

Introduction

- 1.1 Education provides opportunities and choices for the future. Evidence shows that improving education outcomes is critical to improving the quality of life for a community. The difference it makes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples¹ was highlighted by the Prime Minister in February 2017 when he noted that ‘the data tells us that there is no employment gap...between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians with a university degree’.²
- 1.2 There is no shortage of examples of Indigenous people who have worked hard to achieve significant education and employment outcomes, often overcoming substantial disadvantage to do so. Throughout the inquiry, the committee was continually impressed by the energy and enthusiasm for learning displayed by Indigenous students from across Australia.
- 1.3 The committee was also heartened by the dedication of parents, teachers and elders who were working together to support student attendance and education outcomes.
- 1.4 Nonetheless, the gap in attendance and education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is an unavoidable fact that must be addressed.

¹ For ease of reading, this report will be using the term ‘Indigenous’ to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

² The Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP, Prime Minister, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 14 February 2017, p. 2.

Conduct of inquiry

- 1.5 On 16 September 2015, during the 44th Parliament, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, asked the House Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs to inquire into and report on key aspects of educational opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous 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.
- 1.6 The committee received 61 submissions and 11 supplementary submissions. It held 15 public hearings in Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales, and Canberra, hearing from over 200 witnesses. The committee conducted an anonymous online questionnaire regarding individual's education experiences, which received almost 550 responses.
- 1.7 On 4 May 2016, in anticipation of the dissolution of Parliament for a general election, the committee tabled an *Interim Report: First Steps*. The report made four recommendations:
- Recommendation 1:** The committee recommends that the Department of Human Services undertake an independent review of ABSTUDY with a view to the program being redesigned and the new system being fully operational at the latest by 30 June 2017.
- Recommendation 2:** The committee recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the Australian Government allocate an additional portion of the remaining funds available through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy to girls' education programs, comparable to that of boys' programs previously allocated funding through the Strategy, so to ensure gender equity.
- Recommendation 3:** The committee recommends that in evaluating future grant applications, the Australian Government ensure that there is equity in the number and especially the type of

girls' and boys' education programs funded, and if necessary, undertake to fund additional programs to ensure gender equity.

Recommendation 4: The committee recommends that, in the 45th Parliament, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs refer to the Indigenous Affairs Committee the Inquiry into educational opportunities and boarding arrangements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

- 1.8 As at the time of tabling, the committee has not yet received a government response to these recommendations.
- 1.9 On 19 October 2016, at the start of the 45th Parliament, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator the Hon Nigel Scullion, asked the committee to recommence the inquiry under the same terms of reference.
- 1.10 During the 45th Parliament, the committee also conducted two online questionnaires, one aimed at peak bodies and the other at teaching staff, including teaching assistants involved with educating Indigenous students, which received 384 responses.
- 1.11 In the 45th Parliament, the committee received 68 submissions, 11 supplementary submissions, 25 exhibits and held 19 public hearings, as well as site visits in Western Australia, Victoria, the Northern Territory, Queensland and Canberra at which the committee heard from 177 witnesses. A list of submissions and exhibits received during the 44th and 45th Parliaments is at Appendix A.
- 1.12 The committee offers its sincere thanks to all of the schools, individuals, and organisations that hosted it. These visits were invaluable to the inquiry and gave the committee a full appreciation of the scope of the issues being raised. Witnesses and site inspections are listed at Appendix B.

Acknowledgements

- 1.13 The committee acknowledges and thanks the members of the House Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs from the 44th Parliament for their efforts gathering evidence for this inquiry; in particular, it acknowledges the Chair, the Hon Dr Sharman Stone.
- 1.14 The committee also thanks the secretariat staff who worked on the inquiry, both during the 44th and 45th Parliaments. Finally, the committee thanks all those who contributed to the inquiry by making submissions, providing additional information, hosting a site visit or appearing at a public hearing. The committee also thanks the state and territory governments for supporting the committee's inquiry by providing submissions and access to schools.

