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Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

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The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides this submission to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* as the peak strategic body representing 298 Catholic schools in Queensland that are operated by 22 Catholic Schooling Authorities and educate a total of 145,332 students, including 5,908 Indigenous students.

QCEC welcomes the opportunity to provide input to an inquiry that focuses on such an important element of education. This response has been informed by input from Catholic Schooling Authorities in Queensland that has identified programs that work well and produce positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The submission identifies key challenges in the provision of quality education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and explores the approaches and models that have been successful in supporting Indigenous students to transition to the school setting, succeed in their local school environment and transition to the work environment or higher education.

QCEC has formulated this response in accordance with the key aspects identified in the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry. However there are some key principles that QCEC believes are fundamental to delivering quality education to any identified group and these principles are proposed first to provide a context for decisions made in relation to Indigenous education.

Principles underpinning the QCEC response:

1. **Equity** – QCEC seeks fairness in the provision of education rather than implementing the same arrangements for all. In many cases this requires additional resourcing to be provided to specific groups of students or specific areas. Catholic Schooling Authorities in Queensland have long operated in a group funding model for Federal recurrent funding that allocates funding according to a number of criteria, including Indigeneity. Through this redistribution model, additional funding is provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in recognition of their additional resourcing needs.
2. **Sustainability** – it is critical that successful education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be sustainable and ongoing. At times, education programs and initiatives, particularly in targeted areas such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, have changed at the direction of Governments, with at times seemingly little regard for evidence based decision making. Quality programs need to be structured in such a manner that they become sustainable, embedded and with budget certainty and predictability. There are

many examples of programs funded by Governments that have been well intentioned, but lacking ongoing sustainable funding, providing insufficient lead-in times, and requiring evolving and overly complex accountability processes from Catholic Schooling Authorities and schools.

3. Coordination and consistency – linked to the above principle, there needs to be consistency and coherence as well as continuity in the delivery of education programs. As one principal stated: “I need to be able to assure my school community - students, teachers and parents, that the programs and support we have in place to address the needs of specific groups of students will be there in future years.” Where policy and resourcing are uncertain and changing, it is difficult to build and sustain the effort and commitment required to ensure the success of the program.
4. Subsidiarity - governance of Catholic schools in Queensland is grounded on two basic principles:
 - Principle of the common good is characterised by promoting a spirit of co-operation rather than competition, effective communication, and individual responsibility.
 - Principle of subsidiarity is characterised by decisions being made as close to the local level as appropriate and/or feasible.

QCEC values the current Commonwealth government funding arrangements that provide loadings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and enable approved system authorities, such as QCEC, to redistribute funding according to its own approved mechanisms. This ensures that each Catholic Schooling Authority can expend funding most appropriately to address local context and needs. The replacement of a targeted funding program approach by a loadings approach removes the dependency on short term, highly structured and often inflexible Government driven programs, and provides the opportunity for Catholic Schooling Authorities to identify and address specific issues related to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the local level.

5. Accountability – QCEC values relevant and necessary accountability requirements as an essential component of quality education provision. Close cooperation is sought between responsible levels of Governments and Catholic schooling in determining appropriate accountability requirements in the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning and teaching.

QCEC acknowledges and supports the principles articulated in the newly endorsed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy and has developed this response with these principles, as well as the five principles outlined above, in mind. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy has been accepted by those with particular responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Catholic Schooling Authorities as a quality high level framework to overarch the delivery of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Following is QCEC’s response to key aspects raised in the Inquiry. Each section aims to identify programs that are working well, give reasons why they are working well, and outline the positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Access to, participation in and outcomes of pre-schooling

The value of early childhood education has been well recognised in recent research. Indigenous children in particular benefit when they are well-prepared for the transition from a prior to school setting to Prep as the first year of schooling. Catholic Schooling Authorities report success from specific programs

initiated to encourage access and participation in pre-schooling (referred to as kindergarten in Queensland for 3 ½ to 4 ½ year olds). While kindergarten is a fairly new sphere for QCEC involvement, there are currently 52 children enrolled in the 24 Catholic kindergartens on school sites across Queensland who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

QCEC points to the success of the Pre-prep program 'Mini Murris' developed in the Toowoomba Diocese to cater for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children to enable children to successfully transition into the school environment. In this program, Indigenous children who were starting Prep the following year received a backpack of resources to assist in the development of early literacy and numeracy skills. An important element of the program was in getting the parents familiar and comfortable with the school setting. The program recognised the existing capabilities and knowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have when they arrive at school. Despite the success of this program, it unfortunately no longer operates due to the absence of a sustainable funding source.

