

Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Consultation Paper Response

November 2011

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the national representative body for Australia's 320,000+ postgraduate students

Prepared by John Nowakowski, CAPA National President;
Adrian Hepi, NIPAAAC President;
and Sadie Heckenberg, MPA Indigenous Representative

November 18, 2011

Level 1, 120 Clarendon St, Southbank, Victoria 3205

www.capa.edu.au

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| About CAPA | 3 |
| Introduction..... | 3 |
| Summary of Recommendations..... | 4 |
| CAPA Policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduates..... | 5 |
| The Nature of Indigenous Research..... | 8 |
| Providing Positive Environments | 9 |
| Improving Indigenous Access | 10 |

ABOUT CAPA

Founded in 1979, The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is a membership based non-profit organisation. CAPA's main role is in protecting and promoting the interests and needs of Australia's 320,000+ postgraduate students.

CAPA is made up of student representative bodies from 32 of the 39 Universities, and, through CAPA, the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC) is sponsored, a national collective for indigenous postgraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

Within Australia, there are approximately 1,500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identifying students, constituting less than 0.5% of total postgraduate enrolment. This lies substantially below the 2.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation within the wider community. These students are broadly distributed across Australia's 39 Universities and Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education.

There are various theories as to why engagement at a higher degree level are low, but it should be noted that there are many blockages that cause students to be placed in substantially different environments to what they would feel most confident. Students are generally substantially older than the rest of the cohort, and methodologies substantially differ. Past government policy and inequity plays largely in lower intakes, as well as lack of culturally safe environments.

Several elements have been identified by CAPA as necessary to consider for the improvement of the engagement on Indigenous students at a Higher Degree level. These are outlined below.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: All Universities must offer good introductory courses into research, particularly focused for the needs of Indigenous Students

Recommendation 2: All Indigenous Students should be supported with a panel of supervisors, which should include at least one Indigenous advisor.

Recommendation 3: All persons who work with and are engaged in activities to do with Indigenous students should do cross cultural awareness training facilitated by Indigenous people.

Recommendation 4: All Indigenous Students should be encouraged to use both western and/or traditional methodologies through their investigations

Recommendation 5: The ethics application for working with Indigenous communities should be reviewed, and universities should develop courses to aid and assist in applications

Recommendation 6: All Universities must offer a stable pastoral environment, providing appropriate mental health support, and appropriately funded extra financial support.

Recommendation 7: All Universities should identify skills required through personal learning plans, rather than directed to generic skills that may or may not be relevant

Recommendation 8: More grants and support to both students and universities should be provided to ensure support for students throughout their studies

Recommendation 9: To improve equity, there needs to be more scholarships provided to Indigenous post graduate students at a rate whereby students can support themselves adequately.

Recommendation 10: Accommodation near a campus should be provided at a reduced rate for Indigenous students during block release and for those travelling to study, ideally with several scholarships that fully fund accommodation.

Recommendation 11: Universities should be encouraged to work with a broad range of communities, including those Indigenous persons currently incarcerated

Recommendation 12: All Universities should strive to create parity of Indigenous Higher Degree enrolments, which currently sits nationally at 2.2% of the Indigenous population.

CAPA POLICY ON ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER POSTGRADUATES

- 1 Australia has two broad cultural groups who are its original inhabitants. The Torres Strait Islander peoples who are the original inhabitants of the Torres Strait Islands and the Aboriginal peoples who are the original inhabitants of the rest of Australia. Both cultures are uniquely rich and complex with sophisticated social organisations, ideologies and technologies which distinguish one from the other. There are however common characteristics, such as languages and customs.
- 2 Each cultural group has subcultures, which are distinguished by their ‘country’ or ‘language’ name. Country refers to the geographical location of a language group. The terminology ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ and ‘Indigenous Australians’ are labels given to the original inhabitants to classify and separate our cultures. When visiting a country, the terminology that is acceptable by the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be the name used when referring to those local people. Nevertheless ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ is preferred to the use of the term ‘Indigenous’. Verbalising the acronym “ATSI” is considered culturally insensitive.
- 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students are faced with difficulties in maintaining:
 - (a) a balance between their cultural dignity based on individual identities and scholastic requirements based on traditional Western paradigms; and
 - (b) an obligation to oral traditions verses academic literary tradition.
- 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, as with other postgraduate students, should be able to construct theoretical frameworks that utilise their own cultural knowledge, skills and social constructs.
- 5 Equity that includes reconciliation of all Australians can only be achieved when non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians consider the attitudes, beliefs and understandings of the original inhabitants of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands. Further, they should consider their place in devising effective ways in which they can walk hand-in-hand with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian people.
- 6 This will require an acknowledgment, recognition and observance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages, historical contexts, knowledge, and protocols. It also requires the sharing of this information in a manner that does not compromise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 7 CAPA upholds that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples have never ceded ownership of their traditional lands. Therefore we uphold the sovereignties of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples over their traditional lands, and actively supports the development of projects fostering the awareness and promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island sovereignties in the wider community.

