# BOARDING SCHOOLS FOR REMOTE SECONDARY ABORIGINAL LEARNERS IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY. SMOOTH TRANSITION OR ROUGH RIDE?

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*After the 2014 Northern Territory Wilson Review of Indigenous education, the NT Department of Education committed resources support secondary aged students to take up boarding options. The basis for this was firstly, low retention rates of students to Year 12, and secondly, difficulties associated with providing quality secondary education in remote communities. Beyond the Review, the Department's policy had a small evidence base. It did not know how many young people were attending boarding schools, where, how long they were attending or what the impact of the strategy would be for students or communities.*

*In response, the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Remote Education Systems project commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research to uncover the missing evidence. It became apparent that finding data to fill the gap would be a challenge. Nevertheless, the project revealed findings following interviews with community stakeholders, principals and heads of boarding schools.*

*While the research project itself cannot fill all the gaps it can offer an independent critique of a strategy designed to increase boarding school participation. It also poses questions for further research in a field where transformative impact is assumed to be positive, but where evidence for transformation is limited.*

## Introduction

The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation's Remote Education Systems (RES) project ran for five years to 2016 examining ways that outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students could be improved. The research uncovered a significant array of findings that challenge assumptions while offering solutions to existing problems. The project produced over 70 peer reviewed publications and a number of other publicly accessible resources that could be used by practitioners, policy advisers, universities supporting the development of graduate teachers as well as community members.

During the course of the project, boarding schools came up repeatedly in the media, advocated by prominent Aboriginal leaders and others, as a way to address the problem of failing remote schools. As we investigated this issue it soon became apparent that there was little in the literature to provide an evidence base, despite the media attention. To address the gap, the RES team brought together

interested stakeholders to discuss what would be needed to fill the evidence gap.

We concluded that several issues needed addressing. Firstly, there was no data. We could not find how many young people were going to boarding schools, where they were going, how long they were attending or what the transformative impact (positive or negative) of boarding is for students, families and communities.

The team started with a relatively simple exercise of finding answers to the quantitative questions of how many students come from which communities and go to which boarding schools—just for the Northern Territory. To do this, Ninti One Limited commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research to provide answers to the following questions.

- From where in the Northern Territory do boarding schools and other educational facilities draw their remote and very remote students?

- How many Indigenous students from the Northern Territory are in boarding schools?

- In what year levels are Indigenous boarding students?

- What is the gender breakdown of these students?

It soon became evident that finding answers to these questions would not be as easy as we had first thought. Consequently, the project shifted in focus to more of a qualitative study that sought to understand the dynamics of boarding for remote students in the Northern Territory.

## Literature review

Before considering what the project *did* find, it will be important to gain an understanding of the policy context from which boarding school strategies are generated. Secondly, while limited, we will explore the emerging body of contemporary boarding school research as it connects with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We are mindful of the significance of different histories, experiences of colonization, assimilation, protectionism, and stolen generations but for the purposes of this paper we set those important issues aside in favour of the contemporary issues.

### Policy context for remote boarding in Australia

In response to frustrations with progress in remote education, some commentators have implied that governments are not capable of providing an adequate secondary education in remote locations. For instance, in his article published in *The Australian* on 5 November 2004, Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, Noel Pearson wrote: 'There is not sufficient scale, and the teachers and specialisations required to provide a proper secondary education are impossible with small student populations' (Pearson, 2004). The same perspective was outlined in Wilson's (2014) Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory, suggesting the apparent lack of alternatives for remote secondary students:

> *The only way to meet the needs of a small and thinly distributed student population for substantial secondary education including a breadth of options in the senior years is to aggregate students into larger groups (p.143)*

In an ABC *Lateline* interview, Professor Marcia Langton (ABC, 26 February 2013) acknowledges a broader debate that boarding school education represents a new policy of removal of children from families such as the stolen generations. Langton disputes this, but accepts the inability of government education provision as a given, stating:

