



SOCIAL
COMPASS

Evaluation of the Away from Base Program

FOR THE NATIONAL INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS AGENCY

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Social Compass

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Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the many lands to which Indigenous participants in this evaluation belong. We pay our respect to your culture and Elders past, present and future. We are thankful to the many Indigenous people who participated in this research from all across Australia, in particular students who gave us their time and shared with us their stories.

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The research team would like to acknowledge that in its evaluation of the Away from Base program, this report does not have the scope to address the range and extent of the impacts of colonisation on Indigenous communities across Australia, nor to document the strength, resilience and leadership of Indigenous people, communities and cultures.

Disclaimer

The opinions, comments and/or analysis expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the National Indigenous Australians Agency.

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Acronyms and glossary

Acronym or term	Description
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ABSTUDY	A group of payments for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students
AFB	Away From Base
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
DEST	The former Department of Education, Science and Training
DSS	Department of Social Services
fares allowance	ABSTUDY fares allowance (FAA) payable to AFB students
higher education	University level education
IAS	Indigenous Advancement Strategy
IESIP	Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme
IETA Act	Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000
mixed-mode course	A course that is primarily delivered via distance education but includes a compulsory on-campus residential component.
NATSIEP	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
QBT	Formerly Qantas Business Travel, now operating as QBT
residential expenses	actual costs of meals and accommodation paid to education provider who has organised them
SEWB	Social and emotional wellbeing
tertiary education	Post-secondary education (VET or higher education)
travel allowance	set allowance paid to student to cover costs of accommodation and meals
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Executive Summary

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and the Department of Social Services (DSS) both fund models of ‘Away from Base’ (AFB) support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who need to travel to complete approved tertiary courses—including Vocational Education and Training (VET) and university or higher education. DSS funded AFB is delivered through the Abstudy program with Services Australia.

AFB funding is primarily for students studying via distance education who are required to attend residential blocks or work placements as part of their course. Funding covers travel, accommodation and meals, but does not cover tuition. In certain circumstances, AFB funding is provided to education providers to allow staff to travel off campus to deliver the face-to-face component of a course (known as a ‘reverse block’).

Evaluation

In November 2019, the NIAA commissioned Social Compass to conduct an evaluation of Away from Base. The evaluation had three broad aims and six key evaluation questions (KEQ):

1. Assess the extent to which the needs of Indigenous AFB students are met through the Commonwealth’s investment.
 - KEQ1 - To what extent have the AFB programs enabled students to access tertiary education courses and to overcome barriers to accessing education?
 - KEQ2 - What has been the student experience of the models?
2. Examine the administrative effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of AFB for education providers and the Commonwealth agencies who administer it.
 - KEQ3 - To what extent do Government departments administer the models efficiently?
 - KEQ4 - To what extent do education providers deliver the models in an efficient, effective and appropriate manner?
 - KEQ5 - To what extent are the models delivered in a culturally appropriate way?
3. Provide advice to the Commonwealth on implications for future delivery of AFB support.
 - KEQ6 - Drawing on the evidence available and findings from this evaluation, what are the implications for AFB future delivery?

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, drawing on program data, online surveys, secondary literature, program documentation, and key stakeholder interviews.

Data limitations

There is potential bias in the sample of student participants that should be considered when interpreting the findings of the evaluation. Education provider staff were involved in identifying staff and students to be interviewed and surveyed. Therefore, there is a potential selection bias of students that would provide positive feedback.

In addition, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions the majority of interviews were conducted remotely rather than in person, which limited the involvement of AFB students to those with access to internet and/or phone services. In particular, this limited the engagement of a representative sample of students from remote and very remote communities, who are most likely to face major barriers to accessing education. Remote students may also have experienced difficulties accessing the online student survey via a link sent to their email, although only 4.5 per cent of AFB students responded to the survey suggesting systemic issues. COVID-19 travel restrictions also prevented the planned visit to

two reverse-block sites. This meant that the perspectives of family and community members were not able to be included in the evaluation.

Findings: KEQ 1 – To what extent have the AFB models enabled students to access tertiary education courses and to overcome barriers to accessing education?

Over the period 2013 to 2019, an average of 6123 students per year accessed NIAA AFB; and in 2019-20, 1147 students accessed Services Australia AFB. Therefore, approximately 80 per cent of students access AFB funding through the NIAA model. Across both models, AFB students are predominantly female (approximately 65 per cent) and studying across a wide range of courses at the level of Certificates I to IV, and undergraduate courses; the highest numbers are in the areas of Health (24 per cent), Education (16 per cent) and Society (15 per cent).

The majority of AFB students reside outside of major cities, with around 30 per cent of students who access AFB coming from Very Remote Australia. Data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (in which NIAA AFB students are a subset) showed that VET students accessing NIAA AFB are more likely to be from Remote and Very Remote Australia than the broader Indigenous VET cohort. Further, the completion ratios for AFB students in VET courses were higher than those for VET Indigenous students nationally during the period 2015-18, by at least 11 percentage points for Diplomas or higher level degrees (25 per cent compared to 14 per cent) and up to 26 percentage points for Certificate I courses (45 per cent compared to 19 per cent). While this data is limited to VET AFB students, it provides evidence that AFB is contributing to educational access for Indigenous students in remote communities and achievement across all geographical locations.

Some Indigenous students continue to experience barriers to accessing educational opportunities, and AFB students can face challenges undertaking their courses. Issues encountered include caring and community responsibilities, access to technology and communication networks, travel distances, financial security, literacy and numeracy, administrative challenges, and self-confidence. Anecdotal evidence from the education providers suggests AFB has assisted students to overcome some of the barriers and challenges they encounter. Seventy-one per cent of surveyed students stated that it would have been impossible or very difficult to complete their studies, if they had no access to AFB funding for travel, accommodation and meals.

BOTH MODELS	Finding 1: AFB is contributing to increased access for Indigenous students to education courses, particularly for those from remote locations.
BOTH MODELS	Finding 2: Although Indigenous students are successfully accessing educational opportunities through AFB, they continue to experience a range of barriers. These barriers tend to be more pronounced for students from remote communities.

Findings: KEQ2 – What has been the student experience of the models?

Interview and survey data from AFB students and education providers indicated AFB students experienced positive outcomes from face-to-face learning and interacting with their peers that are not possible through distance education. Positive outcomes related not only to improved educational experience but also to student social and emotional wellbeing, including:

- increased social confidence (88 per cent)
- engagement and knowledge sharing (91 per cent)
- networking and relationship building with Indigenous people from other communities (92 per cent)
- improved social and emotional wellbeing (75 per cent)

- respite from family and community responsibilities (75 per cent)

Completion data for NIAA AFB students compared to broader data for Indigenous students in VET suggests that AFB is contributing to improved likelihood of Indigenous students completing their courses. Seventy-one per cent of student survey respondents indicated that completing their studies would have been impossible or very difficult without access to AFB funding.

BOTH MODELS	<p>Finding 3: AFB students and education providers identified positive outcomes for students from attending face-to-face learning activities, including an increased likelihood of course completion and improved social and emotional wellbeing.</p> <p>Recommendation: AFB should continue to prioritise face-to-face learning opportunities for Indigenous Australians who want to study without leaving their communities for long periods of time.</p>
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Findings: KEQ3 – To what extent do Government departments administer the models efficiently?

Arrangements for funding

Differences were found in the funding of the two AFB models: The DSS program delivered through Services Australia covers the actual (full) costs of a limited number of AFB activities per student, whereas NIAA funding is capped funding per student.

While the NIAA model covers a broader range of education activities, NIAA AFB providers bear a financial risk that can result in providers experiencing a shortfall in funding, which occurs when they enrol a disproportionate number of students from remote areas with high travel costs. NIAA AFB financial acquittal data from 2016 to 2020 indicates that up to five of the 26 AFB providers each year have a funding shortfall associated with the cost of AFB remote students.

NIAA MODEL	<p>Finding 4: Under the NIAA model, education providers with a disproportionate number of students travelling from remote communities may receive insufficient funding to cover the costs of AFB activities.</p> <p>Recommendation: NIAA should review the current structure of its payments to education providers, with consideration of their proportion of remote students and the extent to which current arrangements are meeting their needs.</p>
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Effectiveness and efficiency of communication between government agencies and education providers

Education providers reported their communication channels with NIAA were generally effective, with clear processes. Whereas their experiences with Services Australia were more challenging, particularly in terms of obtaining clear and consistent information. A number of factors were found to impede effective communication, including government security protocols preventing certain information being sent by email, a lack of designated contact personnel for education providers, and the absence of a stand-alone guideline document for AFB.

SERVICES AUSTRALIA MODEL	<p>Finding 5: Effective communication between Services Australia and AFB education providers is impeded by security protocols, an absence of dedicated personnel, and inconsistent information/advice.</p> <p>Recommendation: Services Australia should review their communication processes with AFB education providers to ensure they are efficient and secure. A 'how to' manual specific to AFB should be developed to improve the consistency of information/advice provided.</p>
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Implications of ABSTUDY eligibility requirements for both models

All AFB students, regardless of model, must be ABSTUDY eligible (administered by Services Australia) in order to claim AFB funding (or have an education provider claim it on their behalf). AFB students are often only applying for ABSTUDY for the purposes of travel to a short residential block, rather than for an entire semester. Often the ABSTUDY claim does not align with the timing of the residential block, which can cause confusion for students and increase the administrative workload for providers.

BOTH MODELS	<p>Finding 6: The unique nature of AFB means that the time to process ABSTUDY claims often does not align with the timing of residential blocks.</p> <p>Recommendation: Services Australia should consider the possibility of ‘fast-tracking’ the ABSTUDY claim process for AFB students. In addition, increased visibility for AFB education providers, in terms of the ABSTUDY status of their students, would assist staff to plan residential blocks and support their students to prepare for their blocks. Improved communication processes (see Finding 5) could also alleviate this timing issue.</p>
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AFB students participating in the evaluation reported varying experiences when communicating with Services Australia regarding their ABSTUDY status. While 56 per cent of students surveyed reported that the ABSTUDY approval process was easy, a significant minority (26 per cent) disagreed. As the survey sample contained a disproportionate number of students with higher education levels and access to communication technologies, it is possible that the ease of communication with Services Australia is overstated in the survey results. Education providers often support students to negotiate ABSTUDY processes, and staff reported in interviews that communication with Services Australia can be challenging for students in remote communities, those with poor access to technology, and those for whom English is an additional language. Examples of the challenges identified by students and staff in both interviews and surveys were long call-centre wait times and inconsistency of information provided by call-centre staff.

BOTH MODELS	<p>Finding 7: Student experiences of dealing with Services Australia vary, with particular challenges experienced by students with limited access to internet and telephone networks, who speak English as an additional language, and those with low literacy levels.</p> <p>Recommendation: Services Australia should continue to explore ways to facilitate communication with Indigenous students for whom navigating ABSTUDY claim requirements can be challenging.</p>
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Travel arrangements

Providers using the NIAA model usually organise travel for their AFB students. This arrangement allows them to tailor travel plans to the particular needs of their students. For students accessing the DSS AFB delivered through Services Australia model, travel is usually arranged by Services Australia’s contracted travel services provider, QBT. This arrangement allows education providers to avoid paying student fares upfront and risking out-of-pocket expenses. AFB education provider staff and students identified that QBT does not always understand the relevant unique geographical circumstances and local climates, which can make travel more complicated for students from certain areas. Students can also have cultural obligations in their community that necessitate changing travel plans at the last minute.

In some cases, the lack of capacity of a single, urban-based travel agency to respond to the unique needs of AFB students from diverse communities across Australia is resulting in a lack of efficiency and flexibility in organising student travel.

As education providers cannot communicate directly with QBT, they are limited in their capacity to assist students with travel arrangements. The proportion of providers affected by this issue was not able to be determined within the scope of this evaluation, and could be the subject of further research.

SERVICES AUSTRALIA	<p>Finding 8: For most education providers accessing the DSS AFB model, student travel is arranged by Services Australia’s contracted travel-services provider, QBT. Education providers reported that QBT does not always have sufficient local knowledge to make efficient travel arrangements for these students, particularly those from remote locations and with complex travel needs.</p> <p>Recommendation: Services Australia should review the way that travel is arranged for AFB students to ensure it is culturally appropriate and context specific.</p>
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Findings: KEQ4 – To what extent do education providers deliver the models in an efficient manner?

AFB education providers are extremely diverse organisations operating across multiple sectors, locations and contexts. As such, it is difficult to generalise about the delivery processes of AFB education providers as a whole. Both NIAA and DSS allow flexibility in terms of how education providers run courses or interact with students, leaving providers to determine the most appropriate way to cater to the needs of their particular student cohort.

In interviews and surveys, the research team found evidence of education provider staff effectively building relationships with students to support them through their AFB journey, from enrolling and applying for ABSTUDY, through to travelling and completing coursework. A large majority of surveyed students (85 per cent) felt that their provider was doing its best to meet the needs of Indigenous students.

BOTH MODELS	<p>Finding 9: DSS and NIAA supply education providers with protocols on how AFB funding can be spent, but allow flexibility in terms of how education providers deliver AFB activities. This flexibility allows education providers to deliver AFB in ways that best suit their context and the needs of their student cohort.</p>
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Findings: KEQ5 – To what extent are the models delivered in a culturally appropriate way?

A key aspect of cultural appropriateness is the capacity of a program – its policies, guidelines, practices and personnel – to acknowledge and take into account the barriers specific to, or common among, Indigenous Australians and to support them to overcome these barriers.

AFB supports Indigenous students to overcome barriers to education without the need to leave their communities and families for long periods of time, and is therefore culturally appropriate in its objectives. Furthermore, education providers are given flexibility under both models to deliver services in a way that is culturally appropriate to their students. This includes through face-to-face education that enables students to connect with and seek support from other Indigenous students, and through availability of Indigenous staff.

There is some evidence that the process of communicating with Services Australia can be challenging, particularly for those AFB students with multiple barriers to accessing education, such as literacy, access to communication technologies, speaking English as an additional language, or difficulty negotiating complex bureaucratic processes. As noted above, some education providers reported in interviews that QBT does not always have location-specific expertise.

BOTH MODELS	<p>Finding 10: Cultural appropriateness of AFB delivery at the education provider level is facilitated by the flexibility that providers have to tailor the delivery of their services to the particular needs of their Indigenous AFB students.</p> <p>Recommendation: The cultural appropriateness of AFB could be improved by better facilitating the processes for student communication with Services Australia about ABSTUDY, and reviewing the capacity of QBT to meet the needs of students with complex travel needs.</p>
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Findings: KEQ6 – Drawing on the evidence available and findings from this evaluation, what are the implications for AFB future delivery?

The evaluation did not find evidence of differences between the two models in terms of accessibility or outcomes for students. However, from an administrative perspective, education providers have a more positive experience dealing with NIAA compared to Services Australia.

The existence of two separately administered models causes administrative complications and inefficiencies. Although they are administered separately, the models are closely interlinked in two key ways. First, students can only access one AFB funding at a time, which requires staff to cross-check students to ensure payments are not duplicated. Second, NIAA AFB students must be ABSTUDY eligible, which makes the NIAA AFB administratively dependent on Services Australia. Policy changes made by DSS or Services Australia can therefore have implications for the NIAA AFB funding.

Opportunities to improve the working of the two models include:

- NIAA and Services Australia continuing to work closely together to streamline administrative and communication processes that affect both models of AFB.
- NIAA and Services Australia reviewing their education provider reporting requirements in order to collect student-outcomes data that can be compared across the models.

The NIAA and DSS models are both achieving the intended outcome. NIAA and DSS should consider if having two versions of the program operating demonstrates an efficient, effective, economical and ethical management of public resources, consistent with each agency's obligations under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*.

Taking the findings of this evaluation into account, amalgamating AFB would increase the effectiveness of the program. In particular, a future program should continue to assess the best ways of delivering AFB to maximise its benefits to students, particularly in the areas of funding for complex travel needs, tailoring travel arrangements, ABSTUDY application and approval, communicating with providers and collecting student-outcome data.

A consolidated approach would provide a consistent set of rules and level of service, reduce significant duplication within NIAA and Services Australia, and reduce confusion of students and education providers. These considerations could draw on the basis of how each agency supports students – the DSS supports students through the demand-driven ABSTUDY program (established through the *Student Assistance Act 1973*); compared to the NIAA Model, which is funded through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (a grants-based program) and subject to changes in government priorities.

BOTH MODELS	<p>Finding 11: The existence of two separately administered but interlinked funding models causes administrative inefficiencies and complications.</p> <p>Recommendation: Both agencies should consider amalgamating the models into one program, creating a common set of rules and consistent level of service, reducing duplication, and addressing the findings of this evaluation, including the need for more consistent outcomes-data collection to help inform policy.</p>
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1 Introduction

In November 2019, the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) commissioned Social Compass to conduct an evaluation of Away from Base (AFB)—a Commonwealth Government funding program providing travel assistance for tertiary Indigenous students who need to travel to complete compulsory elements of their course.

The purpose of the evaluation is to:

1. assess the extent to which the needs of Indigenous AFB students are met through the Commonwealth's investment
2. examine the administrative effectiveness and efficiency of AFB for education providers and the Commonwealth agencies who administer it
3. provide advice to the Commonwealth on implications for future delivery of AFB support

1.1 Report structure

The report that follows first provides a background to the two models of AFB. It then describes the methodology used by Social Compass to undertake this evaluation, including the evaluation design and scope, procedures for data collection, limitations of the data, data analysis and testing of findings. The subsequent three sections correspond to the three evaluation purposes stated above, and lay out the findings from the evaluation.

1.2 Background to AFB

'Away from Base' is currently the name of two models of Commonwealth Government funding available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who need to travel to complete the requirements of approved tertiary courses. Tertiary courses encompass Vocational Education and Training (VET) and university or higher education. One model is administered by the NIAA. The second model is administered by Services Australia with policy oversight from the Department of Social Services (DSS). The two models will be referred to throughout the report as the 'NIAA model' and 'DSS', respectively.¹

Under both models, funding covers costs of travel, accommodation and meals for students attending residential blocks as part of a mixed-mode course—that is, a course that is primarily delivered via distance education but includes a compulsory on-campus residential component. Funding also covers travel for the purpose of compulsory work placements. It does not cover tuition costs. In certain circumstances this funding is provided to an education provider in order for a staff member to deliver the face-to-face component of a course off campus in a student community. This arrangement is known as a 'reverse block'.

While the underlying principles and aims of the two AFB models are similar, there are significant differences in terms of how they are administered, funded and delivered. Table 1 provides a summary of the differences between the two models.

¹ The DSS program is delivered through Services Australia and is commonly referred to as ABSTUDY AFB. However, because of the frequent discussion in this report of ABSTUDY as relating to both models, the use of the term ABSTUDY AFB could cause confusion. Therefore, for clarity, this report uses 'DSS AFB' or the 'DSS program' throughout.

Table 1: Summary of the two AFB models

	DSS ABSTUDY AFB model	NIAA AFB model
Administration	Services Australia	National Indigenous Australians Agency
Funding/policy area	Department of Social Services (ABSTUDY)	Indigenous Advancement Strategy
Legislation	<i>Student Assistance Act 1973</i>	The annual <i>Appropriation Act (No. 1)</i> – for the Bill 1 IAS 1.2 appropriations.
Program guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ABSTUDY Policy Manual Away from Base operational documents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed-Mode Away from Base Operational Rules Indigenous Advancement Strategy Guidelines
Payment	Submission for advance payment or reimbursement made by education provider or individual student. Funding is limited to a certain number of trips/days per student per year.	Direct payment to service providers based on average rate per student enrolment. Funding is capped per student.
AFB activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> residential blocks practical placements field trips reverse blocks delivered in community testing and assessment programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> residential blocks practical placements field trips reverse blocks delivered in community.
Student eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> must be ABSTUDY eligible must be studying an ABSTUDY approved course² does not have to be studying a 'mixed-mode' course³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> must be ABSTUDY eligible must be studying an ABSTUDY approved mixed-mode course
Arrangements for travel	Usually made by Services Australia's contracted travel agency, QBT. Education provider in some circumstances arranges travel. Individual students in some circumstances arrange their own travel.	Made by the education provider delivering the mixed-mode course (or individual student in exceptional circumstances).
Arrangements for accommodation	Usually made by the education provider. Individual students in some circumstances arrange their own accommodation.	Made by the education provider delivering the mixed-mode course.

² All courses approved under the Student Assistance (Education Institutions and Courses) Determination are also approved for ABSTUDY. In addition, some Indigenous special courses of study are approved for ABSTUDY. (For more information see chapter 11.5.2 of the ABSTUDY Policy Manual.)

³ The Services Australia Centrelink form SY034 states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can apply for ABSTUDY to cover costs for 'mainstream course away from base activities', i.e. where 'non-Indigenous students in the course are expected to cover their own costs for the same activity', such as field trips and placements.

	DSS ABSTUDY AFB model	NIAA AFB model
Arrangements for meals	Education provider in some circumstances arranges meals/payment of meal allowance. Services Australia in some circumstances pays meal allowance directly to individual students.	Education provider arranges meals or payment of meal allowance to students.

There are currently 22 AFB providers funded to deliver AFB activities under the NIAA model, and approximately 72 providers⁴ with students who access the DSS program through Services Australia. However, the NIAA providers account for the majority of AFB students – approximately 80 per cent. AFB education providers are diverse in size, sector and location, and include universities, TAFEs and a range of registered training organisations, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Eligible students and education providers (on their behalf) are only entitled to access funding via one model (NIAA or DSS delivered through Services Australia) for courses taken in a single calendar year. However, because the NIAA model does not provide AFB funding for testing and assessment, students funded through the NIAA can still apply for Services Australia AFB assistance to travel for testing and assessment purposes (PM&C 2018a, p.6).

⁴ It is likely that individual students from other institutions access Services Australia AFB independently. This data was not available for the purposes of the evaluation.

2 Methodology

2.1 Evaluation design and scope

2.1.1 Evaluation purpose and framework

NIAA provided Social Compass with an evaluation strategy, which had been developed in 2019 by Urbis in collaboration with nine key AFB stakeholders. The three evaluation purposes and corresponding key evaluation questions (KEQ) from this strategy are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Evaluation purposes and key evaluation questions

	Evaluation purpose	Key Evaluation Questions
1.	Assess the extent to which the needs of Indigenous AFB students are met through the Commonwealth's investment.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To what extent have the AFB models enabled students to access tertiary education courses and to overcome barriers to accessing education?2. What has been the student experience of the models?
2.	Examine the administrative effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of AFB for education providers and the Commonwealth agencies who administer it.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">3. To what extent do Government departments administer the models efficiently?4. To what extent do education providers deliver the models in an efficient, effective and appropriate manner?5. To what extent are the models delivered in a culturally appropriate way?
3.	Provide advice to the Commonwealth on implications for future delivery of AFB support.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">6. Drawing on the evidence available and findings from this evaluation, what are the implications for AFB future delivery?

2.1.2 The research team

The Social Compass research team consisted of two Indigenous consultants and two non-Indigenous consultants, supported by the non-Indigenous Social Compass Director and research assistant.

2.1.3 Ethics

Social Compass received ethics approval from the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Human Research Ethics Committee for all aspects of the AFB evaluation (reference number EO162-12112019, 6 March 2019). Participant information sheets were provided for all evaluation participants and their informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews or focus groups. AFB students who participated in interviews received a supermarket voucher to recognise the time they contributed to the evaluation. The ethics committee approved changes to the methodology made to respond to COVID-19 travel restrictions. No other issues of ethical concern arose during the project. Social Compass will submit a final report to the AIATSIS Human Research Ethics Committee once the final evaluation deliverables have been completed to the satisfaction of NIAA.

2.1.4 Evaluation governance

Social Compass and NIAA established an Advisory Group to guide the implementation and interpretation of findings from the evaluation. The Advisory Group consisted of nine members from NIAA, Services Australia, DSS and six AFB education providers, including three Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations who provided additional Indigenous guidance and perspectives. Members of the group reviewed and provided feedback on evaluation deliverables, progress and findings. The group met four times throughout the evaluation.

The NIAA also established a Governance Group as a forum for the relevant government departments to review and discuss the implementation and findings of the evaluation, and to consider the implications for the future administration of AFB. Due to other departmental priorities imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, this group only met twice during the evaluation.

2.2 Data collection

In collaboration with NIAA, Social Compass selected 15 AFB providers to participate in planned fieldwork. These 15 providers identified and invited staff and current AFB students to participate in interviews. The sample of providers deliberately included a range of providers by model, sector, type of organisation and geographic location. The final selection included 15 AFB providers with the following attributes:

Table 3: Attributes of AFB providers selected for fieldwork

Model

NIAA	DSS	Both NIAA and DSS
6	5	4

Sector

University	VET	Both University and VET
4	9	2

State

NSW	NT	QLD	SA	VIC	WA
4	3	3	1	1	3

Four participating education providers were Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

2.2.1 User-level data collection: AFB students

The research team completed interviews with 38 Indigenous students from 13 AFB education providers. In most cases, students were selected by the provider, based on the student's comfort with speaking to outside researchers. In other cases, the whole AFB cohort was invited, by the provider, to participate. Most students chose to participate in a group, rather than individually. Sixty-eight per cent of participants were female. All interviews were conducted by a combination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. For five providers, interviews were conducted in person through site visits; but for the remaining ten, interviews were conducted via online video conferencing or phone calls because of the travel restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the themes that emerged from early analysis of the interview data, the research team created an online survey for AFB students, including a range of scale and tick-box questions, as well as open-ended questions. The interview and survey questions are at Appendix A.

AFB providers were invited to send the survey link via email to their current and past AFB students. A total of 264 Indigenous students from 24 different AFB providers and 122 different communities participated in the online survey (approximately 4.5 per cent of the total AFB cohort). Seventy-eight per cent of respondents were female. The response rate is unknown, as not all AFB providers told us

how many students they sent the survey to. Further demographic data on the students surveyed is included at Appendix B.

2.2.2 Service-provider-level data collection: AFB education providers

The research team completed focus groups or interviews with 65 staff at 15 AFB providers. Fifty-five per cent of participants were Indigenous. Based on the themes that emerged from the interview data, researchers created an online survey for AFB providers. All 22 NIAA AFB providers were invited to participate in the survey, as well as 55 Services Australia AFB providers. The interview and survey questions are at Appendix A.

A total of 140 staff from 34 different AFB providers (44 per cent of those invited) participated in the survey. Forty-seven per cent of respondents were Indigenous and 65 per cent were female. Further demographic data on the staff surveyed is included at Appendix C.

Data collection also included submissions to the AFB Discussion Paper, collected by the NIAA in 2018. A total of 27 AFB providers contributed individual submissions. The terms of reference for the submissions were not identical to the questions for this evaluation; however, information from the submissions was in many cases relevant to the present evaluation and contributed to the findings.

2.2.3 Government-level data collection: NIAA, Services Australia, DSS

The research team interviewed six Services Australia staff members employed within the ABSTUDY branch, four NIAA staff members involved with AFB, three DSS staff members from the ABSTUDY policy team and three employees of the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). Of these 16 government agency employees, four identified as Indigenous. Three non-Indigenous government interviewees had Indigenous family members. The interview questions are at Appendix A.

QBT, the travel agent for Services Australia, was invited to put forward staff to be interviewed but chose not to participate in the evaluation. This means that this evaluation has not been able to include the views of this significant stakeholder in the Services Australia delivery of the DSS model of AFB.

2.2.4 AFB program data

NIAA routinely collects a range of data from their AFB providers, including student demographics, enrolments and completions by course type and field of study, and financial acquittal data. NIAA data from 2017 to 2019 is included in this evaluation. Further detail on how NIAA data is collected is included at Appendix D.

Services Australia does not usually separate AFB data from the broader ABSTUDY data that they collect. For the purposes of this evaluation, however, Services Australia agreed to extract AFB data for the period from July 2019 to June 2020.

Data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research was used to make comparisons between the AFB VET cohort and the wider Indigenous VET cohort of which AFB students are a sub-set. This enabled comparisons of AFB students' course completion rates and geographic demographic characteristics with the wider Indigenous VET cohort.

2.2.5 Data limitations

Interviews and surveys

The travel restrictions caused by COVID-19 meant that only five of the 17 intended site visits⁵ with 15 AFB education providers were completed. Interviews with staff and students at the remaining ten education providers were conducted via Zoom, rather than in person. These changes meant that only students with access to internet and phone facilities were able to participate in interviews. As a result, the research team was unable to interview students from two of the education providers, whose student cohorts were largely from very remote communities and were uncontactable via phone or other means. By excluding those students who have the most difficulty accessing communication and internet technology, and who are more likely to speak English as an additional language, the evaluation did not hear a representative sample of the perspectives of students who face these major barriers to accessing education.

The sample of students participating in the evaluation therefore contained a disproportionate representation of students for whom communication and technology pose less of a challenge. However, AFB students who participated in focus groups and interviews often spontaneously described the experiences and barriers that they observed other students encountering. These accounts gave researchers insights into the experiences of a broader range of students. While these observations by other students are not as robust evidence as first-hand accounts, they are equally as valid as education-provider-staff perspectives on student experiences.

In many cases, education provider staff were involved in identifying students and staff to be interviewed and surveyed. It is therefore feasible that some students were approached because of the likelihood that they would reflect positively on the organisation.

Reverse Blocks

Between 25 and 30 per cent of AFB providers deliver reverse blocks. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the research team was unable to visit the two reverse-block sites they had planned to visit. This means that they did not interview any students who had participated in reverse blocks, nor were they able to conduct interviews with and include the perspectives of family and community members of AFB students as intended. Evidence relating to reverse blocks is therefore limited to data collected from AFB education providers. Three of the interviewed AFB providers spoke about their experience delivering reverse blocks. These providers included the two largest providers of reverse block delivery.

Testing and assessment

Based on data provided by Services Australia, it is estimated that 15 to 20 per cent of AFB providers receive funding for testing and assessment activities. The research team interviewed three AFB providers accessing this funding, but did not speak to any students who participated in AFB testing and assessment activities. Additionally, one of the providers included in the 15 selected for fieldwork was not accessing any AFB funding at the time of our interviews. This provider had previously been accessing Services Australia funding for testing and assessment purposes, but had ceased to do so due to difficulties receiving funds in sufficient time to pay for travel. Interviews with this provider and their students were therefore of limited use to answer the broader evaluation questions.

Non 'mixed-mode' students

It should be noted that, whereas the NIAA model caters solely to students enrolled in eligible mixed-mode courses, the DSS ABSTUDY model provides AFB assistance to a broader range of students. Students receiving ABSTUDY AFB assistance might be in a mixed-mode course, but they could equally

⁵ Social Compass had originally intended to visit both the on-campus and reverse block sites of two of the education providers.

be in a 'mainstream' course that requires them to travel for the purpose of a practical placement or a field trip. This evaluation did not include the perspectives of individual students accessing AFB funding from Services Australia outside of a mixed-mode-course context.

Student surveys

From the beginning of the evaluation, AFB providers advised the research team that remote and very remote students would have limited ability to engage in the survey, and predicted that response rates would be low. Although 264 students participated in the survey (approximately 4.5 per cent of the total AFB cohort), the demographics of survey respondents differ significantly from the broader AFB student cohort in terms of their level of study and the remoteness of their community. Survey respondents were more likely to be studying at a higher level and less likely to be from remote or very remote communities than the overall cohort. It is likely, therefore, that their experiences of accessing tertiary education are not representative of those AFB students with lower educational attainment, who live in remote or very remote locations, or who do not have easy access to the internet. Further research needs to be conducted to better understand the perspectives and experiences of this AFB cohort. The overall low percentage of respondents may also reflect limitations in the distribution of the survey by providers to current and former students.

Program data

The program data collected by NIAA is more comprehensive than that collected by Services Australia. Services Australia only collects demographic data of students, not unit-completion data. The research team could not use Services Australia data to make any findings related to educational outcomes for students accessing that model. More specific details regarding the limitations of program data are explained in section 3.1.

