

A Submission by the
National Indigenous Postgraduate Association
Aboriginal Corporation
(NIPAAC)

to the

**SENATE EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE
RELATIONS AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO THE HIGHER EDUCATION
SUPPORT AMENDMENT (ABOLITION OF
COMPULSORY UP-FRONT UNION FEES) BILL
2005**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Executive Summary	3
1. Indigenous-Australian Higher Education Participation	4
1.1 Undergraduate Students	4
1.2 Postgraduate Students	6
1.3 Student Unions and Indigenous-Australian Participation	7
2. The Likely Effect of the Legislation on the Provision of Student Services by Campus-Based Student Unions	7
2.1 Representation and Support	7
2.2 Student Activism	8
2.3 Campus Life and Cultural Inclusion	9
2.4 Advocacy	9
2.5 Services	10
2.5.1 Financial Aid	11
2.5.2 Childcare	11
2.5.3 Scholarships	12
2.5.4 Computing Services	12
2.5.5 Second-Hand Textbooks	12
3. The Likely Effect of the Legislation on the Provision of Student Services by National Student Unions	13

Introduction

The National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee Inquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Union Fees) Bill 2005.

NIPAAC is a national organisation representing the 1,224 Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students in Australia. Under the current student union funding arrangements, all Indigenous-Australian students receive automatic support and representation from NIPAAC when they pay their Student Services Fees. NIPAAC works closely with the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA), which is a peak national representative organization for Australian postgraduate students.

NIPAAC's key objectives are to increase participation of Indigenous-Australians in postgraduate education, and to improve the quality of education experiences for Indigenous-Australian students. Since NIPAAC's inception in 1999, we have made valuable contributions to improving access to postgraduate education and broadening the capacity of Australian universities to support Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students.

Executive Summary

The current system of universal student unionism is based on the payment of a universal fee in return for universal representation and on the ethos of student control of student affairs. The introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) legislation would decimate the capacity of student unions to represent students and would undermine the important principle of student control. NIPAAC believes that it is the Federal Government's intention in introducing VSU to weaken the opposition of students to Federal and university policy concerning education and broader issues.

NIPAAC strongly opposes VSU because a voluntary payment system is not appropriate for the provision of representation from which all students benefit. NIPAAC also opposes VSU because it is likely to result in the introduction of a user-pays system for the provision of services that are currently provided at a low cost by student unions. This would not only mean increased costs for student services, but may also result in the abolition of certain important services which student unions currently subsidise because the demand would not be great enough to ensure a significant profit margin.

Student unions currently play an important role in encouraging equitable access to higher education and providing an avenue through which to advance the rights of minority and equity groups. This is particularly important for Indigenous-Australian students, who would be disproportionately affected by VSU legislation because they are among the poorest, most under-represented and marginalized students in higher education.

1. Indigenous-Australian Higher Education Participation

Indigenous-Australian undergraduate and postgraduate participation rates continue to be well below those of non-Indigenous students, with little progress made since 1997 towards the 2.5% participation benchmark nominated by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).¹

The National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (NRPIET) 2003 notes that total Indigenous-Australian student numbers increased by 1.3% but commencing Indigenous student numbers decreased by 3.2% in 2003.²

The brief analysis of student statistics below demonstrates that Indigenous-Australian students continue to be severely under-represented in higher education.³ It also shows that student participation growth in relation to Indigenous-Australian population growth is either very low or in decline, depending on the course level. Clearly, strategies to improve Indigenous-Australian higher education access, attrition and completion remain inadequate. Furthermore, Indigenous-Australian students remain one of the student groups most vulnerable to policy changes that adversely impact on the affordability of higher education, including income support reductions and course fee increases. As such, Indigenous-Australian students will suffer disproportionately from attacks on student unions, which have traditionally represented a broad base of student interests and sought to ensure access to higher education on an equitable basis.