> *It's quite wrong to refer to this as the Stolen Generation, a new stolen generation, because Aboriginal parents willingly send their children to these schools, they want their children*

*to have a good education. So the conditions are there for them to perform much better than the children who don't attend boarding schools. It's a tragedy to have to say that, it's heartbreaking, but those are the facts.* (ABC, 2013)

The premise for the push for boarding schools, is largely based on the assumption that remote schools for Aboriginal children are failing (Anderson, 2012), that there are inordinate obstacles to success (O'Keefe et al., 2012), and that the best way (despite the allusions to Stolen Generation) to deal with the problems is to send the children away (Mundine, 2014).

Having argued that local education provision is not a legitimate option for remote and very remote secondary students, proponents quickly move on to discuss the various models of boarding. These boarding models broadly fit into two main categories. The first category is provision of full or partial scholarships to high-cost independent schools based in metropolitan centres. Through Abstudy funds, the Commonwealth provides a significant portion of the per-student costs—the total Abstudy secondary component is budgeted at $145 million this year (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016)—, but also contributes through funding programs such as Yalari, the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP), and the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF). In the case of the latter, the Australian Government has committed $38 million to the AIEF's Scholarship Fund (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, 2015a). These programs are also financially supported through corporate and benevolent organisations. The second category is the development of local/regional boarding programs in remote areas, generally for very remote students, although these programs are still in the construction and development phase in the Northern Territory following the recommendations of the 2014 Wilson review. Both options address themes of providing better opportunities for students, building social capital, and practical reconciliation. Wiltja (wiltja.com.au) and Yirara (yirara.nt.edu.au) are examples of boarding schools that are located away from communities but provide free access to boarding programs for Aboriginal students. After the 2014 Wilson Review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory, the Northern Territory Department of Education committed significant resources to increase the proportion of young people of secondary age who take up boarding options as part of its *Indigenous Education Strategy* (Northern Territory Deparment of Education, 2015). The basis for these substantial investments was firstly, low retention rates of students through to Year 12, and secondly the difficulties associated with providing quality secondary education in remote communities. Beyond the Review, the Department made these decisions largely without an independent evidence base. As part of the Strategy, the Northern Territory Department of Education established a Transition Support Unit which has begun liaising and brokering between target schools and families within the region to assist in placing potential boarding enrolments (Northern Territory Deparment of Education, 2016).

The Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been a useful opportunity for many organisations interested in the topic, to put forward submissions. The submissions themselves represent a large body of knowledge and experience. In preparing this paper, we analysed 63 submission documents that were available. The analysis shows that of the 63 submissions, 56 raised remote education as an issue. Of these, 54 discussed funding issues, 48 mentioned boarding, 46 talked about quality, 43 mentioned career pathways and post school destinations and 42 discussed partnerships or collaboration. While there is not space here to discuss the details of submissions, the confluence of these multiple themes points to a range of concerns that stand out or need to be addressed in order to improve educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Further, there is a lot of overlap across these themes, pointing to the complexity of the issues, and the need for whole system solutions rather than simple interventions.

## Australian contemporary research on boarding schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

There is a small but growing body of mostly qualitative research on contemporary boarding school experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, some of which is focused on people from remote communities. Mander's work on the transition experience of Western Australian students attending boarding schools, based on his PhD thesis (Mander, 2012) is perhaps the

most extensive in the recent literature. His interviews revealed a range of influences that contributed to their perceptions and highlighted the importance of family support, Aboriginal peers and the perceived poor quality of locally available educational options. He notes that boarding school students experienced higher levels of 'emotional difficulties and greater levels of depression, anxiety and stress than non-boarders' (Mander, Lester and Cross, 2015, p. 131). Among the negative influences Mander (2012) notes that: 'issues such as prejudice and covert racism influenced the transition experience to boarding school for Aboriginal boarding students' (p. 248). In a more recent paper, Mander commented on the experiences of parents: 'all participants spoke about the heavy emotional toll that sending a child away to boarding school placed on them as parents (for example feelings of guilt, stress, sadness)' (Mander, 2015). Elsewhere in an exploration of staff perceptions, Mander concludes that:

