

## Boarding

- 6.1 Living away from home for study is a key component in the delivery of education to many Indigenous students across Australia. For many students living in remote and very remote communities, they have little choice but to leave their community in order to attain Year 12 or higher qualifications. It is, therefore, essential that students are able to access a range of affordable, culturally safe boarding options to meet their health, academic, and social needs.
- 6.2 This chapter considers Indigenous students' experiences of living away from home for study, examining both the opportunities and challenges presented by boarding. It explores models of boarding – public and independent, regional and metropolitan – and considers the challenges of providing secondary education in small remote communities.
- 6.3 The chapter discusses the standards and services that boarding facilities offer and considers whether they are meeting the needs of Indigenous students. It considers the challenges faced by students and the phenomena of 'walking in two worlds'. Finally, the chapter examines why many students who live away from home for study return to community shortly after commencing.
- 6.4 The cost of boarding, ABSTUDY payments, application processes, and other funding matters are discussed in Chapter 7.

## Living away from home for study

6.5 In 2014, ABSTUDY Living Away from Home benefits were paid to over 200 boarding schools and hostels on behalf of almost 4,300 students. There were also 300 students in 'other accommodation arrangements' supported by ABSTUDY.<sup>1</sup>

6.6 Indigenous students study away from home for a range of reasons. Dr Margaret (Marnie) O'Bryan, after interviewing a number of parents of students at boarding school, found that for parents from remote communities, boarding school was often the only option available for secondary education, with one stating that:

That's really what it comes down to; we have no choice...If we want to live where we want to live we've got no choice but for our kids to be sent away...<sup>2</sup>

6.7 For others, the quality of education available at home was the issue, with one student explaining that:

My main reason to get out of [remote community] was because the school there was horrible, and yeah...just not many people got through Year 12.<sup>3</sup>

6.8 Dr O'Bryan noted that for some parents, boarding schools provided opportunities that their children may not get elsewhere. A focus group of very remote parents explained that:

...mainstream schools, they have more activities, more things that they could do...<sup>4</sup>

6.9 Many parents wanted their children to maintain their culture and tradition whilst also gaining an understanding of their place in the wider world, with one parent explaining that:

I wanted them to not only...follow my pathway, but to...at least broaden their perspective [to understand that] our land stretches out and there's a lot more people out there to be talking to...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O'Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O'Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O'Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 118.

## Models of boarding

- 6.10 Whilst the details of the services offered by each boarding facility vary, boarding generally comprises a boarding house or houses where students are provided with accommodation and meals. Students are supervised and supported by staff, often referred to as 'House Parents', who usually live on or near the boarding facility.
- 6.11 The committee encountered a number of different boarding models available to students living away from home, including:
- boarding schools;
  - independent boarding facilities;
  - state-owned residential colleges;
  - Federal Government hostels; and
  - informal arrangements.

## Boarding schools

- 6.12 Throughout Australia, there are a number of schools that offer boarding for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. These boarding facilities are usually located on or near the school campus and are generally only available to students attending the school that owns the boarding facilities.
- 6.13 The vast majority of these boarding schools are independent; however, there are some government boarding schools, such as Nhulunbuy High School in the Northern Territory,<sup>6</sup> as well as boarding schools that work in close partnership with government, such as Kormilda College in Darwin.<sup>7</sup>
- 6.14 Examples of independent boarding schools that cater specifically for Indigenous students include Worawa Aboriginal College in Healesville, VIC;<sup>8</sup> Yirara College in Alice Springs, NT;<sup>9</sup> Djarragun College in Gordonvale, QLD;<sup>10</sup> and Wiltja Secondary College in Adelaide, SA.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O'Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> Nhulunbuy High School, <https://directory.ntschoools.net/SchoolProfile.aspx?name=Nhulunbuy%20High%20School>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Kormilda College, <http://www.kormilda.nt.edu.au/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Worawa Aboriginal College, <http://www.worawa.vic.edu.au/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Yirara College, *Submission 33*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Yirara College, <http://yirara.nt.edu.au/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Cape York Partnership, *Submission 55*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Good to Great Schools Australia and Cape York Partnership, *Submission 28*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Djarragun College, <http://www.djarragun.qld.edu.au/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

### Independent boarding facilities

- 6.15 There are a number of independent boarding facilities, many with links to sporting clubs and associations, catering for Indigenous students, operating in regional centres and cities. Students boarding at these facilities may choose to attend a range of affiliated government and non-government schools. Examples include AFL Cape York House in Cairns<sup>12</sup> and NRL Cowboys House in Townsville.<sup>13</sup>
- 6.16 Some independent boarding facilities focus on supporting Indigenous students as they transition into mainstream education in a capital city. These boarding schools are often affiliated with or supported by mainstream independent or government schools. Examples include the Melbourne Indigenous Transition School (MITS)<sup>14</sup> and the Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School<sup>15</sup>.

### State-owned residential colleges

- 6.17 In Western Australia and the Northern Territory, there are state and territory-owned and operated residential colleges and hostels located in regional centres that offer boarding for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Students boarding at these residential colleges and hostels may choose to attend nearby government or independent schools.<sup>16</sup> Examples include Broome Residential College<sup>17</sup> and Callistemon House in Katherine East.<sup>18</sup>

### Federal Government hostels

- 6.18 Aboriginal Hostels Limited (AHL) is a Commonwealth company that provides accommodation for Indigenous peoples for a range of purposes, including accessing medical services and education. AHL operates nine hostels for Indigenous students living away from home to attend secondary school, which collectively provide accommodation for up to

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<sup>11</sup> Wiltja Secondary College, <http://www.wiltja.sa.edu.au/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>12</sup> AFL Cape York House, <http://www.aflcy.com.au/afl-cape-york-house/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>13</sup> NFL Cowboys House, <http://www.cowboysfoundation.org.au/programs/nrl-cowboys-house/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, *Submission 18*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, <https://www.mits.vic.edu.au/>, accessed 6 July 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School, <http://www.wesleycollege.net/Wesley-Life/Yiramalay-Wesley-Studio-School.aspx>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Western Australia Department of Education, Country Boarding, <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/boarding/country/detcms/navigation/about-us/>, accessed 11 July 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Broome Residential College, <http://broomeboarding.wa.gov.au/>, accessed 13 July 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Callistemon House, <http://www.callistemon.org.au/>, accessed 13 July 2017.

