

IRU feedback to New Colombo Plan – Indigenous focus

Innovative Research Universities (IRU) is a network of 6 comprehensive universities committed to inclusive excellence in teaching and research in Australia. Our membership is Charles Darwin University, James Cook University, Griffith University, La Trobe University, Flinders University and Murdoch University.

The IRU members strive to be universities of choice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff, promoting understanding of Indigenous knowledges in education, research and policy.

The IRU supports the aim of the NCP Secretariat within DFAT to encourage greater participation by Indigenous students in the New Colombo Plan.

The need for action is based on participation to date being lower than the enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students would suggest should be expected. As part of the NCP application and acquittal process, universities are not required to report participation (of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity or any other demographic) as part of the completion reporting process. To assess the effectiveness of the program in reaching all students this data should be collected, using the Department of Education and Training's student data set items.

The NCP Secretariat has developed some options for how the program might improve participation:

- an Indigenous Fellow, as one scholarship each year;
- an NCP Indigenous Partners program;
- removing the age limit of 28 for Indigenous students
- an NCP Indigenous champion; and
- supporting better mentoring for Indigenous students.

Overall the measures are positive ways to increase the participation of Indigenous students in the NCP mobility program. The sections below address each of the individual measures being proposed.

IRU members have individually provided feedback to the IRU Secretariat on the proposed changes. The main message they highlight is the need for thoughtful and considered programs that best harness the attributes of the targeted students. There is a concern that the short deadlines for applications in NCP rounds could inhibit institutions' capacity to implement and take advantage of the new measures in the short term.

The issues raised that can hold back Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from accessing NCP places can also affect other students, touching on the financial position of the student, family commitments, cultural commitments and aspects about the individual such as age.

The discussion about how to raise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation points to weaknesses in the structure of NCP where it assumes a traditional model of a student being young, fresh from school, with limited Australian based commitments. If NCP is to fulfil its aspirations as supporting a life and mind changing experience as a standard part of being a university student then it has to cater for the breadth of students.

Consistent with the IRU's focus on a whole of institution approach to ensuring good outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students it is important that the NCP reflect the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in its whole operation, being targeted with Indigenous specific arrangements.

An Indigenous Fellow, as one scholarship each year

Highlighting one scholarship holder each year as the Indigenous Fellow will raise the profile of the NCP among Indigenous students, with the potential outcome of more students applying for overseas mobility programs and for the NCP Scholarships program in particular. Having some high profile Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship holders will help other students learn how to negotiate the challenges that a period of international study raise.

The question could emerge of whether more than one Indigenous Fellow could be awarded in a given year if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are identified as the top-ranked candidates for some study locations. In such cases it would be sensible to allow each of those students to be both an Indigenous Fellow and be the location Fellow.

The NCP should also look to ensure that one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student is selected each year where there at least one application meets the threshold for winning a scholarship. If necessary an additional scholarship should be allocated for a year to achieve this outcome.

Pilot an NCP Indigenous Partners program

It is a valuable suggestion that the NCP should target some programs to study with, and develop greater understanding of, the Indigenous cultures and communities of the NCP partner countries. Indigenous partner programs would strengthen understanding and recognition of Indigenous knowledges.

The desire to participate in such programs would be spread across all Australian students, whether or not Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. As with any study option some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will be interested in the focus, others will have different priorities.

Hence the proposal is valuable for improving social and cultural knowledge rather than its direct impact on whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participate in the NCP.

The related option that a set of universities work together to deliver some NCP programs for Indigenous students primarily will depend for success on whether sufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students prefer such a program over the programs targeting any interested student. The question of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students when overseas is likely better addressed through explicit relevant support rather than creating primarily Indigenous programs.

Removing the age limit of 28 for Indigenous students

The NCP age limit of 28 that applies for scholarships and to at least 70% of participants in a mobility program is an example of how the program is unconsciously biased towards a traditional view that university is for younger people studying full time with few other commitments. IRU members have many students who are older than 28. In the current world where people change careers regularly and any given career area can be subject to substantive change over a decade it is foolish to assume that older students are less likely to provide a good return on investment on additional support such as the NCP.

The recognition that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are older but have much to contribute to their communities and Australia more generally should be part of a broader change to the NCP guidelines to target all undergraduate students.

Hence the NCP should remove the age limit for all students.

An NCP Indigenous Champion

This measure is modelled on the New Colombo Plan Business Champions initiative. A champion would assist further promote the NCP amongst both students and potential institutions and business for the program. To have a champion or champions with impressive business connections would assist achieve the desired outcomes.

Support better mentoring for Indigenous students

The New Colombo Plan Internship and Mentorship Network, currently connects universities, students and private-sector organisations in Australia and across the region to progress course-related work experiences for New Colombo Plan students.

This initiative could be further enhanced by facilitating the involvement of both Indigenous students and Indigenous private sector host organisations rather than a separate initiative specifically for Indigenous mentoring.

About the IRU

IRU member universities are universities of choice for both Indigenous staff and students.

- IRU members educate 19% of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students.
- 2.1% of all our students are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders against a national parity target of 2.3% and overall sector achievement of 1.4%.
- 1.1% of IRU completions are by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders against overall sector achievement of 0.8%.
- IRU employs 17% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders staff working in Australian universities.

IRU member institutions are signatories to the IRU *Statement of Intent* signed at a formal ceremony at Parliament House on 24 February 2014. The Statement of Intent is a landmark document for both IRU and the sector as a whole. It sets out how IRU members have become the universities of choice for their students and staff, committing to actions that go beyond achieving parity of enrolment and employment to integrate Indigenous knowledges into university teaching and research.

18 March 2016