



**Indigenous Department**

**Submission To Department of Education, Employment and Workplace  
Relations Review of Australian Higher Education**

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In consultation with the delegates to the NUS National Indigenous Students Conference

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## **Introduction**

This submission is written by the National Union of Students' Indigenous Students Department on behalf of a collective of Indigenous students who gathered at the Inaugural National Indigenous Students' Conference hosted by the University of Sydney, from July 31<sup>st</sup> – August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008. At this conference, there were 25 Universities represented and a total of 53 Indigenous students attended and participated in discussion.

Three sessions were held that allowed NUS research staff to take appropriate notes from which to write this submission on behalf of the attending students and the Indigenous student population across Australia from which they were drawn. The comments made by students were often from personal experiences on their own campuses. While we cannot certify that these experiences are fully representative of every Indigenous student in Australia, we have tried to include in this submission a broad range of experiences and as much first hand information as possible about Indigenous students in Higher Education.

Universities represented at the conference were:

*Australian Catholic University*  
*Australian National University*  
*Charles Sturt University*  
*Flinders University*  
*Griffith University*  
*La Trobe University*  
*Melbourne University*  
*Monash University*  
*Murdoch University*  
*Queensland University of Technology*  
*RMIT*  
*Southern Cross University*  
*University of Canberra*  
*University of Newcastle*  
*University of South Australia*  
*University of Southern Queensland*  
*University of Sydney*  
*University of Tasmania*  
*University of Wollongong*  
*University of NSW*  
*University of Queensland*  
*University of Sunshine Coast*  
*University of Technology, Sydney*  
*University of Western Australia*  
*University of Western Sydney*

## **Summary of Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1.** The diversification of block and mixed mode programs will ultimately provide diversification of Indigenous student graduates. Universities should consult with Indigenous communities to gain a clear understanding of the educational needs of higher education students, and incorporate these into the programs offered to Indigenous students to ensure they will be equipped with skills required to facilitate and manage the growth, development and sustainability of Indigenous Communities.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Commonwealth fund the creation of half-HECS equity scholarships for all HECS-liable Indigenous students.

**Recommendation 3:** That all universities maintain and extend their outreach and mentoring programs for Indigenous students to the junior and middle levels of schools in disadvantaged communities. Where possible these programs should be undertaken collaboratively. The Indigenous Department of NUS, DEEWR, Universities Australia (and its sub-groupings) and any new national regulatory buffer body should collaborate to identify best practices.

**Recommendation 4:** DEEWR develop a good practice guide or a framework guide for ITAS administration regarding reporting and delivery of the program. This would be a practical and useful measure towards increasing appropriate tuition support for students.

**Recommendation 5:** DEEWR should conduct investigation into the delivery of ITAS for the students who are enrolled in block/mixed mode programs in order to determine where the tutorial services are not meeting students academic needs. Appropriate measures should be put in place to ensure all eligible students receive adequate tutorial assistance.

**Recommendation 6:** That when reviewing the retention of ITAS into 2009 and beyond, the Commonwealth increase ITAS funding to ensure that it can be effectively delivered across the diversity of study modes used by Indigenous students.

**Recommendation 7:** That university ITAS co-ordinators ensure that tutors have sufficient cultural training and are allocated in line with appropriate cultural gender and age considerations.

**Recommendation 8:** Universities should adopt a more transparent system of reporting university funding for Indigenous Centres, in order to provide students and staff with a clearer understanding of the reasons for changes, reductions and limitations to many services.

**Recommendation 9:** DEEWR should ensure that all Indigenous Centres are awarded stabilised funding levels to ensure that vital programs are not ceased because of fluctuating student enrolments from one year to the next.

**Recommendation 10:** Staff members who assist students in achieving scholarship or income support assistance should be mandatory in all Indigenous centres or support centres. This staff member would be required to provide information to Indigenous students on scholarships, government income support entitlements and provide assistance in preparing student for application processes and preparing applications.

**Recommendation 11:** Indigenous staff members should be available to provide information and assist Indigenous students with gaining suitable employment throughout their qualification and in graduate positions.

**Recommendation 12:** Research that investigates Indigenous cultures, land, people and issues should be conducted jointly between Indigenous Communities and Universities to ensure Indigenous ownership of the knowledge acquired, respect for Indigenous

cultures, and the highest level of academic recognition is awarded to Indigenous researchers.

**Recommendation 13:** Indigenous communities should be consulted by all ethics clearance committees to ensure that both methodology and findings are not racist, culturally inappropriate or culturally incorrect.

