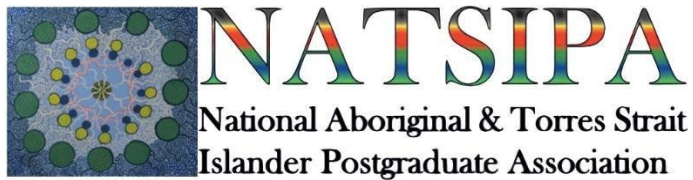


Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA)

Response to Higher Education Support Amendment (Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report) Bill 2023

August 2023



Compiled with the assistance of the office bearers of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) and Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

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Foreword

This is a joint submission of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA).

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 481,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international postgraduates. We are comprised of 28 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA). CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA) is the peak representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students, representing almost 940 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students and over 3600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate coursework students.

We thank the University Accords Panel for their efforts in putting together the Interim Report and the Senate Committee on Education and Employment for the opportunity to contribute our views and concerns in these discussions.

Introduction

CAPA and NATSIPA are pleased to welcome the five immediate recommendations mentioned in the University Accords Interim Report. For years we have opposed the 50% pass rate for CSP recipients deeming this policy to be unfair to the most disadvantaged, that CSP should be guaranteed to all First Nations students that are accepted into a course irrespective of where they live; and that universities need to change how they operate as institutions of higher learning. We look forward to addressing the numerous other discussion points raised by our members.

Recommendations:

We are satisfied with the immediate recommendations noted in the University Accords Interim Report but believe:

1. Increasing HDR stipends are of immediate concern to the welfare of HDR students.
2. Increasing accessibility to Austudy & ABSTUDY and its payment rate is the most effective means to ensure students of lower SES backgrounds can access the same education in-person like everyone else if they choose to.
3. 'Increased reporting' should be non-invasive to ensure such processes do not increase anxiety and distress for students that are already facing difficulties managing their studies.
4. That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their student representatives should be involved in each step of consultations for policies that involve their education and that ISSP funding be increased to a level that not only responds to current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student numbers but also provides for planning and future increases in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments.
5. That the proposal for a levy on international student income be abandoned.

Priority 1: Extend visible, local access to tertiary education by creating further Regional University Centres (RUCs) and establish a similar concept for suburban/metropolitan locations.

CAPA and NATSIPA broadly welcome the creation of more facilities to support students, especially belonging to equity groups that do not have access to the resources needed for learning. We are happy to see that recognition has been given to identify these issues as not strictly a regional/remote locations issue, but is also an issue for students living in suburban/metropolitan areas.

We are however concerned that this initiative is a workaround to addressing the real issues affecting students, that is the 'real costs' of engaging in tertiary education. Austudy is still not accessible to most domestic postgraduate students which consequently locks them out from other financial support schemes like rental assistance and access to public transport concession fees in some states like Victoria. Furthermore, mentioned numerous reasons why young people must leave home, including escaping domestic abuse which this policy does not take into consideration. In addition, Abstudy is not available to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander postgraduate students, which means these students are doubly disadvantaged.

Thus it is our recommendation that it would be more equitable to increase student payments to ensure students of lower SES backgrounds can access the same education as everyone else to attend in person if they choose.

Priority 2: Cease the 50% pass rule, given its poor equity impacts, and require increased reporting on student progress.

Both CAPA and NATSIPA welcome the recommendation to cease the 50% pass rule for Commonwealth Supported Place recipients and the opening up of places for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, regardless of their location.

The *Jobs Ready Graduate Package* (JRGP) has been detrimental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying in those areas deemed to be not as highly required by industry. We recommend an end to all punitive measures associated with the JRGP, particularly the relegation of broad fields of study into bands, impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

However, we recommend that the implementation of ‘increased reporting’ should not be invasive on students and to be mindful that such processes can increase anxiety and distress for students that are already facing difficulties managing their studies.

Priority 3: Ensure that all First Nations students are eligible for a funded place at university, by extending demand driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students.

We welcome the extension of demand-driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students as we firmly believe that the geographical location of where students are situated should not determine the opportunities available to them. It is our view that this policy could be further extended to ensure all First Nations students are eligible for ABSTUDY and not those included in the approved course list of the *Student Assistance (Education Institutions and Courses) Determination 2019*.¹

We also believe there needs to be an immediate influx of funding to boost ISSP funding. ISSP funding is not keeping pace with the increased numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolling into higher education, therefore funding for student support roles and similar roles in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students support centres is also on the decline. An immediate boost to ISSP funds would ensure ongoing support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. ISSP funding is dependent on student numbers and completion, therefore contingent. Universities play on this contingency of the funding. This lack of adequate, appropriate, and ongoing funding plays a significant role in the provision of appropriate student support and success, but also the need to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff necessary to provide that student support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at Australian universities.

CAPA and NATSIPA firmly support self-determination in education as integral to ‘closing the gap’ and believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their student representatives should be involved in each step of consultation on policies that involve their education.

Priority 4: Provide funding certainty, through the extension of the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee into 2024 and 2025.

CAPA and NATSIPA broadly agree that providing universities with funding certainty (from the public purse) is essential to the welfare of students, staff and the local community. However, we seek further clarification as to what ‘delivery of supports’ and ‘high equity’ would entail; and how the Federal Government will look to ensure the interim funding as intended for equity groups.

¹ Australian Government, *Student Assistance (Education Institutions and Courses) Determination 2019*, Federal Register of Legislation last updated 13th March 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2023C00251>

Priority 5: Through National Cabinet, immediately engage with state and territory governments and universities to improve university governance.

