
1 Terms of Reference

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry is framed around defined Terms of Reference relating to educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This submission will talk primarily to three of those terms of reference:

- 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; and
- impacts on, and support for families and communities whose children experience different models of educational services.

MITS does not suggest that our model is the only or best model for education of Indigenous students across Australia. Different communities want different approaches for their children. However, every community across Australia wants the same outcome: strong, capable, empowered young Indigenous people who have the ability to negotiate outcomes for themselves and their communities. As a school seeking to enable our own students and their communities to achieve this goal, we believe that our experience and practice is relevant to the Standing Committee's inquiry.

2 Introduction to MITS

2.1 Introduction

The Melbourne Indigenous Transition School (**MITS**) is a not-for-profit entity whose mission is the successful and confident transition of Indigenous students from home communities to Melbourne Schools, creating pathways to greater educational opportunity. MITS has been developed over almost a decade of consultations with remote Indigenous families, community elders, remote Northern Territory and regional Victorian educators and Melbourne schools. It opened to its first students at the beginning of the 2016 school year.

MITS is built on a simple principle: Indigenous families in remote and regional communities want a range of educational opportunities for their children, including, for some families, away-from-home schooling in large cities like Melbourne. At the same time, many Melbourne schools have a desire to support Indigenous students by offering academic and boarding scholarships. However, very often, the academic, social, cultural and emotional challenges of away-from-home schooling can be too great for them to achieve their goals.

MITS recognises the innate abilities and ambitions of remote and regional Indigenous children, and the potential benefits of away-from-home schooling. It also recognises the desire of their families and communities for access to quality education for their young people. MITS therefore seeks to offer access to greater educational opportunity and choice for the young people from the communities with whom we have built connections and relationships.

The MITS model acknowledges and responds to the immense academic, cultural, social and emotional challenges encountered by Indigenous students as they move away from home for secondary education. It also seeks to support Melbourne Partner Schools as they create culturally safe learning environments for our students. We offer cultural awareness professional learning programs and continue to support and celebrate MITS students' learning and achievements throughout their secondary schooling.

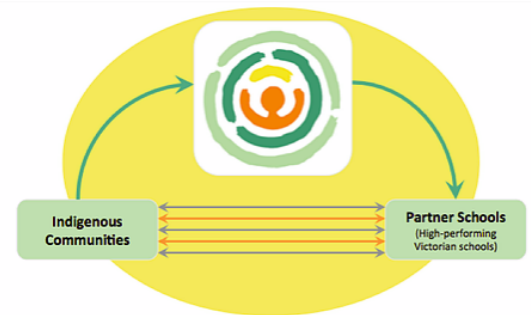
2.2 About the MITS program

Each year, 22 students (11 boys and 11 girls) around Year 7 age from remote and regional communities come to MITS for one year. During their MITS year, they undertake a Year 7 program which is strengths-based, differentiated, scaffolded and accelerated. It is based upon *The Australian Curriculum*, and recognises the EAL/D (English as an additional language/dialect) strengths of all students. The classroom learning environment is culturally safe and supportive, and is a space in which

students' wellbeing and teachers' high expectations are at the fore. Our students live at MITS's boarding house, which is a warm, home-style environment where each student's culture and personal identity are celebrated.

MITS's school and boarding house staff are Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with deep experience in education, boarding and Indigenous communities. In the school, we use a very low staff to student ratio of approximately 1 to 5.

At the conclusion of their MITS year, MITS identifies, and supports students to transition into, scholarship positions at MITS's Partner Schools. Our Class of 2016 are currently preparing to transition to 2017 positions at Brighton Grammar School, The Geelong College, Kingswood College, Melbourne Grammar School, Methodist Ladies' College, St Kevin's College, Trinity Grammar School Kew and Yarra Valley Grammar School

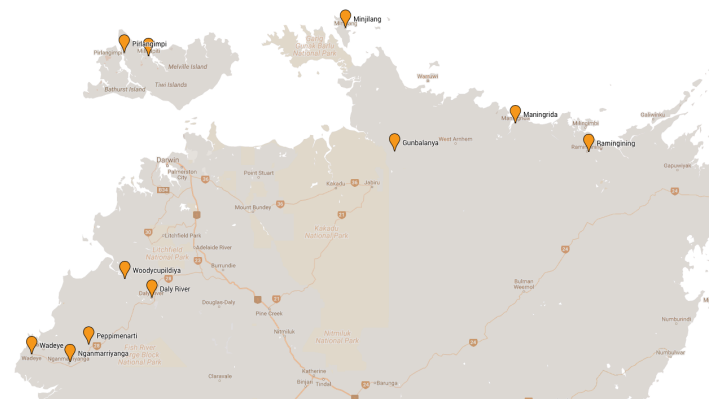


The MITS boarding house is located in the inner city Melbourne suburb of Richmond with the classroom for students located a short walk away at the Richmond Football Club's Korin Gamadji Institute. The boarding house and school are also located close to public transport, many of Melbourne's best known sites and institutions, and within short proximity to most MITS Partner Schools.

2.3 Our students and communities

MITS students are Indigenous students from remote Top End Northern Territory communities and regional Victorian communities. They are students who – together with their families and communities – have a desire to go to school away from home and have the potential to benefit from the MITS program. They are students who have a commitment to their education, demonstrated through a strong attendance record, positive attitude in the classroom, and consistent effort in their upper Primary years. They have been identified as MITS applicants, by their community elders, families, teachers and local school Principals.