> *If boarding schools believe they have a social responsibility to offer an alternative secondary education pathway to families in regional and remote communities, then they must first ensure their schools are safe and inclusive places for Aboriginal students to inhabit.* (Mander et al., 2015, p. 324)

In other recent research conducted in South Australia, Benveniste et al. (2014b) highlight the need for better school-parent communication as a key factor that could improve the experience of students and parents. Benveniste, Dawson and Rainbird (2015a) also critique and question the 'role of residence' as a vehicle for achieving beneficial goals such as self-determination or walking in 'two worlds'. Stewart, introducing his own PhD research on transition experiences in remote Queensland comments that while 'the supports are there to allow children from the community to access a quality secondary education 'down south'… a significant number of those who leave the community to be educated, exit secondary school prematurely' (Stewart, 2015, p. 15). One way of addressing this, O'Bryan (2015) argues, is through intentional partnerships between remote schools and urban boarding schools, which could mediate a number of cultural, personal and social benefits. Osborne (forthcoming), drawing on his PhD findings of a study in central Australia, suggests that many families are open to boarding and see it as holding possibilities for strengthening young people, but they tend to appropriate the various opportunities available in response to the priorities and perceived needs of the family at the time. In other words, they do not necessarily buy in to the argument that boarding is the single best avenue to securing a successful future for young people, but it is not shunned either. The CRC-REP's research, while not specifically focused on boarding, concurs with much of the above

> *Boarding school is firstly seen as a transition space between community, school and a career. However, respondents were also careful to say that the required processes for these transitions are important—that students are offered appropriate support as they enter into boarding and appropriate support as they emerge from that experience. The second major cluster of responses were about the importance of the residential experience being supported in terms of relationships, structures and environments which give young people a positive experience. The third important point raised related to the significance of family influence and support for young people going to boarding.* (Ninti One Limited & Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation, 2016, p. 131)

There are several examples of partnerships between remote communities and urban schools that could be cited, but few have been documented or independently evaluated/researched. One of the more notable examples is the Yiramalay-Wesley partnership—a partnership which has a clear intent to achieve a number of outcomes for Bunaba people of the Fitzroy Valley: 'Expand the horizons and life choice expectations of our youth; Enrich and enhance the whole of life experiences for both communities; Develop cultural understanding and a capacity to relate to others; and Support to enhance community cohesion (Drennan & McCord, 2015, p. 7). However, there is no independent evaluation publicly available to show how well it actually works, to achieve what outcomes, and for whom. There are many other uncritical examples of best practice (Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, 2015b), 'what works' (What Works: The Work Program, 2007), 'innovation' (Wilson, 2016) and 'culturally responsive' boarding (Perso, Kenyon and Darrough, 2012). Reading these exemplars, one would be excused for thinking that applying best practice principles to boarding would fix the apparent problems of remote education (particularly in relation to attendance, academic

achievement and retention). The problem we see is that these best practice solutions treat complex problems as simple, but they are not (Biesta, 2009).

The emerging academic work from Mander, Benveniste, O'Bryan and Stewart, as cited above, goes some of the way towards offering a critical lens through which to view boarding outcomes. But even these do not answer the fundamental quantitative questions we posed earlier. We are yet to understand the outcomes of boarding for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia, whether it be in terms of destinations, academic progression beyond schools, employment and career prospects; or whether it be in terms of community leadership, community capacity or social cohesion.

