



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

Inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments

Submission by
the Independent Schools Council of
Australia (ISCA)

28 February 2020

Contents

About ISCA	3
Introduction	4
Background Information about the Independent Sector	4
The Role of State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools.....	4
Types of Independent school.....	4
Independent School Enrolments and Trends.....	5
Independent School Size and Location	6
Independent Schools in Remote and Regional Locations.....	7
Indigenous Students	9
Boarding Schools.....	11
Indigenous Boarding Students	12
The Gap in Educational Achievement	13
Key Barriers and Challenges.....	14
School Funding and Related Issues.....	15
Demographics	16
Distance.....	16
Staffing	17
Limited Educational and Social Services	19
The Australian Curriculum	20
Natural Disasters and Other Extreme Circumstances.....	21
Addressing the Key Barriers and Challenges.....	21
The Unique Challenges of Indigenous Education	23
The Role of Associations of Independent Schools in Indigenous Education	26
ABSTUDY	28
Conclusion.....	29

About ISCA

ISCA is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISCA represents a sector with 1,148 schools and almost 632,000 students, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISCA's major role is to bring the unique needs of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other risk factors.

Many Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs. Examples include the Independent community schools for Indigenous students in remote areas, special schools for students with disability and boarding schools to educate children from regional and remote areas. There are also schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community or that seek to practise an internationally recognised educational philosophy such as Rudolf Steiner or Montessori schools. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example the Lutheran systems. Systemic schools account for 18 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

Introduction

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments.

Independent schools serve a broad range of students and communities, reflecting the diversity of Australian society, and have a long-standing commitment to supporting quality education for students across Australia, including in remote and complex environments.

The autonomy of Independent schools enables them to respond flexibly, effectively and creatively as professional educational organisations to meet the needs of their school community and to develop, innovate and improve the school to enhance outcomes for students.

This submission focuses particularly on the provision of educational services by Independent schools for students from remote communities and complex environments, either living in those communities or furthering their education away from home at an Independent boarding school.

This submission will provide a background to the nature and funding of the Independent school sector, with a particular focus on the funding arrangements for the 122,000 students enrolled in 387 Independent schools located in regional and remote Australia, students from these areas being educated in metropolitan schools, and address a range of issues from the inquiry's Terms of Reference.

Background Information about the Independent Sector

The Role of State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools

Independent schools in each state and territory are directly represented and supported by the Association of Independent Schools (AIS) in their jurisdiction. While almost all Independent schools choose to become members of their State or Territory Association of Independent Schools, the AIS does not act as a 'system authority' for member schools.

AISs provide a range of professional services directly to schools, as well as providing educational support such as learning opportunities, advice and information. Many AISs also offer industrial relations services, policy and compliance support, professional learning services, and implement government programs, for example the Australian Government Capital Grants Program. In addition, AISs represent the views of the Independent school sector at the state and territory level.

Types of Independent school

There is a common perception, encouraged by media portrayal, that Independent schools are large, urban schools which only cater to high income families. In fact, ninety percent of Independent schools are low to medium fee schools which cater to the full spectrum of Australian society.

Independent schools also cater to specific groups of disadvantaged students including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* students attending remote 100 per cent Indigenous schools in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory; high needs students with disability attending special schools; and highly disadvantaged youth who have been excluded from both government and non-government schools and who are now attending Independent special assistance schools.

This diversity has long been considered a major strength of the Australian schooling system, serving well the needs of a geographically dispersed, socially mixed, multicultural and multi-faith population.

Families and communities are the foundation and at the core of all Independent schools and their broader communities wherever they may be situated but especially so for Independent schools which are located in and/or cater to regional and remote areas. It is the partnerships which are developed between the school, parents, students, families, and the wider community that enable Independent schools to create learning environments in which education can happen in innovative and diverse ways in order to meet the needs of the school community.

While the Australian Government is the main provider of public funding to Independent schools, it should be recognised that parents, families and school communities are the primary funders of schools in the Independent sector.

The range of tuition fees paid varies greatly from school to school reflecting the diversity of the sector. The spectrum of fees ranges from schools serving highly disadvantaged communities which charge no fees, through to schools which charge in excess of \$20,000 per year. It should be noted that schools charging in excess of \$20,000 per year only represent eleven per cent of Independent schools. The median fees charged per student in Independent schools are \$5,423 per year.

Most of the 145 boarding schools in the Independent sector charge fees for provision of boarding services which are additional to tuition fees paid per student. For many boarding schools enrolling Indigenous boarding students, boarding costs are supported by the amount of ABSTUDY a school receives for individual students. However, this generally does not cover the full costs of boarding.

Independent School Enrolments and Trends

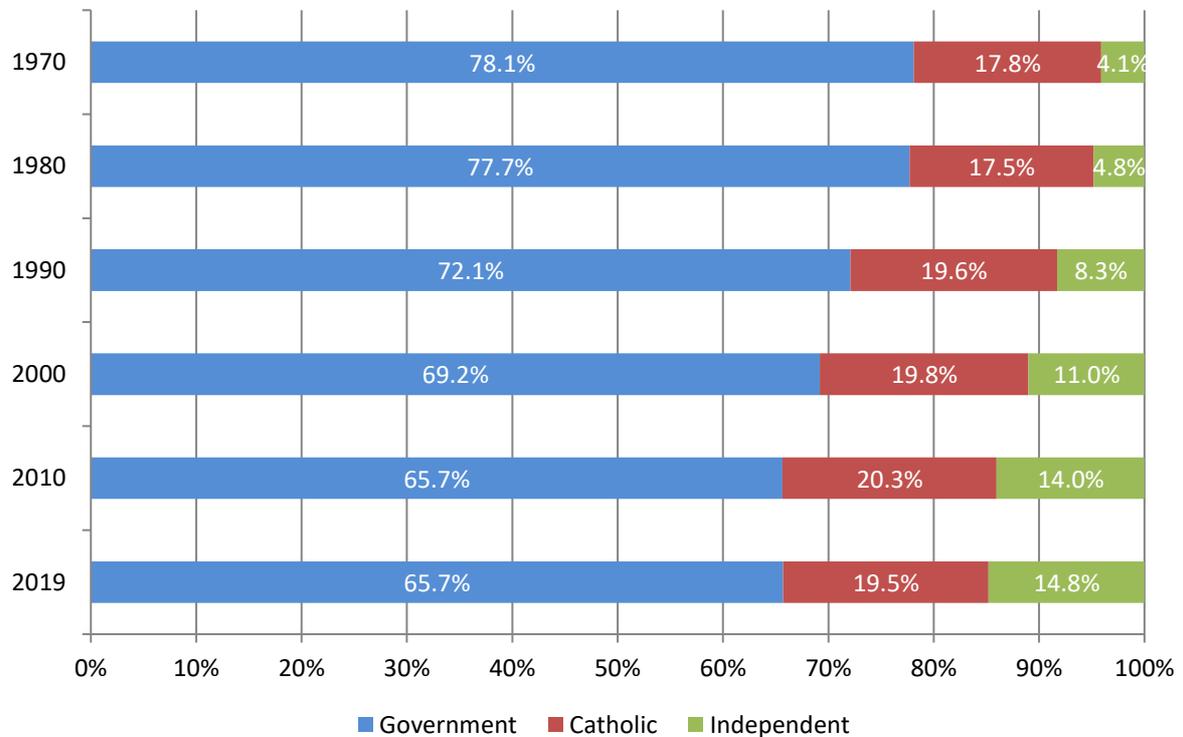
The Independent school sector is the third largest school education provider in Australia (after the New South Wales Government and the Catholic education systems) and at secondary level is the largest provider of schooling services.

Enrolments in Independent schools have grown steadily since the 1970s. According to ABS data, in 2019 Independent schools accounted for 14.8 per cent of total student enrolments (19.0 per

* For brevity the word “Indigenous” may be used.

cent of secondary enrolments) compared to 4 per cent in 1970. Full time enrolments have increased from around 124,000 in 1970 to over 584,000 in 2019. Including Independent Catholic school enrolments, the sector enrolment is almost 632,000 students.

