

## Achieving positive outcomes through Boarding, for remote Indigenous students

2014 began with news headlines blazing the challenge issued by the Wilson review of Indigenous education in the NT:

*"Indigenous education crisis: Report calls for bush students to be sent to boarding schools" 7/2/2014*

*"Boarding school call to bridge road to nowhere", 1/11/2013*

*"Education in remote NT communities: are boarding schools the answer?" 12/2/2014*

If the report is acted upon with the urgency implied, how well is the Boarding industry prepared to meet this challenge?

Provision of Boarding for Indigenous students around Australia is in a state of constant tension; between the benefits of boarding being realized and the mitigating factors that often diminish the benefits for Indigenous students from remote situations.

There are many challenges in the remote Indigenous student's life experience **and** in the capability of the Boarding Residence to cater for and meet the challenges that prevent them engaging successfully with the Boarding opportunity.

Boarding providers who cater for a significant cohort of remote Indigenous students face many unique challenges and there is a constant struggle to be adequately resourced to help the remote student realize the full potential of Boarding.

## What are the potential benefits of Boarding for remote Indigenous students?

1. Consistency/regularity of attendance and long-term retention in school.
2. Variety of choice –Boarding opens up a wide variety of types of education not accessible in a remote community – private, public, multi-cultural, vocational, religious, single-gender, agricultural/rural, urban.
3. Equity of quality of education (an "antidote to catastrophic failure of community based education")
4. Opportunity for exposure to wider career choices and work-experience
5. Social capital – increased social interaction and inter-personal and life skills,

cross-cultural experience and friendships, wider world view, awareness of general Australian societal 'norms'

6. Immersion in Standard Australian English and a literate, academic environment – essential for overcoming a literacy deficit to enable ESL students to achieve at a senior secondary level and access further study.
7. Health and well-being outcomes, including health screening, and nutrition and health education
8. Security and support: called for by some Indigenous leaders in situations of community dysfunction
9. Supportive interactions with positive adults and peer role models.

## What factors can prevent remote Indigenous students from accessing the benefits of Boarding?

There are mitigating factors on both sides of the equation that can influence whether a student copes and engages successfully with boarding; residence factors and student factors.

### Possible student factors:

1. **Student stress** - the transition into boarding can be traumatic for Indigenous young people who have to leave their communities to undertake secondary studies, due to:
  - alienation and cultural disconnect with school and boarding
  - embarrassment at not speaking Standard English
  - difficulty with learning in Standard English
  - fear of failure / shame at not succeeding
  - gap in knowledge from absenteeism
  - low self-esteem from marginalization and racism
  - addictive behaviours eg smoking, drug-use
  - parental anxiety from negative experiences
  - high incidence of family loss and grief
  - family unemployment/poverty cycle
2. **Cultural issues** eg young males going through law, cultural/family obligations of "sorry business", funerals and ceremonies, expectation to attend community cultural or sporting events,

3. **Difficulty for students to transition** – lack of preparation, not knowing what to expect, homesickness and culture shock, distance from family and community support,
4. **Health and well-being deficits** - without health and well-being support, many students struggle to settle into boarding and therefore cannot learn in the school environment.
5. **Education deficits** – low literacy and numeracy levels
6. **Revolving door syndrome** –behavioural issues can cause problems, suspension and shame, students may be highly mobile between Boarding providers and local community schools,

### **Possible residence factors:**

7. **Inadequate parental and community engagement by boarding Providers** – difficulties communicating due to a cultural divide, remoteness, family mobility and poor phone/internet service.
8. **Lack of sufficient funding** for appropriate staff : student ratios, transition support and ongoing health and well-being assessment and care.  
*“The cost of Indigenous people not succeeding academically is MORE than the extra costs involved in ensuring an education that results in Indigenous people achieving similar educational outcomes as non-Indigenous.” (3)*
9. **High staff turnover**, particularly in remote areas, lack of training and cultural awareness, and very few Indigenous staff employed in the industry.
10. **Lack of culturally connected leadership and Governance** – a cultural disconnect of those in Management creates a culturally unsafe tone in a boarding Residence. Management and staff often arrive with no awareness of Indigenous students’ cultural or social backgrounds, and can lack cultural induction, awareness and sensitivity.
11. **Inadequate strategies for early management of serious behavioural issues** - without a positive framework of restorative practice and early intervention that includes the family, suspension can be an all too common response.
12. **Quality of education and subjects available can be limited for remote “hostel” providers** –a remote hostel/residence which isn’t a boarding school may not have any control over the quality of education on offer.
13. **Mono-cultural residences limit social growth.** A mono-cultural Indigenous Residence in a remote community limits students’ social growth, likewise a small cohort of Indigenous students in an otherwise mono-cultural

Non-Indigenous residence will struggle to feel comfortable.

## How can boarding providers maximize the quality of provision for remote Indigenous students?

### 1. Boarding is appropriately staffed and able to support student social and emotional wellbeing and mental health

To address the health Gap and meet the complexity of student need, stress and disadvantage, a residence requires higher staff : student ratios and qualified health and support personnel. There is also a need for a "culturally appropriate model of health intervention to cater for health and well-being screening and support, nutrition and pastoral care.

*"There is also growing recognition that schools need to be ready for Aboriginal children rather than solely a focus on getting children ready for school." (8)*

*"....when moving away from the family **most Indigenous students need more, not less, social support as they contend with a culturally unfamiliar and difficult educational experience.**" (1)*

**2. Boarding acknowledges and preserves cultural identity, is welcoming and inclusive and has a critical mass of Indigenous students,** to help prevent homesickness, cultural isolation and culture shock, a strength-based approach is more respectful and effective than a negative deficit focus.

