

Guidance in Creating Honours (Fourth Year) and Postgraduate Equity Pathways in Tertiary Psychology for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Applicants: A Report from the Equity Pathways Working Group as part of the AIPEP Community of Practice.



AIPEP
Australian Indigenous
Psychology Education Project
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Transforming Indigenous
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This project was led by the Pathways Working Group members* from the AIPEP Community of Practice, chaired by Associate Professor Jeneva Ohan and Dr Stacey McMullen, in collaboration and through the governance of the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP).

*Membership is listed in full on page 5 and 6.

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**These two authors contributed equally to this work

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Foreword

This document is the result of efforts of a Working Group consisting of psychology academics from across Australia as part of the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project's (AIPEP's) Community of Practice. As there was little (or no) guidance to developing equity pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants in upper levels of tertiary psychology education, we wanted to offer something to help people who are wanting to develop such initiatives where they work. Moreover, we thought that in providing guidance we could begin more conversations about equity pathways, and stimulate others to develop such pathways where they might not have thought to do so before. We also hope that this stimulates and helps psychology educators in other colonised nations to do the same.

We have learned much in this process; in particular, about how we can work towards a more equitable nation. We have been surprised (but heartened) at how much this initiative excited others to take steps towards equity. Before beginning this work, it seemed inevitable to us that instigating nation-wide change in taking concerted efforts towards equity would be difficult... but we did not find this to be the case. Having said that, the degree to which this nation-wide change will be accomplished depends in part on you (the reader) taking action. With this document, we hand this responsibility to you now.

At the time of this writing, Jeneva Ohan was living and working on Noongar Country as an Associate Professor and Director of the Clinical Psychology Programs at the University of Western Australia (where she started and/or supported equity pathways for Honours and Postgraduate entry). Jeneva is not Indigenous, and is continually learning about Aboriginal culture. Stacey McMullen, is a proud Kooma woman who was born and raised on Awabakal Country. She was living and working on Awabakal Country as an Indigenous Scholar/Lecturer and Clinical Psychologist at the University of Newcastle at the time of writing.

Finally, we wish to thank our working group members, and the AIPEP team who coordinates the Community of Practice meetings. We wish to thank Professor Pat Dudgeon AM for her leadership of AIPEP. This effort sits in this firm context and through the support of a broader network that continues to move towards change in tertiary psychology education and in the discipline. We also wish to thank each other: it has, above all, been an excellent and memorable experience in working together.

We ask you not to reproduce this work without our permission.

Our best wishes,

Jeneva Ohan (non-Indigenous co-chair) and Stacey McMullen (Indigenous co-chair)

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A Report from the Equity Pathways Working Group as part of the AIPEP Community of Practice.

Background to the Working Group.

Undertaking Honours and Postgraduate studies in psychology is a desired pathway for many students; however, it has many and varied obstacles. Training involves several years of study, is costly, and is increasingly competitive at higher (and professional) levels. In particular, training to become a psychologist with an area of practice specialty (e.g., clinical psychology, neuropsychology, industrial-organisational psychology) after starting undergraduate tertiary psychology studies involves at least two entry points: the first at Honours (4th Year), and the second at Postgraduate level (for some higher education providers, the Postgraduate qualification is divided up into two separate programs of study, one at Level 3 (e.g., Masters of Professional Psychology), and one at Level 4 (e.g., Masters of Clinical Psychology), each with its own application process). Due to the highly regulated and resource-intensive nature of Postgraduate professional training programs, many have small or modestly sized student cohorts, making entry difficult due to their highly competitive nature.

The proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students is well below parity across all higher education levels in psychology. In 2021, the proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in Undergraduate psychology courses in Australia was 1.8%, compared to population representation of approximately 3% (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021). This disparity widens at the Postgraduate level, where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students comprised 0.97% and 1.35% of students enrolled in postgraduate coursework and research degrees, respectively (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021). Even though there is an increase in the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander psychologists, there is some indication that the parity gap is widening rather than closing (Clark & Hirvonen, 2022).

There is significant desire and need to make psychology programs more accessible to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. This is especially the case at Honours and Postgraduate levels, where 'bottlenecks' are often met. Historically, psychology and psychologists have played a key role in practices and policies that have detracted from and been detrimental to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' social and emotional wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Dudgeon & Walker, 2015). There is a national movement within the discipline toward righting this wrong. Increasing the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander psychology graduates, and hence the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander psychologists, will play a crucial role in ensuring that Indigenous voices contribute to the national conversation on psychology and the direction of psychological training and practice in Australia. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander-led mental health solutions, services, and professionals are crucial to addressing the mental health and wellbeing disparities experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians. Further, training and the discipline of psychology stands to learn much from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and knowledges.

