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BARRIERS AND BUREAUCRACY, BRIDGES AND BROKERS

How Independent boarding schools negotiate the thicket of ABSTUDY to deliver education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary school students from remote communities

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We would especially like to thank the school principals and business managers, finance and travel officers and others. Their feedback about their experiences with ABSTUDY was essential to helping us understand the issues that these schools grapple with in their particularity, and formulate recommendations that we hope will inform review and change of ABSTUDY to better support their provision of boarding school education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas.

Acronyms

ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
ANU	The Australian National University
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DSS	Department of Social Services
HoRSCIA	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
ISCA	Independent Schools Council of Australia
PM&C	Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
RIPANIC	Remote Indigenous Parents Association National Indigenous Corporation
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

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Executive summary and recommendations

Barriers and bureaucracy, bridges and brokers: these four words sum up the findings of our study, which investigated the experiences of independent schools in obtaining ABSTUDY funding for Indigenous students from remote areas. Schools, along with Indigenous secondary boarding students from remote areas and their families, deal with barriers to providing education for these students. One of these barriers is the complex bureaucratic system that schools, families and students need to negotiate to obtain ABSTUDY funding. Interpersonal relations between diverse social entities are an essential part of this educational ecology; we found that individuals and organisations who act as bridges or brokers between different social elements within this environment, reducing the burden on schools, families and students, play a valuable role and are very highly regarded.

Many Indigenous students living in remote areas of Australia have limited access to secondary education within their communities. While debates continue about how best to provide secondary education for these students, currently the only option for many is to attend boarding school. ABSTUDY has been, and continues to be, critically important for enabling many remote-area Indigenous students to access secondary education at a boarding school. ABSTUDY has been the subject of numerous reviews including, most recently, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs *Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*. The Inquiry issued an Interim report ahead of the July 2016 federal election and addressed ABSTUDY in its first recommendation – that an independent review of ABSTUDY should be conducted, with a view to the program being redesigned.

The findings of our study commissioned by the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) support the need for such a review. We conducted semi-structured interviews with national and peak bodies and with principals and key personnel of ten independent boarding schools; these schools were diverse in their nature and location. Our focus was on the impact of ABSTUDY on the individuals, organisations, communities, schools and families coping with the program; that is, how it functioned ‘on the ground’. While many of the common themes that emerged from our discussions related to challenges associated with ABSTUDY, we also listened out for, and sought to formulate, strategies and potential solutions to those challenges. We also

attempted, where possible, to give voice to the people we consulted.

Every school and organisation we spoke with struggled with a range of significant issues regarding ABSTUDY. This was true for better-off schools in metropolitan areas as well as for schools located in remote areas with large Indigenous student populations, although wealthier schools may be able to access more resources to manage the challenges.

We identified issues under the following four main themes: the inadequacy of ABSTUDY funding, the heavy administrative burden of ABSTUDY, communication difficulties (in various contexts), and student travel. The main messages to emerge from our study were:

- The current location of ABSTUDY in the welfare space, under the auspices of Centrelink, is incongruous with ABSTUDY’s educational purposes.
- ABSTUDY does not sufficiently fund boarding education for Indigenous students from remote areas, particularly the wraparound services Indigenous students need to get the most out of their education. Schools subsidise these services from other sources; however, for some boarding schools that provide education to the most disadvantaged Indigenous secondary students from remote areas, this is unsustainable.
- ABSTUDY funding lacks transparency, can be inconsistent from student to student, and is unpredictable.
- Many remote Indigenous communities are a long distance away from the facilities and services of larger centres and often lack adequate infrastructure (e.g., transport, postal services, telephones, internet). In these communities, there are particular cultural norms and practices, many people speak a language other than English, have poor English literacy skills, and lack official documents such as birth certificates. Current ABSTUDY procedures and systems do not sufficiently accommodate these features of Indigenous communities in remote areas. (It is worth noting that most of the Western-educated English-speaking participants in our research found ABSTUDY’s complexity challenging to negotiate.) Transition Support Units, where they exist, play an extremely helpful bridging role, facilitating communication between schools and communities.
- There were many issues related to travel, described in detail in the report.

- Finally, a number of schools were concerned that they were not consulted about changes to ABSTUDY policy and had few opportunities for direct input into ABSTUDY policy.

Based on our study, we formulated the following list of recommendations. More detail regarding each of these recommendations is provided in Section 8.

Recommendations

Recommendations related to the nature and structure of ABSTUDY

- Reframe the ABSTUDY program to return to an educational support focus rather than an individual welfare payment
- Establish ABSTUDY regional account managers
- Enable school-based ABSTUDY program delegates
- Require all Commonwealth ABSTUDY program staff to visit a remote community to develop greater understanding of conditions and circumstances in these communities
- Develop a portal on the Department of Human Services website for boarding schools hosting Indigenous boarding students

Recommendations related to increasing educational participation of remote-area students

- Establish Commonwealth funding to provide for transition support programs in all States and Territories
- Invest in plain-English versions of ABSTUDY application forms, manuals and online rules and procedures
- Clarify ABSTUDY funding to support Schools' engagement with students' families and communities

Recommendations related to reconfiguration of ABSTUDY funding

- Empower school finance officers or their delegates to act as agents for individual students/families/care-givers in applying for ABSTUDY support
- Allow each school to apply for and receive ahead of the start of the school year a prospective or advance per capita payment involving a formula that includes a base-rate payment for each student, and the various allowances and costs applicable to remote-area boarders

- To improve efficiency, develop routes of greater autonomy for schools that are demonstrably effective and successful managers of ABSTUDY support programs. This could involve conferring a 'trusted school' status on such schools
- Enable ABSTUDY staff within Centrelink greater discretion to provide financial support in individual cases where a student has access to a particular opportunity, but parents cannot afford it

Recommendations related to ABSTUDY travel

- Expand ABSTUDY travel funding to allow schools to organise travel for student suspensions and more timely management of expulsions
- Streamline ABSTUDY processes and eliminate required applications and approvals for reasonable travel for boarding students
- Allow students to travel to boarding school on the weekend

Recommendations related to engagement of policy-makers with schools

- Commonwealth, State/Territory, boarding and independent school stakeholders to facilitate opportunities for schools to contribute to policy-making related to boarding funding and ABSTUDY payments

1 Introduction

Barriers and bureaucracy, bridges and brokers: these four words sum up the findings of our research into the experiences of independent schools when it came to obtaining ABSTUDY funding for Indigenous students from remote areas. Schools, along with Indigenous secondary boarding students from remote areas and their families, deal with barriers to educating these students. One of these barriers is the complex bureaucratic system that schools, families and students need to negotiate to obtain ABSTUDY funding. Personal interactions between diverse social entities constitute an essential part of this educational ecology; we found that individuals and organisations who act as bridges or brokers between different social elements within this environment – reducing the burden on schools, families and students – play a valuable role and are very highly regarded.

This report presents the findings of a study commissioned by the Independent Schools Council of Australia. The study was titled *ABSTUDY and Independent Schools: impact and challenges for Indigenous students, with particular attention to students from remote communities attending Indigenous boarding schools*. While ABSTUDY has been the subject of numerous reviews, several in the recent past, the aim of this study is very specific, concentrating on the impact of the program on Indigenous students from remote areas who wish to attend boarding schools.

According to the ABSTUDY Policy Manual, the objectives of ABSTUDY are to:

- encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available;
- promote equity of educational opportunity; and
- improve educational outcomes (Department of Social Services 2017: 7).

ABSTUDY originated in 1969 as a Commonwealth Government program designed to support Indigenous education beyond secondary school. The scheme provided grants for courses of study at universities, colleges of advanced education, technical colleges, centres for vocational training and other institutions. In its first year 115 grants were made and a total of \$62,177 was spent on the program (Schwab & Campbell 1997). Today, the program has expanded significantly beyond the original remit to assist more broadly with costs related to study, housing, living expenses and travel. ABSTUDY at present comprises a range of payment types including multiple supplementary payments and benefits and,

unlike the original program, there is no single ABSTUDY payment. While more diverse in form and focus when compared to the original program, ABSTUDY continues to be critically important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to study, and it retains powerful symbolic and practical value to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a program aimed specifically at their needs.

ABSTUDY has long been the subject of criticism and debate. It underwent its first major review and overhaul by the Howard government in 1997 (Schwab & Campbell 1997) and continues to receive substantial attention. In 2014 the Forrest review called for revision of ABSTUDY to improve its capacity to meet the needs of Indigenous students attending boarding schools (Forrest 2014). More recently, ABSTUDY was examined as part of a House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs *Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* (HoRSCIA 2016a), and the Australian National Audit Office recently conducted a performance audit of the administration of ABSTUDY, tabling its report in May 2017 (ANAO 2017).

The independent schools sector is a major provider of education for Indigenous students. In 2016 there were 12,600 Indigenous students enrolled in 832 independent schools. Indigenous enrolments have increased over time in this sector, growing at an average of more than six per cent per year over the past decade.¹

In 2016, there were 2,400 Indigenous boarding students at independent schools (see Table 1 for a summary of statistics related to Indigenous students, boarding and ABSTUDY). Many of these students were from remote communities; the literacy and numeracy levels of many of these Indigenous students are low, and needs are high. ABSTUDY is a critical component of support for these students, yet there are clear indications that the current program is often not meeting the needs of students and families.

The remaining sections of this report are structured as follows:

- Section 2 Overview of project, key research questions and methodology
- Section 3 ABSTUDY: the policy context
- Section 4 ABSTUDY: objectives and current boarding funding arrangements
- Section 5 ABSTUDY in context: students, communities and the benefits and challenges of boarding

- Section 6 Findings: the experience of ABSTUDY 'on the ground'
- Section 7 Summary and recommendations for improvements to the ABSTUDY Scheme, in relation to boarding education for Indigenous students from remote areas
- Section 8 Recommendations
- Section 9 Concluding comments and suggestions for future research.

TABLE 1. Indigenous students, boarding and ABSTUDY: an overview

Indigenous students attending secondary school ¹ – number	65 200
Indigenous students attending secondary school ¹ – % of all students	4.5%
Number of independent schools ²	1 104
Indigenous students attending independent schools ²	12 618
Number of independent boarding schools ³	116
Number of students at independent boarding schools ³	109 300
Indigenous students attending independent boarding schools (including day students and boarders) ³ – number	3 800
Indigenous students attending independent boarding schools ³ – % of all students	3.5%
Indigenous boarders attending independent boarding schools ³ – number	2 400
Indigenous secondary students receiving ABSTUDY Away From Home benefits ⁴ – number	5 700
Indigenous boarders at independent boarding schools receiving ABSTUDY ⁵ – number	1 800
ABSTUDY direct boarding received by Indigenous students at independent boarding schools ⁵ – \$ total	\$22 million
ABSTUDY direct boarding received by Indigenous students at independent boarding schools ⁵ – \$ average per student	\$10 600

Notes:

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census extracted using Tablebuilder.
2. <http://isca.edu.au/about-independent-schools/independent-schools-overview/>
3. Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2016 data
4. 2017 Prime Ministers Closing the Gap report, 2015 data
5. Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2015 data

2 Overview of project, key research questions and methodology

To assess the extent to which ABSTUDY's objectives are being met, we framed our research to address a series of key questions. These questions are simple and straightforward, and in attempting to answer them we asked a range of important stakeholders to describe their experiences of ABSTUDY 'on the ground' – that is, we attempted to capture in their own words how the program works and how it serves or fails the needs of Indigenous students, their families and caregivers, and the schools that provide their education:

- Are ABSTUDY payments overly complicated?
- If so, does that complexity result in difficulties for families and school staff in terms of compliance, correct entitlements, and accuracy of payments?
- Do ABSTUDY application process timelines have a negative impact on schools?
- Are ABSTUDY payments sufficient for covering the costs for Indigenous boarding students, particularly those from remote areas?
- Is there a discrepancy between what schools expect to receive at enrolment versus what is received?
- How well does ABSTUDY accommodate the need for students to travel during term time?
- Do current ABSTUDY rules concerning parental employment create a disincentive for parents of Indigenous students and/or an unexpected financial burden on schools?

The project design was approved by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2017/397) and involved a mixed-methods approach:

- Literature review – identifying and analysing existing research literature, government inquiries, submissions and reports related to the current ABSTUDY scheme, paying particular attention to impact on Indigenous boarders;
- Qualitative research component – semi-structured interviews conducted mostly by telephone (in person where research participants were in Canberra) with:
 - officers from Commonwealth departments responsible for the administration and delivery of ABSTUDY
 - representatives of five organisations selected from national peak bodies and State/ Territory Associations of Independent Schools

- Ten independent school principals (and/or their school business managers and/or other relevant school staff) in schools providing boarding school education to Indigenous students from remote communities
- representatives of the Remote Indigenous Parents Association National Indigenous Corporation (RIPANIC)²; and
- Calculation of the effective marginal tax rates in relation to ABSTUDY and the rest of the tax and transfer system to model and estimate how income changes affect eligibility and income. In the end, this proved impossible given the complexity of the modelling involving many variables. We were, however, able to graph the indicative change in ABSTUDY payments as parental income increased for one scenario (see Fig. 1). This provided some insight into the frustrations expressed by schools related to parental means-testing.

The project was designed around the series of semi-structured interviews conducted by telephone with principals and business managers (or similar) from ten schools. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with representatives from a number of related peak bodies, including organisations with a remit extending beyond the independent school sector.

