places a power imbalance between universities and student organisations. Universities have the freedom to set conditions with the percentage of SSAF they offer the student organisations, which is often a pittance of what is needed to operate. They may choose to deny or discontinue funding at their discretion. Such actions have taken place recently at the Australian National University, which has chosen to discontinue funding its postgraduate

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<sup>19</sup> University of Queensland 2023, *Academic Pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the Business School*, <https://business.uq.edu.au/files/60454/ATSI%20Academic%20Pathway%20brochure.pdf>

student organisation, the Postgraduate & Research Student Association (PARSA). Similarly, the Macquarie Graduate Research Union (MGRU), formed because of the pandemic, has been refused by Macquarie University to be recognised or negotiate a means of earning recognition to access SSAF funding for their operation. Macquarie University has an established reputation for defunding previous student organisations, both undergraduate and postgraduate.

These harrowing examples of universities losing faith and forgetting their responsibility to nurture future leaders are disappointing. Undoubtedly, student organisations periodically clash heads with management and question their actions. Nevertheless, isn't it part of the exercise of attending university to develop new ways of questioning our world? How are students supposed to nurture the skills of debate, reason, and critical thinking if they are not provided with the proper avenue to practice these skills during their studies? Answering these fundamental questions, we believe the skills described are essential to differentiate the capabilities of graduates from emerging technologies like ChatGPT.

On the benefits of student unions, we quote a statement made in the 1957 Murray report from the Committee on Australian Universities:

It could prove one of the most potent influences in developing that corporate life which is urgently needed if the modern tendency for the average student to be exposed throughout his university course to nothing but purely vocational interests is to be corrected. The Union can do much, also, to lessen the handicap suffered by students living in lodgings by providing wholesome meals at reasonable prices, and reading, games and common rooms where, as well as the company of his fellows, he can find some of the amenities otherwise denied him.<sup>20</sup>

These statements were written for a different time, but the latter remained true at the height of the pandemic when student organisations supported the most vulnerable students who could not work during the lockdown. More importantly, we note that the needs of postgraduate students differed from their undergraduate counterparts. The ability of postgraduate associations to engage with their cohorts could NOT be replicated as a Student Representative Council or in a combined student organisation with undergraduates. Nevertheless, their capacity was limited by the funding their university is willing to provide them, which is often

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<sup>20</sup> Murray K., Clunies-Ross I., Morris C., Reid A., Richards J. (1957), Commonwealth of Australia, Report of the Committee on Australian Universities, <https://vital.voced.edu.au/vital/access/services/Download/ngv:53782/SOURCE2>

less than 50% of the overall SSAF collected by their universities. Many student organisations hope for a legislated guarantee to receive a minimum of 50% SSAF each year, like in the Act of each Western Australian university.

Racism and marginalisation remain issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Racism can be overt or covert, occur inside or outside of classrooms, and is linked to student attrition. NATSIPA believes that there need to be mandatory modules in all tertiary education programs that educate on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Culture. In addition, as previously stated, ISSP funding needs an influx of funds to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary education centres on university and VET campuses. This will assist in ensuring that our tertiary institutions are safe for our students.

Education outcomes (at all levels) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples remain low, fuelled by racism and discrimination<sup>21</sup>. The 2021 National Student Safety Survey report found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander female students are more likely to be sexually harassed in a university context than any other students<sup>22</sup>. The report found that 7.8% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, compared with 4.5% of other students, had been sexually assaulted in a 'university context' such as at events, places or social occasions arranged or supported by a university, or where students or staff from a person's university were present<sup>23</sup><sup>24</sup>. This is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed if we are ever to close the educational gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

To ensure research quality is prioritised and supported, we suggest that all universities adopt the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) research ethics framework for all research, especially for those undertaking research by higher degree (HDRs). The AIATSIS research ethics framework is structured around four principles: Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous leadership, Impact and value, and Sustainability and accountability. For far too long, research has been done about us without us, which needs to change. By ensuring the AIATSIS research ethical framework is at the core of all research in

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<sup>21</sup> Leroy-Dyer, S. (2018). Aboriginal enabling pedagogies and approaches in Australia: Centring and decolonising our approaches. *International Studies in Widening Participation*, 5(2), 4-9.

<sup>22</sup> Heywood, W., Myers, P., Powell, A., Meikle, G., & Nguyen, D. (2022). *National Student Safety Survey: Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021*, <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2021-NSSS-National-Report.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Leroy-Dyer, S., & Heckenberg, S. (2022). The Gap will never close if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students don't feel safe on university campuses *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/the-gap-will-never-close-if-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-students-dont-feel-safe-on-university-campuses-180234>

Australia, will ensure that truth-telling in research is at the forefront, instead of the historical untruths that have dominated research in the past. In addition, professional development training for non-Indigenous peoples that are supervising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HDRs or people researching Indigenous areas is essential.

Finally, we wish to comment on the transparency of data gathering surrounding the PhD experience. Most graduate schools conduct internal student satisfaction surveys, but the data is used for internal purposes only and is inaccessible to the general public. We raise this concern because the PhD student experience is significantly deteriorating with the raised expectations for PhD students to submit their thesis within three years and PhD students being moved out of their personal desk space and forced into a hotdesking arrangement. If there were mechanisms that would allow the sentiment of research students to express their dissatisfaction, universities might be held to account for these types of decisions. Thus, we recommend a comprehensive national Quality Indicator for Learning and Teaching (QILT) survey to assess research students' satisfaction at Australian universities.