Chart 1: Enrolment Share by Sector 1970 to 2019

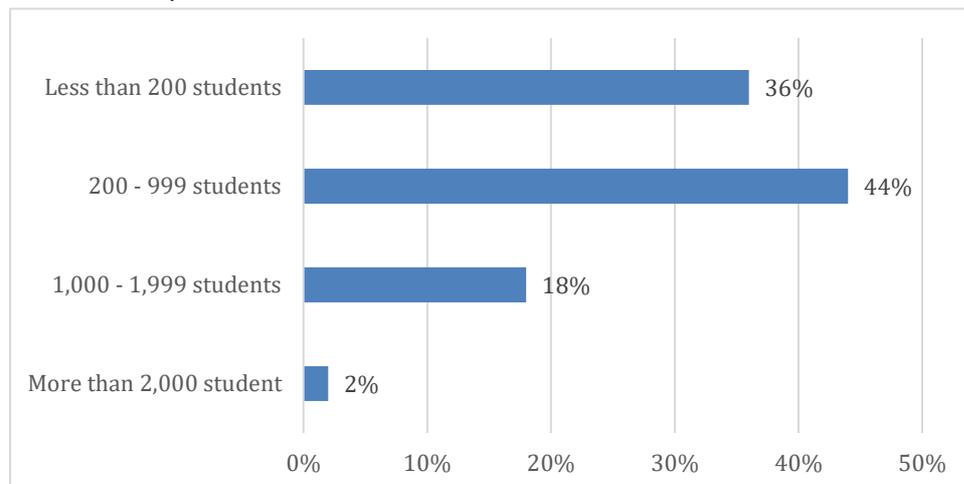


Source: ABS Schools Australia. Excludes Independent Catholic schools from Independent school share.

Independent School Size and Location

Independent schools vary greatly in size with the average Independent school size in 2019 being 537 students. This compares with an average of 389 students at government schools.

Chart 2: Independent School Size 2019



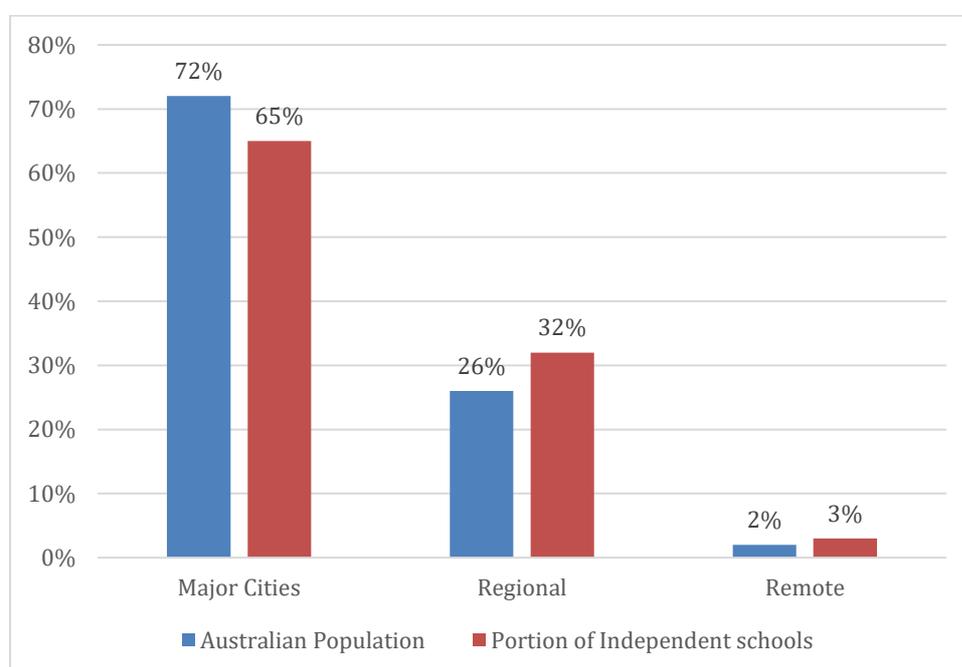
Source: DET Non-Government Schools Census 2019.

Thirty-six per cent of Independent schools have fewer than 200 students; 11 per cent have fewer than 50 students.

The Independent school sector serves diverse communities and not exclusively those located in metropolitan areas. Independent schools make a significant contribution to educating students from Australia's regional and remote areas.

As demonstrated in Chart 3 below, the distribution of Independent schools is reflective of the distribution of the Australian population as a whole. While 65 per cent of Independent schools are located in metropolitan areas, 32 per cent are in regional areas, and three per cent of Independent schools are located in remote areas.

Chart 3: Independent School Location 2019



Source: ACARA My School Dataset and ABS Regional Population Growth, Australia (3218.0)

Many students who live in regional and remote areas attend boarding schools in the state and territory capital cities or larger regional centres. Alternatively, they may board elsewhere, but attend school as day students. Others attend Independent schools in their local areas, including Indigenous community schools. Some students seek to widen their educational opportunities by taking up the option of distance education or online learning through an Independent school located in a regional or metropolitan location.

Independent Schools in Remote and Regional Locations

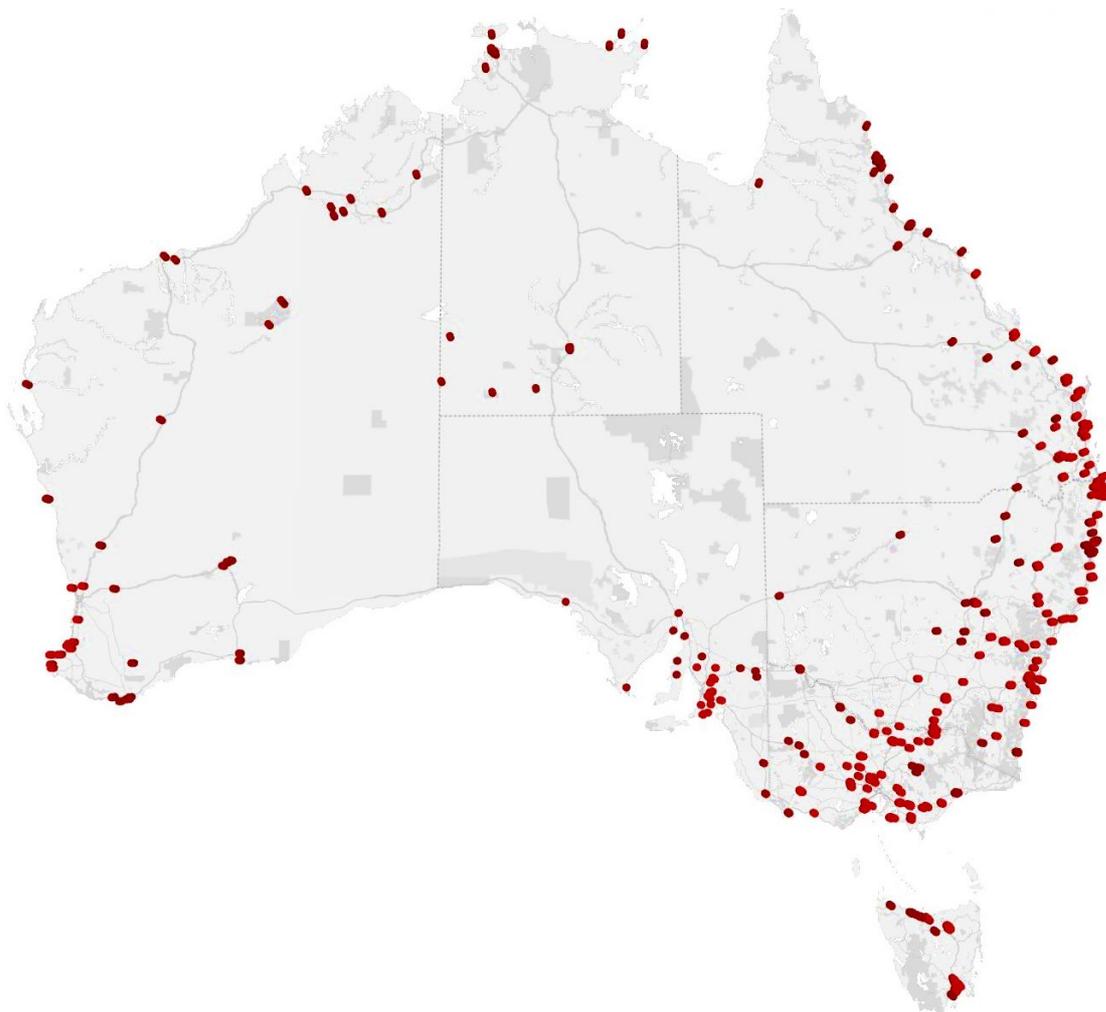
As Map 1 below shows, there are a significant number of Independent schools located outside of the major capital cities. Three hundred and eighty-seven Independent schools are located in regional and remote areas. This represents almost one in three schools in the Independent sector. These schools enrol 121,919 students and employ 16,256 teachers and other staff.