**Recommendation 14:** Research into Indigenous issues should always include an Indigenous person as the primary researcher in order to ensure opportunities for Indigenous researchers.

**Recommendation 15:** Academic communities and Universities should recognise and embrace culturally diverse learning and research methods in order to enhance both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students abilities to achieve successful academic outcomes.

**Recommendation 16:** Good practice methods of recruiting and retaining Indigenous students both through secondary school and higher education should be audited and compiled for all institutions to implement programs to further the growth of the Indigenous students participation in higher education and broaden opportunities for Indigenous students in the graduate workplace.

**Recommendation 17:** DEEWR should increase funding for the IYEC program to allow extending the program beyond the 19 year old age limit in order to support a greater number of Indigenous students, both current and prospective, particularly mature age.

**Recommendation 18:** The IYEP Key Performance Indicators should be evenly weighted towards outcomes which would provide opportunities for Indigenous students to access Higher Education, in addition to the employment outcomes.

**Recommendation 19:** That the income bank for Abstudy be increased from \$6,000 to \$12,000 annually.

**Recommendation 20:** That the income reporting mechanisms to Centrelink for income above the income bank level be aligned with Youth Allowance.

**Recommendation 21:** That Centrelink, DEEWR and the NUS Indigenous Department establish regular consultative forum to discuss issues about improving ABSTUDY and NEWSTART programs and delivery.

**Recommendation 22:** DEEWR collaborate with Universities to conduct an audit of support services available to Indigenous students both within Indigenous Centres and the broader university support service provision, focusing on financial, academic and social support. The findings of such an audit would enable institutions to understand the level of access for Indigenous students to support services on low retention rate campuses and how to encourage more students to access these services through examining practices on high retention rate campuses.

**Recommendation 23:** That the Federal Government be urged to release a new model for protecting essential student services and representation following the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism. VSU has clearly impacted on Indigenous student representation and support services.

**Recommendation 24:** That programs are developed by DEEWR and accessed by universities for the provision of cultural awareness training for all staff in order to assist with a broader understanding of Indigenous students and cultures, and reduce racist and culturally inappropriate or offensive behavior.

**Recommendation 25: Universities should have in place recruitment policies and strategies to increase the number of Indigenous staff members throughout the university, in both academic and administration roles at all levels.**

**Recommendation 26: Indigenous centres should monitor the affects of staff changes on students who access centres and adopt welcoming events or processes to ensure smooth transition of staff moving in and out of Indigenous centres.**

**Recommendation 27: That universities formally recognise national Indigenous cultural events (NAIDOC week, Reconciliation Week) and engage with Indigenous Centres and Indigenous students organisations in the development and delivery of appropriate on campus acknowledgement of these events.**

**Direct responses to Higher Education Review discussion questions:**

**How adequate are the mechanisms for aligning supply and demand of graduates?**

***Participation of Indigenous students in higher education***

Students have reported that most university campuses have experienced growth in Indigenous student enrolments for both full time and part time students as well as school leaver age and mature age students over the most recent years. However, more importantly, the retention rates for these students are increasing. The University of Southern Queensland was pleased to report that there are now third year students completing courses. The University of Sunshine Coast has had enrolment growth from 20 students in 2006 to 150 students in 2008. Nine of the universities represented at the conference reported that there were more mature age students at university than school-leaver age; however, most students were enrolled in undergraduate programs. Students commented that the most effective method of recruiting Indigenous Students is through Community networks and word of mouth. Some universities actively recruit students from remote communities through introduction programs and special entry bridging programs.

***Employment outcomes and course diversification***

Many Indigenous students from campuses across Australia participate in block/mixed-mode or distance education programs. The students at the conference provided thoughts on the employment outcomes for Indigenous graduates as a result of the programs. The types of programs offered in block/mixed mode or distance education are usually limited and students are concerned there is very little diversification in the qualifications that Indigenous graduates will achieve. Many courses are aimed at providing students with qualifications they are able to use if they remain in their communities, or if they gain employment in the public sector, such as community or social services roles. These roles are typically ones in which the students are able to use their 'Aboriginality'. Students are concerned that courses such as Business programs are rarely offered in Indigenous block programs, despite the view of Indigenous students that these courses are as important to Indigenous communities' futures as other more community based courses. The conference delegates suggested that Universities recognise the need for Indigenous students to gain education that will equip them with the knowledge, understanding and skills they will require in the future to adequately ensure the growth, development and sustainability of Indigenous Communities, a responsibility the students are

all too aware they will inherit. The diversification of courses and career opportunities for Indigenous students is closely related to a recent report that investigated Indigenous education programs in the VET sector that involved the Private sector providing employment. Generally cadetship programs for university students and traineeships for VET sector students have been government run and supported programs, and therefore dominate the types of qualifications Indigenous students are offered in the Block/Mixed mode programs. Diversification into the private sector provides Indigenous Students with a broader range of opportunities in which to develop and widen the Australian population's understanding of Indigenous culture.

