



**Australian Government**

Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council

# **Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council**

**Submission to Consultation Paper:  
Meeting Australia's research workforce needs  
*A consultation paper to inform the development of the  
Australian Government's research workforce strategy***

**August 2010**



**Australian Government**

**Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council**

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Dear Ms Baly

**Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council - Submission to  
'Meeting Australia's Research Workforce Needs'.**

Since its inauguration in 2004, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) has provided policy advice to Government on improving outcomes in higher education for Indigenous students and staff relating to their participation, retention and progression in study and in employment.

The Council, now in its third term, reports to the Minister for Education and the Minister for Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. The Council welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Consultation Paper to inform the development of the Australian Government's research workforce strategy.

IHEAC's submission incorporates information from a range of IHEAC sources, in particular the Council's recent work on developing a National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy (NIHEWS), Council's proposal for the establishment of an Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development, and input from Council members.

In providing this submission, IHEAC would appreciate the opportunity for ongoing consultation during Government's development of the research workforce strategy. In this way, we can together ensure that the significant barriers to Indigenous participation in the research workforce sector are addressed in a coordinated and targeted manner.

Yours sincerely

Professor Steven Larkin  
Chair  
10 August 2010

**Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council Submission to  
'Meeting Australia's Research Workforce Needs'**

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**Executive Summary**

In order overcome the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities associated with building an Indigenous research workforce, the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council recommends:

- that the Australian Government continue to consult with IHEAC during the development and implementation of the RWS agenda;
- that the Australian Government support the implementation of a NIHEWS and work with IHEAC to consider options for aligning the actions of the NIHEWS, the RWS, and any other relevant researcher workforce initiatives;
- that the Australian Public Service Commission includes provision within the APS Employment and Capability Strategy for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Employees for supporting Indigenous public sector employees who are eligible and wish to complete a higher degree by research;
- that the Australian Government provide funding to support an Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development (ICRD), for example through the Australian Research Council's existing research funding programs;
- that the Australian Government encourages all Australian universities to participate in the ICRD and provide in-kind support to ensure the success of the network;
- that the Australian Government improve data collection and reporting on the characteristics of the Australian research workforce, including provisions for identifying the number of Indigenous researchers within a national database;
- that the Australian Government include an Indigenous identifier for applicants and recipients of researcher awards, scholarships and fellowships, such as those listed on the Australian competitive grants register, so that Government can better track progress in this area for Indigenous peoples;
- that the Australian Government recognises and promotes through its programs Indigenous knowledge as a unique asset to Australia's research sector and the added value that Indigenous researchers can contribute to mainstream research topics;
- that all proposals for research and research training grants be encouraged to consider Indigenous perspectives, and that the participation of Indigenous leaders in research teams be promoted;
- that a portion of existing researcher-support funds, equal to population parity, be reserved for any suitably-qualified Indigenous researchers who seek to pursue these opportunities; and
- that the Australian Government consult with IHEAC during the finalisation of its research workforce strategy and adopt the recommendations of this submission as priority areas for action in the short term.

## Introduction

The Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) welcomes the release of the Australian Government's Consultation Paper to inform the development of the Australian Government's Research Workforce Strategy (RWS). The paper appears to broadly capture the challenges facing the general Australian researcher workforce.

From an Indigenous perspective, however, these challenges, and the factors behind them, are particularly pronounced. To assist The Australian Government in its task of developing an RWS, and to help close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage, this submission will address the specific challenges faced by Indigenous Australians in the research workforce field.

While these challenges are acute and often multi-faceted, addressing them also presents opportunities to exercise significant leadership and innovation. In developing this submission IHEAC has endeavoured, where possible, to suggest solutions. Where solutions are not immediately apparent, the challenges have been noted and left unresolved, in order to encourage the Australian Government to further consider its approach as it develops and implements its RWS agenda.

To assist in this regard, and as an overarching recommendation of this submission, IHEAC would welcome the opportunity to work with the Government during the development of the RWS. In this way, Council can work with the Government beyond the short term to address the structural barriers which inhibit Indigenous participation in the research workforce.

