

Australian Universities Accord

University of Melbourne Submission on Indigenous Higher Education

1. Introduction

This submission relates to matters pertaining to Indigenous higher education. It should be regarded as part of the University of Melbourne's broader institutional response. We have sent this element somewhat separately because it is important to us that the Accord panel hears from the authentic Indigenous voice of the University. Accordingly this has been prepared with leadership from Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous) Barry Judd, who has collected feedback from our Indigenous colleagues. The submission summarises key issues and concerns for universities and the sector, and offers suggestions and examples where appropriate for consideration by the Accord panel.

The purpose of this document is to delve more deeply into some of the key issues facing Indigenous staff and students. In it we highlight some of the relevant initiatives already taking place, and provide commentary and examples concerning how we think the Government and the sector can work together to ensure that our higher education sector is a place where all Indigenous Australians have the opportunity to succeed and that the value of indigenous people and knowledges is embedded throughout. It also includes specific recommendations for consideration.

In recent decades, the University of Melbourne has amplified efforts to work in partnership with Indigenous people to achieve our core purpose: *to benefit society through the transformative impact of education and research*. As outlined in our *2023-2027 Indigenous Strategy*, to be launched in the middle of the year, the University has bold ambitions to cement our position as a national and global leader in:

- supporting Indigenous people's educational goals and aspirations
- our recognition of and scholarly engagement with Indigenous knowledge traditions and their application to address critical issues confronting humanity.
- being a destination of choice for Indigenous students and staff.

The Accord is an opportunity to collectively address these ambitions, and for the higher education sector and Government to work together to tackle enduring Indigenous disadvantage. This will require a much stronger commitment to achieving the Closing the Gap target of having 67 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15-24 years in employment, education and training by 2031. It will require universities and Government to prioritise the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in higher education and to promote the exchange of knowledge through deep, reciprocal partnerships for the betterment of our communities.

We begin by providing high level comments on what we see as the main issues in relation to the Accord. This section is followed by more detailed commentary with suggestions in specific areas.

2. General Comments

Providing Indigenous students with greater access to higher education, and ensuring that they have the requisite support to succeed, is of paramount importance. However, this not the only challenge or opportunity associated with Indigenous peoples in the context of higher education. We believe there is the risk of Indigenous issues being viewed solely through the prism of access and equity, and we urge the Government to take a broad view of Indigenous matters and their place in the review. It is crucial to consider the unrealised potential of Indigenous knowledge in relation to research, innovation, and economic and social development.

When considering Indigenous matters the Government should not fall into the deficit model, by only focusing on problems – real or perceived - related to Indigenous peoples. Instead, we encourage the Government to adopt a strength-based approach when considering all Indigenous matters in the Accord. The review is an exciting opportunity to recognise and elevate the unique knowledge and knowledge systems held by Indigenous communities and the huge and unique value this represents to both the sector and to the broader Australian economy and society.

To bring about real change in the higher education sector, Indigenous people must be in decision-making roles and empowered to influence the status quo. We acknowledge the important role that Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt AO is playing on the Panel. We urge the Government and universities to increase their commitment to Indigenous equity, inclusion, and empowerment by ensuring that Indigenous experts are in key decision-making roles across the sector, and that greater funding is provided for Indigenous leadership development. This will be critical to ensuring that Indigenous matters are at the heart of decision-making.

While emphasising the importance of Indigenous leadership, we must also acknowledge and address the cultural load on Indigenous staff and students across the sector. This burden has been well researched and requires urgent attention from universities in terms of workforce planning, remuneration and addressing behavioural racism.¹

As a sector, there is strong evidence of competition, rather than collaboration, in relation to achieving better outcomes for Indigenous students, staff and communities. We need to shift this focus and find ways to promote collaboration across the entire Australian higher education sector. The current situation, whereby institutions compete for Indigenous students and staff, is counterproductive. We need to explore a range of incentives and initiatives, including secondments, exchange, joint programs, networking opportunities and communities of practice, to encourage the sector to work together, with the support of Government, to achieve our national aspirations.

Finally, central to all our goals is the creation of culturally safe campus environments. Indigenous students have much better outcomes when they feel well supported in their learning journey while being in an environment that understands the obligations of culture, family and community. While responsibility lies with individual institutions, Government can play a key role by facilitating and supporting (including through funded programs) the sharing of best practice and development of resources around culturally safe practices and spaces.

The Accord offers an opportunity for the sector and Government to share ideas and good practice around these issues, and to ensure that they are prominent in policy discussions at national and institutional levels.

¹ Locke, M., Trudgett, M., & Page, S. (2023). Australian Indigenous early career researchers: unicorns, cash cows and performing monkeys. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 26(1), 1-17.

3. Feedback on key areas

3.1 Indigenous students – access, participation, and success

Education has a major role to play in achieving better economic outcomes and is considered one of the main strategies for addressing Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. In July 2020, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap identified the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieving their full learning potential, setting a target of having 67 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands (15-24 years) people in employment, education, and training by 2031.

