

Universities Australia response to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (JSCATSIA) Inquiry into Improving the Economic Self-Determination and Opportunities for First Nations Australians

24 May 2024

Introduction

“The Indigenous Strategy will remain focussed on equal opportunity and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (UA Indigenous Strategy 2022-25, p. 17).

UA's [Indigenous Strategy](#) sets commitments for universities to achieve in supporting Indigenous self-determination. In particular, the Strategy seeks,

“in partnership with Indigenous university leaders – to move beyond aspiration to implementation, ensuring that commitment to principles translates consistently into concrete actions and outcomes. This requires a sharper focus on universities’ commitment and responsibility, both at an institutional level and across the sector, to ensure those responsible are delivering on the commitments, and that indicators and evidence show how they deliver and whether they have reached their goals” (p. 17).

In the context of Indigenous economic self-determination, universities can be valuable facilitators for enabling and promoting Indigenous businesses, financial and economic awareness and generating partnerships with other organisations.

Universities have a social mandate to respond to community needs and encourage participation in university and post-university life through high-quality education, community activities and partnership opportunities within Australia and beyond.

Many universities have a range of policies and programs in place that have been co-designed or led by Indigenous leaders. One example is Western Sydney University’s development of a training program for Indigenous businesses that facilitates the development of Indigenous businesses from inception through to supporting evaluation of supply chains. Such activities are supported by Indigenous Procurement Guides which seek to support a university’s engagement with Indigenous businesses.

Accordingly, UA has developed, in partnership with Indigenous leaders and senior staff in universities, a set of principles and guidelines to inform Indigenous Procurement and Employment activities within universities, recognising the valuable social, economic and cultural pride Indigenous businesses bring to universities and their wider communities. These core principles could be leveraged more broadly to achieve a similar impact on Indigenous economic self-determination across the nation, building on the successes for existing Indigenous entrepreneurs, whose contributions to Australia are already significant.

A report by the Dilin Duwe Centre for Indigenous Business Leadership demonstrates that, by supporting Indigenous economic self-determination, the Australian Government would facilitate \$16.096 billion in revenue and employ over 116,000 people in over 13,000 businesses.¹ Entities like Supply Nation – a national database and linkage platform for

¹ [Snapshot+3.0.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

verified Indigenous businesses – together with procurement and engagement guides could help drive further economic self-determination for Indigenous Australians.

Recommendations

- Leverage the Guiding Principles of UA's Indigenous Procurement and Employment Guidelines to support sustainable Indigenous economic self-determination.
- Support increased and improved access to education opportunities for Indigenous people.

'Guiding Principles from UA's Indigenous Procurement and Employment Guidelines' to support further action to improve the economic self-determination of Indigenous Australians.

These Guiding Principles serve as a foundation for UA's Indigenous Procurement Guidelines and Indigenous Employment Guidelines and aim to support Indigenous self-determination and the evolving needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities. They include:

- Respect for Indigenous cultures and traditional knowledge
- Prioritisation of Indigenous voices and decision-making processes
- Commitment to creating a culturally safe workplace
- Commitment to cultural governance by Indigenous leaders
- Commitment to creating long-term, not just transactional, relationships
- Recognition and incorporation of local contexts
- Commitment to continuous learning through listening, reflection, gathering data, measuring outcomes, and improving
- Intention to mature Indigenous employment and procurement practices so they are embedded in everyday practices, policies, and procedures, moving away from 'initiatives'

Case Studies

Standardising and embedding activities into general practice is best practice. The cases below are just some of the Indigenous procurement activities that have been successful within the university sector. They have been deidentified, but are sourced from several universities across Australia:

- Indigenous and social enterprise supplier panels were established and communicated across the university, covering spend categories such as catering, printing services and corporate gifts.
- An Indigenous builder panel was established consisting of four Indigenous-owned builders. For projects that are directly related to the university's Indigenous engagement strategy (for example, design and construction of Indigenous learning circles), only builders from the Indigenous builder panel are invited to tender. For all other refurbishment and construction projects, two Indigenous builders (a more favourable rotation) from the panel are invited to every tender.
- The university invests in the establishment of a social enterprise café on campus whose social impact purpose is supporting Indigenous outcomes of employment, training, and supplier engagement. The café is used to host events and provides catering to university functions.