- **Recommendation: that The Australian Government continue to consult with IHEAC during the development and implementation of the RWS agenda.**

In the immediate term, IHEAC is pleased to offer the following input on selected consultation questions.

### Consultation Question 3

*Do the issues identified adequately capture the challenges facing Australia in delivering required levels of research skills to its workforce over the next decade? If not, what other challenges should be considered?*

There are a number of significant challenges in delivering required levels of research skills to a research workforce that includes Indigenous people. The most pressing of these are a lack of suitably-skilled Indigenous students graduating from university, in turn leading to underrepresentation of Indigenous people in the research workforce.

#### ▪ **Challenge 1: Building capacity at the university level**

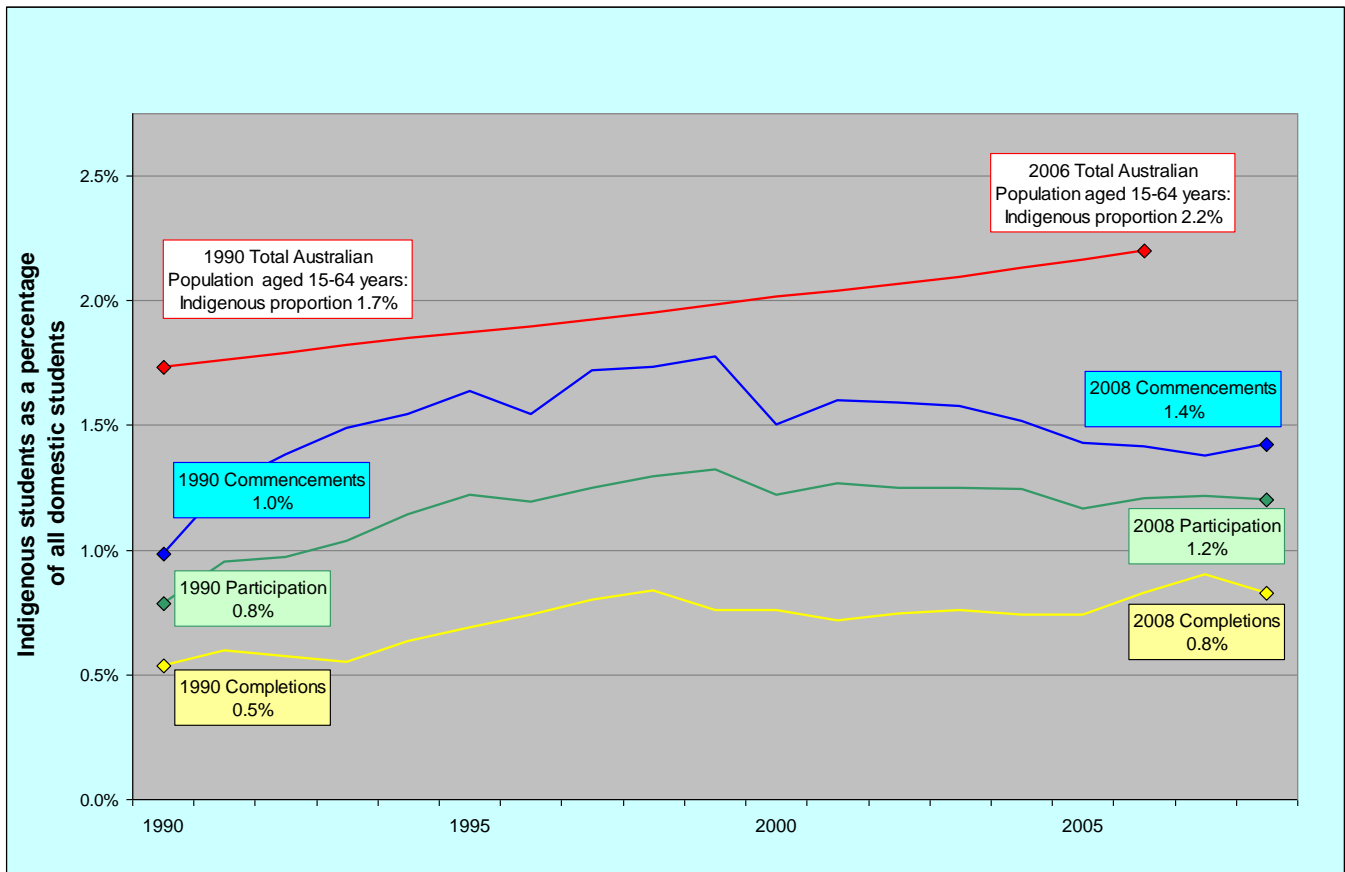
Developing capacity to undertake a higher degree by research (HDR) begins at the early levels of schooling, and continues through to university where intensive learning prepares a student for research-level qualifications.

