

POLICY BRIEF

SHARING RESEARCH TRAINING PROGRAM FUNDING ACROSS UNIVERSITIES TO STRENGTHEN INDIGENOUS HDR SUPERVISION AND COMPLETIONS

Professors Maria Raciti and Bronwyn Fredericks
ARC Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures (CE230100027)

Executive Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students demonstrate remarkable resilience in navigating research programs. Yet, their full potential remains unrealised due to systemic barriers, including limited access to appropriate supervision by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics that could elevate completion rates to match their non-Indigenous peers, and drive their academic and scholarly success.

This brief proposes a formal Research Training Program (RTP) funding portability mechanism that enables cross-institutional Indigenous supervision arrangements, transforming the current informal cultural load¹ practices into recognised, funded partnerships that will improve completion rates while building national Indigenous research capability, and success, along with tangible outcomes for communities.

Key recommendations:

- Introduce RTP portability for Indigenous HDR supervision
- Formalise cross-institutional supervision through shared funding and recognition
- Establish a national Indigenous HDR supervision register

Purpose

The purpose of this policy brief is to recommend a cross-institutional sharing model of the RTP to increase access by Australian Indigenous HDR students to Australian Indigenous HDR supervisors. This approach addresses the underrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HDR students in research enrolments and completions. It also enhances the cultural integrity of supervision by enabling access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise across the sector.

¹ Cultural load refers to the often invisible additional workload borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the workplace beyond their formal roles that can lead to burnout and inequity if not acknowledged or compensated (Australian Public Service Commission, 2023)

Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain significantly underrepresented in HDR programs in Australia. In 2023, Indigenous HDR students made up just 1.3% of all HDR enrolments, despite comprising 3.8% of the Australian population².

Beyond enrolments, Indigenous HDR completion rates are also concerning. Over the past decade, Indigenous HDR completion rates have hovered between 50–60% nationally, compared to 70–75% for non-Indigenous students³.

A barrier to improving Indigenous HDR outcomes is the limited availability of appropriate Indigenous academic supervisors. Indigenous academic supervisors represent only 1.1% of the university workforce and are thinly distributed across the sector⁴. Consequently, many Indigenous HDR students cannot access Indigenous supervision within their institution, particularly those in regional locations or specialised disciplines.

While cross-institutional supervision is theoretically possible, in practice it often relies on informal arrangements. Indigenous supervisors are frequently engaged as unpaid, external contributors, with their work occurring above their formal load and without recognition in workload models, performance reviews, promotion criteria or scholarly contributions.

This invisible labour **constitutes a form of cultural load**.

Such conditions actively discourage Indigenous academics from participating in cross-institutional supervision, further limiting students' access to culturally safe and academically rigorous Indigenous expertise.

Compounding this, the current RTP funding model restricts financial support to the student's enrolling institution. This disincentivises the development of formal, equitable co-supervision arrangements across universities.

Without reform to enable RTP sharing and workload recognition, Indigenous research training will remain **structurally inequitable**, and Indigenous academic capacity will continue to be overstretched.

To address these structural barriers and advance equitable research outcomes, the following policy recommendations propose a coordinated, national approach to support cross-institutional Indigenous HDR supervision through RTP funding reform and institutional collaboration.

² Department of Education (2024) 2023 Section 6 – First Nations students. Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2023-section-6-first-nations-students>

³ Universities Australia (2023) Indigenous Strategy Annual Report: July 2023. Available at: <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/UA-2023-Indigenous-Strategy-Report.pdf>

⁴ Ibid

Recommendations

#1 RTP Portability Mechanism

To support Indigenous HDR students, a pro-rata sharing of RTP funding should be enabled to follow Indigenous supervisors to their home institutions through formal cost-sharing agreements.

This initiative would be available to Indigenous HDR students in cases where cultural, disciplinary, methodological or ethics expertise is not accessible at their enrolling institution, or when the student expresses a preference for co-supervision by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander academic based at another institution.

Governance of this arrangement would involve joint supervision agreements that clearly define roles, responsibilities, and performance indicators. Over time, this process would be facilitated through a national Indigenous HDR supervision portal.

#2 Formalised Cost-Sharing Agreements

A standardised template framework should be established to guide supervision load allocation across institutions. Administrative costs would be shared proportionally, reflecting each institution's level of supervisory contribution. Performance metrics, such as HDR completion rates, time to completion, and achievement of student milestones, would be used to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these arrangements.

To ensure institutional accountability and recognition, participation in joint supervision should be formally embedded in workload models, performance reviews, and promotion criteria at both the home and host institutions.

#3 National Indigenous HDR Supervision Register

A centralised database of Indigenous academics should be established to facilitate cross-institutional HDR supervision, organised by discipline and research expertise areas. This resource would have governance oversight provided by Indigenous academic leadership to ensure cultural integrity and accountability.

Participation in the database would be strictly opt-in, with controlled access granted to HDR coordinators to maintain privacy and respect individual preferences. To support sustainable supervision practices, the system would include capacity planning features that track supervision loads, helping to prevent overcommitment and promote equitable distribution of responsibilities across institutions. The database would additionally allow for a secondary benefit, that of a listing of possible panel members for HDR milestones, along with possible thesis examiners.

From Current Practice to Best Practice

The table below illustrates how these recommendations would shift current practices.

Current Practice	Best Practice
Informal, ad hoc cross-institutional supervision	Formal RTP portability for Indigenous HDR supervision
Supervision above-load and unpaid	Cost-sharing and workload recognition between home and host institutions
No access to RTP funding for co-supervisors	Shared supervision agreements with performance metrics
Invisible labour is not counted in performance reviews or promotion applications	Inclusion in workload, performance and promotion
Reproduces cultural load	Supports equity, wellbeing, and completion

Alignment with National Priorities

Universities Accord (2024): Centres equity and Indigenous peoples in higher education reform.

Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy (2022-2025): Aims to increase HDR completions and support Indigenous staff advancement.

National Research Infrastructure (2021): Promotes Indigenous research expertise and cultural respect in national infrastructure planning.

Closing the Gap (2020): Sets goals for equitable Indigenous workforce participation via education and employment.

Benefits

Immediate benefits

- ☑ Boost Indigenous HDR completion rates to achieve parity.
- ☑ Support culturally safe, discipline-specific supervision with fair workload recognition.
- ☑ Enable cross-institutional collaboration to strengthen Indigenous research.

Long-term benefits

- ☑ Strengthen Indigenous research training through a sustainable, sector-wide model.
- ☑ Equitable and inclusive research supervision practices.
- ☑ Develop a scalable framework to support other underrepresented groups.

Consequences of Continued Inaction

Without reform, cross-institutional Indigenous supervision of Indigenous HDR students will remain an informal, invisible and unrecognised cultural load.

This perpetuates:

- ☒ Low Indigenous HDR students' completion rates and loss of research talent.
- ☒ Uncompensated labour burdens leading to burnout and limiting career progression among Indigenous academics.
- ☒ Undermine sector-wide goals for equity, excellence, and innovation through missed opportunities to incorporate Indigenous research and perspectives.

Call to Action

Indigenous HDR students deserve equitable access to Indigenous supervision.

This policy brief provides a practical roadmap for achieving measurable outcomes that will enhance Indigenous research training outcomes and strengthen Australia's overall research capability and capacity.

We call on university leaders, government bodies and research organisations to champion this approach as a strategic investment in the nation's research future, advancing both equity and excellence in Australian higher education.

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