CAPA and NATSIPA strongly support immediate action from the National Cabinet to improve the university governance of all Australian universities. Many of the concerns we often raise could be resolved with university management, but our efforts to pursue legislative change is often because the plight of our members, students, staff and unions have often gone unheard. Some of these issues include:

1. Stipends and properly resourcing for HDRs

We are pleased to see the Interim Report agreed the RTP stipend rate should be increased because some universities still offer the bare minimum stipend rate that is legislated with many other still offering stipends below the poverty line and minimum wage knowing full well there is broad agreement this amount is too little to live off. Thus it is disappointing to see that PhD students will need to wait until the end of the year to see if the government will increase the minimum stipend rate to a livable amount because universities will not do this themselves.

In addition to this, some universities do not guarantee their research students their own desk space and instead offer them hotdesking and locker space that is often insufficient to store the necessary station supplies and office equipment necessary to do work. Some universities have been known to monitor the desk usage of individual students and sending demands to vacate their desk within a few days if they don't use them more than 4 days a week. These kinds of operational procedures are unwelcoming and careless to the needs and feelings of students. It is for this reason we recommend a National minimum resource standard for all HDR students upon enrolment.

2. Equity Amongst Research Students

It should come as no surprise that some research students belong to equity groups but unlike their coursework counterparts, there is currently no equity support mechanism for research students. For example coursework students that need extra support can apply for special considerations to extend assessment deadlines, longer reading or exam writing time can be arranged. Yet the only support universities provide research students belonging to equity groups is to provide an option to convert their research degree to part-time knowing well that part-time stipend scholarships are taxed and are almost equally worse off. Many have even claimed that providing extra time to disadvantaged students was impossible because the 'government is monitoring HDR completions and cannot offer extensions to their degrees beyond 4 years' as if it was a federal offence to do so, which is simply untrue. These students may no longer have a HDR scholarship but this is separate to their status as a student of the university to completion.

It should not be unreasonable to expect universities to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds more time to complete their PhDs and that all research training programs in the country offer transparency on the mechanisms they could implement to support students belonging to equity groups.

Since universities have not acted in good faith to their students will be recommending in the future greater support for research students belonging to equity groups by amending the *Commonwealth Scholarships Guidelines (Research) 2017* to allow RTP tuition fee scholarship and stipend to extend beyond 4 years EFTSL, and increasing the entitled number of sick leave days per year.

3. Wage theft, casualisation of work and its consequences on the quality of education

To date only 16-17 Australian universities have agreed to a new enterprise bargaining agreement and the frequency of protected industrial action have taken place to protect the rights of staff, their academic freedoms and working conditions. CAPA and NATSIPA stands with the NTEU that these issues must be addressed but recognises the consequences these deadlock negotiations have on both staff, who do not have certainty on their future employment conditions and students, who have to endure disruptions to their learning sometimes as a consequence of these protected industrial actions. Some universities are simply not negotiating on fair terms in the absence of a national governance agency for universities.

4. Ensuring independent student governance - fully funded.

A significant proportion of universities have disbanded and defunded independent student governance on campus and replaced them with Student Representative Councils (SRC) that are hand picked by the university to 'represent' students. This is not good governance. The government needs to ensure that independent student associations are adequately funded to do the vital work they do. This also includes peak student bodies such as CAPA and NATSIPA who rely on these student organisations to survive. It is imperative that university governance extend to student organisations.

On a Tertiary Education Commission

CAPA and NATSIPA believe that the Tertiary Education Commission should play an integral role in the discussions around improvements to university governance. We are particularly eager to engage and discuss further details of the duties of this commission. Our interest lies particularly in how an independent commission could be involved to better handle SASH complaints and SSAF negotiations between student associations and universities.

Furthermore we seek to establish an understanding with such a body on the importance of a postgraduate voice that is distinctly separate from undergraduate representation based on the differences in our cohort, aspirations and lived experiences with education.

Final Thoughts and concerns:

CAPA and NATSIPA are pleased with the immediate recommendations proposed in the University Accords Interim report with the expectation that further details will be shared on a Tertiary Education Commission. We look forward to participating in further discussions on sectorwide reform including improving the working conditions on campus, improving learning outcomes for students, strengthening the student voice on campuses and increasing the stipend rate of HDR students. However we are concerned how some of these initiatives will be funded and our members are concerned with the proposal to introduce a levy on universities based on International Student Income. Many see this policy will only push the cost onto international students and further exacerbate the issue of exuberant international student fees.

On the levy we noted the following comment from the Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, 19th July 2023.

"Government can't fund everything. And there are things that people in this room want funded. Whether it's research, or whether it's more infrastructure, whether it's student housing,"

We have considered the Minister's dilemma on funding and to be open-minded on this discussion, but the question remains that if the Australian Government and the Australian tax-payers are not willing to pay (fund) their own bills, why should it be the responsibility of international students' to pay for it? Ultimately this jeopardises the reputation of Australian universities as a study destination and does not

work towards building positive relationships with alumni and nurturing international alumni networks as noted in the Interim Report.

CAPA and NATSIPA's stance will be to oppose such a levy because it fundamentally stands against the core value of our organisations. We believe that agreeing to such a levy is an acceptance to the practices of generating generous financial surpluses (some say 'profit') from international student fees. It is our view that fixing the tertiary education sector requires 'new money' funded from the public purse and not just a tax on existing money to be recirculated.

Recommendations:

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