In 2016 and 2017, our Northern Territory students have come from Pirlangimpi, Milikapiti, Wadeye (Port Keats), Nganmarriyanga (Palumpa), Peppimenarti, Woodcupildiya, Minjilang (Croker Island), Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Maningrida and Ramingining. Our Victorian students have come from Bairnsdale, Lucknow and Mooroopna. A map of Top End communities that our students call home, is set out to the right.



At MITS, we believe that strong relationships with our families and communities underpin our program. We must listen closely to what our communities want for their children. We recognise that relationships of genuine trust and understanding take time and resources to build. In the first years of our operation, we have chosen to work with a small number of remote and regional communities where the demand and need for away-from-home schooling is clear.

2.4 Our partners

MITS was established through the support of many corporate pro bono supporters, private philanthropic supporters and through a one-off Federal Government capital grant through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Now that MITS is operational, it relies on standard educational funding through the Commonwealth Department of Education and Victorian Department of Education and Training, ABSTUDY funding through the Commonwealth Department of Human Services, and through continuing philanthropic contributions from institutional and individual donors.

We work with the Northern Territory Department of Education's Transition Support Unit to identify Territory families and students who aspire to schooling away-from-home in Melbourne. We also work with Koorie Education Workers and Koorie Education Support Officers across Victoria.

In delivering our program, MITS works with a wide range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations, including Ilbijierrri Theatre Company, Melbourne Museum, Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, Royal Botanic Gardens and Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience.

Our classroom inside the Richmond Football Club's Korin Gamadji Institute underpins a critically important relationship between MITS and RFC. Whilst our program is in no way a "football program", our two organisations share a commitment to cultural safety and celebration (particularly in the Indigenous context), high expectations, personal excellence and the power of community.

MITS has also partnered with the Menzies Foundation to create the Sir Robert Menzies Indigenous Mentoring Fellowship. Each year, one young Indigenous leader will receive the Fellowship, enabling them to provide essential mentoring, peer support, and cultural connection to MITS students on a regular basis throughout the school year, whilst undertaking their own study.

3 Access to, participation in, and benefits of *different school models for Indigenous students* in different parts of Australia

MITS offers a unique model of education to facilitate improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students. Our model is based on the concept of a one-year transition: recognising our students' unique strengths, enabling them to build on those strengths in a supportive and culturally respectful context throughout a transition year, and allowing them to access mainstream Melbourne schools with confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of their personal identity.

During the MITS transition year, our approach is based on high-expectations, academic rigour, strong relationships of trust and understanding between our students, staff and communities and family support for education, particularly away-from-home education.

The concept of student wellbeing is central to our program: we recognise that in order to reach their potential in the classroom, students' wellbeing must be strong. For us, this includes cultural, emotional and physical wellbeing. We must celebrate our students' strengths, and see their cultural identity as one of those strengths. Family, community and first-languages are all highly valued at MITS.

MITS carefully matches students to their Partner Schools: ensuring that each school is a culturally safe place that will nurture our students and enable them to build on their personal strengths. Where possible, we match students with schools that have a pre-existing relationship with their family or community. Once students are matched to their Partner Schools, they visit that school regularly, building friendships, confidence and understanding as they prepare to move to that school the following year. MITS staff spend significant time with Partner School staff discussing each student: their profiles, their strengths, their challenges.

Once students have transitioned to their Partner School, MITS will continue to play a role in their continued wellbeing in Melbourne. MITS staff will spend time with students, Partner School Staff and home-stay families ensuring that students continue to go well. Students know that they are always welcome at the MITS boarding house, and are welcomed back through a range of structured alumni activities.

Our approaches are highly individualised and look at the particular strengths and needs of each of our students. We believe that this is critical to the success of our transition model.

4 Engagement and achievement of students in remote areas

The Northern Territory Transition Support Unit has performed extensive analysis on the engagement and achievement of students in remote areas of the Northern Territory. That analysis shows that remote and very remote Indigenous students in the Northern Territory demonstrate academic performance which is significantly below that of remote and very remote non-Indigenous students in the NT, provincial Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the NT, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous students nationally.

This analysis confirms MITS's view that there is a need for pathways to greater educational opportunities for Indigenous students from remote and regional communities, particularly those in the Top End. However, we do not suggest that away-from-home schooling is wanted by, or is appropriate for, every student and community. We advocate that many different approaches are required to support the full representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities.

5 Impacts on, and support for families and communities whose children experience different models of educational services

As MITS has only opened in 2016, we do not have specific data which demonstrates the impact of our model. However, at the end of our first year, 17 of our initial 22 students will transition to Partner Schools in 2017 (a completion rate of 77%). We have learned from those students who have not completed their year at MITS, and we have sought to refine our model accordingly.

Importantly, our parents and families tell us that they feel confident that MITS is supporting their children academically and in their wellbeing. At our Official Opening in late April 2016, one parent said:

"We feel happy that our kids can live at MITS.

We feel happy that our kids are getting a good education.

We feel proud that our kids can be strong leaders for our community, now and in the future.

We feel happy that our kids can learn to speak English with new people.

We feel proud that people in Melbourne can learn about Aboriginal way from our kids.

We feel happy that younger kids can follow these students.

We feel proud to think about kids from our community finishing school.

We feel happy that maybe our kids can go to university.

We feel happy and proud to see these kids here today, standing tall for their community."

6 Recommendation

MITS welcomes the continued support by the Australian Government of unique educational models that support the success and wellbeing of Indigenous students.