Committing to initiatives that support the applications, enrolment, and retention of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in Honours and Postgraduate psychology programs is

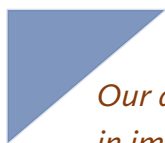
one action we can take to support the Australian Psychological Society's (APS) Apology, to serve the aims of the Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA), to action the Terms of Reference of the Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP), and to move our nation forward and contribute towards closing the mental health outcomes gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

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Purpose of the Working Group.

As part of the AIPEP's *Community of Practice*, self-selecting psychology academic staff from around Australia collaborated on a Working Group with the following purpose:



Our aim is to provide guidance for higher education providers (HEPs) to adopt in implementing pathways for Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander applicants' entry into Psychology Honours (4th Year) and Postgraduate study in Australia

This Working Group was chaired by one Indigenous (Stacey McMullen) and one non-Indigenous (Jeneva Ohan) member. The process had oversight from those coordinating the AIPEP's Community of Practice (Belle Selkirk, Joanna Alexi, and Pat Dudgeon). As such, this was a collective effort of Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff from various tertiary education providers from across Australia.

This document promotes and describes ways that higher education providers around Australia can design and implement equitable entry pathways into their Honours and/or Postgraduate

programs. The steps and considerations described herein are intended to promote equity by increasing the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander psychology applicants, students, and graduates in Honours and Postgraduate studies. In so doing, this will contribute to the aims of AIPEP, which include “improving the recruitment, retention and graduation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander psychology students.” This is expected to also contribute to a further mission of AIPEP, which involves building “the capacity of the emerging mental health workforce to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.” (Dudgeon et al., 2016).

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Dudgeon, P., Darlaston-Jones, D., Phillips, G., Newnham, K., Brideson, T., Cranney, J., Hammond, S., Harris, J., Herbert, J., Homewood, J., & Page, S. (2016, Retrieved 2022, November 29th). Home – Australian Indigenous Psychology Education Project (AIPEP). (indigenouslypsych.org.au).

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AIPEP-2 Project Team

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Guidance for Instantiating an Equity Pathway.

The following describes a general set of recommendations for psychology education providers in Australia to consider in establishing a pathway that will help increase applications, admissions, retention, and graduation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to Honours and/or Postgraduate degrees in Psychology.

As **general principles** underlying the process of instantiating equity entry pathways:



Seek consultation with and input from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people at multiple points along the way. This might include students, other staff, Aboriginal Elders, the education provider's Indigenous centre, and/or psychologists/practitioners.

Consult frequently and widely with psychology school/department staff in the process of developing a pathway in order to foster a sense of shared commitment and investment in the success of the pathway.

Consider broader system forces that underscore successful pathways and progression to Honours and Postgraduate Study (e.g., the cultural safety of the higher education provider and its School/Department of Psychology, and the relationship between the school/department of psychology and their Indigenous Education Centre), and how these might play a role in supporting students through this pathway to feel safe, connected, and valued.

As **specific recommendations**:

1. Recommendations for Allocations to Equity Pathways:

There are different ways of allocating entry pathways to consider:

- a. **Threshold-Only Entry:** Set a pathway with clearly articulated and communicated threshold criteria, guaranteeing entrance for all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants who meet these criteria.

Wherever possible, consider setting threshold criteria without a ‘cap’ on the number of places for entry through these pathways. This is because the alternative of ‘capping’ at a specified number of places can encourage competition amongst Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants, who are often part of the same peer group, which would increase pressure on students by suggesting that if there are more applicants than places available some applicants who meet the threshold criteria will not gain entry.

b. **Using Reserved Places:** For some programs, especially postgraduate programs with small or modest entry quotas, where it may be difficult to set a guaranteed entry threshold criteria, setting entry thresholds with a reserved number of places should be considered to support movement towards population-based parity.

A reserved number of places should be considered for programs that have a very limited number of intake places, but high demand (i.e., large number of applications). The number of reserved places might vary, aiming for about 10% of places to support movement towards population-based parity. In the case that 10% is fewer than 2 places, consider setting aside two places rather than one, as this enables some peer support.

If ‘caps’ are set on the number of entry places through this pathway, consider what will happen if there are more applicants who meet threshold criteria than there are places available. In this case, consider all equity pathway applicants via the standard pathway as well as this may then free up reserved pathway places.

2. For both of the above recommended equity pathways (i.e., using threshold-only and using reserved places), consider threshold criteria thoroughly and flexibly.

Thresholds for essential and desirable criteria should be thoroughly considered. For example, ‘*relevant experience*’ to the training program might be a desirable criteria, but might not be essential for a student to succeed in the program. Considering ‘relevant experience’ as necessary might disadvantage some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants who might not have had these opportunities but are still capable of completing the program.

Also consider ways to enable applicants through these pathways to describe their relevant and/or compensatory experience, such as through having sections in the application that query other relevant experiences in the case that they do not meet certain criteria.

Program staff will need to consider how these experiences would help that applicant to succeed in completing the program. What experiences would be relevant would likely differ by program, program level, and/or type of skill being considered. For example:

- Research-intensive programs: could consider other education/educational experiences, research-associated work, project management skills, report writing
- Clinical/professional programs: could consider a range of experiences related to professional and interpersonal skills, such as Aboriginal Health worker training, a Narrative Therapy diploma, previous employment that has involved working in public-facing roles, and/or experience of working and being within an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community or context.

