

## National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) Submission to the National School Resourcing Board's Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings

### Introduction

When supported through strength-based, high-expectations approaches, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can thrive in education. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote Australia often experience a range of complex and interrelated social and community factors that can create barriers to this success<sup>1</sup>. This is evident in the higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas<sup>2</sup> coupled with the disparities in Year 12 attainment<sup>3</sup>, ATAR eligibility<sup>4</sup> and post-school education outcomes<sup>5</sup>.

All elements of the Schooling Resource Standard must contribute to support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student needs. Some of these are outside the scope of this review e.g. the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student loading, which should support excellence *and* address the intergenerational impacts that drive educational disparity. But it alone cannot ameliorate all of the barriers common to remote Indigenous students. Nor do the other student loadings fully account for these students' needs. Remote students face additional challenges unique to their remoteness.

For example, the majority of remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia are more than 100 km from a school with a full secondary education program<sup>6</sup>. Many of these students are forced to choose between not continuing their schooling — further exacerbating the impact of intergenerational educational disadvantage — or studying away from home<sup>7</sup>. The schools they attend must be able to address the barriers they bring with them from their remote home location.

NIAA recommends three changes be considered to ensure the location loading is best positioned to support student achievement:

1. The location loading calculation should be expanded to consider remote students' home location for those students who study away from home.
2. The location loading calculation should be expanded to include student characteristic loadings, not just the base per student amount.
3. An alternative or updated classification of remoteness that more fully reflects remote Indigenous communities' accessibility should be explored, or at a minimum loading calculations use the most recent ARIA+ dataset.

### The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)

NIAA is committed to implementing the Government's policies and programs to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We work with state and territory governments, peak bodies and service providers to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and services are delivering for Indigenous Australians.

NIAA administers the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) Children and Schooling Program, which provides over \$220 million each year in targeted complementary funding. The program supports activities to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes.

However, this funding represents less than 2 per cent of annual Commonwealth expenditure on education from early childhood through to tertiary education.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Government, 2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework

<sup>2</sup> ABS 2016, AGEP by INGP Status and Remoteness Areas (UR). Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder

<sup>3</sup> ABS unpublished data

<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2019). *Indigenous employment*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>

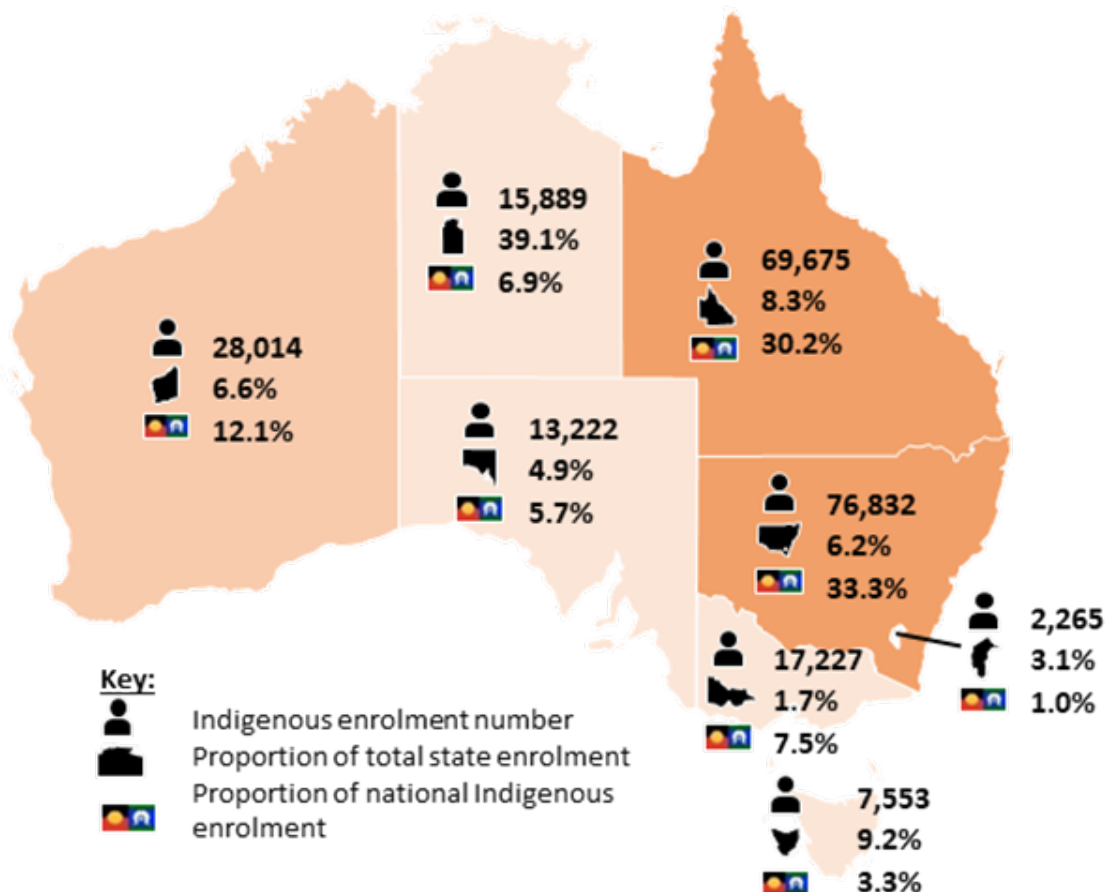
<sup>5</sup> ABS 2016, HEAP by INGP Status and Remoteness Areas (UR). Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder

<sup>6</sup> Australian Government, 2017, Study Away Review - [https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/study-away-review\\_0.pdf](https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/study-away-review_0.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Australian Government, 2017, Study Away Review - [https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/study-away-review\\_0.pdf](https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/study-away-review_0.pdf)

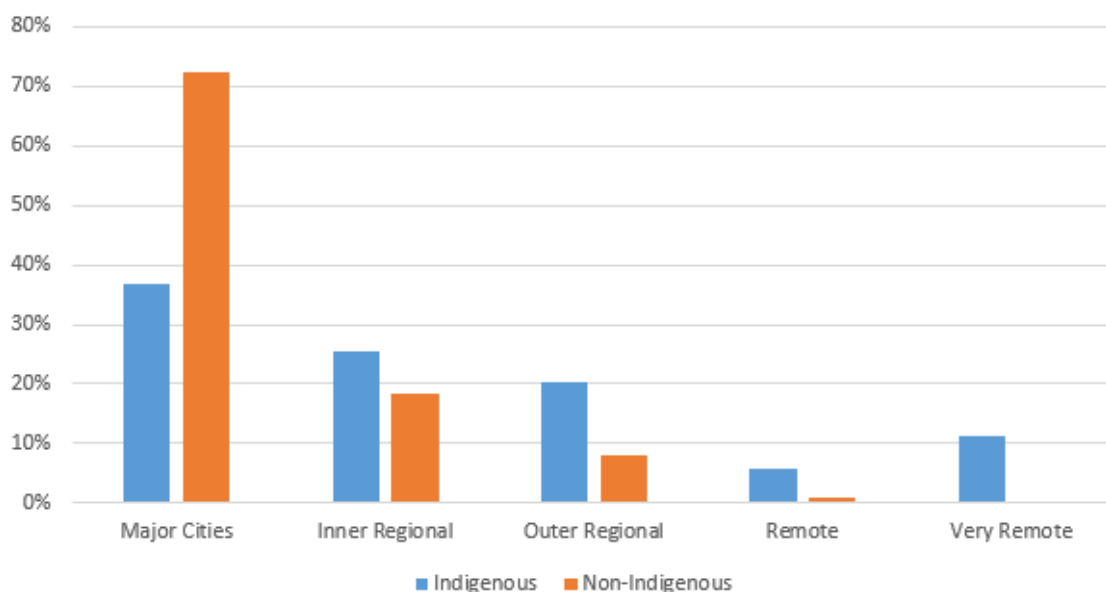
### What does the data tell us?

In 2019, there were 230,677 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students, comprising 5.8% of all students.



Compared to their non-Indigenous peers, a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reside in regional, remote and very remote Australia. This means that significantly more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience the educational barriers presented by remoteness and are disproportionately affected by the school characteristic loadings.