1.1 Undergraduate Students

In 2004 Indigenous-Australian undergraduate students were participating at 1.28% of the total undergraduate domestic student population. That is just over half of the 2.5% participation benchmark that reflects the proportion of university aged Indigenous-Australians in the Australian population.⁴

Table 1 below shows that the number of commencing Indigenous-Australian undergraduate students declined from 2,700 in 2002 to 2,454 in 2004. Commencing Indigenous-Australian undergraduate students as a proportion of commencing domestic students declined in the same period, showing that

¹ *Achieving Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes: Indigenous Australians in Higher Education*, DEST, August 2002, p.3. The 2.5% figure is the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian population aged below 65. (It is an age-specific reference value that takes into consideration the young profile of the Indigenous population).

² *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (NRPIET) 2003*, Canberra, Commonwealth Government, 2005.

³ All statistics in this section are sourced from the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), Selected Higher Education Statistics, <<http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/statpubs.htm#studpubs>> and the Australian Bureau of Statistics data, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population series, 2002, <<http://www.abs.gov.au>>

⁴ Enabling and non-award students are not counted in the undergraduate student figures. The Indigenous-Australian population figures are according to the 2001 Census count, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

the Indigenous-Australian student drop was not necessarily reflective of circumstances affecting non-Indigenous students. Students in Enabling and Non-Award courses are not included in the undergraduate student figures in Table 1 to demonstrate that the decline is not confined to pre-bachelor levels, and is not necessarily the result of a movement towards the Vocational and Educational Training (VET) sector by pre-bachelor students, as DEST has asserted.

Table 1: Commencing Indigenous-Australian and non-Indigenous domestic students (without enabling and non-award courses), showing percentage change on previous year, 2002-2004.

Course	2002	2003	% change on 2002	2004	% change on 2003
Indigenous					
Higher Degree	245	272	-	302	-
Other Postgraduate	266	238	-	273	-
Sub-total Postgrad	511	476	-6.8%	575	+20.7%
Undergraduate	2,700	2,657	-1.6%	2,454	-7.6%
Total	3,211	3,133	-2.4%	3,029	-3.3%
Non-Indigenous					
Higher Degree	37,525	40,423	-	39,157	-
Other Postgraduate	35,977	36,434	-	34,565	-
Sub-total Postgrad	73,592	76,891	+4.5%	71,007	-7.7%
Undergraduate	175,666	166,499	-5.2%	163,288	-1.9%
Total	249,258	243,390	-2.4%	234,295	3.7%
Indigenous PG % of PG Total	0.69%	0.62%	-	0.8%	-
Indigenous UG % of UG Total	1.54%	1.6%	-	1.5%	-
Indigenous % of Total	1.29%	1.29%	-	1.29%	-

In 2002 DEST altered its formula for collecting student statistics, which has made it very difficult to consistently analyse student growth across the whole decade. However, it is worth noting that pre-2002 figures demonstrated a significant decline in absolute numbers of Indigenous-Australian undergraduate students after 1999. There was an 8.2% drop in Indigenous-Australian enrolments in 2000 (commencing and continuing students), which NIPAAAC believes reflects the impact of the year 2000 reforms of ABSTUDY.

Moreover, there has been no growth in Indigenous-Australian undergraduate participation rates over the past decade when considered in relation to Indigenous-Australian population growth. Indigenous-Australian undergraduate students were 1.08% of the domestic student population in 1996, when the Indigenous-Australian population was 2.0% of the total. They were 1.17% of the domestic student population in 2001, when the Indigenous-Australian population was 2.2

1.2 Postgraduate Students

For postgraduate students, the gap between Indigenous-Australian and non-Indigenous participation is even wider than for undergraduate students. In 2004, there were 1,224 Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students, out of a total of 173,109 Australian domestic postgraduates.⁵ Those figures put Indigenous postgraduates at 0.7% of the overall domestic postgraduate student population (See Table 2).