**Recommendation 1. The diversification of block and mixed mode programs will ultimately provide diversification of Indigenous student graduates. Universities should consult with Indigenous communities to gain a clear understanding of the educational needs of Higher education students, and incorporate these into the programs offered to Indigenous students to ensure they will be equipped with skills required to facilitate and manage the growth, development and sustainability of Indigenous Communities.**

## **How do pricing and labour market signals impact on student choices?**

### ***Study debt as a barrier to higher education***

While delegates emphasised the immediate importance of income support, the issue of the cost of education was also raised with one delegate calling for the abolition of HECS fees. The issue of study debt aversion is covered extensively in the main NUS submission, in particular its negative impact on aspirations of junior-middle high school students in disadvantaged low SES and rural communities to follow a study pathway that leads to higher education. As many Indigenous students also suffer low SES and rural disadvantages on top of their Indigenous disadvantage NUS believes that a compelling case can be made that half-HECS equity scholarships should be made available to all HECS-liable Indigenous students.

**Recommendation 2: That the Commonwealth fund the creation of half-HECS equity scholarships for all HECS-liable Indigenous students.**

## **Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education?**

### ***University Programs to Increase Indigenous participation***

The conference delegates provided examples of programs demonstrating that universities are making outstanding efforts through advertising and marketing to communities and schools encourage Indigenous students to participate in higher education. . Many of the students were recruited through Outreach programs while others were currently actively involved in Mentoring programs at their university that encourage younger Indigenous students to consider further education opportunities.

**The QUT Outreach program** was highly praised. The University approaches not only the students in the later years of high school, but ran informal information events, such as family barbeques for the extended families of the students, in order to alleviate concerns about problems that Indigenous students would face as a minority group in a large university setting. Introducing the Indigenous centre and providing information about support services for their family members was hugely encouraging for the students and their concerned families, considering for many families, these students would be the first to enter into a university education.

Other students were involved in mentoring programs for high school students. Programs that were discussed and praised by all delegates were:

**UWS – Attack Program** which involves two high schools and the university students mentor year 11 and 12 students for one and a half years.

**University of Sydney - AIME program** – This program began at Sydney University in 2005 and will be expanding to four NSW universities in 2009. The mentoring program is for Indigenous students in high school and approached the students when they are in year 9 until year 12. The mentors are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous university students. The philosophies behind accessing the students in year 9 is to help increase up to year 12 retention as well as provide incentive and information for entering university. The inclusion of non-Indigenous mentors in this program provides cultural awareness for both the high school and university students. In expanding

the program to other university campuses, the organisers have adopted an approach allowing the framework for the program to be adapted to meet different communities and universities needs. AIME is hoping to expand across Australia in 2010, and is also providing opportunities for graduate Indigenous students to work as program managers on campuses and in other roles as the program is expanded, however the success of the program relies on University support and funding and Aboriginal community participation.

**RMIT – Believe program** – NESB mentoring that helps NESB students access and adapt to the university curriculum, as well as provide encouragement to students to enroll in university despite their not having English as a first language. It is not uncommon for many Indigenous students who are from remote communities to have English as a third language, therefore facing similar language difficulties with both academic language and social interaction, as many migrant students and international students - the cohorts commonly associated with NESB programs.

**Flinders University** – Aspire program provides mentoring for Indigenous students by Indigenous students within the University.

**Canberra University** has a special entry bridging program for Indigenous students who are recruited by an equity officer on campus.

**RMIT - Koori Express** - involves an Indigenous Liaison Officer going to schools and communities and inviting them to an open day, welcoming them into the University community, from which there was an increase in enrolment and applications from this community.

**Recommendation 3: That all universities maintain and extend their outreach and mentoring programs for Indigenous students to the junior and middle levels of schools in disadvantaged communities. Where possible these programs should be undertaken collaboratively. The Indigenous Department of NUS, DEEWR, Universities Australia (and its sub-groupings) and any new national regulatory buffer body should collaborate to identify best practices.**

### ***Programs To Increase The Success of Indigenous Students***

#### ***Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme***

One of the most successful programs in ensuring that Indigenous students can meet academic expectations is the ITAS program. However, the students at the conference expressed concern about the method of funding for the tutors. Many commented that access to tutoring was different at each university, and yet they were of the belief that each university received funding for this program based on the number of Indigenous students, they were concerned that some universities were not providing enough tutors, while others were providing ample because the university was contributing extra funding to this program.

