



09 September 2020

Submission to the Education and Employment Legislation Committee: Higher Education Support Amendment (Job Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020¹

NATSIEHC appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Education and Employment Legislation Committee.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium (Aboriginal Corporation) (NATSIEHC) has a membership of over 80 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic and professional staff employed across the higher education sector. NATSIEHC was established in the 1990s (previous National Indigenous Higher Education Network) and provide high level advice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education to both Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) and the National Indigenous Australian Agency (NIAA). NATSIEHC also has MoU partnership agreements with Universities Australia (UA) and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), as well as other stakeholder collaborations.

NATSIEHC recently led a commissioned report for the DESE on the Advancement of Indigenous Higher Education in Australian Universities and worked collaboratively with UA to deliver the first National Indigenous Higher Education Strategy.

For further information on NATSIEHC, www.natsiehc.edu.au

Over the past 10 years we have been able to achieve some great momentum in increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education student outcomes. Whilst we are generally supportive of the need to consider options for the future, there is a sense that the proposed legislative reforms contradict existing Indigenous higher-education policies, programs and measures (e.g. *Indigenous Student Success Program* (ISSP) and the *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program* (HEPPP)). Accordingly, there is an inherent risk that the reforms may in fact have an adverse impact and effect on Indigenous students and our endeavours to achieve continuous growth in Indigenous admissions, enrolments, progression and success. The research and commissioned work informing the changes have not considered the workforce and environments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Further to this, although we invite the focus on regional, rural and remote students, this should not be to the detriment of urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student accessibility to higher education opportunities.

¹ Amended submissions previously provided to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment Job Ready Graduates consultation prepared by both NATSIEHC and the DVC/PVC (Indigenous) collective.



Schedule 1: Commonwealth Supported Places

The return of the 'demand-driven system' for Indigenous students is very welcomed; however, isolating this initiative to solely regional and remote students is problematic and exclusive, particularly as overall numbers of Indigenous students are below parity, irrelevant of location. Urban Indigenous communities are not considered within this agenda, even though their numbers are not at parity with non-Indigenous urban populations accessing higher education. The recently released report of the National Rural, Regional, Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (NRRRTES) shows that attrition rates for Low SES in urban areas is 15.4% and for remote it is 20.2%. For Indigenous students' urban attrition was at 23.1%, higher than low SES remote outcomes².

We are fully supportive of initiatives that aim to increase rural, regional and remote students however not to the detriment of urban students. It could be argued that the new formula for HEPPP aligned to low SES and Indigenous communities will counteract the exclusion from these initiatives; however, urban students will only be counted in the 10% Indigenous component of the HEPPP formula, and not recognised as low SES, as the calculation continues to be based on postcode, which results in a significant number of our communities still not being recognised appropriately. For example, in NSW, Redfern has a high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, many very low SES, however this is not identified as a low SES postcode as it takes in to account other very high SES communities. 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, irrelevant of location.

We recommend that the Government open up the Demand Driven System to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to increase much needed access to higher education.

Schedule 2: Student Contribution - Funding Clusters

The proposed modifications of funding clusters will have a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. 2018 data shows over 52% of Indigenous students were enrolled in programs that will be impacted by an increase in student contributions for humanities based disciplines (33% in societies and culture alone) with only 14% of Indigenous students in STEM related fields of study compared to 23% for non-Indigenous

² Australian Government (2019), National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy. Available at https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/national_regional_rural_and_remote_tertiary_education_strategy.pdf



students³. This will result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students graduating with a higher HECS debt than non-Indigenous students and moving into the workforce with a greater financial burden.

We acknowledge that the proposed reforms are being guided by the aim that ‘the outcomes of these reforms are a better alignment of investment with national priorities’ and aims to incentivizing enrolments in ‘emerging labour market priorities’⁴. However, this does not take into account the labour market priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, where many of our students are at university to be able to give back to their community and therefore preference studies in societies, culture and community development. Already, research has shown that high achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are less like to choose a university pathway that non-Indigenous students. The research recorded that 72% of non-Indigenous students in the top quartile of NAPLAN results in contrast to 43% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students aspired to go to University, due to the ‘negotiation of race, class, economic and cultural divides in ways that are not shared by non-Indigenous students’⁵. Further barriers such as increased student contributions will either result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students not choosing to enroll in higher education or a higher percentage of Indigenous students graduating with higher HECS debts than non-Indigenous students. We do not believe the proposed fee changes will influence discipline selection, nor do we believe it is in the best interests of our students.