2.2.6 Data collection summary

Table 4 outlines the number of survey and interview participants for each stakeholder group. As not every survey respondent answered every question, the number of full responses is indicated along with total response number. Not every question was relevant to each respondent and therefore the number of responses to each question varied. Where survey questions are referred to throughout the report, the response rate (n) for that question is indicated.

Overall, changes and restrictions to data collection mean that the very remote student voice and broader community voices have not been included in the evaluation as originally intended.

Table 4: Number of interview and survey participants from each stakeholder group

Stakeholder group ⁶	No. of interview participants	No. of survey responses
AFB students (current and past)	38	264 (175 complete)
Staff from AFB education providers	65	140 (80 complete)
Government staff	15	N/A
Families of students	0	N/A
Employers of students	0	N/A

2.3 Data analysis and testing of findings

The research team made recordings of most interviews (with the permission of participants), which were then transcribed. Qualitative data from interviews and surveys was then analysed thematically by coding the data into preselected categories defined by the evaluation questions, for example,

⁶ For further details about interview and survey participants see appendices.

‘barriers for students’. Other themes, such as unintended outcomes, were coded as they emerged from the data. The research team and the Evaluation Advisory Group then met to discuss and clarify the general themes, exceptions, conundrums and surprises found in the data.

Descriptive statistics and analyses of the quantitative data from the surveys and program data were conducted using Excel.

3 Findings: The extent to which the needs of Indigenous AFB students are met through the Commonwealth's investment

This section addresses the first evaluation purpose, to assess the extent to which the needs of AFB students are met through AFB funding. The section responds to the following KEQs:

- To what extent have the AFB models enabled students to access tertiary education courses and to overcome barriers to accessing education?
- What has been the student experience of the models?

3.1 To what extent have the AFB models enabled students to access tertiary education courses and to overcome barriers to accessing education?

To gain insight into student access to AFB, Social Compass has used reporting data from both NIAA and Services Australia. The two data sets are not directly comparable. The NIAA data set covers the period from 2013 to 2019 whereas Services Australia has only been able to provide data for the period 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020. The categories against which NIAA and Services Australia record data do not always align.

In order to interpret the data provided by Services Australia, some estimations were necessary. Due to privacy restrictions, exact numbers were not provided for categories with less-than-five counts.⁷ In these cases, the research team inserted a count of four, leading to a small number of overcounts within data aggregated by Social Compass. Occurrences of any such estimations are indicated in a footnote to the relevant graph.

Although these data challenges limit the accuracy and depth of an analysis of who is accessing AFB, the available data can nevertheless provide some insight into the demographics of the AFB cohort. The following section will describe the AFB student cohort in terms of overall enrolments, gender, remoteness of student communities, course type and field of study. It will also present some statistical and qualitative evidence that AFB is enhancing the likelihood of course completion for Indigenous students.

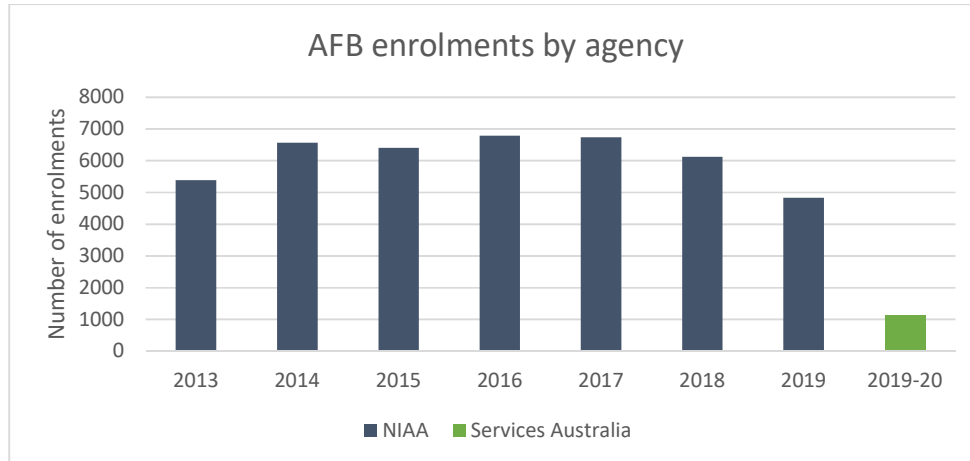
3.1.1 Overall enrolments

As shown in Figure 1, a significantly larger proportion of students are accessing AFB through the NIAA model. Over the period 2013 to 2019, an average of 6123 students per year were accessing NIAA AFB, compared with 1147 who accessed Services Australia AFB in the 2019-20 financial year. Comparing the latest data point for each agency⁸ shows that NIAA students made up approximately 80 per cent of total AFB students.

⁷ For example, the number of enrolments in the subcategory Certificate I/female/under 24 was given as <5.

⁸ These two data points do not align (NIAA refers to calendar year, Services Australia to financial year), therefore the proportion should be seen as illustrative only.

Figure 1: AFB enrolments by agency



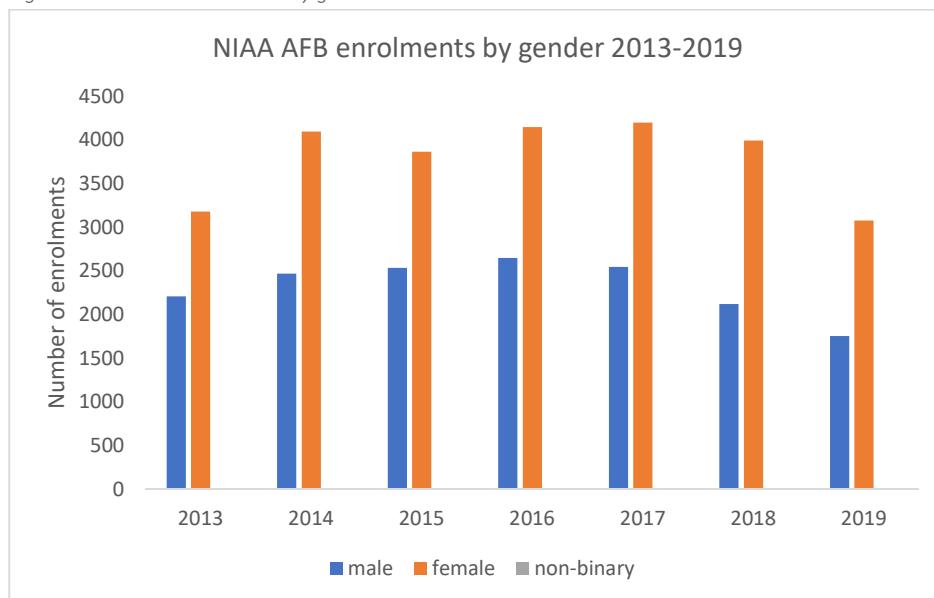
Source: Data provided by NIAA and Services Australia

3.1.2 Gender

Both NIAA and Services Australia data sets show that the majority of students accessing AFB are female (see Figure 2 and The proportion of female students was slightly higher for the Services Australia model in 2019-20: 30 per cent male to 70 per cent female. Figure 3).

Over the seven years encompassed by the NIAA data, the proportion of male to female students has been on average 38 per cent male to 62 per cent female.⁹

Figure 2: NIAA AFB enrolments by gender 2013-2019

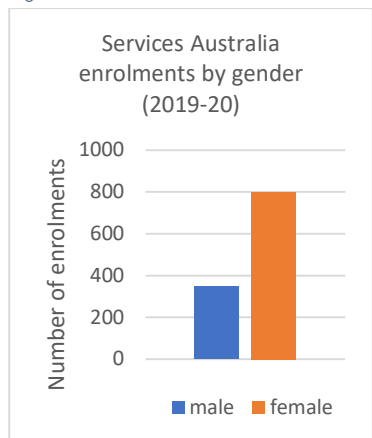


Source: Data provided by NIAA

The proportion of female students was slightly higher for the Services Australia model in 2019-20: 30 per cent male to 70 per cent female.

⁹ Numbers for students identifying as non-binary were only reported in 2018.

Figure 3: Services Australia AFB enrolments by gender (2019-20)



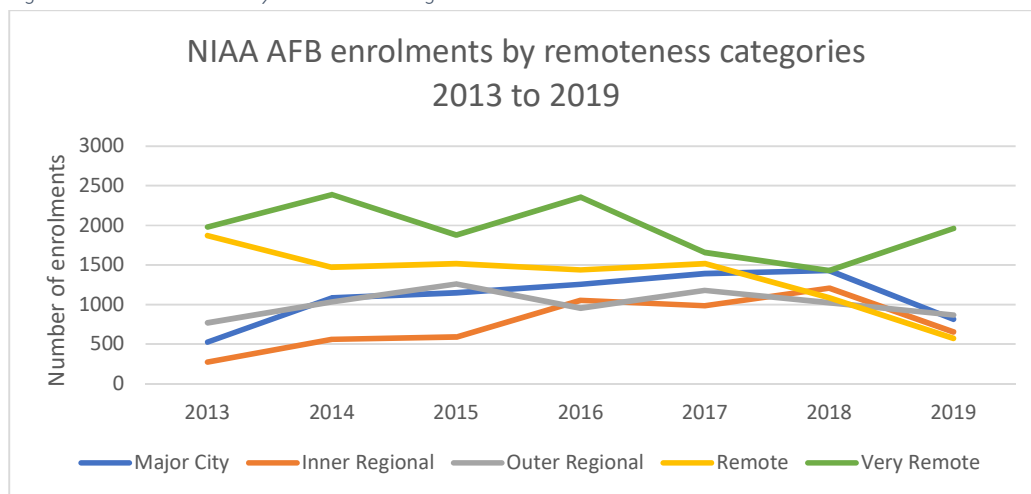
Source: Data provided by Services Australia

3.1.3 Remoteness

Both agencies collect data describing the remoteness of AFB students' place of residence. Remoteness areas, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, divide Australia into five categories of remoteness based on relative access to services. Data from both agencies shows that students accessing AFB are most likely those from the most remote areas –Very Remote Australia (an average of 32 per cent of NIAA students since 2013, and 30 per cent of Services Australia students in 2019-20).¹⁰ The majority of AFB students reside outside of the major cities.

Figure 4 shows that the number of NIAA students from Remote Australia has declined since 2013, in proportion to the other categories, to be the least represented remoteness category in 2019. For Services Australia this category also has the lowest representation (see Figure 5).

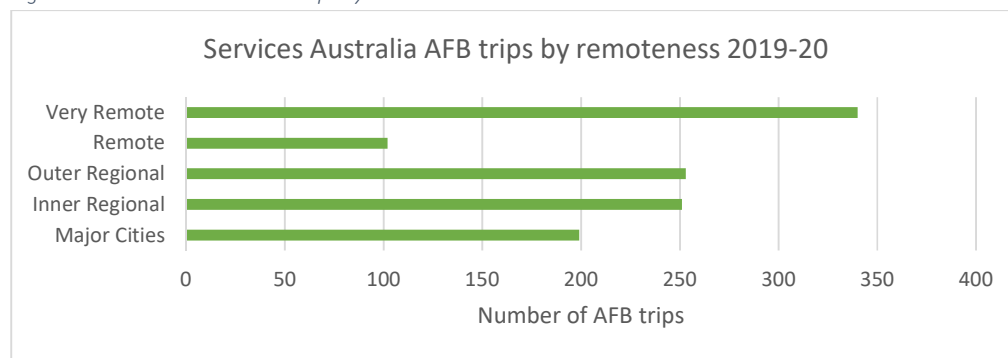
Figure 4: NIAA enrolments by remoteness categories 2013 to 2019



Source: Data provided by NIAA

¹⁰ This Services Australia data should be seen as illustrative only as the count is of trips booked rather than individual students.

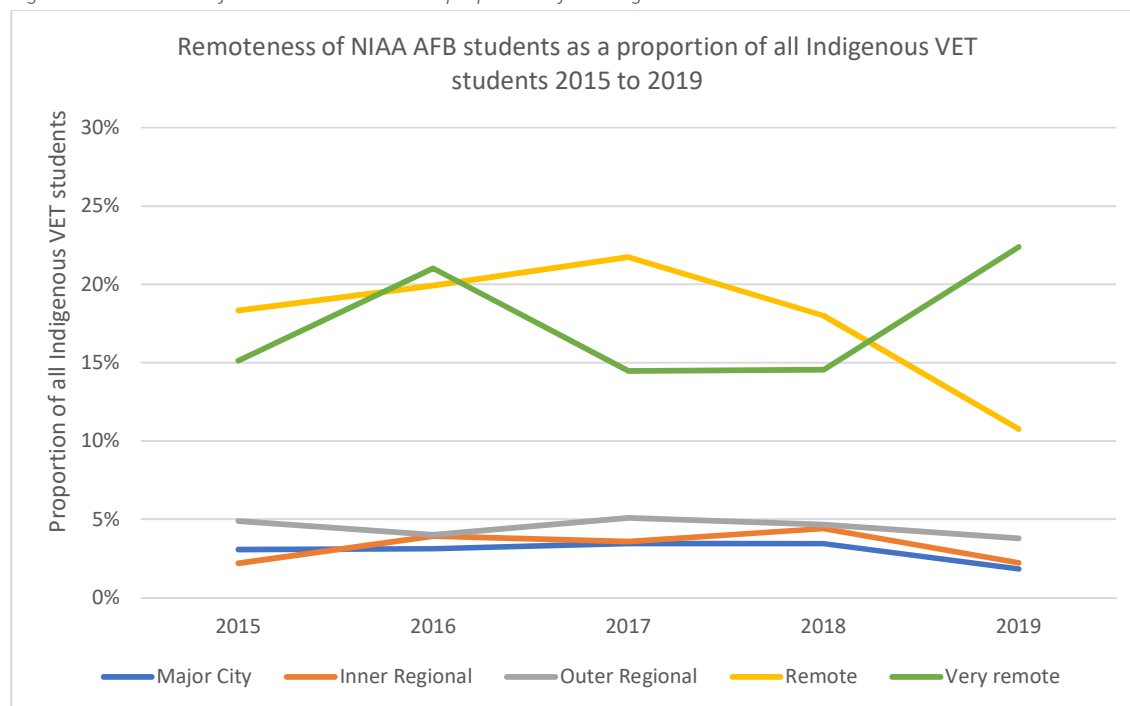
Figure 5: Services Australia AFB trips by remoteness 2019-20



Source: Data provided by Services Australia¹¹

A comparison of NIAA and national VET data for all Indigenous students (of which NIAA AFB VET students are a subset) shows that VET students accessing NIAA AFB are more likely to be from Remote and Very Remote Australia than the broader Indigenous VET cohort (see Figure 6). Although this data set is limited to students in the VET sector, it provides evidence that AFB is contributing to increased access to education for Indigenous students in Remote and Very Remote Australia

Figure 6: Remoteness of NIAA AFB students as a proportion of all Indigenous VET students 2015 to 2019



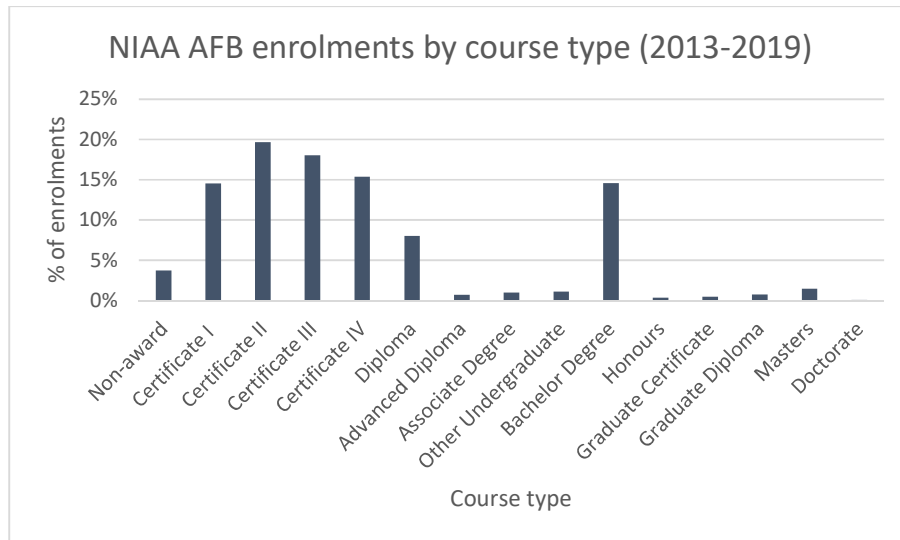
Source: NIAA and National Centre for Vocational Education Research

3.1.4 Course type

AFB includes tertiary courses in both the VET and higher education sectors. Data provided by NIAA (see Figure 7) shows that the majority of AFB students are enrolled in Certificates I to IV and bachelor degrees. Certificate II has the highest enrolment numbers, followed by Certificate III, Certificate IV bachelor degree and Certificate I.

¹¹ Counts of less than 5 individuals, categorised as 'unknown', have been excluded from this data.

Figure 7: NIAA AFB enrolments by course type (2013-2019)

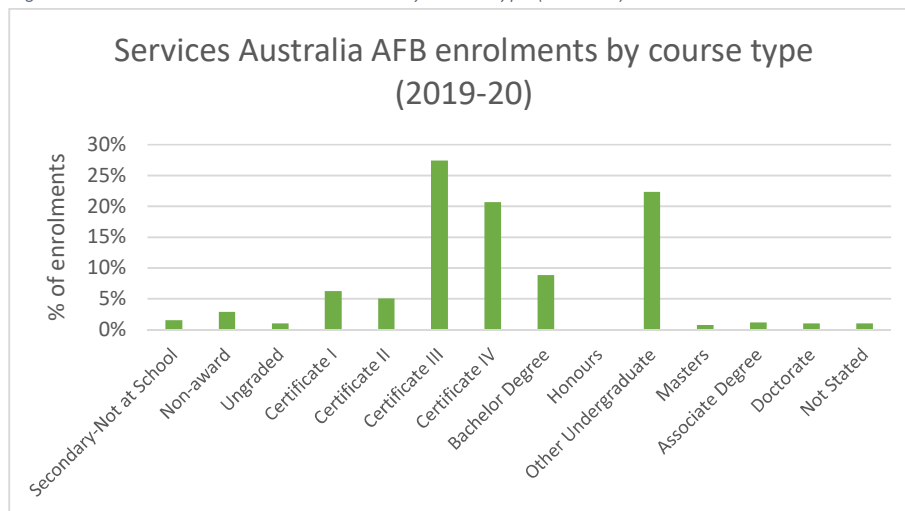


Source: Data provided by NIAA

Services Australia data (see Figure 8) also indicates a high enrolment rate in Certificates III and IV, but a proportionately lower enrolment rate for Certificates I and II. The DSS AFB delivered through Services Australia has a much lower proportion of bachelor degrees when compared to NIAA, but the second highest enrolment numbers are categorised as ‘other undergraduate’, which includes:

- associate degree
- associate diploma
- a diploma course at a TAFE institution or provided by a VET provider for which an entry requirement is successful completion of year 12 of secondary studies
- 2-year undergraduate diploma

Figure 8: Services Australia AFB enrolments by course type (2019-20)



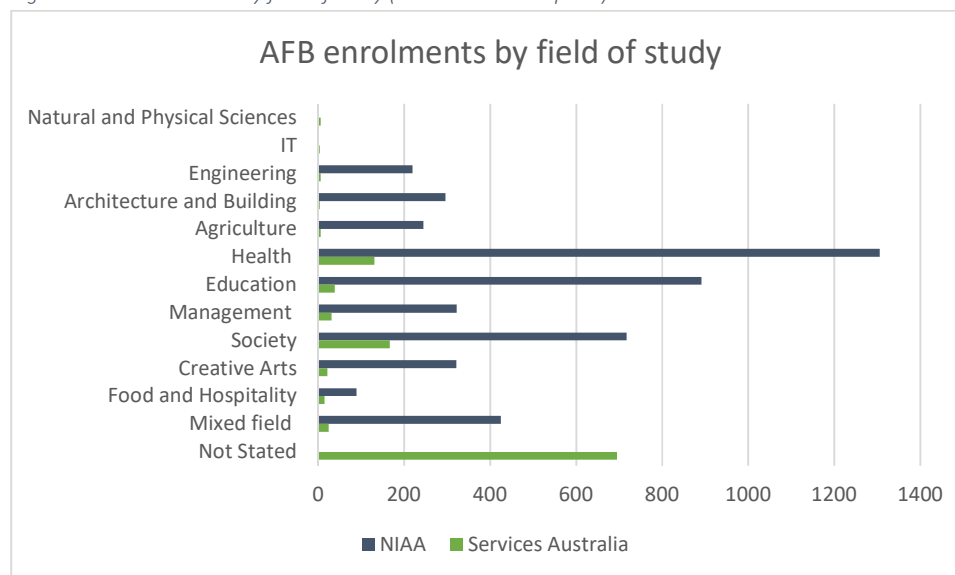
Source: Data provided by Services Australia¹²

¹² Enrolments of less than 5 in Services Australia data were estimated by Social Compass as 4. This will result in a probable slight overcount for some course levels.

3.1.5 Fields of study

As shown in Figure 9, the most recent data points from both agencies indicate that students accessing AFB are enrolled in a wide range of fields of study. For a large proportion of the Services Australia AFB students the field of study was not stated; however, the largest known enrolments were in Health, followed by Education and Society. Health had the largest number of enrolments for the NIAA model (27 per cent) followed by Education (18 per cent) and Society (15 per cent).

Figure 9: AFB enrolments by field of study (most recent data point)



Source: Data provided by NIAA and Services Australia¹³

Across both models, the number of enrolments in Science and Information Technology were very low.

3.1.6 Summary: Access

While it has certain limitations, the quantitative data available for AFB provides some important insights into the extent to which the program provides Indigenous Australians with access to tertiary education.

Most AFB students (approximately 80 per cent, according to the most recent data from each agency) are accessing funding through the NIAA model of AFB. Overall, the majority of AFB students are female – approximately 60 to 70 per cent, depending on the model – and are from outside major Australian cities, demonstrating that AFB is providing access to education for students who might not have many study options in their home community but might not want or be able to leave their community in order to study in their chosen field. Additionally, the significant numbers of students from major cities choosing to access AFB suggests that the funding is allowing them to stay in their home cities while accessing study options that are not available to them there.

The majority of AFB students are enrolled in VET courses (Certificates I–IV) and undergraduate studies. While a broad range of study areas are represented, the highest number of enrolments are in Health, followed by Education and then Society. Participation by Indigenous Australians in the health, education and social work sectors is crucial in terms of making progress toward Closing the Gap targets. The number of AFB enrolments in these broad areas, combined with evidence that AFB is contributing to increased likelihood of course completion (discussed below in section 3.2.2) suggests

¹³ Enrolments of less than 5 in Services Australia data were estimated by Social Compass as 4. This will result in a probable slight overcount for Information Technology and Architecture.

that the funding is playing a significant role in enhancing Indigenous capacity and workforce participation in areas of need.

On the other hand, the enrolment numbers for Science and Information Technology were very low. A number of factors (including perhaps that residential blocks are not the most appropriate study format for these subjects) might explain these low numbers, but it is a potential area for future investigation.

Finding 1: AFB is contributing to increased access for Indigenous students to education courses, particularly for those from remote locations.

3.2 What has been the student experience of the models?

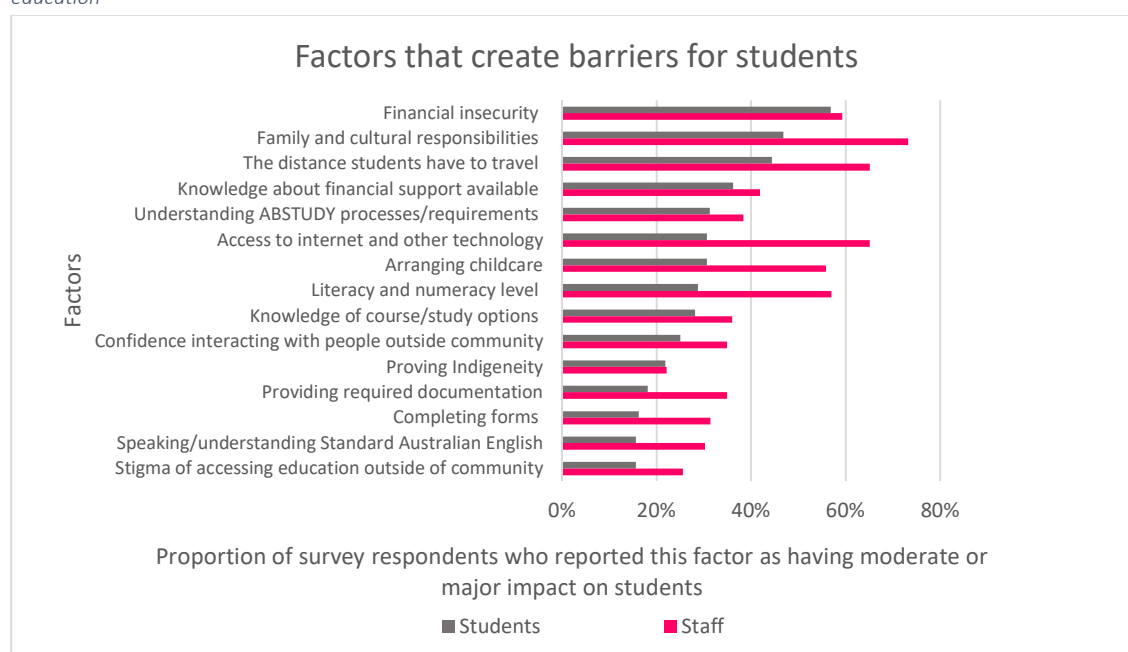
The following section focuses on the principal barriers and outcomes experienced by AFB students. Other aspects of the student experience of AFB are covered throughout the report.

3.2.1 Barriers for students

Although AFB is contributing to better access to education for Indigenous students, it cannot eliminate all barriers. Numerous research studies have established that the access, retention and completion rates of Indigenous students in tertiary education are significantly lower than those of non-Indigenous students (Behrendt et al. 2012; Gore et al. 2017; Lowe et al. 2019; James & Devlin 2006). Much is already known about the barriers that Indigenous students face in terms of accessing and completing tertiary education. The evidence presented in this section supports this research and demonstrates that these barriers are ongoing.

During interviews with 38 AFB students, the research team asked about the barriers and challenges they faced during their AFB studies. Based on the themes that emerged from the interviews, students were then asked, via the online survey, the extent to which each of the identified barriers affected them. AFB providers were also asked the extent to which they observed those factors affecting students. Of the 264 student survey respondents, 160 responded to the questions about barriers. Figure 10 shows the percentages of AFB students and providers who stated that those factors had a moderate or major impact on AFB students.

Figure 10: Education provider and student perspectives on barriers for AFB students to accessing and completing tertiary education



Source: Education-provider-staff (n=86) and student (n=160) surveys

It must be emphasised, however, that the student survey respondents were not representative of the broader AFB student cohort. Survey respondents were more likely to live in a major city or regional location and were more likely to be studying a diploma or bachelor level course than other AFB students. The data does not, therefore, adequately represent the views of students living in Remote and Very Remote locations nor those who are studying lower-level VET courses. It is likely these underrepresented students are more greatly affected by these barriers. The fact that provider staff observed a greater impact for all factors also suggests that those higher-impacted students were not reached by the survey.

Despite these limitations, the graph shows that the ranking of the barriers, in terms of their impact, by students and education providers is similar and largely consistent with themes that emerged from the interview data. Both groups identify caring and community responsibilities, technological challenges, travel distance and financial insecurity as having the greatest impact on students. These and other identified issues are discussed below.

Caring and community responsibilities

Indigenous students often have more cultural and community responsibilities and dependents than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Behrendt et al. 2012). Studies show that caring, family and community commitments can place a strain on Indigenous students (Gore et al. 2017) and draw them away from study activities (Kinnane et al. 2014).

Throughout interviews and surveys, AFB students and providers identified caring and community responsibilities as a major factor impacting on students' ability to access and complete their studies. Many students reported needing to leave early or miss residential blocks because of a death in the community, or other community priorities. Students often have a range of community roles that require their time and attention when they are at home. These responsibilities can limit their ability to complete distance education components.

*When I travel to [residential] I am able to focus and concentrate on my subjects;
when I am home I have many cultural obligations that [are] unavoidable.*

—AFB student

According to NIAA and Services Australia data, approximately 60 to 70 per cent of AFB students are women. One of the biggest challenges they reported was arranging childcare, and the difficulties that come from being separated from their children for periods of time.¹⁴

I'm a single mum, childcare was a constant challenge. It often caused a lot of stress being worried about them and if they were sick or something. I had to call on a lot of people for help and often felt like a burden. I also couldn't help but feel homesick and bad for leaving my kids.

—AFB student

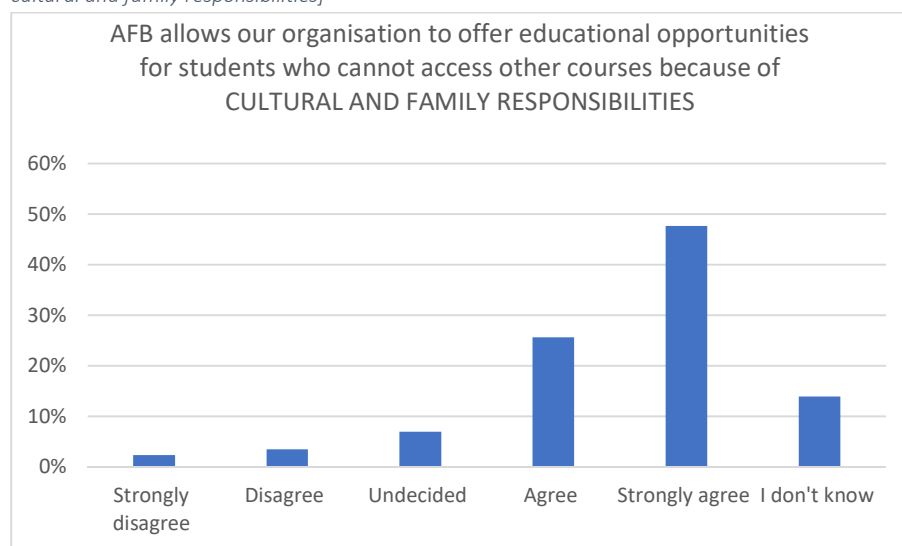
In the survey, nearly 60 per cent of student survey respondents and 75 per cent of education provider respondents stated that arranging childcare had a moderate or major impact on their ability to access and complete their studies. In interviews, a considerable number of AFB students with other caring responsibilities described similar challenges in arranging alternative care for family members.

I was a carer and I was unable to leave my mum and Downs Syndrome brother with anyone so I can travel to Sydney to study.

—AFB student

Although many AFB students find that community and family responsibilities affect their studies, responses to the service-provider-staff survey indicated that AFB helped to minimise the impact of these responsibilities on gaining access to education. Figure 11 shows that 73 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that AFB was allowing their organisation to offer educational opportunities to students who would not otherwise be able to attend a course because of cultural and family responsibilities.

Figure 11: To what extent do you agree with the following statement about AFB at your organisation? [Mitigating impact of cultural and family responsibilities]



Source: Education-provider-staff survey (n=86)

¹⁴ Interview and survey participants were not directly asked whether they had children, but the survey asked if childcare was a barrier to accessing education. Issues of childcare were frequently raised in interviews.

Accessing and using the internet for online learning

Online learning is one way of addressing lack of access to education for Indigenous Australians who do not live near their education provider. Existing studies, however, show that several barriers continue to impede access to online learning for those in remote communities, including unreliable internet connections (Kinnane et al. 2014), software issues, and gaps in knowledge about how to best deliver online content to Indigenous students (Grealy et al. 2019).