300 Indigenous students.<sup>19</sup> AHL 'services all Indigenous students...without reference to academic merit, means testing or other forms of selective intake'.<sup>20</sup> Examples include, Canon Boggo Pilot Hostel on Thursday Island, Kununurra Hostel, Kardu Durrikardu Numida Hostel in Wadeye, and Fordimail Hostel in Katherine.<sup>21</sup>

### **Informal boarding arrangements**

- 6.19 The Department of Social Services (DSS) noted that informal boarding arrangements can be made for students who are living away from home with extended family, comprising 'an arrangement between the parent and whomever the parent chooses to send the children to'. DSS advised that there are approximately 300 informal boarding arrangements supported by ABSTUDY.<sup>22</sup>

### **Committee comment**

- 6.20 Throughout its inquiry, the committee visited a variety of boarding facilities, ranging from independent boarding schools with an Indigenous focus, to state-owned residential colleges that could be accessed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.
- 6.21 The overwhelming evidence received by the committee is that one size does not fit all. There are a wide range of boarding models and each has benefits as well as challenges. Students and families must be empowered to make informed decisions about what best suits their needs. Regardless of the model, the committee found that boarding facilities that worked with families, students and communities to properly understand and meet the needs of students, achieved the best outcomes.

### **Boarding vs local schools**

- 6.22 Some submissions raised concerns regarding the shift away from the provision of secondary schooling in small communities in favour of boarding.<sup>23</sup> Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, Australian National

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<sup>19</sup> Aboriginal Hostels Limited, *Submission 38*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Aboriginal Hostels Limited, *Submission 41*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Aboriginal Hostels Limited, *Prospectus*, <http://www.ahl.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-11/Prospectus.pdf>, accessed 13 November 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Ms Emma Kate McGuirk, Branch Manager, Work and Study Payments, Department of Social Services, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 19 April 2016, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> For example: Australian Education Union, *Submission 45*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Independent Education Union, Queensland and Northern Territory Branch, *Submission 10*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament;

University, highlighted the lack of data regarding the benefits and impacts of boarding, and questioned ‘how can the government be so sure about pushing our kids into boarding schools when there is so little data...how can we be pushing this model when we do not even know that it works?’<sup>24</sup>

- 6.23 However, others, such as the Association of the Heads of Independent Schools of Australia suggested ‘caution in assuming that local schools and colleges are the only and best answer to Indigenous education’, explaining that ‘boarding programs in interstate independent schools offer opportunities to Indigenous students that can never be matched in local community schools’.<sup>25</sup>
- 6.24 Ninti One emphasised the importance of ensuring that families have a ‘well supported suite of options, locally and away from home [which] should include metropolitan and regional boarding options, short term away from home learning opportunities and access to learning in communities’.<sup>26</sup> Ms Priscilla Collins, Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory, emphasised the right to choose:

One size does not fit all students, and we think that families should have the ability to decide the best options and choices for their children and to choose between sending their child to school in their home community, in a nearby regional town or an interstate boarding school.<sup>27</sup>

## Wilson Review

- 6.25 In 2013, the Northern Territory Department of Education commissioned a review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory, commonly referred to as the ‘Wilson Review’. The review found that:

The NT has made substantial efforts to deliver secondary schooling in remote settings for more than a decade, with limited success. Enrolments and attendance in these schools decline rapidly during the secondary years, NAPLAN results show low success rates and there have been very few Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET) completions. The

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Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory, *Submission 9*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Ninti One, *Submission 6*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

<sup>24</sup> Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> Association of the Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Submission 46*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. [31-32].

<sup>26</sup> Ninti One, *Submission 6*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ms Priscilla Collins, Chief Executive Officer, Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 6 April 2017, p. 7.

review found evidence of curriculum programs without a clear link to qualifications and with a narrow range of options.<sup>28</sup>

6.26 The review argued that:

... secondary education for remote and very remote students should progressively be provided in urban schools (Darwin, Palmerston, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Nhulunbuy), with students accommodated in residential facilities...Implementation of these arrangements should be gradual...Negotiations with communities will determine where smaller remote schools can offer middle years programs, but senior secondary education should largely be delivered in urban settings.<sup>29</sup>

6.27 Mr Andrew Penfold AM acknowledged the economic difficulties of providing quality secondary education in small communities but asserted that 'not all kids should be leaving their communities and going to boarding schools'.<sup>30</sup>

6.28 The Independent Education Union (IEU) noted that 'access to boarding schools does not negate, or compensate for, lack of access to quality education in a student's home community'.<sup>31</sup>

6.29 Mr Anthony Considine, Northern Territory Department of Education, assured the committee that, despite the recommendations of the review, the department '[has] not shut down any secondary delivery in the bush...At the time the Wilson Review was delivered in its first form, the recommendation was to scale back secondary provision. After further consultation, that was not continued with'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Wilson, *A Share in the future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Wilson, *A Share in the future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*, Northern Territory Department of Education, 2015, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Mr Andrew Penfold AM, Member, Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 11 February 2016, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Independent Education Union, Queensland and Northern Territory Branch, *Submission 10*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Mr Anthony Considine, General Manager, Indigenous Education Review Implementation, Northern Territory Department of Education, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 6 April 2017, p. 15.

## Regional boarding

6.30 A number of submissions informed the committee of increasing communications and tracking issues that arise when students go interstate to study. The Northern Territory Department of Education advised the committee that:

Our work with the health department has been about health checks for kids, and certainly there was very strong work last year in that area, but not with boarding, because that boarding area moves outside of our jurisdiction...<sup>33</sup>

6.31 Mr Selwyn Button, Assistant Director-General, Queensland Department of Education and Training, informed the committee that the issues of communications and tracking of children does not just occur when the student leaves the state, but is an issue for those coming to boarding schools from outside:

Where we experience difficulties in transferring information is when we get kids predominantly from the territory who come across to our schools, and that is where we do have some issues around transfer of information. As I said, most of our kids will stay in Queensland but it is the kids who come from the NT and WA who come across to our boarding schools where there is a lack of information about those kids and how do we best support them as well.<sup>34</sup>

6.32 In terms of tracking and the sharing of pertinent information regarding students, it appears it would be preferential for them to stay within the state, and certainly for the many students who suffer homesickness, living in a regional town closer to home may be beneficial.