The ITAS system, while held in high regard by all, is not without its faults. Students were in agreement that many tutors were lacking in cultural knowledge and awareness necessary for tutoring Indigenous students, that assigning tutors in some cases did not meet needs for gender and age appropriateness, and most importantly, many students who were mixed-mode or block students found that there was particularly poor access to tutors who were able to tutor specialist subjects in remote areas, and sometimes just off-campus areas. The results for many who are not able to access sufficient or appropriate tutoring can be devastating and may lead to students falling behind or dropping out of their courses. One student commented that the change in curriculum structure at Melbourne University left tutors unable to effectively tutor their students because they are not qualified in the new subjects required to be included in courses. Students from universities with multiple campuses also reported that there was much poorer access to tutors on the smaller campuses than on the main campus. The students suggested that a good practice guide or a framework guide for ITAS administration regarding reporting and delivery of the program would be practical and useful measures towards increasing appropriate support for students.

**Recommendation 4: DEEWR develop a good practice guide or a framework guide for ITAS administration regarding reporting and delivery of the program. This would be a practical and useful measure towards increasing appropriate tuition support for students.**

**Recommendation 5: DEEWR should conduct investigation into the delivery of ITAS for the students who are enrolled in block/mixed mode programs in order to determine where the tutorial services are not meeting students academic needs. Appropriate measures should be put in place to ensure all eligible students receive adequate tutorial assistance.**

**Recommendation 6: That when reviewing the retention of ITAS into 2009 and beyond, the Commonwealth increase ITAS funding to ensure that it can be effectively delivered across the diversity of study modes used by Indigenous students.**

**Recommendation 7: That university ITAS co-ordinators ensure that tutors have sufficient cultural training and are allocated in line with appropriate cultural gender and age considerations.**



### *Indigenous units*

The most important aspect of many Indigenous students experience in their university education is their relationship with their Indigenous campus centre. These centres are the 'hub' of the University for many students.

The students provided varying statistics on the levels of participation in their campus's Indigenous centre, and there is a great amount of variation in the findings. Some universities noted that there is a big difference between the number of students who identify as Indigenous and the number of students who access the services at the Indigenous centre. Statistically the number of students using centres who have 'identified' ranged from 10% to 70%. Some students offered explanations behind the low level of use by Indigenous students of Indigenous centre support including the prejudice fairer skin Indigenous students feel they may face, life journeys causing students to not go to the centres, and students who are doing well, academically for example, feel they would be taking opportunities from students who are more in need of these services. One university suggested that there are probably Indigenous students at the university who have not identified as Indigenous and therefore statistics for both participation in higher education and in accessing the centre may not be entirely accurate.

In addition to the funding for ITAS program, students expressed concern about the funding for campus Indigenous centres. Given the importance of the programs run by these centres in providing support for enrolled students to succeed in their education, as well as the programs to engage prospective students in high schools, delegates expressed concern that funding levels were too often based on enrolment numbers and in many cases, a slight drop in enrolment could mean the loss of a well run and valuable program, staff member or a severe reduction in the services in the centre. Delegates suggested a more transparent system of reporting university funding of Indigenous centres, in order to provide students and staff with a better understanding of the reasons for changes, reductions and limitations to many services as they happen.

**Recommendation 8: Universities should adopt a more transparent system of reporting university funding for Indigenous Centres, in order to provide students and staff with a clearer understanding of the reasons for changes, reductions and limitations to many services.**

**Recommendation 9: DEEWR should ensure that all Indigenous Centres are awarded stabilised funding levels to ensure that vital programs are not ceased because of fluctuating student enrolments from one year to the next.**

### ***Scholarships/Income support and associated application processes***

Many Indigenous students are recipients of either university bursaries, scholarships or Centrelink benefits, however, initial access to these financial support programs is often the result of a staff member whose role it is to assist students in understanding and meeting requirements for as well as completing scholarship and Abstudy applications. The scholarship information for students needs to be delivered in a timely manner, to help students prepare applications. Many students were concerned that these important positions were either not filled or not present preventing eligible students from preparing themselves to make applications or having enough prior knowledge of requirements to make successful applications. Scholarships may not be taken up because students are not applying for them, despite eligibility, and this may be due to a deficit in staff provision of information.

### ***Employment assistance***

Another extremely important role of the Indigenous centre is the provision of information to students about prospective employment programs, such as cadetships, and internships that are run specifically for Indigenous students either while studying or upon graduation. Information on opportunities within the University, and in the wider community is vital for Indigenous students to enable them to further develop and utilise their skills and talents.