Interviews and surveys with AFB students and providers supported this literature. The research team heard that lack of access to the internet, computers and other technology is one of the major barriers for AFB students, particularly for those in remote communities. The lack of internet access and phone networks impacts students' ability to complete coursework, but can also limit effective communication with their provider or Services Australia about ABSTUDY and travel issues.

Additionally, AFB students and providers told us that some AFB students, particularly older adults, may not have learned how to use computers and other technology.

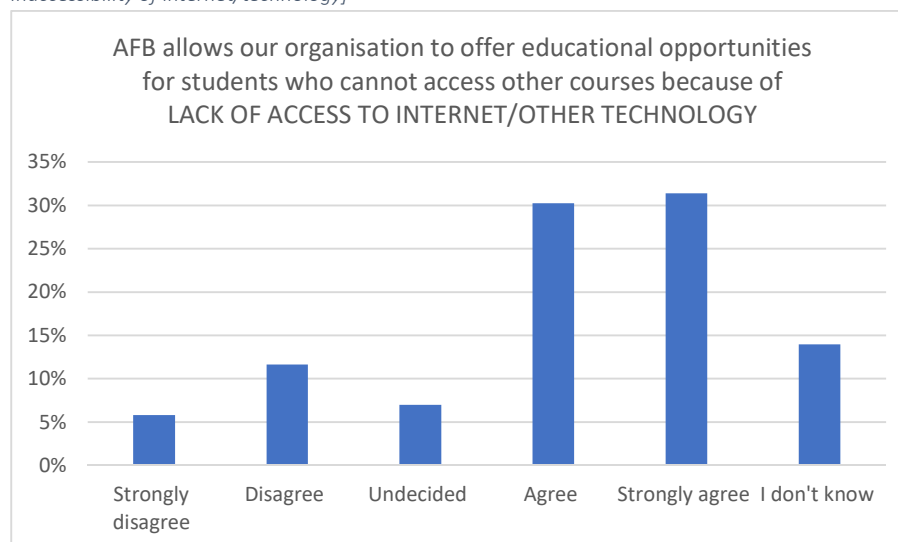
There's a lot of older people that study here – so not a lot of them can use technology very well. I think it's difficult because at home the only accessible computer is at the school and we don't have reception. And some people don't know about technology much, especially computers, how to work them.

—AFB student

In the online survey, access to internet and technology was the second largest barrier identified by students, with 65 per cent saying it had a moderate or major impact on their ability to access and complete their studies.

Responses to the service-provider-staff survey, however, indicated that many staff perceive AFB to be reducing the impact of inaccessibility of technology on gaining access to education. Sixty-two per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that AFB allows their organisation to offer educational opportunities to students who would not otherwise be able to access courses because of lack of access to internet and other technology.

Figure 12: To what extent do you agree with the following statement about AFB at your organisation? [Mitigating impact of inaccessibility of internet/technology]

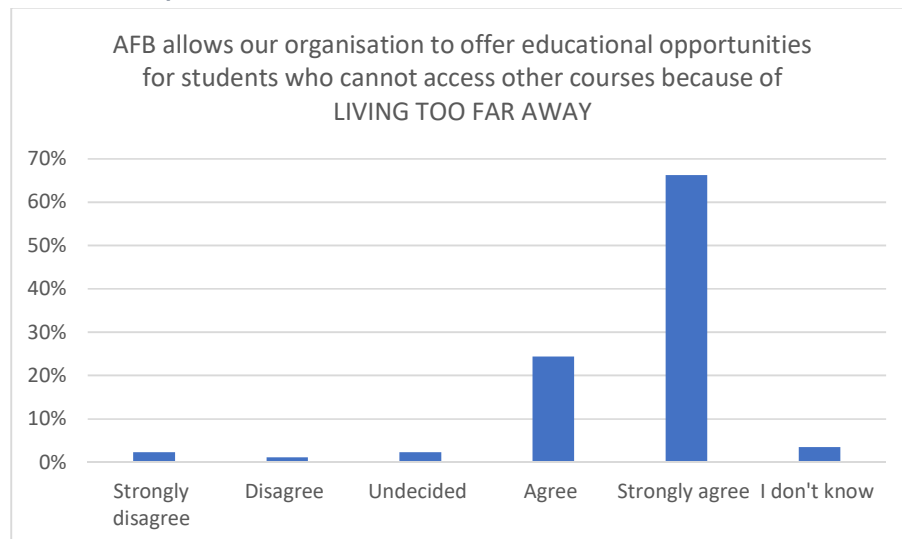


Source: Education-provider-staff survey (n=86)

Distance that students have to travel

For many Indigenous students, the courses they want to enrol in are not available in their communities and so travelling far from home is required. In interviews and surveys, AFB students told us about the stresses this creates in terms of the costs, arrangements and disconnection from community involved with travel to and from their training provider. These stresses are also documented in the literature (Kinnane et al. 2014; Gore et al. 2017). The distance students have to travel is rated by 45 per cent of student survey respondents as having a moderate or major impact on their ability to access and complete their studies. This proportion is likely to be higher in the wider population of AFB students because, as outlined above, survey respondents were more likely to live in major cities and regional areas than the broader AFB cohort. The fact that many AFB students find travel a factor that makes study more difficult does not suggest that AFB is not contributing to overcoming this barrier, rather it underscores the fact that Indigenous students continue to require support to access educational opportunities. In fact, 91 per cent of respondents to the education-provider-staff survey agreed or strongly agreed that AFB was allowing their organisation to offer study opportunities to students who could not otherwise access other courses because of living too far away.

Figure 13: To what extent do you agree with the following statement about AFB at your organisation? [Mitigating impact of distance to travel]



Source: Education-provider-staff survey (n=86)

Financial insecurity and knowledge of available support

A relatively high proportion of Indigenous Australians come from low socio-economic status backgrounds. It has been acknowledged that removing financial barriers for Indigenous students is key to increasing their access to education (Behrendt et al. 2012; Kinnane et al. 2014). AFB is based on the assumption that the financial cost of travelling is one of the main barriers to completing studies. Furthermore, Indigenous students are more likely to have additional financial needs because they are more likely than non-Indigenous students to be mature age and have dependents (Behrendt et al. 2012).

When asked about the importance of AFB funding to their education, 71 per cent of the 136 survey respondents who answered the question stated that without AFB financial support, they would be unable to complete their course. Other costs incurred throughout their studies, such as purchasing laptops, can also be a challenge. Additionally, a small number of AFB students explained that previous debts incurred with Centrelink had prevented them from accessing ABSTUDY payments. Students

under both models also described the financial hardship experienced from having to take leave without pay from their employment to attend residential blocks and placements.

The literature recognises that Indigenous people often lack resources and information to help them make decisions about pursuing tertiary education (Kelly et al. 2009; Behrendt et al. 2012; Gore et al. 2017). Sixty per cent of AFB education-provider-staff survey respondents felt that a lack of knowledge about financial supports available for tertiary study was a barrier to more Indigenous students accessing courses. Nearly 50 per cent also indicated that a lack of knowledge about tertiary study options was also a barrier. This data is supported by interviews with AFB students, who often described finding out about AFB and their course through word-of-mouth from a family or community member.

English, literacy and numeracy

Strong retention and use of traditional languages among some Indigenous communities can mean that Standard Australian English is not the primary language of many Indigenous students, in particular those from remote communities. This language barrier can present a challenge when accessing mainstream education (Behrendt et al. 2012). AFB students and providers told the research team about remote and very remote students who may speak English as an additional language and therefore have increased challenges accessing and engaging in study.

English might be second or third language [for students] who can very clearly articulate in their language in a professional way but if you translate that to a Western academic environment they would appear almost illiterate. We have a lot of students for whom English is not a predominant language, or it's a Kriol.

—Education provider

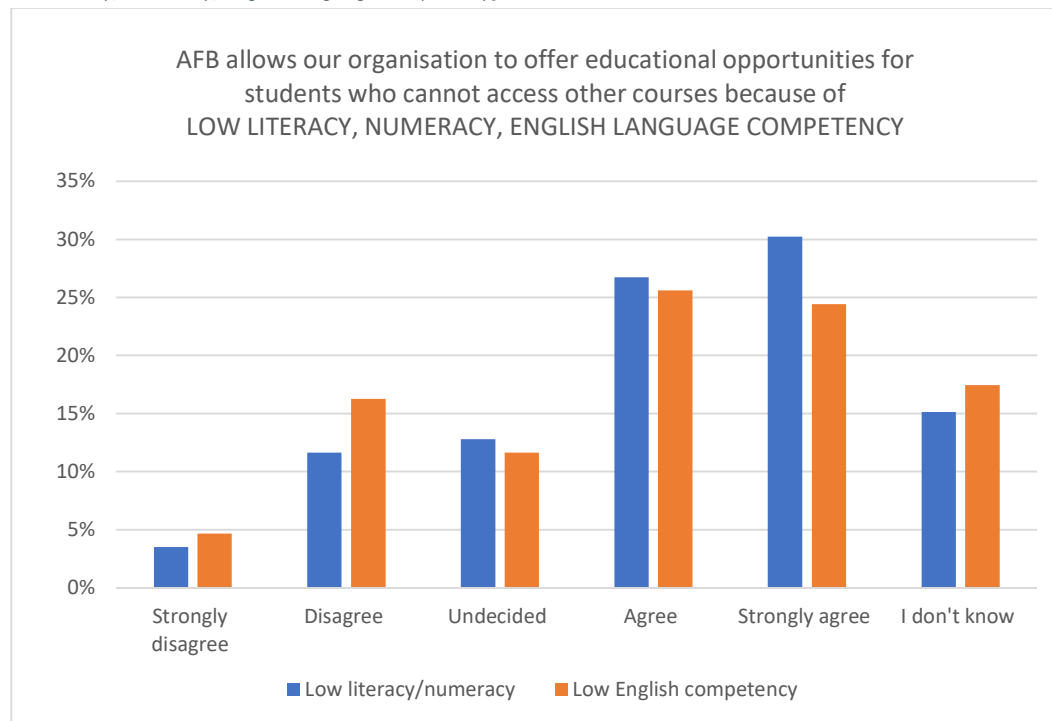
Consistent gaps in the literacy and numeracy levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are well known (Commonwealth of Australia 2020; Behrendt et al. 2012). The research team heard that low literacy and numeracy is a significant barrier, particularly for AFB students from remote locations who are engaging with tertiary study for the first time. According to AFB providers, it prevents some students from being able to enrol in a Certificate I course and, for others, prevents them from progressing further. AFB providers with large numbers of very remote students are aware of the impact low literacy and numeracy has on students' studies, and on their ability to complete the necessary forms for ABSTUDY and course enrolment.

A lot of the [AFB students] I work with battle with literacy. They want to come to college to learn more and college has been very good in allowing people to come who struggle with literacy. Some people who you help aren't quite fluent, others tell me what to say, I spell the words so they can write it. A lot wouldn't be able to fill the form out themselves. It would go in the too hard basket for tomorrow and tomorrow would never come. Sometimes the questions seem straightforward to us, but they need a bit of explanation.

—Education provider

Responses to the service-provider-staff survey indicated that a majority of respondents perceive AFB to be increasing access to education for students whose literacy, numeracy and English abilities might prevent them from accessing other courses. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that AFB was allowing educational opportunities for students with low literacy and/or numeracy; this figure was 50 per cent for those with low English competency.

Figure 14: To what extent do you agree with the following statement about AFB at your organisation? [Mitigating impact of low literacy, numeracy, English language competency]



Source: Education-provider-staff survey (n=86)

Providing documentation

ABSTUDY requires students to provide a range of documents in order to receive payments. These include birth certificates, proof of residence and information about legal guardians. AFB students and providers told us that providing these documents is difficult for some students and can delay the confirmation of their ABSTUDY eligibility or approval for AFB travel.

Even with the best of intent, even if students identify early that they want to do a course, birth certificates are an issue, there's lots of evidence that students need to provide that they are living in a particular location to access government subsidy for the training. Students don't have that ID available all the time.

—Education provider

Proving Indigeneity, although not an issue for all AFB students, was described by a small proportion as a challenge when they are applying for ABSTUDY and in other parts of their student experience.

Confidence and self-esteem

The postcolonial experience of education has been negative for many Indigenous people. Racism, deficit discourses and disconnection from culture have all contributed to bad experiences of mainstream education (Lowe et al. 2019). These experiences have resulted in low self-confidence for many Indigenous students in mainstream educational settings (Gore et al. 2017). AFB students and providers described how students often start their course lacking confidence and self-esteem, which can hinder their ability to engage in class.

One common element is lack of self-confidence, due to past educational experiences that has eroded that. Then they come to uni, which is very Western and they have to adapt. [...] Our biggest challenge is that students have had bad experiences with education.

—AFB provider

Lack of confidence may also mean that students are unaware of the skills and experience they already have (Lowe et al. 2019), preventing them from feeling adequately qualified to enrol in the first place. The following quote from an AFB education provider illustrates this point:

If you [...] look at mature agers entering, [the forms] ask for previous study or lived experience and when you can speak to the student about their experience they can articulate previous experience, through community work or being in community or the work that they've done. If you just gave them the form up front, they'd tell you that they don't have previous knowledge to undertake the programs. When they say 'provide evidence' students will say 'university's not for me', because they see evidence as being something that's attained somewhere else, not evidence of something they've already experienced.

—Education provider

AFB students and providers also told us about the barriers for remote and very remote students who may be leaving their community for the first time and whose confidence interacting with others—as well as confidence finding their way around in other locations—is very low. As the quote below explains, leaving Country can also be difficult for Indigenous students.

I think it's a bit stressful, I've talked to a lot of students who get a bit overwhelmed leaving Country and going somewhere unfamiliar.

—AFB student

In addition, shame or stigma from community members about going outside community to get an education is a factor that impacts on a small proportion of AFB students. In the online survey, 16 per cent of respondents reported that this was an issue that had a major or moderate impact on their studies. This finding is supported by other studies that found that some Indigenous students faced suspicion and discouragement from family and community members about their higher education aspirations (Behrendt et al. 2012).

Section 3.2.2, Outcomes for students, outlines the ways in which AFB is improving the confidence of students and thereby helping them to overcome this barrier.

Racism

Many Indigenous people have experienced and expect to experience racism as part of their engagement with education institutions (Behrendt et al. 2012; Gore et al. 2017). The literature acknowledges that, despite some education providers taking action against racism, it continues to impact on Indigenous students (Behrendt et al. 2012; Lowe et al. 2019). In our interviews with students, a small number described experiences of racism involving other students, education provider staff and staff of AFB accommodation providers. The case highlighted in the quote below occurred during a residential block.

Because of my white skin I was discriminated against. [...] One lecturer questioned me about my fair skin. As I was going through that course—he actually shamed me in front of the whole class—he was not being nice to me and belittled me in front of everyone at the residential school. [...] Even my own family saw it as prejudice. My tutor [...] was a non-Indigenous woman and she said 'There is something wrong here.'

—AFB student

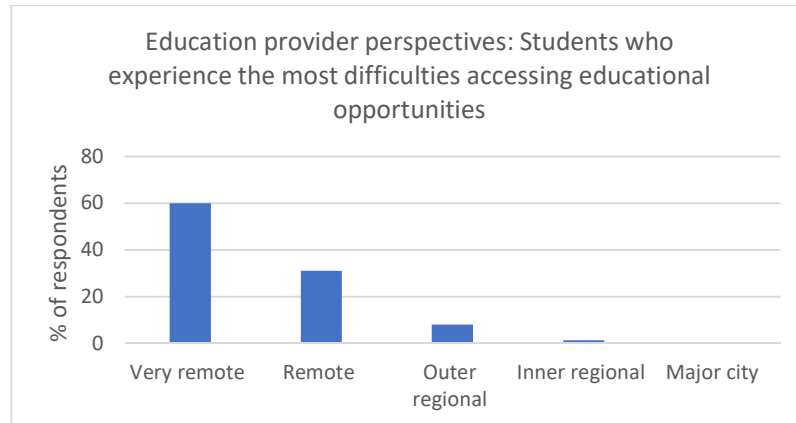
Summary: Barriers for students

Research shows that Indigenous Australians continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged when it comes to accessing tertiary education. The data collected for this evaluation points to a range of barriers that Indigenous students can experience throughout their AFB journey, including family and community responsibilities, technology and communication challenges, distance, financial insecurity,

educational disadvantage, administrative challenges and confidence issues. It also demonstrates the value of AFB in helping address these barriers.

Because of structural and systemic factors resulting in higher levels of disadvantage for Indigenous people in remote and very remote locations (Commonwealth of Australia 2020; Behrendt et al. 2012; Gore et al. 2017), these identified barriers are often more pronounced for AFB students in these communities. Figure 15 shows that 90 per cent of respondents to the education-provider-staff survey have observed that access to educational opportunities is most difficult for students in remote and very remote locations.

Figure 15: In your experience, students from which type of location tend to have the most difficulties accessing educational opportunities?



Source: Education-provider-staff survey (n=75)

Finding 2: Although Indigenous students are successfully accessing educational opportunities through AFB, they continue to experience a range of barriers. These barriers tend to be more pronounced for students from remote communities.

3.2.2 Outcomes for students

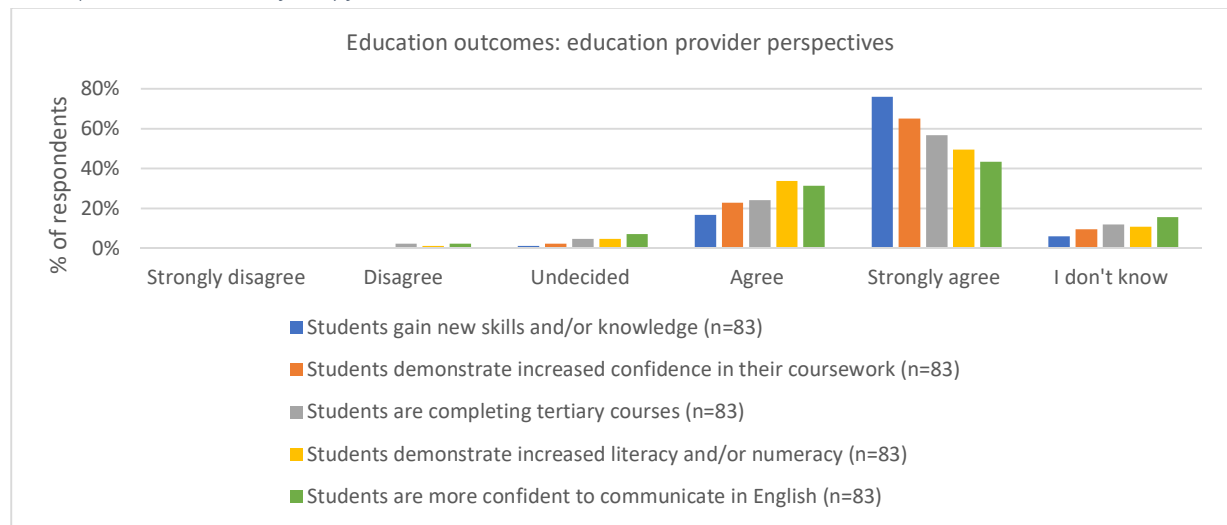
The following section discusses the outcomes that are being achieved by AFB, from the perspectives of AFB students and education providers. Student outcomes are grouped into the following categories: education, employment, benefits for community, and social, emotional and cultural wellbeing.¹⁵

Education outcomes

Figure 16 shows that a large proportion of respondents to the education-provider-staff survey agree that students are completing tertiary courses, gaining knowledge, improving skills and becoming more confident in their coursework as a result of their participation in AFB.

¹⁵ This grouping corresponds to four of the ultimate outcomes identified in the AFB program logic (see Appendices).

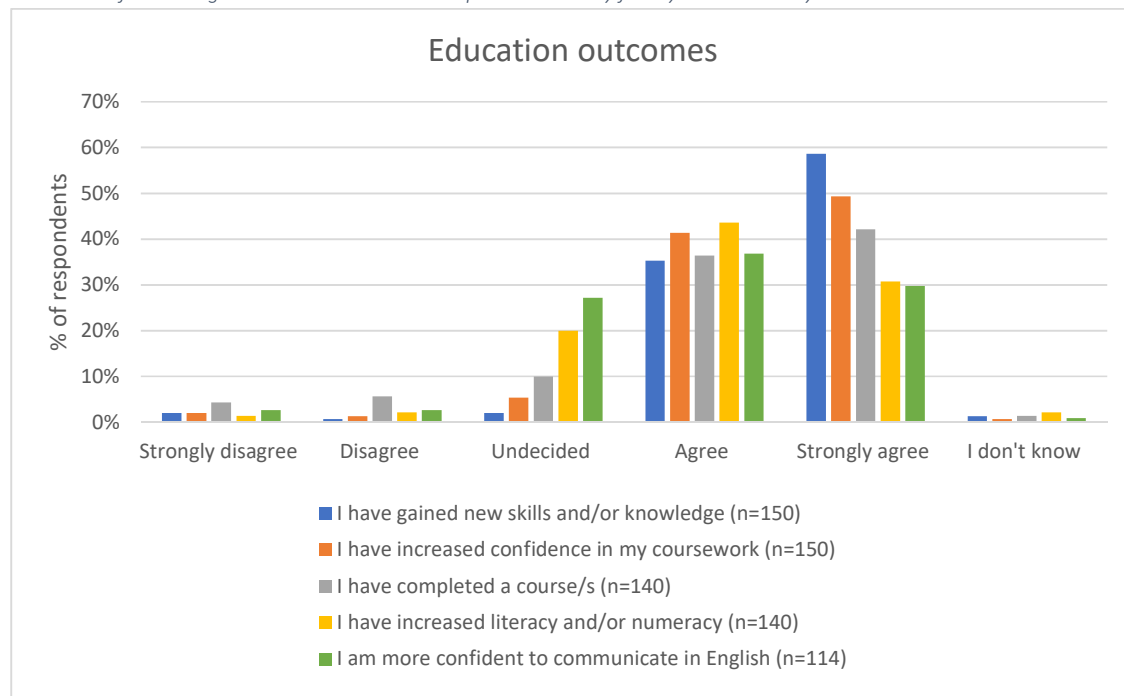
Figure 16: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [educational] outcomes students have experienced as a result of Away from Base?



Source: Education-provider-staff survey

Figure 17 shows AFB student responses for the same set of statements. The graph indicates that students largely agree that they are achieving these outcomes, but are more likely than staff to merely 'agree' rather than 'strongly agree'. For the areas of increased literacy and numeracy, and confidence to communicate in English, the weaker results may be explained by the fact that the cohort responding to the survey had already reached a higher level of education than the broader AFB cohort (see methodology section) and were less likely to experience English as a language barrier. It is to be expected that they would therefore have not personally seen marked improvements in these areas.

Figure 17: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [educational] outcomes or benefits as a result of attending a residential block or work placement away from your community?



Source: Student survey

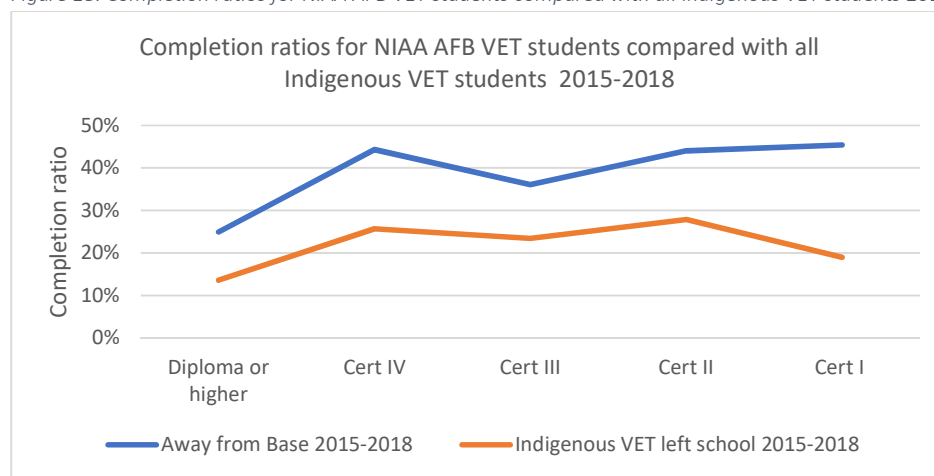
Most courses are made up of discrete units, which students do not complete at a consistent rate—some study part-time, some defer and resume over a long period. It is therefore very difficult with a data set from a limited period to calculate the proportion of students who enrol and then go on to complete a course.

Instead of completion *rates* (the proportion of enrolled students who complete a course), completion *ratios* have been used as a proxy to understand student attainment. A completion ratio refers to the number of students who complete their course in a given year as a proportion of the number of students who enrol in a course that same year (Karmel 2019).

Comparing NIAA AFB completion ratios with broader Australian completion ratios for Indigenous students in VET (of which NIAA AFB students are a subset) can provide some insight into the contribution of AFB to outcomes for Indigenous students. (As Services Australia does not collect this data, a corresponding comparison cannot be made for that agency.)

Figure 18 shows that the completion ratios for AFB VET courses were higher than those for VET Indigenous students nationally during the period 2015-18 by at least 11 percentage points for Diplomas or higher level degrees (14 compared to 25 per cent) and up to 26 percentage points higher for Certificate I (19 compared to 45 per cent).¹⁶ These statistics provide some evidence that AFB is contributing to improved likelihood of course completion for Indigenous students.

Figure 18: Completion ratios for NIAA AFB VET students compared with all Indigenous VET students 2015-2018



Source: NIAA completion data and National Centre for Vocational Education Research

This statistical analysis was reinforced by students who participated in the evaluation. The student survey asked respondents to ‘imagine a situation in which they no longer had access to AFB funding to pay for the travel, accommodation and food costs’ while they were on residential blocks and work placements. Seventy-one per cent of the 136 respondents who answered the question stated that it would have been impossible or very difficult to complete their studies, if they had no access to AFB funding for travel, accommodation and meals.

I would be forced to drop out from my training. Then I would fail to help my people of my community that have language difficulties understanding English, as English is their 2nd language.

—AFB student

¹⁶ These years and course types were selected for comparison because both data sets were available for the period. The use of ratios was considered a justifiable proxy for completion rates because the overall number of completions and the number of enrolments were fairly steady across the period 2015-18.

I would not be able to study. This would impact and limit opportunities for work and improving the living conditions of my family.

—AFB student

The majority of the remaining 29 per cent stated that without AFB their studies would be negatively affected. The importance of AFB in supporting all students' studies emphasises its contribution to student access and achievement as described in Findings 1 and 2 above.

Education providers and students relayed to the research team the importance of course completion to improving student confidence.

You see students grow, from someone who doesn't believe in themselves to being the graduate with all the family there and just being that proud to have done it. It's pretty special when you see that. You see how proud they are of themselves.

—Education provider

The fact that I finished. It's a sacrifice. [...] I just felt accomplished because I'd just started a new job, I studied and worked and managed 5 kids.

—AFB student

Furthermore, some providers reported that the confidence gained by students motivated them to go on to further study.

Students that have gone on to postgrad qualifications, [...] Because of that confidence with the educational attainment, we've had some go on to do psychology, medicine.

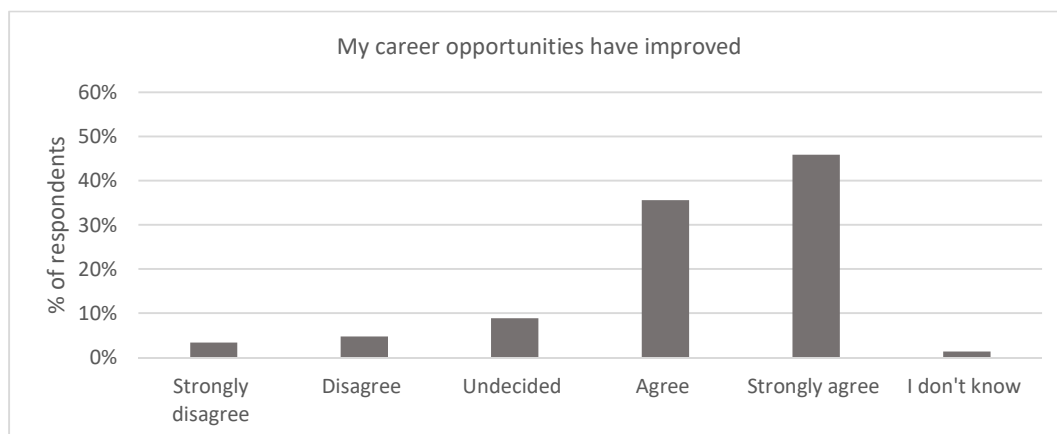
—Education provider

Employment outcomes

The research team did not have access to any data that links AFB students with employment outcomes. In the absence of such 'hard', quantitative data, the evaluation relied on the perspectives of education providers and students to assess the extent to which AFB is increasing student employment or enhancing their careers.

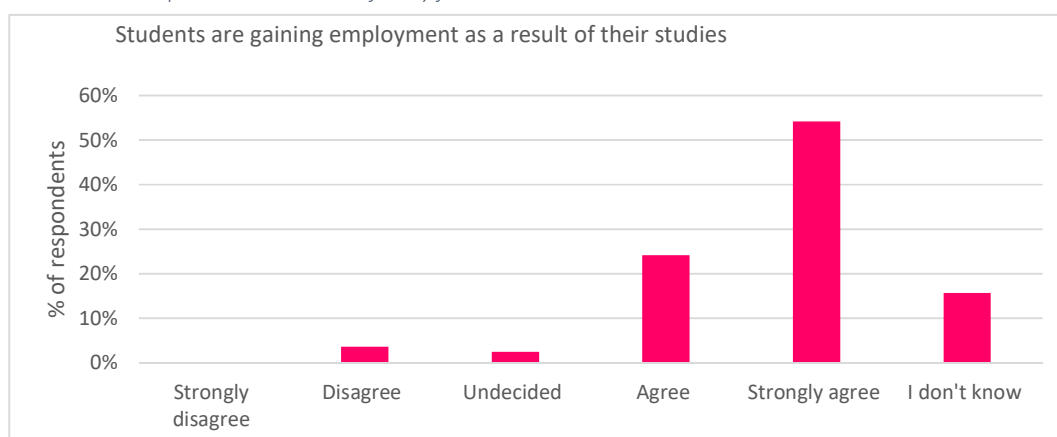
Figure 19 shows that 82 per cent of AFB student survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their career opportunities have improved as a result of AFB activities. Figure 20 shows that 78 per cent of education-provider-staff respondents are observing that AFB students are gaining employment as a result of their studies.

Figure 19: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [career] outcomes or benefits as a result of attending a residential block or work placement away from your community?



Source: Student survey (n=146)

Figure 20: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [employment] outcomes students have experienced as a result of Away from Base?



Source: Education-provider-staff survey (n=83)

Several education providers described the ways in which AFB training has been directly linked to work opportunities for students.

For example, we are doing a pre-employment course for Fire and Rescue NSW. They came to us because they want to employ Aboriginal people into the service.

—Education provider

Many of the interviewed students were currently employed in their communities in, for example, health or social work roles. These students were often studying in order to enhance their skills and knowledge for the job they were already doing. In some cases, providers reported that courses through AFB are broadening the horizons of students already in employment.

[We see] the change in their career aspirations. They may already be in a role. Once they've come through the first and second residentials they're already talking about where they want to go after the studies, what jobs they're aspiring to.

—Education provider

The importance of career aspiration as a factor in employment outcomes for Indigenous Australians should not be overlooked. The data from the evaluation shows that employment outcomes are closely linked to, and often dependent on, student aspiration as well as skills and knowledge. The following quote illustrates one student's journey from negative assumptions about education prospects for Indigenous people to study, internships, a scholarship and a job.