- 8 We uphold that other Australians have much to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples, and will actively encourage the development of programs and Policy to enhance this learning process. In order to do this, it must be acknowledged that the academic systems in Australia is Eurocentric and thereby disadvantages both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and other Australians. CAPA upholds that all Australians have a valued voice in the construction of Australia's and the World's knowledge pool. Valuing voices, including those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples mutually benefits all Australians.
- 9 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples may have different aspirations from those provided by mainstream tertiary education. Equal opportunity to succeed in tertiary education therefore often means different procedures and processes to achieve equality of educational outcomes. CAPA acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Peoples are striving for culturally appropriate provision of education, as a means of facilitating self determination, cultural preservation and future survival. We also acknowledge self determination in education as control over 'construction of identity' which involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples writing their own knowledge traditions. We further acknowledge self-determination as the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples to make decisions on issues relating to them and to manage their own affairs.
- 10 That CAPA recognises the unique disadvantaged position that Indigenous – Australian Post Graduate Students are in when pursuing a higher education. That their employment rate is far lower than their fellow non-indigenous students. Therefore CAPA is directed to lobby the Federal & State ministers for Education and Indigenous Affairs and the Vice Chancellors of the various Institutions to prioritise Postgraduate Indigenous employment in the institutions and education sector generally
- 11 NIPAAC and CAPA are concerned that Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students, particularly those who are single and/or supporting children, are unable to meet basic living expenses and the high course costs associated with Masters and Doctorate degrees on current ABSTUDY rates. A tax-free 'living wage' plus additional components for travel and study costs should be made available to all Indigenous-Australian Masters, Doctorate and Honours degree students. An additional payment should be provided for each dependent child. It should be noted that the living wage should be based on conservative living estimates, and NIPAAC and CAPA's longer-term goal is to attain higher levels of student income support
- 12 CAPA believes that the education of all Indigenous-Australian children in their sense of self worth and of Aboriginal culture and language is paramount.
- 13 CAPA endorses the 21 recommendations of the CAPA Response to the Indigenous Perspectives of Postgraduate Education (October 1996) together with the 28 recommendations of that report and the 5 recommendations in Appendix 5 of that report.
- 14 CAPA supports NIPAAC's membership of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), which makes recommendations to the Minister of Education on the awarding of staff scholarships, develops strategies for increasing the number of Indigenous-

Australian staff in higher education, and convenes an annual conference to develop Indigenous-Australian higher education strategies. CAPA and NIPAAAC believe that the IHEAC should be given more funding and a greater role in order to become the umbrella organization for the development of all Indigenous-Australian higher education policies.

- 15 CAPA believes each University should revive Access and Participation committees with strong local Indigenous community representation.
- 16 CAPA believes all institutions and management of the same must establish their roles in supporting the growth and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate study and research and support systems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands People students and provide regular courses to all academic and regular staff involved in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands People students. CAPA believes that better strategies should provide support to Aboriginal support units, together with working to recognise the following:
 - (a) presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders;
 - (b) staffing;
 - (c) culture of the University;
 - (d) information technology;
 - (e) research funding;
 - (f) equal employment opportunities; and
 - (g) rights and diversity.
- 17 CAPA affirms development of understandings of academic definitions to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural ways of seeing, communicating and learning. Further, CAPA recognises the need of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students to demonstrate their learning through a range of mediums other than a written thesis or in ways that compliments the written thesis.
- 18 CAPA believes it is critical that universities include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural ways of seeing, communicating and learning by accepting alternative methods of assessment of their knowledge.
- 19 CAPA supports the compulsory inclusion of anti-racist, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and cross-cultural education within courses for potential academics, teachers and other professionals, and within student organisations throughout all tertiary institutions.
- 20 CAPA urges universities to question their understandings of academic definitions to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural ways of seeing, communicating and learning. Further, CAPA recognises the need of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students to demonstrate their learning through a range of mediums other than a written thesis or in ways that compliments the written thesis.
- 21 That CAPA urge universities to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural ways of seeing, communicating and learning by accepting alternative methods of assessment of their knowledge.