**Recommendation 10: Staff members who assist students in achieving scholarship or income support assistance should be mandatory in all Indigenous centres or support centres. This staff member would be required to provide information to Indigenous students on scholarships, government income support entitlements and provide assistance in preparing student for application processes and preparing applications.**

**Recommendation 11: Indigenous staff members should be available to provide information and assist Indigenous students with gaining suitable employment throughout their qualification and in graduate positions.**

### ***Community involvement in research***

The delegates at the conference included a small number of postgraduate research students, who provided some insight into the role, operation and delivery of research in the Indigenous community, how this research should be conducted jointly between the Indigenous communities and the University in ways that would ensure Indigenous ownership of knowledge, respect for Indigenous

cultures and ensuring that Indigenous students achieve the highest level of academic recognition for their contribution to research into Indigenous issues.

The delegates agreed that research was proven to be successful when owned by the community. This ownership is based on the level of community involvement in deciding topic for research, designing the methodology, and being supported and involved in carrying out the research. Communities would be most concerned that research methodology and findings are not racist, culturally incorrect or culturally inappropriate. A current example of this is at the University of Sunshine Coast where an Indigenous student is conducting research into pathways for Indigenous students to Higher Education. The research will investigate students at school, in communities, their experiences, why they are at university, how they are retaining their place in university study, and what affects poor retention. The research hopes to bridge the gap between universities and Indigenous Units, for example it is looking at how the Indigenous centres are promoted on University websites, such as through main page access to Indigenous units, and what information is on these pages. At the conference, the researchers from both the University of Sunshine Coast and Southern Cross University highlighted the importance of research in Indigenous culture having informed consent from communities, because the consent involvement of local communities is vital to successful and valuable research outcomes.

Delegates were supportive of the notion that research into Indigenous issues should always include an Indigenous person as the primary researcher, such measures would not only help to ensure community trust in research outcomes and willingness to be involved in research, but would further Indigenous population capacity building to become more engaged in education.

Indigenous research would benefit greatly if the academic community was more accepting of culturally appropriate learning and research methods such as the recognition of ‘storytelling’ as a legitimate form of research. Embracing learning methods from the Indigenous culture would further enhance Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ ability to achieve successful academic outcomes as well as legitimating the value of Indigenous learning and teaching methods.

**Recommendation 12: Research that investigates Indigenous cultures, land, people and issues should be conducted jointly between Indigenous Communities and Universities to ensure Indigenous ownership of the knowledge acquired, respect for Indigenous cultures, and the highest level of academic recognition is awarded to Indigenous researchers.**

**Recommendation 13: Indigenous communities should be consulted by all ethics clearance committees to ensure that both methodology and findings are not racist, culturally inappropriate or culturally incorrect.**

**Recommendation 14: Research into Indigenous issues should always include an Indigenous person as the primary researcher in order to ensure opportunities for Indigenous researchers.**

**Recommendation 15: Academic communities and Universities should recognise and embrace culturally diverse learning and research methods in order to enhance both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students abilities to achieve successful academic outcomes.**

## **What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success?**

### ***Good practice***

- The involvement of Indigenous communities and high schools in the university recruitment practices, offering of scholarships to Indigenous students in programs as well as the introduction of scholarships for continuing students with credit grades as well as commencing students.
- Some universities provide extra professional development for Indigenous unit staff members, such as connecting with Indigenous communities, overseas Indigenous centres, and government departments.
- Access for remote students to online academic help, library services and tutoring.
- Mentoring, outreach and bridging recruitment programs as mentioned earlier.
- ITAS program is regarded as a key factor in academic retention and success
- Indigenous student clubs keep students at university because of the social and academic support provided through friendships and networks that are formed.
- Cultural celebrations such as NAIDOC Week, Reconciliation Week and other events to recognise and celebrate key achievements in the Indigenous community
- Indigenous Yarn Group at UNSW provides an opportunity for students to gain knowledge and understanding of Indigenous issues such as the NT Emergency Response.

### ***Problems that could be improved upon***

- Indigenous extended families have problems, for example with child care.
- The visibility of Indigenous students and culture on many campuses is very low, for example, there are few campuses that fly the Indigenous flag, Indigenous campus centres are not easily found on University websites –there is rarely a link from the home page.
- Non Indigenous staff in Indigenous service delivery roles are unaware of the Indigenous culture, yet run Indigenous events or classes.
- There is a need for educating the wider student population about Indigenous culture so that there is more interaction and understanding.