It is important to note that in a number of remote locations, particularly remote Indigenous communities, Independent schools are the sole providers of school education. There are 13 Independent schools recognised in the current Commonwealth funding model as being remote sole providers; that is, they are the only available school in that location.

Similar to distribution patterns in other sectors, more than 50 per cent of Independent schools located in regional and remote areas have enrolments of fewer than 200 students.

Independent schools in regional and remote locations assist in creating real schooling choice for families in these areas. They include for example Anglican, Lutheran, Christian, Montessori and Steiner schools.

Map 1: Independent Schools in Regional and Remote Areas 2020



Source: MCYEETA Geographic location database plus additional geolocation. Includes school campuses.

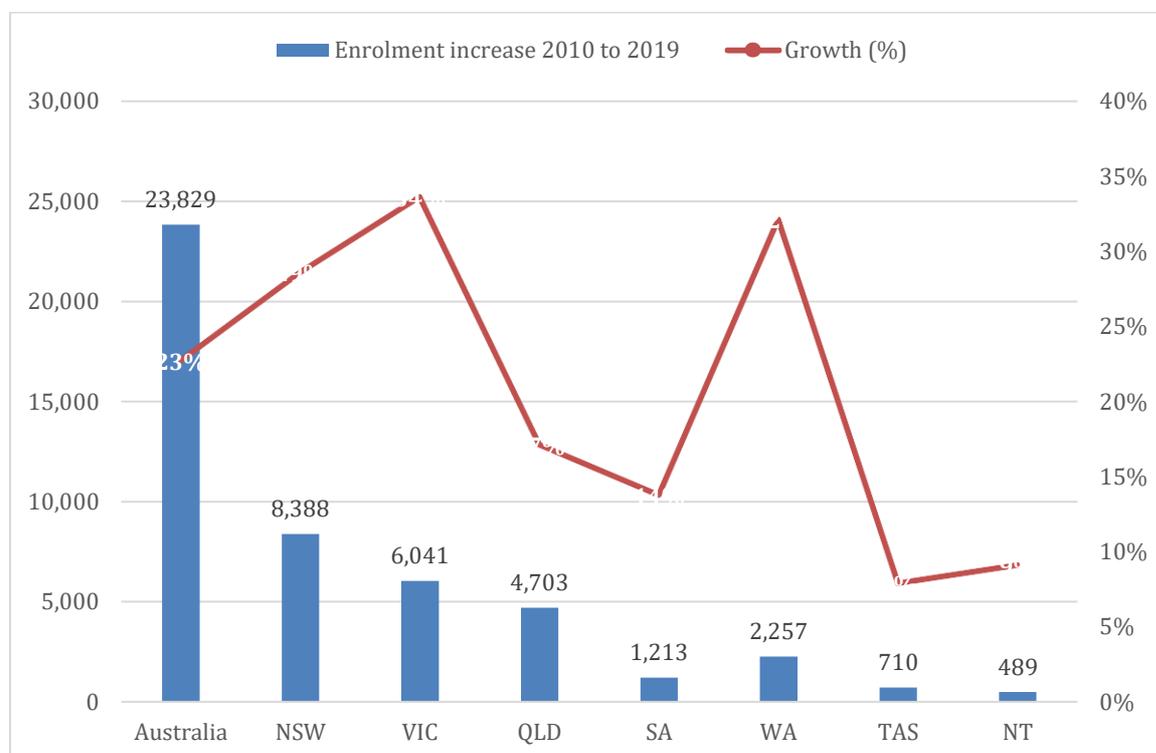
Student enrolments in Independent schools located in regional, and remote areas have grown by 23 per cent over the decade 2010 to 2019 (see Chart 4 below). This compares with 22 per cent over the same decade in Independent schools Australia wide. The greatest percentage

growth was in Independent schools located in regional and remote Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales.

For many parents and families, the issue of whether to educate their children locally or in another location is a significant and difficult decision. In making this decision, these families weigh the benefits, opportunities, and disadvantages that may be presented by children boarding away or by staying at home.

Parents and families are influenced by a variety of factors, including religious affiliation, broad academic outcomes, quality teaching, a supportive caring environment, the physical environment and facilities, financial cost, the content of the curriculum, quality leadership and the range of extra-curricular opportunities, in order to reach a choice that best serves their particular circumstances.

Chart 4: Enrolment Growth in Regional and Remote Independent Schools 2010 to 2019



Source: DET Non-Government Schools Census 2010, 2019.

Indigenous Students

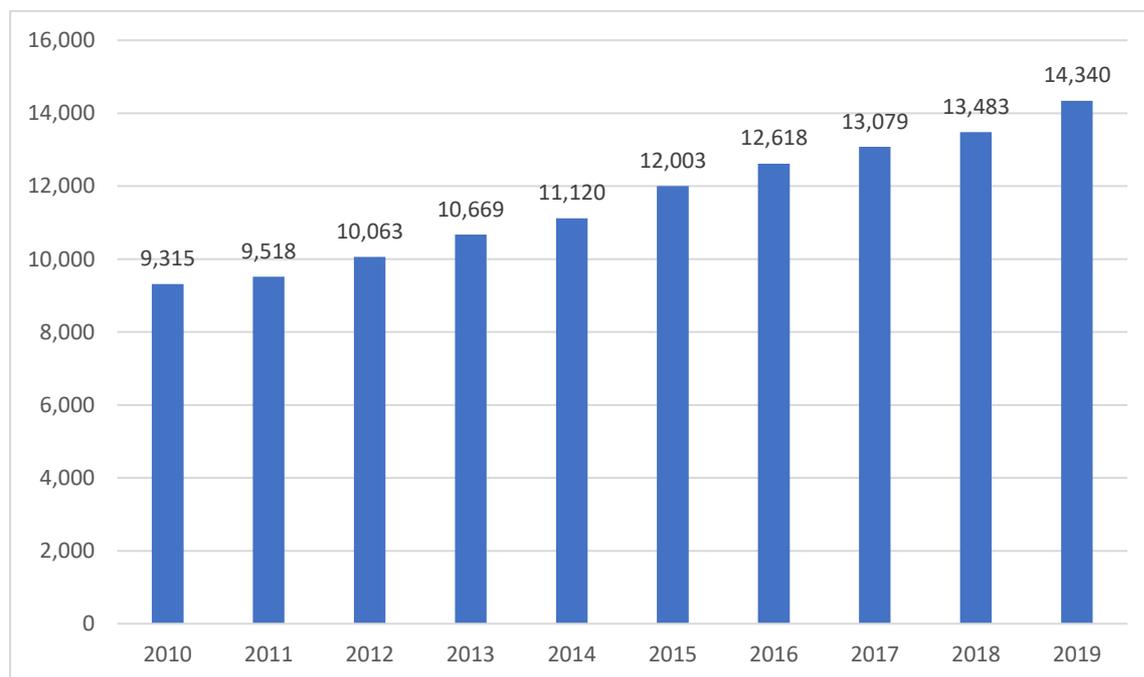
As a group, Indigenous students face significant barriers to educational achievement and many Indigenous parents choose enrol their children in Independent schools.

Indigenous student enrolments are dispersed broadly across the Independent sector and in 2019 there were over 14,300 Indigenous students enrolled in 897 independent schools. Seventy-eight per cent of Independent schools in Australia enrolled Indigenous students in 2019.

Enrolments of Indigenous students in Independent schools have grown at an average rate of almost 6 per cent per year over the last two decades. ABS data released in February 2020 confirmed the Independent sector as experiencing the largest growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments, exceeding the national average growth of 3.7 per cent.

