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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

The focus of this submission is on Indigenous students from remote communities who must transition to boarding schools and residential facilities in urban centres in order to access a comprehensive secondary education.

The vast majority of these students leave their homes in remote communities with significant deficits in terms of their literacy and numeracy levels by comparison with their non-remote peers.

Consequently, when they enter mainstream secondary education they face significant barriers in addressing the demands of a mainstream curriculum. Many boarding schools lack the resources required to address the issues of literacy and numeracy.

Significant resources must be directed to ensure that the concept of 'transition readiness' is addressed. Students must be as well prepared as they can be for an education away from home and boarding schools must be ready to work effectively with students from remote communities.

Rating: 6

Teachers and teaching

In the context of the transition to boarding school for students from remote Indigenous students, teachers in communities need to ensure that they work with families to prepare children for the challenges they will face in moving away from home and community into a very different world.

They must work, often in a very challenging environment, to ensure the best possible standards of literacy and numeracy are developed to give their students a chance of successfully engaging with a mainstream curriculum.

In the same way, teachers and boarding staff must ensure they have the knowledge and skills required to successfully engage with students undergoing a complex and at times very stressful transition. It is imperative that teachers of students in transition are able demonstrate an excellence in ESL/EAL pedagogies.

Rating: 6

Leaders and leadership

In the context of the transition from remote Indigenous community to boarding school, leadership plays a critical role. Principals in remote communities where there is limited secondary education provision need to ensure that the preparation for transition is a part of their core business. It cannot be seen as something that needs to be addressed half way through Year 6 or left to the work of a service focused on transition such as the Transition Support Service in Queensland or the Transition Support Unit in the Northern Territory. The preparation for transition must begin no later than the

end of Year 4. Transition readiness encompasses not just literacy and numeracy but must also embrace the need for students and families in remote communities to address the need for a priority to be given to addressing the social and emotional needs of students transitioning from remote communities to mainstream boarding schools in regional and urban centres.

In the same way, principals of boarding schools and their senior staff, particularly heads of boarding, must ensure that appropriate strategies are in place to meet and manage the demands of children who are a long way from home and far removed from the cultural safety afforded by family and community. This requires strong leadership and a willingness to articulate and respond to the needs of a vulnerable student population. Too often, the first response of leadership in boarding schools is to exclude students who struggle to adjust to the demands of life a long way from home.

Rating: 7

School and Community

With few exceptions, boarding schools and residential facilities struggle with the demands of building strong, robust and respectful relationships with the remote communities from which they draw students. There are many reasons behind this; the logistics of managing relationships across vast distances (such as that between Wadeye in the N.T. or Kalumburu in W.A. and boarding schools in Queensland for example), language and cultural barriers and policy rigidity in the application of Commonwealth support programs such as Abstudy which places considerable bureaucratic barriers in the way of schools, parents and families in building relationships across distance and culture.

It is clear that where boarding schools and residential facilities work on building relationships with the families and communities they serve, students are more likely to remain in school longer and experience significantly better educational outcomes.

Rating: 7

Information and Communication Technology

In the context of the transition of Indigenous students from remote communities to boarding schools and residential facilities, information and communications technology can play a very positive role. Students who leave remote communities must be competent users of ICT if they are to function effectively in mainstream classrooms. ICT can also provide a very useful platform for enhancing quality regular communication between students and their families and between school staff and families in remote communities. However, the use of ICT is often hampered by limited accessibility and poor or sporadic network coverage in remote communities. While boarding schools may be keen to use programs such as Skype to communicate with families, the families themselves may not be able to access the facilities which allow for an appropriate degree of privacy and reliability of transmission. Few homes in remote communities have the ICT resources which are the norm in most urban households. They rely on shared access in schools, council offices, schools or, where they exist public libraries or knowledge centres. This access is, at times, highly problematic.

The view that Indigenous students in remote communities can access distance education at home through organisations such as the Katherine School of the Air or the Cairns School of Distance Education in the same manner as their non-Indigenous peers is both fanciful and misguided. Few homes in remote communities have the ICT infrastructure and hardware required, overcrowding is chronic and few families would be in a position to provide the level of support required to facilitate the effective engagement of a child in a program of distance education.

In the context of transition, ICT should be seen as a tool to facilitate enhanced communication between boarding schools and families in remote Indigenous communities

Rating: 6

Entrepreneurship and schools

This concept is highly problematic for remote Indigenous communities across Australia. There are opportunities for employment in fields such as health, education and caring for country, but these are often in low-skilled and low-paying positions such as aboriginal health worker (AHW), teacher aide/student attendance officer (SAO) and ranger. Highly skilled positions such as nurse, teacher, qualified trades person or positions in local government demand the completion of Year 12 and successful completion of a tertiary degree or apprenticeship. To complete Year 12 and complete a university degree or a full apprenticeship demands that a young Indigenous person must leave their community at the end of Year 6. By the time they complete a degree course they will have been away for the best part of ten years.