## Methodology

The findings presented here are based on two strands of research which have been brought together as a mixed methods study (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The qualitative component, led by a senior Aboriginal researcher from the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) sought to establish a picture of Indigenous boarding across Northern Territory schools. To do this, the researchers asked a series of open ended questions designed to firstly understand from where students came from and how many were involved; and secondly to understand school processes, policies and issues affecting boarding of remote students. The quantitative component of the study, led by a senior non-Indigenous researcher from the CRC-REP, drew from two publicly available data sources: the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011 Census (ABS, 2012), and a public presentation given by the Northern Territory Department of Education. In the case of the ABS data, the online Tablebuilder Pro tool was used to compile descriptive statistics for the Very Remote region of the Northern Territory.

### Data collection

ACER collected a range of qualitative and quantitative data throughout the course of the project. Much of this information came from community schools and in particular school principals. ACER also contacted boarding schools and other boarding facilities such as hostels and other residential programs. Two of the schools which had enrolled students from remote Northern Territory schools were located outside of the Northern Territory.

Phone interviews were conducted with school principals and other relevant school and community members who were involved in liaising with boarding schools. A total of 18 people were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to gather qualitative data about Indigenous boarders' and schools' experiences with transition to and engagement with boarding schools. Participants from community schools and boarding facilities were asked a range of questions in interviews which focused on the process of recruitment and application from the community schools' and families' viewpoint, the set-up of the boarding school, school-community perspectives of the new Transition Support policy initiative, experiences of Indigenous students' readiness for and transition to boarding school. Some interviewees offered recommendations for future improvements in the process, especially given the likelihood that under the new Northern Territory government policy boarding for senior school students from remote communities would become the norm.

Analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using a process of thematic coding. Codes were assigned through a process of inductive analysis as they emerged from the data, consisted with a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

### Ethics

ACER routinely collects sensitive data and has well established procedures for protecting confidentiality and privacy in research involving human subjects, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances. ACER has an established Code of Ethics for research that defines institutional policy for staff. An Ethics Committee reviews projects as required. The researchers followed ACER

protocols for ethical conduct of research and incorporated the principles of respect for, and benefits to, each individual community where we conduct research.

## Findings

Figures provided by schools in 44 very remote communities suggest that in 2015, 228 students were enrolled at a boarding school either in the Northern Territory or elsewhere. We know this is well short of the figure for all very remote Aboriginal students, firstly because there are 89 very remote communities that have schools, and secondly because these figures represent students that the respondents were aware of.

In a public presentation early in 2016, a policy briefing suggested that across the Northern Territory, 1097 students were approved for Abstudy support, and of those approximately 350 were enrolled interstate, leaving about 747 enrolled in Northern Territory boarding schools (Considine, 2016). The briefing also suggested that enrolments declined from about 800 for Year 7, down to 120 for Year 12. We estimate that capacity for very remote Aboriginal students in Northern Territory boarding facilities is about 885, as shown in Table 1. The 747 enrolled students represents about 85 per cent of available capacity. The table data is drawn from information available on websites associated with the facilities. It is also possible that a number of very remote students live with families and attend day schools. We also know that at any given time numbers will be less than official enrolments. For example, at Yirara College, the actual capacity is about 200, while the College Year book and MySchool information shows enrolments of about 250. This is due to the churn of students through the year. We are also aware that at any given time most of the hostels are not at their stated capacity, though actual numbers are difficult to obtain.

*Table 1. Boarding facility capacity in the Northern Territory*

| Name | Location | Capacity for very remote Aboriginal students at any given time (estimated) |
|---|---|---|
| Kormilda College | Darwin | 200 |
| St John's Catholic College | Darwin | 75 |
| St Philips College | Alice Springs | 10 |
| Yirara College | Alice Springs | 200 |
| Marrara Christian College | Sanderson | 100 |
| Callistemon House | Katherine | 40 |
| Fordimail Student Hostel | Katherine | 40 |
| Woolaning Homeland Christian College | Litchfield | 60 |
| Wangkana-Kari Hostel | Tennant Creek | 40 |
| Tiwi College | Melville Island | 80 |
| Kardu Darrikardu Numida Hostel | Wadeye | 40 |
| | | 885 |