The boarding schools in scope for the research were independent schools with Indigenous boarding students (with close attention towards those with Indigenous boarding students from remote areas) that have engaged to some extent with the ABSTUDY program. A list of independent schools meeting these criteria was provided by ISCA.

From this list, we identified a sample of schools we believed would potentially provide insight into the ABSTUDY experience and represent a mix of different States and Territories, and variation in the number and proportion of Indigenous students boarding in those schools. Working through the list of schools initially identified for our sample, one declined participation, and two did not reply. Ultimately, ten schools participated in our study.

The sample of participating schools covered all States and Territories except Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, where the number of Indigenous boarding students was very small; and included schools located in metropolitan, regional and remote areas. The number of Indigenous boarding students attending the

participating schools ranged from about 25–100, and accounted for 2%–100% of their school's total student population. The schools included single-sex and co-educational schools with student populations ranging in size from less than 100 to over 1,000; at least one non-denominational school; schools that catered for both boarders and day students, as well as schools that were for boarders only; and schools that provided boarding for students at all stages of secondary schooling (Years 7–12) as well as schools that focused on a particular stage of secondary schooling. The participating schools covered 22% of all Indigenous boarding students in independent schools in 2016, and 38% of the total amount of ABSTUDY boarding income received by independent schools in the same year.

2.1 Analytical approach

The research was primarily directed at the experience of students, families, care-givers and schools in securing and administering ABSTUDY payments to support the education of Indigenous boarders from remote areas. While this is a very specific concern, we recognise the myriad relationships and linkages involved. Students are not an isolated variable in the educational equation; they present a diverse range of capacities and often face some significant challenges in their educational journeys. They come from families and communities with disparate, consequential histories, interests and concerns. Similarly, boarding schools are not merely hostels providing accommodation for students. Every day they confront complex challenges of staffing, duty of care, health, welfare, education, and the like. The schools are also administrative bodies faced with negotiating complex systems of payment and accountability, not just with Centrelink as the agency responsible for ABSTUDY, but with other local, State/Territory and national agencies and government departments. Through all these threads are human relationships, replete with all the challenges, opportunities and possibilities those entail. In our investigation of the impact of ABSTUDY 'on the ground', we listened carefully to accounts of this complexity, searching not merely for instances of problems and barriers, but also for strategies and potential solutions that might enhance the delivery and successful outcomes of the ABSTUDY program. Importantly, we attempted, where possible, to give voice to the individuals we consulted.

3 ABSTUDY: the policy context

In 2009, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) observed that over recent

decades there have been debates about the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches aimed at improving educational outcomes of Indigenous Australians. Their report noted that ‘with few exceptions, the debates about Indigenous education focus on whether it is better to educate Indigenous children in their own communities or whether it is better to remove Indigenous children to boarding schools where they can access western style education’ (HREOC 2009). Indigenous children have a fundamental right to access education, whether at home or away.³ While it is not appropriate or useful here to enter into this debate, the reality is few students from remote areas have any real choice.

For most Indigenous students from remote parts of the country, educational participation at the secondary level continues to be challenging. Few remote communities provide secondary education, and students are required to travel and often board away from home if they want to continue with schooling. ABSTUDY has been and continues to be critically important for enabling many of these students to continue their studies. As noted earlier, the independent schools sector has a longstanding commitment to the provision of education for Indigenous students, and is the major provider of boarding school education in Australia.

The Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme, the forerunner to ABSTUDY, first appeared as a Commonwealth Government program in 1969. The scheme was originally designed to foster Indigenous participation in education after secondary schooling, but the program we know today provides income support for school education as well. From a modest beginning where in 1969 there were 115 grants made totalling \$62,177, ABSTUDY in 2015-16 allocated over \$259 million to nearly 32,000 students (Schwab & Campbell 1997; ANAO 2017).

Over the course of its history, ABSTUDY has been reviewed, reconfigured, and transferred from department to department. Most recently, ABSTUDY has been identified as an area of concern in the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs *Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*. That Inquiry was suspended with the approach of the Australian federal election (held in July 2016) and subsequently resumed. As at 31 August 2017, the inquiry was conducting public hearings. The Committee issued an Interim Report in order to highlight ‘widespread community concerns in some areas, most significantly in relation to ABSTUDY arrangements’ (HoRSCIA 2016b: 1). The first recommendation of the Interim Report was

‘that the Department of Human Services undertake an independent review of ABSTUDY with a view to the program being redesigned and the new system being fully operational at the latest by June 2017’ but as of September 2017 that review has yet to see the light of day (HoRSCIA 2016b: vbii).

In addition, the Australian National Audit Office was asked to undertake an independent performance audit in the Department of Social Services and the Department of Human Services on the administration of Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY (ANAO 2017). The aim of that audit, published in May 2017, was to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the two departments’ administration of the programs. The audit report provided three recommendations:

- 1 Human Services implements a strategy to ensure that the rollout of the new processing system to other payments and programs administered by the department is well planned and managed, including by sharing the lessons learned from the implementation of this processing system for Youth Allowance (Student)
- 2 Human Services to review its Quality On Line sampling of ABSTUDY decisions to align with the risks associated with the accuracy rates of new claims compared to non-new claims
- 3 DSS and Human Services to review the payment accuracy Key Performance Measure in the Bilateral Management Arrangement to more clearly distinguish between expected levels of performance for payment correctness and payment accuracy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these recommendations are primarily processual and aimed at efficiency. Significantly, the report notes that ‘there is no internal or public reporting to inform assessment as to whether Youth Allowance (Student) or ABSTUDY programs are achieving their overarching policy objectives’ (ANAO 2017: 11).

In addition, in recent years there have been some specific reviews related to the funding of boarding education for Indigenous students. One review, carried out by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, analysed the costs borne by an agreed set of non-government boarding schools with substantial numbers of Indigenous boarders from remote communities (see e.g., ISCA 2016). A similarly focused review, conducted by KPMG and specific to the Northern Territory, was completed in late 2016 (KPMG 2016). Both of these reviews, involving detailed financial analysis, determined that government funding is insufficient to

meet the costs associated with delivering boarding education to Indigenous students from remote areas, even to current levels of service.

Finally, we would note that the Commonwealth is not sitting idle, but is deeply engaged in a process of exploring the best way forward for ABSTUDY and the support of students who need to board away from home. There is a group within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet conducting what is referred to as the 'Study Away Review'. What that review will produce is not yet clear. At the same time, there is a growing body of academic literature that will help to inform future directions. References to a selection of this literature are included at the end of this report.

4 ABSTUDY objectives and current boarding funding arrangements

4.1 ABSTUDY objectives

The objectives of ABSTUDY, articulated in the ABSTUDY Policy Manual (Department of Social Services 2017: 7) are to:

- encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available
- promote equity of educational opportunity, and
- improve educational outcomes.

4.2 Current ABSTUDY boarding funding arrangements

4.2.1 ABSTUDY Policy Manual

The two main Australian Government sources of information about ABSTUDY are the ABSTUDY Policy Manual⁴ (APM), available from the Australian Government Guides to Social Policy Law website, and the Australian Government Department of Human Services website.

Indigenous secondary students from remote communities who need to live away from home to attend school may be eligible for the following main allowances, which are 'paid to the boarding school or hostel in 4 instalments at the beginning of each term to help pay for school fees and boarding costs' (ABSTUDY Remote Areas form⁵):

- School Fees Allowance
- Basic Payment Living Allowance
- Rent Assistance
- Remote Area Allowance

The full suite of allowances that Indigenous secondary students attending boarding school may be eligible for under the Schooling B Award (depending on their age and other criteria) is summarised in the APM at 22.1.1 (page 67).

Two other ABSTUDY components particularly relevant to Indigenous boarding students from remote areas are:

- travel fares allowances⁶
- the boarding supplement for ABSTUDY approved boarders under 16 years.⁷

Boarding schools play a vital role in relation to these, as schools are the institutions that coordinate and submit travel requests to Centrelink for students who receive ABSTUDY Fares Allowance (or arrange travel themselves and seek reimbursement – this seems to be a less common arrangement); and claim the boarding supplement for ABSTUDY approved boarders under 16 years of age.

The Under-16 boarding supplement is available to schools that provide boarding facilities integrated within the school's structure, where at least 10% of total student enrolments at the school, or a minimum of 20 enrolled students, are Indigenous (and, since 1 July 2015, qualifying hostels) (APM 86.3).

4.2.2 ABSTUDY information available through the Department of Human Services website

The Australian Government Department of Human Services website⁸ hosts a portal for *Indigenous Australians*, which in turn has an ABSTUDY portal.⁹ To be eligible for ABSTUDY, applicants must be 'Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; in an approved course, Australian Apprenticeship or traineeship; and not getting another payment to study or train'.

Clicking on the *Claiming* hyperlink directs users to a textbox titled 'Claiming', and clicking on the *Next* button in this box takes users through to a page titled 'Claiming ABSTUDY'.¹⁰ Scrolling down this page, a section titled 'How to claim' first lists 'Phone claims', which offers users the opportunity to claim over the phone using a free 1800 phone number. The next heading, 'Claim forms', provides a table listing 'Circumstances' in the first column and 'Form to complete' in the second column.

Following on from two categories of circumstances relating to students aged 15 or under and living at home, the third 'circumstance' listed relates to the population of interest for this research, i.e., *secondary school student from a remote area who needs to live away from home for school*. Clicking on the link in the 'Form to complete' column takes the user through to a webpage with a direct

link to the form.¹¹ According to this form, Indigenous secondary students from remote communities who need to live away from home to attend school may be eligible for the following allowances, which are ‘paid to the boarding school or hostel in 4 instalments at the beginning of each term to help pay for school fees and boarding costs’:

- School Fees Allowance
- Basic Payment Living Allowance
- Rent Assistance
- Remote Area Allowance

Further down this page, users are advised that ‘When you claim, we might ask you to fill in extra forms. These help us accurately assess your claim and understand your circumstances. If we ask for these, you need to submit them within 14 days together with your confirmation of identity, if needed’.

For boarding schools, there does not appear to be a single website entry point that takes them to information relevant to them. The link to the *Claim for boarding supplement for ABSTUDY approved boarders under 16 years*, which ‘must be completed by a boarding institution representative’, is found on the same webpage as additional forms that the students or their families may need to complete.

Information for boarding schools or hostels about their role in coordinating travel requests for their Indigenous boarding students (where applicable) is not prominently displayed. It is located on different pages, including under ‘Resources’, at the bottom of the ABSTUDY ‘Fares Allowance’ webpage. The form can also be accessed by selecting ‘Organisations’ at the top of the DHS home page, then selecting ‘Business’, then selecting the grey box on the left titled ‘Education and training providers, parent and student groups’. Under the heading ‘Payments for students’, links are provided to the general ABSTUDY portal page, with information regarding:

- School Fees Allowance for students 15 years of age or younger, which is ‘usually paid directly to the school’ and
- ABSTUDY fares allowance information for boarding schools and hostels.

4.2.3 Summary of ABSTUDY arrangements

Very broadly, ABSTUDY allowances that support Indigenous secondary students from remote areas to attend boarding schools fall under three main arrangements, subject to various eligibility criteria and other conditions:

- Allowances that are claimed by the student or their family and then directed to the boarding school (e.g., Living Allowance, School Fee Allowance)¹²
- The boarding supplement for ABSTUDY approved boarders under 16 years, which must be completed by a boarding school representative and is paid to the school¹³
- Fares allowance, generally managed via a procedure in which the school submits a travel request to Centrelink, whose travel provider QBT then arranges the travel.¹⁴ Schools or students who make their own travel arrangements can also be reimbursed for travel costs if they meet the relevant criteria.

5 ABSTUDY in context: students, communities, and the benefits and challenges of boarding

The schools included in our study are varied, ranging from small establishments the entire student population of which are constituted by Indigenous boarding students, to large metropolitan schools in which Indigenous boarding students from remote areas make up a small proportion of the total school population. For many of these students, as for their families and communities, English is not their first language and is often their third or fourth language. While most students have had local access to western or mainstream education, schools reported that the literacy skills of students starting boarding school in Year 7 is often well behind their peers.

The means by which boarders came to attend specific schools were varied. Several schools concentrated on providing learning opportunities for students who were disengaged from education, and in a few cases students were referred to the school by a child protection agency or through the juvenile justice system. All the schools reported providing for students from remote areas who had traumatic backgrounds with experience of poverty, exposure to drug and alcohol use, family violence, parental separation, and out-of-home care. One school reported that families sometimes chose to send students to boarding school from their remote communities because in their community they could not obtain the level of health care that their children needed if they had a chronic disease. Obviously, such students had complex and significant needs.

Understanding the characteristics of remote communities and the circumstances of students living in these communities is essential to providing services that meet their requirements. Yet schools commonly expressed

frustration that policy makers – ‘Canberra-based bureaucrats’ – and those working in service delivery agencies displayed little knowledge or understanding of local contexts. We will return to this issue later.

Many schools have historical connections with particular communities, and students often came to the schools by word of mouth or followed in the footsteps of other students from the same community. Indeed, school respondents observed it was fairly common for parents or another family member to have attended that school. Alternatively, students sometimes came to a school by means of its good relationship with a wider network of feeder schools.

Scholarship programs were another means by which Indigenous students from remote areas came to attend boarding school. Some schools hosted students who were participants in Indigenous scholarship programs provided by non-profit organisations, such as Yalari,¹⁵ the Smith Family’s Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP),¹⁶ and the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF).¹⁷ Such programs are not simply avenues for funding, but rather are actively involved in supporting engagement that benefits students across a far broader scope than merely academic achievement. One school noted that its selection criteria for students for the IYLP include strengthening cultural identity:

There are some criteria. One: being able to survive at boarding school – we don’t want to set them up for failure and send them home, causing more shame. Will they cope academically? Two: pride in their identity and being able to express it, so – becoming stronger in their cultural identity. Three: leadership. Four: academic effort. There may be family links, but we don’t automatically accept siblings.