TABLE 2: All Indigenous and non-Indigenous domestic postgraduate students by Broad Level of Course, showing increase in Indigenous student participation relative to overall growth in student population, 2002 – 2004

Course	2002	2003	2004
Indigenous			
Higher Degree	638	683	792
Other Postgraduate	391	396	432
Total Postgraduate	1,029	1,079	1,224
Non-Indigenous			
Higher Degree	100,884	109,309	112,829
Other Postgraduate	58,252	60,619	59,056
Total Postgraduate	159,136	169,928	171,885
All PG students (Indigenous and non-Indigenous)	160,165	170,438	173,109
Indigenous HD% of Total HD	0.63%	0.62%	0.7%
Indigenous % of Total	0.64%	0.63%	0.7%

The growth in Indigenous-Australian postgraduate student numbers between 2002 and 2004 was slightly higher than for undergraduate students. However, in relative terms, the growth in Indigenous-Australian participation in higher education has not kept pace with growth overall of the Indigenous-Australian population. In 1992, there were 344 postgraduate students, making up 0.37% of the domestic postgraduate population. Indigenous-Australians made up 1.4% of the Australian population.⁶ In 2001 Indigenous-Australian postgraduates were 0.61% of domestic postgraduate enrolments, and the proportion of Indigenous-Australians in the Australian population had grown to 2.2%. More recent population figures are not available but the trends demonstrate that Indigenous-Australian participation rates are currently further from reflecting their appropriate reference value than they were in 1991.

⁵ This figure does not include overseas enrolments so that the proportion of Indigenous students can be compared to the proportion of Indigenous-Australians in the Australian population.

⁶ Population at 1991 Census. See *Achieving Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes: Indigenous-Australians in Higher Education*, DEST, August 2002, p.3.

1.3 Student Unions and Indigenous-Australian Participation

Student unions have played a significant role in facilitating participation growth since Indigenous-Australians first entered higher education in the 1960s. As will be discussed in the following section, student unions provide representation, advocacy, support, low-cost services, and opportunities for the expression and celebration of Indigenous-Australian cultures. They have been responsible for advocating greater access for Indigenous-Australian students and for assisting in the retention of Indigenous-Australian students by improving the quality of their education experiences. It is likely that without the support and representation of student unions, Indigenous-Australian participation rates would be significantly lower than their current levels.

2. The Likely Effect of the Legislation on the Provision of Student Services by Campus-Based Student Unions

2.1 Representation and Support

The role of student unions in advocating for student rights and channeling concerns at the university and governmental levels can only be supported through universal student membership. NIPAAAC is strongly opposed to the restriction that VSU would impose on the rights of students to represent themselves, whether it be through membership on university boards and councils, by responding to Senate Inquiries or by forming democratic student mechanisms. Although some of those activities are themselves performed at a low cost, the decimation of the overall student union framework would drastically reduce the capacity of student unions to play a representation role in general, for example by making it impossible for student unions to employ research staff or hold student elections.

Given that Indigenous-Australians remain significantly under-represented and have one of the most marginalized voices in higher education, the role that student unions play in advocating for more equitable access to higher education and providing a channel for Indigenous-Australians to represent themselves *vis a vis* university and government interests is particularly important.

Student unions, in general, have acknowledged the importance of Indigenous-Australian control of Indigenous-Australian affairs and have created specific avenues for Indigenous-Australian students to represent themselves. Some student unions, for example, have representative positions for Indigenous-Australian student officers on their executive and/or council and some have Indigenous-Australian student committees.

Other departments in many student unions, such as women's departments, queer departments and environment departments have also often been inclusive of issues concerning Indigenous-Australian students. Environment departments, for example, are involved each year in organising a national

environmental conference called Students of Sustainability, in which issues for Indigenous-Australians occupy a prominent place on the agenda.

Student unions have historically worked in the interests of students to maintain a check on the cost of education in order to ensure that universities remain open to people from a variety of backgrounds, including low socio-economic. They currently have to work against strong trends towards a user-pays system under which higher education is increasingly becoming an exclusive and unaffordable domain. Their work is not only confined to education fees, but also involves other financial concerns, including transport costs and student income support. Indigenous-Australian students, the majority of whom come from positions of socio-economic disadvantage, clearly benefit from the representative role of student unions in this regard.

