

18 August 2023

Professor Mary O’Kane

Chair

Australian Universities Accord Review Panel

Submission in Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

Dear Professor O’Kane

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.

The University of Queensland is the host institution of the **Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures**, the first entirely Indigenous-led ARC Centre of Excellence that commenced in 2023.

Please find attached a submission responding to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report prepared by Professors Maria Raciti¹, Marnee Shay² and Bronwyn Fredericks³, who lead the Education and Economies theme of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures.

The discussion and recommendations are provided for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,



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Executive Summary

Professors Maria Raciti¹, Marnee Shay² and Bronwyn Fredericks³, Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures, Education and Economies Theme Leads

The **ARC Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures** commenced in 2023 and is the first entirely Indigenous-led ARC Centre of Excellence. The Centre aims to transform the lives of Indigenous Australians by deploying and leveraging Indigenous knowledge and practices to inform the design and implementation of evidence-based policies and programs. The Centre's first objective is to change the way Indigenous inequities are conceived. This Centre's second objective is to apply more complex understandings of Indigenous inequity to inform and challenge the way policies and programs are developed and implemented. The Centre has three interconnected research themes. We lead the Education and Economies theme. A focus of the theme is nourishing Indigenous education, which includes contributing to policy reform to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples underpinned by Indigenous rights, excellence, and self-determination.

Our high-level feedback for the review panel is as follows:

- We applaud the evolving mission of higher education to put First Nations at the heart of the Australian higher education system
- We applaud Priority Action 3 to extend demand-driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students but tender concerns to ensure that no *more* harm is done to Indigenous peoples
- We propose a 'parity plus' approach to Indigenous higher education
- We pose questions for further consideration by the review panel regarding a) Indigenous academic staff and doctoral students, b) the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP), and c) recognised prior learning (RPL)

1. We applaud the evolving mission of higher education to put First Nations at the heart of the Australian higher education system

The Accord Interim Report's clear and firm position that First Nations Australians are to be at the heart of Australia's higher education system is welcomed. This is a crucial and long-overdue step towards reconciliation and equality. The foregrounding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, our knowledges, perspectives, and wisdom respectfully acknowledges our rich and diverse heritage that forms the foundation of our nation. Putting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the heart of higher education is a significant step forward that will enrich higher education with benefits for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and communities.

2. We applaud Priority Action 3 to extend demand-driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students but tender concerns to ensure that no *more* harm is done to Indigenous peoples.

We applaud the Minister and Review for Priority Action 3, which seeks to provide equity of opportunity to participate in higher education for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, irrespective of their postcode. With most Indigenous Australians living in urban areas⁴, this priority action provides certainty and a tangible pathway for those who meet entry requirements and who wish to undertake university study.⁵

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⁴ ABS. 2023. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Accessed 10 August, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples>

⁵ Shay, M., Fredericks, B. & Raciti, M. (2023). Uncapping uni places for Indigenous students is a step in the right direction, we must do much more, *The Conversation*, 06 July, <https://theconversation.com/uncapping-uni-places-for-indigenous-students-is-a-step-in-the-right-direction-but-we-must-do-much-more-208918>

As with all policy decisions, there is the possibility of unintended consequences. For example, aggressive recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or overpromising of support should be actively discouraged and monitored. We recommend that guidance in terms of protocols and principles is provided to universities so that Indigenous students are set up for success. Our recommendation is to ensure that Priority Action 3 **does no more harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**.

Encouraging more Indigenous Australians to enrol in a university degree will not be as simple as just uncapping places. While the Interim Report hints at an awareness that a holistic approach is needed, we wish to emphasise that for any university student to be successful, they must have foundational academic skills to support their learning. Closing the Gap data in education shows there is also still a long way to go in addressing schooling educational outcomes. For example, in 2021, 68% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had achieved Year 12 or higher, compared with 91% of non-Indigenous Australians.

It is vital that Indigenous peoples wanting to undertake university study come equipped with the skills they need for success. Many Indigenous people come with invaluable knowledge, perspectives and experiences connected to their identities as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. In addition to these strengths, academic preparedness for university study that results from quality schooling will support their educational trajectories over the long term.

Furthermore, university culture must change. Indigenous students also need to be supported when they get to university. The recent Universities Australia report showed that almost all Australian universities have activities or programs for the recruitment of Indigenous students. Although, when surveyed, less than half of the 39 Australian universities made reference to an anti-racism statement or policy. The report also notes: “member universities’ responses were generally not focused on equipping students with an awareness of Indigenous values and knowledges”. They were not focused on addressing the racism that students experience by other students, and staff, along with systemic racism.⁶ If the culture and environment of universities don’t change, providing more numbers or even other methods, such as scholarships, are unlikely to change the overall outcome.⁷ Urgent action is required, and uncapping Indigenous student numbers is only one small part of a larger picture.