I was always under the understanding growing up that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people don't go to uni. So, when my parents did the [course] when I was in high school, I was like ok, there is a pathway. I wasn't getting the grades in high school so I started [the course] when I was 18 but I deferred. 10 years down the track I looked at my life and I'm like what am I doing with it, where are the next steps? So I went back to study and it's the best thing I have done because it has opened so many more doors. I used to think small. Now I am living in Brisbane, I've done three internships with businesses. I got a job with one of them. I went overseas through an exchange program on a scholarship. All these individual achievements which have made me braver.

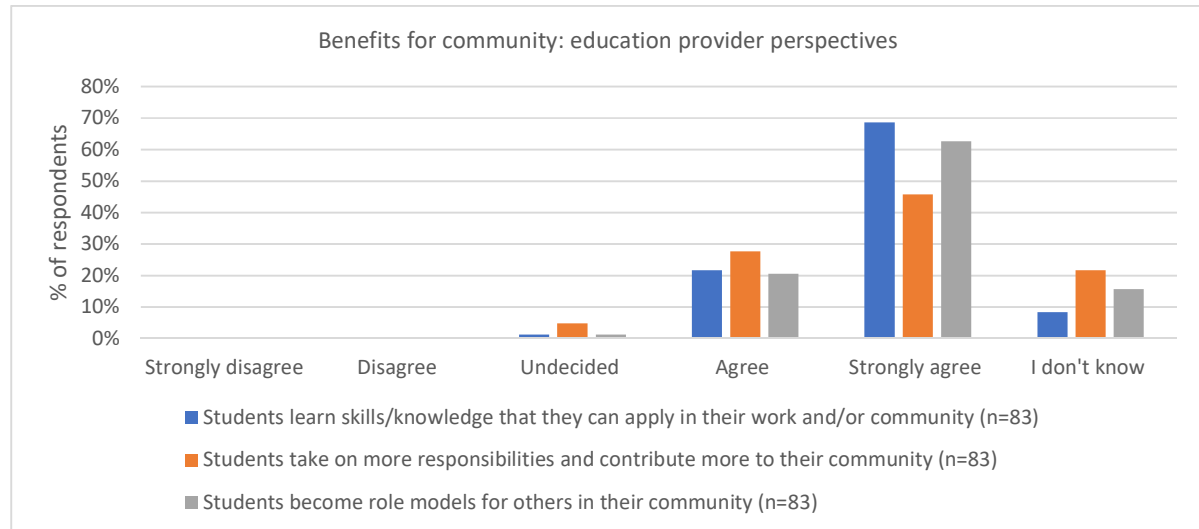
—AFB student

Benefits for community

Due to travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team was unable to interview community and family members of AFB students. The following discussion therefore relies on the perspectives of education providers and students.

Figure 21 shows that education provider staff largely agree that students are learning skills during their studies that they can take back to their communities, that they are contributing more to their communities and are becoming role models as a result of AFB.

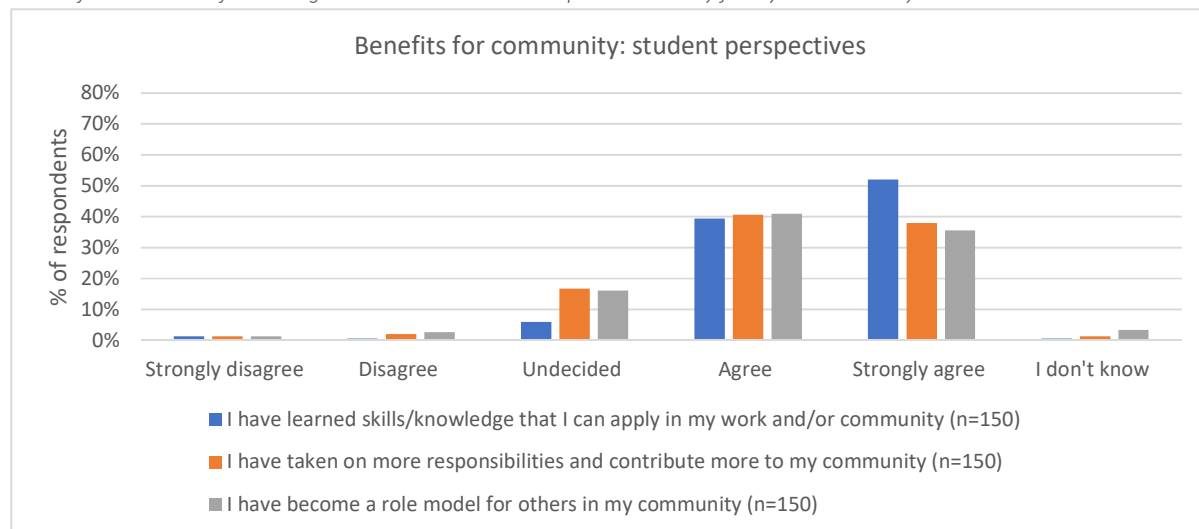
Figure 21: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [benefits for community] outcomes students have experienced as a result of Away from Base?



Source: Education-provider-staff survey

Data collected in the student survey largely confirms the opinions of education provider staff. Figure 22 demonstrates that, although students are somewhat less likely to be as effusive as staff regarding community outcomes (that is, generally more likely to select 'agree' than 'strongly agree'), they broadly agree that their participation in AFB is beneficial for their communities.

Figure 22: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [benefits for community] outcomes or benefits as a result of attending a residential block or work placement away from your community?



Source: Student survey

In interviews, AFB students commonly identified community outcomes they envisaged from their individual studies, often describing increased self-determination and empowerment.

The potential around where this course can take our collective people is the most empowering element to it. I've talked to our classmates about us being there to better ourselves so we can actually prove it to our own mob. That they can be empowered and an amazing community. That's been really amazing. The platform created by this [course] is what empowerment looks like when our mob own our own realities and push through it determining what we want and deserve. That's what keeps me here and going through the stress of the assignments.

—AFB student

Both education provider staff and students reported cases in which the confidence gained by students as a result of completing a course can feed back into their community. The research team frequently heard from providers that many of their students are recruited into their courses through referrals made by past students.

They take it back to their communities—there is a lot of word of mouth. We get students from those communities who have seen other students who have finished and graduated.

—Education provider

In their article 'Can't be what you can't see', Kinnane et al. (2014) argue that, in many Indigenous communities, students lack role models who have had a positive experience of tertiary education. Other research describes the importance of role models in supporting the aspirations of other community members (Behrendt et al. 2012; Gore et al. 2017). The desire to set an aspirational example for family and community can be motivating for AFB students, many of whom told us they are the first in their family to gain a mainstream educational accreditation.

You sit and you think 'we set an example'. I have a goal within myself to finish my degree before I'm 30 which won't happen but I want my nephews and nieces to know that education is not how it used to be and they can make a difference today. And I want to make my grandparents proud, which I know they would be. I will be the first one in my family to graduate from uni. We can make a difference.

—AFB student

By supporting students to complete courses, AFB is contributing to increased confidence and skills. This in turn benefits their communities, both in terms of the skills they have to offer and the example they can provide for other community members aspiring to undertake their own studies. Kinnane et al. refer to this phenomenon as a 'ripple effect' (2014, p.10).

Health outcomes are one particular way in which communities are benefiting from AFB students. One provider specialising in Aboriginal health education reported that, even before students are qualified as Aboriginal Health Workers, they are gaining health knowledge that they can pass on to their families. Another provider told the research team that one of their students had been educating their community in the importance of hand washing. This may be a very simple outcome but, particularly in the current context of the COVID-19 health crisis, not insignificant.

One student, who was studying to be an Aboriginal Health Worker and who already worked in a clinic in community, reported that their AFB course had helped them to better liaise between Aboriginal patients and clinic staff.

If they are talking to a nurse or a doctor you can help them understand what the doctor is trying to say. I feel more confident speaking English now.

—AFB student

Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing

The AFB program logic (see Appendix E) identifies as an intermediate outcome ‘students studying together support each other to travel and complete their studies.’ This aligns with findings from studies that show that peer connections and support play an important role for Indigenous tertiary students (Behrendt et al. 2012, West et al. 2016).

A consistent theme across many AFB student interviews was the supportive and positive experience that came from simply ‘connecting with other mob’. Education provider staff reported that students who leave their communities to come to residential blocks are often shy and lack social confidence. Increased social confidence among these students was one of the outcomes most frequently observed by staff. The following quote from a student interview describes the social confidence that resulted from attending a residential block with other Indigenous students.

I was a bit scared at first and I think I’ve got a bit more confidence. Learning a bit more about the culture, the younger ones calling me Auntie—I’ve never had that. Think I’ve learned more about respect and how to receive it. I know how to give it, but receiving it, I’m not used to it.

—AFB student

The opportunity to engage in on-campus activities with peers can lead to professional and personal connections that endure into the future. One AFB education provider, in their 2018 discussion paper response, made the point that,

the gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from across Australia into a physical class affords them an opportunity to make connections, exchange ideas and forge professional support networks that often serve them for life, just like mainstream students. This development of a community of learners and practitioners is considered by most educators to be an essential element of student development in higher education contexts.

—Education provider

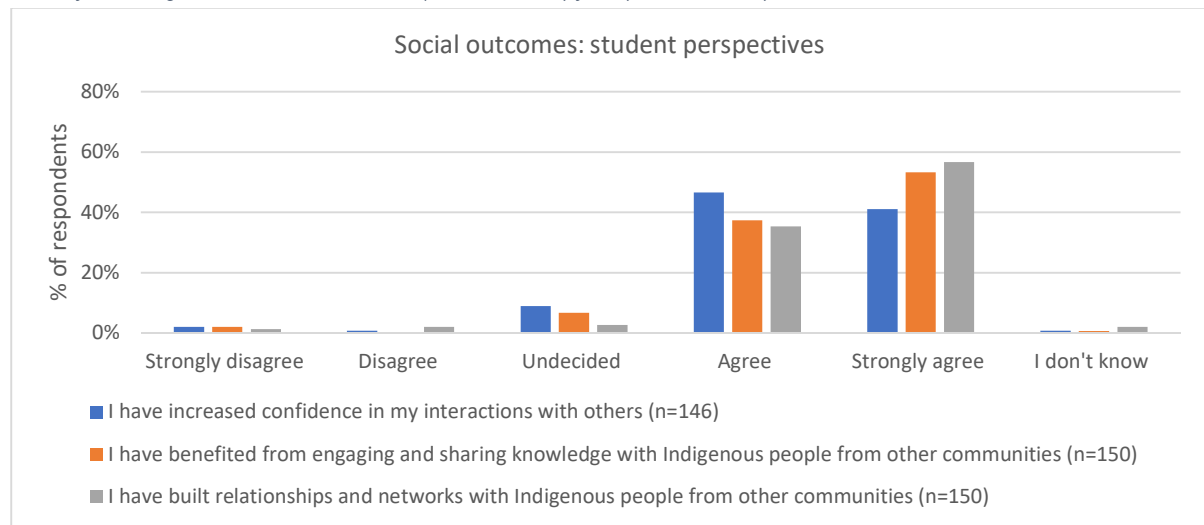
Interviews with students revealed that the peer connections that students make when they are physically on campus often transform into networks that endure after the end of their studies. Students told the research team that the opportunity to learn from Indigenous Australians from other communities has been beneficial for students and widened their perspectives.

The learning environment from my peers has been exceptional, I have learned so much from others in my class. People come with amazing work backgrounds and cultural knowledge that they bring from across Australia—it’s been exceptional. In our first year we had someone from (a remote community) and the conversations we had really helped to broaden even my mind around the things that are happening that we hear of on the Black grapevine but she had personal lived experiences of.

—AFB student

Of the students surveyed, the majority agreed or strongly agreed that AFB has resulted in social outcomes—namely, increased social confidence (88 per cent); engagement and knowledge sharing (91 per cent); and networking and relationship building with Indigenous people from other communities (92 per cent; see Figure 23). Responses to the education provider staff survey indicated that the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that AFB students were experiencing these outcomes.

Figure 23: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [social] outcomes or benefits as a result of attending a residential block or work placement away from your community?



Source: Student survey

An unintended outcome of AFB, noted by education provider staff in interviews, was the respite it affords those AFB students with stressful community and family responsibilities. For these students, the residential blocks provide time and space to concentrate on their studies that is not available to them when they are at home in their community. One student recounted:

[I'm] working with the young people with drug issues. At the Aboriginal medical centre. It's not 9 to 5—they knock on the door at any hour looking for a feed or a couch for the night. They go from [suburb] and my house is in the middle. Half way. That's the situation there. I find that this place here is needed, you know? Because we need to get out of that community—a respite for us because it's pretty heavy.

—AFB student

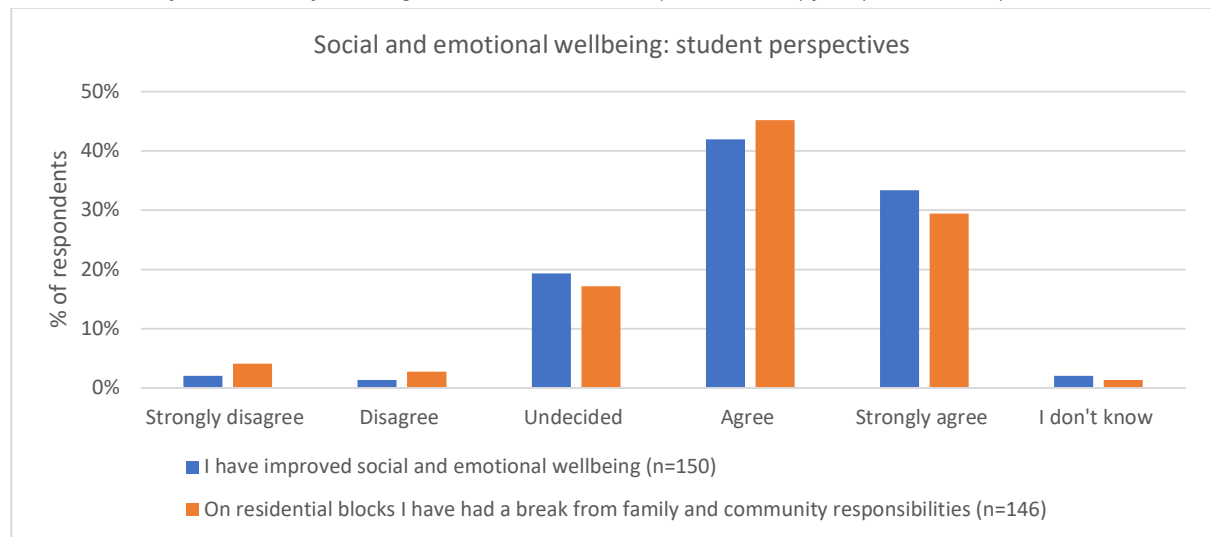
This finding aligns with literature that shows that studying away from home can have a range of benefits for Indigenous students, including the ability to have a break from caring responsibilities and focus on their studies (Wilks et al. 2017; Patton et al. 2012). The research team heard from female AFB students with children that, while being away from their children could be hard, residential blocks were vital opportunities to concentrate on coursework without the pressure to attend to the needs of their families.

You have a break from your responsibilities. I've got kids and even though I miss them... they just need me all the time.

—AFB student

Figure 24 shows that the majority of surveyed AFB students agreed or strongly agreed that AFB has improved their social and emotional wellbeing (75 per cent) and provided respite from family and community responsibilities (75 per cent). This student experience was supported by the perspectives of education provider staff who responded to the survey.

Figure 24: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about [social and emotional wellbeing] outcomes or benefits as a result of attending a residential block or work placement away from your community?



Source: Student survey

Summary: Outcomes for students

The research team found that AFB students are experiencing positive outcomes resulting from opportunities to engage in face-to-face learning. While online learning does increase opportunities for accessing education, the evaluation found that face-to-face learning is crucial for AFB students. AFB allows Indigenous students to interact with teachers and peers in a way that is not possible over the internet. This personal interaction is beneficial to their learning as well as their social and emotional wellbeing in the educational setting.

Finding 3: AFB students and education providers identified positive outcomes for students from attending face-to-face learning activities, including an increased likelihood of course completion and improved social and emotional wellbeing.

Recommendation: AFB should continue to prioritise face-to-face learning opportunities for Indigenous Australians who want to study without leaving their communities for long periods of time.

4 Findings: The administrative effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of AFB for education providers and the Commonwealth agencies who administer it

The following section addresses the second evaluation purpose, to examine the administrative effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of AFB for education providers and the Commonwealth agencies who administer it. It responds to the following KEQs:

- To what extent do Government departments administer the models efficiently?
- To what extent do education providers deliver the models in an efficient, effective and appropriate manner?
- To what extent are the models delivered in a culturally appropriate way?

4.1 To what extent do Government departments administer the models efficiently?

The efficiency of the NIAA and DSS (through Services Australia) administration of AFB is considered in relation to the following areas:

- payment arrangements between AFB education providers and the two government departments who fund AFB, and the extent to which funding is adequate
- clarity of arrangements and communication between government departments and education providers
- Services Australia's processing of ABSTUDY claims for AFB
- Services Australia's communication with ABSTUDY AFB claimants
- AFB travel arrangements
- AFB accommodation arrangements

4.1.1 Funding models

NIAA and Services Australia diverge considerably in how they administer entitlements and payments for their respective models of AFB.

Payment arrangements for NIAA AFB

NIAA negotiates contract variations with education providers at the beginning of each calendar year. Funding for each year is based on a formula in which the rate is the same for every student. In 2020 this amount, known as the Education Provider Unit Cost (EPUC), was \$6641.85. NIAA makes two payments to education providers during the year. The first payment is 50 per cent of the provider's estimated entitlement for that year. This estimate is based on the number of student enrolments from the previous year. The second payment is the remainder of the entitlement. This is calculated from the actual enrolment numbers over the year as reported by the provider in September. Education providers can allocate 10 per cent of their funding to administrative purposes.

Payment arrangements for Services Australia AFB

Under the DSS AFB model, three modes of payment exist: advance payment, reimbursement and bulk funding.

An advance payment for AFB residential expenses (accommodation and meals) can be requested by an education provider for a student. Requests by education providers must be made six weeks in advance of the activity. A request by an individual student for travel allowance (accommodation and meals) must be lodged at least three weeks in advance of the activity. Advance payments are subject to acquittal (DSS 2019, ch.96.3).

A reimbursement for the costs of an individual AFB activity (fares, residential expenses/travel allowance) can be requested by an individual student or education provider. Education providers

must request approval to seek reimbursement at least six weeks in advance of the activity (DSS 2019, ch.96.4)

An education provider can apply for AFB bulk funding, usually for the whole year. In this instance Services Australia makes an advance payment that will cover the costs of planned activities for the first semester. The payment for second semester activities is made when the education provider has provided the report and expenditure statement for the first semester (DSS 2019, ch.96.5).

Staff at Services Australia have indicated that most education providers use the reimbursement option as it is the most practical.¹⁷ As student travel is usually booked by Services Australia's contracted travel management company, QBT, education providers generally do not incur expenses for fares.

Adequacy of funding

DSS AFB is demand-driven funding that pays the actual costs incurred by students, for a limited number of AFB activities and a limited number of total days of AFB activities. NIAA funding, on the other hand, is a capped amount per student.

In the education-provider-staff survey, 53 per cent of respondents (n=34) from NIAA education providers agreed that NIAA funding was sufficient to cover the travel, accommodation and meal costs of AFB students. A higher proportion (67 per cent) of respondents from Services Australia providers agreed that the DSS (administered by Services Australia) funding was sufficient.

A common complaint among interviewees and survey respondents was that the NIAA capped payment per student was not enough to cover the travel costs of students from remote and very remote communities.

The EPUC, it needs to be indexed to reflect the costs associated with travelling students in regional and remote areas – there's no public transport system out here. [Remote students] might require 3 or 4 transfers to get to us and back. The cost to get the student to and from one workshop takes up the whole EPUC. God help us if they want to come to two workshops in the year!

—Education provider

NIAA education providers with a balance of students from different locations can spend their AFB allocation flexibly: if some students' residential block costs are significantly lower than the EPUC, the remainder can go towards the travel costs of more remote students. This works well for some providers, but not for those with a high proportion of students coming from remote communities, such as islands in the Torres Strait.

NIAA AFB financial acquittal data from 2016–2020 indicates that up to five AFB providers each year have a significant overspend and have to draw on other funds to cover the costs of AFB students. Although this evaluation has not had access to data showing proportions of remote students per provider, those providers with large overspend in the financial data told the research team, in interviews, that they have large numbers of remote students.

Conversely, the NIAA financial data also indicates that a small number of providers have significant underspend. This could be because those providers have larger proportions of students from regional and capital city locations.

Summary: Funding models

Whereas DSS has a demand-driven funding model that pays the actual costs of a limited number of AFB activities per student, NIAA AFB funding is a capped allocation per student. The NIAA funding

¹⁷ Future research could investigate why this is the case, if deemed necessary by Services Australia.

model is therefore less advantageous for education providers that cater to a large number of students whose travel arrangements are more costly.

Finding 4: Under the NIAA model, education providers with a disproportionate number of students travelling from remote communities may receive insufficient funding to cover the costs of AFB activities.

Recommendation: NIAA should review the current structure of its payments to education providers, with consideration of their proportion of remote students and the extent to which current arrangements are meeting their needs

4.1.2 Clarity of communication and arrangements with education providers

Guidelines provided

When asked about arrangements with government departments in the online survey, NIAA education providers were more likely than Services Australia providers to agree or strongly agree that the guidelines for delivering AFB were clear and easy to understand (69 per cent compared to 43 per cent, as outlined in Figures 25 and 26).

There are several explanations for this discrepancy between perceptions of the clarity of the two models. First, the payment options for the DSS (ABSTUDY) are more diverse than for the NIAA model, and therefore more complicated for providers to understand.

Second, the NIAA issues a set of Operational Protocols for providers that is specific to delivering AFB. The guidelines for Services Australia AFB, however, are contained within the broader ABSTUDY Policy Manual, making them more difficult to locate.

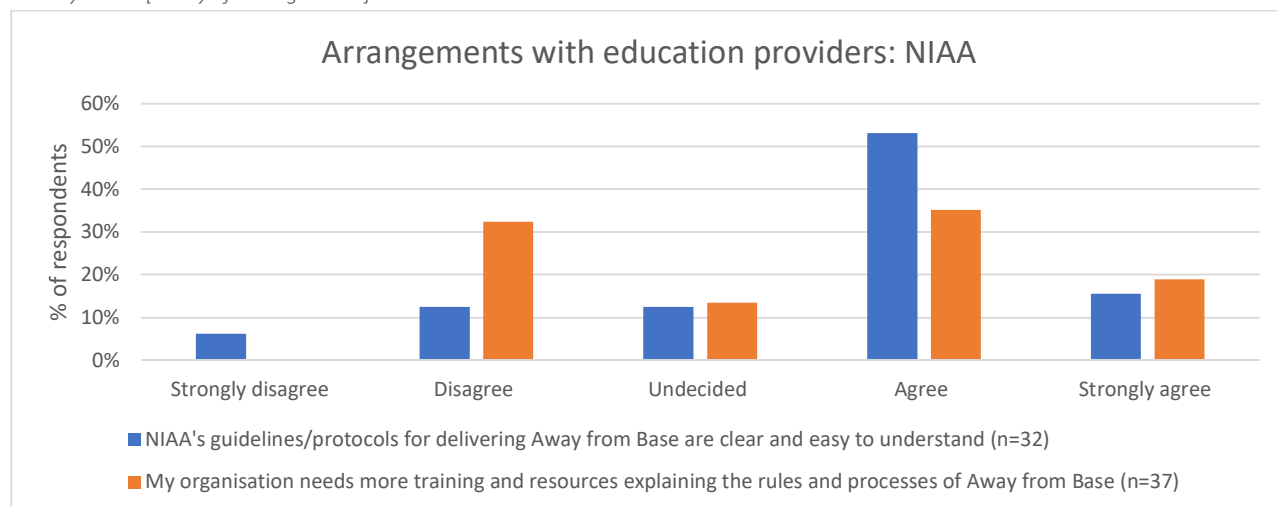
They need a simplified version of the policy documents. [...] The document is too big. What they need to create is a simplified version for people who don't speak that [bureaucratic] language.

—Education provider

A staff member from DSS echoed this view, acknowledging that their funding delivered through Services Australia could benefit from a set of guidelines for providers that are specific to AFB.

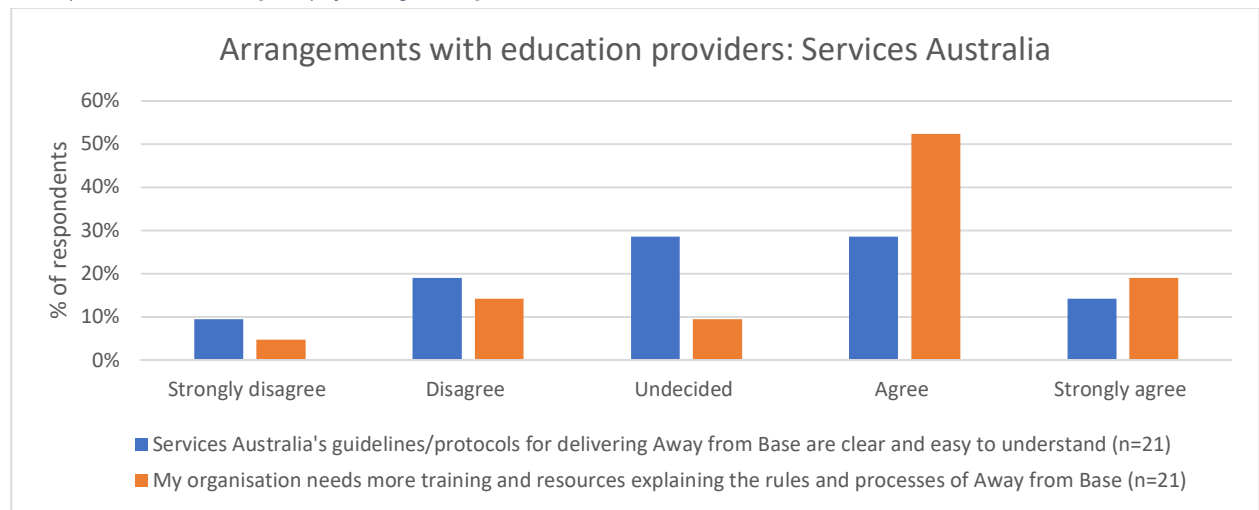
Figure 25 and Figure 26 also show that a significant proportion of education provider staff from both models (53 per cent for NIAA and 71 per cent for Services Australia) felt that their organisation would benefit from more training and resources explaining the rules and processes of AFB.

Figure 25: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by NIAA? [clarity of arrangements]



Source: Education-provider-staff survey

Figure 26: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by Services Australia? [clarity of arrangements]



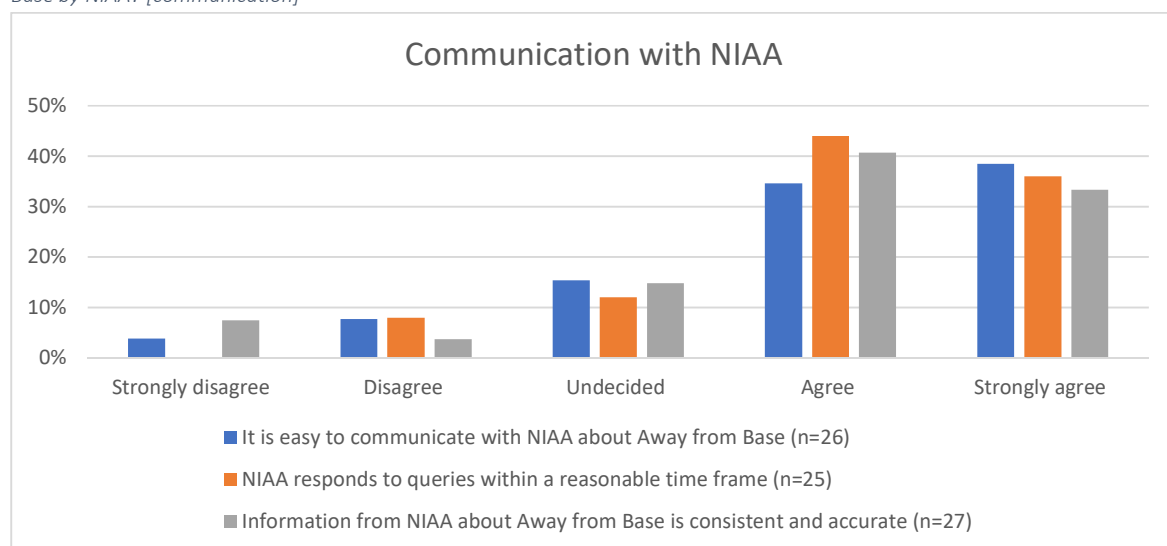
Source: Education-provider-staff survey

Communication

The survey asked education provider staff about ease of communication with the relevant government agency, the time taken for responses to queries, and the consistency and accuracy of information received. In general, education providers delivering the Services Australia model of AFB were more likely to be dissatisfied with communication processes (see Figure 27 and Figure 28). For example:

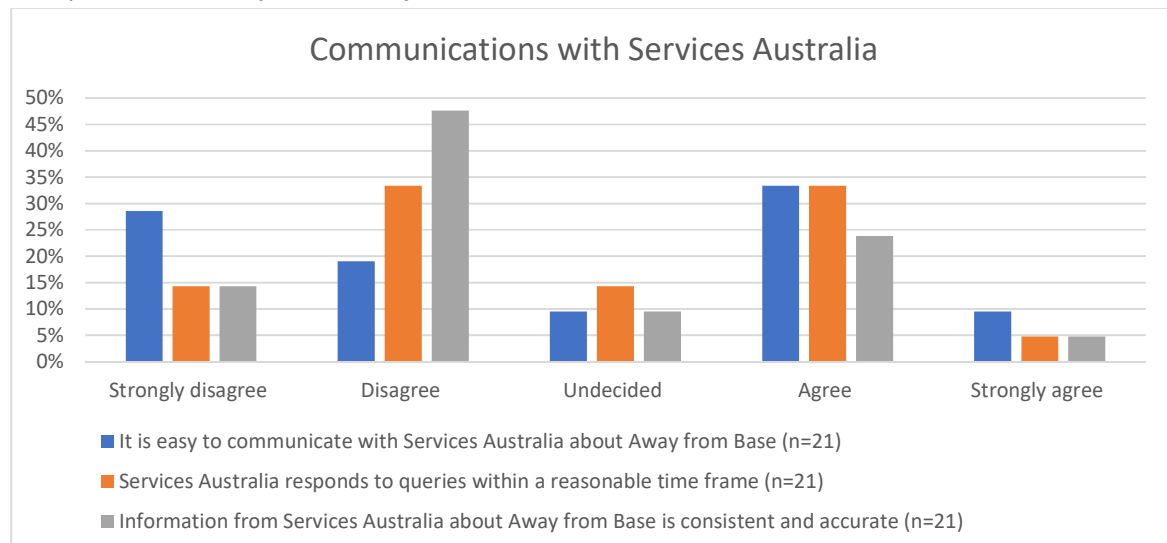
- 73 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is easy to communicate with NIAA about AFB, compared to only 43 per cent with Services Australia
- 80 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that NIAA responds to queries within a reasonable timeframe, compared to 38 per cent with Services Australia
- 74 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information from NIAA about AFB is consistent and accurate, compared to 38 per cent with Services Australia.

Figure 27: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by NIAA? [communication]



Source: Education-provider-staff survey

Figure 28: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by Services Australia? [communication]



Source: Education-provider-staff survey

The discrepancy between provider perspectives on ease of communication can be explained by several factors. While providers delivering the NIAA model told our research team that it was relatively easy to communicate with the AFB team within NIAA, providers using the DSS AFB program with Services Australia reported that they had no one contact person to communicate with at Services Australia.