[School principal, NSW independent school]

5.2 Benefits and challenges of boarding as seen by boarding school principals and independent school associations

To obtain more information about the context in which the ABSTUDY program operates in relation to Indigenous boarding students from remote areas, we asked research participants *‘what helps Indigenous students from remote areas get the most out of attending boarding school?’*

The most fundamental issue was that local access to secondary schooling is limited in most remote communities. For many students living in remote communities who want to access secondary education,

particularly senior secondary education (Years 10–12), boarding is the only option. But even where secondary education options are available locally, some students and their families desire the boarding option.

Beyond issues of boarding schools helping to overcome barriers to access, research participants told us boarding school provided a structure that improved school attendance, offered a safe and secure environment where students’ basic needs (e.g., food, sleep) could be met, and enabled a sense of family and community, away from the distractions and peer pressures of their home community. This involves what some schools described as a holistic approach to students’ health and wellbeing – an approach which those schools believe is integral to students’ educational participation and academic performance. Representatives of some schools described this as ‘wraparound’ support for students, an approach to pastoral care that is particularly important for students who have experienced trauma and have complex needs. However, the extent to which schools are adequately funded to provide this support is often insufficient, a point we will return to below.

Several schools said they were trying to create a sense of hope and opportunity, and to restore students’ pride. Many students were the first in their family to gain a senior secondary educational certificate, and consequently ‘arrive at school believing they can’t do well academically [; however,] that changes’ [Principal, SA independent school]. Many schools were faith-based, encouraging Christian ethics and values. At the same time, several schools said they supported students to maintain, develop, strengthen and express their Indigenous identity and culture in various ways.

Schools and State/Territory associations identified a range of challenges that they faced in providing a boarding school education for Indigenous students from remote areas. One of the primary challenges is to ensure Indigenous students from remote areas are able to cope with the range of new and unfamiliar experiences and expectations many encounter. Homesickness is extremely common and difficult for many students, who have never travelled away from home alone.

One participant observed:

... the culture gap, ... being a whitefella institution ... we haven't got many Aboriginal staff, we don't have many staff who are really attuned to Aboriginal family settings and context, whether that be cultural or even just the socioeconomics. ... The [students] come from beloved families and very relational communities, whereas down here it's all work, work, work ...

[Indigenous student coordinator, NSW independent school]

Such school work can be difficult. It was suggested by more than one school principal that literacy, numeracy and general educational levels of Indigenous students from remote areas were often 2–3 years behind Year 7 students. These students need a lot of academic support in and outside the classroom.

The educational gaps that the [students] come with is a huge problem ... they've often had such intermittent or problematic schooling histories that there's big gaps in their learning. So, compensating for that, getting them up to speed – literacy and numeracy – is expensive. But we're doing it; we provide extra resources there, well and beyond anything that ABSTUDY or anyone else gives us. ... Speech pathologists, psychologists, counselling, trauma counselling – about 80% would have a trauma history of some sort. ... We help out with clothing and any stuff they're missing – pens, books, textbooks; we cover uniforms.'

[Indigenous student coordinator, NSW independent school]

These challenges are exacerbated by what some schools described as students' histories of trauma and grief. Poorly treated illness and untimely death are prevalent in many remote communities, often leaving students anxious about family at home – this requires careful and sensitive support from school staff, a type of support that is not without financial consequences. Indeed, as will be described below, a major challenge for these institutions is the cost of the services necessary to enable Indigenous students from remote areas to make the most of their educational opportunities.

6 Findings: the experience of ABSTUDY 'on the ground'

The findings regarding how students, communities and schools experienced ABSTUDY were remarkably consistent. While there was some variation, particularly in relation to the depth of knowledge and experience staff in different schools had with the program, every school and peak body we spoke with struggled with a range of significant problems. These can be clustered into four themes: the inadequacy of ABSTUDY funding, the heavy administrative burden of ABSTUDY, the difficulties of communication, and the management of student travel.

6.1 ABSTUDY funding – insufficient, inconsistent, incongruous and unpredictable

6.1.1 Funding is insufficient

Every school indicated that the amount of boarding funding they received was insufficient to provide proper support to Indigenous students from remote areas. The costs of providing for these students is not met by ABSTUDY payments. Because they do not receive adequate funding, schools attempt as best they can to make up the shortfall from other sources. Schools that were better-off and had a small proportion of Indigenous boarding students from remote areas were in a better position to cross-subsidise and absorb these costs. For other schools that catered largely or entirely to remote-area Indigenous boarding students, the financial situation was precarious. While for the former this is frustrating and inconvenient, for the latter it is unsustainable. Several of the individuals we spoke with pointed to the experience of Kormilda College in Darwin as the worst-case scenario. After several years of inadequate funding, Kormilda was 'bailed out' and saved from closure by a \$5.1 million injection of funds from the Northern Territory Government in late 2016. Operating funds for 2017 were then guaranteed by the Commonwealth subject to development of a sustainable business model. In mid-2017 it was announced that Kormilda would be taken over by Victorian education provider Haileybury College. But the degree to which a new institution can resolve the crisis remains to be seen.

We've got quite a number of schools that are finding it more and more difficult ... to cater for the boarding students; we've got a number of schools that have had to go cap-in-hand to the Commonwealth for top-up funding just to survive. We've got a number of schools ... that are on the verge of having to close boarding programs because of that lack of funding. It gets tossed backwards and forwards between

[the Commonwealth and State/Territory ministers]. They know. There's been two major reviews that have both shown exactly the same thing, both independent reviews, and yet we've still got people [in Commonwealth and State/Territory ministers' offices] saying 'Oh well we don't really believe that's the case'. I think 'Oh well you don't believe it because you don't know how to cover it.'

[Executive director, State/territory Association of Independent Schools]

The difficulty [with providing the school's boarding program] comes when the funding models underpinning it are killing us. There just isn't enough to go around and we're forever moving from grant to grant, from policy change to policy change. And we're getting all this talk about closing gaps, we're getting talk about this is what we need to do and when we're desperately trying to do it, they're chopping us off at the knees – when we believe we can make genuine change with these kids and help them become stronger, and they're just making it really hard because it's basically impossible to fund. We just can't afford it. And we can't get anyone to listen to us.

[Principal, NT independent school]

A recent KPMG review of seven independent schools in the Northern Territory (KPMG 2016), based on those schools' data from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2015, found the annual average cost of providing an Indigenous boarding facility (excluding the academic program) in a school-based setting was about \$26,000 per student. The KPMG review estimated the funding shortfall per student (to deliver a boarding service in line with National Boarding Standards) to be about \$12,000.

Our research did not set out to quantify the costs to schools of providing boarding for Indigenous students from remote areas. However, as schools began telling us repeatedly that the funding was insufficient, we began to ask these expert informants (school principals and business managers/financial officers/accountants or similar) to indicate their ballpark estimates of these costs. While we did not do this in a systematic way and cannot directly compare results, our findings do not diverge significantly from KPMG's. Schools' estimates of the annual cost of supporting an Indigenous student from a remote area to attend boarding school ranged from \$25,000-\$50,000. These amounts inevitably varied depending on the school's particular circumstances, the number and types of support they provided, and what

they included in their estimate. The most commonly reported amount was in the vicinity of \$35,000.

A couple of schools estimated the shortfall to be 20–40%, which was covered by cross-subsidisation or in other ways (for example, by accessing health services provided for free under the Closing the Gap program, or through the financial support of school alumni).

While some schools acknowledged that the Commonwealth Government's Gonski 2.0 schools funding package (see e.g., Goss & Sonnemann 2017) would increase their *education* funding, they suggested that funding for boarding was declining. One school said the gains from the new education funding model (Gonski 2.0) were negated by the costs of boarding and argued that boarding schools were, in effect, being penalised for providing boarding services.

Funding as far as schooling goes is heading in the right direction with this new funding agreement that's been recently legislated – I think that's going to certainly make a significant difference in the school side of things – but boarding still ... the trajectory is heading south ... financially. Resources that we have to support boarding ... is just not adequate to provide the level of care that we think the students that we're working with need.

[Principal, WA independent school]

This was attributed by one research participant partly to the expiry at the end of 2016 of the Commonwealth Government's Indigenous Boarding Initiative.¹⁸

6.1.2 *Funding is inconsistent and incongruous*

Our interviews revealed a widely-held belief that there are major inconsistencies in the way ABSTUDY is allocated across jurisdictions, sectors, and even from school to school and student to student. One school described a case in which a family of twins, who lived in the same town and in the same house, submitted an ABSTUDY application for each child and while one received ABSTUDY, the other did not.

Another school told us:

We can't get a lot of information for the payments that are made from ABSTUDY. For instance, we might get \$1,000 for one student from boarding, \$4,000 for another student, and then we'll see \$11,000 come in for a student and we know that's not all for this year but we can't decipher what's what. And they won't

give us that information. They just – make payments. And so it's very hard for us to understand what's going on ... the funding is very inconsistent and we don't know why.

[Business manager, WA independent school].

At the State and Territory levels, we were told that inconsistencies also occur across jurisdictions and sectors. Some of this may be a reflection of a greater depth of experience among business managers in some schools and knowledge about how best to ensure funds are allocated, but we also heard stories of individually brokered arrangements whereby a school might successfully negotiate funding around its particular needs.

... over the years individual schools have done individual deals to support their boarding and educational programs ... it comes out of the woodwork every now and again ... we are not the beneficiary [here] of any of those ... as we look around, what is clear is, the status quo isn't working ... we suddenly discover some schools are receiving [a comparatively greater amount] annually and have done for many many many years – all of a sudden you understand why they're able to do the things that we can't do. So that level of inconsistency is a real problem.

[Principal, NT independent school]

A couple of schools we talked to felt that a criterion used to determine whether Indigenous boarding students were eligible for a higher rate of ABSTUDY, a primary source of *boarding funding* for these students, was incongruous with the basis for their school's *education funding*.

Under the *Australian Education Act 2013*, schools' *education funding* comprises a base amount plus a total loading. The base amount reflects the number of students at the school that year; the schooling resource standard funding amount per student at that school; and 'the capacity of the school's community to contribute financially to the school'. Extra funding, or *loading*, is provided in relation to students with disability; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; students from low socio-economic backgrounds; students who have low English proficiency; schools that are not in major cities; and smaller schools.¹⁹ The new educational funding arrangements from 2018 ('Gonski 2.0') will retain the base amount plus loadings model.

The consequence of this model is that schools with larger proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and with larger proportions of students from low socio-economic backgrounds have a higher loading applied to their *education funding*. Yet when it comes to *boarding funding* in the form of ABSTUDY Living Away from Home allowance, students with a scholarship to an independent boarding school are *not eligible* for a higher rate of ABSTUDY unless 'the school has a socioeconomic funding score for Commonwealth General Recurrent Grants of 100 or more'.²⁰ The ABSTUDY Policy Manual provides little detail on the rationale for this, stating simply that 'the purpose of ABSTUDY assistance for students who meet one of the criteria is to substantially extend the educational access and outcomes of Indigenous students' (APM, Chapter 35).

Schools could not understand why students at schools with lower overall socio-economic scores should not be entitled to a higher rate of *boarding funding*. They felt that if the educational impacts of disadvantage were being addressed by directing higher levels of *education funding* to these students, then other impacts of disadvantage on students' health and wellbeing, supported by schools in many ways through their boarding programs, should be addressed by directing higher levels of *boarding funding* to the students, in the form of a higher rate of ABSTUDY. To the schools that raised this issue, this situation was incongruous and simply did not make sense.

We have actually asked ABSTUDY [for our school] to be approved [by the government program] as an independent boarding school ... which means that once students are given a scholarship to the school, they are automatically approved for travel Unfortunately ... we're not eligible to be approved because we don't meet one of the criteria, which is our socioeconomic (SES) score. In order to be approved you need to have a minimum score of 100, and we don't actually have a score. We're called MATSIS, which is Majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School. Which ... doesn't really make sense because ... we're not scored ... because the students come from a very remote community and ... families wouldn't have a good capacity to support the school, which is what that score represents, but we need to have a minimum score to enable students to be approved. So it sort of contradicts itself and it doesn't really make sense to me. We actually get higher funding from the state and federal government because of that MATSIS SES score, so it just doesn't make sense that ABSTUDY would then request that we have a minimum score to enable our students to be approved. Because to me ABSTUDY's meant to be for the more disadvantaged student.

[Executive support officer, WA independent school]

Because our SES socioeconomic score is under 100, we're not allowed any longer to offer an Indigenous scholarship. Prior to this we were on 100, you could put it in your letter that you were offering an Indigenous scholarship, the school would pay at least 15% of the costs, and that was it, no questions asked, ABSTUDY came through. Because we're on 99 instead of 100 we're not eligible to offer this scholarship. So in order for our [students] to get ABSTUDY they have to prove a valid reason why they can't live at home and study ...

[Accountant, NSW independent school]

A higher rate of ABSTUDY is also available to students who gain a 'Scholarship to a Highly Effective or High Expectations School'. This raises the troubling question of whether or not schools need to be selective and not take the most disadvantaged students in order to maximise funding.

