

RESPONSE TO COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE EXPERIENCES WITH ABSTUDY

8 FEBRUARY 2017

BACKGROUND

On behalf of the University of Melbourne and affiliated residential colleges, the University is pleased to respond to the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs inquiry into educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The University prides itself on its efforts in co-ordinating and supporting the development of a wide range of programs to attract and support Indigenous undergraduate students. In our experience, it is essential prospective Indigenous students are equipped with knowledge and support when applying for and commencing higher education studies. The University has committed to achieving population parity of 3% for Indigenous student numbers by 2050. Our 2016 enrolments totalled 285 Indigenous students with a target of 1527 students (based on current domestic student enrolments) to meet the 3.7% parity rate that the ABS predicts for 2050.

The University's Reconciliation Action Plan and Indigenous Student Plan are the University's Indigenous student policy foundation. Both plans are driven by Murrup Barak, Melbourne Institute for Indigenous Development in collaboration with Chancellery, University Services and Academic Divisions. The University's Indigenous student policy focuses on attracting and supporting undergraduate students. The Reconciliation Action Plan provides an overarching framework for Indigenous participation and leadership across the University. The Plan identifies a range of actions and strategies, including partnerships to support Indigenous development, programs that build awareness of Indigenous knowledge, culture and values across the University community and beyond. The Indigenous Student Plan provides the framework for mainstreaming the responsibilities for Indigenous student outcomes across the University and sets out the strategies to be implemented over a five-year period for the University to achieve its overall target for Indigenous student numbers for 2020.

ABSTUDY plays a critical enabling role in supporting Indigenous students to undertake university study. However, as the University actively increases its Indigenous student numbers, the difficulties Indigenous students, the University and residential colleges regularly face with ABSTUDY are increasing significantly.

The University's response to the Committee's inquiry into educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students contains a number of recommendations specific to the context of higher education and ABSTUDY.

In summary, we recommend the following improvements to the ABSTUDY program:

1. Lower the age of independence for Indigenous students to 18 years old (from the current 22 years of age)
2. Streamline ABSTUDY application forms and ensure the application forms are culturally suitable for Indigenous families
3. Improve the information made available online regarding the costs associated with attending university and how alternative sources of funding can impact eligibility under the ABSTUDY program
4. Increase the weekly allowance for Indigenous students on the Residential Costs Option
5. Align the ABSTUDY processing time with University enrolment time frames
6. Re-establish an ABSTUDY claims office in Victoria
7. Provide a direct phone number to the ABSTUDY claims office where dedicated ABSTUDY specialists can provide assistance, with additional staffing during the first weeks of semester in-office and at campus.

To discuss this submission further, Ms Margot Eden, Advisor Indigenous Strategy and Social Compact, can be contacted on (03) 8344 6388 or m.eden@unimelb.edu.au.

1. Eligibility for ABSTUDY

ABSTUDY is essential for many Indigenous students if they are to pursue higher education. However, determining whether or not an Indigenous student is eligible for ABSTUDY can be difficult and complicate the enrolment process.

The main issue lies with those students who are on the cusp of ABSTUDY eligibility. Due to their family assets, family structure and age, many Indigenous students are deemed ineligible for ABSTUDY. In particular, eligibility tests regarding independence and living away from home raise recurring problems.

In Indigenous communities, independence most often begins when an Indigenous child turns 18 years old. However, ABSTUDY deems a student independent when they are 22 years old. For Indigenous students applying for ABSTUDY, being deemed as dependent hinders their ability to receive ABSTUDY and in many cases does not reflect their actual life circumstances. In 2016, 65% of our Indigenous undergraduates were under the age of 22.

Indigenous students deemed ineligible for ABSTUDY face a high risk of choosing not to pursue further education opportunities. Given the profound under-representation of Australia's Indigenous population in the higher education system, Governments play an important role in encouraging and promoting Indigenous students to pursue further education following high school completion. Aligning ABSTUDY's age of independence criteria with the typical age of university enrolment would further facilitate access.

Recommendation 1: Lower the age of independence for Indigenous students to 18 years old (from the current 22 years of age)

2. Claiming ABSTUDY

In the University's experience, students find the ABSTUDY application forms overly long, difficult to understand (particularly eligibility requirements and acceptable forms of proof of eligibility) and often require assistance to complete documentation. For many students, obtaining and being asked to prove their Indigenous status can be confronting and can raise painful sensitivities in families.

Additionally, the details required in the application are often not relevant or applicable to Indigenous families who may be living in extended family arrangements. For example, many Indigenous families revolve around communal living and include extended family members. Moreover, many Indigenous children grow up in the care of guardians who may not necessarily be their birth parents.

The differences in Indigenous family living conditions are not accommodated for in the ABSTUDY application forms. This makes it very difficult for Indigenous students to successfully complete the relevant forms and results in applicants requiring assistance from either Centrelink or the University.

The culturally unsuitable application forms for claiming ABSTUDY can play a role in discouraging Indigenous students from pursuing higher education pathways.

Recommendation 2: Streamline ABSTUDY application forms and ensure the application forms are culturally suitable for Indigenous families

3. Details about ABSTUDY

The information offered online regarding ABSTUDY policies fails to provide adequate information regarding Indigenous students attending university. The available information centres predominantly on Indigenous students in high school rather than in higher education.