Student Proportion by Remoteness and Indigenous Status



**Some are forced to study away from home**

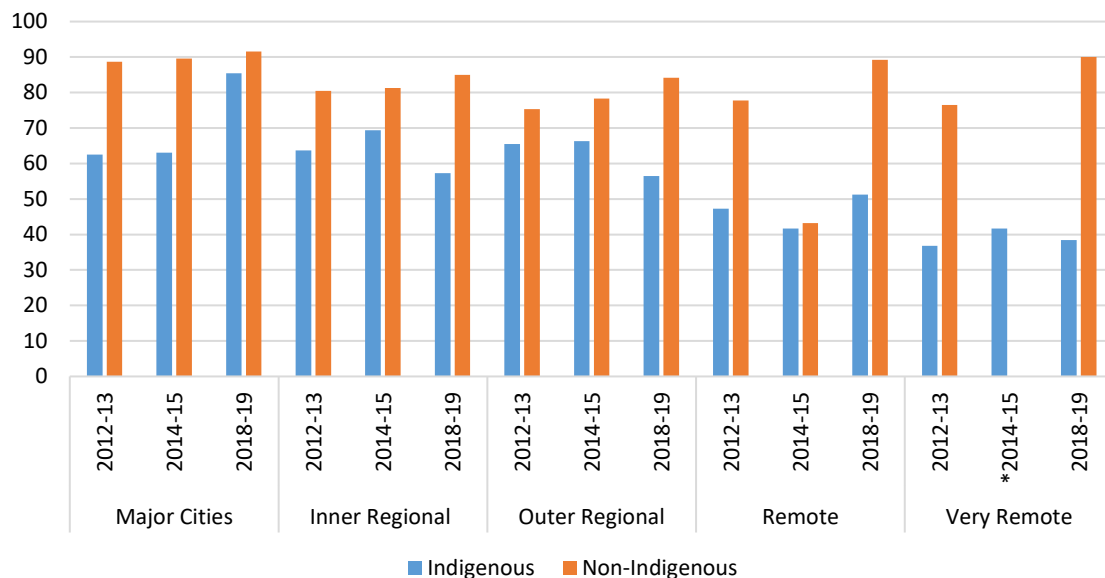
In 2019, there were approximately 4,800 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying away from home who received ABSTUDY<sup>8</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make up approximately 18 per cent of the Australian boarding population and 76 per cent (around 3,600) of these students come from remote or very remote Australia.



**Year 12 attainment decreases by remoteness and has a flow-on effect to post-school pathways**

Although there have been improvements over recent years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Year 12 attainment in remote and very remote is still low compared to non-Indigenous students<sup>9</sup>. In 2018–19, only 43 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote and very remote areas finished Year 12.

**Year 12 Attainment by remoteness, per cent**



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<sup>8</sup> Services Australia Administrative data. Unpublished.

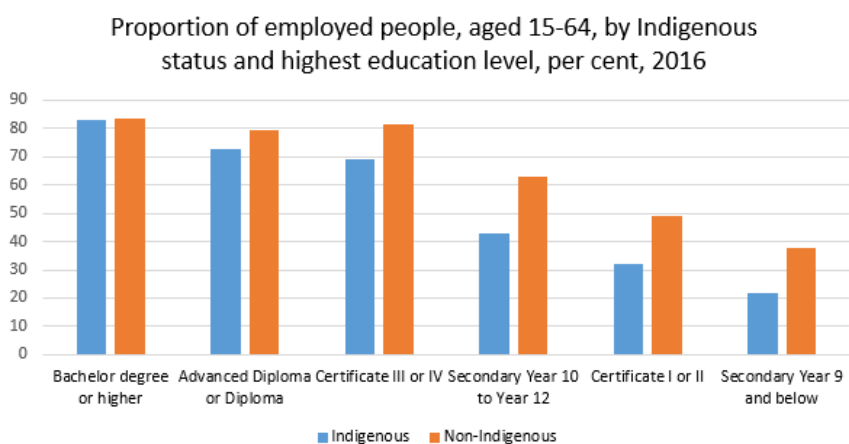
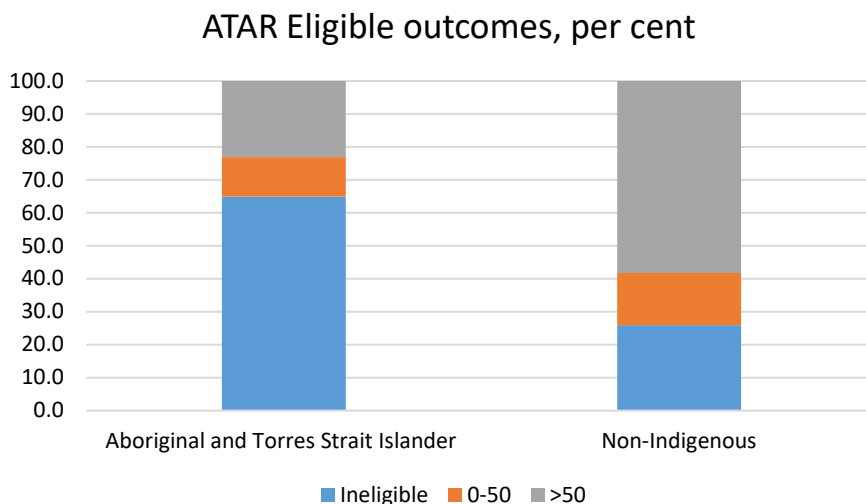
<sup>9</sup> ABS unpublished data