6.33 A number of submissions noted the benefits of students from remote communities boarding in regional centres.<sup>35</sup> Ms Kristine Van, Broome

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<sup>33</sup> Mr Anthony Considine, General Manager, Indigenous Education Review Implementation, Northern Territory Department of Education, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 6 April 2017, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Mr Selwyn Button, Assistant Director-General, State Schools – Indigenous Education, Queensland Department of Education and Training, *Proof Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 29 August 2017, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> For example: Torres Strait Islanders' Regional Education Council, *Submission 61*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Richard Stewart and Rachel Elphick, *Submission 26*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory, *Submission 9*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Aboriginal Hostels Limited, *Submission 38*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Ninti One, *Submission 6*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Northern Territory Christian Schools, *Submission 27*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; and Cape York Partnership, *Submission 55*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

Residential College, explained that boarding in a regional centre provides the 'best of both worlds':

Our catchcry is 'Keeping Kimberley kids in the Kimberley'. It is really great that students can come to a place to live where they actually know people. While they may not know each other, family relationships and kinship relationships are so important to an Indigenous person. If they have family or relationships in a boarding house, it makes it so much more successful. We also have a more relaxed lifestyle. The parents are able to visit because they are a lot closer. So not only do they have family in the college – when I say 'family', I mean that in a kinship sense – but people can come and visit, which is fantastic.<sup>36</sup>

6.34 Mr Gregory Robson, Western Australia Department of Education, explained that in relation to Western Australian students:

...what we are trying to do in Kununurra and some of the other regional centres is build a critical mass, because that gives us the chance to specialise a bit more in the curriculum... We have to be much more strategic, and we have to link what we deliver, in my view, to the employment opportunities that are available in the surrounding community.<sup>37</sup>

6.35 Mr Ned David, Chair, Torres Strait Islanders' Regional Educational Council, told the committee that 'the overwhelming position for most parents in the region is to have their kids attend secondary school here on Thursday Island, or in the Torres Strait...what we want is to increase the number of [boarding] beds available on Thursday Island'.<sup>38</sup>

6.36 The Council noted that approximately 50% of secondary students leave the region to attend boarding school. The Council advised the committee that, the two boarding facilities on Thursday Island are at capacity and are insufficient to meet demand.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ms Kristine Van, College Manager, Broome Residential College, *Committee Hansard*, Broome, 29 June 2017, pp. 24–25.

<sup>37</sup> Mr Gregory Robson, Regional Executive Director, Kimberley, Western Australia Department of Education, *Committee Hansard*, Kununurra, 28 June 2017, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Mr Ned David, Chair, Torres Strait Islanders' Regional Educational Council, *Committee Hansard*, Thursday Island, 9 March 2016, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Torres Strait Islanders' Regional Education Council, *Submission 61*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 28–30.

## Committee comment

- 6.37 The committee acknowledges the economic difficulties of providing quality secondary education in small communities; however, this does not absolve state and territory governments from the responsibility of providing access to quality public secondary education. Indigenous students should be able to choose from a range of well-supported options for secondary education, public and independent, within their local region as well as further afield.
- 6.38 Boarding facilities, such as Broome Residential College and Kununurra Hostel, provide a high-quality public boarding option for students who wish to study without leaving their region. It may not be possible to provide secondary education in all small remote communities; but, by providing public boarding facilities in regional centres, students and families are given access to quality public and independent schools without needing to send their children to a capital city located thousands of kilometres away.
- 6.39 Given the evidence received, it is the committee's opinion that public boarding facilities in regional centres should be developed in consultation with communities within each region and tailored to meet the preferences and needs of Indigenous students from that region.

### **Recommendation 14 (Priority)**

- 6.40 **The committee recommends that the Federal Government, in partnership with state and territory governments, establish additional public boarding accommodation in key regional centres, so that students can attend schools in their local area rather than going to school in another region.**

## Quality of boarding

6.41 A number of submitters emphasised the importance of ensuring that there are high standards for staff, facilities, and services across all models of boarding.<sup>40</sup> Mr Anthony Bennett, Manager, Wiltja Boarding, explained that:

You need to have highly qualified staff in boarding – standards...If Indigenous boarding is going to happen successfully, there needs to be an absolute emphasis on the pedagogy and methodology in the school, but there also needs to be equal resourcing and light shed upon the boarding side. It is often seen just as a place of feeding and watering. That does not work, and this is what I would see as critical.<sup>41</sup>

6.42 The IEU noted that ‘there is no federal legislation governing the operation of boarding schools, and while there is state legislation in New South Wales and Western Australia, boarding school operators in Queensland and the Northern Territory have effectively no legal obligations to boarders, staff or parents beyond those specified in site-specific contracts’.<sup>42</sup>

6.43 In July 2015, a national standard for the management of boarding facilities was published by the Council of Standards Australia. This standard provides a common framework across jurisdictions and is designed to promote and safeguard the welfare of students in boarding.<sup>43</sup> However, the IEU noted that, while this partially addresses the gap in legislation, ‘the standards represent a guide to best practice within the sector rather than legal obligations’.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> For example: Australian Parents Council, *Submission 16*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 40*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Wongutha CAPS, *Submission 37*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Australia, *Submission 7*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Australia, *Submission 21*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Independent Education Union, *Submission 10*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 31*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; and Australian Association of Christian Schools, *Submission 24*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

<sup>41</sup> Mr Anthony Bennett, Manager, Wiltja Boarding, Wiltja Secondary College, *Committee Hansard*, Northgate, 26 February 2016, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Independent Education Union, *Submission 10*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Council of Standards Australia, *AS 5725:2015 Boarding Standards for Australian schools and residences*, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Independent Education Union, *Submission 10*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 6.