*Table 2. Estimates of boarding and non-boarding school engagement and disengagement*

| Population group | Number of people |
|---|---|
| Total NT population aged 12-17, based on Census 2011* | 4073 |
| Stated as enrolled in primary or secondary school, based on Census 2011* | 2540 |
| Not stated as enrolled based on Census 2011* | 1533 |
| Approved for Abstudy, 2015[#] | 1097 |
| Approved for Abstudy, attending boarding schools interstate, 2015[#] | 350 |
| Attending NT boarding schools | 747 |
| Attending NT schools in very remote communities (estimated) | 1443 |

* (ABS, 2012) #(Considine, 2016)

Table 2 summarises our estimates based on the policy briefing data shown earlier, and Census

information from 2011. We recognise that combining these datasets has some limitations (due to population growth and mobility), but the numbers from both sources align reasonably closely. Based on the assumptions presented in the policy briefing mentioned earlier, we estimate that approximately 1500 young people aged between 12 and 17 are not engaged in any form of school. This is largely consistent with the 2011 Census data that shows 1533 young people not stated as enrolled. The point is, that if the intention of the Secondary Pathways element in the Indigenous Education Strategy is to increase the engagement of this group of young people in education, then careful consideration of the process to achieve this will be fundamentally important. This is where our qualitative findings, albeit with their limitations, become useful.

## Interview themes

Themes that emerged from ACER's interviews with community schools and boarding schools were consistently repeated. From the point of view of the community schools, sending students who were inadequately prepared for the social, cultural and educational transitions (and often shocks) involved to boarding schools would most often mean that they would be unlikely to stay for long at the boarding school, either because their frustration and shame of not coping in the new environment lead to behavioural problems, or because they had had motivations other than educational achievement for enrolling. Community school staff insisted that the school should be consulted about the suitability of students to go to boarding school, and that boarding schools should visit the communities from which they drew boarders, both to see for themselves what remote community life was like, and to answer the questions of families and students about what boarding school life was like. They also consistently emphasised the need for effective communications between the boarding schools and communities and families. Some felt that community schools, when adequately resourced, were in most cases the best alternative for their students; yet this option will seemingly not be available under the Northern Territory government's policy of withdrawing support for senior secondary education in remote communities in its response to Wilson's (2014) Review.

Principals and stakeholders spoke about their experiences of the readiness of young people and their families for boarding school. Some of the commonly expressed issues concerned the decision-making process for schools and community families, and recruitment strategies by boarding school representatives.

In general, interviewees said that the decision to go to boarding schools is sometimes made for the wrong or inadequate reasons; students may for example be having problems in the community, or may want to join a friend or friends who have gone to a boarding school. Students may be actively recruited: interviewees said that representatives from some boarding schools have been reported as coming into communities, directly contacting parents and students and encouraging them to sign up.

The problem from the schools' point of view is that this approach does not allow for proper filtering processes; community schools, which have a good understanding of the student's academic and other readiness, are left out of the process, with the result in many cases that students have little chance of succeeding in the radically different and unfamiliar social, cultural and educational environments they will encounter as boarders. It is suspected by some principals that in cases where students are actively recruited, boarding schools are often motivated by the pursuit of funding, and that this is indicated by, for example, enrolment drives taking place just before census dates. In some cases representatives of boarding schools are reported as making unrealistic promises and parents, who want the best for their children, are vulnerable to these promises. The upshot is that more often than not students return to communities after a short time; boarding schools can become 'revolving doors'.

If students are asked to leave or are even expelled by the boarding school, there is often an element of shame when they return to the community. These students do not tend to go back to the community school, and may in some cases never return to education, or may want to try other boarding schools. An example was given of one student who had gone to three boarding schools in 18 months. A number of interviewees said that in these cases generally there are many more failures than successes.