The University of Melbourne has set ambitious targets that include reaching an Indigenous student headcount of 1000 by 2029, an undergraduate to graduate student ratio to be equal for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students by 2025, and that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will be equally successful in graduate coursework by 2025. To support Indigenous student success, our Indigenous Student Campus Barometer Survey will provide important data that will inform our approach to creating an environment that is culturally safe, welcoming and respectful, and where Indigenous students are equipped for academic success.

We encourage the Government to support institutional efforts and ensure national targets are met and all Indigenous students are equipped and supported to succeed.

Recommendation 1

That the Accord consider the following recommendations for Government action:

- Open the demand-driven system for all Indigenous students regardless of their location - not just from regional and remote locations.
- Invest in support for enabling programs for Indigenous students. Once enrolled, Indigenous students face multiple challenges and without appropriate support they are at much higher risk of dropping out than non-Indigenous students. It makes sense for the Government to review its current investment in programs such as Abstudy and enabling support schemes, in terms of adequacy and effectiveness, to ensure that Indigenous students are given every chance to succeed. This investment will pay dividends beyond the individual student, extending to their families, communities and broader Australian society.
- Remove the current requirement that students must maintain a pass rate of at least 50 per cent to continue as a Commonwealth Supported Student. It is well evidenced that Indigenous students face a range of challenges that have a detrimental impact on their university experience, including family and community responsibilities, financial difficulties, ill health, lack of social support, academic disadvantage and issues surrounding personal wellbeing. This may delay progress. However, when provided with the right support, many go on to successfully complete their studies.²
- To secure a robust Indigenous Academic pipeline, Government support should support arrangements for progression from undergraduate to graduate programs (including graduate research programs). This could take the form of a dedicated scholarships program.

² Fredericks, B., Barney, K., Bunda, T., Hausia, K., Martin, A., Elston, J., Bernardino, D., & Griffiths, D. (2022). Building the evidence to improve completion rates for Indigenous students. *NCSEHE project final report*.

3.2 Advancing Indigenous staff recruitment and retention

The University of Melbourne is committed to the advancement of Indigenous staff recruitment and retention and aims to employ 350 staff by 2025 (including professional and non-academic staff but excluding casual staff).

The [Melbourne Indigenous Professional Employment Program \(MIPEP\)](#) is a signature initiative that aims to increase the number of professional staff. The two year program provides a starting salary of \$69,365 per annum plus 17% super, rotation across diverse roles, professional development and cultural enrichment activities and the opportunity to study a Diploma of Business. The success of MIPEP highlights the potential for consideration of more funding for professional staff entry level employment and training programs across the sector.

We need Indigenous leadership across the sector, but this requires us to attract, retain and nurture our Indigenous staff. Funding is required for more senior professional staff employment, development, and leadership programs, including for support for study.

Our Indigenous staff are at risk of being negatively affected by additional cultural load. Institutions and Government must acknowledge and recognise this in framing policy that relates to higher education and to cultural safety in universities.

Recommendation 2

That the Accord consider mechanisms for:

- Investing in professional staff entry level employment and training programs across the sector.
- Investing in senior professional staff employment, development and leadership programs including support for study.
- Factoring in the high burden of cultural load on Indigenous staff in the work of Government and universities.

3.3 Unlocking the potential of Indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge should be an integral part of future measures to drive research quality, integrity and impact, as well as innovative, distinctly Australian approaches to new forms of education and research. Currently our higher education sector undervalues Indigenous knowledge, expertise, and relationships. Achieving widespread recognition and valuing of Indigenous knowledge requires Indigenous people and communities to be recognised as equal/genuine partners across our research system. For example, to achieve real change, Indigenous people must not be limited to advisory roles but must rather be appointed to key decision-making roles.

The University of Melbourne's newly created [Indigenous Knowledge Institute](#) marks a critical turning point in how the University of Melbourne engages with Indigenous knowledge systems, and values and recognises the expertise of Indigenous knowledge holders. We encourage the Government to prioritise supporting research and collaborations in Indigenous knowledge systems across the higher education sector.

Recommendation 3

The Accord should consider:

- Dedicated resources to support institutions to build capacity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in all aspects of Indigenous knowledge.
- Dedicated resources to allow Indigenous people located in communities to become equal research partners.

There are also issues around conducting ethical research with local and international Indigenous communities. All universities need to have appropriate protocols and training around Indigenous community engagement and co-design. These requirements underpin innovation and fulfil our commitment to strengthening and harnessing our Indigenous knowledge through ethical, reciprocal partnerships with local and global communities.

Recommendation 4

The Accord might consider the value of:

- National guidelines to ensure appropriate and consistent recognition and remuneration for Indigenous knowledge, recognised through contracts, agreements, and/or other arrangements.

