



Editorial Introduction

In Australian higher education, Indigenous students are defined as students who self-report as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student to their higher education provider, either at the time of their enrolment or during their studies.

This briefing paper considers how Australian universities are performing against parity targets for the participation of Indigenous students in higher education. It finds that despite over three decades of the widening participation agenda, significant work remains to reach targets for enrolments and completions in undergraduate, postgraduate coursework, and postgraduate research.

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Widening the Participation of Indigenous Students in Australian Higher Education

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Access to higher education is a fundamental human right enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and addressing Indigenous educational disadvantage remains a pressing public policy challenge as it is fundamental to 'closing the gap' on social, health and employment outcomes (Fahey, 2021; Liddle, 2016; Pitman et al. 2017). For three decades Australian government policy, through the widening participation agenda (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990), has sought to improve the proportional representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, in higher education so that participation levels mirror their representation in the broader Australian population.

Indigenous graduates experience a marked increase in employment outcomes from post-bachelor study and achieve better than their undergraduate and postgraduate non-Indigenous peers in terms of full-time employment (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2021). Given the critical role higher education plays in improving the socio-economic position of Indigenous people, there have been numerous reviews into how to increase the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in higher education. These reviews have found that progress towards parity representation has been slow (Behrendt et al., 2012) and varies among institutions (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2011; Pechenkina et al., 2011).

It should also be acknowledged that the pursuit of these aspirational targets has occurred against a backdrop of racism, colonisation and marginalisation (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), deficit discourses (Pyle et al., 2018) and 'a constant ideological flux between welfare, equity and economic priorities' (Wilson & Wilks, 2015). This briefing paper explores key trends in participation and completion for Indigenous students, how these trends differ by university group and type of higher degree, and the potential effects on the achievement of the widening participation agenda for this cohort.

Participation Trends and Policy Agendas

Participation needs to be considered across the enrolment life cycle and thus participation outcomes need to be captured at different points in the life cycle (Taylor et al., 2019). **Access** is the number of equity group students commencing as a proportion of all commencing domestic students, while **retention** measures the number of equity group students enrolled as a proportion of all continuing enrolments. Together, these two measures represent participation in higher education.

The participation of Indigenous students has historically been significantly below the 2.2 per cent target set for Indigenous students as a proportion of the student population (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990), especially in postgraduate research and coursework programs.

As shown in Figure 1, there have been slight improvements in the proportional representation in commencements for Indigenous students. However, this improvement has been gradual, has come from a low baseline and is not translating into completions at the same level. There are also marked differences based on degree level, with outcomes across both measures decreasing the higher the level of study. This perhaps reflects the emphasis on getting Indigenous students “in the door” (Liddle, 2016, p.55).

The importance of reaching parity for admissions and completions is signalled by the funding model for Australian universities. For example, Australian higher education institutions are rewarded for the successful timely completion of higher degrees by research students via annual research block grants (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021).

Weightings are applied based on degree level (Masters or Doctorate), degree cost (high or low), and whether the student undertaking the degree identifies as an Indigenous or non-Indigenous student. Under the funding formula, weightings change the relative economic value of completion to a university.

Completions by Indigenous students are weighted at twice the value of non-Indigenous student completions (via annual research block grants (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021) to provide a financial reward to institutions to boost the number of Indigenous students completing higher degrees by research. These weighted premiums are designed to increase the enrolments of students with marginalised identities (Li, 2019).

Despite such measures, the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students grown as the level of study in higher education has increased (Trudgett, 2014). This suggests that the necessary cultural change and support required across the degree lifecycle and levels of qualification are not sufficient to support students to completion (Anderson, 2016; Smith et al., 2017; Vignoles & Murray, 2016).

It may also suggest that the need for financial incentives indicates a misalignment between policy in relation to the achievement of quotas or targets rather than the achievement of measures of success defined by First Nations peoples on their own terms.

Further, there is an explicit and ongoing tension between different policy imperatives such as the push for the timeliness of PhD completion, and the recognition implicit in the widening participation agenda that there is structural and systematic disadvantage that affects the capacity of members of certain equity groups to meet these aspirations (Grant-Smith & Winter, 2021).

Performance by University Groups

Our research shows significant differences in the comparative performance of university groupings on Indigenous student participation rates (Grant-Smith et al., 2020). The Regional Universities Network (RUN) and Innovative Research Universities (IRU) perform significantly better than the other university types.

