

Submission of the National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAAC)

To the

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014

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The National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAAC) is a peak student representative organisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students. Key aims of NIPAAAC are to increase participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in postgraduate education, and to ensure that postgraduate education experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are positive and culturally appropriate.

NIPAAAC is a national network of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students and non-Indigenous student supporters. Our goal is to ensure that Indigenous-Australians can access postgraduate education in a fair and equitable manner. We do this by working towards better support, greater funding, and improved opportunities for Indigenous Australians in higher education. NIPAAAC has a proud tradition of advocacy, support and representation.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014, on behalf of Indigenous Postgraduate students throughout Australia.

The Bill seeks to amend the Higher Education Support Act (HESA) 2003 along with other legislation including the Australian Research Council Act 2001, Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 and various associated regulations and guidelines, to implement the Abbott Government's proposed changes to higher education and research, as announced in the 2014-15 Budget.

NIPAAAC wishes to express our gravest concerns around what the proposed changes will mean for the students we represent, as well as the higher education sector as a whole. The Government's plans to cut education spending and vital welfare support will severely impact students and the higher education sector. Combined with the cuts to university funding last year, the new proposals put added pressure on

already underfunded Australian universities, which will have a negative impact on the quality of university education and the student experience.

Of most concern to NIPAAAC is Fee increases including:

- the intention to deregulate University fees;
- the 10% cut to Research Training Scheme (RTS) funding equating to \$174.7 million;
- The imposition of an efficiency dividend of 3.25% on Australian Research Council (ARC) grants \$74.9 million, which will translate in lower value of competitive research grants;
- Introduction of the ability for Higher Education Providers to charge fees on Research Training Scheme degrees (i.e. PhDs and Masters by Research) of up to \$3,900 per year;
- The cessation of university higher education reward funding;
- Cuts to the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP);
- Replacing the ITAS program from 2015 with a competitive grants process under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy;
- Lowering the income threshold and imposing real interest rates on outstanding student loans = 6%.

Effects on Indigenous students:

These proposed funding cuts and changes to domestic fee structures will have a devastating effect on Indigenous postgraduate students most of which are from low SES backgrounds.

The proposed introduction of domestic fees of \$1,700 per year for Masters Students and \$3,900 per year for Research Higher Degree students will deter Indigenous students and they will be less likely to do a Masters or PhD, which will mean they are less likely to move into the sector as an academic, which will have significant impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing levels.

In addition, the changes proposed in the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill will apply to all existing students as of 1 January 2016 regardless of when the student enrolled. All Indigenous students currently enrolled in a Research Higher Degree may be required to pay a fee of up to \$3,900 by their Higher Education Provider, regardless of the fact that the payment of fees was not part of the legislation at the time that the student enrolled. This is a change which will affect a significant number of Indigenous students enrolled in research higher degrees. It is unjust and grossly irresponsible to propose the charging of fees on students who were not made aware of the existence of fees at the time of enrolment.

Some of the regional universities with a high proportion of Indigenous students will face an added dilemma. These universities will be under pressure from communities and student cohorts to keep fees low and still provide a full range of services to students. Under the current model of education the government has put forward, this is an impossible task.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completing doctoral degrees has quadrupled in the past two decades and a new generation is preparing to influence the institutions of knowledge in Australia. Just 55 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were awarded PhDs in Australia from 1990 to 2000, but 219 students earned PhDs in the 11 years to 2011, a fourfold increase, according to the Department of Education. A remarkable 143 PhDs were awarded in the five years to 2012, according to the last available data. Moreover, 324 Indigenous students were enrolled in PhDs in Australia in 2012. According to the last census data, 362 Indigenous Australians had PhDs in 2011, including honorary or overseas doctorates; 28 doctorates were awarded in 2012 in Australia and data

for 2013 is still to be added, so it's likely the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with PhDs in Australia has topped 400. Although these numbers are still a long way from a benchmark parity rate of 2.2 per cent with the non-Indigenous population recommended by a 2012 review of Indigenous higher education, the growth is having a multiplier effect.

Professor Steven Larkin, pro vice-chancellor for Indigenous leadership at Charles Darwin University, says PhD graduates can change the way those who follow conduct research, adding that Aboriginal PhD students need supervisors who understand "conflicts of knowledge culture" (<http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/rise-of-aboriginal-phds-heralds-a-change-in-culture-20140316-34vqm.html>).

In 2011, A Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People was commissioned to establish and examine how higher education outcomes among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contribute to nation building and the reduction of Indigenous disadvantage. A panel of experts, including Professor Larissa Behrendt and Professor Steve Larkin directed the review which called on submissions and advise from key stakeholders. The review developed a strategic framework that identified key priorities, actions and opportunities for the Government and the higher education sector to consider all aimed at 'closing the gap' between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous university students and staff across a range of outcomes. NIPAAAC does not believe that the current Government has addressed any of the recommendations of this review. Of particular concern are the recent changes announced to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and to ABSTUDY which contradict the recommendations of the review.

Changes to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS)

Since its introduction in 1993 Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) has been a vital source of support to Indigenous students from kindergarten right through to postgraduate studies, and has improved Indigenous student figures bringing them closer to parity within Australian Universities. Universities currently receive funding for ITAS based on their number of enrolled Indigenous students. Each student is given the opportunity to have a qualified tutor for maximum of 2 hours per week per subject during the teaching period and up to a maximum of 5 hours in total during the examination period.