- Awareness in the wider university community about the national Indigenous events needs to be addressed starting with inclusion into university calendars.

***Issues faced by remote and block students***

- isolation for block studies students
- there is little flexibility in the programs students can access
- Staff changes in the centres – no formal introductions
- 2 week orientation but students still don't know each other
- No cultural work – education
- Students with poor computer skills are disadvantaged with online assistance services
- Students recruited from remote communities often face difficulties with finding appropriate housing and have language difficulties, as for some, English would be a third or more language.
- Despite many universities reporting a growing connection between Indigenous communities and the University, there are still some who report that there is a lack of community relations.

***DEEWR funded IYEC – program (Indigenous Youth Employment Consultant program)***

- The current contract only allows the support of 15-19 year olds, however, extending the program beyond the 19 year old age limit would allow IYEC to support a greater number of Indigenous students, both current and prospective, particularly mature age.
- Greater success in supporting prospective and current Indigenous students may be achieved through a change in the key performance indicators required to be met by the IYEC. These KPIs are heavily weighted towards employment outcomes. This may potentially have IYEC steer their participants towards employment for the sake of an outcome rather than supporting a participant in establishing long term goals and pathways towards achieving successful higher education outcomes for Indigenous young people. These KPIs should be evenly weighted towards the different outcomes and sectors of education.

**Recommendation 16: Good practice methods of recruiting and retaining Indigenous students both through secondary school and higher education should be audited and compiled for all institutions to implement programs to further the growth of the Indigenous students participation in higher education and broaden opportunities for Indigenous students in the graduate workplace.**

**Recommendation 17: DEEWR should increase funding for the IYEC program to allow extending the program beyond the 19 year old age limit in order to support a greater number of Indigenous students, both current and prospective, particularly mature age.**

**Recommendation 18: The IYEC Key Performance Indicators should be evenly weighted towards outcomes which would provide opportunities for Indigenous students to access opportunities in Higher Education in addition to the employment outcomes.**

**What evidence is available from institutions about the impact on individuals or groups of either failure to gain income support or the inadequacy of income support?**

*Abstudy*

The students provided many examples of the impact that low income levels and poor access to income support has on their ability to successfully achieve good results academically and indeed to remain enrolled in their course.

The first problem that many students reported was the problems with Abstudy processing times. Students reported delays of up to 6 months from the day of lodgment to the day of approval. The impact of this enormous delay in approval for funding to attend university is enormous. Students reported having to work extra hours, accept other social security benefits such as Newstart which also required them to be actively looking for work and meeting other obligations in order to continue receiving this payment, despite studying full time and working part time. There was an example provided where a student was working to support himself while waiting 5 months for an application to be approved and when it finally was, he had incurred a debt because the money he had earned while waiting exceeded the amount he was able to earn to receive Abstudy, during this time, his academic progress was also impacted. Students are often driven to question their commitment to full time study during this processing time, and it was suggested by delegates that this would contribute to the number of discontinuing students.

Delegates reported that they found that documentation and the information required for various rates of Abstudy, such as the Independent rate, were extremely difficult to produce in some instances, causing further delays in processing, and therefore the obvious implications as mentioned above.

The students expressed concern with the ease in which a debt is incurred through incorrect understanding of the Abstudy system. Currently, Abstudy recipients, who range from high school to tertiary level, have an option to nominate a weekly amount of paid income they will earn for the period of study to Centrelink and from this the amount of grant they receive on a weekly basis is determined. The other option is that the students may provide fortnightly wage amounts to Centrelink to determine payments, if their income fluctuates. If there is no set agreement for a weekly amount, Centrelink will make a payment based on no income amount, therefore allowing students to be overpaid (Austudy has the same system). Students, who know they have been

overpaid, can contact Centrelink and provide accurate wage information, resulting in either a cancellation of Abstudy payments or a reduction in payments and very often a debt to Centrelink. Alternatively, should the Tax office audit the student, they will pass information to Centrelink causing payment cancellation and debts will be incurred.

As many students who receive Abstudy are in fact within the general age group of the receivers' of Youth Allowance, delegates questioned why they were not able to follow a similar payment and reporting system, whereby students report wage earnings to Centrelink fortnightly and payments are processed following this, thereby not putting students in the position of being able to incur a debt if they don't report income. It needs to be a consideration when determining these systems of income support that students are generally the lowest income earners and therefore, the payments they receive make survival possible but extra funds are always welcomed and generally help provide basic living items. Therefore, should a student know they have earned over their limit, and that their payments will be stopped, students may avoid reporting to Centrelink because they are unable to continue studying without their Abstudy payments and choose to face a debt later than go without the income they need.