Structure of report

- 1.15 The report is structured as follows:
- Chapter 1 lists the currently available data regarding access, attendance and educational outcomes;
 - Chapter 2 considers some of the barriers that many Indigenous students face throughout their education, ranging from early childhood through to secondary school;
 - Chapter 3 explores the key elements of culturally safe environments and the importance of teaching through language and culture;
 - Chapter 4 considers a number of programs and initiatives developed to encourage Indigenous students to attend and engage with school to achieve their education goals;
 - Chapter 5 discusses the importance of quality teaching, teacher training, and ongoing support and professional development for teachers as well as considering some of the pedagogies and education programs utilised by schools;
 - Chapter 6 considers Indigenous experiences of living away from home for study, examining both the opportunities and challenges presented by boarding; and
 - Chapter 7 outlines the funding arrangements for schools, programs and living away from home for study and considers Federal assistance for students living away from home for study and explores the costs of boarding and the federal funding available to meet these costs.

Data

- 1.16 The data concerning the education outcomes for Indigenous students continues to be of great concern. When the committee requested data during public hearings, it often found that the schools and state and territory governments did not collect and compile much of the information it requested. It appears that the data that is available and being relied on is a snapshot of information from limited sources. Therefore, the data only represents part of the picture regarding Indigenous education.
- 1.17 This chapter presents data received by the committee from submissions or outlined in the *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) *Education and Indigenous Wellbeing* paper. It outlines:
- the number of Indigenous students and where they are enrolled;

- attendance rates and attendance levels;
 - literacy and numeracy results;
 - Year 12 attainment; and
 - further education and employment outcomes.
- 1.18 The remainder of the report explores the challenges and social issues Indigenous students often face on their path to educational success.

Attendance

- 1.19 The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) advised the committee that in 2014 there were 192,500 Indigenous students enrolled in approximately 8,000 of Australia's 9,400 schools of which:
- 40 per cent (%) were in metropolitan areas;
 - 40% were in provincial areas;
 - 10% were in remote areas; and
 - 10% were in very remote areas.³
- 1.20 In 2014, 85% of Indigenous students were enrolled in government schools, 10% were enrolled in Catholic schools and 5% were enrolled in independent schools.⁴

Early childhood

- 1.21 Participation in early childhood education has been shown to improve the transition to full-time school. It is a strong predictor of future social, educational and occupational success, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Federal Government's early childhood education strategy aims for universal access for all children in the year before full-time schooling.⁵
- 1.22 PM&C advised the committee that:
- Since 2008, the Commonwealth Government has provided over \$2.8 billion through a series of National Partnership Agreements on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education to support States and Territories to increase preschool participation. Universal access aims to ensure that a quality preschool programme is available in the year before full-time school, for

³ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44th Parliament, p. 3.

⁴ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44th Parliament, p. 3.

⁵ Department of Education and Training, 'Universal Access to Early Childhood Education', <https://www.education.gov.au/universal-access-early-childhood-education>, accessed 29 September 2017.

600 hours a year, delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher who meets National Quality Framework requirements. National Partnership arrangements include a strong focus on lifting participation rates for Indigenous children.⁶

- 1.23 The 2017 Closing the Gap Report affirmed that 'Australian governments remain committed to closing the gap in the developmental outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by increasing their participation in quality early childhood education'.⁷
- 1.24 In 2015, nationally, 87% of Indigenous children were enrolled in early childhood education in the year before full-time school, compared with 98% of non-Indigenous children nationally. Of the Indigenous children enrolled, 92% were recorded as having attended⁸ early childhood education (see Figure 1.1).⁹

Figure 1.1 Proportion of children enrolled in early childhood education in the year before full-time schooling by Indigenous status and state/territory, 2015 (per cent)



Source Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 29.

- 1.25 Early childhood education attendance decreases with remoteness. In 2015, 95% of Indigenous children in both major cities and regional centres were enrolled in early childhood education in the year before full-time schooling and were recorded as having attended.¹⁰ This was only

⁶ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44th Parliament, p. 2.

⁷ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 26.

⁸ Present for at least one hour during the reference period. The census date for the 2015 Collection is Friday 7 August 2015, with the one-week reference period spanning 3 of August to 9 August 2015. Some jurisdictions may adopt a two-week reference period, which means the permissible period spans 27 July to 16 August 2015 inclusive.