3. We propose a ‘parity plus’ approach to Indigenous higher education

The notion of ‘parity’ featured heavily as the ultimate measure of success with regard to Indigenous students. Parity as the determinant of success is scattered throughout most education equity policy documents, but it remains unchallenged. There were frequent references to population parity, parity in access and parity in participation in the Interim Report. Like many, we have concerns about parity. At first, achieving parity for Indigenous students—be it population, access, or participation—appears attractive and desirable. But is it enough? And what happens when parity is achieved? While it would be ideal, it is unlikely that parity will be replaced by another metric. From this perspective, in what ways can we augment and decolonise parity measures to address parity’s limitations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

The Report talks of ideas for bold reform. Our position is that achieving parity for First Nations Australians is not bold thinking, rather it is old thinking. For the Review to be truly bold, to address historical injustices that continue to impact present-day Indigenous Australians, parity would not be

⁶ Fredericks, B., Barney, K., Bunda, T., Hausia, K., Martin, A., Elston, J., Bernardino, B. & Griffiths, D. (2022). *Building the Evidence to Improve the Completion Rates for Indigenous Students*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education: Perth, Western Australia . <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/improve-completion-rates-indigenous-students/>

⁷ Fredericks, B., Barney, K., Bunda, T., Hausia, K., Martin, A., Elston, J., & Bernardino, B. (2023). Calling out Racism in University Classrooms: The Ongoing Need for Indigenisation of the Curriculum to Support Indigenous Student Completion Rates. *Student Success*, 14(2), 19-29. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2874>

the 'finish line' in terms of Indigenous education success. We encourage the Review to go beyond parity and recommend a 'parity plus' agenda. A 'parity plus' agenda also addresses the question no one wants to ask: what happens when parity is achieved? What does the achievement of parity mean in real terms beyond the numbers? Does a lack of disparity (i.e., equal) population, access, and participation metrics with non-Indigenous Australians in higher education suggest Indigenous Australians are no longer marginalised nor experience racism in higher education, or that patterns of work-related exclusion and discrimination for graduates no longer exist? When parity is conceived as a number, and the numbers line up with population, access, and participation, does this mean that justice has been achieved, that wrongs have been righted, that the system is impartial?

Parity alone is limited and limiting for Indigenous students. A 'parity plus' agenda provides the opportunity to expand the types of parity of interest (e.g., parity of experience, parity of outcomes) and how these could be measured at the national level. More importantly, a 'parity plus' agenda could consider additional measures of success for Indigenous peoples in higher education. As esteemed Professor Martin Nakata has long argued (e.g., 2007; 2013; 2018⁸), when the label of 'equity group' is imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by governments, and success is measured in terms of parity with the non-Indigenous population, it locks in deficit perspectives, overlooks unique cultural and historical contexts, and creates a one-size-fits-all approach that does not fully recognise the diverse needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples.

Our understanding of Professor Nakata's body of work is that the imposed label of 'equity group' sets in motion 'equity logics', which directs the deployment of resources in a manner that assumes and perpetuates deficit perspectives for an entire population, irrespective of individual differences or circumstances. These 'equity logics' mirror 'colonial logics'. Hence, when Indigenous student equity success is measured with parity, parity can be seen to be a colonial instrument. Parity does not emancipate but rather further enmeshes Indigenous students in a web of 'colonial logics'. Professor Nakata posits a shift towards self-determination, which empowers by emphasising and returning agency to Indigenous Australians to define their own educational goals and engage with education on their terms.

We note that the Interim Report refers to Indigenous self-determination; hence we feel we are on the 'same page' and suggest a 'parity plus' approach that embraces creating and implementing additional measures of success as defined and evaluated by Indigenous peoples under the leadership of Indigenous peoples is a step in the right direction toward decolonising parity. The Interim Report proposes a First Nations Higher Education Council as part of a possible Tertiary Education Commission. It stands to reason that a remit of this Council could be to *enact* a decolonial 'parity plus' agenda, but it is critical that this agenda must first be *set* by the Review.

4. Questions for further consideration by the review panel

Below are several questions for the review panel's deliberation:

- a) Why is there silence in the Interim Report about strategies to achieve and exceed parity of Indigenous representation among academic staff and doctoral students?
- b) How can guidelines and public transparency regarding Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) funding be improved to ensure that *all* Indigenous students are benefitting?
- c) Why does the Interim Report not mention the necessity to include and accredit Indigenous knowledges and experiences in Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) assessments?

⁸ Nakata, M. (2007). The Cultural Interface. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(S1), 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1326011100004646>; Nakata, M. (2013). The Rights and Blights of the Politics in Indigenous Higher Education. *Anthropological Forum*, 23(3), 289–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2013.803457>; Nakata, M. (2017). Difficult Dialogues in the South: Questions about Practice. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 47(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2017.22>