Centrelink staff contacted by this author suggested that Abstudy and Austudy had these systems of reporting income because these were payments for people whose main occupation was as a student. However, Youth Allowance recipients who are also fulltime students are treated differently because the system they access does not allow debts to occur.

Other situations under which students incurred debt to Abstudy was when they worked over the semester break to try to save money to help support themselves through the semester, because of the low rate of support payments, however, earning too much causes overpayment and a debt is incurred. NUS notes that many of these reporting issues would be alleviated through the increase of the income bank from \$6,000 to a more realistic level such as \$12,000. The income bank has not been indexed since it was introduced in the early 1990s.

Students described situations of the implications for part-time students, and those who are finishing their degrees whereby they are unable to access Abstudy for this final period. They alerted the conference to situations such as being made to receive Newstart payments but with this, were subjected to continual obligations for looking for work that was inappropriate and unrelated to their qualifications, as well as Centrelink staff showing a lack of understanding of what point they were at in their education. It is absurd that the Abstudy system is too inflexible to allow for finishing students to access these payments and that their completion of a university qualification could be jeopardised because of this inflexibility.

Conference delegates expressed concern about the remote location of the only Abstudy Processing Centre which in addition to causing longer processing times because of time differences between the

states. Students reported inappropriate assumptions or questions by Centrelink staff in Western Australia because of their lack of geographic knowledge of local areas in the Eastern states. One student reported a staff member assuming that Bourke was within an easy travel distance to Sydney and questioned why the student had to relocate.

Despite many negative experiences for students when discussing Abstudy access, the students praised some universities for the Centrelink advice on campus that was available at certain times, such as orientation sessions. The conference delegates suggested that this could be provided more often or perhaps on a more personal and less general basis so that actual student cases could be discussed.

**Recommendation 19: That the income bank for Abstudy be increased from \$6,000 to \$12,000 annually.**

**Recommendation 20: That the income reporting mechanisms to Centrelink for income above the income bank level be aligned with Youth Allowance.**

**Recommendation 21: That Centrelink, DEEWR and the NUS Indigenous Department establish regular consultative forum to discuss issues about improving ABSTUDY and NEWSTART programs and delivery.**

### ***Scholarships***

Indigenous students at many universities have access to many varieties of bursaries and scholarships, these include:

Murdoch – students doing bridging courses get given \$6k when they enroll.

UWS – new students get \$2k

UWA – medicine Indigenous students in first year get a laptop and other assistance from the faculty

USyd – new students get up to \$10k

USyd changed its structure so that continuing students also received money, if their results achieved at least credits.

UniSa – has 36 scholarships of about \$2k awarded to cover accommodation, learning and education needs, and travel from remote communities.

While there are many opportunities for Indigenous students to access scholarship assistance, the students highlighted problems that students face in accessing these scholarships. Most of the scholarships require students to be holding a health care card, and some students commented that while this was providing help to the students most in need, there was a feeling that students who

were hard working, to earn money to support themselves, thereby earning over the maximum amount for a health care card entitlement, were not being recognised and rewarded for their achievements. In addition to these students who are studying part-time, such as many mature age students are ineligible for scholarship assistance.

Knowledge of the scholarship system for many Indigenous students is limited to what they are told within their faculty or Indigenous centre. There is little information easily found on University website, Indigenous centre webpage's and many students rely on word of mouth for this information.

## **How can the quality of the student experience within Australia's higher education institutions be monitored nationally?**

### *Student support:*

#### *- On campus*

As mentioned earlier, while there is a large variation between campuses regarding the access of Indigenous centres by Indigenous students, it should be of concern to the sector that there are some campuses with as little as 10% of students who are receiving support. Nationally, the Indigenous centers are the main hub for Indigenous students and these support service should be accessed by the majority of students in order to ensure that students are not only gaining vital assistance academically but also are supported culturally on University campuses, and are not isolated from the potential networks and structures that enhance the university experience. It was also noted at the conference that the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism had significantly diminished funding to student-delivered and directed support and orientation programs for Indigenous students. Furthermore, the impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Indigenous student representation generally was noted. Lack of funds for student representative bodies had meant that there was little to no funding support for Indigenous student leaders to organize events, participate in broader university governance or advocate in the community on Indigenous student issues.

#### *- Off campus*

Isolation is the key problem for many Indigenous students who are enrolled in mixed mode or block courses, where they spend most of their study time in their own Communities. Students have reported that they have limited access to ITAS tutors, who are properly qualified to assist them in specialist areas, and have difficulty with internet/online assistance when they have limited computer skills. Many are also not aware of student networks, and don't have contact with their Indigenous campus unit.

