



The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (NATSIHEC) is committed to ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in Higher Education are self-determined, culturally safe and supported in their career journey. NATSIHEC's goals are to increase the availability of higher education for our communities and to develop and grow research and scholarship for and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. NATSIHEC aims to progress, elevate and secure – past, present, and future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges to influence western education institutions. NATSIHEC has a national mentoring program, Working Together, Empowering Each Other.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) is a national network of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students and non-Indigenous student supporters. NATSIPA's goal is to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can access postgraduate education in a fair and equitable manner. NATSIPA holds a postgraduate student conference each year, providing opportunities for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students to link-up, support each other, and share ideas.

NATSIHEC and NATSIPA welcome to opportunity to work together and provide a submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel on the Terms of Reference of the Review. We would like to speak to the following key priorities of the Terms of Reference:

- Access and opportunity
- Investment and affordability
- Governance, accountability and community
- Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Access and opportunity

When engaging in the future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the cultural and geographical diversity of this student cohort needs to be respected and taken into consideration. The demography of communities who are engaged needs to be respected. Challenges of remote and very remote students and their ability to access education needs to be nuanced when creating targets and reforms, as it should for metropolitan students. Indeed, the strong focus on regional and remote should not be at the detriment of our urban Indigenous communities where there is a demonstrated and evidenced high need. There is still much work to be done to achieve higher education parity of access and success for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, regardless of location.

There also needs to be an open conversation around previous educational opportunities of student populations and the realities for many of our students populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Indeed, the 2020 Australian retention rates for Indigenous students in Years 10 to 12 was 60.0 per cent compared to 83.2 per cent for non-Indigenous students (Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training 2020, p.125). Historically, this is because education models have not been created for Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. In fact, the colonisation of Australia resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia being marginalised, segregated, excluded and then assimilated without proper inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in the Australian education systems (Fletcher, 1989; Kabaila, 1998; Groome, 1994).

This attempted erasure of Aboriginal peoples means that we could not see ourselves in the things that we learn (Andersen, 2009). Yet persistence from Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators have seen a shift in government policy and in the school systems as a means to addressing social inequality. This system shift, through the hard work of curriculum experts, is reflected more and more within higher education and university classrooms are becoming more culturally inclusive and culturally competent. However, engagement within such spaces is still a very hard thing to do for many students who may be first in family or are in families who have endured bad experiences. Indeed, the data below is from the 2021 National Student Safety Survey report found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students were less likely than other students to feel safe on campus (76.2%) or in the classroom.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments have increased to “8.9 per cent in 2020” (Universities Australia 2022:10), however “the nine-year completion rates for Indigenous students remain around 47 per cent — significantly below the 74 per cent for non-Indigenous students” (Universities Australia, 2020:24 in Fredericks, Barney, Bunda, Hausia, Martin, Elston, Bernardino and Griffiths 2022:3). Pastoral care, mentoring programs and the amazing work of our Indigenous student success teams are making the difference. Diverse pathways that centre the need of the student are essential. Feeding into and improving the environments that students are walking into, is key for their success, Success in this instance is defined by the student.

While there is a need to increase the diverse ways our students can access pathways into universities, ensuring that students given every opportunity and enter a welcome environment as opposed to setting students up to enter into an environment that is not welcoming or into a system that penalises students for trying, such as the current CSP arrangements. It is hoped that the Accord process works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education experts to ensure this is addressed.

Investment and affordability

In NATSIHECs submission to *Education and Employment Legislation Committee: Higher Education Support Amendment (Job Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020* we were supportive of initiatives that aimed to increase rural, regional and remote students, however not to the detriment of urban students. NATSIHEC called on the government to open up the demand driven system to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This separation of our student cohort has a ripple on effect whereby each Indigenous student success team have to individually negotiate with their respective university regarding which students has a protected Commonwealth supported place (CSP) and which student does not. Further to this, both staff and students are left troubled by conflicting institutional and government policies whereby students in the same situation, in the same institution are being treated differently. With their CSP at risk, some program coordinators seek to allow for early ‘no fail’ exit for students. Some institutions allow this for the good of the student, however, other institutions deny this option as they want the income. If such differences between institutions are left in place, students need to be fully informed prior to enrolment around what the institutional policies are, so that the student can

make an informed decision regarding what university is best for them under their current circumstances.