3. Consider how to support applicants to establish their eligibility.

To be eligible for an equity pathway place, applicants will need to establish their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status in line with the education provider's policies. Find out how your education provider establishes Aboriginality and/or Torres Strait Islander status for incoming students, and consider ways to support applicants in completing this process.

4. Make the equity pathway available to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants, not just those already attending/who have attended that particular higher education provider.

The idea behind equity pathways is to enable more Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to enter the psychology workforce. Pathways should *not* be narrowed to only those applicants who have attended a particular higher education provider for a prior course. We recommend making any equity pathways accessible to *any and all* Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander applicants.

5. Consider how to inform potential students about these pathways early on in their studies.

Knowing that an equity pathway is available might serve as a welcome sign of respect, encouraging students to pursue studies and to overcome obstacles that they might be facing, or have faced, throughout their undergraduate degree.

Ensure that the pathway is thoroughly advertised so that potential applicants will see it. Let undergraduate and other potential students know about pathways (including those that exist at other providers) early, through a variety of ways of communicating (e.g., the AIPEP mail list and website, online, university course websites, through mentoring programs, via email, via the education provider's Indigenous centre, Aboriginal-controlled organisations, through other education provider support programmes) and repeat this information often.

6. Address potential stigma about the pathway, both during pathway development and during implementation.

Despite intentions to establish these pathways to promote equity and as part of enacting the APS Apology and AIPEP Terms of Reference, there is the possibility that such a pathway might carry stigma, such as negative assumptions about the ability of those who gain access through using it.

It is plain wrong: students entering an equity path have still demonstrated the underlying capability to succeed. It is also germane to address both staff and student perspectives through an educative and human rights lens. Involving many staff in the process of consultation to establish the pathway could be key to addressing concerns before the pathway is proposed and put in place. For staff and students, pathways should be described as being developed for equity reasons and information concerning gaps in mental health outcomes and psychology training among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people should be provided. Presenting the APS Apology is one means of promoting helpful and positive attitudes, understanding, and support.

It should also be made clear to applicants that the pathway by which they gain entrance to the program is not disclosed to others outside relevant staff. In other words, it is up to the

applicant to share whether or not they applied and/or gained entrance through the equity pathway; this is not up to staff members.

At some higher education providers, there may be other disciplines that have similar equity pathways already established who could provide additional ideas and assistance, including overcoming potential institutional barriers to implementation.

7. Support applicants in developing their application.

Consider how your school/department can support prospective applicants. Some possible ideas include later cutoff dates for applications depending on applicants' needs, and having a contact person for applicants to reach out to directly. This might be a dedicated staff member who prospective applicants can approach to find out more information and who will be responsive to questions along the way; this person could develop a short personable video explaining the pathway and warmly welcoming applicants to connect. Send messages of: come as you are, we are here to help, we want to hear from you.

Also support applicants who are not successful in gaining a place. Reach out to them, instil hope, and ask if there's anything else that can help them to work towards their goals, offering feedback on areas of their application that they can further develop.

8. Start early and find out what you need to do to implement the pathway.

Implementing an equity pathway might necessitate a proposal to your higher education provider's leadership (e.g., school executive group, Vice Chancellor). You might also wish to contact your state Equal Opportunities centre/commission (or equivalent) about what you are planning. There are likely dates by which you need to have the final version of the pathway outlined in order to implement it for the following year's application cycle. Start your development process early, with these dates in mind, and with a good idea of the process required at your university or higher education provider.

9. Seek and establish supported places (e.g., scholarships, bursaries).

Seek sources of funds and input from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and education providers/departments as to how funds could be allocated (e.g., multiple smaller vs fewer larger scholarships, timing). Furthermore, inform, encourage and advocate for the applications of students for existing sources of funds (e.g., as a scientific discipline, psychology students might qualify for science awards).

10. Consider retention strategies.

After implementing a pathway, think carefully about how to support students who gain entry to continue and be successful as they go through the program. Some possible ideas include connecting undergraduate and Postgraduate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students through mentoring programmes (e.g., in which Postgraduate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students mentor undergraduate students), cultural safety and awareness training for staff, connecting students in Postgraduate programmes across higher education providers and/or states, writing skills, study skills, and yarning groups are all possibilities. This should not be the sole responsibility of the student or Indigenous Education Centre on campus to work out; think about what the school can provide, and other areas that provide this support (e.g., library, graduate research school). Students could be encouraged to join AIPA as a

member (if provisionally registered) or associate member if a student. This may put them in touch with other Indigenous psychology students and/or registered psychologists for further inspiration. There might also be programs available (or that can be made available) to support the students' other needs, such as for housing, transportation, and/or laptops.

Participation in retention strategies should be voluntary.