Interviewees said that students and families often do not have a realistic idea of what boarding school life will be like, or have any way of finding out, or know whom to contact if there is a problem, or what the possible alternative responses to issues arising in the boarding school might be, other than for students to be returned to communities.

## Discussion

The data we have provided here, based on estimates, old census information and best guesses from websites, are hardly reliable. But that is partly the point of this paper—to highlight the lack of evidence on which policies, are based. There are no baselines, no meaningful outcomes measures, no logic or theory of change models, no cost-benefit analyses and little understanding of impacts, beyond a handful of small qualitative studies which raise a number of red flags to the claims of best practice, innovation and what works.

Further, some of the qualitative interview data suggests that there are some major systemic problems associated with recruitment of students for boarding schools, for example recruiting to ensure that numbers are at capacity for census dates. As noted in the findings, this does nothing to ensure that students are adequately prepared for boarding, or that parents really understand what they are signing their children up for. These findings are quite consistent with some of the more recent academic studies (Benveniste et al., 2014a, 2015b; Mander, 2012; Mander, 2015; O'Bryan, 2015; Stewart, 2015) that demonstrate that the promotion of best practice, innovation and what works is not necessarily reflected in student or parent experiences. For too many students (though we do not know how many) the transition to boarding is anything but smooth. It can be very rough, and may involve bouncing from one boarding school or hostel to another over the course of their secondary years.

What we can say with some confidence, even based on the best estimates we have produced here, is that within the Northern Territory there are insufficient places to meet the demand if even half of those secondary aged young people who are not enrolled, were to transition to boarding schools. This in itself leads back to the need for quality locally based secondary options, if for no other reason than as a basic human right (United Nations, 2007). The Indigenous Education Strategy (Northern Territory Deparment of Education, 2015) recognizes the need for choice, but consistent with Wilson's (2014) Review, suggests that boarding is a better option for quality education.

One problem for many potential boarding students though is that they do not necessarily meet the entry requirements for boarding schools, for example minimum attendance levels and minimum literacy and numeracy standards. We could also be confident in arguing that, given their current disengagement from school, the estimated 1500 young people who would be the target of 'quality education experiences' at boarding schools—whether in the Northern Territory or elsewhere—would most likely not cope. Transition support will undoubtedly assist a number of families who perhaps do not have the capital to make the necessary connections to access scholarship funds, or find appropriate schools to suit the needs of their children.

## Conclusions

This paper has just scratched the surface of a highly complex issue. Our hope was to present data that would show some quantitative analysis of the flows into and out of boarding schools for students coming from remote communities of the Northern Territory. Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in this aim. What we have highlighted is that the assumptions about the net 'good' of boarding schools as the best option for students where according to the Wilson Review (2014), providing a quality secondary education is not viable, need to be carefully tested. A number of red flags raised by contemporary research on boarding school experiences in Australia are seemingly set aside in the hope that all will be good in the end.

What we do know from our research is that for the estimated 1500 disengaged remote Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander students in the Northern Territory, there are few options for a secondary education of any kind, let alone a quality education in a boarding school. Transition supports will help some families who have the necessary capital to take steps for their children, but it is likely to be a small minority of students.

We also know from the academic research literature and our own findings, presented here, that for too many students transitions remain problematic—more of a rough ride than a smooth transition—despite the promotion of best practice, what works and innovative practice. Transition supports may be of some help to students, but we are still less than certain about the outcomes of the Northern Territory attempts to ameliorate the concerns.

All this points to the pressing need for more research to better understand the extent of the problems relating to remote education, which are currently being addressed strategically through policy initiatives. We need to also understand what the net impact of boarding strategies are on communities. Deliberately removing the brightest and best young people from communities may set up unhelpful divisions between those who go and those who stay—assuming of course that the majority of students do return to communities. The point is though, that there is no certainty about any of these outcomes.

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