Note should be made here of the required division between funding received by QCEC from governments for school education and funding available for early childhood education and kindergarten. Programs offered in early childhood education cannot be resourced with funding provided for school education¹, meaning that early childhood education programs must be fully self-sustainable and cannot be reliant on school resourcing, even where the kindergarten shares a school site. There may be advantage in reconsidering the separation of funding but there would be no desire to make early childhood education more "school-like".

The provision of boarding school education and its outcomes.

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families from remote areas, there is very little choice in local schooling opportunities. Boarding programs provide an avenue for Indigenous students in rural and remote areas to access high quality education. Catholic education in Queensland is proud of its history of providing boarding programs for students, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote regions of Queensland and other parts of Australia. In some cases these boarding schools are located in remote areas; in others, students from remote areas board at metropolitan schools. In either arrangement, students very often travel for long distances from their homes to participate in a boarding school program.

In Queensland Catholic schools in 2015, the number of Indigenous boarders increased by 15% from the previous year. Far North Queensland region had the greatest growth with the number of Indigenous boarders increasing by 29% from 2014 to 2015. This significant growth highlights both the demand for and success of boarding programs that the Catholic education sector provides for Indigenous families and students and was augmented by the opening of a new boarding facility in the Far North.

Successful boarding programs make strong cultural links with communities and enable families to be confident that their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, values and cultures are acknowledged and respected. In school, the provision of culturally appropriate activities which reflect

¹ Early childhood education and kindergarten are covered by separate legislation to that covering school education.

the values of the Indigenous culture helps students to develop confidence and participate in school activities such as weekly dance opportunities.

Funding their children's education can be challenging for many families, particularly where boarding school costs are required. Indigenous Education scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can encourage participation, achievement and school retention by removing one of the barriers to access. Overtly celebrating the success of students holding a scholarship within the school community can further encourage participation.

The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Foundation (QATSIF²) provides some scholarship funding to support students in the senior years of schooling and this has been instrumental in providing families with funds that enable students to attend boarding schools³. At school, students are guided to make appropriate decisions about subject choices and pathways to tertiary education or post-school destinations.

The increased number of boarding programs and students has prompted the employment of additional Indigenous workers to strengthen the partnership between the school and the families of Indigenous boarders. One Catholic Schooling Authority reports that the creation of a Transition Manager position has led to the construction of a transition house for families where they can reside short term while supporting the education of their child or attending special school events.

Strong school-home community communication channels promote stable enrolment and retention rates. Building high quality, positive relationships with Indigenous families from remote communities through visitation and telephone conversations ensures students feel welcomed and supported. One Catholic College with a high population of Indigenous boarders reported with pride that in 2014 there was a 100% retention rate across Year 8-12 and 100% of Year 12 Indigenous students graduated with a Senior Certificate.

A different schooling/boarding model that enables Indigenous students to access education is the 'homestay program'. Under this arrangement in one metropolitan school, students from remote communities are provided with the opportunity to attend school through a structured homestay program. Students reside with families who have or have had students at the College. Places for students are offered through a process of negotiation with the student, family and the school which builds meaningful relationships within the school community. Enrolment support processes are conducted over an extended period of time to prepare students, and the school then provides ongoing support by trained key staff members over the entire period of the schooling journey.

Students in the program gain confidence in themselves and develop skills to participate in society and are able to access tertiary entrance pathways or vocational pathways post-schooling. This initiative has attracted increased interest from new families and communities, and from other school providers, seeking an alternative boarding option. The school leadership has indicated that the removal of some of

² The QATSIF program has utilised interest on monies from the "stolen wages" to provide scholarships supporting education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their senior years of schooling.

³ QATSIF celebrations have become significant public functions across a number of regions in Queensland. They highlight the partnership between QATSIF and schools /school sectors and have engendered great pride and positive role modelling among Indigenous student scholarship holders.

the seemingly excessive bureaucratic 'red tape' requirements for homestay arrangements could alleviate the workload on schools providing this type of program.

Some boarding schools report a significant loss of tuition and school contact time because of complicated travel arrangements for some rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and believe that students attending boarding school would benefit from improved travel arrangements to and from their remote communities. In some cases it can take up to two weeks at the beginning and end of each term to travel between home and school. A more time efficient travel and transition service would decrease time lost in travelling from home to school and increase school contact time.

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

Queensland Catholic Schooling Authorities recognise that schools cannot use a 'one size fits all' approach. In order to enable all students to access the same educational opportunities, schools need to flexibly and agilely respond to the needs of all students. Some Catholic Schooling Authorities support educational opportunities for disengaged young people through the provision of flexible learning settings. Re-engaging young people, including Indigenous young people, between the ages of 12 to 18 years in flexible learning environments has led to successful outcomes for students.