In addition to financially related issues, student unions represent the concerns of Indigenous-Australian students to universities and government in a number of other ways that address the specific demographics of Indigenous-Australian students. These include:

- * Anti-Racism and cultural inclusion: Student unions have been particularly active in monitoring racism on campus, and encouraging universities to address issues that affect the ability of Indigenous-Australian students to feel safe and comfortable on campus. Some unions, for example, have performed 'racism' audits to identify curriculum content that is racist or exclusive of Indigenous-Australian world views or to identify racist graffiti that needs to be removed.

- * Representing part-time and external students: Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students have a higher than average rate of part-time and external attendance at universities. Most student unions provide avenues for the particular needs of part-time and external students to be represented, through specific committees that feed information and concerns back to their universities.

- * Rural and Isolated students: Student unions also represent the needs of rural and isolated students, such as by monitoring to quality of distance and external education programs and suggesting ways to improve university services to those studying off campus. This has a benefit for Indigenous-Australian students, over one third of whom are classified as rural or isolated.

2.2 Student Activism

The role of student unions in organising campaigns about education, social justice and environmental issues has been heavily criticized by the current Federal Government. NIPAAAC believes that the criticism is unwarranted, and has a basis in the Federal Government's desire to silence opposition to its ideology and policies.

Student unions have a right and responsibility to take an interest in broad political issues that affect the lives of students. Student rights are not only limited to education-related issues, but also include human rights, rights for minority groups, social justice issues and environmental concerns. Additionally, the right of student unions to organize and participate in political campaigns is underpinned by the fact that those decisions are made through the democratic mechanisms of student unions, including student councils and collectives.

The right of students to participate in political campaigns is particularly important to Indigenous-Australian students whose access to university has a basis in public opposition to racist policies and actions, and in the advancement of broader political rights, including human rights and rights to education.

2.3 Campus Life and Cultural Inclusion

Many criticisms of VSU have focused on its likely impact on civic education and extra-curricular activities. Certainly, VSU would impact on the capacity of student unions to fund and coordinate a wide range of campus activities, clubs and societies. Many Indigenous-Australian students participate in clubs, such as the Koori and Gubba Club at Latrobe University, that receive funding from their student unions. Such clubs provide an opportunity for Indigenous-Australian students to meet and support each other, and make an important contribution to raising awareness amongst students about Indigenous-Australian issues.

Furthermore, student unions participate in, and help organize, Indigenous-Australian cultural events and days of importance. For example, many student unions organize well-attended BBQs, dinners and concerts to recognize the National Day of Healing on 26 May. In this respect, student unions also provide significant support to the role of Indigenous Higher Education Units in acknowledging cultural events and effectively promoting cultural inclusion.

The role of student unions in providing social and cultural spaces is particularly important for Indigenous-Australian students who identify 'cultural isolation' as one of the key reasons for not accessing, or dropping out of, university.⁷

2.4 Advocacy

Many Indigenous-Australian students access their on-campus Indigenous Higher Education Units for support and advocacy because they feel more comfortable in Indigenous-centred environments. However, Indigenous-Australian students also rely on the support and advocacy services of student

⁷ *Achieving Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes: Indigenous Australians in Higher Education*, DEST, August 2002, p.19.

unions because their independent status allows them to be critical of university practices. Sometimes Indigenous-Australian students require an independent avenue for complaints about issues directly concerning their Indigenous Higher Education Units, such as the conduct of a staff member within the Unit or an assessment appeal for work that was marked by Indigenous Higher Education Unit staff. In those cases, student unions provide vital support in terms of research and case management.

Student union advocacy staff members are also well trained in the internal university and external complaints mechanisms for racial discrimination, and provide valuable assistance to Indigenous-Australian students in this regard.

2.5 Services

Low rates of retention and progress for Indigenous-Australian students are strongly connected with student poverty. This impacts on students' ability to find adequate study time because it conflicts with work commitments. It also affects attendance rates because students often cannot afford to pay education related expenses and travel costs. Poverty also impacts indirectly on student performance by affecting the health and well-being of students.