Indigenous students are educated across a range of settings and in different types of schools in the Independent sector. There are some Independent schools that provide education to significant populations of Indigenous students and some schools are entirely Indigenous. Forty schools in the Independent sector have an Indigenous enrolment of more than 50 per cent. A significant number of these schools are located in regional or remote areas.

Chart 5: Growth in Indigenous Student Enrolments at Independent Schools 2010 to 2019



Source: DET Non-Government Schools Census 2010 to 2019.

Many Indigenous students, particularly those from regional and remote communities face considerable educational challenges including that their educational levels are often behind those of their non-Indigenous peers, many students have significant social and health issues, and many have traumatic backgrounds and disrupted educational journeys. The context and educational setting means that the needs of Indigenous students, and thus of the schools, teachers and support staff, vary according their educational circumstances.

Currently neither Australian Government nor state and territory government funding arrangements for non-government schools adequately address the very substantial cost differential in school provision for Indigenous students in and from remote locations. Indigenous students attending Independent schools in remote communities should be supported to the same level as Indigenous students in similar government schools.

Remote Indigenous students attending boarding schools also require substantial additional financial assistance, over and above general education expenses, to meet the additional costs of supporting their participation in education. This issue will be further addressed below when discussing Indigenous boarding students and the particular challenges of Indigenous education.

Boarding Schools

The Independent sector includes 145 schools which enrol over 15,500 boarding students. The Independent sector is by far the largest provider of boarding school education for Australian school students. A significant number of Independent school boarders are from regional and remote areas. Independent boarding schools provide these students with pastoral and emotional support while they access an education. Independent boarding schools are frequently the only option for students from regional and remote communities who must board away from home in order to further their education.

The actual social profile of boarding school students challenges the perceived stereotype of a boarding school student. Boarders in Independent schools represent a diverse group of students from a range of backgrounds, and often from a diverse range of countries. Students board full-time, on a daily or weekly basis, or on an 'as required' basis, depending on their individual circumstances. This wide range brings flexibility and diversity of experience and culture into school communities as a whole.

Due to issues of remoteness, for many parents there is little choice but to enrol their children in a boarding school. Many of these parents are acutely aware that an emphasis on access to education underpins their children's future success, and that boarding helps alleviate issues connected with isolation in Australia's regional and remote areas.

Given the significant number of regionally based, particularly farming families, that use boarding schools, conditions such as low commodity prices, low economic growth or downturns, drought, and other natural disasters, can leave these families and therefore their children's schools vulnerable. For many families who enrol their children at a boarding school, tuition and boarding fees are a critical factor in their selection of school. These families have concerns about the rising cost of schools and naturally are interested in boarding school affordability. These families need to have a degree of certainty regarding school funding which has an impact on the ongoing costs of tuition and boarding fees, as well as other associated costs of their children's schooling.

Boarding schools play a unique role in the provision of schooling for families in special circumstances, such as those in Australia's regional and remote communities, or those living and working overseas. Independent schools which are located in regional and remote areas often have an important economic role in the communities in which they are situated. Secondary and tertiary educational institutions are often the lifeblood of regional economies. Direct employment at the school, and indirect employment opportunities for associated businesses created by the provision of services such as maintenance, and locally sourced food and other supplies, often make a significant economic contribution to the local community.

Indigenous Boarding Students

Many Independent schools provide scholarships which enable Indigenous and other students from remote areas access to a high-quality education. The Independent sector is the largest provider of boarding services to Indigenous students. In Queensland, for example, Indigenous boarding students make up the greatest proportion of growth in enrolments in Independent boarding schools.

One hundred and seventeen Independent boarding schools enrol Indigenous boarders. Of the nearly 2,110 Indigenous boarders in the Independent sector, half attend schools with either very large numbers or a high concentration of Indigenous boarders. Many of these students come from remote communities where primary level education is the only schooling locally available and they have to leave their local communities in order to undertake secondary studies. Students from remote and very remote communities often enter boarding schools at Year 7 or Year 11 with significant literacy and numeracy delays which require considerable staffing and resources to successfully address.

The additional costs of educating students from remote communities in boarding school away from their families and communities is significant. These additional costs include not only living and educational support, but also substantial physical and mental health support to meet the often complex and high-level needs of students including those from disrupted and traumatic backgrounds, pastoral and cultural support, and costs associated with maintaining links to home communities.

Often these schools serve communities with limited capacity to contribute to the costs of their children's educational and boarding needs. Government funding, including ABSTUDY payments play a central role in funding these services. However, schools are not currently resourced to provide the broad range of services that are critical to ensure students are 'school ready'.

Education funding starts at the school gate and is designed to achieve educational outcomes. The additional support Indigenous students need to actually get to school, stay at school and be ready to learn is not part of standard educational funding. It is widely acknowledged that students cannot learn if they are hungry, tired, distressed. It should also be noted that these issues are not 'one-off's' but need to be constantly addressed. For example, for boarding students commencing boarding or returning to school at the beginning of term, many students need significant health and social and emotional support in order to be 'school ready'.

These additional costs have been examined, quantified and validated by a number of independent studies and reports commissioned by government in recent years, most recently through the Grant Thornton Report.¹

¹ These include the Review of Funding for Schooling ('Gonski Review'), the 2013 Wilson Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory, the 2013 Australian Government Department of Education, Employment

As shown in these independent reports, the additional costs of educating Indigenous students in boarding schools with large numbers of these students are not being met. Schools are addressing this demonstrated shortfall through a variety of means, all of which impact on the viability of schools and the quality of education that can be provided.

For boarding schools where Indigenous students from remote communities make up all or the majority of the student body, these additional costs threaten the financial viability of boarding provision. The gap between income and costs for schools providing this critical educational service for Indigenous students must be addressed urgently, in order for the viability of schools educating large numbers of Indigenous boarding students to be maintained.

The Gap in Educational Achievement

There is no doubt that many students living in remote and complex environments have outstanding educational experiences which enable them embrace opportunities, achieve excellence, reach their personal goals, and provide substantial benefits to the communities in which they live and work.

However, it has long been established that educational outcomes show that students in and from remote and complex circumstances, tend on average to not do as well as students from metropolitan areas. This trend is seen across a range of measures as recorded by national and international tests, assessments and results.

Examples of recent research, outcomes and results that are indicative of the gap in educational achievement students living in or from remote communities and complex environments and metropolitan students include:

- The 2018 Report of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (the ‘Halsey Report’) noted that the achievements of students from regional, rural and remote communities “have in the main lagged behind urban students for decades” as demonstrated by National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results, the successful completion of year 12 or equivalent qualification, transition to university and the proportion of persons aged 25–34 years with a bachelor degree or above, and participation rates at the diploma level for vocational education and training (VET).
- The Mitchell Institute’s *Educational Opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out* which demonstrated that “there is a consistent link between where Australians

and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) Review Funding of Selected Indigenous Boarding Schools conducted by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu (‘Project Vale’), the 2015 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, and the 2016 KPMG Non-government Indigenous Boarding Schools Review of funding arrangements for the Northern Territory Department of Education, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet’s 2017 *Study Away Review*, and the 2019 Grant Thornton Report analysing support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

live and their educational outcomes at all stages of education, with those living in rural and remote communities doing worse than students in urban areas.”

- The Grattan Institute’s 2016 *Widening Gaps: what NAPLAN tells us about student progress*, which used mainly Victorian school NAPLAN results to highlight that “many regional and rural students make up to two years less progress than students in inner city areas between Year 3 and 9.”
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Education and Work, Australia, May 2016* showed that while 85.7 per cent of 20 – 24 year olds in metropolitan areas attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification, only 63.8 per cent in Outer Regional and 44.6 per cent in Remote and Very Remote areas had attained such a qualification.
- In 2013 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) used PISA data to describe an “urban advantage” in school performance that was evident in nearly every country which undertook the assessment, including Australia.

There is no doubt that there is a gap in Australia between the educational achievement of students from living in or from remote communities and complex environments and those from metropolitan areas. The Mitchell Institute research notes that “to date, many of the policies in place to address this have been ineffective”. The Productivity Commission also notes, in relation to the provision of human services in Indigenous communities, that “(d)espite goodwill and significant resources, initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for Indigenous Australians have often fallen short at the implementation stage.”