<sup>10</sup> ABS unpublished data

\*Estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use

**You can't aspire to what you can't see**

Lower school retention and Year 12 attainment outcomes mean there are less people from remote areas achieving higher levels of education to promote these pathways as an option for others. In 2015, only 23 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students received an ATAR making them eligible to go directly to university and 65 per cent weren't even eligible to receive an ATAR<sup>11</sup>.



*We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a Bachelor degree or higher have equal or better employment outcomes as their non-Indigenous peers. But they are less likely to have the opportunity to attain this.*

In remote and very remote Australia, less than 2 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a Bachelor Degree level education, compared to 12 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians. In Major Cities, this jumps to 7 per cent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and 19 per cent for non-Indigenous<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> 2016, Australian Government, Productivity Commission, Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016  
<sup>12</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2019). *Indigenous employment*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-employment>  
<sup>13</sup> ABS 2016, HEAP – 1 Digit Level by INGP Status and Remoteness Areas (UR). Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder

**Table 1. Highest Level of Education by remoteness by per cent**

Education Level	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote	Very Remote
<b>Indigenous</b>					
Postgraduate Degree Level	1.7	0.9	0.5	0.4	0.2
Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate Level	1.1	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.3
Bachelor Degree Level	7.2	4.4	3.4	2.7	1.3
Advanced Diploma and Diploma Level	8.1	6.6	5.7	4.0	2.6
Certificate III & IV Level	20.7	21.1	19.3	14.9	11.3
Secondary Education - Years 10 and above	43.9	44.6	48.7	51.4	50.8
Certificate I & II Level	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.8
Secondary Education - Years 9 and below	13.6	17.6	17.9	21.0	26.8
Supplementary Codes*	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.6	6.0
<b>Non-Indigenous</b>					
Postgraduate Degree Level	6.6	2.7	2.1	2.2	2.4
Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate Level	2.4	2.0	1.6	1.7	1.8
Bachelor Degree Level	19.4	11.7	10.6	11.7	12.6
Advanced Diploma and Diploma Level	10.3	9.4	8.6	8.7	8.8
Certificate III & IV Level	15.6	22.6	22.7	23.5	26.3
Secondary Education - Years 10 and above	33.9	36.5	38.8	39.4	36.4
Certificate I & II Level	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Secondary Education - Years 9 and below	7.8	11.4	11.9	9.5	8.3
Supplementary Codes*	4.0	3.5	3.4	3.2	3.3

ABS. 2016, *Census of Population and Housing*

### Social and community factors

Overcoming the challenges of distance and low population density in regional and remote service delivery is something all governments have grappled with across many sectors. Schools, like other services, do not exist in a vacuum. They interact with, and need to respond to, the community around them. This can lead to increased costs arising from diverse economic and social factors.

These factors are often interrelated and have a higher prevalence in remote areas — issues such as inadequate and overcrowded housing, lower family employment and educational attainment levels and community safety. These have flow-on effects to students’ health and wellbeing — and in turn their education — from distracting home learning environments, to insufficient sleep<sup>14</sup>, reduced access to nutritious breakfast and higher rates of health complications such as otitis media<sup>15</sup>, trachoma<sup>16</sup> and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). All of which are more prevalent in remote areas.

