

Submission to the Inquiry into the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019

Submission made on behalf of Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia by CEO, Greg Franks

Background

Founded in 1995 Boarding Australia launched Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia (IEBA) as its new trading name at the National Indigenous Education and Boarding Symposium in March 2019.

IEBA has been created to close the education gap through boarding so that all Indigenous students gain an effective education in child-safe and culturally safe learning environments with access to health, wellbeing and mental health services.

Our vision is ***that all Indigenous students attain educational outcomes to be successful in their future choices.***

IEBA is the lead national peak organisation recognised as having expertise in Indigenous education and boarding and is well placed to operate across educational sectors throughout Australia. IEBA has effective working relationships with Independent, Catholic, Christian and government education providers. As IEBA does not have a vested financial interests as a boarding provider it also operates from a base of neutrality.

Indigenous Secondary Education

Indigenous young people are amongst the most vulnerable in our community. They are disproportionately likely to be in care, in contact with police, in poor health or commit suicide. Education is the key to their economic and social participation and better health outcomes.

For young Indigenous people living in regional and remote Australia there are few education options other than to leave their family and country to become boarding students in unfamiliar cities large distances from home. For most, boarding is their only access to secondary education.

There have been a number of studies and reports that explored Indigenous student boarding including the *Study Away Review*, The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* report by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs.

There is however a shortfall of data relating to Indigenous student boarding. The three Reports all point to evidence of what has failed and yet we are still left with no publicly available independent research (beyond the small body of mainly doctoral studies) or evaluations that explore for example:

- The educative values of boarding outside of the formal classroom environment
- The benefits or costs of Indigenous boarding funding through ABSTUDY welfare payments
- The net economic benefit or cost of boarding to individuals, Indigenous communities and the nation;
- The costs of 'churn' that results from student exclusion or educational disengagement
- The roles of State and Australian governments in secondary education for rural & remote Indigenous students

Coupled with the need for evidence, is a need for accountability. In the absence of an Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard there is no measures or body to hold boarding schools & residences accountable. When things go wrong for students (for example because of exclusion) who is then accountable for providing equitable alternatives? Where is the accountability back to Indigenous parents, from boarding schools in terms of ensuring safety, support and adequate care?

It is clear, however, that many Indigenous families are deliberately withdrawing their children when Family Tax Benefit ceases. This is evidenced through the anecdotal accounts from experienced senior managers in boarding schools and residences and the number of students whose boarding ceases upon them turning sixteen.

Funding of Indigenous boarding

Whilst ABSTUDY is a family welfare payment it has become the foundational source of (government) funding for most providers of Indigenous boarding.

In the absence of access to quality or indeed any secondary education options for most students from rural and remote areas a boarding education is the only option. For the vast majority of students access to secondary education is considered a right, however for Indigenous students in remote Australia this right is not provided through education funding.

For most Indigenous families their ABSTUDY payments are re-assigned directly to boarding schools and residences to pay the costs of their children's education. The boarding providers see this ABSTUDY money as a payment from the Australia government to cover the cost of boarding and education for Indigenous students. Indigenous scholarship providers base their scholarship as covering the school fees gap above the ABSTUDY.

However, the families who never see the ABSTUDY payments arrive in their bank accounts, rather than feel they are getting a benefit, rightly or wrongly, often feel that their money is being taken from them.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of boarding schools with Indigenous boarders. Information provided by the Department of Social Security in 2018 identified 149 boarding schools, of a total of around 245 boarding providers, who receive ABSTUDY payments. Most of these boarding schools have an Indigenous student cohort of less than 25% of students in boarding.

Scholarships are provided to students who are selected through criteria that would indicate they are likely to achieve academically and remain in schooling to complete year 12. Scholarships are paid to boarding schools over and above the ABSTUDY payment. This selection process and the additional financial support has resulted in scholarship students achieving higher academic outcomes than their peers without scholarships. However, scholarships only supports a small proportion of Indigenous students in boarding.

The historical Indigenous boarding providers have large cohorts of Indigenous boarders, often 100% of their enrolment. These students often have higher care needs and are not entering boarding as high academic achievers who can attract scholarships. These boarding schools are highly dependent on ABSTUDY payments.

There have been numerous reports, the KPMG report *Non-Government Indigenous Boarding School, Review of funding arrangements*, the yet to be released *Evaluation of Investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Boarding Services* report by Grant Thornton, and our own annual Indigenous Boarding Financial

Health Survey indicate funding through ABSTUDY is inadequate for the sustained provision of quality care and education.

There is a strong argument in the boarding sector that Indigenous student boarding should be addressed as an education expenditure, not paid indirectly through a welfare payment. This is also the view of Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia.

The funding of Indigenous education in boarding should recognise additional care needs, address cultural safety and include support for family and community engagement. However Indigenous boarding is funded, it should also focus upon retention of students in boarding and reward academic outcomes within the funding model.

IEBA's response is to continue to monitor, measure and seek feedback from the sector through our annual financial health survey. IEBA will also continue to advocate on behalf of boarding schools and residences for additional funding and systemic change for the Indigenous boarding funding systems.

Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standards

Standards are fundamental to quality. In 2012 Boarding Australia initiated the development of and played a significant lead role in the creation of the Boarding Standard for Australian schools and residences AS 5725:2015. This voluntary code, however, does not specifically address the unique challenges of Indigenous boarding.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs has recommended the development of an Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard. Whilst the boarding sector does an admirable job of providing a caring stable environment for Indigenous students there isn't a recognised national standard for Indigenous boarding students, a cohort that includes vulnerable students with complex needs.

Whilst there are a number of state and sector based cultural frameworks, there isn't any unifying code that addresses the needs of Indigenous boarding students. The creation and implementation of a National Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard will improve the outcomes for all Indigenous boarding students.

It is envisioned that the standard will establish quality measures to apply to all Indigenous education and boarding providers. It will by necessity support effective parent and community engagement and promote culturally safe boarding practices. Compliance with the standard will give boarding consumers, boarding school governors and regulators the quality assurance that does not currently exist.

IEBA seeks to lead the development of a National Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard.

The educative value of Indigenous boarding

The reality for boarding students is they spend around 35 hours at school and 133 hours in boarding each week. Boarding is much more than just providing students with comfortable bedding and a healthy diet.

Best practices in boarding demonstrate clearly that the time a young person spends in boarding does add educational value outside what is taught in the classroom. This learning can contribute directly to the students' academic outcomes but also provides experiential learning provided directly through boarding that can lead to personal growth outcomes, including health and well-being improvements. Boarding needs to

undergo a “cultural shift” where it sees itself and responds as a valued educational partner in the academic journey of each student in collaboration with the learning delivered in the classroom.

Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia is coordinating a group of interested boarding sector organisations, researchers and relevant government agencies to:

- Identify the key learning and development outcomes, including health and well-being that Indigenous students gain from attending boarding.
- identify what is currently being measured and what measures might apply to the other outcomes

In order to

- identify the value of boarding in order to argue for appropriate levels of funding
- create higher expectations of how boarding can contribute to Indigenous student development and educational outcomes
- produce measures that can become benchmarks, can be assessed at an individual boarding site level to compare to benchmarks and progress tracked at a local, regional and national level as an annual barometer of progress.

Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over

The loss of Family Tax Benefit Part A benefits to Indigenous families when their child turns 16 years old has created an unintended exit point for students to be withdrawn from boarding schools. This is the family’s response to a reduction of household income. This denies many students from remote Australia the opportunity to complete their education.

Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia welcomed the 2018 ABSTUDY budget measures when they were introduced and sees the extension of Family Assistance for Indigenous families as having an important role in supporting families sustain their children’s boarding education.

The Family Tax Benefit Part A amendments were introduced to address anomalies in the implementation of the maintenance income test for ABSTUDY students. This budget measure was identified for implementation from 1 January 2020 and IEBA would like to see the Parliament act to see this date achieved.

IEBA called on the Parliament to introduce this legislation in our attached Media Release of 10 July 2019.

Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia support the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019 and request the Senate to support the passage of this legislation.

END

MEDIA RELEASE

10 July 2019

Indigenous boarding students are failing to complete secondary education due to Federal Parliament's inaction



"Whilst the nation's focus is on closing the Indigenous education gap, without the full 2018 ABSTUDY budget measures the distance will not close," states Anthony Bennett, Chairperson of Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia.

"Indigenous families are still being short changed by the failure of the parliament to legislate a critical component of the 50 Years of ABSTUDY 2018 budget measures and as a result remote Indigenous students continue to drop out of the senior years of secondary school boarding.

Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia welcomed the 2018 ABSTUDY budget measures when they were introduced however the most important aspect for Indigenous family's access to ABSTUDY has still not been legislated.

The loss of Family Tax Benefit Part A benefits to Indigenous families when their child turns 16 years old has created an unintended exit point for students to be withdrawn from boarding schools as families cannot afford the loss of household income. This denies many students from remote Australia the opportunity to complete their education.

The Family Tax Benefit Part A amendments were introduced to address anomalies in the implementation of the maintenance income test for ABSTUDY students. This budget measure was identified for implementation from 1 January 2020 but the legislation is still to be introduced to the parliament.

"We are calling for legislation to be introduced immediately as the government needs to take every measure to stop Indigenous families withdrawing their children from boarding when their Family Tax Benefit income cuts out" states Mr. Bennett.

Whilst Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia supports the ABSTUDY system and applauds the 50 Years of ABSTUDY package the historical lack of direct secondary education funding for Indigenous students from remote Australia has meant that for 50 years these students' rights to a quality education has largely been treated as welfare through ABSTUDY benefits rather than through the lens of education funding.

As Mr. Bennett asserts, "ABSTUDY is a welfare payment from the Social Services budget but it is also foundational to the financial viability of Indigenous student boarding. ABSTUDY is therefore critical to provide opportunities for young first nation's people from remote Australia to gain a quality secondary education."

"However, it is our view that Indigenous education would be better served if funding was provided through education channels for remote students as this would focus on metrics more closely aligned to closing the gap."

Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia was launched as the trading name of Boarding Australia in March 2019 to support Indigenous students in boarding. Our vision is that *all Indigenous students attain educational outcomes that enable them to be successful in their future choices.* END