One of the main influencing factors on Indigenous students staying on to year 11 and 12 was found to be: **"a school environment that acknowledged, and sought to preserve, cultural identity, ... and treated Indigenous students with respect."**(1)

### 3. Students are prepared and assisted with transition:

- Students in remote areas need Community and Transition Officers available and cultural brokers on staff.
- Recruitment and selection practices should select or 'stream' students for "staged entry" to appropriate Residences, selecting against "objective criteria for success" (4) (5)

*“Scholarship eligibility is primarily based on enthusiasm and commitment from the student and family and the likelihood of the student successfully completing their schooling through to year 12”. (8)*

- Many remote students could benefit by having a “half-way step”, i.e. younger students attend community based boarding facilities eg Kardu Darrikardu Numida Hostel in Wadeye, NT, that partner with the local community school, helping students to attend regularly and gain social and Boarding skills, before later transitioning to “out-of-community” boarding.

**4. Boarding providers have effective, long-term partnerships with parents and communities** – many Aboriginal parents find schools alienating and far-removed from their everyday lives. An appropriate and culturally secure environment in Boarding requires a staff team that has:

- inclusive, positive relationships and links with parents and communities,
- every member of staff valuing cultural identity and connection, especially those in Management (the Principal and Head of Boarding)
- a boarding culture of openness and two-way communication
- culturally aware staff who make a concerted effort to connect and relate
- Remote Indigenous Parents Association RIPA, (being developed by NT PACE project) will help build parent capacity
- IT assistance for communities and residences to set up Skype communication,
- open discussion with communities about student absences for funerals, ceremonies, sport etc
- regular cultural awareness and visits to communities by residence staff
- early intervention and good communication with families to prevent student suspension

**5. Boarding is appropriately funded:** all the factors below have significant funding implications:

- **Lower student : staff ratios** needed for Residences with significant numbers of Indigenous students –It is suggested ratios as low as “8 : 1 to 10 : 1 rather than the 25 : 1 ratio on which most boarding schools operate” are needed to “facilitate the special care and interventions needed to assist the students’ transition”, to learn Residence culture and meet health and mental well-being needs.. (2)

- **Dedicated funding for health and wellbeing:** all Indigenous residences need a nurse, other professional support, health screening facilities, education and support in nutrition, mental health and personal development. Very few Providers can afford the level of support often needed.
- **Funding for boarding staff recruitment, training, induction and cultural awareness.** Some advances have been made over recent years:
  - 1) The National Workforce Development Fund (NWDF) subsidised staff training for over 400 boarding staff across Australia to complete Boarding Australia's recognized Certificate IV qualification for boarding supervisors, until the change of Government in October 2013 suspended the funding. There is still a huge need for training for boarding supervisors around Australia.
  - 2) The NT RCWP Induction and Staff training program gave potential boarding staff a tour of 6 Indigenous boarding residences in the NT
  - 3) A similar strategy to Education Queensland's Partners for Success strategy is needed to raise the professionalism and qualification of boarding staff. Partners for Success targets teachers who have expertise, enthusiasm and the capacity to teach in challenging remote Indigenous contexts. Eligible teachers receive cultural training, incentives, and opportunities for interaction with Indigenous communities.

**6. Funding a program of Community Service Officers and Transition Support Officers** in remote areas - as in the Queensland Transition Support Service which assists students and their families to manage the transition to Boarding through two streams of service:

- 1) Within the community through the Community Support Officer (CSO) who works to prepare and support students and their families to select, apply to and transfer to a secondary school that 'best fits' the needs and resources of each student.
- 2) At the major regional centres through the Transition Support Officer (TSO) who meets students weekly at their secondary schools to help them to orientate to their new schools and community and to remain enrolled until they complete year twelve.

**7. Education deficits are specifically targeted and students given learning support:**

- schools have ESL or ESD and specialist remediation programs
  - schools and residences have Indigenous staff and tutoring/homework support
  - more Vocational options, career guidance and work experience a priority.
- "The difficulty for many Indigenous youth in making a commitment to learning is that there is often no clear relationship between formal schooling and employment." (1)*

## 8. Other practical considerations:

- **Boarding is accountable:** implementation of Boarding Standards across Australia with regulatory monitoring (or an interim well-developed self-assessment process).
- **Consultation with local boarding providers with experience** when planning new Boarding facilities or re-modeling old infrastructure eg room sizes, outdoor areas, security, staff quarters, etc
- **A "critical mass" of Indigenous student is needed** in a residence for students to feel culturally comfortable and supported
- **Streamlined Abstudy processes** –more parent-friendly, flexible, processes with creative solutions combating the current obstacles often facing families and residences
- **Rigorous data collection and long-term research needed** into the experience of Indigenous students when schooling away from home.

In summary: the extent to which the benefits of boarding are realized for Indigenous students increases with their retention in boarding, which in turn is dependent on the two contending factors described above; the student's environmental and resilience factors and the Boarding providers' ability to balance and allay the mitigating challenges they contend with.

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*Paper by Jenny Florisson, 2014.*

Jenny and Steve Florisson of Boarding Training Australia, have had 27 years experience with Indigenous Boarding and have delivered training to almost thirty residences caring solely or predominantly Indigenous students. Together they developed and deliver the only recognized Australian Qualifications Framework training qualifications (Certificate IV and Diploma) in Australia for student boarding staff.