



Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

26 October 2015

Dear Committee members

RE: Educational Opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

On behalf of Boarding Australia, I am pleased to make this submission to the Committee. Boarding Australia (BA) is an industry association that supports people managing and working in boarding facilities, recognising the unique roles they play in the lives of their students. Our membership comprises boarding facilities delivering Indigenous boarding in rural and remote settings, as well as large metropolitan boarding schools and residences. Members range from small hostels with 15 Indigenous students to large schools with more than 250 boarders drawn from a variety of remote communities.

By way of context, there are some 245 formal boarding providers (incorporating State, Catholic and independent schools, as well as stand-alone boarding residences) in Australia supporting more than 18,000 students. We estimate that up to 40% of all boarding students are Indigenous, the majority from rural and remote communities. In this context, Boarding Australia recognises the critical role that boarding can play in the education of Indigenous students, particularly those from remote communities.

I would like to bring to the Committee's attention a number of issues that our members have raised and that we have noted in the conduct of research and special projects, such as our long-standing efforts to support the development of standards in boarding, staff training and parent/community engagement. The primary issues of concern that relate to the Committee's terms of reference are:

Retention of students and subsequent educational attainment

Boarding Australia strongly supports efforts to ensure the ongoing attendance and engagement of students in school, recognising the important role that a boarding environment plays in a student's education. To this end, BA recommends a shift from the current 'access' focus to one which recognises (and incentivises) 'attendance, retention and achievement'.

Many factors influence the retention of (or failure to retain) students in boarding. We often hear of students who are sent home due to 'breaking the rules', those who fail to return to school after family or cultural business and those who frequently change schools. All of these disruptions have a significant impact on the education of students. In this regard, BA would like to see a number of strategies investigated:





- A review of Abstudy policies, procedures and funding mechanisms such that student retention is promoted. For example, the potential for a 'retention supplement' or staged payments according to outcomes may offer an added incentive to retain students.
- Early transition support. Members that offer trial periods (eg 2 weeks) in boarding – rather than merely an orientation visit – report that retention is greatly improved. Abstudy rules currently do not support this extended trial. Alternatively, "boarding excursions" may serve as a way to orient younger students in year 6 or 7 to boarding.
- Appropriate support for students with additional needs. Boarding providers report that the complexity of issues for Indigenous students from remote communities is increasing. Many students attending boarding are victims or perpetrators of abuse, experience drug and/or alcohol issues, mental or physical health concerns, or display behaviour that can be very disruptive in a boarding environment. Without the adequate support for these students, retention in school and academic performance is severely impacted. In addition, there is an impact on other students and boarding or teaching staff when students with complex needs do not have adequate support from specialist services.

Boarding Australia would like to go on the record as wishing to be involved in any review of Abstudy policies, procedures or other mechanisms by which access, attendance, retention and achievement may be enhanced.

Quality, standards and Royal Commission implications

Boarding Australia has been committed to the development of standards in boarding for a number of years. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, along with a number of state-based reviews, has highlighted the importance of standards, staff training and duty of care when supporting young people in a boarding setting.

With a growing number of Indigenous students entering boarding and with the recent publication of the *Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Hostels*, boarding providers are increasingly concerned with ways in which they can improve their services for students. BA has made a number of submissions to assist boarding providers prepare for the standard and to demonstrate compliance, with particular attention to Indigenous boarding providers, many of whom offer diverse and specialised models of boarding. A pilot project to examine the application of the Standard within an Indigenous boarding context is one critical proposal that has been put forward.

Boarding Australia supports a national commitment to quality improvement, including assistance to develop the systems and processes to implement quality improvement initiatives across the sector. Boarding Australia is also aware of a number of providers of 'pseudo-boarding' – private individuals who offer accommodation to Indigenous students in return for payments provided by Abstudy. The quality and safety of these operations, delivered outside of any formal scrutiny or accreditation, cannot be assured.





Research and data to describe best practice

As noted above, Indigenous boarding is delivered in many different ways. This may include traditional dormitory style boarding schools, family group home settings, residential hostels or services targeted to specific communities or family groups. Each of these models has their strengths and weaknesses. What is clear, however, is that there is a paucity of evidence regarding 'what works' and 'for whom' in boarding for Indigenous students. BA supports research into outcomes-based assessments of the various models of boarding both in Australia and internationally. For this reason, the 2016 Boarding Australia conference will be held in conjunction with the New Zealand Boarding Schools Association and will include site visits to some innovative boarding services, including those with a focus on culturally safe boarding.

One of the things that BA has learned over time is the importance of family and community engagement for Indigenous boarding students. Our work over the past 3 years to develop the Parent and Community Engagement (PaCE) Guide, as well as the establishment of the Remote Indigenous Parents Association (RIPA) National and Roper Gulf branches has illustrated the desire of parents to be involved in the boarding experience of the children, as well as the significant benefits arising from boarding providers better engaging with parents. BA continues this work for the next 2 years under an Indigenous Advancement Strategy grant, but would urge the consideration of continued funding to support the ongoing operation of the National RIPA and additional branches.

In conclusion, Boarding Australia encourages the Committee to consider this submission. BA would be happy to provide further input or clarification, or provide further details of the project submissions made previously to promote Indigenous boarding improvement.

I am happy to be contacted at any time to discuss the submission on _____ or _____

Kind regards

Dan Cox
CEO, Boarding Australia