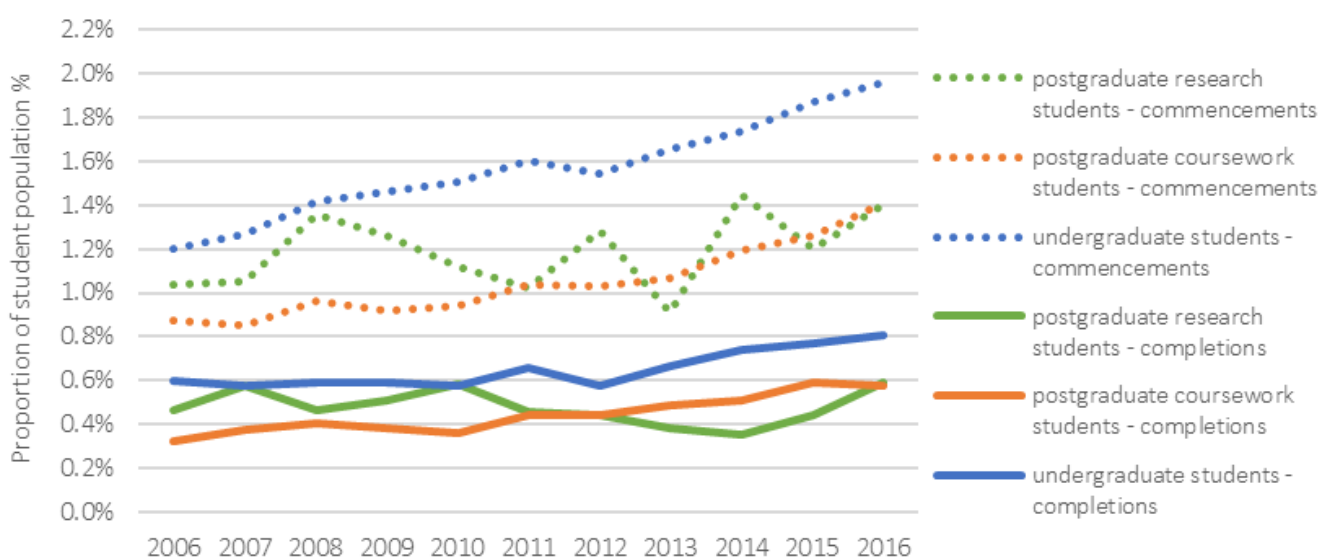


Figure 1. Indigenous student access and completion trends (Grant-Smith et al., 2020)

Although differences can be seen in individual institutions, as a collective, RUN and IRU universities have experienced steady improvements since 2009. In contrast, other university types have seen marginal to no improvement. There may be lessons to be learned from how certain universities are attracting and supporting Indigenous students, particularly in the postgraduate research space.

Although accounting for more than one-third of all commencing and continuing postgraduate students, Group of Eight universities account for only one-quarter of all commencing and continuing Indigenous postgraduate students (Grant-Smith et al., 2020). There is a similar discrepancy in completions with Group of Eight institutions accounting for 38.6 per cent of all postgraduate completions but only 27 per cent of completions by Indigenous postgraduate students. This relatively poor performance is problematic given their elite status and the overall size of their student cohort as lower proportions in larger cohorts have a disproportional effect on outcomes more generally. The causes and effects of this stratification require further investigation.

Are We Measuring What Matters?

Significant progress in the widening participation agenda for Indigenous students remains elusive even after 30 years of focus. At one level, the underrepresentation of Indigenous people in higher education can be explained by lower levels of completion of secondary school. However, it must also be understood in the context of the broader disadvantage, discrimination, and historical exclusion experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Pitman et al. 2017)

and their experiences within an education system that often shows little respect for Indigenous culture and diversity (Liddle, 2016).

The use of comparative measures in which the progress of equity groups is measured against that of the general (i.e., non-Indigenous, able-bodied, high(er) social and economic background and urban student) population should not necessarily be taken for granted as the sole, best mode of evaluation.

Biddle et al. (2017, p.3) argue that the predominance of measures for success involving comparison of Indigenous outcomes against non-Indigenous outcomes may preclude the development and use of 'Indigenous-specific measures that may be vital to the well-being of the Indigenous population'. This comparative agenda may also have the effect of homogenising the experience of Indigenous students and reducing First Nation interests to that of a minority in their own land.

Remaining tied to comparative measures can result in a limited definition of success. It also has the danger of homogenising student equity groups so that intra-group differences and uneven progress may go unrecognised and unaddressed (Biddle et al. 2017), effectively obscuring the effects and outcomes of intersectional difference and the fact that students may claim membership of more than one equity group.

Widening participation outcomes are not routinely reported at the postgraduate level; instead, reporting is typically done at the aggregate level (all students), without distinguishing between levels of study or only at the undergraduate level (Grant-Smith & Winter, 2021). Similarly, this lack of differentiation between degree level makes assumptions about homogeneity (O'Donnell et al. 2009) and results in difficulty in assessing the

extent to which targets are being achieved. Despite this, Gale and Parker (2013) suggest there is reliable evidence that inequalities are more severe at the postgraduate level, particularly for research degrees.

Conclusion

Significant ongoing work is required to support Indigenous students at all levels of study. The widening participation agenda is not ubiquitously advantageous, and there is inequality within and between cohorts. Current reporting regimes mask this inequality.

Further, Australian universities vary widely in their approaches to and achievements in relation to the widening participation agenda (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014), opening the system up to critique in terms of its capacity to deliver social justice in higher education for Indigenous students (Gale & Parker, 2013). However, changes can only be achieved through a more nuanced approach that seeks to address the needs of Indigenous students while simultaneously recognising the diverse assets Indigenous students contribute to creating a vibrant and diverse higher education sector that enriches all who participate in it.

Such recognition would require a significant change to the mindset of policy-makers and some educators and non-Indigenous students. Collectively there is a need to contest the assumption that we can fix the 'problem' of 'failure' to access and complete higher education programs without addressing the ahistorical approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education which is inseparable from the issues of marginalisation and historic injustice that continue to be pervasive in the lives of many Indigenous Australians.

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