Unfortunately, university enrolments for Indigenous people continue to sit below the level which represents population parity. The factors behind such under-representation are complex, multi-faceted and interrelated. They include, but are not limited to, higher rates of poverty and

its incumbent educational disadvantages; high attrition rates of Indigenous students particularly in senior secondary school years; and the over-representation of Indigenous students undertaking vocational rather than academic studies in Years 11 and 12. The consequence of these factors is a low proportion of Indigenous students who possess the prerequisites needed to enrol directly into higher education courses.

Once enrolled, Indigenous people also continue to be underrepresented in university participation and completion rates, as demonstrated in Figure 1:

**Figure 1: Indigenous student commencement, participation and completion rates, 1990-2008.**



Unless this underrepresentation is corrected, it will be almost impossible to build a pool of sufficiently-skilled Indigenous graduates from which an Indigenous-representative research workforce can be developed.

▪ **Challenge 2: Addressing underrepresentation of Indigenous people in the research workforce**

There is an urgent need to raise the number of Indigenous people undertaking and completing post-graduate research study.

In 2008 an unpublished scoping study by IHEAC into Indigenous researcher development issues found a stark disparity in the enrolment, participation and completion rates of Indigenous post-graduate students. Based on 2007 figures, the number of Indigenous masters by Research students would need to more than double, and the number of doctoral students more than quadruple, to reflect Indigenous population parity:

**Table 1: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Doctorates 2002–2007**

<b>Enrolments</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2007 Parity number</b>
Indigenous	144	175	203	205	248	256	1036
Non-Indigenous	30040	35875	37685	38953	40511	41427	
% Indigenous	0.48	0.49	0.54	0.53	0.61	0.62	2.5

*Source: Table derived from DEEWR Higher Education Statistics 2002–2007*

**Table 2: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Masters by Research 2002–2007**

<b>Enrolments</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2007 Parity number</b>
Indigenous	130	124	135	119	109	118	218
Non-Indigenous	10169	9784	9624	9248	8956	8713	
% Indigenous	1.28	1.27	1.40	1.29	1.22	1.35	2.5

*Source: Table derived from DEEWR Higher Education Statistics 2002–2007*

While the PhD journey for all students is a long, complex and arduous one with significant attrition, this report found that Indigenous PhD candidates face additional barriers to their non-Indigenous peers. These include but are not limited to:

- The high likelihood of having non-Indigenous supervisors who might not understand the type or foundation of the research they want to undertake;
- Non-understanding of Indigenous research methodologies by supervisors and/or assessors;
- Non-understanding by supervisors and universities of Indigenous protocols needed to be maintained;
- Non-understanding of Indigenous community participants of university protocols, such as signed consent forms;
- Lack of role models;
- Lack of regular contact with other Indigenous post-graduates — students are likely to be only person in their field within their university;
- The need to be culturally competent in both western and Indigenous research practice, processes and methodologies;
- The high likelihood of students being their families' main financial supporter throughout their studies;
- Marginalisation of the research they want to do within western academe; and
- Limited specific Indigenous post-graduate support within many universities.