⁹ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 29.

1% lower than non-Indigenous children. This figure drops markedly for Indigenous children in remote areas, with 82% attendance, a full 13% drop against non-Indigenous students (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Proportion of children enrolled in early childhood education in the year before full-time schooling by Indigenous status and remoteness, 2015, (per cent)



Source Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 29.

Primary and secondary

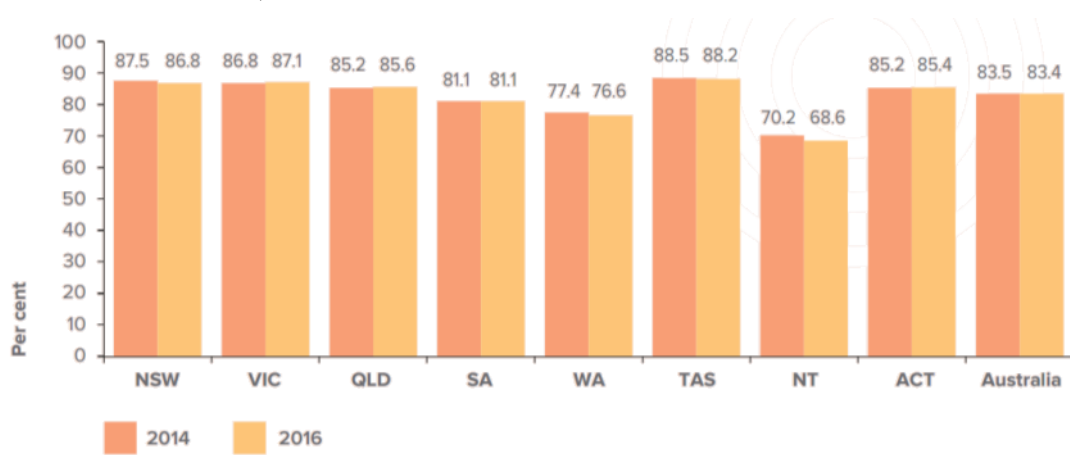
- 1.26 It is during primary and secondary schooling that the attendance rates for Indigenous students drops significantly, and with the decline in attendance comes a correlating decline in education attainment.
- 1.27 The Closing the Gap Report (Figure 1.3) stated that, in Semester 1 of 2016, the national school attendance rate (Year 1 to 10) for Indigenous students was 83.4%, almost 10% lower than the comparable rate for non-Indigenous students at 93.1%.
- 1.28 Of those students attending school, only 49% of Indigenous students attended 90% or more of the time, compared to 79.3% of non-Indigenous students.¹¹
- 1.29 School attendance and attendance levels decrease with remoteness. In 2016, the attendance rate for Indigenous students in inner regional areas was 86.9%, compared with 66.4% in very remote areas (Figure 1.4).¹² Of those attending school, 59% of students in inner regional areas attended 90% or more of the time, compared with 21.9% of students in very remote areas.¹³

¹¹ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 35.

¹² Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 36.

¹³ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 36.

Figure 1.3 Indigenous student attendance rates (per cent) Year 1 to 10 combined, by state/territory, Semester 1, 2014 and 2016



Source Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 36.

Figure 1.4 Student attendance rates (per cent) Year 1 to 10 combined, by Indigenous status and remoteness, Semester 1, 2016



Source Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 36.

1.30 In addition to this, many students living in very remote communities may be highly mobile throughout the school year. The Northern Territory Department of Education advised the committee that on any one day, approximately 20% of Indigenous students in very remote communities may be “out of community”.¹⁴