6.1.3 Funding is unpredictable

A major concern for the schools was variation in the amount of ABSTUDY boarding payments they received from year to year, making it difficult for them to reconcile the amount they expected to be funded and the amount ultimately received – what is typically referred to as business uncertainty, and which in some cases has resulted in the loss of any reliable revenue stream. This is partly a consequence of the inconsistency in payments between individual students, described in Section 6.1.2. Changes during the year linked to student attendance and variations in families' circumstances reflected in parental means testing could also have an impact on schools' funding. If students are not attending the school on the schools' census date, ABSTUDY is suspended until the school notifies Centrelink that the student has arrived or returned, and the school then receives a pro-rata amount only. Often, these inconsistencies and changes in circumstances are not transparent to the schools.

One school manager explained:

For instance, one year we may get ... 60% nearly or 30% less than the year before, which is really significant if you're talking hundreds of thousands of dollars. And to be able to work in an organisation where most of our costs are set ... that inconsistency creates problems with cash flow as you can imagine.

[Business manager, WA independent school]

Another school reported:

One of the things that takes us a while to do every year is to try to reconcile back what we think we're going to get with various funding bodies ... it's not something we know in advance normally and as the year plays out that changes as well depending on changes in people's circumstances, so obviously what we try to do is not let that have any impact on the individual students.

[Principal, SA independent school]

This concern was reported by all types of schools, ranging from small schools catering exclusively to Indigenous boarders from remote areas, to better-off schools in metropolitan areas with large non-Indigenous student populations. However, for the smaller schools or those that did not charge fees, the combination of insufficient and variable levels of funding creates a far more precarious situation, resulting in greater financial pressures and potentially jeopardising the continuing viability of some schools.

I think my Indigenous students are the most incredible people I've ever met ... If nothing changes, my boarding program – it won't be here in five years' time. ... I can't sustain it ... and the danger is we get to that point, we fix it with a grant, and not a policy change ... that's the message I'm really struggling to get through to people that matter, is that without a baseline change in policy ... I can't continue to run this program. And I don't know what I'm going to do with 100 kids apart from they're just not going to get education.

[Principal, NT independent school]

Schools argued that there was a misalignment between the schools' organisational models and the way in which ABSTUDY boarding funding was paid. For example, schools incur certain costs (boarding facilities, staffing, etc.) based on the number of students they are expecting, but receive less funding if students do not attend school, are significantly delayed, or do not stay at the school for the full year. The provision of boarding education for remote Indigenous students almost invariably involves a higher risk of any or all of these situations.

As one school manager commented:

... the biggest component of funding for boarding is obviously ABSTUDY. And there's so many variables in ABSTUDY and in the way ABSTUDY comes to us and there's limited capacity to plan and budget around the unknown.

[Business manager, WA independent school]

At the same time, schools commented that they could not obtain adequate information regarding the ABSTUDY payments that they received. They claimed the ABSTUDY funding formula to be unfathomable, could not understand why ABSTUDY payments varied radically from student to student, and but just hoped or assumed they were getting receiving the correct funding amounts.

It's like we're passive recipients ... we don't really challenge ... whatever amount we get, we just assume that's the right amount. We don't know if it's right or wrong. The only time is when we get nothing for a [student] ... that alerts us that we're expecting something and why has it not come through? But ... if a [student] was only getting the basic ABSTUDY and maybe was entitled to a Living Away from Home Allowance ... we wouldn't know and we just assume that [the student's] getting the right amount. When they come and tell us that we owe them money back, and we've got a debt that we have to pay, we just pay it ... we've got no way of recalculating it and checking it for ourselves. ... Budgeting ... we just take a guess, we don't know exactly what that shortfall's going to be, but whatever it is, we end up covering.

[NSW independent school]

6.1.4 The hidden yet essential costs of boarding

Schools repeatedly made the point that it was difficult to distinguish between boarding and education costs. In addition, they argued that the health services and academic and other supports they provided were essential to students' physical, social and emotional wellbeing – that student wellbeing was inextricably linked to their educational outcomes. Many of these costs are hidden, yet essential. The lack of funding support for these is an enormous problem and a significant threat to the viability of boarding programs.

The importance of these 'wrap-around services' is recognised by Government and referred to recently in the Prime Minister's 2017 Closing the Gap report:

We will continue to focus on the long-term priorities of education, employment, health and wellbeing and safety. These priorities need the wrap-around services that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout life, from preconception through to old age.²¹

Schools reported that they provided a range of goods, services and supports for Indigenous boarding students from remote areas (and their families) that were either not covered at all or not fully compensated for by ABSTUDY; these are summarised in the following account, interspersed with extracts from some of our discussions with school representatives that provide further illustration of this shortfall.

Basic and school needs

This includes clothes, shaving kits, personal hygiene products, school uniforms and textbooks. These are all ongoing and significant costs for the schools. While they are essential needs to be met, schools try to be resourceful in minimising costs. One school, for example, provided students with uniforms, but required their return at the end of the school year so that they could be reused by new students the following year.

We just cover [the costs], we cover all of them. Some of them, it's all costs. Apart from tuition fees, boarding fees, it's things like replacement uniforms, bedding, toiletries, clothing. For example, last week [one of our office staff] went shopping to come back with 20 shaving kits for our Indigenous boys as they need to learn how to shave ... they can't afford razors and shaving cream. Doonas for the middle of winter ... footy boots ... in no way do we want these [students] to appear disadvantaged at the college.

[Principal, NSW independent school]

Staffing

Schools required extra staffing in the areas of boarding supervision, additional educational support, and Indigenous teachers and other Indigenous staff roles. Boarding accommodation requires sufficient staff supervision, with higher staff-to-student ratios suggested for Indigenous students. One organisation advised that 'the staff-to-student ratio that has been suggested for indigenous students is 1:8. In the majority of other boarding settings it is 1:20'. Yet there are no funds available through ABSTUDY to pay for extra staff who can ensure students are supervised when an unplanned or unexpected supervisor absence occurs.

So many of these kids have additional needs so you've got your houseparents and your teachers who are now psychologists – they're playing a support role, they're doctors, they're nurses, they're everything. If a child needs help, well we drive them into town at our expense, take them to hospital on our time, do all those kinds of things. If a child gets sick, or has dentistry needs – all of those kinds of things. That happens out of the school's budget. There's nothing in there ... for additional nursing staff or anything like that at all. So that whole support structure that is required for these kids ... many of them have got hearing issues, many of them have got sight issues as well, all of that is handled on the back of the school.

[Former CFO, NT independent school]

Much extra educational support is provided in the classroom in the form of smaller student-to-teacher ratios, additional teachers' aides, and withdrawing students from mainstream classes to provide them with intensive support. In addition, support extends beyond the classroom, with students receiving help with homework and educational support from tutors and mentors. Many schools have also sought to employ Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers, boarding supervisors, and Indigenous Liaison officers to provide a level of cultural support.

Health services and psychological support and counselling

Schools offered numerous examples of the types of medical services they were required to access in order to meet the needs of Indigenous students from remote areas because of the poorer health of these students. These included paediatricians; audiologists; ear, nose and throat specialists; taking children for monthly injections to treat rheumatic heart disease; echocardiograms; dental services; immunisation, optometry, speech pathology. In many cases the schools covered the costs of these services.

We pay a lot of other costs on top of [tuition and boarding] for things like extra tutoring, psychological support, counselling ... additional services these [students] need to make it work for them. We just fund that out of our normal college resources ... uniforms, textbooks, counselling, extra tutoring, speech pathology, health services. Then on top of that ... we've got a strong alumni network ... we've got [alumni] who are dentists who will do the

[students'] teeth for nothing. We do a lot more that actually gets donated through our community as well.

[NSW independent school]

There were frequent references to the traumatic backgrounds of many students and the need to provide psychological support.

Students' needs are very complex and significant. [There is] a need to get individual support through a counsellor after hours, which we struggle to do. We need to provide health care and services, which we struggle to do.

[Principal, Qld independent school]

We've got access to doctors through normal medical channels. The reality of it is though, these kids, whenever we bring them in, we need to do the health checks, we need to check their hearing, we need to work through with them, every time we do that, because we have to go out and do that rather than services coming into the school, or having capacity through top-up funding to have nurses and other staff – then we have to send people away, and sit in hospitals. So there's all that basic health stuff that you need to do – healthy kids learn better.

[Principal, NT independent school]

... Something as simple as a counsellor would help these kids, would go a long way to improving, not just their academic results but their social, emotional results as they come out.

[Principal, NT independent school]

Outside-school activities for the students – 'the other 18 hours'

Schools commonly reported that ABSTUDY did not provide sufficient resources to support students' needs outside school hours, i.e., during 'the other 18 hours'. These out-of-school and after-hours activities often determine whether or not a boarding student will remain in school. Excursions on the weekends, attendance and participation in sport, and other forms of recreation are in many ways the first line of defence against boredom and loneliness, a combination that increases the risk of homesickness and a desire to return home. The lack of financial support for these activities flies in the face of a program that purportedly aims to encourage and engage young people with learning.

Retention is still a big challenge for us – we seem to have capacity to keep a reasonable number of students in the school, but keeping the same students from February through to December is still problematic for some of our students. I think a lot of that comes back to that level of support, particularly after hours. And being able to provide activities and a boarding or after-school program that engages the students and supports them during that time. The school day is obviously only a small component of their life away from home and the school has the capacity to access the resources to do that – provide the education – but the boarding operation is very limited in its capacity to source funding to expand what they're able to provide. ... Students are involved in a range of activities, they can play in local sporting teams which is pretty popular ... students go into town for shopping, they get access to the swimming pool. They still do quite a range of different outings and things like that. But I guess it's more specifically around that care and input, particularly with the more vulnerable-type students that need, probably more one-on-one type input, or some additional counselling or support

We also do driver training with the students – a lot of the students don't have the capacity to get a driver's licence back home. That's a big drawcard for our students coming to the school ... to give them that freedom and opportunity for employment that many of us take for granted. They have to do 50 hours of supervised driving now, and you multiply that by 40 or 50 students a year, that's a significant amount of resources to meet that demand.

[Principal, WA independent school]

Engagement and communication with family/community

Schools repeatedly made the point that it was essential to engage and communicate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, but that this was an expensive exercise, which lack of funding often prevented them from doing as effectively as they would have liked.

Schools described various ways in which they connected with students' families and communities. These included visiting communities, helping families fill out forms, supporting family visits to the boarding school, talking to family members on the phone when students needed support, and inviting families to school events such as graduations.

At times we get out to the communities and talk with parents and families and past students ... but again, that's an expensive exercise, hugely expensive, and we've not had the capacity to do that to the extent which probably is necessary.

[Principal, WA independent school]

Consultation with the community is very important. It's not just once every few years or ... an annual thing, it has to be ... all the time in everything you do. ... If a child gets upset, I know [our travel officer] spends a lot of time talking to family on the phone, trying to work out who's the best person from community to come.

[Qld independent school]

Student orientation and transitions

Schools noted that there was an ABSTUDY allowance for orientation, but it was for a very short time, given that moving away from home to attend boarding school was a significant cultural shock for many Indigenous students.

It's uniform costs, the cost of delivering this program, which is very much supporting them and bringing families down ... to provide this holistic approach and it's very much bringing the families on because you're not just dealing with the student. Once you take these students on, you've got to bring the families on the journey as well. So there's quite a bit of cost involved in that which isn't really supported by ABSTUDY. [You can bring someone down to accompany the student when they start] but what about all the little celebrations, the costs are not always covered. It's also supporting the types of educational programs that are required ... there's extra things that we need to do in supporting them in their educational programs that isn't always just covered by ABSTUDY.

[Executive director, WA independent school]

One school said that the amount of time funded for orientation by ABSTUDY left a very short time for the school to do all the things it needed to do; for example, developing individual support plans while the parent or guardian was in attendance. Many families were tired after spending a substantial amount of time travelling, and in many cases there were language barriers. This did not leave enough time for family visitors to familiarise themselves with the student's new environment.

Post-school pathways

A number of schools described various ways in which they attempted to support students in the transition from school to life after school. These include: providing driver training, supporting students to stay on at the boarding school for longer to make up for their initial lag in literacy and numeracy skills, and working in partnership with vocational or higher education organisations, or employers, to support students' post-school transitions. These are important activities for supporting students to realise outcomes from their secondary education. However, despite one stated objective of ABSTUDY of concentrating on educational outcomes, schools do not receive any support from ABSTUDY for these important post-school transition support activities.

6.1.5 Making up the difference between costs and funding

All of the schools indicated that the school made up the difference between their costs and the funding they received for providing a boarding service for Indigenous secondary students from remote areas. Schools described a variety of ways in which they were able to cover the gap in funding or to access the services they needed. A number of school participants said that they drew on their education budget to cover these excess costs.

How does the school manage the shortfall? It comes out of our educational recurrent [budget] ... the school gets ABSTUDY and then the school gets our educational recurrent budget ... where does the money come from? It's not spent on books, it's not spent on teacher aides, it's spent on getting kids back and forth from home because ABSTUDY won't do it. So the only place we get money as a school, our boarding program, is either ABSTUDY or what the educational side earns. And we have to make it work from that pond. So we're boarding ... and [school name] suffers from a boarding program that very rarely breaks even, that we have to subsidise that from our educational recurrent funding. And that makes it incredibly difficult.

[Principal, NT independent school]

In other cases, the funding gap was covered by scholarships or donations by benefactors. Some schools were able to draw on free services provided by their alumni network, or were able to access free medical and allied health services through the Closing the Gap program. One school staff member mentioned that there used to be small capital grants available from Aboriginal

Hostels Limited²² for things like mattresses or kitchen equipment, but that these grants are no longer available.