- 6.44 The Northern Territory Department of Education recommended that the application of this standard be mandated across Australia ‘so parents are assured of quality care and wellbeing of their children’.<sup>45</sup> Boarding Training Australia agreed, asserting that boarding facilities must be held accountable to these standards and Indigenous boarding facilities should be regularly monitored.<sup>46</sup> This sentiment was also shared by Boarding Australia, which emphasised the need for quality assurance mechanisms for Indigenous boarding programs and called for the development of a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy.<sup>47</sup>
- 6.45 Mr Bennett noted that informal boarding arrangements supported by ABSTUDY are not subject to any oversight:
- At the minute anybody can make an application to ABSTUDY to acquire funding. There is no audit; there is no check – nothing. There are no standards upon which a check could be made...I can only wonder how those houses are being funded. What worries me is there are no standards; there are no qualifications. You have got this gentleman and his wife looking after a very large number of children in various sites without any scrutiny whatsoever. I am not suggesting that anything improper is going on but, from a risk perspective, you would have to suggest the risk is significant... Anybody can open one of these things, and they do.<sup>48</sup>
- 6.46 DSS advised the committee that they do not have any role in assessing the quality or standard of informal boarding arrangements.<sup>49</sup> Ms Cath Halbert, DSS, stated:
- This is a completely private arrangement between the family and the person providing the accommodation, except insofar as, of course, state and territory governments have child protection legislation and so on. There are no particular protections attached to ABSTUDY.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 8–9.

<sup>46</sup> Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Boarding Australia, *Submission 21*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 2–3.

<sup>48</sup> Mr Anthony Bennett, Manager, Wiltja Boarding, Wiltja Secondary College, *Committee Hansard*, Northgate, 26 February 2016, pp. 2–3.

<sup>49</sup> Ms Emma Kate McGuirk, Branch Manager, Work and Study Payments, Department of Social Services, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 19 April 2016, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ms Cath Halbert, Group Manager, Payments Policy Group, Department of Social Services, *Proof Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 7 September 2017, p. 11.

## Student/staff ratios

- 6.47 A number of submissions called for lower staff to student ratios in boarding facilities, with some pointing to the Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body's finding:

The student/houseparent ratio for Indigenous students needs to be acknowledged as requiring to be about 8-10:1 rather than the 25:1 ratio on which most boarding schools operate, in recognition of the high demand nature of the special care and interventions needed to successfully transition these students.<sup>51</sup>

- 6.48 Wongutha CAPS told the committee that its current ratio of 18:1 is inadequate for Indigenous students:

Increasingly, young Indigenous students from remote communities are presenting with complex behavioural, mental health, emotional, physical and addiction issues that require very specific care and support that cannot be achieved effectively with current student : staff ratios.<sup>52</sup>

## Cultural safety

- 6.49 The importance of cultural safety, as outlined in Chapter 3, also applies to boarding students. A number of submissions emphasised the need for boarding facilities to be culturally safe and to provide cultural support to students.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body, *Position Paper: Boarding Schools*, 2000, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Wongutha CAPS, *Submission 37*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 3-4.

<sup>53</sup> For example: Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, *Submission 14*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Submission 46*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Central Land Council, *Submission 41*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Aboriginal Hostels Limited, *Submission 38*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Professor Jeannie Herbert AM, *Submission 8*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 20*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 40*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Australia, *Submission 21*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Dr Maryanne Macdonald, *Submission 11*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; and Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, *Submission 18*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

- 6.50 Dr Marnie O'Bryan called for predominantly non-Indigenous boarding schools to 'look critically at their own school culture and ensure that they are culturally safe spaces for students to live and learn'.<sup>54</sup> One of the participant's in Dr O'Bryan's research asserted that:

Aboriginal kids are having an identity crisis, and school can actually help serve Australia's future by enabling them while they're at school to reconstruct who they are in a really positive way, and I think what you will find is that those kids then don't end up in the prisons and end up in the gangs and end up dead because they leave with a sense of – it is really, really cool to be black, it is really cool to be an Aboriginal person in Australia.<sup>55</sup>

- 6.51 Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers explained that, as students do not have one single culture or identity, it is essential that students and families are consulted to ensure that a boarding facility is culturally safe:

In my experience, the best thing we can do is work with student groups and come up with some student-led initiatives because they know what works for them. They are experts on themselves. Schools are so quick to expect that students will fall in with everything and just get on with it. They do not ask what students are looking for and what makes them feel comfortable and safe.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O'Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 233.

<sup>55</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O'Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 114.

<sup>56</sup> Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 25.

## Health and wellbeing

6.52 The health and wellbeing issues affecting students outlined in Chapter 2 equally apply to boarding students. A number of submissions emphasised the importance of ensuring that students are able to access appropriate health and wellbeing services while living away from home for study.<sup>57</sup> Boarding Training Australia asserted that:

All Indigenous residences need an on-site nurse and health facility, with other professional supports, health screening facilities, education and support in nutrition, mental health and personal development.<sup>58</sup>

6.53 Wongutha CAPS noted that, as a minimum, their boarding staff are required to complete a Certificate IV qualification in Community Services and recommended that Indigenous boarding residences have an on-site nurse as well as access to counselling support services.<sup>59</sup>

6.54 Similarly, Worawa Aboriginal College advised the committee that:

A visiting GP and other specialist services ensure that students receive a range of medical services on site to monitor their health and social and emotional wellbeing. An on-site Health Clinic staffed by a school nurse with experience in Remote Health ensures that physical health issues are dealt with quickly and professionally.<sup>60</sup>

6.55 Mr Ricky Hanlon, Program Manager, AFL Cape York House, highlighted the success of individual case management for students:

Our wellbeing manager has just come on this year. The results we have seen in that space are absolutely fantastic in terms of the wellbeing of our boys and their health.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For example: Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 8-9; Australian Association of Christian Schools, *Submission 24*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 5; Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory, *Submission 9*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 3-4, 8; Independent Schools Queensland, *Submission 19*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp 3-4; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3; North Queensland Cowboys, *Submission 49*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3; Northern Territory Christian Schools, *Submission 27*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 2-3; Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Submission 16*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; pp. 23-24; Boarding Australia, *Submission 7*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 2; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 20*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 7; Dr Maryanne MacDonald, *Submission 11*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 13; and Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Wongutha CAPS, *Submission 37*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 11.

<sup>61</sup> Mr Ricky Hanlon, Program Manager, AFL Cape York House, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 32.