*The location loading focuses on the equipment and employment costs associated with remote service delivery, but does not sufficiently consider the social and community factors prevalent in remote*

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, P., Kohler, M., & Blunden, S. (2012). Sleep and academic performance in Indigenous Australian children from a remote community: an exploratory study. *Journal of paediatrics and child health*, 48(2), 122-127.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, C. J., & Jacobs, A. M. (2009). The impact of otitis media on cognitive and educational outcomes. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 191(S9), S69-S72

<sup>16</sup> Commonwealth Department of Health, 2018, Australian Trachoma Surveillance Report 2018

We know that poor health is correlated with educational attainment. Likewise, people with lower educational attainment tend to have fewer opportunities<sup>17</sup>. Schools are uniquely placed to help break this cycle. By creating learning environments that take into account the circumstances of the community and students they support, schools can support students to overcome these barriers to success. But this comes at an increased cost. Some are mitigated by student characteristic loadings — such as student with disability and low English language proficiency — but not all.

While schools cannot be responsible for addressing the root cause of these systemic challenges, they must manage the symptoms. If the symptoms are ignored, students' educational opportunity is lost.

### **Travel and Mobility**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote areas are also more likely to experience disruptions to their schooling due to travel needs. There are two distinct causes: the first is the requirement to travel often long distances to a larger centre to attend school or access other services, such as health and wellbeing services that are not available in the home community, either for the student or a family member. The second is family mobility for social and cultural factors, for example, due to sorry business or cultural activities that are happening in other locations, remote or otherwise. Both have the same effect — time away from schooling.

#### **Recognising mobility in Central Australia**

*In 2015, Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands schools moved to a cluster/partnership approach to better capture attendance and account for the mobility of students and families across communities in the APY Lands. Data showed that students were often attending school outside of their 'home' school community, which was difficult for schools and education authorities to capture in their attendance systems. On average, students regularly attended at least two different schools in the cluster. Depending on the event driving mobility, surges could reach twice the schools regular size — something they are not resourced to manage.*

*There is widespread recognition by government, local services and community that mobility is a feature of life on the APY Lands. This is not uncommon in remote Aboriginal communities. While this cluster/partnership approach dropped away, relevant stakeholders are exploring opportunities to better manage and track school mobility and attendance.*

A national school funding model element that accounts for remoteness costs may not be able to provide the flexibility to address this. However, schools in those areas must be able to address the symptoms. This includes building strong school community partnerships to understand student mobility and put in place steps to manage its impact. As well as supporting student reintegration, so they can (re-)engage in their learning. Schools and education authorities must consider innovative responses. A location loading that more fully addresses the characteristics of these schools and their students' needs better positions them to be able to do this.

*It is not easy to address the challenges remoteness presents and these often compound to create further barriers.*

<sup>17</sup> Hart M, Moore M & Lavery M 2017. *Improving Indigenous Health through education. The Medical Journal of Australia* 207(1):11–12.

### **Students missed in school funding calculations**

Student mobility can have a big enough impact on students and their peers, where they require additional support to reintegrate into the classroom. But there is a much greater risk to schools' ability to support them where students are not adequately captured in school funding considerations. For example, if students are away during schools census period, they are not counted towards that school's funding calculations.

*What happens when student mobility means a student isn't factored into school funding calculations?*