3.4 Building our Future Indigenous Research Workforce

Securing our future Indigenous research workforce requires a long-term vision and accompanying strategies to increase the number of Indigenous academics across the research system. This includes building a strong and resilient talent pipeline beginning in schools and continuing through to our research institutions and into the research workforce. STEM areas are particularly problematic leading to significant economic and social ramifications.

Once in academia, Indigenous academics require greater support at the entry stage (PhD/ECR) as well as at more senior levels. There is a shortage of Indigenous academics in leadership positions and more needs to be done within universities to provide training and support that enables our Indigenous academics to succeed at the Executive level.

The University of Melbourne currently delivers two programs to support the success of Indigenous Higher Degree Research (HDR) students and Early Career Researchers to address the disparity in HDR completions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. However, this program requires urgent financial support to expand to meet demand and secure long-term viability. Moreover, we need to provide leadership training across the academic lifecycle to ensure that Indigenous academics are prepared for leadership positions at the highest level.

Recommendation 5

The Accord consider:

- A whole-of-Government approach to developing a national strategy to attract and retain more Indigenous students into STEM across the Australian education system.

- Investment in programs to prepare and develop early career Indigenous academics for careers across the Australian higher education sector.³
- Investment in programs to increase Indigenous leadership and management capability across the Australian higher education sector.

3.5 Building and strengthening partnerships

The Accord presents an exciting opportunity to boost collaboration and the multi-way flow of people between institutions, industry, community, and government to enhance teaching and learning and increase research impact.

The University of Melbourne is committed to partnering with industry and the community to deliver tangible benefits for society. Our three strategic place-based partnerships with the Traditional Owners of Narm (the Melbourne area), the Yorta Yorta Nation in the Goulburn Valley region of Victoria, and the Yolŋu people in Northeast Arnhem Land demonstrate our commitment to Indigenous social, economic and cultural advancement in metropolitan, regional and remote communities.

[The University of Melbourne's Poche scholars program](#) is an example of the potential of place-based education initiatives, producing four PhD graduates from the local Indigenous community in Shepparton. Strengthening our relationships with community allows us to grow our Indigenous academic workforce, to expand our understanding of Indigenous cultures and knowledges across our campuses and to provide greater exposure and access to the University.

We recommend that the Government considers how it can work with universities to encourage greater links between universities and external partners and to closing the gap in regional and remote communities.

Recommendation 6

In relation to tackling inequities in regional and remote communities, that the Accord considers the desirability of public investment in:

- community-university initiatives to build our capabilities in working ethically and productively with Indigenous communities, organisations and individuals, in the context of the Voice and Treaty and truth-telling activities initiated by Federal and State Governments.
- Indigenous-led research and enterprise in the region supported by university expertise to create Indigenous self-sufficiency and prosperity. (For example, The Goulburn Valley Prosperity plan outlines meaningful investment in Indigenous enterprise and has the potential to play a major part in achieving parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in the region⁴).
- incentives for universities and other tertiary providers to collaborate through regional/remote partnerships when working with Traditional Owner groups to develop education and services.
- incentives, programs and support to establish strong Indigenous education workforces in regional and remote locations. This could include:

³ Universities New Zealand is running two separate initiatives to strengthen and grow the Māori research workforce. See <https://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/latest-news-and-publications/universities-launch-programme-support-m%C4%81ori-academics>

⁴ https://www.kaielainstitute.org.au/uploads/7/9/1/0/7910149/goulburn_murray_regional_prosperity_plan_-_full_report_-_final.pdf

- free-of-charge university qualifications (with end-to-end support) for primary, secondary and vocational teacher training;
- free-of-charge Masters and PhD programs in education and relevant post-graduate professional qualifications; and
- incentives and funding/support for Indigenous researchers.

3.6 Supporting Indigenous enterprise

Employment relationships are governed by industrial law and enterprise agreements, and as such are outside the purview of the Accord. However we consider that it is important that the Accord note the value of the following positive examples of flexible employment practice, some of which are already being enacted in the sector.

Flexible employment models could support enterprise appointments in a full-time, part-time, continuing, fixed term and honorary capacity.

Benefits might include:

- A high degree of flexibility promotes tailored engagement opportunities based on need and availability, resulting in the growth of a University's Indigenous academic workforce beyond traditional appointments, potentially serving as a pipeline to future recruitment.
- Indigenous industry professionals can act as mentors for Indigenous students and provide access and networks for potential future employment for students.
- Non-traditional Indigenous appointments enhance opportunities to inform curriculum development and provide support to non-Indigenous academic staff in their efforts to introduce and embed Indigenous cultures and knowledges in their research and teaching and learning activities.
- Strategic Indigenous appointments that build relationships and partnerships with industry, community and government through people-to-people links, thus opening possibilities for research collaboration, work-integrated learning for students, staff exchange and generation of philanthropic leads.

Recommendation 7

Without in any way proposing limits on the autonomy of universities in this regard, that the Accord note the potential value of flexible employment models in strengthening participation of Indigenous people in higher education and the workforce more generally.