Edmund Rice Education Australia Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres provide Learning Centres and Bridge and Outreach mobile programs. These provide young people with educational opportunities to re-engage and achieve positive educational outcomes in flexible and supported learning environments. In Queensland 30% of the students enrolled in Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Enrolments in the Youth Community Learning Centre in Toowoomba, a different model of flexible learning provision, remain steady and up to 20% of students transition annually back into mainstream schooling.

A newly opened Flexible Learning Centre operated by the Cairns Education Office in the Far North Queensland region is already at capacity despite having only been opened for ten weeks. All of the 37 Indigenous students enrolled at the Centre had previously experienced short term detention but all are now actively participating in learning.

Catholic schools strive to deliver effective models of teaching and learning that are inclusive of every student. Through Transition classes, schools are able to provide Indigenous students who have significant gaps in Mathematics and English and may not be able to complete the usual full academic year program, with inclusive learning programs. The outcome of this targeted approach is that students are now achieving significantly higher results in Pre-vocational Mathematics and receiving both excellence and diligence awards. The inclusion of the scaffolded mainstream as well as the Transition classes has given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the opportunity to develop appropriate skills in English as a Second Language and in English. Recognition of culture and respect for students' Indigenous languages make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students more likely to achieve the same education outcomes as other Australian students.

At one Catholic College, all Indigenous students have access to Enrichment classes, modified learning and tutoring sessions. One on one tutoring with experienced teaching staff has positively impacted on Indigenous student achievements and helped to improve grades. The program recognises the students' capacities and strengths but is also responsive to the challenges they experience in learning.

Programs such as the Ranger Cadetship Program in North Queensland have sparked interest in students in becoming rangers in their respective home regions. The program provides culturally enriching, accredited learning in an area of interest and active participation by Indigenous students. Unfortunately this is another example of an effective program that delivered positive outcomes for Indigenous students that will cease as Government funding has not continued.

Support in co-curricular areas allows Indigenous students to achieve in areas beyond the classroom. For example, staff attend sporting events with students to support and guide them with completing any required paperwork. Recognition of Indigenous students' co-curricular abilities and skills provides students with a balanced view of life, education and learning and provides further opportunities for the student to be rewarded and acknowledged in their schooling community.

Learning that is responsive to the needs of the local and school community helps students experience success and develop maturity. Recognising that the capabilities, abilities and skills of Indigenous students can be transferable into their home community and into future employment strengthens the partnership between the community and the school. The inclusion of subjects that are linked appropriately to occupations present in remote Indigenous communities has been praised and welcomed by Indigenous community leaders and Elders.

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

QCEC notes the ambiguity of this aspect as posed. Models of education services could refer to regular day schools, boarding schools (either remote or metropolitan), flexible learning centres or distance education. The provision of boarding school education has already been addressed in this submission as has the topic of different schooling models in the foregoing section on flexible learning centres. No Distance Education is provided directly by Catholic schooling although students in Catholic schools, especially in rural and remote areas, may access courses through the State School of Distance Education.

QCEC has elected to focus on *support for families and communities* and those strategies that are shown to work well.

Catholic education considers parents as the first and primary educators of their children and endeavours to put in place various supports for parents to assist them in this important role.

Catholic schools are cognisant of the importance of being accountable, transparent and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families. Direct home - school visits and contact made by the Indigenous Support Officers help families be confident that the school respects and welcomes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values. Ongoing contact with families and positive

communication between home and school remains the most important way to build solid meaningful relationships.

Some Catholic schools employ School Transition Support Officers who come to know the students and their families well. They establish close partnerships with families and the wider community which supports the student throughout their school journey. Transition team visits to remote communities broadens the school's exposure to the student's home environment and also helps build strong partnerships.

Cross-partnering of services between education and other support agencies, such as Queensland Health, addresses the total health and well-being of young people. Employing a registered nurse has assisted Catholic boarding schools to manage the health and well-being of Indigenous students. Staff from health agencies have worked with school staff in educating students in the areas of health, personal hygiene and sex education.

One Catholic Schooling Authority employed an auditory hearing specialist to identify and verify the high number of Indigenous students with hearing issues. Careful analysis of the results of the hearing tests identified the need for, and led to the implementation of, professional development for classroom teachers to support the needs of these students. More ongoing auditory testing and verification of students and appropriate teacher professional development is required to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Awareness of hearing issues has helped families support their child's learning needs.