**Recommendation 22: DEEWR collaborate with Universities to conduct an audit of support services available to Indigenous students both within Indigenous Centres and the broader university support service provision, focusing on financial, academic and social support. The findings of such an audit would enable institutions to understand the**

**level of access for Indigenous students to support services on low retention rate campuses and how to encourage more students to access these services through examining practices on high retention rate campuses.**

**Recommendation 23: That the Federal Government be urged to release a new model for protecting essential student services and representation following the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism. VSU has clearly impacted on Indigenous student representation and support services.**

### *Cultural awareness across the university*

Unfortunately for many Indigenous students, racism on campus is a stark reality. Indigenous students report not only racist behavior from academic and administration staff but also from library staff, security staff and tutors. Experiencing racism creates a far less enjoyable and welcoming experience for students, and drastically reduces their sense of belonging to the university community. Such treatment make student's experience more difficult and they are more likely to achieve poor academic results and not complete their course.

It is suggested by the conference that all staff are provided cultural awareness training in order to assist with a broader understanding of Indigenous students and reduce racist behavior, which may be unintentional but still extremely offensive.

Some delegates suggested that all courses should include an Indigenous culture subject, therefore providing a broad cultural awareness program to the entire university.

**Recommendation 24: That programs are developed by DEEWR and accessed by universities for the provision of cultural awareness training for all staff in order to assist with a broader understanding of Indigenous students and cultures, and reduce racist and culturally inappropriate or offensive behavior.**

### *Staff employment strategies*

Indigenous units were a main focus for many of our delegates. We attribute this partly to the fact that many of the students were funded to attend the conference by their Indigenous centre and therefore are closely involved with the centre and therefore understand the importance of a successful Indigenous centre. Through these insights we were able to derive information about the staffing of the centres and how this affects the Indigenous students' experience at university. Most Indigenous centres are staffed by either all or a majority of Indigenous people. The Centres with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, reported that having non Indigenous staff was good, as

this helps broaden awareness of Indigenous culture. Some centres have 100% Indigenous staffing policies but these were implemented recently and non-Indigenous staff are able to remain. Other centres have non-Indigenous staff because when staff leave, it is often critical that the staff member is replaced and finding non-Indigenous staff is easier when meeting these time constraints. In most Centres the academic staff are almost always Indigenous, while non-Indigenous staff will fill administration or support roles.

The students often commented on the changes that have occurred within the Indigenous centres. Some universities have imposed structural changes and many have done this with no student consultation. Staff changes however, are made with much more thought given to the effect on the students and the other staff. In most universities, staff are welcomed with an event or a long transition period, while there were a couple of delegates who reported staff changes were a problem for students, with one going as far as to attribute a drop in students who use the centre to the poor transition and introduction of new staff. With staff changes, come centre changes, and there were a number of students who suggested that these changes often don't recognise the importance of some of the services to the students wellbeing. One example was a centre that previously bought text books for students to loan for their course, and the student was supposed to then return the book to the centre and it would be available to other students the following semester. While perhaps not an enormous program, a new centre director in an Indigenous Unit abolished this program with little or no regard to the impact it would have on the students who had been relying on this assistance throughout their studies. The explanation for the abolition of this program surrounded funding and budget cuts. Student often noted that funding cuts played a large part in the level of service provision within their centres, a student from a university with nine campuses revealed that due to low funding, the centre was only resourced for one support officer, who had to travel between five of these campuses on a monthly rotating basis, resulting in some campuses going for at least a week with no little or support staff in the centre.

Indigenous representation across universities is particularly low, in comparison to within the Indigenous centres. Many students were unable to inform the conference if there is an Indigenous staff employment strategy on their campuses, or if the university actively recruits Indigenous staff throughout the university. The two universities that did provide information were the University of Technology, Sydney where there are Indigenous employment strategies across the university, and the University of South Australia who could reveal that there are 34 Aboriginal staff in the University in addition to an across the university recruitment strategy.

**Recommendation 25: Universities should have in place recruitment policies and strategies to increase the number of Indigenous staff members throughout the University, in both academic and administration roles at all levels.**

**Recommendation 26: Indigenous centres should monitor the affects of staff changes on students who access centres and adopt welcoming events or processes to ensure smooth transition of staff moving in and out of Indigenous centres.**

**Recommendation 27: That universities formally recognise national Indigenous cultural events (NAIDOC week, Reconciliation Week) and engage with Indigenous Centres and Indigenous students organisations in the development and delivery of appropriate on campus acknowledgement of these events.**