6.2 Excessive administrative burden to manage ABSTUDY payments

Schools commonly reported that managing ABSTUDY payments requires a tremendous amount of administrative time, and one suggested that schools may respond to this by limiting student numbers.

One school stated:

It takes 1.5 people (full-time equivalent) to manage ABSTUDY for 60 students, not including accommodation and fuel. It is really hard going and a big cost to chase this money.

[Executive director, WA independent school]

When you actually add up the numbers of Indigenous boarders that are remote Indigenous boarders, you cannot be talking more than 5 000 of them. Ok, let's say it's 10 000. ... the quantum of that amount of money does not justify the amount of paperwork.

[Principal, NT independent school]

The underlying bureaucratic process from application to payment is complicated. Students' families/parents/guardians need to apply to Centrelink for the ABSTUDY boarding funding, which is then channelled to the boarding school with the family's authority. As one school stated, 'we accept the students, the parents have to lodge a claim [for ABSTUDY]'

[Qld independent school]

While this funding arrangement means the schools are in some respects at arm's length from the ABSTUDY Claim process, they can also find themselves involved in identifying the best way to support families in applying for ABSTUDY.

We moved [name] into this role and 50% of [name's] time is on ABSTUDY ... and we nearly have another person that is full-time running around driving – so one and a half people to look after (a large number of) students on ABSTUDY which is quite a big cost, that's not including accommodation ... fuel, all that ... and I think that's why a lot of schools just throw their arms in the air, it's really hard going and it's a big cost to do it, to chase this money. ... And the process just doesn't stop. I can understand why other schools

limit how many students they do, because that's why we struggled before, we didn't have any dedicated people that could support these families, because it's the families that have to do it [apply for ABSTUDY], you can't do it for them. ... We've got a fine line that you don't want to cross, especially when they're signing 'stat dec' forms ... you've got to make sure, you've got to sit down and explain it to them, what they're signing ... and so it's not a five minute job [where] you just run out and get a signature. It's a costly business to do it ... and we're still only 60% of what we should be getting In the long-term the sustainability ... it's a struggle that we're always watching.

[Executive director, WA independent school]

One principal described this as sometimes being a Catch-22 situation, where schools asked students whether they were eligible for ABSTUDY before they offered the student a place, but students needed to have the offer of a school place before they could establish their eligibility for ABSTUDY. For that school, the Smith Family's Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP) has acted as a broker in taking on the school's burden of managing the process.

Broadly, the two main factors that contribute to the excessive administrative burden placed on schools are:

- The ABSTUDY application process, and
- Communication challenges.

6.2.1 Application procedure

Applying for ABSTUDY is not by any measure straightforward, and for most remote area parents and caregivers it is a complex challenge.

Complicated application forms

Schools described the relevant ABSTUDY Claim form as long, complicated, and not user-friendly. One school suggested the ABSTUDY paperwork was designed with 'a white dominant culture person' in mind. For Indigenous families living in remote communities the application process can be challenging and 'on-the-ground support for families to complete the forms is required'.

A principal in any particular school around the country ... first Friday in August, signs a 'stat dec' that says I've got these many hundreds of people in my school. End of story, government funds us, so we get on with life. If you're an Indigenous student, you've got to first of all have your parents fill in a 14-

page form when they can't read and write, the others don't have to fill in a form of any documentation at all, and then we have to prove this and prove that and prove the next thing in order to get funding for a handful of kids – literally a handful of kids when you compare the total of Indigenous boarding students to the rest of the country – it is just ridiculous They could solve this problem before breakfast on a Monday morning if they really wanted to.

[Former CFO, NT independent school]

The necessary form for a secondary school student from a remote area who needs to live away from home for school²³ is the 'Claim for ABSTUDY Remote Areas' form.²⁴

English language and literacy skills and lack of familiarity with bureaucratic processes

Indigenous people living in remote communities may have limited English language and literacy skills, making it difficult to complete the paperwork required as part of the ABSTUDY application process. Misinterpretation of questions, missing signature, lack of a tax-file number or supplying a name that that has changed or is duplicated elsewhere can stall or derail the process.

Difficulties obtaining documentation

For schools, one of the most challenging aspects of claiming the school's ABSTUDY entitlements for remote-area Indigenous boarding students was obtaining required documentation from families, such as birth certificates and Medicare numbers. Students may not have original birth certificates, or the name on the birth certificate may not match the name the student is currently using. Schools also pointed out that Medicare cards (another form of documentation required in certain circumstances) were not required in remote communities, as people attended their local clinic.

Applying for tax file numbers for students at age 16

School participants commonly raised the issue that students turning 16 years of age need a tax file number to keep receiving their ABSTUDY payments. They commented that that recently Centrelink has begun to enforce compliance by cutting off ABSTUDY and not approving student travel if students do not have a tax file number. According to one school, 'the rules are very black and white' [NSW independent school].

Again, there were challenges stemming from the schools being at arm's length from the process:

- Getting parents to fill out the application form is difficult
- Schools can help with filling out the form, but proof of identification is required to lodge it, and many students do not have immediate access to the required documentation.

In response, a small number of schools now arrange for the students to commence application for a tax file number much earlier. One research participant asked 'when students apply for ABSTUDY, why can't they get a tax file number at this stage?' Another participant went further, asking 'why do they need a tax file number at all?' This is a fair question, which again highlights incongruities in the provision of educational funding and ABSTUDY boarding funding. The typical Australian secondary school student does not need a tax file number to access secondary education.

Eligibility criterion relating to difficult situations

Two of the eligibility criteria for ABSTUDY secondary students to be approved for *Away from Home* entitlements are:

- Not having 'reasonable access to an appropriate education institution ... whilst living in the permanent home' (APM 25.1)
- If conditions at the student's home or surrounding community are a serious impediment to their educational progress, for example, conditions that consistently deprive students of basic necessities, represent a serious threat to the student's health or wellbeing, or excessively disrupt or prevent the student's ability to study at home (APM 33.1).

The participant from one school stated that the main eligibility criterion for their boarding students was the limited educational program offered by their local school. However, in numerous so-called 'limited program schools',²⁵ the 'limited program' is considered to apply only in relation to the senior secondary school program (Years 11–12). The school concerned above instead assessed eligibility of younger students in relation to the second criterion relating to 'home conditions'. It conducted personal visits to families and communities in such cases, which generally related to issues of bullying, overcrowding, or family violence. The sensitivity surrounding these problems could make these difficult issues to discuss.

Mobility and family structures

ABSTUDY requires parents to update their address details to continue receiving payments – this is difficult in communities where there is considerable mobility. Schools also noted that as a result of fluid Aboriginal extended family structures, it can be difficult to establish who a student's guardian is, which makes the application process more time-consuming. Changes in guardianship also present challenges.

Parental means-testing

Parental means-testing is illustrative of the frustrations repeatedly expressed by school staff regarding their inability to access information about students and the amount of time spent reconciling ABSTUDY payments. Students' ABSTUDY payments can be reduced once parents start earning a certain level of income. From the perspective of the schools' budgets and cash flows, the lack of transparency regarding changes in students' ABSTUDY payments is a vital concern.

We have no ability to access the means-testing ... we just don't know what the payments should be. You have no idea what a family's entitled to ... and there's obviously the privacy issues around that information, so you don't really know what you're foregoing or what sort of rigour there is around the information that's provided. You're talking about Centrelink, a massive bureaucracy – it's difficult to negotiate your way through at the best of times.

[WA independent school]

Schools noted that with means-testing, 'there is the presumption that parents with means will supplement ABSTUDY', but often parents could not afford to supplement ABSTUDY.

Another research participant said the means-testing threshold was not high, and that in some cases parents might have other children as well as their own children living with them:

It's not hard to reach the threshold and have to pay [for their own children's education themselves], yet they may be caring for other children who are able to access ABSTUDY. They might wonder 'why should I go to work?' when they are supporting their own and other children on a very small income.

[Executive director, State or Territory Association of Independent schools]

At one school it was noted that the cost of living in remote areas was relatively high, so a given level of income did not go as far as in other areas. This meant that ultimately there may be an impact on students' education or on the schools' finances. It appears the schools generally cover the difference – if they did not do this, students would not be able to continue attending the school. This potentially represents a disincentive for parents to take up higher-paying employment.

6.3 Difficulties of communication related to ABSTUDY

The communication process between parents, schools and Centrelink is complicated and appears fraught, with difficulties being exacerbated by privacy provisions. There are a number of different types of communication challenges involving the different parties engaged in the ABSTUDY process.

6.3.1 Information about ABSTUDY not readily accessible to schools or families

Schools were scathing in their assessment of the ABSTUDY documentation. One school respondent described the nearly 400-page ABSTUDY Policy Manual as 'impenetrable'. Schools described the Department of Human Services website²⁶ as 'complicated and not easy to understand ... it goes around in circles and is completely confusing ... if I find it confusing, how would students and families find it?' Another school observed 'we don't have a good understanding of the ABSTUDY payments available ... we get a booklet of 100-odd pages every term and it's very confusing'.

In the case of Indigenous families living in remote areas, the impenetrability of ABSTUDY documentation is often compounded by language and literacy barriers, poor access to telephone or internet services, and lack of access to a Centrelink office.

6.3.2 Schools' difficulties accessing information about students' payments

The amount of time schools spend reconciling balances due to inconsistency of payments and unpredictability of their revenue has already been discussed (see Section 6.1). The complexity of the ABSTUDY payments themselves confuse even dedicated school staff:

I still don't completely understand the different ABSTUDY payments and how it works. I've tried reading over the information on the internet and I just find it goes round and round in circles. I just end

up getting confused. So I vaguely know how much a student should get ... it depends on their age and also depends on whether their parents work or not. But I still find the whole thing completely confusing. And I'm sure if I find it confusing I have no idea how our students' families or parents can understand it – you know, someone who maybe can't read as well as I can – it's very confusing ...

[ABSTUDY officer, WA independent school]

Schools were frustrated by their lack of access to information about student payments in general. Most schools did not appear to have ready access to itemised information about student payments. They perceived this as stemming from privacy provisions, which operate between the school and the family: while each family applies for ABSTUDY, the school is the payee for the ABSTUDY boarding payment and any associated amounts. One Queensland independent school explained that they would only find out a few weeks into the term that a student's ABSTUDY had been income-affected, and would then need to try to recoup the difference from the parents, but many parents could not pay the difference.

One specific example commonly cited by the schools was parental means-testing, as discussed further in Section 7.7. School staff said that they were not privy to information about means-testing assessments, and therefore the impacts of parental means testing were not transparent. Parents might not relay this information to the schools – schools would only learn that a student's payment had been reduced when the payment advice came through.

6.3.3 Communications with Centrelink

Every school we spoke to had experienced frustrations in their dealings with Centrelink. Fundamentally, research participants felt that as an enormous bureaucracy and welfare delivery agency, Centrelink was 'a mismatch with education' that treated schools as if they were 'passive recipients'. School staff asserted the increased centralisation of Centrelink services – primarily accessed via a call centre with an 1800 phone number – had created greater communication challenges.

It'd be really great if the people who worked in ABSTUDY could visit some of these communities. Because they've probably never stepped out of suburban [major city], and when you say to them there's no point posting this out to this person because they're not going to walk out to their

letterbox at 6 o'clock every night like we do – they have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. And it wasn't until I myself visited these communities that you then start to understand why they're not doing things like, say, I would. Because they live differently to us. And we're expecting them to be able to work on a system that is catered to White Australia. Even though the money is meant to be going to the Aboriginal students There's certain levels of literacy and understanding that you've got to have to be able to navigate that system.

[ABSTUDY officer, WA independent school]

The common difficulties experienced by schools in communicating with Centrelink were:

Long waiting times on the telephone

Most schools reported that it was not unusual to be on hold for an hour when calling the Centrelink 1800 number. Schools described instances where the time spent on hold was particularly frustrating because the call dropped out or they were told they did not have the right to enquire about a student.

While schools could cope with this to some extent because it was part of their job (e.g., by putting the phone on speaker while they waited), they explained that for some parents living in remote communities, limited access to public telephones mean that for many it was not an option to remain on the phone for that period of time.

While a recent initiative aimed to encourage phone-based applications, one participant commented:

I actually have concerns about the process that, you know, they say that they've made it more accessible by ... telephone registration. Given [all the communities that the students come from], all of whom speak Aboriginal language, I think that that's an issue. I think also that ... if we have to wait for an hour here to get onto [Centrelink], how does that affect [those in Indigenous communities]? And sometimes there's only one telephone box in the whole community.

[Chief executive, Vic independent school]

Requirement that schools send information by fax

A number of schools expressed incredulity that Centrelink required information to be sent by fax and

would not communicate by email. They said Centrelink explained that this was due to 'privacy', but schools were not convinced that sending information by fax was more secure than sending it by email.

Centrelink not forthcoming with information

A number of schools made statements to the effect that Centrelink (or 'ABSTUDY') was not forthcoming with information relating to what schools could claim, student payments, and training. School staff made statements like 'we are not privy to that information'; 'ABSTUDY don't offer any information [about what allowances are available, e.g., regarding transfers to and from the school]'; 'ABSTUDY are difficult to deal with, trying to get information'; Centrelink don't want to impart information, they are not forthcoming with information about what we are eligible for; 'we can't get information and Centrelink is increasingly bureaucratic ... to get information we need to have "permission to enquire"',²⁷ 'there is not a lot of training available from ABSTUDY'.