These barriers represent significant challenges to building Indigenous representation in the research workforce. Their impact is seen in the level of Indigenous PhD completions:

**Table 4: Comparative PhD by Research completions 2002–2007**

<b>Completions</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2007 Parity Number</b>
Indigenous	9	12	11	16	18	26	143
All Students	4290	4728	4900	4372	5519	5721	
% Indigenous	0.21	0.25	0.22	0.37	0.33	0.45	2.5%

Source: Table derived from DEEWR Higher Education Statistics 2002–2007

**Table 5: Comparative Masters by Research completions 2002–2007**

<b>Completions</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2007 Parity Number</b>
Indigenous	8	16	13	13	15	15	36
All students	1551	1593	1570	1576	1584	1420	
% Indigenous	0.51	1.00	0.82	0.82	0.94	1.05	2.5%

Source: Table derived from DEEWR Higher Education Statistics 2002–2007

As Tables 4 and 5 show, while the Indigenous completion rate is trending upward, it is starting from such a low base that, at current rates of increase, the numbers of Indigenous researchers needed to reach critical mass are many generations away.

Increasing the number of Indigenous research post-graduate students will not just be a matter of getting more enrolments. Indigenous postgraduates, as is the case for all post-graduates, require adequate time and training to develop and master key research skills.

Despite these challenges, the sector-wide commitment to, and program implementation of, support for Indigenous researchers tend to be *ad hoc* and often short term. Moreover, success and innovation in developing Indigenous researchers often goes unrewarded, while a lack of success is allowed to pass without due scrutiny, suggesting a lack of commitment to truly addressing the issues.

In order to correct this situation, IHEAC suggests a number of possible measures, including

- a) Consideration of issues as relevant in the proposed review of higher education access and outcomes for Indigenous people;
- b) the development of the Indigenous higher education workforce;
- c) strategies to support Indigenous researcher development; and
- d) improved data collection

#### **a) Review of higher education access and outcomes for Indigenous people**

Preparation has begun for a review of higher education access and outcomes for Indigenous people, in line with Recommendation 30 of the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley Review):

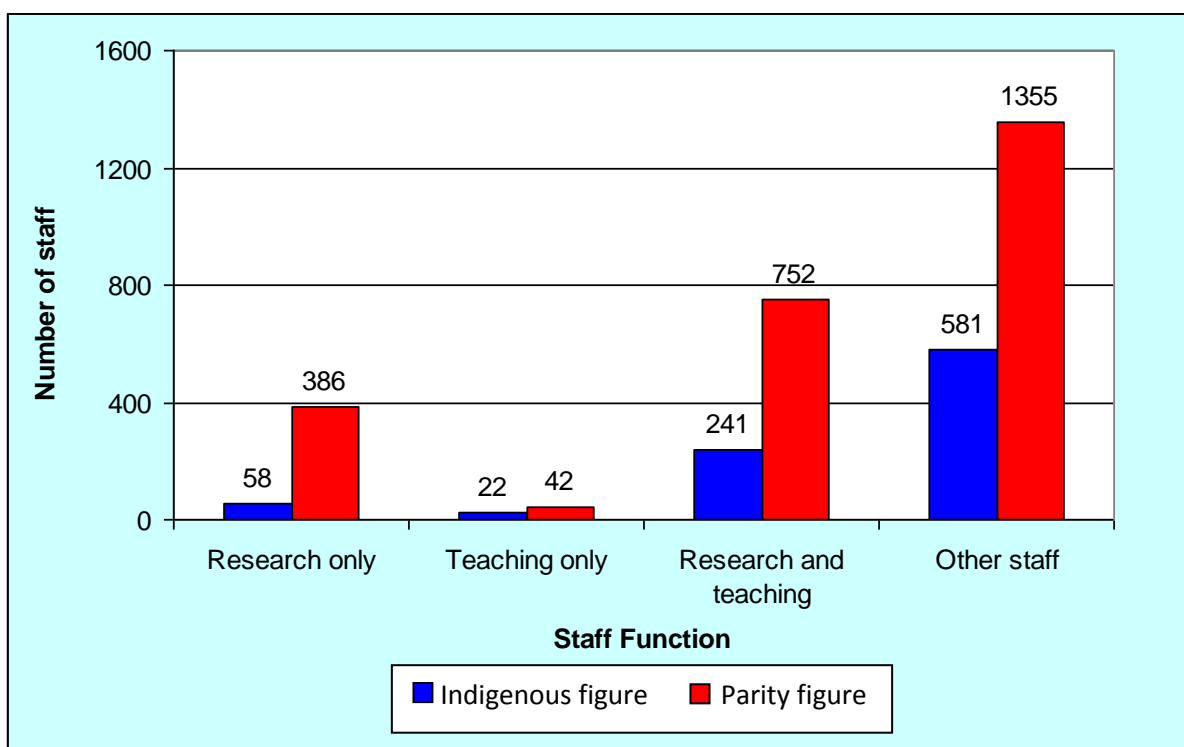
*‘That the Australian Government regularly review the effectiveness of measures to improve higher education access and outcomes for Indigenous people in consultation with the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council.’*

