

SUBMISSION TO THE POST-IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW OF THE INDIGENOUS STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAM

5 September 2018

Universities Australia (UA) is pleased to make a submission to the post-implementation review of the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP). UA welcomes the Government's review of the implementation of the ISSP, and the opportunity it provides both to identify problems or barriers, as well as to make further improvements to the design and effectiveness of the program.

UA fully supports the ISSP. Increased flexibility for universities in allocating funding has improved the responsiveness and effectiveness of universities' Indigenous programs. We believe that there is now an opportunity to further improve the flexibility of the program.

It was necessary and helpful — as a transitional measure — to include in the original program design a requirement to continue to offer services that had been supported under previous funding arrangements. Now that the ISSP is more established, and has been successful across the sector, the time has come to remove 'legacy' provisions and support greater flexibility in universities' efforts to support Indigenous participation and success in higher education.

ISSP: A POSITIVE CHANGE

UA acknowledges that the design of the ISSP, rolled out in 2017 is a positive change in support of Indigenous participation and success in Australia's universities.

By making funding rules more flexible, the ISSP enables universities to direct support where it's needed most. A flexible ISSP supports universities' efforts and existing programs in the Indigenous space and reduces the likelihood of unnecessary and unhelpful tension between universities' aspirations and targets or goals set by Government. The ISSP makes it easier for universities and Government to work together to achieve real outcomes.

Similarly, the new program is more streamlined and easier to administer. This also boosts the effectiveness of Indigenous support, by concentrating universities' efforts on delivering effective programs, with a minimum of distraction from administration and reporting.

The new ISSP aligns well with [UA's Indigenous Strategy](#). UA believes that the ISSP and the Indigenous Strategy can reinforce and support each other. In particular, UA welcomes the requirements on participating universities to have an Indigenous employment strategy and an Indigenous governance mechanism and to work towards employing a senior Indigenous leader at Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Pro Vice-Chancellor level.

SOME POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS

UA strongly endorses the proposal from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) to develop a handbook to accompany the program guidelines. In particular, we agree that including case studies in the handbook would be helpful to universities and would give positive examples of practice. A handbook could make information available to participating universities (and their students) in a very accessible and practical way. This would raise awareness of the ISSP and its potential. Importantly, it could also be an opportunity to recognise and share best practice.

Improving opportunities to share good practice across the sector, and to discuss what works in given circumstances, is an important part of improving the effectiveness of Indigenous programs. UA would welcome the opportunity for further discussion with PM&C about effective ways to do this. UA has recently taken over responsibility for an online repository of materials on learning and teaching – formerly maintained by the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT). Curating this resource, and adding new materials over time, will be a useful way to share effective practice in learning and teaching, student support and maximising success. UA intends to include a specific Indigenous focus in our curation and presentation of the repository.

Working to improve Indigenous access and success is a long-term project. Effective intervention has to overcome a long history of Indigenous disadvantage and exclusion – in universities, in education more broadly, and in society as a whole. While the last few years in particular have been a story of accelerating success, there is a long way still to go.

For these reasons, UA argues it would make more sense to allocate ISSP funding on a longer funding cycle than the current annual allocation. Annual funding limits universities' capacity to plan and especially to devise big picture new initiatives. A three or four year funding cycle would encourage universities to plan initiatives for the medium term.

UA would also be keen to discuss with PM&C how program design could better accommodate the specific needs of universities with large cohorts of online/distance students. Online delivery is particularly important to extend opportunity to a broad group of working age Indigenous students, who may not have had the chance to undertake post-secondary education before. A sufficiently flexible program should be able to deliver support to these institutions that is as effective as support delivered to other universities. We would welcome the opportunity to look more closely at specific adjustments to the program that could ensure maximally effective support for provision of distance education to Indigenous students.

UA would support an approach to performance reporting which included more items on the impact not only of the ISSP itself, but on the impact of university activities supported by the ISSP. Combined with more active and higher-profile sharing of best practice (as discussed above), and with UA's own collection of data and information on our members' work to realise the goals of the Indigenous Strategy, this would enhance not only universities' accountability for ISSP funding, but also universities' accountability in a broader sense for Indigenous access and success.

UA believes that the policy intent to increase the flexibility of the ISSP can now be furthered by removing transitional provisions from the program rules. Funds currently set aside for preserved scholarships could be rolled into overall ISSP funding, provided that funding rules ensure that recipients of scholarships awarded before 2017 continue to receive the benefits to which they are entitled (indexed to allow for inflation). At the same time, it is advisable to consider the term 'scholarship' and its potential impact on students' expectations about the level of support available.

For the same reason, UA argues that the program Guidelines should be amended to allow for support of a broader range of international mobility experiences for Indigenous students. Currently, the Guidelines limit support to international travel that is a specific 'requirement' of a particular course of study. A broader specification would support international mobility for Indigenous students, in line with priorities of [UA's Indigenous Strategy](#).

Finally, UA believes the ISSP could do more to support Indigenous success and completion. While Indigenous commencements have increased rapidly in recent years — nearly doubling over the past decade — completion rates remain significantly lower than for non-Indigenous students. UA welcomes the change to weighting of ISSP funding to explicitly support success and completion. Moving to a multi-year — as opposed to an annual — funding cycle would help to support completion.

At the same time, the funding formula for rewarding universities for completions should be adjusted to more fairly reflect the relative contributions of different institutions where a student has attended more than one. At present, only the university where the student is enrolled at the time of completion receives completion funding. We acknowledge that this is not a large problem, relative to total numbers of completions, but it would be better in principle to recognise all institutions involved in producing an Indigenous graduate and would help to frame the message that completion is the end goal of activities supported by the ISSP.

Recommendations

UA recommends that Government:

- develop a handbook to accompany the program guidelines;
- work with the sector to develop effective ways of sharing good practice;
- further the development of a flexible ISSP, including by removing transitional provisions;
- move to a multi-year funding cycle; and
- examine options for enhanced performance reporting.