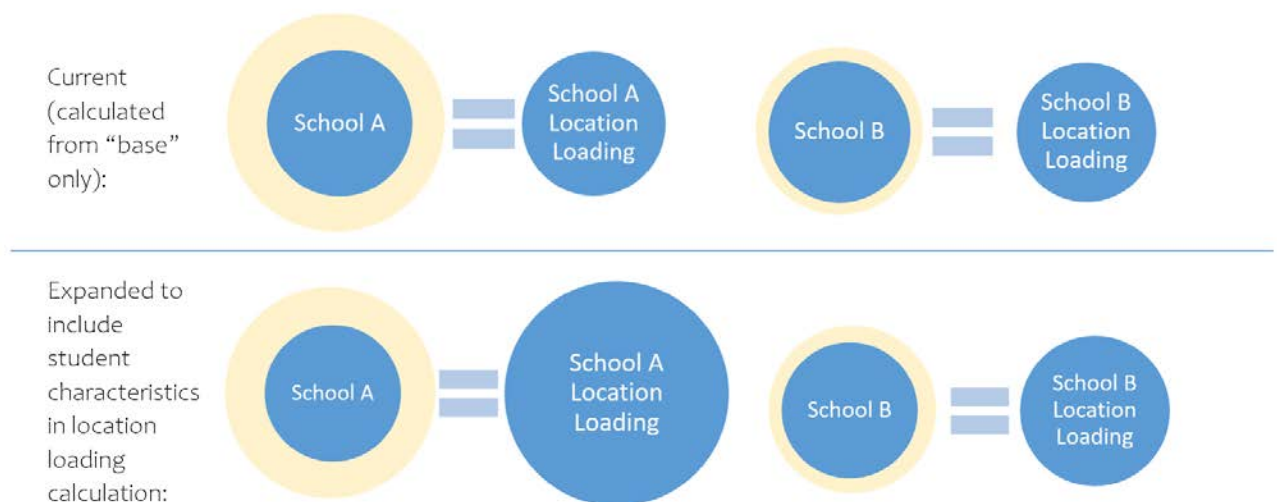
Anecdotal feedback also suggests that small schools view the special circumstances processes available to counter this as being administrative burdensome and that they lack the capacity to complete the process. While not directly relevant to regional loadings, it disproportionately affects those schools most likely to rely on these loadings, who are tasked with supporting some of the most vulnerable students in Australia. It is particularly difficult for small non-systemic schools who are more susceptible to volatility from student numbers.

### **Expanding the location loading to consider these factors by including student loadings in its calculation**

While the location loading acknowledges that education in remote areas generally costs more, its calculation only looks at an increase from the "base" per student funding amount. This excludes the student characteristic loadings, so schools with the same characteristics but different student cohort needs attract the same school location funding.

This ignores the fact that the increased cost of education delivery also has an impact on how schools support students' additional and complex needs. As well as the fact that characteristics can compound to create additional barriers that may not be simply addressed by looking at each element individually. For students who are already at risk of falling behind their peers, this can result in schools only partially being able to support them.

The diagram below shows this, where the yellow circle represents the student characteristic differences between the two schools. In the first set, the student characteristics have no effect on the location loading. But, as the second set shows, if this calculation is expanded to consider student loadings, not just base funding, the school with more complex needs will receive a higher location loading, so the increased costs of remoteness are accounted for in both core school costs and additional costs to meet complex student need.





### **Ensuring adequate access to secondary schooling**

It is well-established that people who complete Year 12 are more likely to find employment when they leave school or pursue further study<sup>18</sup>. Unfortunately, too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are unable to realise these opportunities.

*It is the responsibility of education authorities to ensure all children are able to complete their schooling in a safe and culturally appropriate environment.*

For some this is due to a lack of education facilities close to home. The majority of remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia are more than 100 km from a school with a full secondary education program<sup>19</sup>. These students must travel away from home to continue their schooling.

*In one Northern Territory community with around 100 school-aged children, students have had to travel to 38 different schools across 16 different cities and towns in each state and territory of mainland Australia<sup>20</sup>. This brings with it a range of challenges, including the boarding schools capacity to build relationships with the community, which is vital for maintaining students' engagement in education.*

### **Students carry their experiences with them**

More than 75 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students come from remote or very remote locations<sup>21</sup>. These students face a range of challenges, including difficulty transitioning to a new learning environment, low literacy and numeracy skills, increased proportion of English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) students, poor health and untreated health issues, undiagnosed disabilities, feelings of isolation and homesickness<sup>22</sup>. For many of these students this will be their first experience leaving their family and the area they have grown up in, often with no family at the school and very few friends when they first arrive, if any.

These are just some examples of experiences that are specific to the in-classroom elements of boarding students. These are not just pastoral care concerns for boarding providers. They directly impact students' chances of ongoing engagement and educational success.

As with some of the social and cultural factors discussed earlier, schools can't be responsible for managing the underlying cause of all of these. However, schools must manage the symptoms of these that affect educational engagement within a strength-based approach that enables students to thrive.