## **The Role of International Education**

Universities are a nexus point for breaking cultural boundaries, exchanging ideas, and sharing values through international collaboration. The real purpose of international education is to help foster an environment reflective of an international community that has come together for the shared purpose of growing and sharing knowledge. For our domestic students, it allows for personal growth by engaging with this diverse community from around the world without having to leave Australia. For this reason, it is disappointing that the treatment of some international students has been so poor and comparable to modern slavery in a US Department of State 2017 Trafficking in Persons report,<sup>25</sup> as mentioned in an earlier section.

It is difficult to imagine living in a society where we pride ourselves on fairness and equality but at the expense of foreign nationals. However, Australia must have a difficult conversation on its four<sup>th</sup> largest export. To what extent has the descriptions of modern slavery made by our US ally an accurate reflection?

Our final point on international education concerns PhD students, who are often at greater risk of being exploited from the power imbalance between student and supervisor. Many are not

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<sup>25</sup> US Department of State 2017. Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2017. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/271339.pdf>.

provided with a stipend but are promised sessional teaching positions for income. Unfortunately, some students are exploited in fear that crossing their supervisor will lead to losing teaching opportunities or being kicked out of their PhD program. Furthermore, universities rarely approve international students to convert candidature to part-time, an inequality that significantly disadvantages those needing it.

## **Investment and Affordability**

Commonwealth funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success needs an immediate and increased influx. As previously stated, the ISSP funding has not been adequately funded for several years. Even with the \$30m announced in the Federal budget, this is insufficient to keep up with student demand. A further consideration is needed about how the ISSP is funded (currently, the funding formula is based on student access, participation success and regionality). This funding is outcomes-based, and universities with higher numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students benefit most from this funding. Funding needs to be directed to enhancing the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who did not do well at school and who did not get marks that would allow them to enter university and to universities that do the majority of work in assisting student transition from schools to university, then onto HDR studies. There also needs to be additional funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to transition from undergraduate to HDR and then to ECR status.

The most frequent concern students have with the JRG is the risk of losing their CSP for failing more than half of their units because it disproportionately disadvantages those in various equity groups already experiencing hardship. To lose government subsidy is seemingly a 'stick' approach to the already most vulnerable and should be removed.

In principle, the funding provided for each discipline band for CSPs should also be restored to what they were before JRG to ensure all courses are adequately funded for teaching. We also believe there should be no difference in student contribution between different discipline bands because we have seen that price signalling has no significant effects on most students except for those of lower SES. Setting different levels of student contributions in this manner will only promote a perverse idea that the wealthy and privileged will be free to study whatever they desire. However, those of lower SES are provided incentives to backfill jobs that society needs that are largely undesirable. Such an inequality should not be acceptable in our society. We



should do better to give all students the freedom to choose their field of study without external benefits or repercussions from the higher education system.

Furthermore, the misalignment of student fees (particularly in STEM courses) is misaligned with the running cost of teaching units. Consequently, some universities have increased the number of places for low-cost humanities degrees to subsidise the losses from higher-cost STEM degrees and to fund more research to maintain a high standing in university rankings. The association of world rankings with quality and prestige allows research-intensive universities to market more attractively to international students and to leverage higher tuition fees. Figure 1 is an example of advice in some online guides on studying at Australian universities. Since teaching quality does not affect university rankings, it becomes the least lucrative attribute to improve at a research-intensive university. For these research-intensive universities, it is a self-perpetuating cycle of sustaining high research output to attract more international student fees to fund even more research.

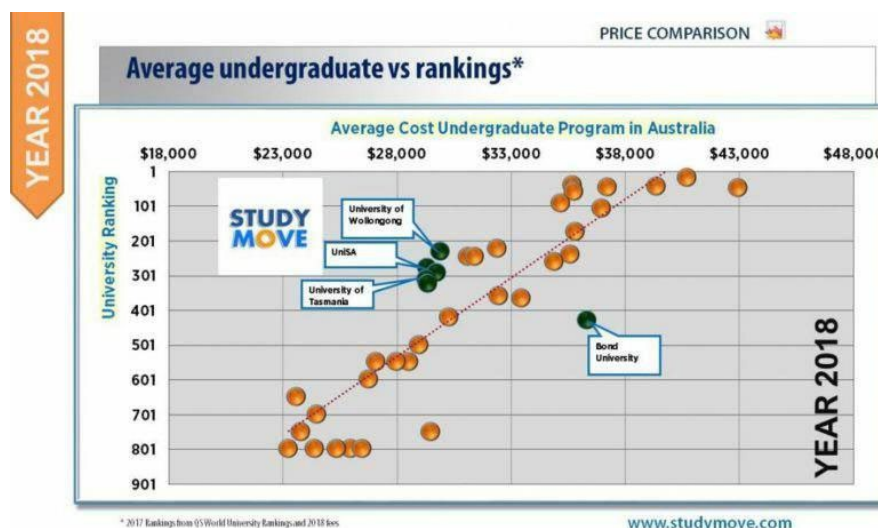


Figure 1. Comparison between the average undergraduate international tuition fee to rankings of Australian universities for 2018 found online (source: [www.studymove.com](http://www.studymove.com))

The university's prestige will also attract the brightest and most able students, who are often already endowed with the resources and support for success, making employability far less of a concern.

The most concerning aspect of the JRG and the current higher education system is how it may shift the definition of social mobility, previously determined by the level of education obtained. However, the way universities are slowly differentiating themselves as (1) the prestigious research-intensive universities and (2) teaching-focused universities that promote employability, the future of social status will likely be determined not by the level of education

but by the institution that an individual attended. An example of this currently exists in the United States with exclusive private Ivy League research universities and public communities college. Therefore, if the Minister believes postcodes should not determine school and university opportunities, then perhaps he would be interested in ensuring our reformed higher education system does not drive public universities to differentiate in this way.

To encourage more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to undertake higher education, we believe there should be no cap on university places for this cohort.

Compiled by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

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