IHEAC hopes this Review will produce lasting improvements in access, participation and completions for Indigenous people in higher education, and, consequently, a larger pool of Indigenous people with the capacity to pursue post-graduate research qualifications.

### b) Developing the Indigenous Higher Education Workforce

Indigenous people continue to be underrepresented within the higher education workforce, particular at academic levels. Figure 2 shows the current number of Indigenous employees, Australia-wide, by function, with the number of staff needed for population parity representation. As the figure clearly indicates, Indigenous staff numbers in ‘research and teaching’ roles would need to more than triple to reach population parity, while staff numbers in ‘research only’ roles would need to increase by a factor of over six.

**Figure 2: Indigenous Higher Education Staff: Actual and Population Parity Figures (2009)**



*Note: Figures represent numbers of staff in each function, not Full-time Equivalent staff. Parity rates are calculated on ABS national-level population estimates, Indigenous Australians representing 2.5 percent. Staff figures taken from DEEWR's Staff 2009: selected higher education statistics tables.*

To help address this, IHEAC is in the process of developing a National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy (NIHEWS). The NIHEWS will seek to build the number of Indigenous people in the Higher Education sector, with a particular emphasis on increasing the number of Indigenous academic employees.

By supporting and developing Indigenous staff, a number of the proposed actions within the draft NIHEWS will help build the pool of potential HDR candidates and lead to further opportunities for Indigenous people. IHEAC believes that the Government's RWS has the potential to complement the goals of the NIHEWS. IHEAC will provide a copy of the NIHEWS to the Government on finalisation, and seek further opportunities to align the two strategies.

- **Recommendation: That Government support the implementation of a NIHEWS and work with IHEAC to consider options for aligning the actions of the NIHEWS, the RWS, and any other relevant researcher workforce initiatives.**

### **c) Other strategies to support Indigenous researcher development**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, once in the workforce, Indigenous university graduates often find it difficult to return to academia, due to financial pressures and the inability to take the leave needed to undertake a higher degree.

IHEAC encourages the development of a program which supports workplaces to help Indigenous graduates return to university and pursue higher degrees by research. This may include the right for Indigenous students to access leave without pay for up to three years to complete a PhD. IHEAC recommends that, as a starting point, the Australian Public Service Commission explore the feasibility of such a program within Government Departments, as part of the *APS Employment and Capability Strategy for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Employees*.

- **Recommendation: That the Australian Public Service Commission includes provision within the APS Employment and Capability Strategy for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Employees for supporting Indigenous public sector employees who are eligible and wish to complete a higher degree by research.**

On a more comprehensive scale, IHEAC is currently developing a proposal for the establishment of an Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development (ICRD) to build the capacity of Indigenous researchers in higher education and encourage Indigenous leadership in research. IHEAC's vision for the ICRD stems from a 2008 scoping study which proposed that the Australian Government fund the establishment of a discrete ICRD to provide a nationally coherent, locationally diverse, program of Indigenous researcher capacity building and Indigenous research leadership development.

