

Boarding Providers

The following updated advice is to assist boarding providers manage ABSTUDY student travel in the context of the current challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak. We have updated our earlier advice of 17 March 2020 to include information around emerging health concerns and new travel restrictions affecting remote communities.

Boarding issues –

- Due to increasing community concern about COVID-19, and restricted travel to some remote Indigenous communities, we advise boarding schools need to work with the relevant State education authority and student's home community, including with relevant land councils and traditional owners to understand the impact on the student and the community. Schools need to implement adequate strategies to mitigate risks of students getting stranded or returned to the school. Services Australia may not authorise travel if boarding providers do not have a suitable Safe Travel Plan in place for each student.
- This consultation should be conducted prior to the boarding school making any travel booking requests.
- We also advise schools to update their Safe Travel Plans (further information is provided below) to consider this fluid situation, and the potential need for students to self-isolate prior to returning to their community. Where communities have put isolation measures in place which limit or prevent students' return to community, schools will need to work with parents, communities and other relevant stakeholders to make suitable arrangements.
- **As we've previously advised, the decision to close boarding and send students home early is a matter for boarding providers**, including consideration of the current advice from Chief Medical Officers and relevant Health Departments. Schools and parents should consider the risks versus the benefits of a student remaining in boarding school, noting that the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic may span several months. The decision to remain at boarding school should be a shared and documented decision.

Health impacts

- Boarding schools present a marked increase in risk of transmission of COVID-19 due to close and shared living arrangements and higher frequency of contact.
- Should a boarding student from a rural or remote community be diagnosed with COVID-19, or be considered by the community to be at risk of carrying COVID-19, they may not be able to return home if there is not sufficient health infrastructure to support them, or support their isolation.
- As previously advised, where students are considering returning to remote communities, **schools or boarding providers should work with the student, the relevant state education department and their home community early, including relevant Land Councils and Traditional Owners to understand the impact on the student and the community and consider any strategies that may need to put in place to mitigate risks.**
- For reference, the Department of Health has published a factsheet *Coronavirus (COVID-19) information for schools and early childhood centres, students and parents*
<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources#for-childcare-schools-and-higher-education>

ABSTUDY for secondary students

- Where a school or boarding provider requests an ABSTUDY boarding student's end-of-term travel be brought forward because the school or boarding is closing early due to Coronavirus (COVID-19), **ABSTUDY can support students to travel home early and the associated funding to the school will continue to flow.**
- **Where the travel will be more than one week before the student's usual end-of-term travel,** Services Australia will encourage the school to keep up regular contact with families and provide learning material to keep the students engaged in education during their extended break from school.
- Where students are considering returning to remote communities, **schools or boarding providers should work with the student and their home community early, including relevant Land Councils and Traditional Owners to understand the impact on the student and the community and consider any strategies that may need to put in place to mitigate risks.**
 - This includes considering whether students will be required to self-isolate for 14 days or undergo testing and self-isolate while waiting for test results. Before booking flights, we recommend schools contact local communities to identify these requirements to ensure students safely arrive home, or remain safely within the boarding school environment.
 - If required, the school should work with the student/local community to determine the safest and most appropriate option for self-isolation. This must then be outlined in the students' Safe Travel Plan (see below).
 - For reference, the Department of Health has published a factsheet *Coronavirus (COVID-19) information for schools and early childhood centres, students and parents* <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources#for-childcare-schools-and-higher-education>

Safe Travel Plans

- Boarding schools and providers would be well aware that Safe Travel Plans are mandatory for school students, who are under 18 years of age, where Services Australia pre-books their travel.
- Boarding schools and providers are responsible for developing, updating and administering each student's Safe Travel Plan. The continued success of the Plans is reliant on each school or boarding provider meeting their duty of care responsibilities.
 - As above, we advise schools to update their Safe Travel Plans to consider this fluid situation, and the potential need for students to self-isolate prior to returning to their communities or testing. Before booking flights, we recommend schools contact local communities to identify these requirements to ensure students safely arrive home, or remain safely within the boarding school environment.
 - Safe Travel Plans must contain a contingency option for a period of self-isolation, including supervision arrangements.
- Emergency contacts must be available throughout the student's journey in case of disrupted travel. If travel is disrupted and the emergency contact is not available, the student may be stranded without supervision or support. This is particularly important given the current environment of increased flight cancellations and rapidly changing travel advice.
- For students with existing bookings for travel to restricted communities, schools will be contacted by Services Australia to clarify if a community restriction is known. The student must have a suitable Safe Travel Plan in place which addresses any requirements associated with self-isolation in a safe location with suitable supervision. Services Australia will not authorise travel for students without suitable Safe Travel Plans.
- Future bookings for students travelling to restricted communities will not be authorised without the school confirming each student has a Safe Travel Plan which addresses any requirements associated with a period of supervised self-isolation.

- Further information regarding Safe Travel Plans is available on the Department of Social Services website at <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-benefits-payments-student-payments/safe-travel-plan-guidelines-and-template>

ABSTUDY for tertiary students

- In the case of an ABSTUDY tertiary student's eligibility for Fares Allowance, if a tertiary institution brings forward the end date for a study period (semester) or for a year-long course, brings forward its mid-year break then the relevant students would be eligible to claim Fares Allowance. Noting that students would still be subject to the overall yearly travel limits applied by Fares Allowance.
 - In this instance the student would still be eligible for payment of relevant benefits while classes have been deferred even if they were not meeting their study load requirements.
- If the tertiary institution was continuing to offer the course through an online arrangement, then the course would not be considered to be deferred and payments would continue as the student would generally be meeting their study load requirements.
- Where students are experiencing significant financial hardship due to COVID-19 they may also qualify for an Additional Assistance payment, but this would need to be assessed on a case by case basis.