



Abolition of Indigenous tutoring scheme will impact on the Government's education commitment

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The Abbott Government's decision to abolish the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) has been described by Australia's peak Indigenous doctor's representative body as undermining the Government's support for Indigenous education, particularly tertiary education.

The ITAS acknowledges Indigenous educational disadvantage, providing supplementary tutorial support to Indigenous students in order to increase participation and graduation rates. The scheme enables Indigenous Australian students to access up to a maximum of 2 hours per week per subject additional tutorial assistance during the teaching period and up to a maximum of 5 hours in total during the examination period.

CEO of the Australian Indigenous Doctor's Association (AIDA), Ms Kate Thomann, expressed her concern about the ITAS changes and the lack of consultation or notice given about the changes.

Ms Thomann says many of AIDA's student members have indicated that without the support provided by ITAS they would either have never enrolled in medicine in the first place or believe they would have dropped out early.

"Developing a skilled and highly professional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce is a major priority in closing the gap and supporting academic education," said Ms Thomann. "This decision is contrary to the statements by the Prime Minister and Ministers Scullion and Pyne that Indigenous education is both a priority and a prerequisite to closing the gap.

"AIDA has been successful in working with the strong support of Australia's Medical Deans and the heads of Post-graduate Medical Colleges to increase the number of Indigenous doctors in Australia and the ITAS program has been a key element in allowing Indigenous students to succeed.

"The abolition of ITAS will be a blow to this success just as we have finally achieved a significant milestone in 2011 when the number of first year Indigenous medical students reached population parity for the first time," said Ms Thomann. "It will be a terrible mistake if successful efforts to encourage our people into medical careers are undermined by a poorly thought out and unilateral decision to abolish this mentoring program."

Final year University of Wollongong medical student and AIDA Student Director, Mr Ben Armstrong, expressed his shock at news of ITAS's imminent demise. "This is really sad news."

Mr Armstrong said many Indigenous students relied on ITAS to support them through their degrees.

"Particularly for first-year students, ITAS has been a vital contributor to Indigenous students making it through the transition period," he said. "Our students often enter university having left family and community behind, travelling long distances from rural areas, and this first year for us includes huge amounts of change.

"Often it has also been a significant period of time since most students have undertaken formal study. ITAS supports our students for success.

"For the tutor also, ITAS also provides much-needed funds to support their own university journey.

"The emphasis on anti-truancy campaigns in primary and secondary education is important but why prioritise the beginning of the educational journey while seemingly sabotaging our success in tertiary education?" concluded Mr Armstrong.

AIDA has called for the Government to rethink the scrapping of ITAS and CEO Kate Thomann said she will be consulting with the Indigenous health and education sectors and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue with Ministers Scullion and Pyne.