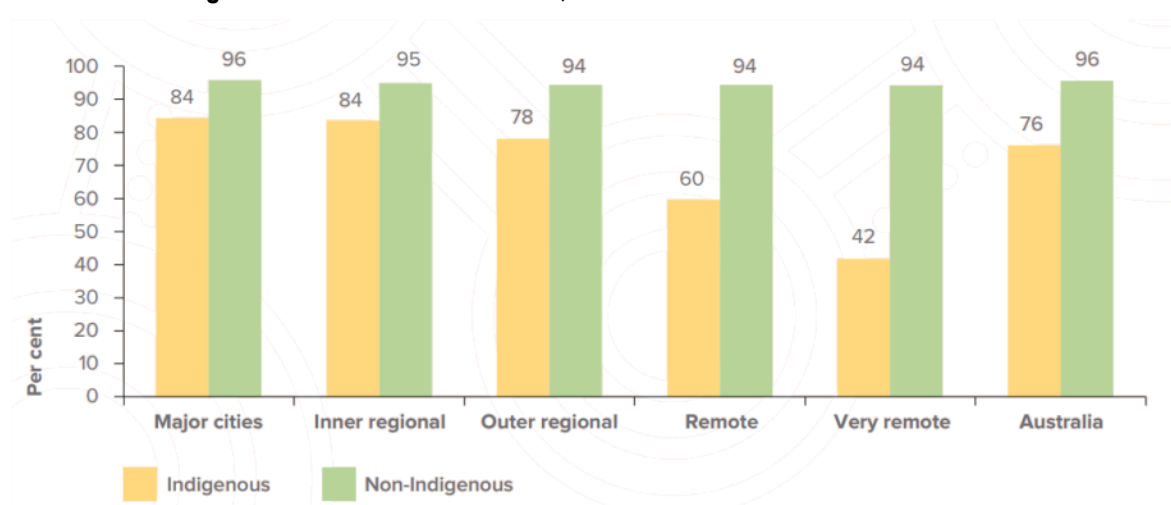
Literacy and numeracy

1.31 Given the correlation between attendance and educational attainment, it is no surprise that there is a gap between literacy and numeracy standards for those students who attend regularly in comparison to those who attend less often.

¹⁴ Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44th Parliament, p. 1.

1.32 Just as attendance rates are lower in remote areas, NAPLAN results for Indigenous students significantly decrease in these areas. PM&C advised the committee that ‘educational attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is strongly correlated to location,’ noting that ‘students in remote and very remote areas are significantly less likely to achieve at or above national minimum standards, as measured by NAPLAN, than those in metropolitan and provincial areas’.¹⁵ This is illustrated in Figure 1.5.

Figure 1.5 Proportion of students reaching National Minimum Standards for Year 5 numeracy by Indigenous status and remoteness, 2016



Source Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 39.

Year 12 attainment

1.33 Year 12 marks the completion of a Senior Secondary Certificate of Education and is considered a key factor in the formal development of skills and knowledge for all Australian students. The Federal Government has a target to halve the gap in Year 12 attainment by 2020.¹⁶

1.34 The 2017 Closing the Gap Report asserted that this target is on track, with the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Year 12 attainment closing by 14.7% since 2008.¹⁷ In 2014–15, 61.5% of Indigenous peoples 20 to 24 years old had achieved Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 45.4% in 2008.¹⁸

1.35 As with literacy and numeracy, Year 12 attainment varied with remoteness. As illustrated in Figure 1.6.

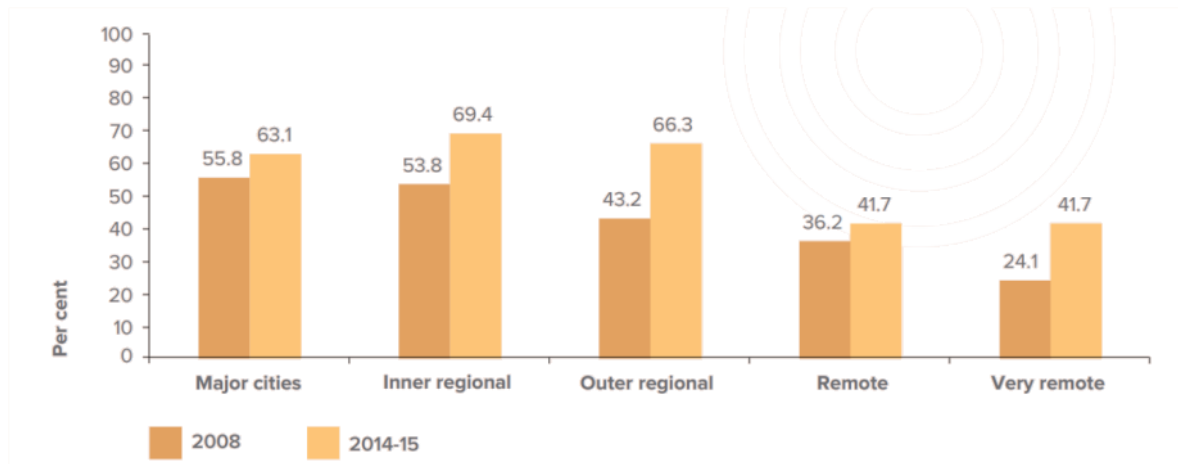
¹⁵ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44th Parliament, p. 4.