IHEAC has further developed the ICRD concept based on the scoping paper's network "hub and spokes" model. The key objectives of the ICRD are to contribute towards improving the retention and completion of HDR students. It will achieve this by building a nationally-focused strategic leadership for the Indigenous research community from a central, Indigenous researcher development 'hub' working with collaborative 'spokes' of Indigenous researchers dispersed throughout Australia. The key function of the ICRD network would be to support the building of Indigenous research capacity within the higher education sector.

The ICRD network would need the participation of a range of universities as partners, and potentially other institutions such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). IHEAC is currently exploring options for funding this proposal including through existing Government programs such as those offered by the Australian Research Council (ARC).

Delivering IHEAC's vision of Indigenous research requires radical change in the way Indigenous researcher development is approached. Achieving a critical mass of Indigenous researchers and the infrastructure to support this vision and foster Indigenous research leadership requires a dedicated, task oriented organisation with the requisite focus, framework and specialist skills.

IHEAC believes that their proposal for an ICRD aligns with the Australian Government's agenda to Close the Gap, and addresses underrepresentation of Indigenous people in the Higher Education sector.

- **Recommendation: That the Australian Government provide funding to support an Indigenous Centre of Researcher Development (ICRD), for example through the Australian Research Council's existing research funding programs.**
- **Recommendation: That the Australian Government encourages all Australian universities to participate in the ICRD and provide in-kind support to ensure the success of the network.**

#### **d) Improving data collection**

IHEAC agrees with the Consultation Paper's findings that "At a national level, Australia can take steps to improve the rigour and frequency of data collection and reporting on characteristics of its research workforce [...]"

In order to better understand the size and nature of Indigenous research workforce, any plans to address data collection must also include measures to identify Indigenous participation. A national database of current Indigenous PhD candidates and their research projects, as well as a national database of Indigenous PhD graduates and their topics should be established. Such a database would be different to one which may list completed PhDs on Indigenous topics, but not indicate if the PhD graduate is Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

- **Recommendation: That the Australian Government improve data collection and reporting on the characteristics of the Australian research workforce, including provisions for identifying the number of Indigenous researchers within a national database.**

In addition, steps should also be implemented to better track the number of Indigenous people applying for and receiving Government assistance through researcher-support grants, in order to assess the usefulness of such schemes.

- **Recommendation: That the Australian Government include an Indigenous identifier for applicants and recipients of researcher awards, scholarships and fellowships, such as those listed on the Australian competitive grants register, so that Government can better track progress in this area for Indigenous peoples;**

#### **Consultation Question 4**

*Do the issues identified adequately capture the opportunities available to Australia to enhance its supply of research skills over the next decade? If not, what other opportunities should be considered?*

Although Indigenous people are currently underrepresented in the research workforce, addressing this disparity provides the opportunity to exercise real innovation, particularly around promoting and valuing Indigenous knowledge.

IHEAC agrees with the Consultation Paper's findings that "strategies to harness the contributions of currently underrepresented groups within organisations, such as Indigenous researchers, have the potential to not only assist in meeting significant anticipated demand but

also more broadly in enriching the stock of knowledge produced by Australia’s research workforce.”

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the oldest living knowledge system in the world, and intellectual traditions that predate western intellectual traditions by millennia. These Indigenous knowledge systems and intellectual traditions have culturally-distinct knowledge bases, research methodologies, evidentiary systems and values. They are complete systems in their own right and represent a unique asset. Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous culture have a powerful and marketable currency; however they are field of scholarship that have yet to be fully recognised and harnessed within the higher education and research sectors.

Moreover, Indigenous knowledge should be valued, not only for its unique content and as a field of untapped research in its own right, but also for its ability to complement the *mainstream* perspectives of non-Indigenous-specific research topics.

Universities and research institutions should recognise, support and capitalise on the significant strengths and knowledge that Indigenous people bring to enrich the higher education and research sectors.

An Indigenous person trained in a ‘mainstream’ research field contributes not only the skills and knowledge of a trained researcher, but also a suite of cultural knowledge and alternative perspectives as an Indigenous Australian.

Identifying strategies to build the Indigenous research workforce presents an opportunity to develop Indigenous researchers not as a *moral* goal, but as an innovative *business* goal. Such an approach not only benefits Indigenous Australians – it also has the potential for Australia to exercise innovation and build an international competitive edge.