We know that a number of our students struggle in their first year, particularly as many are first in family; feel a disconnect and are trying find their sense of identity within higher education environments; or come from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that have had negative educational experiences irrespective of learning environments. Further to this research also indicates that racism can impact on Indigenous student engagement and success in higher education which can lead to disengaging with study and the potential to fail topics. The 2021 National Student Safety Survey report found that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students were less likely than other students to feel safe on campus (76.2%) and felt less respected by staff (83.9%) and by other students (81.2%) (Heywood, Myers, Powell, Meikle, and Nguyen 2022:74). This has a direct effect on students ability to complete their studies, therefore students should not be disadvantaged for circumstances out of their control. Research has shown that once students are connected with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education centres or become more comfortable within the university environment, their academic outcomes improve (Asmar, Page, & Radloff, 2015). Therefore, discarding our students potential within their first engagement of a new, challenging environment would be detrimental.

NATSIHEC and NATSIPA both believe there needs to be an examination of how Indigenous funds are being engaged with at a sector wide level. The Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) provides “supplementary funding”, as defined by the National Indigenous Australian Agency, to “universities to help students take on the demands of university and succeed”. This however is not the case, with most universities requiring ISSP to fund the majority, if not all, support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Indeed, some institutions rely solely on ISSP, the Indigenous percentage of HEPP allocation and, if dual sector, their state government allocation to employ staff, fund tutoring, fund scholarships and pay for overheads such as power and office space. This is in direct contradiction of the whole of university approach advocated for by Behrendt et al (2012). Combined with the funding being completion based, not solely needs based, and the harm of denying students CSPs, funding change is vital if our student numbers are to grow and for our students to successfully engage with their higher education journey. We request that these very important issues be included within the examination of investment and affordability.

Governance, accountability and community

When examining the governance and accountability universities have to their communities, it is important to reflect on and consider the diversity of members of governance mechanisms at higher education institutions, to ensure they reflect the communities they serve and have appropriate standards for reporting on this.

Across the sector universities and higher education institutions engage with their communities in a way that works for their organisation and their local community. NATSIHEC and NATSIPA respect this approach. However, there are two things to consider here. Firstly, we believe it is important for all universities to have elected students in governance positions within committees at the university level, and especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student representation. Secondly, when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities we note that the needs of communities are sometimes not met by local universities or by the sector as a whole. Remote and Very Remote students may require individualised approaches that should not be left

to the Indigenous student success team to ensure but should be a whole of institution commitment. The updated *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* requires Australian Universities to demonstrate “strong civic leadership, engagement with its local and regional communities, and a commitment to social responsibility” (2021:19).

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

NATSIHEC and NATSIPA recognise the importance of researcher/research pipeline and the growth of national and international collaborative research. With the current review of the Australian Research Council and the 2020 introduction of the new Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) Field of Research (FOR) and Socio-Economic Objectives (SEO) codes, more scrutiny is needed in the way we research and collect data on our research excellence in Australia. With closer reflection on Indigenous focused research and collaborations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and industry partners we ask the panel to ensure that as a sector, we are collaboratively working together to ensure ethical research is being undertaken with local and international Indigenous communities.

Best practice guidelines such as the *AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research* and the *NHMRC Ethical Guidelines for Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* are vital for change, however with less than half of universities currently having Indigenous Research Strategies or in-depth Indigenous research protocols sector wide commitment is still a long way off and should be a priority for an Accord process. Further to this, institutions that do engage with these external guidelines may ask for individual researchers to adhere to and understand the significance of Indigenous knowledges, however, may offer little training or understanding on the importance of community autonomy and co-design in research (Ibinarriaga 2020; Eccles 2016; Martin 2008). This in turn supports innovation and fulfills our commitment to the amazing knowledge of our First Peoples by building partnerships with Indigenous institutions globally.

NATSIHEC and NATSIPA would like to speak to two additional points:

Nomenclature

With respect to diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples we recognise the need to use localised and context specific terminology. We understand the Australian Federal Government’s choice to use the term ‘First Nations’ and respect all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who find this term the most respectful. We ask that when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, knowledge holders, students, staff and communities that individuals are asked how they would like to be identified and are referred to as such. This may include, but is not limited to, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous, First Nations and/or First Peoples.

Student Representation on the Accord Reference Group

NATSIPA and NATSIHEC recognise and acknowledge the expertise of the members of both the Accord Panel and the Accord Reference Group. Reflecting upon the need for in depth consultation from students across the sector and the limited places for students within these current mechanisms it is recommended that including a broader range of students voices and the national

student organisations may be a good idea. We acknowledge the expertise from the National Union of Students; however we feel that adding other peak student bodies to this expertise will allow for diversity of perspectives and experiences. Student organisations included could be members of TEQSA's Student Expert Advisory Group, organisations may be but are not limited to, the: Australian Queer Students' Network (AQS); Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA); Council of International Students Australia (CISA); National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) and, where appropriate a student representative from the TAFE Directors Australia (TDA).

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