

Introduction

- 1.1 Education is essential for providing Indigenous young people with opportunities and choices for the future. Addressing the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is a critical element in improving the quality of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In such a diverse country that is Australia, catering to the needs of regional, remote and metropolitan students requires flexible and responsive education delivery.
- 1.2 This inquiry has asked where the problems lie, given the gap remaining between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes, and also what is working well. We wanted to know what schools are delivering positive outcomes for students, what programs have not worked and what lessons have been learnt? It has asked how we can move young people back into the system after they have dropped out – what works for girls, what works for young mothers and their children, and what works for boys.
- 1.3 What the Committee has heard so far is that there are some very effective programs that are successfully engaging Indigenous students in a myriad of different settings, from remote to regional, boarding, scholarship, community, independent and city schools. However, the Committee has also heard that there are widespread community concerns in some areas, most significantly in relation to ABSTUDY arrangements.
- 1.4 Given these concerns, and in anticipation of an election being held in July 2016, the Committee resolved to issue this Interim Report so that these issues were highlighted as soon as possible and action could be taken. This report is not intended to be a comprehensive consideration of all issues raised, nor a complete interrogation of the veracity of all concerns and

issues raised by stakeholders. There has not been sufficient time to complete this report.

- 1.5 The Committee believes however that the issues contained in this report are of such concern that the Minister's consideration of these significant issues cannot be postponed.
- 1.6 As this report highlights, this inquiry is unfinished business. It is imperative that this inquiry be resumed in the next Parliament to build on and complete the valuable work undertaken thus far by this Committee and to do justice to all of the evidence received.

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.7 On 16 September 2015, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion asked the Committee to inquire into and report on educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- 1.8 The terms of reference called on the Committee to inquire into key aspects of educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students up to school leaving age, including but not limited to:
 - access to, participation in and outcomes of pre-schooling;
 - the provision of boarding school education and its outcomes;
 - access to, participation in, and benefits of different school models for indigenous students in different parts of Australia;
 - engagement and achievement of students in remote areas;
 - impacts on, and support for, families and communities whose children experience different models of educational services;
 - best practice models, both domestically and internationally; and
 - comparisons of school models in the transition to further education and employment outcomes.
- 1.9 The Committee sought and received submissions from a wide range of individuals, education groups and state and territory governments. To date, the Committee has received 61 submissions and 11 supplementary submissions which are listed at Appendix A.
- 1.10 The Committee held fifteen public hearings in Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales and in Canberra, hearing from over 200 witnesses. Witnesses at public hearings are listed at Appendix B.

- 1.11 The Committee did not have an opportunity to fulfil its planned hearing program in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Victoria or Tasmania. The opportunity to consider the specific needs of students and educators in regional and metropolitan Victoria and Tasmania in particular leaves a considerable gap in the inquiry.
- 1.12 The Committee did have the opportunity to visit schools in Brisbane, Adelaide, Cairns, Coen, Aurukun, Thursday Island, Newcastle, Sydney and Dubbo. The Committee offers its sincere thanks to those schools and the students it met with. These visits were invaluable to the inquiry and gave the Committee an appreciation of the scope of issues to be addressed, as well as the outstanding work being undertaken by many educators and students.
- 1.13 Recognising that it may not be easy for some to speak out about their education experiences, as well as calling for public submissions the Committee sought views by way of an anonymous online questionnaire. The questionnaire was promoted on the Committee's website and advertised through social media. The Committee also understands that many schools which the Committee visited used the questionnaire in preparation for students' meetings with Committee Members.
- 1.14 At the time of reporting, almost 550 questionnaire responses had been received. These responses have been invaluable in guiding the Committee's deliberations throughout the inquiry.

Structure of the report

- 1.15 Chapter 2 puts on record the extensive community concerns regarding ABSTUDY arrangements. It raises matters for the Minister's consideration as a matter of priority.
- 1.16 Chapter 3 makes some preliminary observations regarding gender equity and Direct Instruction teaching method. It also discusses the importance of this inquiry being continued by the Committee's successor in the 45th Parliament.
- 1.17 Although it is not usual for an interim report to list all submissions and exhibits received and public hearings held, as this report is being issued close to the conclusion of the 44th Parliament, these are listed at the appendices as noted above for the completeness of the inquiry record.