Because education providers do not have a direct communication channel with Services Australia, they are finding that the information provided by staff is inconsistent. In interviews, staff members frequently told the research team that in the past they had had access to a specialised AFB team at Services Australia. Now, however, they call a generalised ABSTUDY line.

Now you just ring up a national number and you're talking to some call centre located somewhere in Australia. You can get a different opinion from each call centre operator. But AFB is a specific program so it's a pity they don't have a specific team working with it. Any other ABSTUDY enquiry a general call centre operator will have sufficient knowledge to deal with it, but not AFB.

—Education provider

Analysis of survey comments about the administration of AFB by Services Australia showed that the most frequently occurring themes were:

- the need to have a direct AFB contact in the department, and
- the lack of consistency of information provided by Services Australia staff.

Several Services Australia staff acknowledged some of the problems that the agency faces with communication.

There used to be four ABSTUDY hubs around Australia. It used to be more hands on and the education providers could contact us directly.

—Services Australia staff

Another Services Australia staff member reported that different staff members have their own ways of doing things, which are not necessarily consistent with their colleagues. For example, they told the research team that 'no two remittance letters were the same.' They explained that efforts are being made to introduce more consistency measures into the delivery of AFB.

The primary challenge that Services Australia currently faces is in relation to Australian Government privacy protocols and cyber-security concerns. One Services Australia staff member told the research team that:

We used to send an email saying we processed this claim, the whole claim used to be on the email. Now, with the changes, even the letters we send to them, there is no detail about students. There are issues under the Privacy Act that prevent us from sharing the information via email. Generally we can't communicate at all via email, only to send emails about approvals for blocks. We used to be very open in our emails to education providers, we used to be able to discuss individual students and their needs and what we needed to get them up and running and to the blocks. The only way now is to get on the phone—and the providers no longer have the contact point.

—Services Australia staff

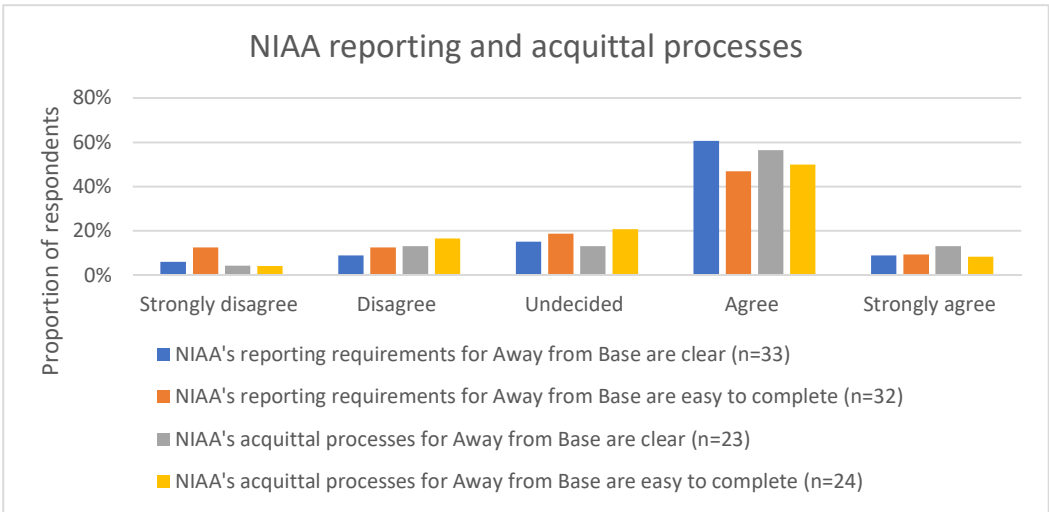
Several Services Australia staff mentioned that their communication processes with AFB education providers could be improved by a centralised, online portal through which documents could be transferred and information accessed.

Reporting and acquittal processes

The reporting requirements for NIAA are more extensive than those of Services Australia for the DSS AFB program. NIAA education providers are asked to provide student enrolment, demographic and completion data, as well as report against their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). (For more details on NIAA reporting requirements, see Appendix D.) Services Australia providers, on the other hand, are only required to acquit expenditure.

Figure 29 demonstrates that 70 per cent of respondents thought NIAA reporting and acquittal requirements were clear, and just under 60 per cent thought they were easy to complete. It is, however, worth noting the low response rate for this question. A high proportion of the survey participants were teaching staff who are not involved with the AFB administrative processes, and therefore did not answer questions relating to administration of the program. Interview data is equivocal on this point, with some participants finding the reporting processes onerous and others finding it straightforward.

Figure 29: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by NIAA? [reporting and acquittal processes]



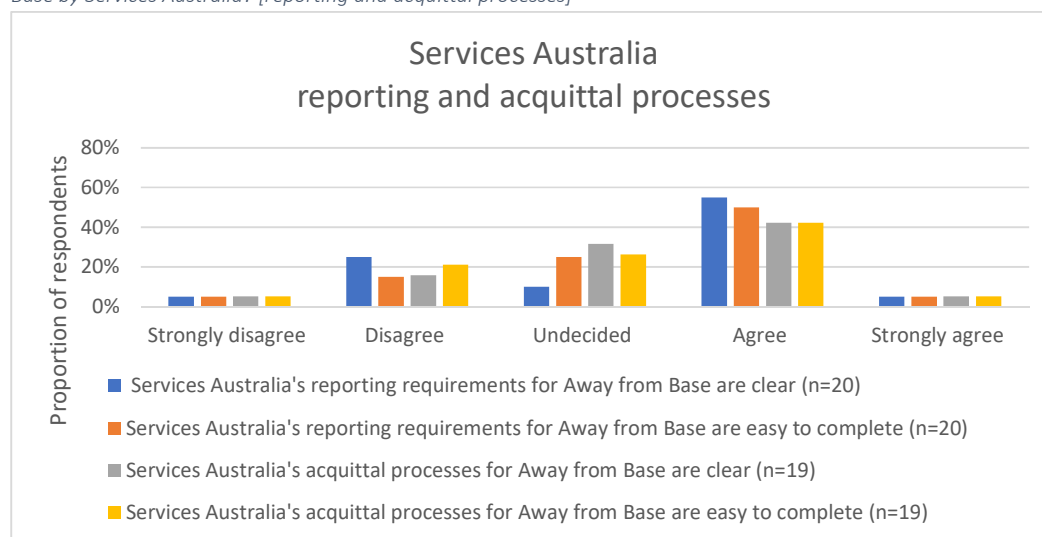
Source: Education-provider-staff survey

Figure 30 shows that just under 50 per cent of Services Australia providers found the acquittal processes clear and easy to complete. Again, the response rate is low for this question because only a subset of survey participants was involved in the administration of AFB. For education providers using the DSS Abstudy program delivered by Services Australia model, the challenges associated with acquittals are closely associated with the issues around communication already discussed. As such, interviews with education providers discussed acquittal problems in the light of the difficulty getting consistent information from Services Australia and the problems associated with transferring documentation.

We develop our own acquittal process to acquit our residential blocks. It would be great if the government gave us the templates that said this is what you need to provide to acquit, just to simplify the process.

—Education provider

Figure 30: To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by Services Australia? [reporting and acquittal processes]



Source: Education-provider-staff survey

One Services Australia staff member acknowledged that education providers are confused about the requirements for acquittal:

You can see for education providers it has become very confusing with the lack of consultation [...] about the requirements they need, not only for the students but for them to be able to reconcile their accounts. There is a lot of rework because there is a lack of information for the institutions.

—Services Australia staff

This staff member told researchers that the AFB team had recently developed a way of better communicating with providers about which student costs have or have not been reimbursed and the reasons why.

As NIAA AFB education providers are paid a lump sum based on student numbers, the issue of reimbursement only applies to Services Australia AFB education providers. The timeliness of reimbursement of these providers did not emerge as an isolated issue of concern. Instead, education providers reported that complications and confusions during the acquittal process then cause delays for reimbursement. These complications include uncertainty regarding the ABSTUDY status of students and communication barriers between Services Australia on the one hand, and education

providers and third parties (accommodation providers, for example) on the other. See below for more specific discussion of the issue of student ABSTUDY status.

Summary: Clarity of communication and arrangements

Education providers using the NIAA model generally reported that their communication channels with NIAA were effective and that processes and policies were clear. On the other hand, education providers using the DSS AFB program delivered by Services Australia model were more likely to have difficulties communicating with and obtaining clear, consistent information from the department. Several factors impede communication, including government-wide security protocols preventing certain information being sent by email, a lack of designated contact personnel for education providers and the absence of a stand-alone guideline document for AFB.

Finding 5: Effective communication between Services Australia and AFB education providers is impeded by security protocols, an absence of dedicated personnel, and inconsistent information/advice.

Recommendation: Services Australia should review their communication processes with AFB education providers to ensure they are efficient and secure. A 'how to' manual specific to AFB should be developed to improve the consistency of information/advice provided.

4.1.3 Processing ABSTUDY claims

A major factor currently affecting the efficient administration of both models of AFB is the Services Australia ABSTUDY approval process. To be eligible for AFB assistance under either model, a student must meet the primary eligibility criteria for ABSTUDY. The student must:

- be an Australian citizen
- be an Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
- be enrolled in an approved course (or approved Testing and Assessment activity)
- not be receiving other government assistance or relevant financial assistance¹⁸
- normally live in Australia (DSS 2019, ch.9.1).

AFB entitlements are not subject to means testing (DSS 2019, ch.56.2).

The requirement for AFB students to be ABSTUDY eligible is one of the primary factors impeding ease of access to both models of AFB. In theory, Services Australia requires 21 days to process an ABSTUDY claim. In an ideal scenario, an AFB student would have finalised their ABSTUDY eligibility in time for education providers to make the necessary arrangements for travel to residential blocks, and book accommodation.

If a provider cannot show that a student was ABSTUDY eligible at the time of the residential block, they risk not receiving funding for that student's expenses. In some situations, an ABSTUDY claim is not processed until after the residential block is over, by which time the student might no longer be an enrolled student and therefore not eligible for ABSTUDY. These situations are causing a great deal of stress for both education provider staff and students.

There are a range of reasons why AFB students are not ABSTUDY approved in time for their residential block. First, many students are not already on ABSTUDY payments, and are only applying to claim the incidental award that gives them access to AFB funding. This means that, instead of applying for ABSTUDY living allowance payments at the beginning of a semester, they are applying for the purpose of attending a residential block. Services Australia staff are aware of this issue.

¹⁸ See chapter 12 of the ABSTUDY policy manual for more details

It's hard because a lot of these students work, they don't rely on ABSTUDY for general assistance, they get ABSTUDY to go to AFB activity so they aren't reliant on ABSTUDY [payments] and, there's not an urgency to get those forms in until they realise that they can't get fares allowance or any assistance to come down.

—Services Australia staff

This staff member explained that the residential blocks do not usually start at the beginning of a course and that, ideally, the education provider would be assisting students with the ABSTUDY claim throughout the orientation process. The research team heard, however, that in many cases the residential block was at the beginning of the course, meaning that there were not several weeks of buffer between the students starting their course and leaving for the residential block. One AFB student told the research team about the difficulties they had observed for other students in their course:

It was pretty easy, but I'm already on a payment. For those not already on a payment they found it very hard to apply. So [name of provider staff] ended up doing some people's for them. If you're already on payment it's easy but if you're not it's a long process. Some were 6 weeks in and they still hadn't received a confirmation that said they were eligible.

—AFB student

Another factor impeding the approval process is that, because of Services Australia privacy protocols, education providers cannot easily find out which of their students is eligible. In most cases they rely on the student providing confirmation from Services Australia on their ABSTUDY status. In cases where a provider has a lot of students from remote communities, collecting these verification letters is not easy. In interviews, some provider staff told the research team that making arrangements for residential blocks would be made much easier if there was more visibility at their end in terms of which of their students were ABSTUDY approved.

Services Australia staff explained that Centrelink has a 'business gateway' that allows third parties, such as education providers, to make an enquiry about a student's status via Centrelink Confirmation e-services. This is only possible if the provider has the permission of the student to access their information and if the provider is registered for Business Services through Services Australia. Furthermore, this solution only offers a 'point-in-time' snapshot of eligible students at the time of the enquiry. As a Services Australia staff member pointed out:

That process is good in theory but [...] it only works if the student is currently getting ABSTUDY at that time—not after the course has finished or if the student is no longer ABSTUDY current.

—Services Australia staff

The research team spoke to some education providers who had access to this confirmation process. The following quote summarises some of the confusions associated with reconciling their student enrolments against the list supplied by Services Australia.

The uni gets a list from Services Australia they tell us how many enrolled at [the institution] and how many have been accepted as eligible by ABSTUDY. Sometimes there's a grey area... They take a long time to process the ABSTUDY claims. [...] We have a list of students we have to know whether we can reconcile that with our records. We might have 150 on our books and they may have 200 and they may be completely different students. We need to be able to reconcile that somehow.

—Education provider staff

Education provider staff and students frequently raised the issue of the time taken by Services Australia to process ABSTUDY claims. Services Australia has a KPI of 21 days as the period in which to

process claims. Data supplied by Services Australia showed that the average ABSTUDY claim times was 26 days.¹⁹ One Services Australia staff member explained that the usual cause of delays is that students need to provide a proof of enrolment and sometimes a letter from an employer. Counterbalancing this perspective, several education providers told the research team that the process takes longer because a student has provided all their documentation but it has not been checked, or has been missed by Services Australia staff.

If a student ABSTUDY claim is not processed in enough time, the student will risk missing their residential block. Several education providers told the research team that they regularly organise travel for students who are not yet ABSTUDY approved on the basis that their eligibility will be confirmed at a later date. In doing so, they risk not receiving funding for the student if the ABSTUDY claim is not completed, or if the student is assessed as not eligible for ABSTUDY.

Summary: Processing ABSTUDY claims

All AFB students, regardless of model, must be ABSTUDY eligible in order to claim AFB funding or have an education provider claim it on their behalf. Because of the nature of AFB, students are often only applying for ABSTUDY for the purposes of a short residential block, not an entire semester. This can cause complex timing misalignments between student application and residential blocks resulting in increased administrative workload for providers.

Finding 6: The unique nature of AFB means that the time to process ABSTUDY claims often does not align with the timing of residential blocks.

Recommendations: Services Australia should consider the possibility of ‘fast-tracking’ the ABSTUDY claim process for AFB students. In addition, increased visibility for AFB education providers in terms of the ABSTUDY status of their students would assist staff to plan residential blocks and support their students to prepare for their blocks. Improved communication processes (see Finding 5) could also alleviate the timing issue.

4.1.4 Communicating with ABSTUDY claimants

Dealing with ABSTUDY is often challenging for AFB students, and they require assistance to manage their claims. Education providers assisting students told the research team that some ABSTUDY staff do not understand the technological barriers for Indigenous students, for example, that they might not have the facilities or capabilities to access a myGov account. Education provider staff told the research team that Services Australia call centre operators are not always well equipped to communicate over the phone with Indigenous students who are not experienced in negotiating complex bureaucracies in English. They reported that communication barriers between students and Services Australia call centre operators can result in a student being incorrectly deemed ineligible for ABSTUDY.

A staff member who travels to remote communities to assist students with the application process gave the following example of a Services Australia staff member who struggled to find an effective way to communicate with an AFB student:

I was in Arnhem Land with a very traditional lady on the phone for 1.5 hours, and [then] the ABSTUDY staff member was asking different things, saying ‘Do you understand that this is a compliance issue?’ I said can you please explain this, she needs simpler words. The ABSTUDY person didn’t know what to say.

—Education provider staff

As demonstrated in the quote above, students trying to call ABSTUDY can find themselves on hold for long periods of time. The combination of all of the factors already discussed can prove too frustrating

¹⁹ This figure is for ABSTUDY claims generally, not just those related to AFB.

for students. In several interviews, the research team heard that if education provider staff were not there to assist students and encourage them to persevere, the students would give up.

Once the students ring up and don't get anywhere it is easy for them to give up and not continue on. They can't get anyone to help them on the phone so they just stop and we can't get them on the phone—they have given up.

—Education provider staff

While the issues described above appear to be more pronounced for students living in remote communities, students from other locations also described the process of dealing with ABSTUDY as frustrating. Like education providers, students reported receiving inconsistent information from ABSTUDY staff.

Finding 7: Student experiences of dealing with Services Australia vary, with particular challenges experienced by students with limited access to internet and telephone networks, who speak English as an additional language, and those with low literacy levels.

Recommendation: Services Australia should continue to explore ways to facilitate communication with Indigenous students for whom navigating ABSTUDY claim requirements can be challenging.

4.1.5 Arranging travel

Currently, the two models of AFB differ to a significant extent in how flexible they can be to meet the travel needs of students. The NIAA is not involved in arranging travel for students. Education providers delivering AFB with NIAA receive bulk funding, which they use to arrange travel, accommodation and meals for their AFB approved students. The capacity for NIAA providers to arrange travel for their students means that they can flexibly cater to the requirements of individual students, based on their knowledge of the student's needs and the local context.

In principle, education providers receiving DSS AFB funding delivered through Services Australia have the option to arrange student travel and apply for reimbursement from Services Australia. As this option carries a risk of out-of-pocket expenses for the provider, however, most opt for Services Australia to organise student travel through their contracted travel-services provider, QBT.

Limitations of Services Australia's administration of student travel through QBT

A key problem with the arrangement with QBT is that education providers have no contact with the agency and therefore no ability to act as a point of liaison between the students and the travel agent. Providers must provide the list of travelling students to Services Australia four to six weeks in advance of the residential block. Some education providers find this requirement unrealistic because community obligations of their student cohort, such as Sorry Business, cannot be anticipated this far in advance.

In spite of the requirement to submit travel lists four weeks in advance, providers told us that students regularly do not receive their travel itinerary in enough time to prepare for travel. This is stressful for provider staff who are fielding calls from worried students who they can do little to help.

We've received itineraries on Friday at 3 pm our time, which means in the East, it's 6 o'clock. They're closed. So if you need to make any queries or change, no hope. And now we've got to get it to a student at a community who is using a community centre or health centre to access the internet—they're closed—but the student needs to get on the plane at 8 o'clock Monday morning and the office opens at 9. And yet they've told us we had to hand the itinerary request in 4 weeks prior.

—Education provider staff

If these students do not travel because of late itineraries, the provider risks losing funds spent on their accommodation. More importantly, students who miss flights could find themselves liable for the cost of the fare.

In other cases, the travel arrangements are unsuitable from a safety perspective. Students from one education provider told the research team that QBT was booking itineraries that required them to be catching a bus from their town at 4am.

To get to that train the bus comes out here at 4am in the morning in the middle of town. And with young fellas in community doing crime we arked up and said we not standing out there so Uncle [staff member] convinced ABSTUDY that we wouldn't do it that way. He drove us all down instead. They wanted us to catch a train—4-hour ride and then pay for a taxi to the motel—we don't even know where we are—we are proper mission mob—we all stick together.

—AFB students

While this anecdote demonstrates that ultimately Services Australia can be flexible around travel, it required strong advocacy on the part of an education provider to arrive at a solution.

Education providers told the research team that Services Australia and QBT seem to lack specialised knowledge of the regions that students are coming from. For example, some islands in the Torres Strait do not have airports, and a complex series of travel legs need to be coordinated to get a student to their residential block. The centralised system means that Services Australia and QBT staff can be unaware of local issues, such as lack of airports or weather conditions that directly affect students' ability to travel.

[QBT is] ringing me saying 'There are no airports on [the island], how do I fly them to [name of town]?' A few years ago there were a whole group of Indigenous people [in ABSTUDY] who know our community, knew our regions, local people, knew what was going on, had their finger on the pulse. Now with the restructure of government anyone in Australia can pick up the claim [...] With cyclones, they won't even know that there is a cyclone and it's an urgent priority for us.

—Education provider staff

Furthermore, rules around travel do not always take into account the day-to-day realities of Indigenous Australians from remote communities, some of whom regularly travel in their region. One education provider who has students from central Australia explained the following scenario:

One thing I find hard to understand is that ABSTUDY says the student has to travel from home to college. On paper that makes sense until you understand how many of our folk operate. They travel quite a bit, come into bigger centres for shopping or medical. They're not always in their home community when it comes time for the block.[...] If someone from Pipalyatjara is in Alice Springs, and wants the fare from Alice springs, ABSTUDY will say 'No, you have to go back to Pipalyatjara so you can come back to Alice so we can get you to [the provider].' Why don't they look at the map and see that to fly them from Alice would be much cheaper? We've had students in Alice getting on the bus going all the way back to Pipalyatjara so that they can get on the bush bus to come back to Alice.

—Education provider staff

A student who participated in an interview reported that ABSTUDY was flying her from Bundaberg to Brisbane and then to Rockhampton when it would have been easier, faster and more cost effective for her to take the train.

Summary: Travel

In order for AFB travel arrangements to respond to the diverse needs of Indigenous Australians, they must be flexible enough to take into account the barriers that participants face. Many AFB students live in remote communities that are not readily accessible via mainstream transport options. Local climate (floods and cyclones) can make travel more complicated for students in certain areas. Students might have cultural obligations in their community that necessitate changing travel plans at the last minute. It is important, therefore, that whoever organises travel has adequate understanding of the context of the AFB students they are dealing with.

Finding 8: For most education providers accessing the DSS AFB model, student travel is arranged by Services Australia's contracted travel-services provider, QBT. Education providers reported that QBT does not always have sufficient local knowledge to make efficient travel arrangements for these students, particularly those from remote locations and with complex travel needs.

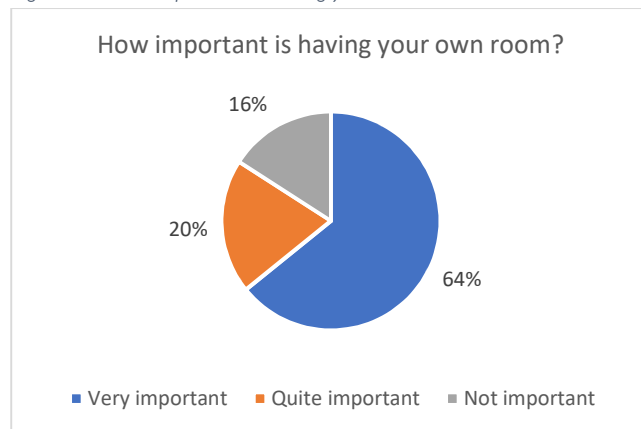
Recommendation: Services Australia should review the way that travel is arranged for AFB students to ensure it is culturally appropriate and context specific.

4.1.6 Accommodation

Under the NIAA AFB model, providers are required to arrange accommodation at the twin-share rate unless students can provide medical or cultural evidence that they require single accommodation (PM&C 2018a, p.24). Accommodation costs for the DSS AFB model are guided by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) determination of reasonable travel and accommodation costs (ATO 2019).

Interviews and surveys revealed that, in practice, accommodation arrangements for AFB students varied considerably between providers, and also depended on the local availability at the time of a residential block. Some students share a bedroom with another AFB student, some have individual bedrooms with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities, and sometimes they are in single accommodation. Accommodation can be either on or off campus. Although the NIAA guidelines specify twin-share accommodation, in reality education providers sometimes find that other solutions (such as a shared house with separate bedrooms) are more economical. Student survey results, shown in Figure 31, revealed that the majority of students prefer to have their own room.

Figure 31: How important is having your own room?



Source: Student survey (n=176)

In interviews, students reported that after a day in class they needed the privacy of a single room, and that sharing with a stranger was uncomfortable. The following quote illustrates a problematic situation arising from inappropriate sharing arrangements.

The thing I didn't like was that they put us in shared rooms with complete strangers. [...] There was one young girl who was only 18, [...], she didn't know she would be sharing a room. [Her roommate] didn't bother even going to [class], and she was in there and had gone through her bags. [...] They wouldn't swap it over to put her in a single room because it was already sorted. So we ended up three in my room because we all just bunked in my room.

—AFB student

In the education provider survey, 59 per cent of respondents reported that students complain if they have to share a room. In interviews, some education provider staff expressed the view that, as adults, their students should be entitled to single accommodation without the need to present medical evidence.

Summary: Accommodation

NIAA AFB guidelines specify that students must be allocated accommodation at a twin-share rate, and DSS specifies that accommodation costs are in line with the ATO determination. Accommodation arrangements for AFB students therefore depend on the local price and availability of accommodation. Although evidence suggests that students prefer to have their own room, this is not always feasible under the current funding allocation for either model.

4.2 To what extent do education providers deliver the models efficiently, effectively and appropriately?

For a number of reasons, the research team found it difficult to make generalisations about the ways in which education providers are delivering AFB. First, AFB is a funding program intended to improve access to a diverse range of tertiary education opportunities, and neither NIAA nor DSS provides guidelines on how education providers should run courses or interact with students. Second, AFB providers are extremely diverse organisations operating across multiple sectors, locations and contexts. A large university in a capital city and an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation in a remote area have markedly different resources, needs, challenges and student cohorts. Third, the processes for delivering AFB differ not only across the two models but also in terms of the arrangements that each provider has with its funder. Fourth, it was beyond the scope of the evaluation to analyse individual-provider delivery in detail.

Regardless of the model used, education providers are (in most cases) organising accommodation and meals for students. Where NIAA is funding AFB, the provider is usually either organising student travel directly, or liaising with a travel agent. In many cases, providers are also providing other support, outside of the parameters of AFB, in the form of pastoral care and academic assistance.

The following section is structured according to four 'steps' in the student journey through AFB, and what education providers are often doing at each step of the way to help make AFB a culturally safe experience. It also outlines the challenges that education providers can face at each step of the process. The four steps are:

1. Getting there safely
2. Creating a safe environment
3. Supporting Indigenous learning
4. Completing the circle

The research team found that, at each step of the way, providers can support students by building relationships with students that help the providers understand the students' individual needs.

4.2.1 Getting there safely

Before students arrive on campus for their residential blocks, they must navigate the enrolment and ABSTUDY claim processes, and prepare to travel away from their community. There are several ways that education providers can assist students in the lead up to AFB activities:

- initiating relationships
- providing assistance to negotiate enrolment and ABSTUDY claims
- supporting the student from their community to their arrival at their accommodation/campus

Initiating relationships with students

The most effective way that education providers can ensure that they are supporting the needs of students is through relationship building. Several education providers reported that it is helpful if staff members have connections with and knowledge of the communities where their students live. Understanding the context that students are coming from, and making contact with the student before they arrive on campus, means that staff can support individual students according to their particular needs.

Before the student even sets foot on campus, they've made a connection with an Aboriginal staff member who knows their full life experience before they even start. Even small things like being able to say 'we've got other students coming from that same town, or that same mob'—we know how to make connections when they set foot on campus.

—Education provider

Some education providers have the capacity to send representatives to communities to help students in the lead up to their residential block; however, this is beyond the capacity of most institutions. This community outreach is not an approved AFB activity and is funded by education providers.

Administrative assistance

Dealing with the frustrations of government bureaucracies is a major hurdle for AFB students to clear before they can participate in AFB activities. In order to support students through their AFB journey, education providers are in many cases assisting them with the process of applying for ABSTUDY.

[Staff member at the Indigenous Support Unit] is good with the paperwork for students. They help you get the paperwork in early—it's the ABSTUDY process that is slow.

—AFB student

Education provider staff described ways in which they assist students to enrol and apply for ABSTUDY. The research team heard that some provider staff go out to students' communities to help with this process.

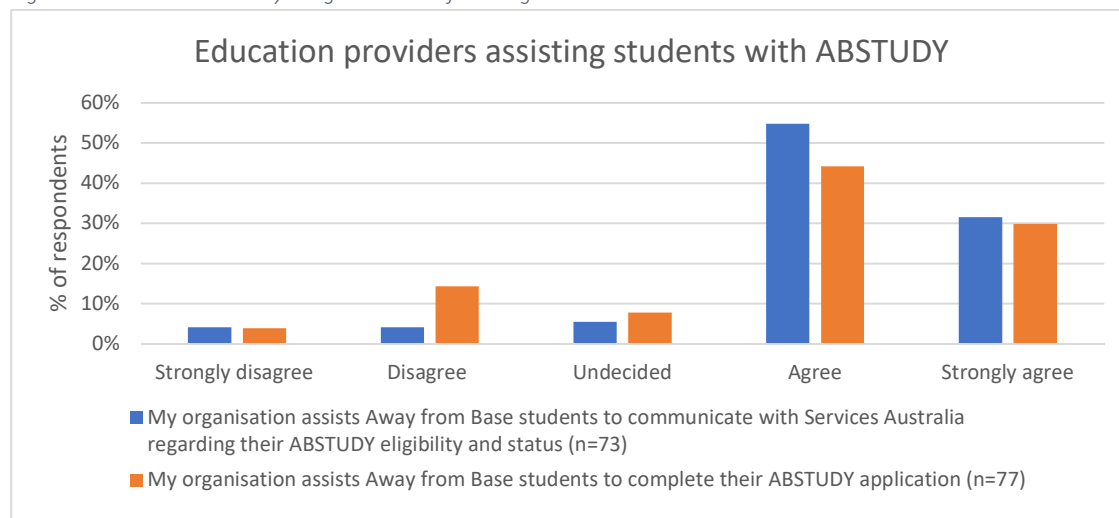
One rule of the college is that they fill [the enrolment form] out themselves, but others can help. So I started helping with that. I started helping them with ABSTUDY applications. We'd ring together, I'd help with the questions that ABSTUDY was asking them. Sometimes we do three-way calls for those who are scattered in remote areas and I can't physically get to.

—Education provider staff

Figure 32 presents education provider perspectives on the assistance their organisations provide to students to apply for ABSTUDY. It shows that 86 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation assists AFB students to communicate with Services Australia, and that 74 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation assists AFB students with the ABSTUDY claim process. These figures were lower for the student survey which, as previously discussed, had an overrepresentation of students less likely to need this type of assistance. Nevertheless, a significant

proportion of students (43 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that their education provider helped them to apply for ABSTUDY.

Figure 32: To what extent do you agree with the following statements about ABSTUDY?



Source: Education provider survey

While providers are often finding ways to assist students with administrative matters, there are likely exceptions. It is probable that students who are accessing AFB support for mainstream courses are less likely to be supported through the administrative process if they are not attached to an Indigenous support unit who understands AFB rules.

Supporting travel

For Indigenous students attending residential blocks, travel can be complicated and stressful. The model of AFB that the education provider uses determines the extent to which provider staff can support students through the journey from their community to the campus. NIAA education providers organise travel for their students, whereas Services Australia providers tend to use QBT. Where providers are relying on QBT to arrange students' travel itineraries, they have less capacity to liaise with students to support them through their travel.

Arranging travel for students can be a time-consuming process, and requires an understanding of the individual needs of students and the complexities of their particular region. Unreliable communication channels also make the organisation process difficult. Providers explained to the research team the advantages of community connections to make sure travel arrangements are clearly communicated to students.

We contact individuals, church leaders etc to make connections. Mobile phones go missing, some places don't have coverage. We still use fax sometimes. We make those connections, once the students are ready to come, we sort out travel with [staff member]. Then there's another process to make sure those students know what bus to get on etc. It takes quite a bit of effort. In one sense we are doing it weeks and weeks before. A good 2 weeks before we're doing a lot of contacting, confirming whether people can come. Then we put paperwork in to [staff member]. It's a struggle to meet that deadline. Then she's rushed to get it back to us. Then we do a lot of work to get it communicated to the students.

—Education provider

Supporting the student journey to campus is not limited to organising their travel itinerary. For Indigenous students who are unaccustomed to travel, or who are not familiar with large cities, the journey to campus can be stressful, particularly if their circumstances change at the last minute. Some

education providers understand that travelling students will need support outside of normal office hours, and arrange that a staff member can be contacted after hours and over the weekend if students run into difficulties on their way to campus.

It is important to note that the needs of Indigenous students are diverse, and not all AFB students find the travel process daunting. However, students from remote or very remote locations often do benefit from support. Arranging transfers to accommodation and campus is another way that education providers can meet the needs of Indigenous students for whom travel into a city might be intimidating. One education provider explained how they assisted students to get from the airport to their accommodation.