It is likely that the inability of various policies to effectively address this gap is partly because the reasons underlying and contributing to the gap in outcomes are complex and multi-faceted. The OECD’s *What makes urban schools different?* PISA in Focus paper states that “socio-economic status explains only part of the performance difference between students who attend urban schools and other students”. The paper goes on to identify school size, responsibility of the school for resource allocation, and staffing issues such as teacher shortages and staff qualifications as relevant differences and challenges for regional and remote schools.

Key Barriers and Challenges

Students living in or from remote communities and complex environments often experience a range of barriers and challenges to their education which impact on their results and outcomes. These barriers and challenges are often different from those experienced by metropolitan students and have an impact both on students’ access to educational opportunities and on their experiences while participating in education.

Such barriers and challenges can range from the adequacy of funding and resource allocation for the school to challenges related to school staffing and the employment of teachers.

In its Report on *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, the Productivity Commission recognized that regionality and remoteness increases the cost of delivering human services such as schooling. “Remoteness poses a number of challenges for service provision. It increases the costs of delivering services

and prevents some services from being delivered at all. The size and remoteness of these communities means that they may not be able to support full time services. Isolation also poses challenges, with some communities cut off from services for weeks or months each year. Even when they are accessible, travel can be difficult, costly, time consuming and for some people ... impossible.” The cost of running remote schools is determined not only by substantial factors such as the expense and difficulty of transporting people and resources to and from the school location but also by something as seemingly simple as a slight rise in the cost of diesel to power generators, an issue that can have a significant impact on the school’s budget and subsequent operations.

School Funding and Related Issues

The current Australian Government School Resourcing Standard (SRS) recurrent funding model provides base funding plus loadings to address disadvantage for government and non-government schools. The amount of base funding a non-government school receives is discounted by the ‘capacity to contribute’ of a school’s parents and community. Currently this is measured using an area-based methodology based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing however from 2020 it is intended that this measure will shift to utilising a direct measure of parental income, the Direct Measurement of Income (DMI) methodology.

Many independent schools in remote communities are ‘CTC exempt’ which means that the base funding that they receive is not discounted. This is generally because they are either Majority indigenous Student Schools or Remote Sole Providers and, in some cases, they are both.

Loadings to address disadvantage include loadings for students with low socioeconomic background, school location, students with low English language proficiency, Students with Disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and school size. Students may fall into multiple categories and attract multiple loadings to address disadvantage. The loadings are fully publicly funded.

The SRS funding model has been subject to several significant changes and it is now expected to be fully implemented by 2029. Most state and territory governments have also ‘signed up’ to the SRS funding model although some state and territories still utilise their own funding methodologies while agreeing to the provision of a set proportion of funding for both government and non-government schools. Under the SRS funding model, the majority of government funding for non-government schools comes from the Australian Government and the majority of government funding for government schools comes from state and territory governments.

While the Australian Government’s current investment in supporting students and schools in regional and remote areas is significant, the issues related to the funding of some schools and students from remote communities and complex environments pose significant barriers and challenges to the educational outcomes of students in these areas. These issues are further detailed in the following sections.

Demographics

Australian Bureau of Statistics data (*Education and Work, Australia, ABS Household Income and Wealth, Australia*) has demonstrated over many years that non-metropolitan communities in Australia, on average, have lower levels of education attainment and lower levels of household income and wealth than households in capital cities. Both higher parental educational attainment and greater household income are considered to be two among a range of factors that can influence and contribute to higher educational aspirations for students, as well as better outcomes and achievements.

The small size of many remote communities and schools may also present a challenge to educational outcomes of students. As noted above, more than 50 per cent of Independent schools that are located in regional and remote communities have student enrolments of less than 200. The small size of these schools may mean that many classrooms are multi-age with students from more than one year level together in a room with the same teacher. This necessity can be challenging even for experienced teachers, especially given the Australian Curriculum has year level achievement standards in the core subjects of English, Mathematics, Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences.

The small size of communities and/or the small size of schools in remote communities makes provision of educational, social and other support services more expensive than such provision would likely be in major population centres. Due to their size, these communities and schools are often unable to access the economies of scale that could otherwise be available in locations where there is a larger population.

Distance

Students in remote areas are often disadvantaged because of the difficulty or lack of access to educational choice and learning opportunities such as cultural institutions and social experiences. Access or lack of access to educational opportunities for students and families has a flow-on effect to the rest of the community.

Meeting the educational needs of remote students often means arranging for students to travel long distances in order to get to school, or from the school to access educational opportunities and experiences. In some circumstances, student travel to and from remote locations to boarding schools in outer regional, regional and metro areas may be fraught with difficulties.

The financial and time cost factors involved in providing these types of opportunities to their students are unique to remote schools. Transport costs, travel times and time taken from other curriculum areas are all costs imposed on school communities to provide a broad range of educational opportunities.

Schools in the Independent sector are using a variety of means to address these issues and overcome the disadvantage students in remote areas may face due to distance.

For example, Groves Christian College provides Online Learning via Distance Education to students in regional and remote areas. Queensland students are enrolled, either directly

through Groves Christian College if they are Home-based or through a local school if they are school based, but 'attend' classes at the metropolitan based 'sister' school through an online platform such as Skype. Students who are at a distance can see the classroom, hear the teacher explaining the topic, listen to and ask clarifying questions, participate in discussions, and submit assessment tasks across the internet in the same way that the in-situ students do. Providing and accessing this sort of online distance learning relies on a suitable and dependable internet connection. Unfortunately, as yet, not all regional or remote communities are able to be sure of such as service.

Other Independent schools located in regional and remote areas are working to pool their resources so that they can offer a wider range of subject choices to their students. For example, one school might employ a specific Languages teacher and another an Ancient History teacher. The students would be enrolled in their home school but would travel to the host school for their particular subject choice. This is a particularly attractive option for students in senior classes, and for other subjects of a specialist nature.

Staffing

The expense associated with recruiting and retaining quality long-term and temporary staff and providing them with high quality professional development and learning opportunities requires major financial and time resources.

A lack of locally available and/or qualified applicants means that schools must search widely for staff. Attracting staff to non-metropolitan areas may be a challenge as the location of the school can mean that employees would be isolated or away from family and friends. This may especially be the case for younger or less experienced Early Career Teachers. Schools also often find that the limited opportunities for partners to also find appropriate work in the local area can inhibit recruitment of more experienced staff.

Some Independent schools in remote communities and complex environments are offering longer informal placements outside of university term time to give Initial Teacher Education students the opportunity to experience working and living in a non-metropolitan community. Initial indications suggest that such opportunities are meeting with some success for teacher recruitment.

The process of advertising for and attracting potential staff, and the relocation of successful applicants add a substantial cost to schools which is paid for directly by the school community. Unlike government or other school systems, the stand-alone nature of most Independent schools means that they do not have the resources to offer financial or other incentives above a standard award-based salary to attract staff.

The costs of attracting and moving staff to schools in remote communities and complex environments are often multiplied due to other factors including costs related to: a relatively high turnover of staff, provision of stable and secure ongoing housing for staff, retaining existing

staff, the higher proportion of younger and/ or inexperienced staff employed, and the provision of professional learning and other support for staff.

Given the often difficult and limited nature of the rental housing market in remote communities and complex environments, it is not unusual for schools to be required to lease under a long term contract or purchase and maintain properties for relocating staff to live in while working at the school. Independent schools do not receive any funding or financial support to provide this basic requirement for relocating staff; it is a further cost that is directly borne by the school community.

As schools in remote communities and complex environments often employ a higher proportion of relocated and younger and/or inexperienced staff, these schools may experience heightened staffing costs connected with a relatively high turnover of staff and to the retaining, upskilling, developing and nurturing of new staff through professional learning and other related opportunities. Such schools may also be a challenging working environment for Early Career Teachers as they may not have suitable experienced staff to mentor and nurture these new staff.

Even for experienced staff, a lack of specialised locally available professional learning and appropriate professional networks to provide connectedness and support, opportunities for cooperation and collaboration, and development of their knowledge and skills can be a challenge. Similarly, it can be difficult for principals and other school leaders to have the opportunity to interact with and learn from other similarly placed leaders. Travel to access such opportunities may mean that the school leader is out of their school for a significant period of time.