A further concern is that if the incentivization based on funding reforms does influence non-Indigenous student choice of alternative areas of study, that this will also put our academic areas at risk given that many Indigenous Studies Centre’s academic concentration fall within the fields of Humanities ‘societies and culture’. Decreased enrolments in these units / courses will have a detrimental impact on the preparation of higher education students to develop graduate attributes related to understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories, social justice and being a positive contributor to a multi-cultural society, especially as it relates to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Surely it is in Australia’s best interests to ensure the protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies/Indigenous Studies for the benefit of Australia’s future? A

³ Source: University Statistics Section, Research and Economic Group, Commonwealth Department of Education; Aurora analysis

⁴ Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020), *Job ready Graduates Exposure Draft Legislation*, available at: <https://www.dese.gov.au/document/job-ready-graduates-exposure-draft-legislation>

⁵ The Conversation (2017), *Why many high-achieving Indigenous students are shunning university*, available at: <https://theconversation.com/why-many-high-achieving-indigenous-students-are-shunning-university-79749>



drop in enrolments within Indigenous Studies disciplines would put at jeopardy funding and resources to Indigenous Studies departments, putting at risk the national priorities of increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic workforce within higher education, including supporting curriculum development in priority areas that have key performance targets in helping to Close the Gap.

We recommend that:

Indigenous Studies be listed as a priority discipline area with the student contributions aligned to this priority.

Cohort testing be completed to determine the impact of the changes to student contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, both in the short and long term.

Schedule 4 – Students Protection

Although a number of Indigenous students that fail 50% or more of their first year end up withdrawing⁶, the students that do move through to completion carry with them important experiences of resilience, overcoming adversity and hard work to achieve success. These are some of our most positive mentors and role models for successive years of students and community members. Success cannot be defined by quantitative indicators. Sometimes diverse experiences are a much better measure of success.

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.

However, once they are connected with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education centres or become more comfortable within the university environment, their academic outcomes improve. Please find a student story below that reinforce these points.

The proposed reform additionally does not provide consideration of 'cultural' reasons listed within the exclusion areas that list 'illness or bereavement'.

⁶ Data collected from Macquarie University and University of Newcastle on first academic progression and success.



Our students are already faced with multiple barriers without having the stress of further obstacles that they have to navigate.

We recommend that:

A full exemption of the proposed discontinuation of HECS-Help for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to allow them to continue and complete their studies if they choose to do so.

The following provides two case studies of Aboriginal students that would have been impacted if they were not able to access a Commonwealth supported place after failing 50% or more of their first year of study. It is understood that the intention is for students to not lose Commonwealth support however rather drop to part-time or change degrees/disciplines however taking away this choice without other considerations is not the best option for our students to succeed. A more appropriate option would be to ensure universities have rigorous processes that oversee appropriate student progression. We have already seen in the last decade universities becoming more responsive to these agendas however there is obviously still work to be done without having a blanket solution that puts at risk student success.

STUDENT CASE STUDIES⁷

Aboriginal Student, Bachelor of Human Sciences (Community Services)

With a passion for sport I came to university to do a Bachelor of Human Sciences with a major in Human Movement, with a vision to later completing a Masters of Physiotherapy. During my first year I struggled with the different way of learning and having to memorise different scientific terms and content, I was first in family to attend university and came from a poor family. After receiving an academic warning from the university, I spoke to the Faculty about my studies. It was then that I realised that changing to a major in Community Services would be much better for both my learning style as well as where I could see myself in the future. Throughout my studies I was also trying to deal with a number of family issues that was really traumatic. I have been very engaged with the Aboriginal education community which, got me through the hard stuff outside of uni which made my studies possible. I now have one semester left of my study and have a part time job working in the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Human Sciences in a student services role. I look forward to when I finish my degree working with Aboriginal communities within Community Services. If

⁷ Stories provided by Aboriginal students enrolled at Macquarie University



the proposed changes in relation to HECS Help were in place when I started university I could not have afforded to continue studying after failing more than 50% of my first year, as even though I changed the focus of my degree I was still in the same degree. These changes concern me as I have siblings that I encourage to come to university in the future and this would put added stress onto the already stressful transition into a university environment.

Aboriginal Student, Bachelor of Business Administration

I never thought that university would be something I could do as I was first in family and never considered university before. I was a young single mother, working full-time and had completed a TAFE course at night when I realised that I could now go onto doing a degree at university. I wanted to study full-time however had to keep on working to have enough money to survive. In my first year I struggled with balancing the expectations of being a mother, working and studying. After failing more than half of my first-year subjects Walanga Muru sat with me to develop a case plan and provided an academic mentor. After this I went onto pass all my subjects, at times achieving a credit with a few distinctions. I am now in my final semester and have a lot more confidence in not only my studies but what I can achieve as a young Aboriginal woman. I believe now I am a good role model for my children and look forward to going onto postgraduate studies some time in the future. Although I have found studying challenging, I am proud of what I have achieved. If the proposed changes to HECS Help were around when I first started my degree I would definitely not be where I am today as I would have not been able to afford to pay upfront fees. I look forward to my children one day having the opportunity to go to university however am concerned about the growing barriers that continue to be placed in front of us that allow us to move forward as individuals and as a community.

Yours sincerely

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