Arriving at Sydney airport for the first time, that's really big. Trying to explain that to the Sydneysiders down here, they think nothing of it. [...] We would hire a bus and we would text the students and he would know their names and say 'Hi, I'm [name] and I work for [institution]' when he picked them up. He would collate all the students, gather them all around [...] and make sure they were safe and would report back if someone didn't arrive. He wasn't just a bus driver; he was part of the wrap-around service.

—Education provider

This provider explained that transferring from the NIAA model to the DSS AFB delivered through Services Australia model of AFB in 2019 limited their capacity to provide this shuttle service, because they were no longer coordinating student travel. The travel was now being organised by QBT. This has had a detrimental effect on the experience of students. The research team spoke to students from this education provider who confirmed the need for more integrated support for students throughout their whole journey.

Once they got there, they didn't know what they were doing, not knowing about transport to get to [institution]. We had to find our own way there. People didn't know that. It was only a five-minute bus drive and a 10-minute walk, so for me it wasn't a big drama but for some who didn't know where they were going, they didn't know what they were doing.

—AFB student

4.2.2 Creating a safe environment

Once students have arrived safely at their residential block, there are several ways that education providers can work to create a safe, non-alienating environment for Indigenous students. Factors that enable a culturally appropriate environment for Indigenous students include:

- the presence of Indigenous staff
- staff who are trained in cultural competence
- cultural orientation
- orientation to the course and campus
- appropriate accommodation arrangements

Indigenous staff

The support roles played by Indigenous staff in tertiary education have been documented in the literature (Behrendt et al. 2012). Data from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020) shows that the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) Indigenous staff in Australian universities has increased by around five per cent per year since 2010, with 1.3 per cent of all FTE staff identifying as Indigenous in 2019. In comparison, according to data collected from NIAA AFB providers, on average from 2017-2019, 58 per cent of their AFB staff were Indigenous.

In focus groups, AFB students presented examples of the ways in which the presence of Indigenous staff on campus helped foster a supportive environment during residential blocks. The research team did not ask students to distinguish between Indigenous AFB staff and other Indigenous staff who supported them on campus. Students explained that having either Indigenous teaching staff or an Indigenous student support unit meant access to people who understood their needs without the student having to explain themselves. One student referred to the Indigenous support unit at their education provider as being ‘like family’. They said:

‘They were my primary support. They understand, you don’t have to explain, they hear what you are saying.’

—AFB student

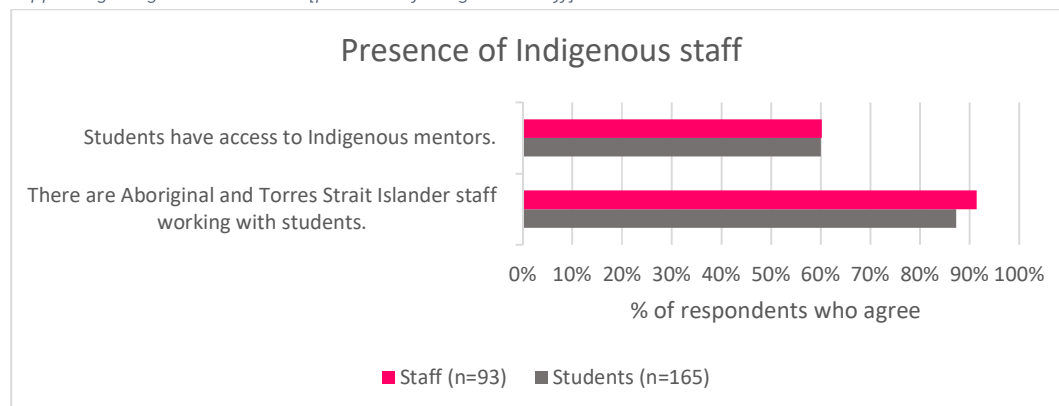
A student from another education provider talked about the benefits of having Indigenous teachers:

When you are taught by your own mob and they understand what we as mob go through—it’s nice and refreshing—a breath of fresh air. We can be who we are 100 per cent. We are not being judged no matter where you are at with learning; if someone can’t read it doesn’t matter.

—AFB student

Figure 33 shows that a high proportion of student respondents (87 per cent) and education provider respondents (91 per cent) agree that students have access to Indigenous staff while they are studying. A lower proportion of respondents (60 per cent for both staff and students) agreed that students have access to Indigenous mentors.

Figure 33: Which of the following statements describe your training provider/university’s way of engaging with and supporting Indigenous students? [presence of Indigenous staff]



Source: Student and education-provider-staff surveys

Not all AFB students agreed, however, that there was adequate Indigenous representation on campus. The survey asked students what their education provider could do to ensure a more culturally safe experience; one of the most commonly arising themes in responses was the need for Indigenous staff working with students on campus and work placements.

Keep Indigenous staff—people who know and grow up in culture—because they can read and know a situation and get a feel for environment more so than non-Indigenous.

—AFB student

Cultural competency of staff

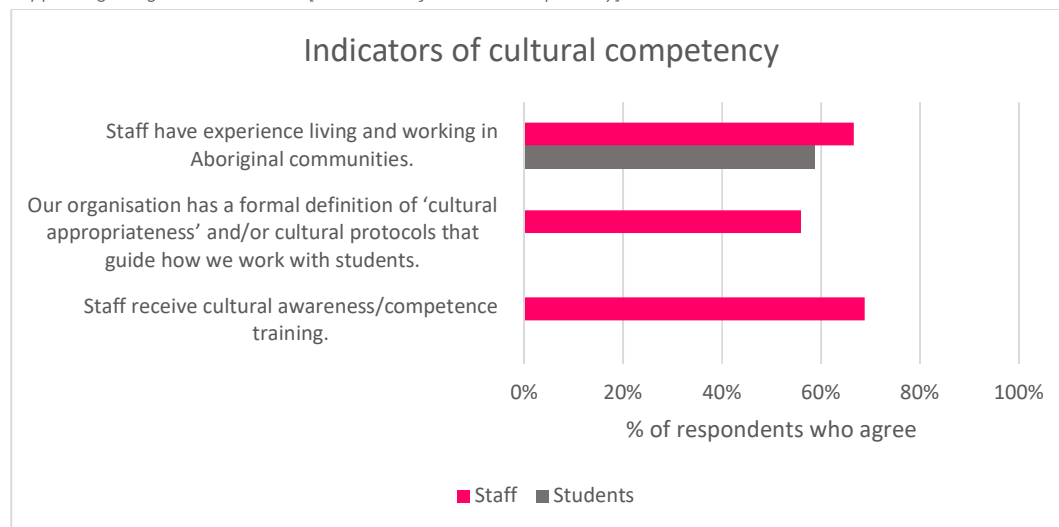
Supporting Indigenous students requires an understanding of the diversity of cultural factors that make their values, and learning and communication styles, different to those of non-Indigenous students. Past studies have described low levels of cultural competency amongst higher education

staff (Kinnane et al. 2014) and highlighted the need to improve cultural competency across the sector (Behrendt et al. 2012).

To be culturally competent, staff also need to be aware of the challenges faced by Indigenous students because of historic, cultural, social, economic and geographic factors. While formalised practices at institutions – such as cultural competence training for staff – do not in and of themselves guarantee a culturally safe experience for students, they offer an indicator as to what measures are being taken towards one. The research team found that education providers are not all delivering cultural competence training for staff. In some cases this training is compulsory, in others it is available as an option (as an online module, for example). Employing staff (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who have experience living and working in Indigenous communities is another way that institutions can enhance the cultural competency of their workforce.

Figure 34 presents survey responses regarding the formalised cultural competency processes at education providers, and the experiences that staff have of Indigenous communities.

Figure 34: Which of the following statements describe your training provider/university's way of engaging with and supporting Indigenous students? [indicators of cultural competency]



Source: Student (n=165) and education-provider-staff (n=93) surveys

The following experience of one student illustrates the difference in cultural competency between two non-Indigenous teachers.

One was absolutely so into the Aboriginal groups. Wanting to understand. She would constantly ask what we needed, what we wanted, what should she bring to this class. She was so invested in that group. That was the first class I did. Even though she was non-Indigenous she made us feel so welcome. She was so aware and into the culture and what was happening. [...]

Last block, we had [another] non-Indigenous teacher, she didn't seem to care. This is the study, this is what we're doing, no cultural interaction, no education support officers coming in. That was really disappointing. If that had been your first experience of AFB education you wouldn't have gone back. She was not welcoming. She didn't like us having a yarn, walking around. Of 17 in that group only five finished.

—AFB student

Orientation

Students told the research team how important orientation processes were to prepare them for their AFB experience. Some education providers have prepared and send out 'welcome' information packs, which students find helpful. Other students described a lack of basic orientation information.

Reflecting back, we have provided feedback to [the education provider] on [the lack of information] because when it's your first time studying coming from communities, [the education provider] needed to have all the information for us – it wasn't provided and we just found our feet as we went along.

AFB student

Students also commented on the importance of some sort of introduction to their fellow students before commencing AFB studies.

You're taking Aboriginal people from their communities into the big city to study. It's a pretty big thing. [The institution should organise] a chance [for an] online meet and greet with who you're going to be studying with. So when you get here you're not on your own. Nobody knows each other until you get to the hotel. Sunday night you get to the motel, don't know anybody, don't know where you're going in the morning.

—AFB student

Some of the smaller education providers, particularly those that are Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, are managing to incorporate this kind of cultural orientation into their residential blocks, including Welcome to Country ceremonies, getting-to-know-you sessions, personal development workshops, introductions to local culture, and opportunities for students to establish family connections and skin groups. Several providers mentioned that they introduced students to the local Aboriginal Medical Service and other facilities in the area.

Student feedback on the subject of cultural orientation was mixed. Some students gave examples of a welcoming and orientation session that they had experienced.

They have the circle outside, everyone met there and introduced themselves, we had a Welcome to Country, he told a story and played the didgeridoo. It took up to morning tea, it was really, really good. It made everyone feel comfortable—having a bit of a yarn before we started. It was good.

—AFB student

Others felt that their provider could have done more to culturally orient students to the local area.

Provide more opportunities to hear from local community members about their community and local culture. There is a welcome but that's all really, no other information is shared about the land we are all visiting.

—AFB student

Some students also reported that they did not receive enough information before arriving on campus about practical issues such as how to get to campus, whether meals would be provided, and where medical facilities were located.

Accommodation

Both NIAA and DSS (Services Australia) AFB providers organise accommodation for students coming to residential blocks. Depending on the location, this could be on-campus accommodation or in commercial accommodation in the area. While education providers cannot necessarily control the running of the accommodation where their AFB students are staying, the research team heard a range of strategies that providers employ to ensure that accommodation is appropriate for their

students. Not all providers use all of these approaches; the following examples serve to demonstrate the various possibilities.

One provider explained that they invite the customer service manager of the accommodation to come and meet the students when they arrive, so they know who they can approach for help if they need it.

The most common complaint about accommodation raised in the student survey was having to share a room, with 31 per cent of student survey respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had to share a room with someone who made them feel uncomfortable. While it is often not possible to source private accommodation for students, several education providers reported that they take gender, family connections, age and community of origin into account when allocating students to shared rooms.

Some students really don't want to share because they feel they are being disrespected [by other students]. Most students are mature students and the older ones don't want to share with the younger ones.

—Education provider

Education providers have an important role to play as advocates for their students. The research team heard several examples of education provider staff changing accommodation providers because of inappropriate practices by the management of the accommodation they were using at the time.

One education provider gave the following example:

They started being really strict on our students, they had security going around making sure our students were in bed by 8 o'clock. We pulled the pin on that. This is adult learning, it's not a bloody school.

—Education provider

4.2.3 Supporting Indigenous learning

The research team identified three main ways that education providers are supporting the learning of Indigenous students:

- building on existing knowledge and strengths
- providing academic support
- offering flexibility around caring and community responsibilities

Building on Indigenous knowledge

In interviews with education providers, the research team frequently heard that AFB students are often mature learners with considerable professional experience and community responsibility. A culturally appropriate learning environment is one that respects the prior learning of students, even if that learning has not occurred within a dominant, mainstream educational framework (Gore et al. 2017; Kinnane et al. 2014). The research team spoke to several providers who offer training in the health and social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) sectors. Students who attend their courses often already work within the sector in their own communities, and bring knowledge and experience to class.

We have so much expertise in the room and I really use that to my advantage. I talk about real things that happen in the community in terms of health or counselling or wellbeing and we have some really amazing discussions about using particular medical software or a particular counselling technique. [...] We are training with a bunch of experts, especially when it comes to SEWB. Blackfellas are experts when it comes to that sort of stuff.

—Education provider

Because ‘strengths-based’ and ‘two-way’ learning are considered elements of best practice in education settings, it is important to temper the claims of the education providers with the perspectives of students. No matter what the providers say they are doing, it is ultimately the students who know whether or not their knowledge is valued, or if they are learning from the experiences of their peers. The following two quotes constitute an example of a claim made by the education provider about learning from Indigenous experience being confirmed by the student perspective. The education provider explained that, to teach basic business accounting skills, they collaborate with a local Indigenous organisation:

We have a group project which we use an Indigenous organisation for; [the students] work on a project for that organisation. We have over time learned a lot about how to talk about things in a way that is more culturally appropriate than how we started out. We have benefitted from their patience with us.

—Education provider

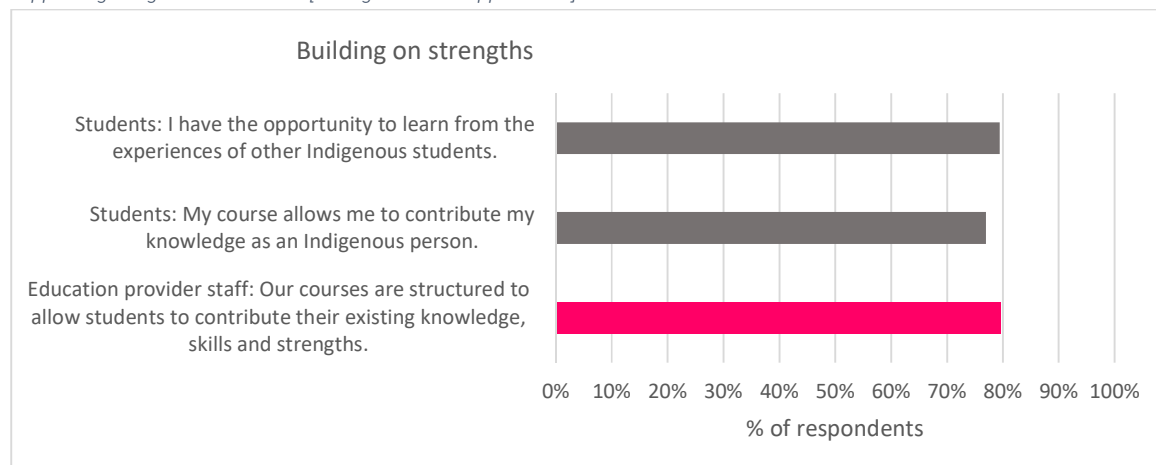
The research team spoke to students from this education provider who reinforced the significance for them of being able to interact with and learn from Indigenous business owners.

Because the [course] is just for Indigenous students they get us to look into Indigenous businesses and focus on how we can bring our personal experiences and our cultural experiences into play—into the course and our assessment. [...] We got to go to a Supply Nation event at the conference centre and talk to lots of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business owners, which was really good.

—AFB student

Sharing stories and knowledge is a key pedagogical tool for Indigenous learning (Yunkaporta 2009). Figure 35 shows that a large majority of respondents to the education provider survey agreed that courses at their institution were structured to build on the existing skills, knowledge and strength of students. This perspective was backed up by a very similar proportion of student respondents who felt that they had the opportunity to contribute their knowledge, and to learn from their fellow students.

Figure 35: Which of the following statements describe your training provider/university's way of engaging with and supporting Indigenous students? [strengths-based approaches]



Source: Student (n=165) and education-provider-staff (n=93) surveys

Academic support

As has been established, many AFB students face barriers to participating in mainstream education, including low literacy, numeracy and English skills. To help students overcome these barriers, education providers are in many cases providing academic support in addition to the specific course

material. This might be in the form of the NIAA Indigenous Student Success Program, which provides funding to universities to help students succeed academically, or through other Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) assistance such as tutors or teaching support. In other cases, teaching staff might help students outside of class time.

A lot of the teachers take time outside of work to help people who actually really need it. So whether that's weekends, or up until the night, whatever it is. Just to make sure people get the help they need.

—AFB student

A common theme throughout the evaluation was the quality of relationships students develop with staff, fostered through the face-to-face contact of attending residential blocks. This relationship is likely to contribute to students being more likely to access extra support than if they were only studying via distance education. It is important, however, that the provider explicitly makes support options available and does not rely on individual students to seek this assistance themselves. One student reported that in one course offered by her education provider they had teaching assistants available in class, but in a different course at the same provider she was disappointed that no assistance was available in the class.

Several providers mentioned that they offer bridging or LLN courses for students, which are not covered by AFB funding.

Flexibility around cultural and caring responsibilities

Providing flexibility for students who have to miss classes because of cultural and caring responsibilities is a challenge for education providers, who risk losing AFB funding for students who do not meet minimum AFB face-to-face attendance requirements. Some education providers had more scope than others to provide this flexibility. Several providers described the ways that they assist students to meet attendance requirements and catch up with work missed due to cultural responsibilities. This could mean working with the students individually to cover material, or offering catch-up sessions.

Anything to do with cultural issues, we accommodate the student completely. You've got Men's Business and that kind of stuff. If a student is late we will [...] deliver the unit individually. Attendance is a big thing: I know that there's a lot of RTOs [Registered Training Organisations] where if you miss that study block, there's no other way to catch up. We need to transfer the knowledge. A lot of RTOs don't have the time. Every Wednesday night we have mandatory study night. We stay here until 7.30 at night and get them up-to-date with everything.

—Education provider

In some cases, education providers in the VET sector described providing flexibility around changing living conditions and family responsibilities of students, enabling them to complete their Certificate in their own time, which may take several years.

It will take around 15 months for most students to do a cert II because we only see them four times a year. Sometimes it might be in 8 months they finish. Some will do it well because they are year 12 graduates from down south—others who are from community will take longer because they have kids and move around. How long does it take to do a course—how long is a piece of string?

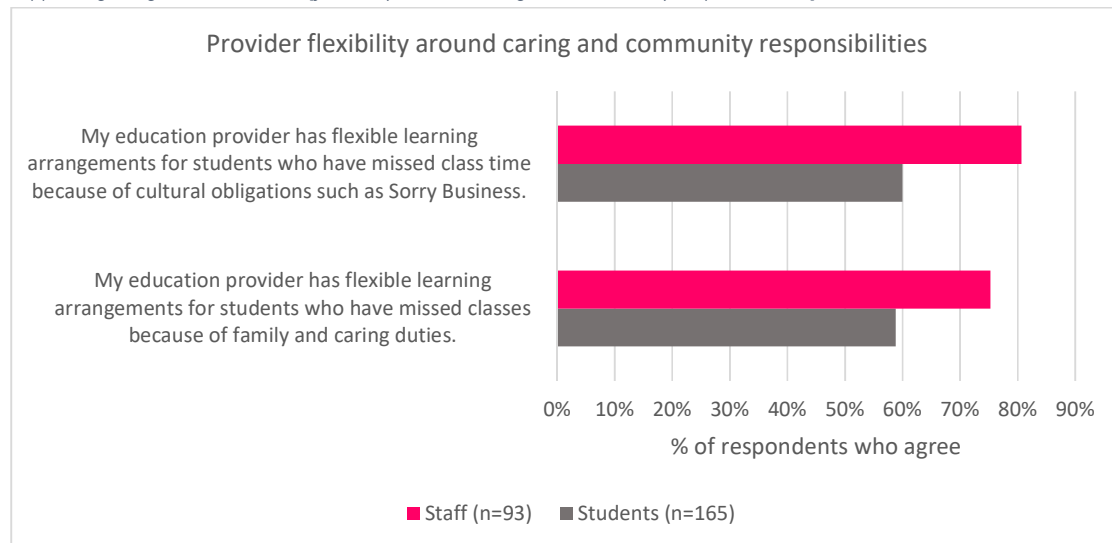
—Education provider

Some education provider staff reported that their organisation pays for students to go back to their community if a family or community issue arises.

Figure 36 presents the responses from surveys regarding the flexibility of providers when it comes to students attending to cultural and community responsibilities. While education provider staff are

more likely than students to agree that their organisation provides this flexibility, there are nevertheless 60% of students identifying that they felt the education provider was flexible.

Figure 36: Which of the following statements describe your training provider/university's way of engaging with and supporting Indigenous students? [flexibility around caring and community responsibilities]



Source: Student and education-provider-staff surveys

The following contrasting quotes show that student experiences of provider flexibility differed from one organisation to another.

I can seek extension if I need it for cultural reasons, they have been really supportive with that stuff.

—AFB student

There are no allowances to take a break if someone passes away. You have to defer and add it to the following term's load and for me that was never going to be possible to do that load.

—AFB student

The research team found that distance education was not always considered appropriate for AFB student cohorts. Their experience showed that expecting students to complete workbooks or access and complete online material was unrealistic when they were back in their communities. Family and community responsibilities were often a barrier to studying at home, as were the unreliable internet connections, lack of access to computers, and IT skills gaps common in Indigenous communities. Several education providers reported that they make sure to cover all of the course material during the residential blocks.

4.2.4 Completing the circle

Once providers have got students to campus safely, and provided a culturally safe and supportive learning environment, the final step in building relationships of trust with students is providing opportunities for feedback. Students who feel supported through the entire AFB journey are more likely to return to their communities with positive stories about their experience and therefore encourage their family and other community members to pursue their own educational goals.

Listening to feedback

One mechanism for maintaining or improving a culturally safe experience for students is to listen and respond to feedback. Providers often choose to do this through a conventional feedback form at the end of the course. Staff gave examples of changes they had made because of student feedback, such

as moving to off-campus accommodation where students felt safer, scheduling assessments differently, or advocating with Services Australia for more appropriate travel times from student communities. One provider mentioned that paper feedback forms were not appropriate for the communication styles of their cohort. Instead, they had a whole class feedback session where students are asked two key questions, which they can discuss in Language together before reporting back orally to staff.

Students reported varying experiences of feedback opportunities. Some said they had not been provided with feedback forms; others felt they had had the chance to openly discuss their concerns with the education provider.

Referrals from family and community

A final indicator of the extent to which education providers are meeting the diverse needs of Indigenous students is the referrals that students make to their family and community members. Where members of their communities have had good experiences of tertiary education, they are more likely to be able to envisage these outcomes for themselves. Someone who is mistrustful of mainstream education is more likely to attend an education provider that has built a relationship of trust with someone they know.

Both of my grandmothers studied [...] there and I helped them with their books and thought it looked good and that was the ultimate decision. When I found out it was an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander college it was a contributing factor. Where I feel safe and people understand me. I think if you have your own mob that have done it you can trust it a bit more.

—AFB student

The research team heard from several providers that one of their key sources of student enrolments was through community and family referrals.

We have strong relationships of trust with communities. Most of our students have a relative who has studied here previously. Uncle, Aunty, Mum. Relationships on the ground and between our staff and students, our staff and community leaders, and church leaders are vital.

—Education provider

4.2.5 Summary: Education provider delivery of AFB

This evaluation did not seek to examine the delivery processes of every AFB provider. However, interviews with provider staff and students, along with surveys, suggested that in many cases education providers are delivering AFB activities efficiently, effectively and appropriately (noting the limitation with efficiency, that it was beyond the scope of the evaluation to analyse individual provider delivery in detail). The research team heard evidence of provider staff effectively building relationships with students to support them through their AFB journey, from enrolling and applying for ABSTUDY through to travelling and completing coursework. The many instances of family and community referrals from past students attest to the successes of education providers in delivering AFB.

Finding 9: DSS, Services Australia and NIAA supply education providers with protocols on how AFB funding can be spent, but allow flexibility in terms of how education providers deliver AFB activities. This flexibility allows education providers to deliver AFB in ways that best suit their context and the needs of their student cohort.

4.3 To what extent are the models delivered in a culturally appropriate way?

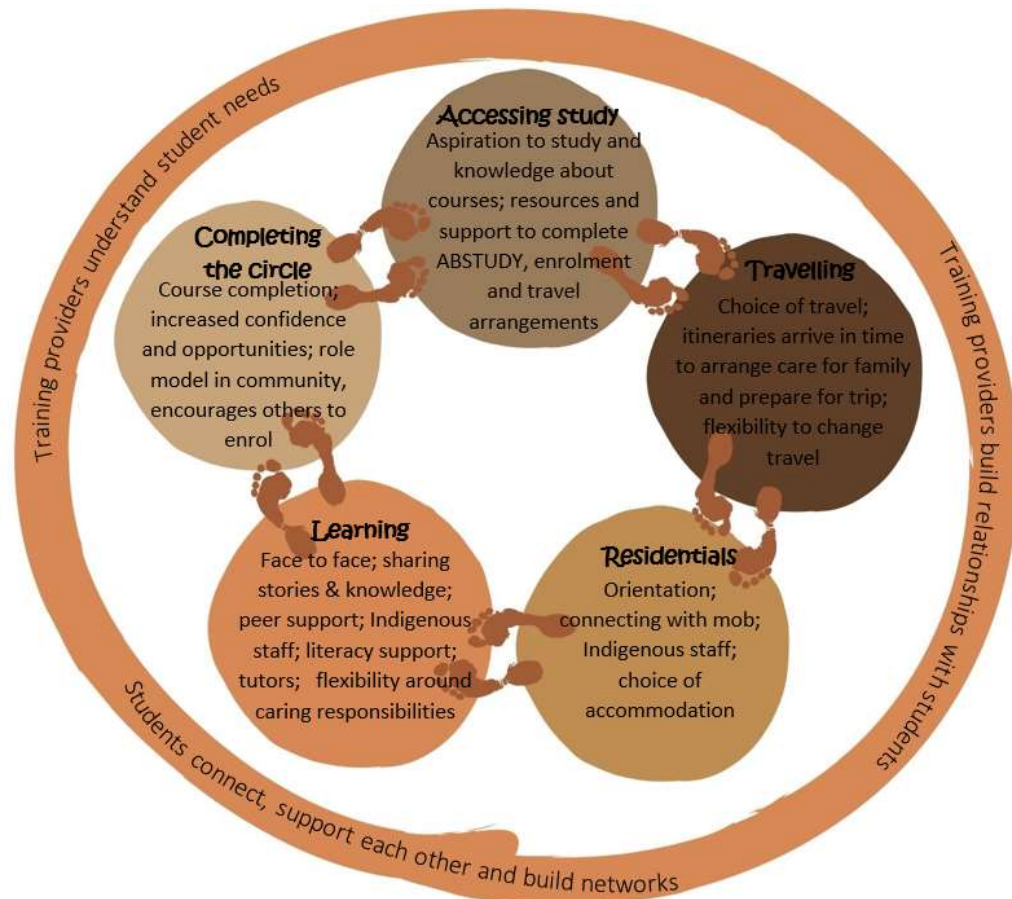
So far, this report has established that Indigenous Australians, including AFB students, encounter a diverse range of barriers to accessing and completing education. Drawing on the findings above concerning the government administration and education provider delivery of AFB, the following section will summarise the extent to which AFB is delivered in a culturally appropriate way. Broadly, cultural appropriateness is understood as the capacity of a program—its policies, guidelines, practices and personnel—to acknowledge and take into account the barriers specific to or common among Indigenous Australians, and to support them to overcome these barriers. Some issues of cultural appropriateness in AFB are common to both models, while others are specific to the DSS program delivered through Services Australia model.

4.3.1 Issues of cultural appropriateness shared by both models

By providing opportunities for face-to-face learning experiences, AFB acknowledges the barriers that Indigenous students face when seeking to participate in tertiary education. Both AFB models support students to overcome these barriers to education without the need to leave their communities and families for long periods of time, and are therefore culturally appropriate in terms of their objectives. Neither NIAA, DSS nor Services Australia provide guidelines to AFB education providers concerning the culturally appropriate delivery of AFB activities. This allows flexibility for education providers to decide what approaches work best for their students. The evaluation did not find evidence that the funding model accessed influenced the cultural appropriateness of provider delivery. Interviews with students, however, suggested that smaller or Indigenous-run organisations are more able than large mainstream institutions to build relationships with students and provide learning experiences that are appropriate to their student cohorts. The data for this evaluation is insufficient to confirm this hypothesis, but it is an area that merits future research.

The following diagram represents a summary of the elements in a culturally appropriate residential block experience.

Figure 37: A culturally appropriate AFB student journey for residential blocks



The principal barrier to culturally appropriate delivery that affects students from both models is the process of applying for ABSTUDY. AFB students in both models must be ABSTUDY eligible, and therefore need to communicate with Services Australia to confirm eligibility. The research team found that Services Australia does not consistently understand or cater for the needs of Indigenous students who have limited internet and phone reception, lack of access to computers, and who have difficulty navigating mainstream bureaucratic systems and language. Education providers in both models can assist students to a certain extent to communicate with ABSTUDY, but are limited by protocols in place within Services Australia that aim to protect student privacy.

4.3.2 Issues of cultural appropriateness specific to the DSS program delivered by Services Australia.

Most Services Australia education providers choose for Services Australia to organise and directly pay for student travel. This option is preferable for providers as they do not risk out-of-pocket expenses for students who do not show up or who are subsequently not deemed eligible. The research team found that the Services Australia travel provider, QBT, does not consistently understand the travel needs of AFB students, particularly those from remote areas who require complex transportation arrangements. As education providers cannot directly communicate with QBT, their capacity to advocate for students' needs is limited.

4.3.3 Summary: cultural appropriateness

AFB supports Indigenous students to overcome barriers to education without the need to leave their communities and families for long periods of time, and is therefore culturally appropriate in its

objectives. Furthermore, education providers are given flexibility under both models to deliver services in a way that is appropriate to their cohorts.

Key factors that make the experience culturally appropriate for students are: access to face-to-face education, which enables them to connect with and seek support from other Indigenous students; and the availability of Indigenous staff within the education providers.

There is room for improvement, however, in terms of Services Australia's capacity to communicate with AFB students in culturally appropriate ways. In addition, the single travel agency contracted by Services Australia does not always have the area-specific expertise to cope with the travel complexities of some Indigenous students.

Finding 10: Cultural appropriateness of AFB delivery at the education provider level is facilitated by the flexibility that providers have to tailor the delivery of their services to the particular needs of their Indigenous AFB students.

Recommendation: The cultural appropriateness of AFB could be improved by facilitating the processes for student communication with Services Australia about ABSTUDY, and reviewing the capacity of QBT to meet the needs of students with complex travel needs.

5 Provide advice to the Commonwealth on implications for future delivery of AFB support

5.1 Drawing on the evidence available and findings from this evaluation, what are the implications for AFB future delivery?

The NIAA has asked Social Compass to consider the implications of retaining the current two-model arrangement of AFB versus an amalgamation of the two models to be administered by either NIAA or Services Australia.

The evaluation did not find strong evidence to suggest that either one of the two AFB models was significantly more accessible or achieving better outcomes for students. In the case of accessibility, each provider had freedom to develop its own program and address issues of access and cultural safety in its own ways. This was independent of the model, with the exception of the issue of ease of travel, where NIAA providers provided more responsive travel arrangements for some remote students, compared to QBT. In the case of outcomes, Services Australia did not provide any data, so completions data are based on the NIAA cohort.

The existence of two separately administered models causes administrative complications and inefficiencies. NIAA and DSS should consider if having two models of the program operating demonstrates an efficient, effective, economical and ethical management of public resources, consistent with each agency's obligations under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*. However, an amalgamated model under either agency would have both positive and negative implications from an administrative and policy perspective. Careful consideration of each of the following scenarios, and further consultation with relevant policy experts, should occur before a decision is made to amalgamate the two AFB models.