Often only a small percentage of staff professional learning and development can be provided locally. While staff are increasingly able to undertake online professional learning, for non-systemic Independent schools finding and accessing relevant and appropriate online opportunities can be difficult. Consequently, staff frequently must travel, often long distances, to gain access to most professional learning opportunities. These factors contribute to the challenge of, not only ongoing professional learning, but also leadership development in schools located in remote communities and complex environments. Costs for travel, accommodation and qualified replacement teachers to ensure appropriate student learning continues while regular teachers are absent undertaking professional learning, are significant.

State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools work with schools in remote communities and complex environments to support them address and overcome these kinds of challenges.

For example, the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) has used the Student First Support Fund, which has been provided directly from the Australian Government to implement national reforms, to heavily subsidise an annual four day professional learning conference for teachers and Indigenous teacher aides from remote communities. While a half

day professional learning opportunity may not warrant the time and expense involved for staff to attend, AISWA has found that a multi-day meeting is an effective method of delivery and goes some way to overcome time and cost issues; the conference is always well attended. The professional learning provided at the conference is followed up by visits from the dedicated AISWA professional learning team and support from other AISWA staff.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) facilitated a project between 2014 to 2017 for teachers in regional and remote schools to learn a subsequent language and teach it at their school. Maintaining a language program is particularly challenging in these schools where languages swap and change to suit whatever language teacher can be acquired at the time of need. The intent of the project is to support schools who could not otherwise find or keep a language teacher due to their regional or remote location or because they had a small cohort of students and therefore not enough teaching hours to entice a teacher to the school.

Participating schools provided teachers with an 'in-country' experience to learn in an intensive immersion course or they could choose to do an online Diploma of Languages. The ISQ project has resulted in ten language programs in schools that would otherwise not have had any and one school with an expanded program.

Associations of Independent Schools across the country also provide online professional learning opportunities for teachers and other staff in the form of webinars, courses, online communities, and social media. The ability of teachers in remote schools to access these opportunities can depend on the quality and reliability of the communication infrastructure in their community.

A number of Independent schools in remote communities and complex environments have suggested that the work of AISs to support schools' professional learning requirements could be aided by the major, national education organisations such as the Early Childhood Teachers' Association, Australian College of Educators, and Australian College of Educational Leadership. These, and other professional organisations, could be encouraged to make a concerted effort to hold professional learning events in non-metro locations. People in country areas are known for the large distances that they are prepared to drive in order to access services or attend events. If a professional association held a half day event in conjunction with some of these major regional events, teachers would welcome the chance to develop their professional knowledge and expertise.

Limited Educational and Social Services

Students living in remote and complex environments may find that the school or the local community is not able to provide appropriately focused or specialised services that they require or desire. This may be due to the location of the school, the characteristics and attributes of the community in which it is located, the financial or other resources available to the school, or the skills and training of the teachers employed.

These challenges and barriers to students' learning may be directly schooling related, such as the inability of the school to offer the full range of subjects on their curriculum, or even just a particular subject in which a single student is interested and wants to pursue. Other challenges and barriers, while having an impact of the student's schooling and education, may be due to a lack of social, emotional, health, and other support services available in the local community.

For instance, in Queensland, the *Deadly Kids Deadly Futures* and the *Deadly Ears* programs provide services in only a small number of remote and regional locations. Additionally, these programs mainly focus on providing services to families whose children attend government schools.

The lack of health, social and other support services can be particularly challenging for students with disability and/or learning difficulties living in remote communities and complex environments.

These barriers and challenges may result in students and their families having to choose to leave their local community in order to access the educational or social services that they require or forgo the opportunity to continue their schooling and further education.

The Australian Curriculum

Many of the issues identified and discussed above associated with being educated in a remote location, such as inexperienced teachers, lack of access to many public institutions, poor access to resources, and families experiencing social disadvantage, will have an impact on the quality of curriculum or interpretations of Australian Curriculum being offered to students.

Anecdotally, there has been strong feedback from schools that the Australian Curriculum has been developed by writers with a metropolitan or city-based focus, simply because that is their lived knowledge and experience. There are few references to remote or other contexts within the curriculum, simply because the writers did not have those frames of reference. Therefore, students in and from remote communities and complex environments will not 'see themselves' within the Australian Curriculum and will not be able to as easily relate to the content.

A further complicating factor is that many remote classrooms are multi-age with students from more than one-year level together in the one classroom. Such a scenario can be challenging even for experienced teachers, especially give the construct of the Australian Curriculum which has year level achievement standards in the core subjects of English, Mathematics, Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences. Even highly experienced and capable teachers can struggle with the tensions of trying to support the differing educational needs of younger learners and older students in the same learning space.

In order to support schools with multi-age classrooms to deliver the Australian Curriculum in flexible ways, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) has developed Progression Points for a number of learning areas. These Progressions unpack the achievement standards and provide explicit, concrete examples of the sorts of things that students would demonstrate to indicate they have achieved a specific (A – E or equivalent) grade. Teachers in multi-age settings have

found these Progressions very helpful. It is important to stress that the Progressions do not provide any new content for the teacher – they are a very accurate representation of the ACARA achievement standards. However, because the philosophy is one of growth and development, the Progressions are ideal for teachers in schools using multi-age classroom settings.

Natural Disasters and Other Extreme Circumstances

Many of the challenges of providing high quality education for students from remote communities and complex environments are further complicated by natural disasters, such as drought and bushfires, and other extreme circumstances. While these environmental factors may be short-term incidents or may persist for many years on end, their effects on student wellbeing and learning will be felt within schools, families, and communities both during and for some time after the event.

Such circumstances exacerbate existing barriers and challenges, such as those outlined above, as well as lead to an intensification in a range of other widespread educational challenges such as student, family, and staff mental health and wellbeing, financial stress caused by variable or low commodity or produce prices, and increased family farm or business workload due to restricted income or a requirement to more intensively care for livestock and land.

Independent schools have sought to address these additional complex challenges by providing support to their communities through measures such as added pastoral care services and programmes, counsellors, and other support staff, fee relief, and community focused assistance.

The Independent sector has welcomed the Australian Government’s support for non-government schools that cater for students in drought-affected areas be managed through the \$57 million Drought Communities Programme going to eligible drought-affected councils across the country. In doing so, ISCA commended the Government for taking action to ease the financial burden the drought has placed on families, schools in drought-affected areas, and the boarding schools educating students from those areas.

The Independent sector has also welcomed the support that the Australian Government has provided to students, families, and school communities in bushfire-affected communities, particularly the \$8 million school community mental health and welfare support through Beyond Blue and the extra funding for school chaplains.

Addressing the Key Barriers and Challenges

The Australian Government’s *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, which was informed by a range of research and other national reviews including the 2018 Halsey Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, noted “that the fundamentals for supporting all students do not change. Personalised learning and teaching—based on each child’s learning needs and informed by iterative evaluation of the impact of those strategies— are effective at improving education outcomes for all students. This holds regardless of a student’s circumstances.”

However, *Through Growth to Achievement*, also highlighted a number of specific areas which could be addressed to help bridge the gap in educational attainment for students in remote and complex environments. These include:

- “the importance of early childhood education and parent and carer engagement in providing a strong foundation for learning for every child”
- “strategies ... to incentivise the attraction and retention of high-quality, experienced and expert teachers in difficult to staff schools including in regional, rural and remote areas and low socio-economic status schools” including “(s)trategies that encourage HAIT certified teachers to teach in regional areas (to) improve the overall experience and expertise of teachers in regional schools”
- “identifying, preparing, and supporting school leaders” including “mentoring and coaching by experienced principals” and reducing the “excessive administrative load on principals”
- “build(ing) quality partnerships to deepen community engagement” including “the importance of school-industry collaborations ... to provide vocational pathways advice and to assist students to negotiate the training and/or employment pathway they want”

ISCA notes that findings and recommendations of both the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education and *Through Growth to Achievement* informed the eight national reforms included in the National School Reform Agreement between the Australian Government and all states and territories that sets out the long-term national goals for school education in Australia. This agreement recognises the critical importance of supporting and facilitating the achievement of priority equity cohorts such as, among others, students living in regional, rural and remote locations.