### **Expanding the school location loading calculation could help address this**

The location loading is currently only based on the location of the school. This doesn't recognise the additional funding required by schools to adequately support the educational needs of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders from remote areas. The school location loading could help schools meet these needs by expanding the calculation to include an element based on student's home location. The calculation could be twofold:

1. School location, utilising the current school location percentage methodology, but expanded to factor the full SRS, not just the base per student amount (as discussed on page 7); and
2. Student home location, utilising students' home locations to group students by ARIA+ rating and calculate the additional location loading amount.

<sup>18</sup>Australian Government, 2019, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019 Closing the Gap Report

<sup>19</sup> Australian Government, 2017, Study Away Review - [https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/study-away-review\\_0.pdf](https://www.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/study-away-review_0.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> O'Bryan, M & Fogarty, W, 2020, *Boarding Off and On Country: A Study of Education in one Northern Territory Remote Community*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. ANU

<sup>21</sup> Grant Thornton, Australia, 2019, Grant Thornton Australia Review on investment in support for Indigenous boarding students

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*



***But that is not the only way – more can be done to increase local access***

School establishment isn't a matter for this Review, but it is important that school funding settings support the maintenance, or creation, of local school offerings in remote Australia; particularly for the gap in full secondary schooling programs.

There are a range of benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who can access schooling within a reasonable distance of their home location. It makes it easier to maintain connection with Country, culture and family, which has a positive effect on students' social and emotional well-being. In turn, this reduces the chances of disengaging from school due to feelings of isolation and homesickness.

However, it is not always possible for students to attend school close to home. Currently, 8 out of 10 Indigenous students in North East Arnhem Land do not continue their education beyond Year 8. As the example below highlights, there is scope to harness Indigenous community partnerships to co-design and forge relevant educational and employment pathways. By doing so, families and children will be supported to complete secondary education and transition successfully to post-school pathways.

*Consider the future potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students if they were given more choices in their schooling options that allowed them to maintain connection with Country, culture and family.*

***Community partnerships create local solutions***

*The Yothu Yindi Foundation and Studio Schools of Australia Ltd have agreed to work together to build a Studio School on the Gulkula (Garma) site to re-engage Yolngu youth and to deliver the educational vision of the Foundation. The Studio School residential model on Country enables Indigenous students to remain close to family, Indigenous culture and language group most of the year, instead of boarding full-time in a capital city school. The model is based on a proven and successful prototype — the Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School, a registered Independent school in the Kimberley, WA. At Yiramalay students spend terms 2 and 3 on site in the Kimberley and some or all of terms 1 and 4 at the partner school, Wesley College in Melbourne, with students returning to their homes during the school holidays. The school has an attendance rate of 90 per cent, compared to 60-80 per cent for remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students more broadly.*

**ARIA+**

School loading decisions should be made based on the most recent available data. ARIA+ was updated in 2016 and would be more appropriate for location loading calculations than ARIA+ (2011). ARIA+ (2016) updates at least one major town from remote to very remote, changing its ARIA+ score.

While the ARIA+ score is calculated based on a location's road distance from a service centre, this does not take into account the actual time it takes to be able to access those services. Many remote Indigenous communities may only be a short distance; however, the condition of these roads translate to increased travel time and limited accessibility. Public transport to service centres is not readily accessible in most remote communities. The roads may also be inaccessible during the wet season. Therefore, ARIA+ does not translate to ease of access to service centres and additional factors should be considered when calculating the impact of remoteness.

## **Conclusion**

Schools in regional, remote and very remote Australia face an increased range of complex and interrelated factors, while supporting some of the most educationally vulnerable students. Students in these areas also have limited choice in their schooling options. The location loading is an important element in ensuring that remote school resourcing addresses this inequity compared to major cities.

Schools who support students from remote areas need to create safe, supportive and responsive learning environments to meet their students' needs. This is the same whether it is a remote school, or a school supporting students from remote areas who need to study away from home to access secondary schooling. The location loading needs to reflect these two distinct cohorts, who experience many of the same challenges.

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote areas will attract the Indigenous loading (and potentially other student characteristic loadings), this can't be expected to support all of their complex needs. Rather, all available elements need to be combined to address these. Addressing these compounding challenges will help ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are supported to succeed.