The following section discusses the potential implications of the following scenarios:

- continuation of two models of AFB
- one model of AFB administered by NIAA
- one model of AFB administered by Services Australia

5.1.1 Continuation of two models of AFB

The two AFB models, administered separately by two government agencies, are interlinked by two key factors. First, no student is allowed to access AFB funding through both models at the same time.²⁰ This means that Services Australia and NIAA staff have to liaise to cross-check their course lists to ensure payments are not duplicated. The cross-checking process involves an element of uncertainty as Services Australia does not have confirmation until the second half of the year of the exact courses which institutions are claiming NIAA funding.

Second, both Services Australia AFB students and NIAA AFB students must be ABSTUDY eligible, which makes both models dependent on Services Australia. NIAA education providers must ensure that the students they are claiming AFB for are ABSTUDY eligible. Services Australia privacy protocols make it difficult for providers to know their students' ABSTUDY status, so NIAA staff liaise with Services Australia to assist their providers in getting this information, creating additional work for both agencies.

²⁰ The exception to this rule is travel for testing and assessment, which is not funded by NIAA. NIAA AFB students can access Services Australia AFB for the purposes of testing and assessment.

NIAA will talk to us to ask us to help [providers] get the verification [of student ABSTUDY status]. We have to do this work. It can take weeks.

—Services Australia staff

Furthermore, changes made by DSS or Services Australia to ABSTUDY can affect both models. For example, from May 2018 students employed by a for-profit organisation or Commonwealth/state governments were no longer eligible for ABSTUDY. Because students who access funding from NIAA AFB must also meet the ABSTUDY eligibility requirement, these changes within Services Australia directly affected providers and students in the NIAA model. Education providers and NIAA staff told the research team that this change was not effectively communicated.

That change got made and we never got told. We weren't consulted, we weren't told. [...] Because [the models] are so closely aligned they impact each other.

—NIAA staff

While staff from both agencies have developed strong working relationships to coordinate their delivery, the interdependence of two models results in a layer of complexity and bureaucratic burden for agency staff.

An additional issue relating to the coordination of the two models is their different data collection practices. As a program under the IAS, NIAA AFB is routinely collecting demographic and outcomes data, which can be used to understand the contribution of AFB towards Closing the Gap education targets. Services Australia does not routinely separate AFB demographic data from the broader ABSTUDY data set, and does not collect unit completion or other outcomes data.

The lack of consistency in the data sets means they are of limited use in terms of informing an understanding of the comparative efficiency and effectiveness of the models, and subsequent areas for improvement. The limitations of the current AFB data collection were highlighted in the following 2018 submission to the AFB Discussion Paper:

Without adequate data about the details of access to the program, the effectiveness of its operations for those whom it is trying to benefit, about the challenges faced by students accessing the program [...], it is impossible to make well-informed and sensible policy decisions.. [...] It is [this AFB provider's] understanding that there is some data collected by the program administered by [NIAA] and less by the [Services Australia] administered program. If the programs are streamlined, a system of data collection should also be implemented so that appropriate information can be gathered about the operations of the system so that ongoing monitoring and review of its success can be undertaken.

—Education provider

While there is a clear case for amalgamating the two models, should the Commonwealth make the decision to retain the two separate models, either permanently or for the short term, it should consider the following changes to reduce confusion and dependence of the NIAA model on Services Australia:

- The name of one or both models could be changed to reduce confusion.
- The requirement for ABSTUDY eligibility for students accessing the NIAA model could be eliminated in order to minimise dependence of the NIAA model on Services Australia. While this would still require cross-checking to ensure students are not accessing support from both of the programs, it would require education providers to establish proof of Indigeneity for students accessing AFB funding.

In addition, consideration should be given to routinely retrieving Services Australia data that is currently collected for AFB and aligning it with available NIAA data. This would give a more

comprehensive picture of the reach of the two models combined. However, this may prove costly for Services Australia for a relatively small proportion of the AFB cohort.

5.1.2 One model of AFB administered by NIAA

NIAA currently provides AFB education providers with a funding model that in practice gives providers more flexibility and capacity to support students through the process of travelling to and from residential blocks. Evidence also suggests that, from an administrative perspective, education providers dealing with NIAA are having a more positive experience than those using the DSS program delivered by Services Australia model. This is principally because NIAA is able to offer more personalised, direct and consistent communication with provider staff. Unlike Services Australia, NIAA AFB collects data about student demographics and education outcomes, which provide evidence for contribution of the program towards education outcomes for Indigenous Australians. This evidence base would be strengthened if Services Australia supported students were moved to the NIAA model. However, if AFB were to be amalgamated into one model administered by NIAA the following considerations would need to be taken into account:

- The capacity of NIAA in terms of funding and staff might not be sufficient to administer AFB to a larger number of students. Two TAFEs have already transferred to the DSS program delivered by Services Australia for this reason.
- Not all education providers have the capacity to organise student travel, which is managed directly by Services Australia for providers accessing that model.
- The NIAA capped funding per student arrangement rather than reimbursement of actual travel expenses might not meet the requirements of all education providers.
- NIAA would still be dependent on the Services Australia ABSTUDY section to determine student eligibility, unless it develops an alternative proof-of-Indigeneity process.

5.1.3 One model of AFB administered by Services Australia

Currently, the DSS AFB program is a sub-stream of ABSTUDY payments administered by Services Australia. As such it is a very small subsection of a large government agency in charge of administering all welfare payments Australia wide. While this status has negative consequences in terms of education provider and student ability to easily communicate with AFB staff, it means that it can benefit from broader DSS/Services Australia resources, including being demand driven rather than operating within a defined budget.

If AFB is amalgamated into one model funded by DSS and administered by Services Australia, the following considerations should be taken into account:

- The current capacity of the Services Australia AFB team, in terms of resourcing and staff, might not be sufficient to administer AFB to a larger number of students. Expansion of the AFB team might be required.
- Under the DSS AFB funding, education providers would be more likely to use Services Australia's travel agent, QBT, to arrange student travel, to reduce the risk of out-of-pocket expenses involved in paying for student fares upfront. In doing so, they would lose their ability to organise the most appropriate and flexible travel arrangements for their students.
- Education providers currently with NIAA would lose the more customised experience that results from communicating directly with a clearly defined team of staff in a smaller agency.
- Visibility of education outcomes from AFB would be lost, as this data is not collected by Services Australia. Furthermore, Services Australia does not routinely separate demographic data for AFB from the broader ABSTUDY cohort, so visibility of students accessing the payment would also be obscured. This evaluation demonstrated that the process for Services Australia to retrieve separate data for AFB is complex and challenging. It would be important

from an accountability perspective for Services Australia to develop systems to report on both accessibility and completions.

5.1.4 Summary: Future responsibility for the administration of AFB

It is clearly important that NIAA and DSS consider if having two models of the program operating demonstrates an efficient, effective, economical and ethical management of public resources. Should the decision be reached to amalgamate the two models under one of the two Commonwealth agencies, policy makers need to assess the relative importance of the visibility of education outcomes and greater ability to tailor the program to student needs under NIAA administration, against ease of financing increased demand for DSS/Services Australia. For example, if the outcomes of AFB funding are to be understood in terms of their contribution to meeting Indigenous education targets, an amalgamated model under NIAA would allow for greater visibility of the benefits of the program. On the other hand, if funding and corresponding administration costs are the main concern, the DSS demand-driven funding model administered by Services Australia may better address these issues. Given the importance of access and outcomes for Indigenous students, the latter option should be accompanied by a commitment from Services Australia to regularly report on AFB students' access and outcomes.

Finding 11: The existence of two separately administered but interlinked funding models causes administrative inefficiencies and complications.

Recommendation: Both agencies should consider amalgamating the models into one program, creating a common set of rules and consistent level of service, reducing duplication and addressing the findings of this evaluation, including the need for more consistent data outcomes-data collection to help inform policy.

5.2 Conclusion: Qualities of a future model of AFB

Whether or not the future of AFB lies with NIAA or DSS (Services Australia), or continues to be administered by both, this evaluation has found that a range of factors affect the student experience of AFB and the ease with which education providers can deliver it. The ideal AFB model, regardless of administrator, would prioritise the following key characteristics:

- Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to access face-to-face educational opportunities while living in their communities.
- Providers need to maintain high levels of culturally appropriate services and cultural capability of staff.
- Streamlined processes for students who need to apply for or enquire about their eligibility, and an assurance that the information they receive will be consistent.
- A direct AFB contact person, within the relevant agency, for education providers.
- Better communication (for example, through a centralised, secure online portal) available for ABSTUDY claims, AFB applications and reporting, to streamline information transfer, which is currently compromised due to cyber security concerns.
- Clear, stand-alone guidelines for AFB delivery, provided in an appropriate format for providers.
- Greater flexibility in regard to the proportion of distance versus face-to-face delivery, to reduce the distance education requirement if it is not appropriate for the specific student cohort.
- AFB funding for student travel that takes into account the distance and remoteness of the individual student.

- Education providers having the choice to organise travel (and provide for an administration allowance) or liaise directly with an appropriate travel agent who can directly invoice the funder.
- Students allowed to choose the type of accommodation that suits them (i.e. private or shared) where possible.
- Providers can organise transfers between accommodation and campus, or a travel allowance for students that is accessible from the beginning of their travel and is adequate to cover transfer costs such as taxi fares.
- Data collection on access and outcomes is reported to inform future policy. If the two models are maintained, ideally this data would be collected in such a way that it can be collated/compared.

AFB is allowing education providers Australia-wide to deliver culturally appropriate, positive and career enhancing educational opportunities to Indigenous students who might not otherwise be able to travel to undertake the studies of their choice. Improvements to this program, which is already contributing in a positive way to the lives of Indigenous Australians, will ensure it continues to have an impact into the future.

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Appendix A: Research instruments

There are three sets of interview questions and two surveys:

- Student interview questions
- Stakeholder (education provider) interview questions
- Government department interview questions
- Student survey
- Education provider survey

AFB student semi-structured interview guide

The purpose of the questions below is to provide a guide for discussion. The questions will not necessarily be asked verbatim. The interviewer is to use their cultural sensitivity and skills to ensure the interview style is appropriate for each participant.

Background of student

1. What course are you enrolled in and at which education provider? What stage of your course are you at (e.g. first residential block, 3rd year of bachelor degree)?
2. What community do you currently live in?
3. Have you heard of Away From Base?

Student experience of AFB

4. What's it like coming here to study-residential blocks. What do you like/dislike?
 - Travel
 - Accommodation
 - Peers
 - Student support
 - Online learning
5. Do you have your own room or do you need to share with someone? How do you feel about sharing a room?
6. How do you get here? Who organises your travel and accommodation and food?
7. What happens when you have to change your travel and accommodation plans? How do you do this?
8. Do you ever pay for travel/fuel? How long does it take to get your money back if you pay for things?

Accessing support

1. How did you find out that you can get support to study away from your community?
2. What was it like applying for Abstudy (and Away from Base)?
 - Did anyone help you?
3. Why did you choose this course and this education provider?
4. What was it like applying and enrolling for the course?
5. What happens if you need English language and computer support?

Cultural appropriateness:

6. To what extent is the travel and accommodation and meals, and your education provider, culturally appropriate?
 - Do you feel that your culture is respected by teachers and other staff at [name of provider?]
 - Do you have any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers?
 - Do you feel that the [name of provider] is culturally appropriate in the way that it deals with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students? If yes, how, if no, how could they be better?
7. Do you have someone here that you trust that you can talk to or ask for help? Is this person a student or staff member?
 - Mentors/support people
 - Speaking Language
 - Peer support/feeling of community
 - Feeling safe/supported
8. What happens when Sorry Business and other cultural obligations affect your study? If you need to take a break, is the provider able to support you through that time?
9. Do you feel like your course gives you the opportunity to use skills and strengths that you already have? Does your course recognise your strengths and knowledge as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander?

Barriers and needs

10. Can you tell me about some of the things that might make it hard for you to get here and to complete your studies?
11. What does your education provider do to help? How could it help more?
12. What would happen if you couldn't get support to come and stay here, what would be different? Would you be able to do your course?
13. What would happen if you had to do your course online or via distance education or in your community- would you be able to complete it?
14. Have you done a reverse block in your community? What was that like?

Outcomes

15. What have been the benefits of participating in this program for you?
 - Have there been any disadvantages?
16. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of traveling from your community to attend courses here

AFB stakeholder semi-structured interview guide

The purpose of the questions below is to provide a guide for discussion. The questions will not necessarily be asked verbatim. The interviewer is to use their cultural sensitivity and skills to ensure the interview style is appropriate for each participant. Not all questions will be relevant to all stakeholders.

Background of interviewee

1. What is your role and how long have you involved in the AFB program?
2. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
3. Who funds your Away from Base activities Services Australia or NIAA?

Delivery of model

4. Can you explain to us how you organise travel
5. Can you explain to us how you organise accommodation
How do students feel about their privacy, in terms of sharing rooms, travelling etc.?
5. Can you explain to us about how you organise meals
6. How do you communicate with students about travel and accommodation etc?
7. How do students get in touch with you if they need information/support
8. Do students do coursework components (online/workbook etc) via distance in their communities?
If so, how does this work?

Administration of model

9. How clear are the guidelines around delivering AFB?
What documents provide guidelines about how to deliver it?
10. How do you communicate with Services Australia/NIAA?
11. To what extent are there clear processes for communicating with NIAA/DHS?
12. What are the reporting/acquittal requirements?
What reports do you provide and when?
Is the data useful to you in any way?
Have you negotiated performance indicators and targets for them which you report against?
13. What happens if you have to seek reimbursement? How long does it take?
14. Are there any other challenges that you haven't mentioned delivering AFB?
15. What aspects of the model work well?

Cultural appropriateness

Besides what you have already told us...

16. How culturally appropriate/accessible/flexible is the **administration of Away From Base by the department** around the needs of Aboriginal students?
17. How culturally appropriate/accessible/flexible is **your delivery of Away from Base activities** around the needs of Aboriginal students?
What makes it so?
 - Do you receive cultural awareness/competence training?
 - Do you have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff on your team, or do you liaise with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at the organisation?

- Where do students go if they need support or guidance? Do students have mentors?
 - What allowances does the program make for cultural obligations such as Sorry Business?
 - Does your organisation have a definition of cultural appropriateness/cultural safety?
 - Are there channels students can use to give feedback about their courses?
18. Do you find that students have existing skills and experiences that they bring to their courses?
 19. In what ways could the delivery of AFB be made more culturally appropriate for students at this organisation?

Student experience

20. Do students know they are getting Away from Base funding?
21. How do students go about applying for Abstudy- how easy/hard is this process?
22. How do students find out about the Away from Base courses you are delivering?
23. How easy is it for students to change travel and accommodation plans when needed?
24. What happens when students need to be reimbursed? How long does it take?

Barriers to students accessing and completing tertiary education

25. In addition to those barriers you have already mentioned, can you think of any other barriers that your Away from Base students face in terms of accessing and completing courses?
26. NIAA data seems to show that the number of students from very remote and remote locations has been decreasing over the last five years. Is this something you have noticed in your enrolments and if so, why do you think that is?
27. Are there students attending mixed-mode courses here that are not receiving AFB support? Why do you think they are not receiving AFB supports? What other supports are available for students wanting to access tertiary education away from their community?
28. Are there students who aren't eligible for Away from Base who should be?

Outcomes

29. What are the benefits for students from attending Away from Base courses?
30. What are the disadvantages for students?

The future of AFB

31. What does a good AFB model look like?
 - Improvements?
 - Are you aware these are two models for AFB?
 - Would you prefer to be organising travel for student yourselves rather than using QBT? Would capped funding at \$6500 be enough to cover the costs per student?
32. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about AFB?

AFB government department semi-structured interview guide

The purpose of the questions below is to provide a guide for discussion. The questions will not necessarily be asked verbatim. The interviewer is to use their cultural sensitivity and skills to ensure the interview style is appropriate for each participant. Not all questions will be relevant to all stakeholders.

Background of interviewee

1. What is your role?
2. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
3. In what way do you engage in AFB and for how long have you been involved?

Delivery of model

4. Can you explain how AFB works under your model?
 - What are the processes involved?
 - Which stakeholders are responsible for the delivery of which aspects?
5. Points to be clarified:
 - For NIAA and Services Australia:
 - Delays and confusion with getting Abstudy approvals—no notification to providers about status of students
 - What does mixed-mode actually look like? Do students need to complete course activities in their communities?
 - For Services Australia:
 - ABSTUDY course approval
 - Length of time between provider submitting travel applications and receiving travel itineraries—often too late to notify students in remote communities
 - Can services directly contact QBT? If not why not? They are telling us that they can't
 - How do individual students apply for reimbursement?
 - For NIAA:
 - what does 'ABSTUDY approved' mean for the purposes of NIAA AFB? If you only know number of students how do you know they're approved?
 - how do you allocate funding if a provider wants more than is covered by the previous year's completions?

Administration of model

6. To what extent do you feel that the agreement between NIAA/Services Australia and providers to deliver AFB is clear and transparent?
 - What are the documents which provide guidance to providers about AFB delivery and how funding can be allocated?
7. To what extent are there clear processes for communicating with providers?
 - Do providers have a funding agreement manager or someone from the Dept they can talk to specifically about the program?
 - Services Australia funded service providers used to have a direct contact with a person in the AFB team in WA (and also SA) and now have generic email/inbox/telephone which seems to be based in the Eastern states. When did the centralised info/communication line come into play and why?

8. To what extent are the reporting requirements and acquittal processes clear? E.g are there KPIs and and targets for them which providers report against?
 - What reports and data are provided and when?
9. To what extent is the process for reimbursements to education providers/individuals clear/efficient?
10. What are the challenges for the Department/Agency in administering AFB?
11. What's working and what's not working well about the model?

Cultural appropriateness

12. To what extent do you feel that the AFB program is culturally appropriate/accessible/flexible around the needs of Aboriginal students?
13. What is it about the model and its administration that makes AFB culturally appropriate/safe/or not culturally appropriate/safe?
 - Do you receive cultural awareness/competence training?
 - Do you have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff on your team, or do you liaise with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff??
 - What allowances does the program make for cultural obligations such as Sorry Business?
 - Does your Department have a definition of cultural appropriateness/cultural safety?
14. In what ways could the administration and delivery of AFB be made more culturally appropriate for education providers and students?

Student experience

15. Do you collect any data about the education provider or student experience of AFB?
 - How do students find out about AFB?
 - How do students access the support available under the model? What is that like for them?
 - To what extent do you think students understand the support that is available under the model, and its eligibility requirements?
 - How easy is it for students to change travel and accommodation plans when needed?
 - To what extent are students reimbursed in a timely way?
16. Are there students attending mixed-mode courses that are not receiving AFB support? Why do you think they are not receiving AFB supports? What other supports are available for students wanting to access tertiary education away from their community?
17. What are the main barriers faced by the AFB cohort in terms of accessing education and employment? (age, distance, experience in travel, cultural/caring responsibilities)
 - How does the AFB model help students to overcome these barriers/support their needs?
 - How flexible is AFB in meeting the needs of different individuals?
 - How could it better support these needs?

Outcomes

18. What data do you collect about student outcomes? What are the outcomes you are seeing from students supported by AFB?
 - In what ways do you think students benefit from residential blocks?
 - In what ways do you think students benefit from reverse blocks in community?
 - What negative experiences do students commonly face when participating in this program?

The future of AFB

19. What does a good AFB model look like?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about AFB?

Away from Base Student Survey

Questions about you and your course

1. Are you currently enrolled in a course?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

2. What type of course are you enrolled in?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Pathways or tertiary entry program
- Cert 1
- Cert 2
- Cert 3
- Cert 4
- Diploma
- Bachelor
- Graduate Diploma
- Masters
- PhD
- I don't know
- Other

3. Were you recently enrolled in a course?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

4. What type of course were you recently enrolled in?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Pathways or tertiary entry program
- Cert 1
- Cert 2
- Cert 3
- Cert 4
- Diploma
- Bachelor
- Graduate Diploma
- Masters
- PhD
- I don't know
- Other

5. Do you identify as:

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- Both
- Neither
- I'd prefer not to say

If you choose 'Neither' or 'I'd prefer not to say', you will exit the survey because we can only use responses to this survey from people who are Indigenous.

6. Have you heard of Away from Base?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

7. In your own words, please describe what Away from Base is.

Please write your answer here:

[Away from Base pays for travel, accommodation and meals for Indigenous students to attend residential blocks, work placements and excursions away from their community as part of their course.

In some locations, Away from Base also pays for teachers from training providers/universities to travel to students' communities to deliver course blocks. As part of your course, do you participate in any of the following activities?]

8. Please choose **all** that apply:

- I leave my community to study at residential blocks at my training provider/university.
- I leave my community to complete work placements in other locations.
- I leave my community to go on excursions as part of my course.
- I attend classes in or near my community when the teacher comes out.
- I don't participate in any of the above activities.

If you don't participate in any of the above activities, this survey is not relevant to you. If you check the final box, you will be exited from the survey.

9. Which training provider/university do you/did you attend?

Please write your answer here:

10. Do you identify as:

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- I'd prefer not to say
- Other

11. How old are you?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Under 24
- 24 to 64

- Over 64
- I'd prefer not to say

12. What community do you live in?

We won't report the names of communities but we are asking this question so we can understand how many places we received responses from.

Please write your answer here:

13. What type of location is your community in?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Very remote
- Remote
- Outer regional
- Inner regional
- Major city
- I don't know

Eligibility and enrolment

14. Please tell us how much you disagree or agree with the following statements:

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
It was easy to find out if I was eligible for funding to cover my travel, accommodation and meals for my residential blocks/and or work placements for my course.							
The process of enrolling in my course was easy.							
My training provider/university helped me enrol in my course.							
It is easy to understand the rules for ABSTUDY.							
The process of applying for ABSTUDY was easy.							
My training provider/university helped me apply for ABSTUDY.							
Someone in my community helped me apply for ABSTUDY.							
I had confirmation of my ABSTUDY eligibility before I started my course							

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I know where to lodge an appeal against an ABSTUDY decision							

15. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about applying for your course or for ABSTUDY?

Please write your answer here:

Travel

16. Do you travel away from your community as part of your course? It may be for a residential block, a work placement or an excursion that is a required part of your course.

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

17. Select the statements that are true for you:

Please choose **all** that apply:

- My training provider/university organises my travel.
- I organise my own travel and get reimbursed.
- Sometimes I organise my travel, sometimes my training provider/university does.
- I drive my car and get reimbursed for fuel.
- Other:

In the previous question you indicated that you *organise your own travel and get reimbursed*.

18. Is it easy to get reimbursed?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

19. Are you reimbursed in a reasonable timeframe for travel that you organise yourself?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

In the previous question you indicated that you *drive your own car and get reimbursed for fuel*.

20. Is it easy to get reimbursed for fuel?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

21. Do you get reimbursed for fuel in a reasonable timeframe?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes

- No

22. Please tell us how much you disagree or agree with the following statements about your travel to and from residential blocks and/or work placements as part of your course:

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
Travel between my community and my training provider/university is well organised.							
Travel between my community and my work placements is well organised							
I can request the type of transport that suits me.							
I get my travel itinerary in enough time before my travel date.							
Travel between my community and my training provider/university is stressful.							
Travel between my community and my work placements is stressful							
I can easily change my travel dates if my plans change.							
I prefer to drive myself to and from my training provider/university and/or work placements.							
If I need it, I can get help with my travel itinerary from staff at my training provider/university							

23. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience travelling to and from your training provider/university or work placements?

Please write your answer here:

Accommodation

24. Select the statements that are true for you:

Please choose **all** that apply:

- My training provider/university organises my accommodation.
- I organise my own accommodation.

- Sometimes I organise my accommodation, sometimes my training provider/university does.
- I stay with family/friends.
- Other:

25. What are the accommodation options for your residential blocks/work placements?

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Individual rooms only.
- Shared rooms only.
- I can choose between individual and shared rooms.
- I can pay extra and have my own room.
- It depends on what accommodation is available locally at the time.
- I have my own bathroom.
- I have to share a bathroom with others.
- Other:

26. How important are the following things for you?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Not important	Quite important	Very important
Having my own room.			
Having study facilities (desk/internet access) in my room.			
Having my own bathroom.			
Having a kitchen where I can cook my own meals.			
Staying in accommodation near where I attend my course.			
Staying in accommodation near a supermarket.			

27. Please tell us how much you disagree or agree with the following statements about your accommodation.

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I have had to share a room with someone who made me feel uncomfortable.							
I have had a problem with accommodation that was not resolved.							

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
If I have a problem at the accommodation, I know who to ask to fix it.							
I have had good experiences with accommodation on residential blocks.							
I have had good experiences with accommodation on work placements.							
During residential blocks/work placements it's difficult to get where I need to go if I don't have my own car.							

28. How could the accommodation be improved?

Please write your answer here:

Meals

29. Select the statement that is most true for you:

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Most of my meals are provided.
- I get a meal allowance and choose how I spend it.
- I buy all my own food and get reimbursed later.

30. Is the food provided adequate?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

31. Is the meal allowance adequate?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

32. Do you receive your meal allowance before the start of the residential block or placement?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

33. Are you reimbursed for your food purchases in a reasonable time frame?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes

- No

34. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about meals while you are on residential blocks or work placements?

Please write your answer here:

Distance Learning

35. Do you have to complete any work (such as online learning or workbooks) when you are back in your community?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Cultural appropriateness

36. Which of the following statements describe your training provider/university's way of engaging with and supporting Indigenous students who are travelling away from their communities for their courses.

Please choose **all** that apply:

- We had a general orientation at the beginning of the course to help us become familiar with the course and the location.
- We had a cultural orientation at the beginning of the course (like a Welcome to Country and meeting Elders) and opportunities to learn more about the local culture and meet other students.
- There are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff working with students.
- Staff have experience living and working in Aboriginal communities.
- Staff know people from my community.
- I have access to Indigenous mentors.
- My course allows me to contribute my knowledge as an Indigenous person.
- I have the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other Indigenous students.
- The training provider/university is flexible if I have to miss class time because of cultural obligations such as Sorry Business.
- The training provider/university is flexible if I have to miss class time because of family and caring duties.
- I know how to give feedback about my course, travel, meals or accommodation.
- The training provider/university is an Indigenous community-controlled organisation.
- The training provider/university does NOT take any steps to be culturally appropriate for Indigenous students.
- Other:

37. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about *residential blocks*?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I feel CULTURALLY safe when I am TRAVELLING TO AND FROM residential blocks at my training provider/university							
I feel PHYSICALLY safe when I am TRAVELLING TO AND FROM residential blocks at my training provider/university							
I feel CULTURALLY safe when I am ATTENDING residential blocks at my training provider/university							
I feel PHYSICALLY safe when I am ATTENDING residential blocks at my training provider/university.							

38. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about *work placements*?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I feel CULTURALLY safe when I am TRAVELLING TO AND FROM work placements							
I feel PHYSICALLY safe when I am TRAVELLING TO AND FROM work placements							
I feel CULTURALLY safe when I am ATTENDING work placements							
I feel PHYSICALLY safe when I am ATTENDING work placements							

39. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statement?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
In general, my training provider/university does their best to meet the needs of Indigenous students.							

40. What could your training provider/university do to ensure a more culturally safe experience for Indigenous students?

Please write your answer here:

Barriers

41. Indigenous students may face a range of barriers to accessing and/or completing their courses. Please tell us what impact the following factors have on your studies.

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	No impact	Minor impact	Moderate impact	Major impact	I don't know
Financial insecurity					
Literacy and/or numeracy level					
Speaking/understanding Standard Australian English					
Getting access to internet and other technology and telecommunications					
Understanding ABSTUDY processes and requirements					
Providing required documentation (e.g. birth certificate, ID)					
Completing forms					
Proving Aboriginality					
The distance that I have to travel					
Cultural and family responsibilities					
Arranging child care					
Confidence interacting with people from outside of my community					
Knowledge about course/study options					

	No impact	Minor impact	Moderate impact	Major impact	I don't know
Knowledge about financial support available for study					
Stigma or 'shame' from community about going outside the community to get an education					

42. Please tell us about any other barriers you face in accessing and completing your course.

Please write your answer here:

43. Imagine a situation in which you no longer had access to funding to cover your travel, accommodation and meals for residential blocks and work placements. What difference would this make for you?

Please write your answer here:

44. Imagine a situation in which teachers and lecturers could not come out to your community to deliver your course. What difference would this make for you?

Please write your answer here:

Outcomes

45. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about outcomes or benefits as a result of attending a residential block or work placement away from your community?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I have improved social and emotional wellbeing.							
I have gained new skills and/or knowledge.							
I have increased confidence in my coursework.							
I have increased literacy and/or numeracy.							
I am more confident to communicate in English.							
I have learned skills/knowledge that I can apply in my work and/or community.							

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I have increased confidence in my interactions with others.							
I have benefited from engaging and sharing knowledge with Indigenous people from other communities.							
I have built relationships and networks with Indigenous people from other communities.							
I have taken on more responsibilities and contribute more to my community.							
I have become a role model for others in my community.							
On residential blocks I have had a break from family and community responsibilities.							
I have completed a course/s.							
My career opportunities have improved.							

46. Which of the following outcomes or benefits do you believe to be the most valuable for you?

Please choose the 3 that you feel would have the most significant impact on your life.

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Improved social and emotional wellbeing
- Increased skills/knowledge
- Increased confidence in coursework.
- Increased literacy and/or numeracy.
- Increased confidence to communicate in English.
- New skills/knowledge that I can apply in my work and/or community.
- Increased confidence in interactions with others.
- Engagement and knowledge-sharing opportunities with Indigenous people from other communities.
- Relationship and network building with Indigenous people from other communities
- Increased responsibility and contribution to my community.
- Becoming a role model for others in my community.
- Time away from family and community responsibilities.
- Completion of a course.
- Increased employment opportunities.

47. Have you experienced other outcomes (good or bad) as a result of attending residential blocks and/or work placements away from your community? If so, how important are they?

Please write your answer here:

48. What is it about the experience that has created those outcomes?

Please write your answer here:

49. How could your experience of attending residential blocks and/or work placements away from your community be improved?

Please write your answer here:

50. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of attending residential blocks and/work placements away from your community?

Please write your answer here:

51. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about outcomes or benefits you have experienced as a result of your teacher coming out to your community to deliver your course?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I have improved social and emotional wellbeing							
I have gained new skills and/or knowledge.							
I have increased confidence in my coursework.							
I have increased literacy and/or numeracy.							
I am more confident to communicate in English.							
I have learned skills/knowledge that I can apply in my work and/or community.							
I have increased confidence in my interactions with others.							
Engagement and knowledge-sharing opportunities with Indigenous people from other communities.							
Relationship and network building with Indigenous people from other communities							
I have taken on more responsibilities and contribute more to my community.							

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Doesn't apply to me
I have become a role model for others in my community.							
I have completed a course/s.							
My career opportunities have improved.							

**52. Which of the following outcomes or benefits do you believe to be the most valuable for you?
Please choose the 3 that you consider have the most significant impact on your life.**

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Improved social and emotional wellbeing
- Increased skills/knowledge.
- Increased confidence in my coursework.
- Increased literacy and/or numeracy.
- Increased confidence to communicate in English.
- New skills/knowledge that I can apply in my work and/or community.
- Increased confidence in my interactions with others.
- Engagement and knowledge-sharing opportunities with Indigenous people from other communities.
- Relationship and network building with Indigenous people from other communities
- Increased responsibility and contribution to my community.
- Becoming a role model for others in my community.
- Completion of a course/s.
- Increased employment opportunities.

53. Have you experienced other outcomes (good or bad) as a result of the teacher coming to deliver your course in your community and how important are those outcomes?