THE NATURE OF INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

An Indigenous way of seeing and doing is at the heart of an Indigenous pedagogy and Indigenous styles of research are holistic in nature. All university staff who supervise an Indigenous student need to familiarise themselves with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies guidelines to locate the place of research within Indigenous community guidelines. Research needs to have outcomes that embrace community aspirations and abide by the ethics and protocols of the diverse range of Indigenous communities living in Australia. An Indigenous standpoint theory needs to be supported and embraced by mainstream higher education institutions and their instruments. An Indigenous philosophy of research is as ancient as is Indigenous knowledge and a space for Indigenous ways of researching are essential to expanding the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as post graduates.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be able to progress through the higher education system there must be an opportunity to learn the western style of research and potentially combine this with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge system. This not only enriches the students experience but offers developing relationships with people, land, country, and provides authentic community involvement and engagement.

Recommendation 1: All Universities must offer good introductory courses into research, particularly focused for the needs of Indigenous Students

Speaking to the Batchelor Institute particularly, it becomes apparent that many of the students studying are not involved in the more common cis-disciplinary studies, but embrace a research methodology that extends across different aspects – including linguistics, history, concepts of science, psychology, and gender and queer studies, to name a few. The method for approaching the research has been noted to best work where supervisors come from a breadth of the University to encourage multiple routes of investigation.

One significant issue with completing research has often included a feeling of isolation from the Indigenous community following a period of study, particularly where the results are seen to be a Western recognition of knowledge, and thus causing separation from a candidate's community. It is noted that inclusion of Indigenous people within the supervisory panel, particularly a person identified as an elder within the community being studied, often aids students in improving relationships within their community.

From past experiences, such relationships involve developing local protocols, and forming sustainable partnerships including local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education unit, University Academic board, Elders and traditional owners where research is being undertaken. Utilising and involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and researchers who have experience in these areas, combined with proper consultation, planning and preparation is fundamental to success.

Recommendation 2: All Indigenous Students should be supported with a panel of supervisors, which should include at least one Indigenous advisor.

Recommendation 3: All persons who work with and are engaged in activities to do with Indigenous students should do cross cultural awareness training facilitated by Indigenous people.

Notably, there are marked differences between the methodologies applied for students, particularly those from traditional communities, where the indigenous nature for investigation is prevalent. All Indigenous students should be encouraged to investigate through both Western and traditional methodologies, thus allowing the work to become relevant for both the research and local communities. The need for research to withstand the demanding Western research environment unfortunately will remain, and will ensure that students must incorporate what many would determine as the “correct” way to research; however, allowing the inclusion of traditional methodologies both allows for growing international recognition, but also allows the candidate to approach a problem through a system that they feel more comfortable relating to and are able to identify with. There is indeed a growing body of work by Indigenous researchers globally who are using an Indigenous methodology and expect Indigenous community aspirations are fulfilled.

Recommendation 4: All Indigenous Students should be encouraged to use both western and/or traditional methodologies through their investigations

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students engaged in research as part of their higher degree, there are a number of key factors: a combination of methodologies, including new media formats, story telling, art and narrative processes; combining with communities; and other researcher projects that surface, which affirm, apply, and secure Indigenous Knowledge.

A major block within the current research environment is that students who wish to investigate Indigenous communities must undergo a thorough and demanding ethics approval system. Whilst CAPA acknowledges the importance of the current process, particularly to ensure the protection of Indigenous persons, the expertise required to appropriately complete the ethics approval is often beyond the capabilities of many candidates, and dissuades many candidates from continuing their studies. It is proposed that the current application process be reviewed, and that universities should consider training in completion of an ethics proposal, particularly for candidates investigating Indigenous matters.

Recommendation 5: The ethics application for working with Indigenous communities should be reviewed, and universities should develop courses to aid and assist in applications

PROVIDING POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Both Research and Coursework Postgraduate Indigenous students often remark about the university being an overwhelming experience. Whilst many students who have grown within a city are accustomed to large buildings, strict working regimes, and are self-sufficient within a busy community, universities should consider their methodology for training of Indigenous students.