- 6.56 However, many submitters also spoke about the funding challenges of providing the necessary level of support to students.<sup>62</sup> The Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory highlighted the need for appropriate funding:

Our schools also provide, or facilitate the provision of, programs that meet the health, socio-emotional, nutritional, and developmental needs of their students who, often, are suffering from the effects of significant trauma (e.g. PTSD), health challenges (e.g. Rheumatic Heart Fever, Scabies, Otitis Media etc.), and disabilities.

The cost of providing these programs is significant, not just the direct cost but also in the cost of training required to ensure staff in the classroom, the boarding house and even in the front office understand the background of the students with which they interact on a daily basis and every staff member contributes to the support those students, and their families, require to succeed.<sup>63</sup>

- 6.57 Boarding Training Australia agreed:

Very few providers can afford the level of support usually needed for the Indigenous young people attending. While Close the Gap health funding is used in every other arena there is a glaring deficit here. There is a need for a “culturally appropriate” model of health screening, intervention and education, and pastoral care.<sup>64</sup>

- 6.58 Dr Marnie O’Bryan reported that many boarding students said that ‘no one at home understood how to support them at school’ and that this ‘fed into a pattern of misunderstanding between home and school, where dissonant presumptions around who was responsible to offer what level of care left young people with no functional means of emotional support’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> For example: Australian Association of Christian Schools, *Submission 24*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 5; Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory, *Submission 9*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 3-4, 8; Independent Schools Queensland, *Submission 19*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp 3-4; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3; Northern Territory Christian Schools, *Submission 27*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 2-3; Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Submission 16*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; pp. 23-24; Dr Maryanne MacDonald, *Submission 11*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 13.

<sup>63</sup> Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory, *Submission 9*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O’Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 126.

## Committee comment

- 6.59 Throughout the inquiry, the committee was impressed by boarding facilities and their staff's desire and commitment to meeting the needs of Indigenous students. Yet despite the best intentions of many boarding facilities, the overwhelming evidence heard by the committee was that boarding, particularly mainstream boarding, is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students. In the case of one boarding facility, which the committee saw and believed was well below an acceptable standard, the committee notes that this facility has now closed.
- 6.60 Students living away from home for study should have access to high-quality, culturally safe boarding facilities. Many boarding facilities identified areas that they could, and often desperately wanted to, improve but were prevented by resource constraints. The committee heard evidence that others seemed uncertain how best to support Indigenous students, with some struggling to properly identify and provide the level of medical and mental health support and cultural-safety that students require to thrive.
- 6.61 The committee is of the view that all boarding facilities should meet the *Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences*. In addition to the boarding standards, boarding facilities should also be required to meet standards regarding cultural safety. In order to assist boarding facilities create culturally safe environments for Indigenous students, the committee is of the opinion that a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy be developed. This strategy should be developed in consultation with states, territories and the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council following comprehensive consultation with Indigenous families and students.
- 6.62 The committee believes that all boarding models should be required to meet certain standards, including informal boarding arrangements. The committee believes that, in order to qualify for Federal Government funding, such as ABSTUDY, any and all boarding facilities should be required to regularly demonstrate that they meet the *Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences* as well as the requirements of a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy.

- 6.63 As discussed in Chapter 2, it is an unfortunate reality that Indigenous children are more likely to have significant health and wellbeing concerns and therefore require substantial support to ensure that they are healthy and well while they are living away from home for study. Each student's medical and mental health needs will be different and, as such, support services must be able to meet each individual student's needs. To this end, the committee agrees that student/staff ratios should reflect the needs of the students they are caring for.

### **Recommendation 15**

- 6.64 **The committee recommends that, by 2020, the Federal Government, in consultation with states, territories and Indigenous leaders, create a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy that will:**
- **require boarding facilities to meet the standards outlined in the *Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences*;**
  - **establish and require boarding facilities to meet a National Indigenous Cultural Standard; and**
  - **recognise and appropriately account for the physical and mental health needs of Indigenous students.**

### **Recommendation 16**

- 6.65 **The committee recommends that, by 2020, the Federal Government:**
- **require boarding facilities receiving federal funding, such as ABSTUDY, to meet the standards set out in a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy; and**
  - **increase federal funding provided to boarding facilities through ABSTUDY, so that the standards set out in a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy can be met.**

## **Walking in two worlds – impacts on students who board**

- 6.66 Evidence about the impact attending boarding school can have on students was also provided to the committee. Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, Australian National University, explained that students who attend boarding school 'are open about the fact that it

changes them', with students often describing their experience of boarding as 'walking in two worlds', with two sets of social and cultural norms.<sup>66</sup>

6.67 Assistant Professor Rogers acknowledged that:

If you want to succeed in this colonised world, you have to learn the skills of the white man. That is what boarding school does. It teaches our kids how to be in two different worlds. We can skirt around that, but the more we actually explain that to our kids, the better they can understand it.<sup>67</sup>

6.68 Mr Jeff Waia, Teacher, Tagai State College, acknowledged the utility of Western education; however he cautioned that:

...one must have a strong identity to be able to participate in the Western world. One must know the knowledge of code switching comfortably in their world. I understand and know that Western education is 'a skill'...The language of English is how to survive...The Torres Strait Islander world is interpreted through oral culture, so one's identity must be interpreted in oral languages, for the oral identity and the protocols and the laws of this society is written in oral languages. Therefore, one must understand those laws by knowing their languages first of all.<sup>68</sup>

6.69 Ms Ashley Dorr, Wiltja Secondary College, emphasised the importance of preparing students to skilfully walk in two worlds. Ms Dorr explained that:

While being very careful with this idea of preserving culture, I think it is extremely essential that there is a sense in which we... show students the other way of working, the way of walking together in two worlds – in particular, a more mainstream world – because they come from such a different background. We hope that they emerge in the end as really well-rounded young people who can operate really comfortably in their communities but also be quite at home in the wider world.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, *Submission 14*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Mr Jeff Waia, Teacher, Tagai State College, *Committee Hansard*, Thursday Island, 9 March 2016, pp. 8–9.

<sup>69</sup> Ms Ashley Dorr, Principal, Wiltja Secondary College, *Committee Hansard*, Northgate, 26 February 2016, p. 2.