Schools also commented on the lack of follow-up from Centrelink in relation to individual cases, e.g., a student who had not been approved because the parent had not signed a form; or students' ABSTUDY payments being cut off abruptly without Centrelink following up on a student's individual circumstances.

Centrelink staff – high turnover and lack of training

Schools observed that there was high turnover in the Centrelink call centre and that as a result school staff would be given inconsistent advice, or in some cases be given advice the schools knew was incorrect. One school respondent said that when they were given advice that they knew to be incorrect, they would hang up and call again, hoping that they would get to talk to a different person. One school observed,

We have often been told by Centrelink that some information had previously been entered wrongly. This might be a slip of the finger in the Centrelink office but has significant consequences for the student.

[WA independent school]

Another Business manager described her frustration:

I phone the ABSTUDY helpline ... I cross the fingers, toes and everything else and hope to hell I can talk to someone who's nice. Because some people that you speak to, some are amazingly helpful. And you get all points in between. Some contradict each other. It's quite frustrating. I've a few times hung up and just phoned back immediately, got a different person who's, you know, I said the last person I spoke to just didn't sound right and they say something completely different and I go okay, well maybe I'd better talk to a third person. ... On the whole, I don't find they're very well-trained and I don't find they know a great deal, and if they have to refer it upwards ... the people that you talk to are in a call centre ... they will sit at their desk and email someone, wait for the answer, tell you their answer, you put the next question, they'll email it ... they're not allowed to put you through to that person, which is quite frustrating. If somebody has to call you back, if they really can't deal with it, I've waited over a month to get a phone call back. By which point you can't even remember what your question was.

[Business manager, NSW independent school]

Lack of dedicated account managers

A number of schools reported that in the past they had dealt with a dedicated person in an 'account manager' role and that this arrangement had worked much better than the current call centre, as the following statements, all from different schools, attest:

Once upon a time we had a dedicated contact, she knew us and there was a relationship of trust; she could sort things out very quickly.

[NSW independent school]

We used to have Centrelink-organised meetings every term, which helped resolve issues. We also used to have ABSTUDY ... direct phone numbers for staff who were fantastic at resolving any issues in a few minutes.

[Business manager, Qld independent school]

... we've had [this] a couple of times, and one particularly when we had a fantastic account manager at the other end, he was exceptional, he would walk us through stuff that we weren't aware of ... he was even good at knowing what kids and

what nuances with their travel – we would have paid a fortune to keep him. That account management process, now I don't know whether that's changed or whether it's just been turnover of staff, but that worked really well for us.

[Principal, SA independent school]

A few schools mentioned that a new direct telephone number had recently been introduced to enable schools to contact Centrelink directly, but did not appear to be able to comment yet on how well that was working.

6.4 Travel

Research participants raised many issues relating to the management of students' travel arrangements. While some of these issues concerned aspects of ABSTUDY policy and administrative procedures, funding, and service provision, the whole area of travel was much more complex. Schools had diverse approaches to students' travel arrangements, depending on their locations and the source communities of their students.

There were some significant recurring themes. Again, the distinct character of students' home environments – remote Indigenous communities – was a common element. The distance between these communities and the students' secondary boarding school, and limited transport options creates several obstacles to education. Some Indigenous boarding students have relatively simple travel arrangements involving a trip by bus, train or aeroplane between the student's home town and the school, without needing to make any connections, but these are rare. For Indigenous students from small remote communities, travel arrangements are typically complex, involving long-distance travel to their point of departure, specially arranged, expensive and frequently unavoidable options, such as charter flights and multiple connections. Based on our discussions, it is clearly not unusual for students aged 13 years and over to be negotiating these travel arrangements on their own.

Most of the schools we talked to managed the students' travel arrangements through the ABSTUDY travel provider, QBT. Most staff found this to be a satisfactory arrangement on the whole, and felt that it would take them a lot of time to manage students' travel arrangements themselves. One school that did organise its own travel bookings had been reimbursed only a very small fraction of the costs and was informed that processing of these claims was behind schedule.

One school recognised that issues would always arise:

We find ABSTUDY travel pretty good, we use QBT, this is fairly new ... in the beginning it was based in Sydney/Melbourne and they had no idea of remote kids' travel arrangements. It's never going to be smooth. There are spelling errors in kids' names, changes occur, kids miss flights, flights are cancelled. Our staff member spends many weeks organising travel for [fewer than 50] kids.

[Business manager, QLD independent school]

This also highlights the importance of service providers being familiar with the context of these students' travel arrangements and relevant local conditions. These issues are discussed in the following sections.

6.4.1 *Safety and duty of care*

Students' safety while travelling was a major concern for schools. They raised the question of who has duty of care for the students while in transit. Although their advice from ABSTUDY is that a student is in the school's care, the schools question how this can be the case for students who have not yet arrived at the school. One staff member contended that 'duty of care for students in transit falls back on the school' [WA independent school], while another felt that responsibility should lie with ABSTUDY 'because they have taken this [centralised provision of travel arrangements] on' [SA independent school].

ABSTUDY funds travel supervisors or chaperones for students aged under 13 years and those travelling to school for the first time; in many cases the staff are supplied by the schools. This still means that relatively young students can be travelling alone and negotiating complex travel arrangements with multiple connections and long waiting times. In some cases these students are confronted with unfamiliar situations that can be frightening for young people, such as missing a connection, or having to negotiate different luggage weight limits between carriers. An observation that typified comments by numerous research participants was:

... you may have a 14-year-old that's making their journey of ... going from Townsville to Brisbane to Sydney to Alice Springs and then over to their community completely unsupervised.

[Principal, Qld independent school]

One school described circumstances in which a student's travel arrangements had fallen through and the student, in their mid-teens, had been transported to a community a considerable distance from the intended destination. In this case, the challenges of the situation were exacerbated by the school's inability to contact ABSTUDY.

I called the after-hours person but they were on leave and had not notified anyone. I just kept on calling and calling until I got someone ... this was a huge breakdown in communication. This is my biggest concern – communication with ABSTUDY when the student leaves here and is in transit. If something happens it is difficult to contact ABSTUDY.

[ABSTUDY Administrator, SA independent school]

Even if this is a relatively unusual example, it is illustrative of the potential risks to students while travelling that are of concern to schools. Based on our discussions, for many of those working in independent boarding schools and in the boarding sector more broadly, student safety while travelling is clearly at the forefront of their minds.

Another issue is the cost to the school of providing supervisors/chaperones. While ABSTUDY meets chaperones' travel, accommodation and meal costs, the school pays their wages. This is another additional cost to the school attributable to the boarding program for which it does not receive any assistance through ABSTUDY.

Another school interviewee emphasised the importance of knowing the local conditions and individual circumstances affecting students. The participant described the amount of time and care taken to contact the travel provider to change travel arrangements for a young female student who would otherwise be the only person on a bus travelling eight hours to a relatively remote community. They also noted that their relationship with people working at local transport hubs was important, saying that they had 'a wonderful relationship with the people at [town name] Station' (NSW independent school).

6.4.2 *Students not allowed to travel on the weekend*

Participants from two schools explained that ABSTUDY would not approve weekend travel. This seemed to be more of an issue in schools where Indigenous boarding students from remote areas made up a relatively small proportion of the student population.

For these schools, the impact of this was that these students could not attend on the first day of term, missing introductory activities and embarrassed about arriving under conspicuously different circumstances to the rest of the students.

6.4.3 Students with special needs

One school questioned the administrative arrangements relating to travel by students with a health condition or disability. The two issues were:

- Some students need a chaperone each time they travel; however, the school needs to go through the process of requesting a chaperone and having to demonstrate eligibility for funding the case every time, creating unnecessary work for school staff. It was suggested that this process could be streamlined.
- There should be a way to notify the travel service provider (QBT) and transport carriers, e.g., Qantas, about students with a health condition or disability.

6.4.4 Travel transfers and connections

Schools raised a number of different issues regarding transfers and travel connections to bus and train stations and airports. These illustrate that schools share some common experiences, but also that travel requirements often differ from school to school, depending on the circumstances of each institution.

Schools exhibited diverse experiences of the ABSTUDY-funded transfer services. Some issues raised in relation to transfers and connections included:

- One school felt this worked well, but had only recently found out about, suggesting that not enough information was offered by ABSTUDY regarding available services.
- Requirement for passengers to be at the airport two hours in advance means a very early start for school staff to drive students; it would be of benefit to staff to be able to finance provision of a professional driver.
- One school staff member observed ‘we play it by ear getting students back to the airport’, explaining that the car might drop students off at the airport, but not necessarily help them through the airport. On one occasion when they had requested transport for students to travel from the school to the airport, the vehicle sent was not large enough to take all the students.
- Sometimes students have a two-hour wait at an airport for their connection.

- For someone from a remote Indigenous community who does not speak English as their first language and who may have poor literacy skills, navigating an imposing metropolitan airport like Sydney is daunting.
- One school has now arranged for chaperone and booking management to be undertaken by the Smith Family’s Indigenous Youth partnership.

6.4.5 Family mobility

Two schools raised the issue that they needed to submit a form if the parents were collecting the student in a community that was not their home address. One participant cited this as another example of the ABSTUDY system being based on ‘a dominant culture assumption ... that people will stay where they are’. [Principal, NT independent school].

6.4.6 QBT requires early notice of travel arrangements, but does not provide schools sufficient notice of bookings

School staff said they are obliged to submit travel requests for students returning to their communities to QBT within the first few weeks of term, ‘when the students have only just come back’ [Vic independent school]. Conversely, however, QBT does not notify schools of the travel bookings ‘until the last possible moment, a few days before the flights’. (NSW independent school).

School staff described worried parents ringing up to find out about these bookings so they could make plans to meet their children.

6.4.7 Need for flexibility for individual cases

A number of schools argued for greater flexibility from ABSTUDY to allow for the individual needs of students and their communities, illustrated by a number of examples specific to their school.

School staff found ABSTUDY to be increasingly compliance-focused and rule-oriented, whereas in the past there had been greater flexibility based on common-sense. Two schools that could hardly be more demographically disparate both described the ABSTUDY travel system as bureaucratic and inflexible, with one school particularly frustrated that they had raised a particular travel issue with Centrelink more than once, without reaching a positive outcome.

6.5 *Management of suspensions/exclusions/ time out*

Dealing with student suspensions was an issue that schools found challenging for a number of reasons. The main reason was that students were often a long way from home and could not easily be sent home for a couple of days at short notice. This was compounded by ABSTUDY not covering travel for student suspensions.

One of the areas that's always been problematic is around the suspension of students. ... Most schools have the capacity to suspend students for certain behaviours, for a day, or three days, or a week. Because of the location of our students, and ABSTUDY policy, we don't have that capacity to suspend students. So we do everything we can to try and manage some of that extremely disruptive or – aggressive behaviour at times. But we're basically left with one alternative to get them home and that is to expel them, which means they're disqualified for the rest of the year from returning [resulting in an extended period disengaged from education]. The only way round it is if parents pay for the travel ... and obviously our parents just don't have that capacity to pay that cost. So we're often left with no alternative other than expulsion, which is far from our preferred option. But we don't have the capacity to carry the cost of that.

[Principal, WA independent school].

The school participants felt that they were unable to manage suspensions in a way that would best support these students to continue to engage in education. Some schools were able to accommodate these students offsite temporarily. For those that were not able to do this (e.g., because of the location of the school), the options were limited and unsatisfactory:

- the school could pay for the student's travel;
- the school could expel the student, in which case ABSTUDY would pay for the travel, but the student would not be allowed to return to the school that year (and might never return); or
- the parents could pay (although few would have the capacity to pay).

One school respondent said that ABSTUDY would pay to bring a parent to the school to settle a student down, and felt that it was inconsistent not to fund students to go back to their community. While it is perhaps understandable that ABSTUDY policy is centred on supporting students to remain at school, the school felt

that sometimes students needed to go home, back on country, and then would be more likely to return and settle into school.

When it comes to our boarders from remote regions it becomes quite difficult when you've got those situations as well. In these situations the student's on the phone to the family and the family can become upset as well because they are so far away and have no control over what's going on.

[Qld independent school]

Interviewees pointed out that they are effectively unable to use suspension in the same way that other schools can, for example, schools that do not host boarders, or that have boarders whose parents are in a position to pay.

6.6 *Funerals*

School responses regarding student travel home for funerals identified these circumstances as requiring balance of a conflict between compassion in acknowledging the time and support required to mourn, on the one hand, and on the other a concern for the best interests of the student in ensuring their timely return to school. Staff were very sensitive to the cultural obligations regarding funerals and recognised the reality that 'there are a lot of funerals in Aboriginal communities'. They felt it was a matter of supporting students' social, cultural and emotional wellbeing. At the same time, students' education was disrupted by the death, and by the period of several weeks between the death and the funeral.

School respondents noted that ABSTUDY covers compassionate travel for two return trips per year, but they also referred to the cumbersome and sometimes insensitive bureaucratic processes regarding compassionate travel; for example, the need to provide a funeral notice or a letter from the community, and to establish that the person was closely related to the student.

The challenge for schools in relation to compassionate travel primarily concerned how to minimise the disruption to students' education while supporting students' and families' cultural obligations and their social and emotional wellbeing.