In 2019 the Australian Government announced two workforce-based initiatives aimed at supporting the provision of education in remote areas.

In October 2019 the Australian Government announced an initiative to remit all or part of an individual's Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt from their outstanding HELP debt after they have been engaged as a teacher, including an early childhood teacher, for four years in a very remote location in Australia (using the ASGS Remoteness Structure) at any of the following:

- an early childhood education and care service that includes a preschool education program
- a preschool
- a school providing primary or secondary education.

Teachers must complete four years full time in a six-year period, or the pro-rated part time equivalent, commencing on or after the start of the 2019 school year.

This initiative is intended to increase the time spent in remote schools by teachers and provide an incentive for new teachers to consider teaching in remote areas.

In December 2019 extended the deadline for In Home Care educators to earn their qualification to December 2021 with the aim of making it easier for families in remote Australia to use In Home Care (IHC) educators.

The change was intended to recognise the challenges faced by IHC educators working in remote Australia and will help ensure educators are available to support remote families unable to access mainstream childcare².

These types of initiatives recognise the challenge of providing skilled teachers and childcare professionals in remote areas and may assist in attracting and retaining staff in remote areas.

The Unique Challenges of Indigenous Education

Indigenous students as a group tend to face greater barriers to educational achievement than most Australian children. Students from remote Indigenous communities are the most educationally disadvantaged in Australia. This fact has been well established by a range of reviews and inquiries with direct relevance to considering the particular educational challenges for Indigenous students.³

The provision of education to Indigenous students, particularly in remote areas of Australia, can be challenging and expensive. Improving the educational outcomes for Indigenous students requires both resourcing levels which recognise the particular circumstances of these students and innovative and flexible approaches to support students. The Independent sector has longstanding concerns about the adequacy of funding for Independent schools which cater predominantly for Indigenous students. These schools frequently need to provide a range of services beyond those required to provide a quality education. Before these students are in a position to learn, schools frequently need to address many health, wellbeing and pastoral care issues.

As noted earlier, the capacity of these Independent schools to charge fees or raise private contributions, is very limited or in some cases non-existent. Many of these schools face high costs due to their remoteness and/or distance from large population centres. It is also important to recognise that Indigenous students attending schools in urban or regional areas may need additional support.

As also noted earlier in this submission, many Independent schools in remote Indigenous communities are the sole providers of education for these communities. These schools have severely limited capacity to raise private income and rely heavily on government assistance to

² <https://ministers.education.gov.au/tehan/supporting-our-remote-child-care-workforce>

³ These include the Review of Funding for Schooling ('Gonski Review'), the 2013 Wilson Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory, the 2013 Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) Review Funding of Selected Indigenous Boarding Schools conducted by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu ('Project Vale'), the 2015 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, and the 2016 KPMG Non-government Indigenous Boarding Schools Review of funding arrangements for the Northern Territory Department of Education, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's 2017 *Study Away Review*, and the 2019 Grant Thornton Report on support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

maintain their operations. All of these schools operate at resourcing levels significantly lower than government schools serving similar populations as sole providers.

My School financial data for schools in the Northern Territory clearly demonstrates that remote non-government schools receive less than half the net recurrent income per student of remote government schools. Similar data in relation to funding for remote Indigenous students in boarding facilities show that Independent schools are providing services for half the cost of boarding services provided by government facilities.

Non-government providers of schooling for Indigenous students whether through remote schools, boarding or as sole providers of education to often significantly disadvantaged communities, should receive at least similar levels of support as government schools. The Emerging Issues Paper prepared as part of the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling noted the high delivery costs in regional and remote schools and that non-government schools serving these populations “did not appear to benefit from the level of funding provided to government schools servicing communities on a sole provider basis.”

Recommendation 18 of the Final Report of the Gonski Review also recognised that:

“Australian governments should fully publicly fund the recurrent costs of schooling for non-government schools as measured by the resource standard per student amounts and loadings where the school:

- does not charge compulsory fees and has no real capacity to do so, or
- provides education to students with very high needs, such that without full public funding of the school’s resource standard those needs would not be met.”

Among the non-government schools, the Report identified as meeting these criteria were

- “majority Indigenous student schools comprised of those with 80 per cent or more Indigenous enrolments, or a very remote school with 50 per cent or more Indigenous enrolments
- sole provider schools in remote locations that are effectively offering a universally accessible service equivalent to a government school.”

The Report envisaged that majority Indigenous schools would be fully publicly funded. It further envisaged that sole provider schools in remote locations would be fully publicly funded.

These recommendations were not implemented.

Therefore, currently neither Australian Government nor state and territory government funding arrangements for non-government schools adequately address the very substantial cost differential in school provision for Indigenous students in and from remote locations. Indigenous students attending Independent schools in remote communities should be supported to the same level as Indigenous students in similar government schools.

Government funding needs to acknowledge the special needs of Indigenous students, particularly those from remote areas. While it is the case that the attendance of some Indigenous students can be erratic, current funding arrangements can result in schools being

penalised at a time when they need all possible resources to ensure they are in a position to attract and retain these high needs students. Funding models need to acknowledge the unique circumstances of schools serving large numbers of Indigenous students and their often fluctuating student numbers.

The current Australian Government recurrent funding model relies on student enrolment numbers determined at a single census point and this presents significant difficulties to schools catering to large numbers of Indigenous students, particularly those from remote areas. Students may attend several schools over the course of a year for significant periods of time at each. Using a point in time enrolment count as an funding allocation mechanism for schools can leave many schools struggling to meet the needs of the students when they may not receive any funding at all for students who are with them for a significant part of the school year.

Schools need to provide a high level of support services to encourage and support school attendance, however the funding fluctuations that can result from student non-attendance are counterproductive to providing this support. In recognition of the special services schools need to provide to attract, support and retain their Indigenous students, particularly those from remote areas, schools catering for these students should be provided with a base level of funding not wholly linked to per capita enrolment. This stable source of supplementary funding would allow schools to provide those support services so vital to attract and retain Indigenous students in school education. These services include additional educational, pastoral, recreational, health and community services.

Other costs are associated with provision of transport to ensure students can reach their school and strategies to ensure that students who need to be away from their home communities can maintain personal and cultural links with their communities. These additional costs can be incurred by schools located in remote areas as well as in regional and urban schools catering for Indigenous students including boarding schools. It is critical that governments recognise that these schools are in a unique position to access and assist these students and that this opportunity can be lost due to a lack of resources and a lack of recognition of the way resources should be applied.

As well as providing additional support for pastoral care, many Indigenous students regardless of the location of the school, are not achieving literacy and numeracy outcomes similar to their non-Indigenous peers. These students need innovative strategies and significant additional support to assist them in improving achievement levels in literacy and numeracy. Schools need reliable and stable sources of additional funding clearly targeted to improving Indigenous educational outcomes in order to address these specific learning needs.

Independent schools providing education to students from remote Indigenous communities are also seeking to ensure that their teachers and any other staff are appropriately skilled to deal with the distinct educational and social issues they may encounter with their Indigenous students, including cultural, educational, social, emotional and mental health issues. Providing funding to support professional learning is challenging for these schools, especially if they are located in remote areas or are small schools. Targeted professional learning funding to support teachers, schools and communities is essential to ensure staff are appropriately skilled.

Independent schools that cater predominantly for Indigenous students also require special consideration in relation to their capital needs. On average, parents and donors in Independent school communities contribute ninety per cent of funds for capital developments. Independent schools that cater predominantly for Indigenous students have very limited capacity to raise private income in order to meet their capital needs. The difficulty of providing for new or improved capital infrastructure is compounded in remote areas by the significant additional costs of building in these areas with costs doubled or tripled due to issues such as transport costs, access to construction expertise and delays due to weather.

The Role of Associations of Independent Schools in Indigenous Education

Associations of Independent Schools support Independent schools that educate Indigenous students in a range of ways. The Association of Independent Schools Western Australia (AISWA) employs a team of dedicated consultants who work to support staff in remote Indigenous schools. Having a dedicated team means the four consultants are able to develop strong relationships with the school community as well as the local Indigenous community. This level of trust is very important to supporting these communities.