## Homesickness

6.70 Many submissions discussed the impact of ‘homesickness’ on retention.<sup>70</sup> Dr Marnie O’Bryan noted that many students she spoke with were ‘very anxious to explain exactly *what* they were missing when people presumed that they were *just homesick*’.<sup>71</sup> Dr O’Bryan explained that:

Far beyond being a transient affliction and a normal part of transitioning to life away from home, many participants were at pains to explain that what schools understand by homesickness fails to take into account different social situations, cultural norms and the responsibilities that they had within their families and communities. Where being away at school meant that boarders were unable to fulfil obligations to loved ones, they described being consumed by the internal conflict that that occasioned.<sup>72</sup>

6.71 Mr James Ballangarry, Student Teacher, University of Newcastle, explained that many students do not just feel homesick for their immediate family:

When we have homesickness, we do not have homesickness just for our immediate family. We have homesickness for our surroundings and for our extended family and entire community. It is much different in that sense. It is that balance. If we could do something to help students to get used to that balance... It is too much of a transition to come here. It is a big culture change.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For example: Central Land Council, *Submission 41*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 15; Remote Indigenous Parents Association, *Submission 47*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 7; Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, *Submission 17*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 4; Aboriginal Hostels Limited, *Submission 38*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 15; Richard Stewart and Rachel Elphick, *Submission 26*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 4, 6; Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. [161]; National Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 18*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 6; North Queensland Cowboys, *Submission 49*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 2; Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Submission 16*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 23; Independent Education Union, *Submission 10*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 5–6; Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, *Submission 23*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Emphasis in original.

<sup>72</sup> Dr Margaret (Marnie) O’Bryan, *Shaping futures, shaping lives: an investigation into the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian boarding schools*, 2016, p. 150.

<sup>73</sup> Mr James Ballangarry, Student Teacher, University of Newcastle, *Committee Hansard*, Newcastle, 21 March 2016, pp. 26–27.

## Absences for family business

6.72 Not only do the requirements imposed by boarding schools impact a student's education, but so do requirements imposed by their families and community.

6.73 A number of submissions highlighted the impact of absences for family business as particularly challenging for students and boarding facilities to navigate.<sup>74</sup> Mr Barry Walleth, Deputy Executive Director, Independent Schools Council of Australia, explained that prolonged absences and miscommunication about when or whether students will return after absences for family business are challenging for boarding facilities:

One of the issues for the schools, of course – especially the boarding schools – is that they must maintain a certain level of ability to accommodate students. That includes the beds, the facilities, the teachers and all those sorts of things. You have students who may not return after a short break...so it is a very, very difficult job for a lot of these schools to maintain that balance between enrolment, facilities, ability to enrol and ability to educate.<sup>75</sup>

6.74 Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers asserted that a balance must be struck between appropriately supporting a student's cultural needs and ensuring that they can attain the necessary skills to thrive, whether in further education or employment:

...there are heartbreaking stories of: 'I can't go home for sorry business, because someone in my community dies every second week and my school won't let me go home. My mum is calling me every night and I feel like I have got nowhere to belong, because I am stuck here and I can't get home to the important business that I need to undertake, and I feel like I am losing my culture.' It is a pretty bitter pill to swallow for some of our kids moving away. On the other hand, this is the world we live in. For any of us to make it in this world, we have to speak English. There is no school in

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<sup>74</sup> For example: Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, *Submission 14*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 2; Boarding Australia, *Submission 7*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 1; Dr Maryanne Macdonald, *Submission 11*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 19; Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 31*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 11; Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Submission 46*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. [10]; and Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, *Submission 2*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> Mr Barry Walleth, Deputy Executive Director, Independent Schools Council of Australia, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 3 March 2016, p. 13.

Australia where you can speak an Aboriginal language and be tested on that for NAPLAN.<sup>76</sup>

## Student retention and ‘churn’

6.75 Some submissions noted that a significant proportion of students who live away from home for study return to community shortly after commencing.<sup>77</sup> PM&C noted that approximately one third of students receiving ABSTUDY in formal boarding arrangements move on and off payments during a school year.<sup>78</sup>

6.76 Mr Steve Foster, Associate Principal, Tagai State College, explained that the majority of students who leave the Torres Strait for secondary education move back and forth between multiple boarding schools and community:

...when you track those students that have gone away to boarding school, you can see that, by the time they finish year 12 – if they finish year 12 – they might have been to five different boarding schools because of a number of issues. If you also track data and you put rigour around tracking that data, you will find that a majority of them somewhere in their senior schooling years end up back here at Tagai State College or TI for a number of reasons.<sup>79</sup>

6.77 Dr Adele Schmidt, Research Officer, IEU, told the committee that the experience of going to boarding school and returning to community without completing the school year can negatively impact self-esteem and lead to behavioural problems:

...kids who come back from boarding school often come back with, for want of a better phrase, 'a chip on their shoulder'. They have gone off to boarding school – they were picked because they were smart and they thought that they could make it – and suddenly they have had their identity challenged. So they are back in the school and they are a little bit lippy with their elders. So

<sup>76</sup> Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 24.

<sup>77</sup> For example: Boarding Australia, *Submission 7*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 1–2; Central Land Council, *Submission 41*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 15; Richard Stewart and Rachel Elphick, *Submission 26*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3; Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, *Submission 14*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 2; Independent Education Union, *Submission 10*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 6; Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 12*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 4; and Association of the Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Submission 46*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. [31].

<sup>78</sup> Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Submission 43*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 12.