There are students who leave their communities and who complete Year 12 but few of them go on to University or complete a trade. Many return to community and take up largely unskilled positions. In my work as an education researcher on Cape York, the comment commonly made at community level is, "Our kids come back from boarding school having been away for 5 or 6 years. They come back and work as teacher aides or clinic workers. Some come back and go onto My Pathway (work for the dole).....when will someone come back to work as teacher and one day run the school for our community... when will someone come back as a nurse and maybe manage the clinic? These are proper jobs.....why is it that only whitefellas can do this? Why do we bother sending our kids away?"

Rating: 5

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

Boarding school is the ONLY option for Indigenous students in many remote communities who wish to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education. In the communities of Coen and Pormpuraaw in Cape York for example, there is no secondary education provision at all. The Wilson Review in the Northern Territory mandates boarding as the only option for students who wish to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education. The creation of the Northern Territory Transition Support Unit is an outcome of the Wilson Review.

The quality of education on offer in boarding schools varies greatly. Interestingly, the Australian Government, which facilitates and enables the transition to boarding school for ALL Indigenous students in remote communities across Australia has little or no interest in using the Abstudy program as a 'lever for quality' as recommended by peak organisations such as Boarding Australia. The Department of Social Services which has policy responsibility for the Abstudy program makes no demands with respect to quality of service provision on the part of boarding schools, residential facilities or 'informal boarding arrangements' whereby care of students being educated away from home is arranged by extended family or friends. In its submission to the recent parliamentary inquiry the Department of Social Security stated rather alarmingly that "we do not have any role in looking at the quality of that particular arrangement." It is time for the Commonwealth to take on a role in ensuring that Abstudy monies are used in providing quality care and access to secondary education, be that in a boarding school, residential facility or 'informal' living arrangement.

Rating for enrolments: 5

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 3

Rating for boarding: 7

Diversity

The focus of this submission is on the particular needs of Indigenous children in remote communities who must transition to boarding schools and residential facilities in order to access a quality and comprehensive secondary education.

These students often attend schools where they are in a minority. It is essential that these schools are adequately resourced in terms of meeting the physical, social/emotional and cultural needs of these students. Schools should embrace diversity and acknowledge the richness and skills that students from remote communities have to offer. Too often Indigenous students from remote communities are viewed in purely deficit terms. Schools which value diversity will acknowledge the particular needs of this student group in a positive and inclusive manner and thus give Indigenous students from remote communities the best possible chance of success.

Rating: 7

Transitioning beyond school

Every student who completes secondary school should leave with a comprehensive transition plan. For Indigenous students from remote communities, Year 12 completion at a boarding school is an extraordinary milestone. However, many students who complete Year 12 return to their homes in remote communities without a clear transition plan.

This is a source of great frustration to many parents and caregivers in remote communities. They ask, "why did we need to send our boys and girls away?...Some come back and do nothing...some come back and do jobs that could be filled by anyone....they didn't need to finish Year 12."

For many parents and family members in community there is great frustration that the children who have gone away are not ready for the world of work. In the same way, very few Indigenous students from remote communities who have gone away to boarding school and completed Year 12 are able to enroll in tertiary courses without considerable support or an almost endless need to do 'bridging courses.'

Post Year 12 transition programs should be demanded of boarding schools who have made the effort to understand the world into which many of their Year 12 students will return.

Rating: 7

Additional Comments

Indigenous students who must transition from their homes in remote communities to access a comprehensive and quality secondary education face multiple barriers. Their transition is complex and multi-faceted. They must move vast distances, move from a community school with a population often under 100 to a school population often over 1,000, transition from an environment with an Indigenous world-view to a non-Indigenous world view, from a non-English speaking world to an English speaking world, from a family orientation to a communal and highly regimented boarding orientation and adjust to the many manifestations of homesickness and anxiety which accompany a move away from home and family, often before the age of 12.

Given that all students in transition to education outside of their home communities must access Abstudy, an Australian Government program designed to mitigate barriers and minimize educational disadvantage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, it is surprising that there are marked disparities in the quality and availability of transition support services. Queensland has a state-funded Transition Support Service which has operated successfully for over a decade but which at present does not support students from remote communities in the Torres Strait or Gulf of Carpentaria. The Northern Territory established a Commonwealth-funded Transition Support Unit in 2016 but it does not extend its service to communities such as Wadeye, nor does it provide in-school support to the hundreds of Northern Territory students who enroll, often for only very short periods, in schools in Queensland and South Australia. Students who leave remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia do so with no transition support. Not surprisingly, the students who leave Western Australian communities such as Kalumburu to attend boarding schools in places such as Townsville in Queensland, rarely achieve any degree of success and invariably end up back in community and disengaged from school.

The Australian Government must work with education authorities in all states and territories to ensure that the Indigenous students who access Abstudy in order to attend boarding schools and other residential options well away from their homes in remote communities are appropriately supported so as to maximize their chances of educational success. Provision of such support would ensure that the most vulnerable of students do access a quality secondary education. It would also ensure that education providers are accountable for the quality of the education and associated services they provide. It is clear that the transition to boarding school is an experience of failure for an unacceptably high number of Indigenous students and it is also clear that boarding providers who are paid Commonwealth funds through Abstudy are not sufficiently accountable for the outcomes they provide.