Please write your answer here:

54. What is it about the experience that has created those outcomes?

Please write your answer here:

55. How could your experience of having a teacher come out to your community to deliver your course be improved?

Please write your answer here:

56. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your experience of having a teacher come out to your community?

Please write your answer here:

Away from Base Education Provider Survey

Your involvement with Away from Base

1. What is your role/position title?

Please write your answer here:

2. Which education provider do you work for?

Please write your answer here:

3. Do you identify as:

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Aboriginal
- Torres Strait Islander
- Both
- Neither
- I'd prefer not to say.

4. Do you identify as:

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- I'd prefer not to say.
- Other

5. How long have you been involved with Away from Base?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- 0-6 months
- 6-12 months
- 12-24 months
- More than 2 years

6. In what ways are you involved with Away from Base?

Please choose **all** that apply:

- I organise student travel.
- I organise student accommodation.
- I communicate with students about their travel and accommodation arrangements.
- I teach Away from Base students on residential blocks.
- I travel to communities to teach Away From Base students on reverse blocks.
- I provide learning support for Away from Base students.
- I provide a range of supports to Away from Base students.
- I am an Indigenous mentor for Away from Base students.
- I coordinate an Away from Base course.
- I liaise with the Away from Base funder.
- I liaise with Services Australia about ABSTUDY matters.
- I complete reports and/or acquittals for Away from Base.
- Other:

7. Are you aware that there are two models of Away from Base: one administered by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and one by Services Australia?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

The NIAA model was previously administered by Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Services Australia was previously known as the Department of Human Services (DHS).

8. Is your organisation's Away from Base funding administered by NIAA or Services Australia?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- NIAA
- Services Australia
- Both
- I don't know.

The NIAA model was previously administered by Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Services Australia was previously known as the Department of Human Services (DHS).

9. How is your organisation's funding divided between NIAA and Services Australia?

Answer was 'Both ' at question 8 (Is your organisation's Away from Base funding administered by NIAA or Services Australia?)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- We receive our main Away from Base Funding from NIAA and access Testing and Assessment funding from Services Australia.
- We are transitioning from the NIAA model to the Services Australia model.
- We receive our main Away from Base Funding from NIAA but some students access Services Australia funding on an individual basis.
- I don't know.
- Other

The NIAA model was previously administered by Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Services Australia was previously known as the Department of Human Services (DHS).

10. Have you participated in an interview for this evaluation of Away from Base?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

Administration of Away from Base

11. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by NIAA?

Answer was 'Both ' or 'NIAA' at question 8 (Is your organisations Away from Base funding administered by NIAA or Services Australia?)

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
NIAA's guidelines/protocols for delivering Away from Base are clear and easy to understand.						
It is easy to communicate with NIAA about Away from Base.						
NIAA responds to queries within a reasonable time frame.						
Information from NIAA about Away from Base is consistent and accurate.						
Staff at NIAA with whom I communicate about Away from Base have a good understanding of life in Indigenous communities.						
NIAA's reporting requirements for Away from Base are clear.						
NIAA's reporting requirements for Away from Base are easy to complete.						
NIAA's acquittal processes for Away from Base are clear.						
NIAA's acquittal processes for Away from Base are easy to complete.						
NIAA Away from Base funding is sufficient to cover the travel, accommodation and meal costs of students at my organisation.						
My organisation contributes additional funding to meet the above student costs.						
My organisation makes in-kind contributions of staff time and other resources to deliver Away from Base activities.						
My organisation needs more training and resources explaining the rules and processes of Away from Base.						
Students need more resources explaining the rules and processes of Away from Base.						

12. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about the administration of Away from Base by Services Australia (formerly DHS)?

Answer was 'Both ' or 'Services Australia ' at question 8 (Is your organisations Away from Base funding administered by NIAA or Services Australia?)

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
Services Australia's guidelines/protocols for delivering Away from Base are clear and easy to understand.						
It is easy to communicate with Services Australia about Away from Base.						
Services Australia responds to queries within a reasonable time frame.						
Information from Services Australia about Away from Base is consistent and accurate.						
Staff at Services Australia with whom I communicate about Away from Base have a good understanding of life in Indigenous communities.						
It is easy to coordinate student travel with Services Australia.						
My organisation receives student travel itineraries from Services Australia within a reasonable time frame.						
Services Australia's reporting requirements for Away from Base are clear.						
Services Australia's reporting requirements for Away from Base are easy to complete.						
Services Australia's acquittal processes for Away from Base are clear.						
Services Australia's acquittal processes for Away from Base are easy to complete.						
Services Australia's Away from Base funding is sufficient to cover the travel, accommodation and meal costs of students at my organisation.						

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
My organisation contributes additional funding to meet the above student costs.						
My organisation makes in-kind contributions of staff time and other resources to deliver Away from Base activities.						
My organisation needs more training and resources explaining the rules and processes of Away from Base.						
Students need more resources explaining the rules and processes of Away from Base.						

Services Australia was previously known as the Department of Human Services (DHS).

13. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about ABSTUDY?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
The processes for getting our courses approved for ABSTUDY are clear.						
It is easy for my organisation to find out the ABSTUDY status of Away from Base students.						
The process of applying for ABSTUDY is easy and accessible for students.						
My organisation assists Away from Base students to communicate with Services Australia regarding their ABSTUDY eligibility and status.						
My organisation assists Away from Base students to complete their ABSTUDY application.						

14. Does your organisation ever cover unscheduled student Away from Base costs and then seek reimbursement from Services Australia?

Answer was 'Services Australia ' or 'Both ' at question 8 (Is your organisation's Away from Base funding administered by NIAA or Services Australia?)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes

- No
- I don't know.

15. Do you get reimbursed within a reasonable time frame?

Answer was 'Yes' at question 14 (Does your organisation ever cover unscheduled student Away from Base costs and then seek reimbursement from Services Australia?)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

16. Is there anything else you would like to say about the administration of Away from Base by NIAA and/or Services Australia?

Please write your answer here:

Your organisation's delivery of Away from Base

17. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about Away from Base at your organisation?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Not applicable
My organisation has effective processes for communicating with Away from Base students.							
Away from Base students find it easy to communicate with staff at my organisation to get information/support.							
If students need to change their travel and/or accommodation plans, it is easy for us to arrange this.							
Students are reimbursed within a reasonable time frame if they need to cover travel/and or accommodation costs themselves.							

18. Please describe how you communicate with students when they are in their communities.

Please write your answer here:

19. What challenges does your organisation face when delivering Away from Base activities?

Please write your answer here:

20. How have you been able to overcome these challenges?

Please write your answer here:

21. What Away from Base processes or activities work efficiently and well at your organisation?

Please write your answer here:

The student experience of Away from Base

22. Do you think students know what Away from Base is?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

23. Are those students aware of the eligibility requirements for Away from Base funding?

Answer was 'Yes' at question 22 (Do you think students know what Away from Base is?)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

24. Are they aware of the rules and conditions around Away from Base activities?

Answer was 'Yes' at question 22 (Do you think students know what Away from Base is?)

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

25. What are the accommodation options for Away from Base students at your organisation?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Individual rooms only.
- Shared rooms only.
- Students can choose between individual and shared rooms.
- It depends on what accommodation is available locally at the time.
- Other

26. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about Away from Base students at your organisation?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Not applicable
Students complain if they have to share a room.							
Students complain if they have to share a bathroom.							

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know	Not applicable
Students prefer to share a room with other students.							
Students like to have kitchen facilities.							
Students complain if they don't have access to free internet at their accommodation.							

27. In what ways could your students' accommodation needs be better met?

Please write your answer here:

28. Which of the following statements describe your organisation's approach to delivering Away from Base activities in a culturally appropriate way?

Please choose **all** that apply:

- We provide general orientation for students at the beginning of the course to help them become familiar with the course and the location.
- We provide cultural orientation for students at the beginning of the course (like a Welcome to Country and meeting Elders) so they have opportunities to learn more about the local culture and share their own stories with others.
- There are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff working with students.
- Staff have experience living and working in Aboriginal communities.
- Staff have established relationships with families and other stakeholders in communities where students are from.
- Staff receive cultural awareness/competence training.
- Students have access to Indigenous mentors.
- Our courses are structured to allow students to contribute their existing knowledge, skills and strengths.
- We provide flexible learning arrangements for students who have missed class time because of cultural obligations such as Sorry Business.
- We provide flexible learning arrangements for students who have missed classes because of family and caring duties.
- There are processes in place for students to give feedback about Away from Base activities.
- Our organisation has a formal definition of 'cultural appropriateness' and/or cultural protocols that guide how we work with students.
- We are an Indigenous community-controlled organisation.
- My organisation does not take any steps to ensure a culturally appropriate delivery.
- Other:

29. Please describe any aspects of the administration of Away from Base by NIAA/Services Australia that are not a good fit for Away from Base students.

Please write your answer here:

30. Do students at your organisation complete distance education components of their course (e.g. online learning, workbooks) when they are back in their communities? Please note, placements and work experience are not defined as 'distance education'.

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

31. What type of distance education are students assigned and how well does this work?

Answer was 'Yes' at question 30 (Do students at your organisation complete distance education components of their course (e.g. online learning, workbooks) when they are back in their communities? Please note, placements and work experience are not defined as 'distance education'.)

Please write your answer here:

32. Why does your organisation choose not to assign distance education activities to Away from Base students?

Answer was 'No' at question 30 (Do students at your organisation complete distance education components of their course (e.g. online learning, workbooks) when they are back in their communities? Please note, placements and work experience are not defined as 'distance education'.)

Please write your answer here:

33. Indigenous students may face a range of barriers to accessing and/or completing tertiary education. For each of the following factors, indicate:

1) the approximate proportion of your Away from Base students affected

2) the extent of the impact on these affected students.

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

Estimated proportion of students affected	None	Some	About half	Most	All	I don't know.
Financial insecurity						
Low literacy and/or numeracy						
Speaking/understanding Standard Australian English is a challenge						
Lack of access to internet and other technology and telecommunications						
Difficulty understanding ABSTUDY processes and requirements						
Difficulty completing forms						
Difficulty providing required documentation (e.g. birth certificate, ID)						
Difficulty proving Aboriginality						

Estimated proportion of students affected	None	Some	About half	Most	All	I don't know.
Distance that students have to travel						
Cultural and family responsibilities						
Difficulty arranging child care						
Lack of confidence to interact with people from outside of their community						
Lack of knowledge about tertiary study options						
Lack of knowledge about financial support available for tertiary study						
Stigma from community about going outside the community to get an education						

Extent to which affected students are impacted	No impact	Minor impact	Moderate impact	Major impact	I don't know.
Financial insecurity					
Low literacy and/or numeracy					
Speaking/understanding Standard Australian English is a challenge					
Lack of access to internet and other technology and telecommunications					
Difficulty understanding ABSTUDY processes and requirements					
Difficulty completing forms					
Difficulty providing required documentation (e.g. birth certificate, ID)					
Difficulty proving Aboriginality					
Distance that students have to travel					
Cultural and family responsibilities					
Difficulty arranging child care					
Lack of confidence to interact with people from outside of their community					
Lack of knowledge about tertiary study options					
Lack of knowledge about financial support available for tertiary study					

Extent to which affected students are impacted	No impact	Minor impact	Moderate impact	Major impact	I don't know.
Stigma from community about going outside the community to get an education					

34. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about Away from Base at your organisation?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who cannot access other courses because they are UNABLE TO COVER THE COSTS INVOLVED.						
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who cannot access other courses because of LOW LITERACY AND/OR NUMERACY.						
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who cannot access other courses because of LOW ENGLISH COMPETENCY.						
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who cannot access other courses because of LACK OF ACCESS TO INTERNET / OTHER TECHNOLOGY.						
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who DO NOT HAVE COURSES AVAILABLE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.						
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who cannot access other courses because THEY LIVE TOO FAR AWAY.						
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who cannot access other						

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
courses because of CULTURAL AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES.						
Away from Base allows our organisation to offer educational opportunities for students who cannot access other courses because of they DO NOT WANT TO LEAVE THEIR COMMUNITY FOR LONG PERIODS.						

35. Do Away from Base students at your organisation face any other barriers to accessing and completing tertiary education?

Please write your answer here:

36. Complete the following sentence:

I estimate that the home communities of the largest proportion of our Away from Base students are in...

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- very remote locations
- remote locations
- outer regional locations
- inner regional locations
- major cities
- I don't know.

37. In your experience, students from which type of location tend to have the most difficulties accessing educational opportunities?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Very remote
- Remote
- Outer regional
- Inner regional
- Major city
- I don't know.

The student experience of Away from Base

38. Imagine a situation in which your students no longer had access to Away from Base funding. What difference would this make for them?

Please write your answer here:

39. Are there Indigenous students attending mixed-mode courses at your organisation who are not receiving Away from Base funding?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

40. Why are these students not receiving Away from Base funding?

Answer was 'Yes' at question 30 (Are there Indigenous students attending mixed-mode courses at your organisation who are not receiving Away from Base funding?)

Please write your answer here:

41. What other support, financial and otherwise, is available for students wanting to access tertiary education away from their community?

Please write your answer here:

42. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about outcomes students have experienced as a result of Away from Base?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know.
Students have improved social and emotional wellbeing						
Students gain new skills and/or knowledge.						
Students demonstrate increased confidence in their coursework.						
Students demonstrate increased literacy and/or numeracy.						
Students are more confident to communicate in English.						
Students learn skills/knowledge that they can apply in their work and/or community.						
Students demonstrate increased confidence in their interactions with others.						
Students benefit from engaging and sharing knowledge with Indigenous people from other communities.						
Students build relationships and networks with Indigenous people from other communities.						
Students take on more responsibilities and contribute more to their community.						

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know.
Students become role models for others in their community.						
Students on residential blocks benefit from time away from family and community responsibilities.						
Students are completing tertiary courses.						
Students are gaining employment as a result of their studies.						

43. Which of the following outcomes do you believe to be the most valuable for students? Please choose the 3 that you consider have the most significant impact on the lives of Away from Base students.

Please select 3 answers

- improved social and emotional wellbeing
- increased skills/knowledge
- increased confidence in coursework
- increased literacy and/or numeracy
- increased confidence to communicate in English
- increased confidence in interactions with others
- engagement and knowledge-sharing opportunities with Indigenous people from other communities
- relationship and network building with Indigenous people from other communities
- increased responsibility and contribution to their community
- being a role model for others in their community
- time away from family and community responsibilities
- completion of a tertiary course
- increased employment opportunities

44. What other outcomes or benefits have students experienced as a result of Away from Base and how important are they?

Please write your answer here:

45. What is it about Away from Base that has helped achieve these outcomes?

Please write your answer here:

46. Please describe any negative outcomes you have observed for Away from Base students.

Please write your answer here:

Some final questions

47. What outcomes have you observed for other stakeholders (for example teachers, your organisation or communities) as a result of Away from Base?

Please write your answer here:

48. How could Away from Base processes/administration be improved?

Please write your answer here:

49. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about Away from Base?

Please write your answer here:

50. Is there any feedback you would like to provide about this survey?

Please write your answer here:

Appendix B: AFB student survey respondents

Figure 1: Proportion of student survey respondents by gender (n=200)

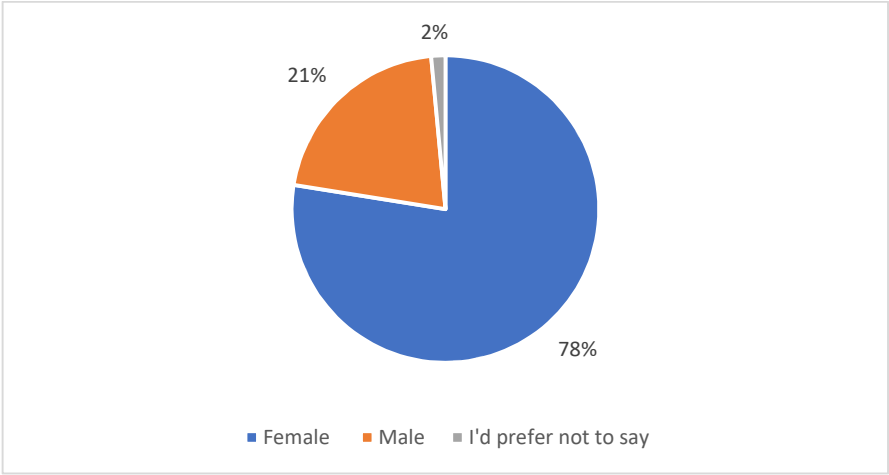


Figure 2: Proportion of AFB student survey respondents by course type (n=231)

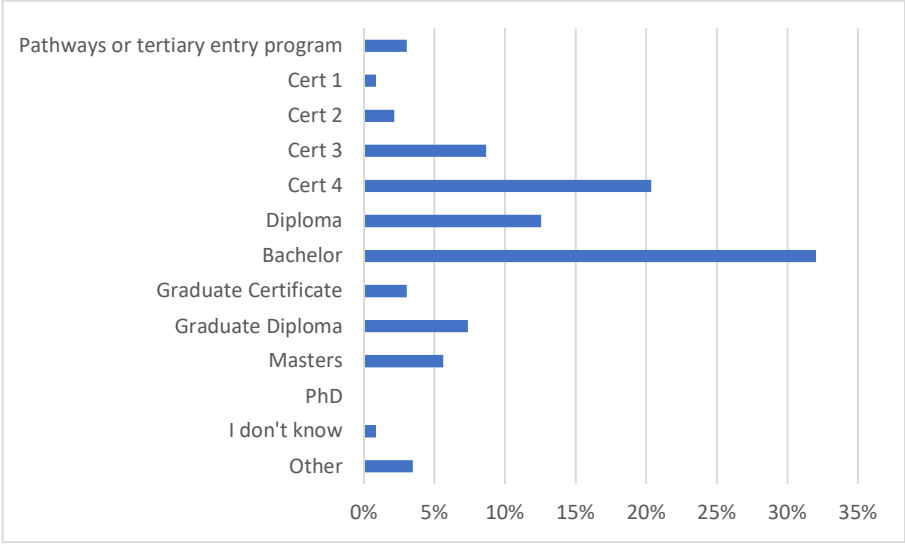
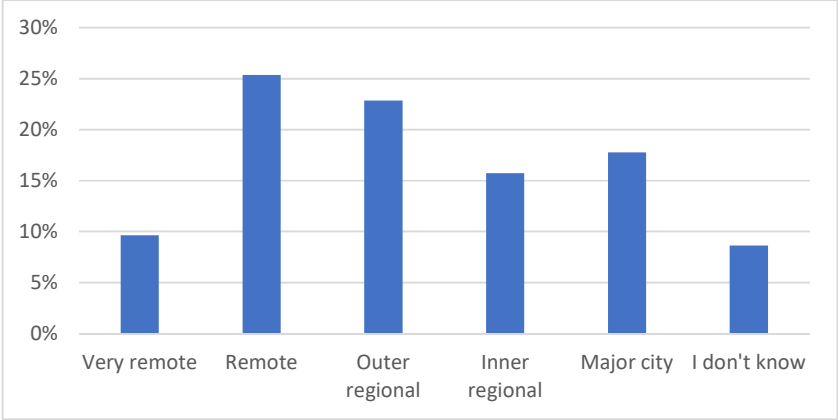


Figure 3: Proportion of student survey respondents by remoteness category (n=197)



Appendix C: AFB education provider staff survey respondents

Figure 4: Proportion of respondents who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (n=119)

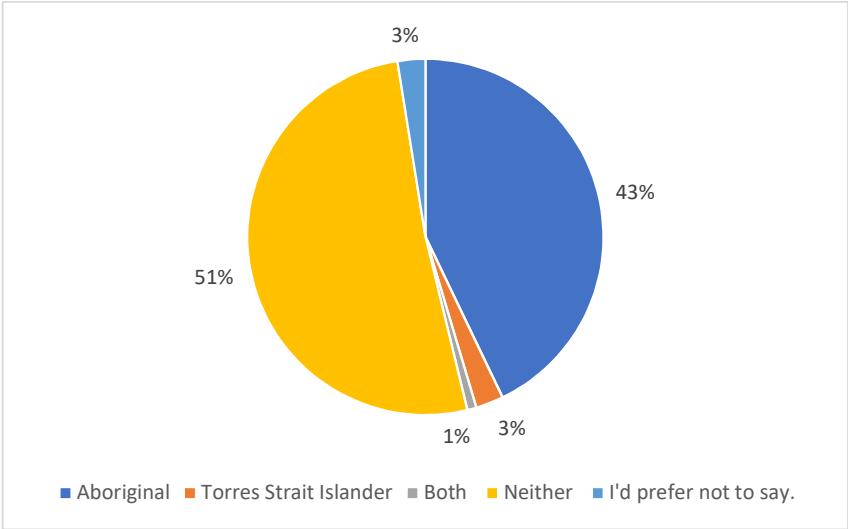


Figure 5: Proportion of respondents by gender (n=119)

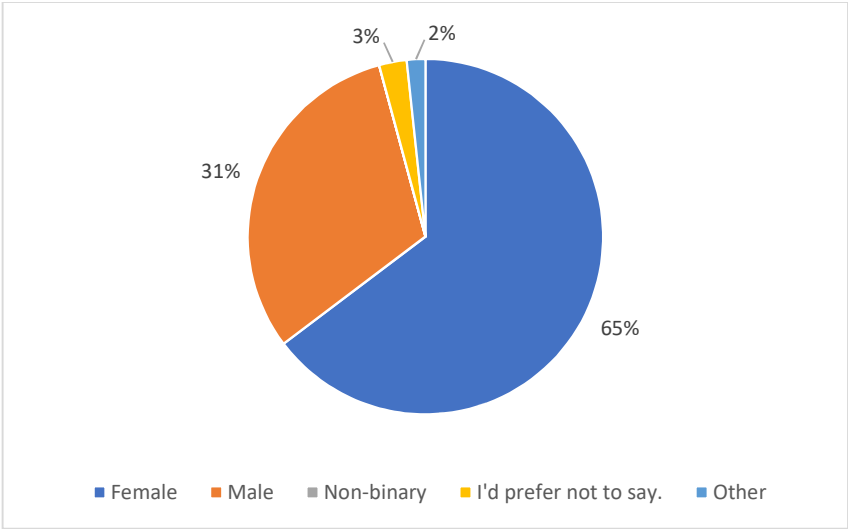


Figure 6: Proportion of respondents by length of involvement with Away from Base (n=119)

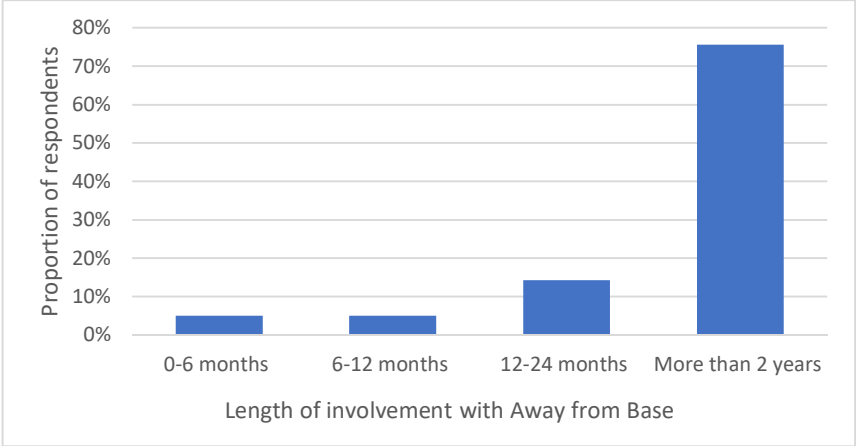
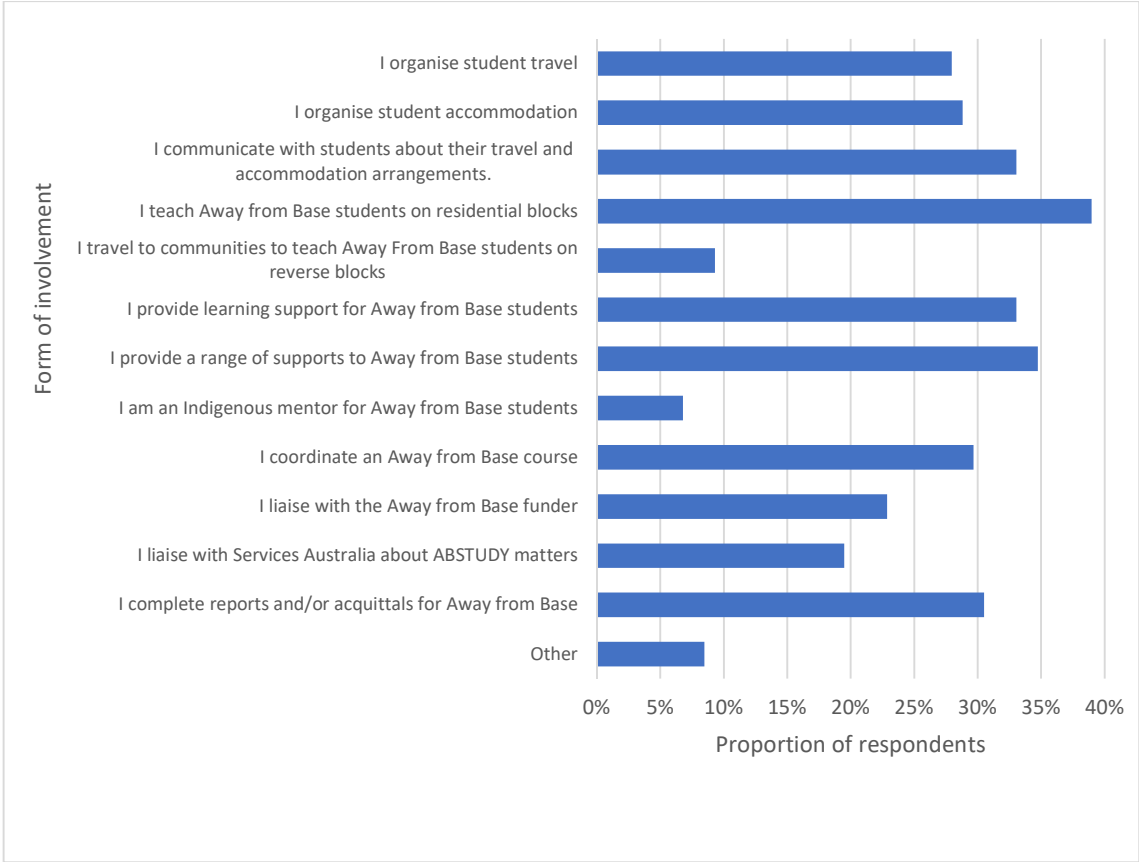


Figure 7: Proportion of respondents by form of involvement in Away from Base (n=118)



Appendix D: NIAA reporting requirements

In September, education providers submit the following reports.

- interim performance report for the current calendar year comprising success stories, challenges and progress in delivering outcomes and objectives
- estimation of the actual number of ABSTUDY eligible students enrolled for the calendar year
- statement of compliance with state/territory legislation pertaining to working with vulnerable people.

In March of the following year, education providers submit the following reports.

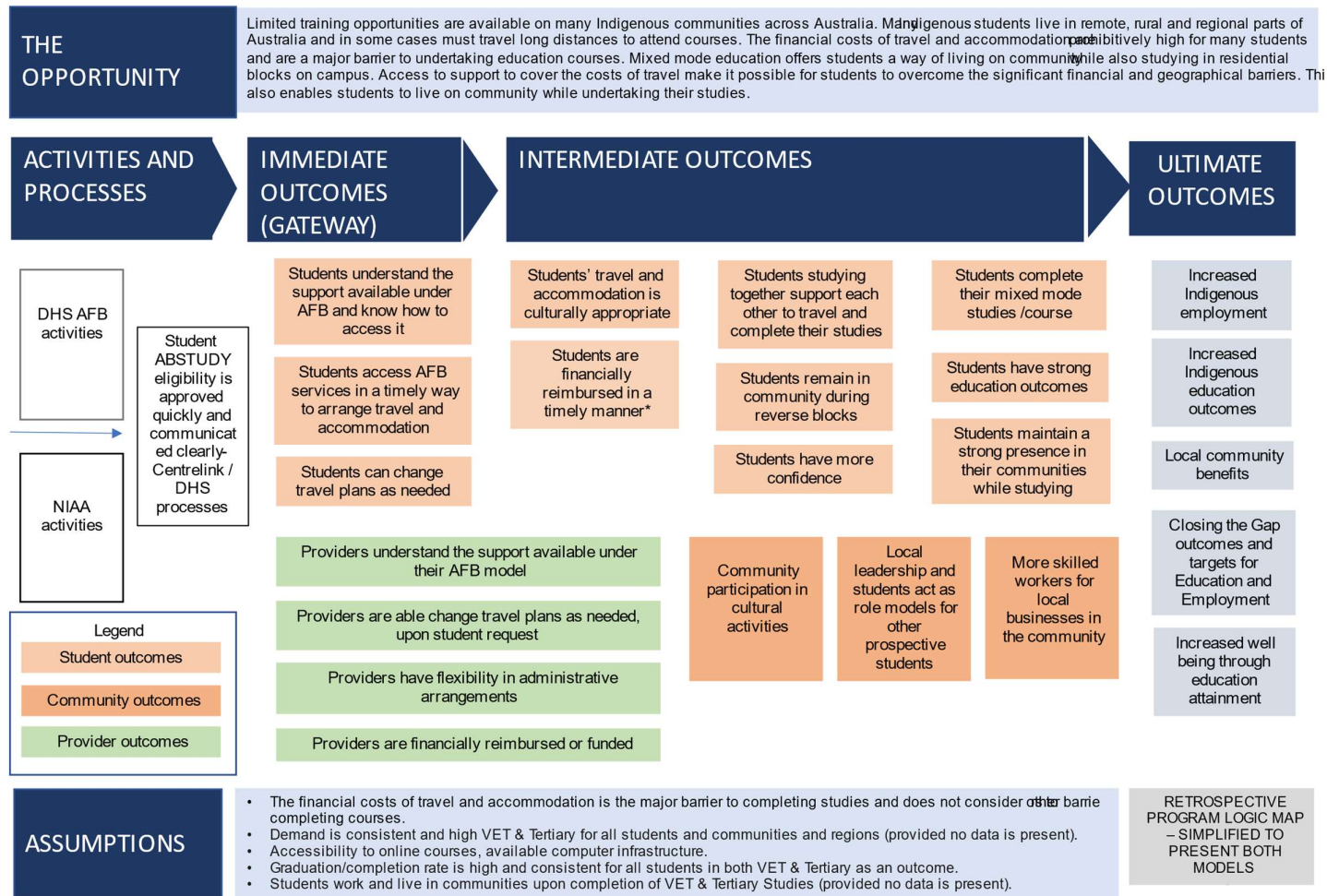
- final expenditure report for the previous calendar year
- final performance report for the previous calendar year, including an attachment with demographic data of students and course classifications, enrolments and completions.

According to the *Operational Protocol*, an education provider who enters into an agreement with NIAA for mixed-mode AFB 'will be required to negotiate performance indicators with baseline data and performance targets' (PM&C 2018a, p.9). Education providers report on KPIs in the September and March progress reports.

The *AFB Project Schedule* outlines five KPIs and associated targets for education providers:

1. Indigenous Employment: 50 per cent of hours worked in the 6-month reporting period under the activity are worked by an Indigenous person.
2. Employment Numbers: Number of Indigenous people employed and the total number of people employed, under the activity (by gender).
3. Hours worked—Indigenous staff: Number of hours worked in the reporting period by all Indigenous people employed under the activity.
4. Hours worked—All Staff: Number of hours worked in the reporting period by all people employed under the activity.
5. Core Service Provision: Core activities or service being delivered meet or exceed requirements.

Appendix E: Combined program logic for both models of AFB



Program logic developed by Urbis for NIAA

