

## **Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs inquiry into the application of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in Australia.**

In response to the question of improving adherence to the principles of the UNDRIP in Australia, the University of Tasmania is pleased to make this submission outlining the institution's approach to embedding the principles of UNDRIP in its day-to-day business, in addition to exploring avenues for further improvement across the sector.

This submission is intended for consideration in light of the key themes and principles in the Declaration, including:

- the right to self-determination;
- the right to be recognised as distinct peoples; and
- the right to be free of discrimination.

In 2019, on behalf of the University, Vice-Chancellor Professor Rufus Black publicly acknowledged the wrongdoings of the past in an Apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal People. It marked a moment where authentic healing of the relationships with Tasmanian Aboriginal people could begin and opened the possibility for the University to become a truly place-based institution in alignment with its values and its connection to Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

In our submission, we describe approaches to adherence to UNDRIP being adopted at the University and consider existing mechanisms which could be sharpened to strengthen the alignment between the Australian higher education system and our national commitment to UNDRIP. We are mindful of the power of data to both monitor human rights obligations and shape behaviour within universities.

### **1. Adherence to UNDRIP at The University of Tasmania**

The University of Tasmania's Strategic Plan for Aboriginal Engagement (SPAЕ) underpins the institution's commitment to the palawa/pakana people of Tasmania, and gadigal and wangal people on whose country its Rozelle campus is based. The plan respectfully explores how Aboriginal success can be embedded more deeply into the core operations of the University across workforce diversity, access to study, research and governance.

Since January 2017, the Australian Government has provided funding to support Australian universities to achieve equity in Indigenous outcomes through the Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP). It provides supplementary funding to universities to help students take on the demands of university and succeed. Universities can offer scholarships, tutorial assistance, mentoring, safe cultural spaces and other personal support services to First Nations students using ISSP funding. The ISSP guidelines present an opportunity to influence alignment with UNDRIP principles across university internal planning processes.

The University of Tasmania's adherence to UNDRIP can be illustrated by framing a selection of its commitments against key principles of UNDRIP, while acknowledging that most measures have impact on more than one of these key principles.

### 1. Right to self determination

The University makes a commitment to providing a culturally safe and supportive environment so as to enable Indigenous graduates to possess the capability and confidence to participate and lead across the full spectrum of professions and vocations. It embraces Indigenous knowledges to support a sustainable future and relies on partnership with knowledge holders to draw on perspectives ranging from local to international in both shaping and pursuing strategic goals.

There is an imperative to invest in Indigenous staff at the University to retain and develop talent across the workforce, in addition to recruiting and training Indigenous staff through the expanded Indigenous Academic Fellows Predoctoral Program. Retention of staff requires ongoing improvement to the quality of the University's working environment and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people.

Indigenous research undertaken by, and in collaboration with, Indigenous academics and communities can contribute powerfully to closing the gap in social and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Participatory and collaborative research supports Indigenous self-determination and addresses the need for improved data related to Indigenous people, while protecting Indigenous data sovereignty. The University aspires to establish an Indigenous research hub, where research strengths can be nurtured, to consolidate collaborative research projects that impact positively on Indigenous social and economic success, and cultural development.

### 2. Right to be recognised as distinct peoples

The University recognises that sustained and personalised care and learning is critical to the retention and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. University staff are culturally informed and competent, and the diversity of cultural knowledges, experiences and intersectional identities are respected.

Riawunna is acknowledged as a Centre exclusively for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, recognised for innovation and leadership in academic enabling through the Murina Pathway Program, student support and wellbeing, community engagement and cultural events. The Senior Indigenous Research Scholarship program has been successful in bringing palawa/pakana knowledge holders and community leaders into the University to share and extend their skills and expertise.

The University demonstrates a commitment to prioritising research with a focus on identifying and responding to the needs and aspirations of palawa/pakana people in Tasmanian Aboriginal communities, particularly with regard to COVID-19 recovery, economic participation, and overcoming barriers to higher education access and success in local and regional areas.

### 3. Right to be free of discrimination

Support for the advancement of Aboriginal Business exists at the highest levels of the University leadership with the University Council, University Executive Team, and Academic Senate serving as active advocates for positive change.

Progress on the right to be free of discrimination has also been achieved through the establishment of the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Aboriginal Leadership, which has an executive role on Academic Senate and in Academic Division Leadership. Further progress is evidenced by the appointment of Professor Ian Anderson, a palawa man, to the senior leadership role of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic).

The Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Aboriginal Leadership, has prioritised Aboriginal Business as a core consideration in the University's policies, strategies and procedures, and is critical to providing leadership and advocacy for Indigenous staff and students at the University.

It is acknowledged that sustained impact will require that responsibility is shared with non-Indigenous staff and students as part of a whole-of-University approach, and that embedding the strategic initiatives outlined in the SPAE into everyday operations is critical to success. Cultural training is a requirement for leadership roles and available for all staff, complemented by on-country experiences as an essential component of the UTAS staff and student experience.

Across learning and teaching, there is a recognition that all graduates need to be competent to critically engage with Indigenous people's culture and experience. To achieve this alongside increasing Indigenisation of curricula, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and knowledge holders available to support student learning across all relevant disciplines is growing.

## 2. Opportunities to leverage greater alignment to UNDRIP within higher education

### 1. Global rankings

Universities worldwide operate in a competitive marketplace in which global reputation is shaped in part by performance in various ranking methodologies, including the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World Rankings and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU). These international rankings can have a significant impact on strategic focus within universities.

The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings are the only global performance tables that assess universities against the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The University of Tasmania is currently the tertiary sector's world-leader in taking climate action (SDG 13), as determined by the THE Impact Rankings, and has developed a comprehensive approach to addressing all seventeen SDGs.

The focus of the University on climate action and holistic sustainability aligns with institutional values expressed in the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan and illustrates commitment to implementation of the University's 2020 Strategic Framework for Sustainability.

Consequently, and despite not being driven predominantly by rankings, the strong performance against rankings criteria provide an opportunity to differentiate at an institutional level and to stand out in the global higher education sector as a committed proponent in the field of sustainability and climate action.

The challenge is that these particular ranking systems do not at this point have sufficient focus on indigenous outcomes to comprehensively drive alignment with UNDRIP at a university level. However, the Australian Government could use its global influence and relationship with the university sector to better align with these international ranking systems.

One key element that is crucial to enable monitoring progress against adherence targets would be improved data availability for reporting processes.

## 2. Data quality, availability and reporting

Since July 2020, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, as negotiated and signed by the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations, has included a target for higher education. To increase the proportion of Indigenous Australians between 25 and 34 years of age with a tertiary qualification at Certificate III or above, to 70% by 2031.

All states and territories are making progress but the rate of progress as recorded in the 2021 census indicates the target will be missed. However, data can currently only be updated in alignment with the National Census so an accurate understanding of the current status is a challenge.

The 2023 Productivity Commission Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap identifies that performance monitoring and public reporting provides only a partial picture of progress towards meeting the socioeconomic outcomes, to the extent that, “the scale of the data development task means that it is unlikely that all of these will be developed within 10 years of the commencement of the Agreement (that is, by 2030). Improved governance arrangements and careful prioritisation of data development efforts are needed.”

The challenge here is that there is insufficient breadth or depth of reporting under the Closing the Gap Agreement to enable a detailed analysis of university performance. This is key to providing the university sector with the evidence needed to drive change. This could be achieved by the Australian government working with the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak organisations and the Productivity Commission to consider improved data availability and reporting processes.

## 3. Higher education landscape and policy settings

Times Higher Education has shown by focusing on the UN Sustainable Development Goals how a global framework can be used to raise the profile of significant ambition and directly drive change at an institutional level in the higher education sector. The policy settings for universities and higher education more broadly provide effective means for the Australian government to strengthen alignment with the principles of UNDRIP.

The development of the Australian Universities Accord provides a once in a generation opportunity to reshape Australian higher education policy to strengthen its alignment with UNDRIP principles.

The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report acknowledges the requirement for “a commitment to empowerment of First Nations people with a self-determined approach developed in relation to funding and policy settings at both a national and institutional level.”

It concludes that one critical first step is to ensure that all First Nations students are eligible for a funded place at university, by extending demand driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students.

Although not exclusive to ATSI students, the recent Australian Government announcement of 20,000 additional Commonwealth-supported places to encourage and enable students from under-represented groups to commence study in 2023-2024 represents a positive step towards enabling ATSI students to reach their full potential through higher education pathways. Comprehensive adherence to UNDRIP across the higher education sector is required to support these students to achieve successful outcomes.

The flexibility of the ISSP assists universities to tailor their services to match student needs and is prioritised towards the support of First Nations students who are financially disadvantaged and/or from remote and regional areas. The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) is currently considering undertaking a review of the ISSP guidelines.

We recommend that the Australian Government consider revising the ISSP guidelines to better align internal institutional planning and strategy processes to the application of the key principles of UNDRIP.