According to one school representative:

[A] challenge that we do have and which sadly enough is just very hard to manage is funerals ... out of all our students, I'd say 98% would have had some closeness with suicide, you know in their family group, it's very prevalent which is very sad. But also there's older people. And then trying to work out how close is the relationship. And sometimes so many of the children might have been brought up by an uncle or an aunty and you need to really try and understand the closeness of that relationship ... and getting them home to that, and letting them go through the grieving, and then catching them up on school. ... It's a real challenge – and there's the cost of getting them back. And the other thing is cultural events ... there's some really important ones, they need to be back, so you try to work with the community, not only the kids but the community and the family ... to understand the importance of education, but also we don't want them to lose their culture and we also want to very much respect their family when there is a death. So that is something we find very challenging ...

[Executive officer, WA independent school]

The Interim Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs recounts that 'one boarding facility ... has now overcome the constant demands that students return home for extended family funerals by developing a formal letter of sympathy which has satisfied all parties' (HoRSCIA 2016b: 2.22).

6.7 Parental expectations

There were some areas of concern regarding parents' expectations. On one hand, research participants were worried that parents hear the message that 'ABSTUDY pays for education' and understandably assume the program will cover all the costs. There was a view that even a relatively small financial contribution from parents of Indigenous boarding students would give parents a greater stake in the outcomes. However, there were concerns expressed by the organisation representing remote Indigenous parents that parents' expectations about what boarding school would provide in terms of educational qualifications and employment outcomes were sometimes not being met.

Both of these perspectives point to a need for better communication with remote Indigenous parents about what ABSTUDY funds and what a boarding education can deliver in terms of their children's educational and employment prospects.

6.8 Schools' lack of input into policy

Almost every boarding school we spoke to expressed frustration that they had no opportunity to contribute directly to ABSTUDY policy development, and were not consulted regarding changes to policy that would affect them as well as the attending students and their families. Several schools identified their lack of policy involvement as a major frustration. They felt that policy decisions were being made by bureaucrats in Canberra with little knowledge or experience of local circumstances. Respondents repeatedly expressed disappointment that despite many schools having similar issues, the schools could not get anyone in a position to effect change to listen to them. One principal with 15 years' experience commented 'this is the first time in 15 years that anyone has talked to me about ABSTUDY' and remarked that principals have never had any direct engagement with Centrelink at the strategic level.

When asked about any final comments, another participant made with the following observations:

One of the frustrations for a long time is just ... schools like ours, and others I'm sure, have not really had much of an opportunity to contribute to some of the policy settings or direction of ABSTUDY, particularly when we're the people on the ground that are affected by these decisions that bureaucrats make, who have no idea of the context, who have sometimes never been out of Canberra or wherever they're based, making decisions which they don't appreciate the – you know – the ramifications of those decisions I've always thought it would be good for there to be opportunities for there to be representatives from boarding organisations like ours to come together and actually work through some of these issues and come to a place where policy actually reflects reality ...

[Principal, WA independent school]

7 Summary and recommendations for improvements to the ABSTUDY scheme, in relation to boarding education for Indigenous students from remote areas

7.1 Are ABSTUDY payments overly complicated?

Our research indicates that ABSTUDY payments in relation to Indigenous students in boarding school are certainly overly complicated; there are several significant contributing factors:

- 1 ABSTUDY is comprised of multiple allowances; eligibility for and amount of payments is assessed in respect of the circumstances of individual students; multiple parties are involved in claiming a variety of allowances; there are divergent processes involved depending on the category of claim; and numerous interdependencies exist within and between these procedures.
- 2 The bureaucratic process whereby students' families apply for ABSTUDY, while payments are made direct to boarding schools is complex and cumbersome, and creates significant administrative barriers to the efficient delivery of education and boarding services to Indigenous boarding students from remote areas.
- 3 There are significant communication barriers at multiple points in these processes.
- 4 The ABSTUDY application process rests on unreasonable assumptions about levels of functional English literacy, family structures and roles, possession of or access to personal documentation, and access to telephones, internet and postal services, that do not recognise the context of remote Indigenous communities.

The opaque and bewildering complexity of the ABSTUDY payments scheme is reflected in research participants' assessments of government information relating to ABSTUDY as 'complicated' and 'confusing'.

More than one research participant responded to questions about ABSTUDY with incredulity: 'Have you seen the ABSTUDY manual?' The ABSTUDY Policy Manual, the authoritative source of information about ABSTUDY allowances, runs to nearly 400 pages and was described by one participant as 'impenetrable'. Participants described the Centrelink website as complicated, confusing, and in no way easy to understand. One participant said '[the Centrelink website] goes around in circles and is completely confusing'.

Another school respondent observed that 'we don't have a good understanding of the ABSTUDY payments available ... we get a booklet of 100-odd pages every term and it's very confusing'.

Across the different schools we investigated, knowledge of ABSTUDY entitlements was variable and ABSTUDY expertise was often concentrated in individuals. One independent school principal said he would have paid 'a fortune' to keep an account manager who was 'fantastic', with an in-depth knowledge of ABSTUDY allowances and processes, along with knowledge of individual students' situations.

Research participants felt that the claim process – whereby Centrelink, a welfare agency, assesses individuals' eligibility for ABSTUDY allowances – was fundamentally misaligned with the educational purpose of the funding.

7.2 If so, does that complexity result in difficulties for families and school staff in terms of compliance, correct entitlements and accuracy of payments?

The complexity of ABSTUDY resulting from the contributing factors identified above does result in difficulties for families and school staff. For boarding schools, ABSTUDY funding is often opaque; schools do not have access to the full details of individual student assessments. ABSTUDY payments appear inconsistent, vary across time and are therefore unpredictable. Schools spend a significant amount of administrative time reconciling ABSTUDY balances. They are often unable to verify the ABSTUDY payments they receive, and in some cases tend to unquestioningly accept the amounts provided, paying back debts when asked to do so. One school respondent told us their school was investing its own resources in developing a tracking system to monitor the payments.

The major sources of difficulty for families in negotiating the ABSTUDY process arise from the often poor English literacy skills of applicants, coupled with complex application forms and processes, a lack of personal documentation such as birth certificates or Medicare cards, lack of local support, and poor access to telephones, internet and postal services. Such barriers contribute to difficulties in undertaking the application process and delays in the lodgement and processing of claims. There is often considerable to-ing and fro-ing between Centrelink, schools and families to assemble all the information required to lodge the claim.

7.3 Do ABSTUDY application process timelines have a negative impact on schools?

As mentioned above, when schools accept students, the parents need to lodge the ABSTUDY claim. One principal described this as sometimes being a Catch-22 situation, whereby schools ask students whether they are eligible for ABSTUDY before they offer the student a place, but students need to have received the offer of a school place before they can establish their eligibility for ABSTUDY.

Schools have little control over the initial ABSTUDY application made by families/parents, although in some cases they may assist families with this process. School respondents commented repeatedly on the difficulty faced by families with poor English literacy in completing the long and complex ABSTUDY claim form. Errors and omissions when completing the form are common, and sometimes result in very significant delays in payment to the schools.

School staff described the way postal services to remote communities are unreliable and slow. This meant that the process of receiving and returning forms in the post could take up to three weeks. And while a recent initiative aimed to streamline this process by enabling families to make claims by phone, a number of research participants observed that not everyone feels comfortable with this option, not everyone is in a position to spend an hour on hold, and not everyone has ready access to a phone.

While ABSTUDY application and processing timelines have clearly had a negative impact on schools, they were primarily concerned with the impact on students. They were particularly concerned when students missed an opportunity to start school because of difficulties with the ABSTUDY application process or delays in approval of claims.

7.4 Are ABSTUDY payments sufficient for covering the costs for Indigenous boarding students, particularly those from remote areas?

As detailed earlier, every school we spoke to indicated that the amount of boarding funding they received was not sufficient to provide proper support to Indigenous students from remote areas.

Schools argued that not only was ABSTUDY boarding funding *insufficient*, but that boarding funding was *declining*. They attributed this to the expiry of funding under the Indigenous Boarding Initiative, which directed funding to 'non-government schools with more than 50

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander boarding students – or 50 per cent or more – from remote or very remote areas'²⁸ as well as a change in indexation following the move of ABSTUDY from the education to the welfare portfolio.

Many schools said they met the shortfall from other parts of their budget. Many talked about cross-subsidisation, and one school observed that 'there is an awful lot of cross-subsidisation going on' (Independent school, NT). One participant noted that gains from the Gonski 2.0 education funding package would be negated by the costs of boarding and argued that boarding schools were, in effect, being penalised for providing boarding services.

Better-off schools and those with relatively low numbers of Indigenous students from remote areas were better able to absorb these costs. For other schools who catered largely or entirely to Indigenous boarding students from remote areas, the financial situation was often precarious.

7.5 Is there a discrepancy between what schools expect to receive at enrolment versus what is actually received?

As noted earlier, variability in ABSTUDY funding makes it difficult for schools to predict the amount of ABSTUDY they are going to receive, and to reconcile discrepancies between amounts actually received with amounts they expected to receive.

7.6 How well does ABSTUDY accommodate the need for students to travel during term time?

There are a number of reasons students might need to travel during term time. Those most commonly raised by schools were funerals, and suspensions or exclusions.

In relation to funerals, ABSTUDY provides for two return trips per year between a student's home and place of study for 'Compassionate travel', including provision for the student to be accompanied.²⁹ However, it appeared that the question of how well ABSTUDY accommodated the need for students to travel during term time was peripheral to the main issue of concern. Schools struggled with finding a balance between supporting the cultural obligations of Indigenous students (e.g., sorry business, initiation) and supporting their education.

In relation to suspensions and exclusions, schools found ABSTUDY travel procedures to be unhelpful in managing these situations. The ABSTUDY travel options and requirements were in conflict with the objectives of

supporting Indigenous students to make the most of their educational opportunity. The main issues were:

ABSTUDY reimburses student travel fares if a student is excluded, but not if they are suspended. This means schools do not have the option of sending a student home while suspended – an option generally available to other schools. Participants were of the view that this option would most likely result in a student returning to school.

7.7 Do current ABSTUDY rules about parental employment create a disincentive for parents of Indigenous students and/or an unexpected financial burden on schools?

Our interviews did not reveal explicit knowledge of cases where Indigenous parents perceived employment, and subsequent reductions in payments, as a disincentive for enrolling their children in boarding school.

However, there was evidence that the reduction of ABSTUDY payments resulting from means testing of parental income was leading to a subsequent reduction in payments to the school. Such parents, schools reported, would virtually never make up the difference in payments out of their own earnings. One possible reason for this is that Indigenous parents perceive ABSTUDY as an Indigenous-specific allowance intended to encourage and enable students to attend school. The logic that the parent's employment should reduce or negate that allowance based on participation in the workforce does

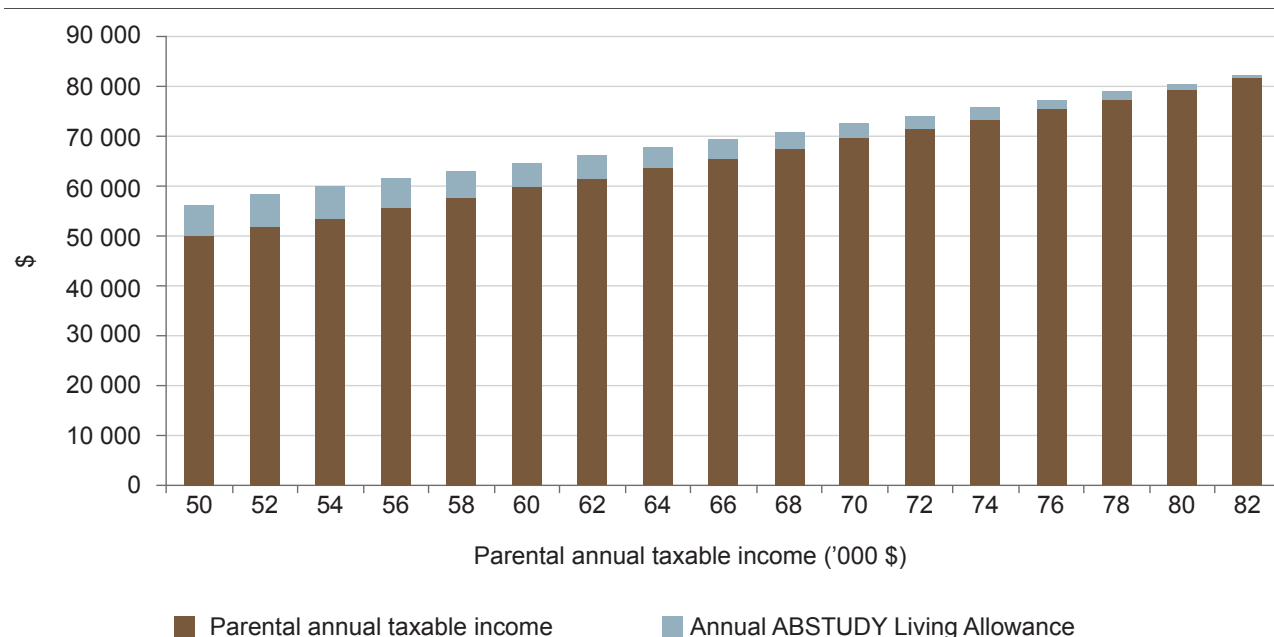
not fit with their perception of ABSTUDY. The logic defining this model is derived from welfare support schemes, and Indigenous parents have never perceived ABSTUDY as a welfare benefit.

Fig. 1 illustrates how the amount of ABSTUDY Living Allowance reduces over time in one scenario – a child aged 15 years, living with two parents who have no other dependent children.