<sup>79</sup> Mr Steve Foster, Associate Principal, Tagai State College, *Committee Hansard*, Thursday Island, 9 March 2016, p. 8.

they start to develop some behavioural problems as a consequence of their experience of going away and, essentially, failing. That is how they feel; I am not saying that they have failed. But they feel like failures, a lot of them.<sup>80</sup>

- 6.78 The Australian Education Union (AEU) highlighted the broader ramifications of boarding scholarship programs that target high-performing students, such as the Australian Indigenous Education Fund. The AEU acknowledged that while the recipients of these scholarships ‘study in a privileged environment where peer effects are likely to be positive for academic achievement...somewhat ironically, one consequence of these students completing their secondary studies at boarding schools is to remove any positive peer effect of their attendance in their local community’.<sup>81</sup>

### Committee comment

- 6.79 Much of the evidence discussed in this chapter focussed on the challenges that many students have experienced when living away from home for study and the impact that this has had on their ability to attend school and achieve various levels of educational attainment. However, the committee wishes to acknowledge and commend the many Indigenous students who have been able to achieve amazing outcomes, despite the challenges they have faced.
- 6.80 All Indigenous students should be empowered to achieve their education goals. The committee received considerable evidence that a significant proportion of students who live away from home for study drop out and return to community shortly after commencing. This can have devastating impacts on the student’s motivation to study and self-esteem. It can also discourage others within the community and places financial and administrative strain on both boarding facilities and schools within the local community.
- 6.81 It is clear that this ‘revolving door’ within Indigenous boarding must be addressed if educational attainment is to be improved. The committee hopes that improving the quality and cultural safety of boarding facilities, as discussed above, will go some way toward addressing this problem. However, more must be done to assist students, families, boarding facilities and schools.

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<sup>80</sup> Dr Adele Schmidt, Research Officer, Independent Education Union, Queensland and Northern Territory Branch, *Committee Hansard*, Acacia Ridge, 5 February 2016, p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> Australian Education Union, *Submission 45*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 19.

## Transition support

- 6.82 A number of submissions emphasised the importance of supporting students as they transition from community to boarding.<sup>82</sup> Both the Northern Territory and Queensland Government provide transition support services for Indigenous students and their families.
- 6.83 The Northern Territory Transition Support Unit (NTTSU) ‘supports students and their families to make choices about remaining in the community or accessing either academic or vocational education and training pathways away for their community’.<sup>83</sup>
- 6.84 Ms Lois Peeler AM, Principal, Worawa Aboriginal College, advised the committee that the NTTSU has ‘proven to be very valuable’. Ms Peeler explained that Worawa works collaboratively with the NTTSU to ensure smooth transitions and higher retention.<sup>84</sup>
- 6.85 In Queensland, Transition Support Services are available in Cape York, Palm Island and at various partner boarding schools.<sup>85</sup> The Queensland Department of Education and Training advised the committee that, in 2016, its Transition Support Services worked with 130 year 6 students and families in Cape York to develop and enact primary into secondary school transition plans.<sup>86</sup>
- 6.86 Mr Ren Perkins, National Catholic Education Commission, advised the committee that a number of Catholic boarding schools now employ transition managers, who work closely with students, families and

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<sup>82</sup> For example: Professor Jeannie Herbert AM, *Submission 8*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 4; Independent Schools Queensland, *Submission 19*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 3–4; Ninti One Limited, *Submission 6*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 7; Richard Stewart and Rachel Elphick, *Submission 26*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 2; Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Supplementary Submission 46.1*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 7–9; Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, *Submission 17*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 11; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 4–5; Boarding Australia, *Submission 7*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 1–2; Boarding Australia, *Submission 21*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 2–3; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 20*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 4; Queensland Government, *Submission 26*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 16–17; Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, *Submission 18*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament; and Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 10–11.

<sup>83</sup> Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 7–8.

<sup>84</sup> Ms Lois Peeler AM, Principal, Worawa Aboriginal College, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 31 March 2017, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> Queensland Department of Education and Training, *Transition Support Services*, <http://indigenous.education.qld.gov.au/community/Pages/tss.aspx>, accessed 21 July 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Queensland Government, *Submission 26*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 16.

communities to develop strong links and strong local knowledge of students' home communities.<sup>87</sup>

- 6.87 The Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia noted that independent schools and, in particular, the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership's High Expectations Program, provide 'support for students to help in the transition from remote community life to a metropolitan boarding school, including professional and private tutors, mentors, role models, weekend home stay families and counsellors', as well as providing assistance and support for parents and guardians.<sup>88</sup>

### Relationships with community

- 6.88 Many submissions emphasised the importance of boarding facilities to build and maintain strong relationships with the families and communities of students.<sup>89</sup> Ms Fiona Jose, Cape York Partnership, emphasised the importance of providing support that is based in community to both students and families:

We only have three high schools throughout our 16 remote communities. So really we started to look at and focus on how we can actually support parents and students transition from remote schools to schools all over the state. One of those things we...lacked was how we were bringing the parents along and how we actually supported them.<sup>90</sup>

- 6.89 Ms Jose explained that the Cape York Leaders Program allows parents to feel confident that their children's needs are being properly considered and addressed by boarding schools in regional and capital cities:

We do a site inspection every year...Our kids do not have a choice...To have that structure fighting for them is extremely

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<sup>87</sup> Mr Ren Perkins, National Catholic Education Commission, Queensland, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 22 March 2016, p. 32.

<sup>88</sup> Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Submission 46*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. [6], [23]–[25].

<sup>89</sup> For example: Independent Schools Queensland, *Submission 19*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3; Remote Indigenous Parents Association, *Submission 47*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Supplementary Submission 46.1*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament; National Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 18*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 10; Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales, *Submission 17*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 12–14; Boarding Training Australia, *Submission 11*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 5–6; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 20*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 4; Dr Maryanne Macdonald, *Submission 11*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 3; Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, *Submission 18*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 5; Worawa Aboriginal College, *Submission 32*, 45<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 10.

<sup>90</sup> Ms Fiona Jose, Executive General Manager, Cape York Partnership, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 9.

important...There are limited Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander organisations with programs transitioning black Australian kids into these schools.<sup>91</sup>

## Flexibility and matching schools to students

- 6.90 Mr Richard Stewart noted that a key benefit of boarding facilities like AFL House, which allows students to attend a range of schools, is the capacity for students to be matched with a school and schooling model that best suits their needs without being sent home each time.<sup>92</sup>
- 6.91 Mr Anthony Bennett, Wiltja Boarding, emphasised the importance of flexibility when addressing student 'churn':
- ...big boarding schools – the 'big end of town' school systems – have very rigid and structured processes of expulsion, exclusion and all the rest of it. We do not. We will do everything in our power to keep that door open. We know that it might take four, five or six times for kids to come and go but eventually get to that point of maturation or decide they want to come back. The young lady doing law this year was deliberately not here for 12 months. We said: 'Go away; get it together...' She did. She finished her year 12 last year and got the highest ATAR that has ever been achieved by a student at Wiltja.<sup>93</sup>
- 6.92 Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle explained that:
- Well-informed families and students as well as schools would, in our opinion, lead to less non-completes for our Indigenous kids. Better application and enrolment processes would ensure a good fit between school and student. Many schools look to attract any Indigenous student and enrol all applicants, for reasons known to such schools. For students and their families, a lack of information and research into Indigenous boarding schools leaves them making decisions without having the full picture. Misinformation and miscommunication can lead to difficult issues to resolve down the track.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Ms Fiona Jose, Executive General Manager, Cape York Partnership, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 25.