- The university utilises the most recent [Supply Nation](#) and state/territory [Indigenous Chambers of Commerce or Networks](#) data to help create connections and partnerships with Indigenous businesses across Australia.

Underpinning each of these principles is the importance of Indigenous-led partnerships that recognise the needs of each stakeholder over the course of meeting a medium to long-term goal. Sustainable investment and ongoing collaboration and partnership arrangements are fundamentally important to Indigenous peoples' economic self-determination. Universities Australia also welcomes the recommendation for needs-based funding to better support this cohort.

Supporting access to education to improve economic self-determination

The Closing the Gap target for socio-economic participation for Indigenous peoples (identified in the CtG Outcome Area 8) currently sits at 62 per cent of Indigenous people aged 25-64 being employed by 2031. Recognising the importance of this outcome, the Closing the Gap Report (2019) highlighted the necessity of establishing a sustainable Indigenous economy to achieve Indigenous self-determination. Between 2016 and 2021, Indigenous economic participation increased from 51 per cent to 55.7 per cent.

A key measure of improving Indigenous peoples' economic self-determination is access to and achievement in education.² Significant evidence demonstrates a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and education outcomes, which in turn impact an individual's ability to be economically self-sufficient or to appropriately determine their own financial needs.³

Initiatives to support Indigenous peoples' engagement with higher education is a necessary social policy as well as an economic one. Ensuring Indigenous Australians have access to higher education provides a strong foundation for innovative partnership agreements in the future, along with a range of economic, social and health benefits for individuals and communities.⁴

There are a variety of ways this can be achieved, and one is to increase numbers of Indigenous people pursuing Higher Degrees by Research (HDR), which in turn leads to progress across the entire pipeline of Indigenous participation in higher education. More needs to be done to support Indigenous students to pursue research degrees. Low completion rates in undergraduate degrees, low funding for stipends for what is often a mature-age cohort, and a lack of appropriate mentorship and support are all contributing factors that will need to be addressed to achieve this goal.

The Universities Accord interim report provided for additional demand-driven funding to support Indigenous students' access to university. This measure was warmly welcomed by the sector and represents an acknowledgment of the power that access to education has in facilitating change, educational attainment potential and improved self-representation in society.

² Armstrong, Leah. "A Place for Indigenous Economic Self-Sufficiency in a Reconciled Australia." *The Journal of Indigenous Policy*, 5 Sept. 2003, pp. 2–13.

³ Carlson, Ronald H., and Christopher S. McChesney. "Income Sustainability through Educational Attainment." *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 24 Dec. 2014, <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v3i1.508>.

⁴ Gloria, et al. "Educational Mobility, Pace of Aging, and Lifespan among Participants in the Framingham Heart Study." *JAMA Network Open*, vol. 7, no. 3, 4 Mar. 2024, pp. e240655–e240655, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.0655>.

Conclusion

Socio-economic participation is a strong indicator of self-determination and social engagement. Moving towards sustainable economic self-determination requires supporting the important foundation aspects of education and partnerships, which do not have set targets, but are an intrinsic part of effective engagement and support for Australia's Indigenous cultures.

Access to sustainable opportunities from consumers and investors remains a difficult barrier to overcome. Overcoming these barriers requires building a strong foundation of educational attainment to ensure Indigenous individuals and communities can appropriately represent themselves, be innovative and establish the necessary partnerships to prosper.

Using principles and guidelines such as those adopted by Australia's universities, these partnerships can be created and sustained in pursuit of Indigenous advancement and a fairer society.