

SUBMISSION TO INDIGENOUS DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN DISCUSSION PAPER

29 October 2021

Universities Australia is pleased to make a submission to the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan Discussion paper.

Universities Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of country on which our members operate. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' culture and knowledge and acknowledge their safeguarding of these valuable resources for present and future generations.

Universities Australia is the peak body for Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. Universities Australia has long advocated for policy and funding settings that extend the transformative opportunity of a university education to as many Australians as possible.

Higher education continues to unlock employment and economic advancement. This is especially so for Indigenous university graduates, who often outperform their non-Indigenous peers in graduate labour market outcomes – meaning there is no employment gap for university graduates.

The NIAA discussion paper highlights barriers to digital inclusion including access and affordability. This has been a reported issue for university students.

The Indigenous Digital Inclusion Plan design process is also an opportunity to acknowledge the role a university education plays in positive employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the development of digital ability.

Digital access is an issue for many Indigenous university students.

Recommendation:

- That NIAA note the supporting case made by Universities Australia regarding poor digital access experienced by many Indigenous university students.

UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA INDIGENOUS STRATEGY

Universities Australia, on behalf of its 39 university members is currently developing the second Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy for 2021-2024. This follows the first ever whole of sector Indigenous Strategy, which Universities Australia launched in 2017.

The Indigenous Strategy is a sectoral commitment to a range of initiatives targeting Indigenous advancement in and through higher education. In this next iteration, the focus for students will shift from access (noting that continued effort is required here) to success, in particular improving completion rates. For staff, there will be a stronger focus on employment in universities and opportunities for staff, including career development and pathways as well as leadership structures.

The *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2021-2024* will also aim to ensure the safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students in university environments through a zero-tolerance approach to racism.

The Strategy will also recognise the value Indigenous people and knowledges bring to the university and its identity and the benefits we all share through embedding Indigenous value systems and knowledges into university structures and courses.

UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA INDIGENOUS STRATEGY ANNUAL REPORT

Under the UA Indigenous Strategy, UA surveys members each year on relevant issues and initiatives. The most recent survey, reporting on the 2020 academic year, revealed a range of issues and responses regarding Indigenous students' capacity to access online education during the COVID-19 global pandemic.¹

Access to equipment required for study was identified by 25 universities (64 per cent) as a barrier to Indigenous students' accessing online learning during the pandemic. This included not having access or only having limited access to computers, webcams, printers and software.

Internet access was also identified explicitly by 25 universities (64 per cent), some of whom did not identify equipment access as an issue. Issues identified as impacting on studies were:

- unstable internet connection;
- insufficient bandwidth for platforms that required high upload/download capacity e.g., lectures and tutorials; and
- affordability, particularly where students resorted to using mobile phone data.

The last two issues above were reported as particularly impacting students who returned to remote communities due to suspension of on-campus teaching.

These access issues were reported as affecting students' ability to complete assignments and exams, engage with lectures and tutorials, and access course materials and support services.

For those that did have access to the appropriate equipment and study space for online learning, reliance on this as the sole study environment revealed restrictions imposed by caring arrangements (including children undergoing home-schooling as a result of the pandemic), sharing a study space including equipment, and the cultural responsibilities that occur within the home environment.

¹ Universities Australia 2021 *Indigenous Strategy Annual Report* https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Indigenous-Strategy-Annual-Report_Mar21_FINAL.pdf

VALUE OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION TO INDIVIDUALS, SOCIETY AND THE ECONOMY

For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, a university degree remains a key enabler of prosperity for individuals, as well as the economy and society more broadly. Graduates are less likely to be unemployed, earn higher salaries and contribute to growing the overall economy.

Recent ABS data shows that in May 2020, the unemployment rate for graduates was 4.9 per cent - compared to 9.8 per cent for those without post-school qualifications.²

Graduates on average earn more over a lifetime, the median male graduate is estimated to earn nearly \$800,000 more than a man with no post-school qualifications, while the average female graduate is estimated to earn nearly \$600,000 more than a woman with no post-school qualifications.³ According to the 2016 Census, university graduates earn 70 per cent more than people with no post-school qualifications and contribute substantially more to national taxation receipts.⁴

Data published by the OECD in 2019 shows the net public benefit for Australia is US\$168,100 per male graduate and US\$117,700 per female graduate. Public benefits included higher tax revenue and lower social security transfer payments.⁵ The OECD estimated that the Australian Government can expect to receive a return of 12 per cent every year on the investment made on tertiary education.⁶

Labour market demand for graduate skills is forecast to continue and strengthen. Projections by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment show that almost 95 per cent of jobs growth over five years to May 2025 will be in jobs that require post-school qualifications.⁷ More than 50 per cent of jobs growth will be in jobs that require a university degree.

² ABS 2020, *Education and Work, Australia, May 2020* Cat. No. 6227.

³ Grattan Institute 2018, *Mapping Australia Higher Education 2018*, p.93.

⁴ ABS 2016 Census, *Employment and income by qualification level – people aged 20-64 years*

⁵ OECD 2019, *2019 Education at a Glance*, Indicator A5.3.

⁶ Ibid, Indicator A5.2.

⁷ Department of Jobs and Small Business 2020, *Employment Outlook to May 2025*.