The team not only gets to know teachers, Indigenous workers and students well in order to provide educational support but is also able to support the wellbeing of staff. Staff in remote communities can feel very isolated and may not want to open up to the few other staff they work with each day, but they may find comfort in talking with known and trusted consultants.

Having a dedicated team employed through AISWA means that groups of small schools can benefit from economies of scale not otherwise available to them. Having the AISWA consultants working across schools provides a more efficient and cost-effective support mechanism than if these schools were to seek their own individual assistance. In addition, having a team which knows the schools and staff well enables current and future work to build upon existing work rather than a “fly in, fly out” approach from consultants who may not know the school or the community. Appropriate funding for AISs is imperative to ensure that this type of meaningful assistance to remote schools is able to continue.

AISWA has also developed their Future Footprints program in which members of the Indigenous community are employed to work across boarding schools to support over 300 Indigenous boarding students in those schools. The program provides mentoring for students, facilitates events across schools so community members can see each other and share their experiences, organises camps on exeat weekends when students have nowhere to be billeted, and so on. In addition to the resources provided by schools, AISWA staff work across schools and with the school liaison officers to support students. The Future Footprints program helps the students remain connected to their culture and community while at boarding school.

Many graduates of the Future Footprints program have returned to the Indigenous boarding school after graduation as volunteer mentors for current students. Many schools credit the Future Footprints program for the retention of these students through to the end of Year 12. In 2019 over four hundred Indigenous students involved with the program and 62 students

graduated from Year 12. This program is supported by a range of corporate partners and sponsors, including the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

The Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales has implemented pilot projects within three Independent boarding schools in Sydney which provide scholarships to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional, remote and very remote communities. These schools prioritise the engagement of parent and carers, families and home communities in developing ongoing sustainable and supportive strategies for their students.

The schools focus on being innovative and flexible in offering support to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students to ensure they are able to reach their full potential to be the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. The following strategies are being used to culturally support, maintain connection, engage and build high educational expectations for the indigenous students within the individual school contexts:

Extended and culturally connected transition programs

Extended and culturally connected transition programs that encompass the individual student, the extended family, the primary school, the home community, and the teaching and support staff from the boarding school is a key strategy to ensure a successful transition for the student.

- Commences within the student's home community in the year prior to their start at the new school. Teachers, boarding staff and cultural mentors spend time meeting with the student and the significant adults to the student.
- Allows for the development of an authentic connection between the school and community, which is continued throughout the student's educational journey with the school.

Pastoral care and academic mentoring

Pastoral care and academic mentoring is provided throughout the student's educational journey with the boarding school.

Local Cultural Mentor

The pilot project has included the ongoing engagement of a local Cultural Mentor at each of the boarding schools which:

- Provides students off-country cultural connection and support, allowing students to continue to feel culturally connected while attending school away from their home community.
- Increases Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment within the school, along with providing staff with additional support and professional learning opportunities.

Maintaining Connection and Communication with each student's extended family

Maintaining connection and communication with student's extended family is an important aspect to engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities and complex environments. This provides:

- Extended families with supported accommodation, located on the school campus to enable families to travel to Sydney with the knowledge that accommodation and meals are provided at a minimal cost.

- Opportunities for families and students to spend additional time together. In one school, students stay with their families while they are visiting and families have reported that this support mechanism has been invaluable to maintaining links with the school and feeling part of their child's education and their relationship with their child.

Professional Learning

All schools engaged with the pilot project are provided with additional professional learning from the AISNSW Aboriginal Education Consultant.

This support enables all school staff to increase their engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures within curriculum delivery, Cultural Competence training and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners within the classroom.

Transition from School to Further Study & Work

A Sydney boarding school in the pilot provides a residential house within the school campus which provides supported accommodation for students in the year after school to assist them to transition to further study, training and full or part time employment. In some circumstances, the school assists the recently graduated students with obtaining part or full time employment by reaching out to the school's alumni network whilst providing residential accommodation to support the young person's move back to the city in the first year post school from their community.

The residential house is also used by families when visiting these students and is made available to family members if other circumstances arise such as a medical emergency treatment. Mentoring and support to the Indigenous students in the residential house is provided by the school's Indigenous Cultural Officer.

ABSTUDY

The purpose of the ABSTUDY scheme is to address the distinct educational disadvantages faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by improving educational outcomes to a level commensurate with the Australian population in general. ABSTUDY payments are designed to encourage eligible Indigenous students and apprentices to take full advantage of available educational opportunities and improve their employment opportunities.

ABSTUDY payments are generally designed to cover school student costs including living expenses, accommodation expenses (rent, boarding fees, residential costs, Remote Area Allowance), education expenses (school fees, books and equipment, incidentals), and fares (such as travel to study each term or semester if studying away from home)

Payment rates vary for the different components of ABSTUDY, changing each year and subject to means testing. Schools report that rates per student per annum can range from around \$8,000 to around \$20,000, depending on parental income and other circumstances.

While Indigenous students are eligible for ABSTUDY payments to be made directly to schools for boarding costs, the application, qualification and payment structures are extremely complex and it is difficult for school staff and families to comply with the regulations and processes required to ensure accurate payments.

Issues may also be experienced due to requirements for families to provide multiple documents, which may be varied and inconsistent, for processing applications. These circumstances often

cause great stress and distress for families and students and result in lengthy delays in ABSTUDY payments.

Where Indigenous parents are successful in obtaining paid employment, even minimal income can significantly affect the level of their ABSTUDY payments for their children. This means that a successful outcome of employment results in parents no longer being able to fund the boarding education of their children – or alternatively the boarding school no longer receiving any income to cover the costs of the children’s education.

ISCA strongly supported the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Act 2019 which extended Family Tax Benefit (FTB) eligibility to the families of ABSTUDY secondary school students who are aged 16 or over and are required to live away from home to attend school. ISCA welcomed the Act as it addressed a significant area of need for Indigenous families and students who seek to further their education by attending a boarding school away from their home.

ISCA also strongly supports the Australian Government’s intent to focus on closing the gap in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and to support more Indigenous students to complete Year 12.

Independent schools which provide boarding facilities for Indigenous students in remote communities operate at half the expense of boarding services provided by government facilities. While Government funding, including ABSTUDY payments play a central role in funding these services, the current ABSTUDY payment covers only half the cost. This situation leaves a significant funding gap.

The issue of the inadequacy of ABSTUDY, is a matter of longstanding significant concern to students, families, and school communities in the Independent school sector.

On this basis, ISCA encourages governments to also address issues relating to the funding of Indigenous students, especially the inadequacy of ABSTUDY. The Independent sector is keen to partner with the Australian Government to address these issues in order to ensure that these high needs students can continue to be supported to achieve their educational goals.

Conclusion

Access to schooling and choice of schooling should not be limited or restricted to students, families, and communities only in major cities but should also be available to Australians living in remote locations.

Relationships built and nurtured between families, communities, and the school are at the core of Independent schools which are located in regional and remote areas. And it is these parents, families and school communities who are the primary funders of schools in the Independent sector.

It is the partnerships which are developed between the school, parents, students, families, and the wider community that enable Independent schools to create learning environments in

which education can happen in innovative and diverse ways in order to meet the needs of the school community.

ISCA notes the Australian Government's on-going commitment to support students and schools in remote and complex environments. ISCA also acknowledges the Australian Government's ongoing recognition of the higher cost of schooling in regional and remote areas through the 'location loading' component of the current Commonwealth funding model.

Independent schools, supported by State and Territory Associations of Independent Schools, are employing a range of strategies and interventions, across a variety of areas to address the gap in learning opportunities and outcomes experienced by students from remote and complex environments.

Associations of Independent Schools provide online and face to face professional learning services which support teachers to maintain their subject area knowledge, as well as opportunities to extend their knowledge and skills into new and in demand teaching and learning areas.

Whether it be offering Online Distance Education Learning programs or working collaboratively with other local schools to share teachers and other resources, Independent schools are finding locally appropriate, innovative ways to address and overcome the disadvantage students in remote and complex areas may face.

Associations of Independent Schools also work with Independent boarding schools which provide scholarships, to deliver support and mentoring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote and very remote communities who are living away from home.

The Independent sector welcomes the focus on the education of students from remote and complex environments, and the role of culture, family and community and country in delivering better outcomes.