In its year 2000 report the AVCC found, for example, that Indigenous-Australian students were often unable to cover the travel costs to their places of study. 37.8% of Indigenous-Australian undergraduates reported that they miss class 'frequently' or 'sometimes' because they cannot afford to travel to campus. Indigenous-Australian undergraduate students were more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous students to miss classes because they could not afford the travel costs.⁸

As a result, Indigenous-Australian students are reliant on the many services that student unions are able to provide free of charge and at a low cost. These include free and cheap meals, low-cost photocopying, car-pooling schemes, free computing services, scholarships, interest-free loans and second hand textbooks. Some of the services most commonly accessed by Indigenous-Australian students are outlined in more detail below.

Due to the universal nature of student unionism, unions are able to subsidise certain services to keep costs low. Due to the fact that students control their union services, they have also retained an altruistic interest in keeping the cost of services appropriate to student budgets. If VSU was introduced, the cost of services would increase under a profit-driven user pays system that not would not cater for the needs of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

⁸ Michael Long and Martin Hayden, *Paying Their Way: A Survey of Undergraduate University Student Finances*, Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, October 2001, p.99 – 102, p.141

In addition, under the current system where student unions manage certain services on the principles of inclusion and accessibility, they have retained an interest in catering for a broad base of students with a diversity of needs. As such, they have sought to maintain flexibility, for example by providing after hours services to a small pool of students, rather than being motivated by stricter laws of supply and demand. This is particularly important for Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students, who have a higher than average rate of part-time and external attendance at universities, and often require access to certain services after hours, such as food outlets and computing services.

Some of the services on which Indigenous-Australian students are most heavily reliant are outlined in the following sections.

2.5.1 Financial Aid

In its submission to the DEST Issues Paper, *Achieving Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes: Indigenous-Australians in Higher Education*, the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee (AVCC) demonstrates that Indigenous-Australian students clearly rely on loans to cover education and living costs while studying. The AVCC reported that in 2001, 21.1% of Indigenous-Australian students had taken out a repayable loan, more than twice the average of 10.5% for non-Indigenous students.⁹

Many student unions provide interest-free loans for education related expenses, living costs and debt consolidation. It is unlikely that an interest-free loan system would be offered by universities in the absence of universal student unionism.

2.5.2 Childcare

Many student unions also provide free or subsidised childcare services. Any legislation that reduced the ability of student unions to provide childcare services would impact adversely on the ability of students with children to participate in higher education, including a high number of Indigenous-Australian students. The AVCC report found that 22.1% of Indigenous-Australian students had dependent children in 1999, compared with 11.7% of non-Indigenous students.¹⁰ Of all Indigenous-Australian students with dependent children, 25.7% were women and 13.7% were men, indicating that a loss of childcare services would impact particularly heavily on Indigenous-Australian female students.

Alternative arrangements by which universities took over the operation of certain student union services would not necessarily guarantee the provision of adequate free or low-cost childcare, given that student unions are

⁹ Submission by the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee to the DEST Issues Paper, *Achieving Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes: Indigenous Australians in Higher Education*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Paying their Way*, p.127

currently in a position to subsidise childcare through income from other services. It is likely that childcare would be provided on a user-pays basis and would more expensive than under current arrangements.

When a form of voluntary student unionism existed in Western Australia, women's departments lost the majority of their funding and childcare services were downsized as a result.

2.5.3 Scholarships

In the absence of an adequate number of targeted scholarships for Indigenous-Australian students and other students from low socio-economic backgrounds, some student unions have developed and funded their own scholarships. The Wollongong University Postgraduate Association (WUPA), for example, has secured funding and is currently developing a targeted scholarship for Indigenous-Australian Honours students, known as the Colin Markham Indigenous Scholarship.

2.5.4 Computing Services

Access to quality computing and the Internet has been an ongoing problem for Indigenous-Australian students, many of whom cannot afford to own a computer. It is almost impossible now to attend university without owning or having reliable access to a computer, yet access to computers through university libraries or laboratories has become more and more difficult with increase in demand.

Many student unions fill an important gap by providing free computing centres with good quality equipment and low-cost printing. Some Postgraduate Student Associations, such as at RMIT and the University of Western Sydney, provide postgraduate-specific lounges with 24 hour access to computing and kitchen facilities. The lounges are well utilized and also provide a social outlet for students.