Recommendation 13 of the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (Behrendt review) called on the Australian Government to reform funding for supplementary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support programs, including the Indigenous Support Program and the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme to allow universities greater flexibility to provide locally relevant, tailored support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff; to target available funding to achieve an improvement in current enrolment levels but also with a greater emphasis on retention and completion rates; to ensure that funding would be simple to administer; and to ensure that funding would support clear outcome-focused accountability for universities. In addition it was recommended that the new funding model should include consideration of inclusion in tutoring support of students who were previously ineligible for ITAS assistance.

The Government is proposing to replace the ITAS program from 2015 with a competitive grants process under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. The sudden announcement has put major pressure on Indigenous centres and organisations, many of whom may miss out on funding if they are unable to make a submission by the closing date of October 7th.

Though packaged as a new more flexible initiative, the complete grants process in fact seems to be a step towards future uncertainty. Indeed the new model only gives 4 years of funding with programs of up to 3 years being funded. This is resulting in instability for students as to whether ITAS will be available during their entire degrees.

Universities are forced to ask what happens after the 4-year funding. Will the money still be there to apply for or will it be eaten up into a general funding pool in will now be placed in. This new grants process also makes it harder for each educational institution to obtain the full amount of funding per student that ITAS granted. With less money for funding overall and bigger universities having more experiences in applying to such grants the worry is that smaller less competitive intuitions will lose out on funding for their students.

Of great concern is that the government are using recommendations from the Behrendt review and twisting them to fit within their ideas of what Indigenous Higher Education should look like. These recommended changes are in contradiction to the Behrendt review and will only further disadvantage Indigenous students. The government should be 'closing the gap' not widening it.

ABSTUDY, AUSTUDY, Youth Allowance & Pensioner Education Supplement.

The Budget 2014-15 has limited the Six-Week Portability Period for Student Payments. These changes are very concerning to all students currently undertaking an undergraduate or postgraduate degree who are supported by Youth Allowance, Austudy or ABSTUDY. For Postgraduate students who are seeking to contribute at international conferences, collecting data overseas or who want to take a vacation will now face losing their income.

Information that can be found on the Department of Human Services website states that the description of this new measure is:

Students who travel overseas from 1 October 2014 will only be eligible to continue to receive student payments Youth Allowance (student), Austudy and ABSTUDY where they are:

- undertaking approved overseas study that is part of their full-time Australian course, including for up to 10 days travelling to and from their eligible course;
- attending an acute family crisis;
- receiving eligible medical treatment not available in Australia;
- attending a training camp with the Australian Armed Forces Reserves.

Students who have left Australia before October 1 October 2014 will be paid under the existing rules affecting payment overseas. However this leaves many students disadvantaged. Students who rely on Centrelink payments for their main or only income should not be at a disadvantage to their future research outcomes. Indeed these students should not be denied even a holiday that other students are allowed to partake in freely. Higher Degree by Research students need to be able to have access to International venues to show their research or to observe others in their particular field. Additionally this limits the amount of time students can conduct field research that is vital to their PhD studies. This kind of participation to invaluable to a student's depth of research but also to future job opportunities. To have students from low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds being denied these vital experiences is unacceptable.

The Government claims that this supposed savings of \$153.1 million over five years is to repair the Budget and fund policy priorities. However where does this leave our students who need this help and

experience. Out in the cold. To become second tier students to those students on other government funded support call 'scholarships'.

Also unacceptable is the removal of the Pensioner Education Supplement (Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment (2014 Budget Measures No. 2) Bill 2014) where it is paid to support the education of those on Carer Payments, Disability Support Pensions and Veterans Affairs Payments. This supplement is vital to providing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on such pensions to further educate themselves for better employment opportunities in the future.

Recommendation 17 of the Behrendt review was that the Australian Government and universities, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student representatives examine any outstanding issues regarding Government income support payments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including issues relating to ABSTUDY, APAs and income support for students undertaking postgraduate degrees that were formerly undergraduate degrees, focusing on the needs of students with children, and explore opportunities to partner with philanthropic and private sector organisations to provide additional income support for students.

The government has announced the budget reforms without consultation with the various stakeholders, which further confirms that this government has not followed any of the recommendations from the Behrendt review. Students and academic leaders are expressing concerns that there has been no consultation nor have the changes been adequately communicated. The changes to Abstudy, Austudy and ITAS will impact severely on Indigenous students yet representatives were adequately consulted about the impact on students or on Indigenous centres at Universities.

Conclusion

Indigenous students will be the most disadvantaged by the changes proposed by the government contained in the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014. If the government is committed to closing the gap and creating parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, this bill should never see the light of day. In recent years we have seen Indigenous PhD's quadruple and it is vital that this trend continues, however under proposed changes to higher education, this is unlikely. The disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face is severe and ongoing.

NIPAAAC urges the senate to block these changes to the budget that will adversely affect Indigenous students not only at a postgraduate level, but at an undergraduate level as well.

This submission was prepared upon the traditional lands of the Awabakal people. NIPAAAC acknowledges the ongoing sovereignty of Aboriginal people over these lands and pays its respects to Elders, past and present, including the children of today who are the elders of tomorrow.