- **Recommendation: That the Australian Government recognises and promotes through its programs Indigenous knowledge as a unique asset to Australia’s research sector and the added value that Indigenous researchers can contribute to mainstream research topics.**
- **Recommendation: that all proposals for research and research training grants be encouraged to consider Indigenous perspectives, and that the participation of Indigenous leaders in research teams be promoted.**

#### **Consultation Question 5**

*Do the issues identified adequately capture the challenges facing Australia in providing productive and viable career paths to its researchers over the next decade and promoting them adequately? If not, what other challenges should be considered?*

There are a range of unique challenges in providing productive and viable career paths for Indigenous researchers.

Many Indigenous academics enrolled in PhDs often find it difficult to complete their studies given their diverse workload demands. These include demands common to all academics – i.e. the increasing pressure to publish, obtain research grants and have higher degree qualifications – and those specific to those in the Indigenous community – e.g. additional student support, mentoring, governance and community engagement roles.

In addition, the lack of Indigenous academic staff to supervise Indigenous post-graduates and act as role models; low-levels of cultural competence among non-Indigenous staff; a lack of peer support-networks for emerging Indigenous researchers and post-graduates; and occasional instances of overt racism create a burden of stress on Indigenous researchers that needs to be acknowledged.

IHEAC accepts that, to achieve representative Indigenous employment within the academic and research sectors, the principle of equal treatment will not in itself result in equitable outcomes. For significant improvement, specific measures need to be adopted by Government, higher education providers and research institutions.

It is hoped that contents of this submission, in particular IHEAC's plans to establish an ICRD and implement a NIHEWS, will guide Government in addressing these challenges and help build productive and viable career paths for Indigenous researchers.

#### **Consultation Question 6**

*Do the issues identified adequately capture the opportunities available to Australia to better support researchers at the different stages of their careers over the next decade? If not, what other opportunities should be considered?*

As noted, a number of new initiatives (NIHEWS, ICRD) are planned to help increase the number of and support mechanisms for Indigenous researchers.

In addition to these proposed measures, IHEAC notes there are a number of *existing* initiatives in place to support researchers at various stages of their careers, as listed at items 2.32-2.38 of the Consultation Paper.

These initiatives represent *established* opportunities which could be better used to support Indigenous researchers at different stages of their careers.

- **Recommendation: That a portion of existing researcher-support funds, equal to population parity, be reserved for any suitably-qualified Indigenous researchers who seek to pursue these opportunities.**

#### **Consultation Question 7**

*Are the priority areas for action outlined in Table 1 the right ones? What other priorities should be identified?*

#### **Consultation question 8**

*Does the allocation of responsibilities for priority areas and actions outlined in Table 1 adequately capture the respective roles of relevant parties? Are there any issues relating to the allocation of responsibilities that need to be considered?*

#### **Consultation question 9:**

*Are the timeframes outlined in Table 1 appropriate? Are there any priority areas that require more immediate or longer-term action?*

IHEAC believes the priority areas for action in Table 1 of the Consultation Paper will help address the *broad* challenges facing the Australian researcher workforce.

However, to address the specific barriers facing the Indigenous research workforce and align the RWS with the Government's Closing the Gap policy agenda, priority areas for action which promote Indigenous researchers must also be added.

Tackling the challenges raised in this submission will require a united approach with shared responsibilities.

To help build the pool of Indigenous researchers, Government has a role to play in funding and supporting the development of an ICRD (or comparable initiative); in improving its data collection around Indigenous representation in the workforce and Government-funded researcher support schemes; and in reserving a proportion of all researcher-support funds for Indigenous researchers.

Universities also have responsibilities in research and research education, particularly the education of Indigenous postgraduate research students at Masters and PhD levels. This is critical for the creation of new knowledge, and is essential for the development of Indigenous scholars and researchers.

- **Recommendation: That the Government consult with IHEAC during the finalisation of its research workforce strategy and adopt the recommendations of this submission as priority areas for action in the short term.**