Parental means-testing highlights one of the frustrations repeatedly expressed by the schools regarding their inability to access information about students and the amount of time spent reconciling ABSTUDY payments. Students' ABSTUDY payments can be reduced once parents begin earning a specific minimum income amount. From the perspective of the schools' budgets and cash flows, the lack of transparency regarding changes in students' ABSTUDY payments is a concern. While a number of school participants said that they did not deal with a large number of cases where students' entitlements were reduced due to parental means-testing, it did contribute to variability in schools' ABSTUDY receipts.

School staff reported that with means testing, 'there is the presumption that parents with means will supplement ABSTUDY', but often parents could not afford to supplement ABSTUDY. One school interviewee noted that the cost of living in remote areas was relatively high, so that a given level of income did not go as far as in other areas.

FIG. 1. Indicative change in ABSTUDY with increasing level of parental income (child aged 15 years, living with two parents with no other dependent children)



Source: <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/enablers/income-and-assets-tests-abstudy#parentalmeans>

This meant that ultimately there may be an impact on students' education or on the schools' finances. It appears the schools generally cover the difference – if they did not do this, students would not be able to continue attending school. This potentially represents a disincentive for parents to undertake higher-paying employment.

8 Recommendations

Our interviews with a sample of boarding schools, State and Territory Associations of independent schools, and national peak bodies uncovered many of the same problems that have been noted in a range of submissions and reviews related to ABSTUDY in the context of boarding school operations. The recommendations we make below are derived from those interviews and represent changes which could increase the likelihood of ABSTUDY achieving its stated objectives of encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take full advantage of educational opportunities, promoting equity of educational opportunity, and improving educational outcomes. Some are high-level recommendations that involve sweeping political, philosophical and programmatic shifts; others require technical or practical changes.

8.1 Recommendations related to the nature and structure of ABSTUDY

8.1.1 Reframe the ABSTUDY program to return to an educational support focus rather than an individual welfare payment

In recent years the ABSTUDY program moved from education to the Human Services area, and payments are now managed by Centrelink. Nearly every individual we consulted indicated this shift had resulted in a decline in service and efficiency. In recent years, governments have increasingly adopted 'conditional welfare' programs wherein access to certain basic benefits and services are restricted to those who accept particular obligations and patterns of behaviour. At the extreme this is manifest in some Indigenous communities in the trial introduction of the Cashless Welfare Card. It was a strongly held view among those we interviewed that ABSTUDY should not be administered as a welfare payment, but rather as targeted financial support intended to enhance educational participation and success, and that philosophically the government should be reducing rather than increasing constraints and conditions. The view of several individuals we interviewed was that the welfare framing of ABSTUDY is resulting in

fewer rather than more individuals attaining successful educational outcomes.

8.2 Establish ABSTUDY regional account managers

A major frustration expressed by boarding school staff was their inability to obtain consistent, knowledgeable advice and assistance from Centrelink. In many cases, school principals or business managers had experience in the past where they had access to an identified single ABSTUDY officer who was familiar with the school and was knowledgeable about programs and specific cases. Those personal links increased the ability of schools and students to resolve problems quickly and efficiently. Today, problems are referred to a help desk, often after an hour of waiting time, where Centrelink staff often have no familiarity with particular schools or the geographical and social contexts of Indigenous secondary students from remote communities, and sometimes little understanding of ABSTUDY rules and procedures. A significant improvement would be for regional clusters of schools to be assigned individual account managers who would be the dedicated point of contact for those schools.

8.1.2 Enable school-based ABSTUDY program delegates

The inability of school finance officers to access the applications and payment status of individual student ABSTUDY claims due to privacy policy creates a situation in which schools are unable to assist families to secure payments where a problem has stalled or stopped payments (e.g., a missing tax file number or a misspelled name). Schools are unable to manage staffing and other arrangements because they are never completely sure if a student will have the necessary ABSTUDY support that allows them to attend. Providing for a school-based ABSTUDY delegate who has the authority to access and sometimes process vital application and payment status information and to resolve ABSTUDY-related problems would assist all involved.

8.1.3 Require all Commonwealth ABSTUDY program staff to visit a remote community to develop their understanding of conditions and circumstances in these communities

After the transfer of ABSTUDY to the Department of Human Services and administration under Centrelink, it appears that many staff who are charged with providing support and assistance with ABSTUDY have no direct experience of the situations in which students live. It was suggested that visits to remote communities

by Centrelink staff, as a professional development activity, would benefit both ABSTUDY applicants in the communities and the officers responsible for administering the program.

8.1.4 Develop a portal on the Department of Human Services website for boarding schools with Indigenous boarding students

The needs of schools that provide boarding to Indigenous students from remote areas diverge from those of other education and training providers. The current Department of Human Services webpage provides no obvious, directly relevant information for boarding schools. There would be enormous value in providing such information.

8.2 Recommendations related to increasing educational participation of remote-area students

8.2.1 Establish Commonwealth funding to provide for transition support programs in all States and Territories

Transition Support Services assist students and families from remote communities to take up placements at secondary boarding schools. At the moment these are provided by the state education departments in Queensland and South Australia and in the Northern Territory. Our interviews indicate that these services provide a point of connection, liaison and communication between remote communities and secondary boarding schools. A nationwide network of transition support services would be invaluable; it would be sensible for the Commonwealth to fund such services in each state and territory.

8.2.2 Invest in plain-English versions of ABSTUDY application forms, manuals and online rules and procedures

A common complaint that emerged in our interviews was that ABSTUDY documents are virtually impenetrable, and most of the individuals who made those comments were highly educated administrators and educators whose first language was English. It is almost impossible to contend that parents and caregivers in remote communities would not struggle with ABSTUDY applications and rules.

8.2.3 Clarify ABSTUDY funding to support schools' engagement with students' family and community

A recurring theme in our discussions was the importance of meaningful ongoing engagement between schools

and communities. School participants recognised the need for them to understand what the students require culturally, and for students to have support from their parents, extended family and community.

Schools already engage with students' families and communities in various ways as part of their support for potential and current students. Various strategies are employed, including school staff members visiting communities; family/community members visiting the school, especially at the time a student commences boarding school or for other significant school events; participation in an Elders' Council school advisory committee; and parent consultations. However, there was a belief on the part of some of the interview participants that none of these sorts of activities can be funded by ABSTUDY. In fact, there are some options in the ABSTUDY travel program (see e.g., APM 88.6.2) that enable school representatives to travel to communities. The recommendation here is that ISCA and the State and Territory Associations should assist individual schools to better understand ABSTUDY travel funding options and limitations related to community engagement.

8.3 Recommendations related to reconfiguration of ABSTUDY funding

There is a virtually unanimous view among schools that current ABSTUDY funding is inadequate, unpredictable, and not achieving its maximum potential impact in relation to the needs of remote area students who want or need to attend boarding schools. What follows is a series of suggestions that, if implemented, could improve the ability of the program to achieve that impact. They are varied in focus and strategy and not all could be adopted together; rather, they represent a range of possibilities:

8.3.1 Empower school finance officers or their delegate to act as agent for individual students/families/caregivers in applying for ABSTUDY support

This would necessarily require reconfiguration of privacy considerations and allocation of resources to each school to enable this service.

8.3.2 Allow each school to apply for and receive ahead of the start of the school year a prospective or advance per-capita payment involving a formula that includes a base-rate payment for each student

and the various allowances and costs applicable to remote-area boarders

Each school would apply for these funds towards the close of the academic year based on anticipated enrolments for the following year; each school would then account for and make or seek adjustments to payments by the end of the financial year based on actual increased or decreased enrolments in the first half of the year and anticipated enrolments in the second half of the year.

8.3.3 Develop routes of greater autonomy for schools that are demonstrably effective and successful managers of ABSTUDY support programs. This could involve conferring a ‘trusted school’ status on such schools

8.3.4 Enable ABSTUDY staff within Centrelink greater discretion to provide financial support in individual cases where a student has access to a particular opportunity, but parents are unable to pay for it

This could take the form of a pool of funds, with a predetermined per-capita ceiling, that could be used by the school to cover costs related to providing for the health and wellbeing of students (e.g., counselling services, medical care, extracurricular activity).

8.4 Recommendations related to ABSTUDY travel

Travel related to boarding is a complex and potentially fraught issue and our discussions of ABSTUDY payments in support of travel revealed a range of issues where regulation and rules conflict with common-sense at the expense of students and schools. The following recommendations would go some way towards rectifying these problems:

8.4.1 Expand ABSTUDY travel funding to allow schools to organise travel for student suspensions and more timely management of expulsions

A current problem with ABSTUDY travel allowances is lack of flexibility and support for travel related to student suspensions. Where a student needs to be temporarily removed from school for safety or other reasons, schools currently have no means of covering travel costs for the temporary return of the student to their home community or, where short-duration removal from the immediate school environment is more suitable, they have no option for providing temporary safe accommodation. While ABSTUDY will fund travel for expelled students, this is a drastic situation where the

student is sent home and not allowed to return to school. Suspensions are more common, but not supported by ABSTUDY. With expulsions there is often a delay while travel arrangements are made via the provider. Instead, if ABSTUDY provided for automatic reimbursement to schools in cases of expulsion, this is likely to support better outcomes as schools would be able to act more quickly in the interests of all students.

8.4.2 Streamline ABSTUDY processes and eliminate required applications and approvals for reasonable travel for boarding students

Our interviews revealed numerous application and approval processes for travel that should be considered a reasonable use of ABSTUDY travel funds:

8.4.3 Allow students to travel to boarding school on the weekend

The current rules for ABSTUDY travel, we were told, do not allow students to travel to the boarding school on the weekend. The consequence of this for some remote students is that they often cannot arrive at school on Monday for the first day of classes, as they are in transit from their home to school.

A related issue is that under this rule students cannot travel over a long weekend (e.g., Easter holiday) or while boarding schools are closed. In some cases this denies students access to enrichment activities that may be possible during such periods because schools cannot afford transport, or cannot afford to provide alternative accommodation.

8.5 Recommendations related to engagement of policy-makers with schools

8.5.1 Commonwealth, State/Territory, boarding and independent school stakeholders to facilitate opportunities for schools to contribute to policy-making related to boarding funding and ABSTUDY payments

Almost every boarding school we spoke to expressed frustration that they had no opportunity to contribute directly to ABSTUDY policy development, and were not consulted regarding changes to policy that would affect them as well as the attending students and their families.

9 Concluding comments and suggestions for future research

For the foreseeable future, independent boarding schools are likely to remain an important secondary schooling option for Indigenous students from remote areas. Our research indicates that ABSTUDY continues to play a crucial role in enabling Indigenous students from remote areas to access secondary education, but falls short of supporting these students to that educational opportunity. Our research also suggests that many schools are expending resources they can ill afford in negotiating, and in helping Indigenous communities, families, and students to negotiate the bureaucratic thicket of ABSTUDY.

We would like to conclude with the following observations:

First, it would be useful to gain a thorough understanding of the educational aspirations and expectations of Indigenous communities and students in relation to boarding; our research indicates these are diverse and can vary greatly from place to place.

This study demonstrated to us the multiplicity of approaches that independent boarding schools use to engage and support Indigenous secondary students from remote areas. Schools are earnest in their attempts to improve student retention and outcomes. Following on from the previous point regarding Indigenous expectations, however, a number of schools argued that what was meant by a 'successful outcome' could vary for many of these students and may often diverge from mainstream expectations. Concern was also expressed that any increased policy focus on improving retention and outcomes needed to ensure that this did not lead to undue pressure on students to stay at school if it was not meeting their needs. This is a contentious but important finding that merits investigation.

Finally, a theme that runs through much research regarding service provision for Indigenous Australians is the delivery of services to remote Australia in general. In the course of this research we encountered innovative approaches to enabling secondary education in remote areas – this invokes the increasingly urgent need to direct research and policy expertise at the relationship between mainstream and remote Australia, and programs that link the two. There would be inestimable worth in understanding how to foster productive engagement between these two worlds: our language of 'bridges' and 'brokers' reflects this theme. Sustained research into

models that increase engagement between mainstream and remote Australia will lead to cultural familiarisation and understanding and it may improve educational provision and service delivery and policy implementation.

Notes

1. <http://isca.edu.au/about-independent-schools/indigenous-students/>
2. Between the time we designed and agreed on the research methodology and later gained ANU Human Ethics approval, we discovered the existence of the Remote Indigenous Parents Association National Indigenous Corporation (RIPANIC). While we have maintained our pledge not to identify schools or specific national or peak bodies, we can justify this exception with consent. We asked specifically if we could identify RIPANIC as a source for our information, to which its members happily agreed. While we have not attributed specific comments, its participants nonetheless provided extremely useful additional insight into 'ABSTUDY on the ground' for remote area Indigenous parents.
3. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People both contain statements of particular relevance to the provision of secondary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Australia in 1990, stipulates in Article 28, paragraph 1(b):
 1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:
 - (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need (UN 1989).

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, supported by Australia in 2009 (UN 2009), states in Article 14:

 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
 2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
 3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language. (UN General Assembly 2007).
4. www.guides.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/July%202017%20ABSTUDY%20Policy%20Manual.PDF
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19. <https://aeaguide.education.gov.au/content/commonwealth-recurrent-funding-frequently-asked-questions#faq3-1>
20. <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/enablers/higher-rates-abstudy-when-living-away-from-home>. The list of non-government schools' SES scores is provided on the Australian Government Department of Education and Training website: <https://www.education.gov.au/funding-non-government-schools>
21. <http://closingthegap.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/ctg-report-2017.pdf> page 8
22. It appears the AHL small grants programme ended in 2014–15: www.ahl.gov.au/?q=overview
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