The guidelines explaining the impact of outside payments on ABSTUDY payments would be improved if they were clarified. In this instance, 'outside payments' refers to scholarships, internships, cadetships and paid work. Indigenous students on ABSTUDY can be confused as to how much outside funding they can earn before their ABSTUDY is adjusted. As a result, it is common for an Indigenous student to turn down the opportunity for an internship or

cadetship as they worry their ABSTUDY will be negatively impacted. The University encourages all students to participate in cadetships and internships to help enrich their studies and improve career opportunities. Employment opportunities can be foregone by students concerned about the continuing eligibility and quantum of for ABSTUDY funding on which they rely for day-to-day attendance at University.

Recommendation 3: Improve the information made available online regarding the costs associated with attending university and how alternative sources of funding can impact eligibility under the ABSTUDY program

The University recognises and appreciates the benefits of the Residential Costs Option offered through ABSTUDY, however, the allowance provided to students per fortnight for personal spending is insufficient. In 2016, 31% of our Indigenous undergraduates were enrolled and living at a residential college.

Although the Residential Costs Option covers the student's accommodation and living costs while at the residential college, without an appropriate weekly allowance, the Indigenous student is unable to participate in social activities or extracurricular activities. While some students are able to manage part-time employment alongside their tertiary studies, other students need to focus all their time and energy on successfully completing their studies, in particular during the first few years. Without an adequate living allowance, Indigenous students become completely dependent on bursaries and scholarships provided from the colleges and the University to support themselves and to enable them to fully participate in College life with their peers.

Recommendation 4: Increase the weekly allowance for Indigenous students on the Residential Costs Option

4. Processing ABSTUDY applications

The University is committed to increasing access and participation of Indigenous students, regardless of whether or not an Indigenous student is eligible for ABSTUDY. However, the delay in processing and confirming ABSTUDY eligibility, in particular the Residential Costs Option, is a financial and operational risk for the University and residential colleges.

Due to the time lag between processing and when students commence their studies, an Indigenous student may be admitted to a residential college under the assumption the student will be eligible for the Residential Costs Option when in fact they may not be eligible. During the lengthy delay in processing ABSTUDY payments, the University or residential college must provide financial support for the student. Not all colleges have the same endowment and some face difficulties in running a negative financial position for most of the academic year while waiting for ABSTUDY payments. When the Residential Costs Option is eventually approved, it is backdated and any ABSTUDY payment received by the student in this waiting period is raised as an overpayment by Centrelink, which the student is required to pay back. This overpayment could be avoided if the Residential Costs Option was processed at the same time as the main ABSTUDY application.

In the instance where a student has been living at a residential college but is deemed ineligible for the Residential Costs Option, the Indigenous student is asked to pay for their fees. In most cases, this is an impossible ask for the student. As a result, the University or the residential college covers the student's fees, accruing a financial loss. With our commencing Indigenous student cohort from outside the Melbourne metropolitan area and from interstate increasing annually to 69% in 2016, this represents a considerable financial burden.

Similarly, Indigenous students who are not enrolled in an extended program or living in a residential college face significant delays in the assessment of their ABSTUDY claims. Several Indigenous students at the University have waited in excess of 16 weeks for their ABSTUDY claims to be processed, leaving them with minuscule funds for covering living costs. The anxiety associated with uncertainty around finances is demonstrably detrimental to the welfare and study outcomes of students.

Recommendation 5: Align the ABSTUDY processing time with University enrolment time frames

5. Receiving assistance about ABSTUDY

The lack of relevant information available online, the challenging application forms and time lags in processing applications means Indigenous students, the University and residential colleges regularly need to seek further advice.

When a student or staff member from the University attempts to get in touch with ABSTUDY, they are consistently faced with long wait times. Staff members are not permitted to act on behalf of students, which means getting in touch with ABSTUDY often becomes a time-consuming and draining process, requiring Indigenous students to neglect their classes and studies in order to make contact with ABSTUDY.

Since the ABSTUDY claims office moved to Perth, there is no longer a direct phone line in Melbourne or a Victorian office. The three hour time difference between Melbourne and Perth makes it very difficult to get in touch with the ABSTUDY Perth office to process claims and have questions answered. Moreover, having no direct phone line specifically regarding ABSTUDY further delays the process of getting in contact with ABSTUDY and receiving accurate information. A direct line to Centrelink staff members who are specifically trained and proficient in the ABSTUDY policies would benefit both the student and staff members.

Recommendation 6: Re-establish an ABSTUDY claims office in Victoria

In 2006/2007, an experienced and trained Centrelink representative was assigned to the University during the first week of the university semester to assist Indigenous students with their ABSTUDY applications. The staff member was knowledgeable about ABSTUDY policies and was able to assist Indigenous students with their questions regarding ABSTUDY. This was an extremely effective arrangement and provided much needed help for Indigenous students during their transition from high school to university. The University would welcome this approach at the beginning of each year.

Recommendation 7: Provide a direct phone number to the ABSTUDY claims office where dedicated ABSTUDY specialists can provide assistance, with additional staffing during the first weeks of semester in-office and at campus.