<sup>92</sup> Mr Richard Stewart, Previous General Manager, AFL Cape York House, *Committee Hansard*, Cairns, 7 March 2016, p. 33.

<sup>93</sup> Mr Anthony Bennett, Manager, Wiltja Boarding, Department for Education and Child Development, *Committee Hansard*, Northgate, 26 February 2016, p. 10.

<sup>94</sup> Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers and Dr Nicholas Biddle, *Submission 14*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, p. 5.

- 6.93 Mr Selwyn Button, Assistant Director-General, Queensland Department of Education and Training, told the committee that the Queensland Government is considering establishing a project management office to track, monitor and coordinate students' transition from community to school and back again:

One of the options that we did talk about yesterday – I am probably more akin to walking down this path, but the review is still underway so we will wait until the outcome – is that within our department it is a matter of whether we go down the path of establishing what we might call a project management office so that logistically we track and monitor every student who goes off to boarding school or is transitioning to a school from remote communities, and that includes the logistics in relation to organising travel and accommodation and all those sorts of pieces along the way. If it is done inside our department and we can then provide the partial care and support and the accompanying pieces around having someone walk with them along the way, logistically it's all in the one space and we can then manage and monitor that better, we know exactly what's going on, we can take full responsibility and duty of care for every individual student, and we are more comfortable in knowing that we can see a seamless transition from community to school and back home again.<sup>95</sup>

- 6.94 Mr Button explained that there are issues with the transfer of information about students who have travelled interstate to live away from home for study, which hinders efforts to support these students:

Where we experience difficulties in transferring information is when we get kids predominantly from the territory who come across to our schools, and that is where we do have some issues around transfer of information. As I said, most of our kids will stay in Queensland but it is the kids who come from the NT and WA who come across to our boarding schools where there is a lack of information about those kids and how do we best support them as well.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Mr Selwyn Button, Assistant Director-General, State Schools – Indigenous Education, Department of Education and Training, Queensland, *Proof Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 29 August 2017, p. 22.

<sup>96</sup> Mr Selwyn Button, Assistant Director-General, State Schools – Indigenous Education, Department of Education and Training, Queensland, *Proof Committee Hansard*, Brisbane, 29 August 2017, p. 22.

- 6.95 The Northern Territory Department of Education also emphasised the need for better coordination and integration of services supporting students as they transition to secondary education pathways, particularly health services, ABSTUDY, and scholarship providers.<sup>97</sup>

### **Committee comment**

- 6.96 The committee received considerable evidence emphasising the importance of supporting students as they transition from community to boarding. Throughout the inquiry, it became clear that it is essential to work with students, families, and schools to ensure that the boarding facility, school, and schooling model best meets the individual needs of each student. Furthermore, the committee heard that retention and education outcomes improve when schools and boarding facilities are flexible and can negotiate a balance between a student's obligations to their family and community with their attendance and schooling.
- 6.97 The committee acknowledges the work that is being done by the Northern Territory and Queensland governments to support students in their transition from community to boarding. However, as many students travel interstate for study, the Federal Government may be the best suited to provide coordination and support so that no students fall through the cracks. The committee is of the view that the PM&C's existing and well-established regional network would be well-poised to deliver such services, whether through the establishment of a new Indigenous Education Support Officer position (the support officer), or by utilising existing resources within each regional office.
- 6.98 Students and families must be empowered to make informed decisions about what model might best suit their needs and to negotiate a balance between the student's obligations to their family and community with their school attendance and educational obligations. However, as many students and families may not feel confident conducting negotiations with schools, the committee believes that this could be an important role for a support officer, located in community. The support officer could liaise with families, students, and schools to ensure the best fit for the student and clarify expectations for all parties. The support officer could also assist students and families to coordinate and negotiate absences and return for cultural and family business.

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<sup>97</sup> Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 39*, 44<sup>th</sup> Parliament, pp. 8-9.

- 6.99 For students who return to community shortly after commencing living away from home for study, the support officer can also have a role in following up with a student and their family to ascertain the reasons for leaving and discuss alternate educational options based on an updated understanding of the student's needs.
- 6.100 As a Commonwealth officer, the support officer would be best suited to provide assistance with applications for federal payments such as ABSTUDY and provide advice regarding other forms of financial assistance. Clear processing pathways between PM&C and the Department of Human Services should be established to streamline the ABSTUDY process. This would create a clearer, faster, more seamless experience for both recipients and schools. ABSTUDY is considered in greater detail in Chapter 7 of this report.
- 6.101 Throughout the inquiry, the committee found that complete and consistent data regarding student attendance, performance and outcomes (employment, tertiary studies, etc.) is difficult to find, particularly when students are travelling interstate to study. This challenge is compounded by the many different schools that a student may attend throughout their schooling. The committee is of the view that the Federal Government should be responsible for collecting and recording this data. Educational attainment cannot be improved if the current state of education delivery and outcomes are not properly understood.

### **Recommendation 17**

- 6.102 **The committee recommends that, by 2020, the Federal Government, through the Prime Minister and Cabinet Regional Network Offices, introduce education coordination services for Indigenous boarding students from remote and very remote communities that will be responsible for:**
- **providing assistance and coordinating applications for ABSTUDY and other forms of financial assistance;**
  - **liaising with families, students, and schools to ensure the best fit for the student and clarify expectations for all parties;**
  - **coordinating and negotiating absences and return for cultural and family business; and**
  - **collecting and tracking student data regarding attendance, retention, educational performance, and outcomes (employment, tertiary studies, etc.).**