First and foremost, any and all supervisors who are to work with Indigenous students should embrace a philosophy that encourages mixed-methodology, trans-disciplinary research, as

opposed to the Western approach to research. Due to the demands of family, many Indigenous students are required to study on a part-time basis, which creates a challenge for supervision. The demands of a university higher degree also cause significant stress, and all universities should have a dedicated Indigenous student support unit, incorporating mental health assistance, acknowledging the stress caused.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) is now being delivered across campuses in Australia there are over 200 accredited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators, in conjunction with University of Melbourne, this 2 day 14 program can be delivered to students right across Australia in partnership with Beyond Blue Art and narrative therapy combined with HIP HOP.

Providing a positive environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is about a holistic approach; encompassing travel, access to medical services, a safe and supportive environment, with accommodation. CAPA and NIPAAC believe this is pivotal, given many students travel from rural and remote communities to attend some of their courses and do block release programs. This should be combined with community visits, support with IT, and flexible delivery and supervision of projects, as Indigenous students have other commitments. Ultimately, this will lead to facilitation of community-based solutions to critical analysis, questions or issues.

| |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Recommendation 6: All Universities must offer a stable pastoral environment, providing appropriate mental health support, and appropriately funded extra financial support</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

IMPROVING INDIGENOUS ACCESS

When approaching University, all students are likely to require some skills not otherwise provided within their course. These may extend to training in statistics and mathematics, some linguistics work, or even requirements such as four-wheel driving to access remote communities. Indigenous students particularly would benefit from working with a co-ordinator around what both they and their supervision team believe are skills lacking, and approaching them to improve likelihood of ongoing engagement. When students are required to undertake compulsory training that they view as unnecessary, or where their skills are inadequate but they are unable to access support in improving them, students are more likely to progress more slowly, or discontinue.

| |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Recommendation 7: All Universities should identify skills required through personal learning plans, rather than directed to generic skills that may or may not be relevant</p> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

One major issue with access is appropriate levels of funding and support. Whilst there are a range of scholarships, these are inadequate to gain the engagement that is desired. Where affirmative action is applied to general scholarships, such as the Australian Postgraduate Award, or where more Indigenous-specific scholarships at a rate that allows for independent living, more students are encouraged to apply and provided with the fiscal support required to best engage with a university environment.

All stages of education for an indigenous person should also be supported more extensively. In schools, often only enough funding for one hour of assisted tutoring per week per student is provided, and support units at Universities are drastically underfunded. With more support, both a better pastoral environment and a better training environment for Indigenous students are made possible.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tutoring program (ATAS), has benefitted many students over a number of years. CAPA and NIPAAC believe that engaging with the tutoring, particularly when the person is a former recipient themselves, give students the opportunity to apply the benefits of support when they have been away from home in block release intensives. Furthermore, with the improvement in technology, and so that students from remote and rural areas now have that support, laptop loan systems are now in place now at a number of universities.

Recommendation 8: More grants and support to both students and universities should be provided to ensure support for students throughout their studies

Recommendation 9: To improve equity, there needs to be more scholarships provided to Indigenous post graduate students at a rate whereby students can support themselves adequately.

Another barrier to better engagement is a lack of access to the campus, usually because living costs in the city are too high, family are unable to accompany a student to the University vicinity, and availability of accommodation is poor. CAPA proposes that all Universities should have a number of rooms available at a reduced rate, if only a token rent, specifically for indigenous students, both covering those travelling on block release, and those working with the University on a part-time basis. By allocating accommodation near the University, not only are students more engaged with their studies, but also with campus life, allowing them the opportunity to mingle with a variety of students in a diverse arrangement.

Recommendation 10: Accommodation near a campus should be provided at a reduced rate for Indigenous students during block release and for those travelling to study, ideally with several scholarships that fully fund accommodation.

Access to education should not be limited to only those of high standing within the community, but afforded to all those who show ability and aptitude. Successes at both Swinburne and Batchelor have been noted working with students who are currently in gaol for a variety of reasons, allowing them to improve their quality of life upon the end of the incarceration. Universities should promote access for all students, regardless of their current arrangements, but based on the potential of the student.

Enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander through higher degree programs by community-based delivery modes is a very successful model for increasing engagement. Examples, including the Institute of Koori Education (IKE) at Deakin University Warun Ponds, demonstrate the best practice models. The work at IKE has shown success, which can be measured through its ability to attract and support supervision through completion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Masters and PhD Programs. This has also been shown through the growth rate of formal enrolments and completions.

Recommendation 11: Universities should be encouraged to work with a broad range of communities, including those Indigenous persons currently incarcerated

Recommendation 12: All Universities should strive to create parity of Indigenous Higher Degree enrolments, which currently sits nationally at 2.2% of the Indigenous population.