¹⁶ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 44.

Figure 1.6 Proportion of Indigenous 20–24 year-olds with Year 12 or equivalent attainment, by remoteness, 2008 and 2014–15

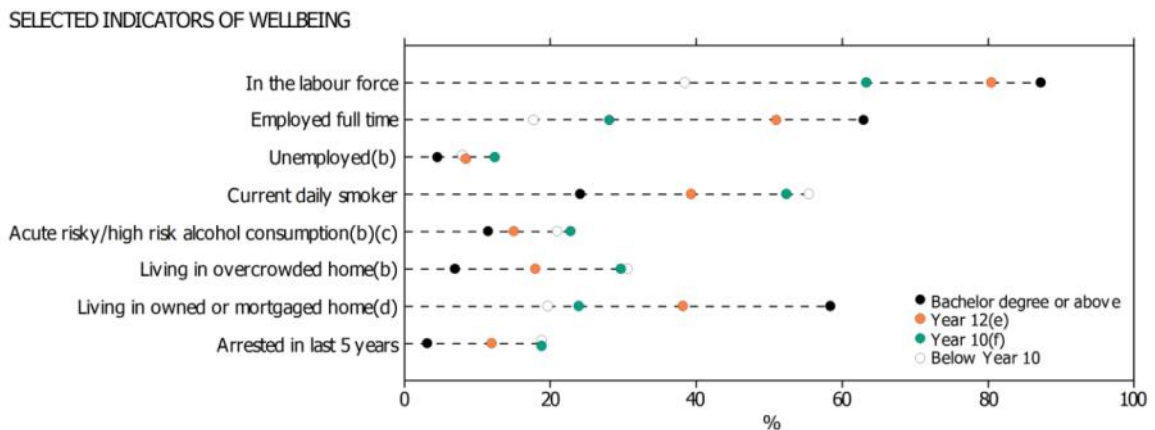


Source Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 43.

Further education and employment

1.36 The 2011 ABS *Education and Indigenous Wellbeing* paper highlighted the correlations between higher levels of education and a range of measures of wellbeing. These included economic participation, income, health outcomes, social participation and crime and justice (Figure 1.7).¹⁹

Figure 1.7 Highest educational attainment achieved, Indigenous persons 18 years and over, 2008, Selected Indicators of Wellbeing



Source Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Education and Indigenous wellbeing*, *Australian Social Trends*, March 2011, p. 3.

1.37 PM&C advised the committee that Indigenous young people have higher rates of unemployment and are significantly less likely to be engaged in education or training.²⁰

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Education and Indigenous Wellbeing*, *Australian Social Trends*, March 2011, p. 3.

²⁰ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44th Parliament, p. 13.

- 1.38 The likelihood of Indigenous young people being engaged in employment or education is also influenced by remoteness. PM&C noted that 84% of Indigenous youth living in very remote areas are not engaged in employment or education, compared with 52% living in major cities.²¹

Vocational Education and Training and apprenticeships

- 1.39 All students may access Vocational Education and Training (VET) while studying to attain their Year 12 certificate. In 2015, 14,577 Indigenous secondary students aged from 15 to 19 participated in a VET course. Of these, 12% were undertaking a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship.²²
- 1.40 PM&C advised that employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians who complete a Certificate III or above are equivalent to those of other Australians.²³

University

- 1.41 The number of Indigenous students undertaking study at university has almost doubled between 2005 (8,330) and 2015 (16,062). Indigenous graduates have very high levels of employment and find work more quickly, on average, than non-Indigenous graduates. The 2017 Closing the Gap Report noted that, in 2016, more than 74% of Indigenous graduates were in full-time employment, compared with 70.9% of non-Indigenous graduates.²⁴

²¹ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44th Parliament, p. 13.

²² Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 45.

²³ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44th Parliament, p. 13.

²⁴ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2017*, p. 46.

Access to quality data

- 1.42 In relation to access to quality data, Mr Andrew Penfold AM, Executive Director, Australian Indigenous Education Foundation highlighted the challenge:

We all know that saying 'you cannot manage what you cannot measure'. Part of the problem we face at the advisory council is the lack of quality data on attendance in schools. This is one of the Closing the Gap targets but actually the Commonwealth only gets data... twice a year...on attendance from the states and territories. It is really difficult to be able to design ideas and solutions around lifting attendance and educational outcomes when the quality of information that is being received is very poor so a lot of work needs to go into that.²⁵

- 1.43 Dr William Fogarty, a Senior Research Fellow at the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University, cautioned that, when formulating policy, too much weight is placed on more readily available data, such as NAPLAN scores and attendance rates, when policy makers also need to give weight to the causal factors behind poor attendance, which may be a result of what is taught and how it is taught.²⁶
- 1.44 In its report into Indigenous primary school achievement the Productivity Commission agreed, explaining that, for many of the characteristics which influence student achievement, both at the school and student level, no data is available (Figure 1.8).

²⁵ Mr Andrew Penfold AM, Executive Director, Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, and Member, Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 11 February 2016, p. 18.

²⁶ Dr William (Bill) Fogarty, Senior Research Fellow, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 16 March 2016, pp. 1-2.

Figure 1.8 Characteristics which influence student achievement, observed and unobserved in Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) data

	Observed in the dataset	Unobserved – data exist but not included in dataset	Unobserved – data do not exist
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remoteness • State 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local unemployment rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Libraries and educational facilities
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School sector • Number of enrolments • Staff numbers • Attendance rate • Finances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average satisfaction of teachers • Teacher and principal turnover • Principal characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School policies • School culture • Educational resources • Extracurricular activities
Peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % Indigenous students • % LBOTE students • % parents by education / occupation category 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • School satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive abilities • Attitudes • Aspirations
Teacher		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Gender • LBOTE • Experience • Qualifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching style • Attitudes
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental education • Parental occupation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent LBOTE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent engagement • Home learning activities
Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age • Gender • LBOTE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health and disability • Attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive abilities • Attitudes • Aspirations

Grouping of characteristics in the statistical analysis:

■ School-level ■ Student-level ■ Unobserved

a The figure provides examples of characteristics. It is not an exhaustive list. **b** The figure categorises unobserved characteristics according to whether relevant information exists at a national level. Unobserved data that exist include data that are believed to be held in administrative records. **c** 'LBOTE' is an acronym for 'language background other than English'.

Source Productivity Commission, *Indigenous Primary School Achievement*, June 2016, p. 5.

Committee comment

- 1.45 The significant and persistent gap in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students appears to relate directly to attendance rates. As a significant proportion of Indigenous students live in remote areas and are, therefore, less likely to attend school on a regular basis, the gap is likely to continue. The committee believes that it is important to provide education to students in remote areas comparable to that received by students living in metropolitan areas. It is also vital that the families of Indigenous students encourage students to attend.
- 1.46 If governments cannot understand why something is occurring, they cannot formulate targeted policy to address it. Governments have been aware of the gaps in attendance and education outcomes since at least the 1980s. Yet in the three decades since the first targets for improved achievement were set, data regarding the factors causing this gap has not been consistently collected and evaluated.
- 1.47 As such, the committee supports the Productivity Commission's observation that a better evidence base and understanding of how to improve the achievement of Indigenous students is needed to improve policy outcomes.

Recommendation 1

- 1.48 **The committee recommends that the Federal Government invest in the comprehensive collection and analysis of data regarding the characteristics that influence student achievement to create a strong evidence base and understanding of how to improve Indigenous student attendance and achievement.**