Best practice models, both domestically and internationally

This submission identified at the outset support for the newly endorsed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015. It is seen as a valuable framework overarching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. It is noted that this framework has brought to maturity practices identified and structured into the previous Action Plan and enabled these to be embedded into ongoing planning in a proactive manner.

Catholic Schooling Authorities are committed to providing an education, in partnership with Indigenous families and communities that is responsive to the learning needs of Indigenous students. In considering teaching, models of best practice promote the learning of all students and considers the best interests of the student, the school and the community.

To address and improve low literacy skills amongst students, including Indigenous students, whole school literacy approaches have been introduced into Catholic schools.

The introduction of Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) for Indigenous students across the Catholic Schooling Authorities has supported schools in providing timely feedback to students and parents. Each student's progress is assessed, tracked and monitored to enable systematic reporting of literacy and numeracy progress.

Indigenous Bandscales training for staff enables them to assess and benchmark student's Standard Australian English (SAE) skills so that they know the specific learning needs of Indigenous students.

Recognition that many Indigenous students come to school speaking languages other than Standard Australian English (SAE) has meant that teachers require knowledge and skill in the teaching of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D). The inclusion of the Capability Framework for Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D learners in professional development for Indigenous Education Officers is helping to address the needs of Indigenous students' language development.

Indigenous Support Officers have a positive influence on students as strong relationships are established whereby students feel supported and encouraged to do well. Tailoring teaching and learning programs to the individual needs of Indigenous students in addition to holding high expectations in their learning and behaviour have enabled students to become meaningfully engaged in their education.

Consultation with Indigenous communities and external organisations and sharing of information about different ways of learning and working has resulted in school staff being more aware of how to engage students both in and outside of the classroom.

Professional training and upskilling in health and well-being of traumatised young people has been a contributing factor in providing a caring environment for students. Professional development for teachers in brain development and brain theory, plus the use of functional analysis approach⁴ when dealing with a young person's behaviour, has meant staff are better able to deal with challenging situations that arise in the school environment.

Employing Indigenous staff in the Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres helps to involve community in the education of Indigenous young people in these centres. Currently across Queensland there are 19 staff in Youth+ who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. In order to retain Indigenous staff a Diploma in Flexible Learning is offered to Indigenous staff who may not have formal qualifications.

The current Government program facilitated through the University of South Australia, *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teacher Initiative (MATSI)*, is one initiative exploring avenues to increase the number of Indigenous teachers in education thereby creating an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher workforce that is culturally competent and influential in providing role models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Hopefully, there will be positive results of the MATSI program at the conclusion of 2015 and funding will be extended to support this worthy initiative.

Comparison of school models in the transition to further education and employment outcomes

The Queensland Catholic schooling sector is committed to providing meaningful opportunities for Indigenous students to access both academic and vocational pathways in their schooling.

At one Catholic College, Year 10 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students participate in the Beacon Program. The students participate in a work-preparation program that provides simulation exercises in interviewing and personal presentation in order to build confidence and encourage students to remain at school to complete their Senior Schooling. School boarding and pastoral care team members conduct

⁴ Functional analysis allows for the development of behavioural interventions specifically designed to reduce a problem behaviour.

information sessions for students. These sessions have proven to be invaluable in enabling more students to transition successfully into further employment, including TAFE and apprenticeship opportunities. Partnership arrangements with universities and tertiary institutions support students through career talks and career counselling which result in students making sound decisions about future goals and aspirations.

School Transition Officers employed by Catholic schooling authorities support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their Senior Schooling phase and post-school. Indigenous students are supported to pursue pathways through the development of leadership skills and life skills, to secure sustained employment, and to consider post-schooling education to improve opportunities for themselves and be role models within their communities.

Closing comments

The submission has been based on feedback from Catholic Schooling Authority central office staff, principals, teachers and school boarding supervisors, about the educational programs being implemented by Queensland Catholic Schooling Authorities. Catholic Schooling Authorities in Queensland are committed to providing an education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students which is responsive to their cultural, social, linguistic and economic needs. This focus on meeting the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is crucial to achieving improved learning outcomes.

Catholic education acknowledges the importance of schools engaging closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, family and community members to build strong, meaningful and genuine partnerships. In seeking to achieve this goal there are challenges inherent in engaging with very remote communities and families of students in boarding schools and home-stay programs.

An analysis of the educational programs being provided to Indigenous students to see what works well and why can only benefit all who seek the best outcomes for Indigenous students. There is a need to support schools, Indigenous students and families with adequate and sustainable funding to deliver programs that lead to positive learning outcomes.

Sustainable funding enables Catholic Schooling Authorities to establish and continually improve programs that result in positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The hallmark of a high quality education system is one that seeks to provide educational opportunities for all Australian students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.