2.5.5 Second-Hand Textbooks

The cost of books and equipment account for a significant proportion of student budgets. The AVCC study of Australian Undergraduate University Student Finances found that full-time students spend around 10 per cent of their budget on course-related costs, or an average of \$1231 a year.¹¹ Course readers are priced at up to \$30 each and textbooks average at around \$80 each.¹² In addition, the government closed the Education Textbook Subsidy Scheme (ETSS) in 2004, resulting in textbook price increases of up to 10%.

¹¹ *Paying their Way*, p.36.

¹² *A Hand Up Not a Hand Out: Renewing the Fight Against Poverty*, Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship, Community Affairs References Committee, p.295.

Many Indigenous-Australian students cannot afford to buy new textbooks and have also been adversely affected by the closure of the ETSS. Student unions currently provide a valuable service in making second-hand textbooks available to purchase. Due to the labour-intensive nature of supplying second-hand textbook services, it is unlikely that student unions would be able to provide such services if their funding was significantly decreased.

3. The Likely Effect of the Legislation on the Provision of Student Services by National Student Unions

At a national level, student organizations such as NIPAAAC, CAPA and NUS, defend student rights by representing student interests at the university and governmental level, opposing policy that would have a detrimental impact on higher education access and quality, generating research about student issues and experiences, and providing information to students about their rights. The VSU legislation is likely to render much of the work of national student organizations impossible because student unions would be forced to guard limited funds for services and representation on their own campuses.

In this section we will outline the likely impact of VSU on NIPAAAC. NIPAAAC strongly supports the roles of CAPA and NUS, and concurs with their findings about the impact of VSU on the ability of national student unions to provide student services.

Key aims of NIPAAAC are to increase the participation of Indigenous-Australians in postgraduate education, and to ensure that postgraduate education experiences and outcomes for Indigenous-Australian students are positive and culturally appropriate.

The objectives of NIPAAAC are as follows:

- (a) to provide a network for Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students;
- (b) to act as advocate for, and to represent the interests of, Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students at a national level;
- (c) to promote reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous-Australians;
- (d) to promote research into Indigenous-Australian issues and the training of Indigenous-Australian researchers;
- (e) to educate researchers on appropriate protocols when dealing with issues of cultural and social significance to Indigenous-Australians;
- (f) to liaise with universities, governments and other national associations with a view to promoting these objectives;
- (g) to promote the participation by Indigenous-Australians as equals in a national community of postgraduate scholarship.

The aims and objectives of NIPAAAC are fulfilled in some of the following ways:

- * Regular contribution to Federal and university level higher education policy discussions and reforms through briefing papers, Senate and Parliamentary Inquiry submissions and membership on the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC).
- * Compiling qualitative and quantitative research reports for use by government and university departments, including statistical analyses of Indigenous-Australian postgraduate participation rates, a study of Indigenous-Australian postgraduate student experiences and needs, and a current research project about the effectiveness and suitability of Indigenous-Australian research ethics in Australian universities.
- * Providing information about Indigenous-Australian postgraduate education to other interest groups by making research reports, briefing papers and submissions available on the NIPAAC website.
- * Providing regular news updates and other relevant information to assist with the studies of Indigenous-Australian postgraduate students through the NIPAAC email list, which has approximately 200 members. The email list also provides an important networking opportunity for postgraduate students.
- * Compiling information packs for student unions to assist in their representation and support of Indigenous-Australian students.
- * Providing information, where relevant, to individual students who are facing particular problems at university with regard to their rights and their avenues for complaint or appeal.

The capacity of NIPAAC to fulfil its role as a peak advocacy, research, support and representation organization would be drastically jeopardised in a VSU scenario. Reduced funding would reduce NIPAAC's capacity to coordinate executive meetings, maintain an office space, manage its website, employ a part-time researcher and participate in national and state forums that involve travel costs. VSU legislation would therefore be directly detrimental to the ongoing struggle to improve the participation rates and experiences of Indigenous-Australians in the education system.