

INTRODUCTION

There is a great deal happening in boarding. Boarding Australia is particularly interested in some of the issues that affect boarding for Indigenous secondary students and their families. This paper focuses on the findings of a recent survey we conducted regarding Indigenous boarding and some clarification of ABSTUDY rules that may assist boarding providers.

We hope to use this information to not only inform Indigenous boarding providers of some of the key issues that affect their work, but also to advocate for change.

INDIGENOUS BOARDING SURVEY

Respondent Profile

In total, 28 respondents completed the survey. Of these, 25% were from Qld, 25% from WA, 18% from both SA and NT, with 14% from NSW/ACT. No respondents were from Vic/Tas.

More than half (54%) of the respondents offer more than 50 boarding places for Indigenous students. Another 25% offer between 25-50 places, with the remaining 21% offering less than 25 places for Indigenous boarders. As such, the survey included respondents from Indigenous-specific and 'mainstream' boarding schools and residences.

Two-thirds of respondents deliver traditional dormitory style boarding on the school campus. Three respondents deliver hostel-type boarding and three responses were from family group home boarding providers.

ABSTUDY delays

Almost three quarters (71%) of respondents indicated that students were delayed from attending boarding at the start of the year while awaiting ABSTUDY approval. The reasons for these delays vary. Comments in the survey indicated that delays were generally a combination of the time required to process applications, and delays associated with the follow up to collect all required data and consents (e.g. tax file numbers, parent signatures, income records) in the case of incomplete applications. Communication about the status of applications was also identified as a problem.

300 students delayed by more than 4 weeks while ABSTUDY applications were being processed

The extent of these delays is alarming in terms of the amount of school missed by students. In response to the question, "How many students were delayed by more than 4 weeks awaiting their application to be processed?" some 300 students were identified. This equated to approximately 15 students in each residence that responded to the question.

At the time of the survey, almost two-thirds indicated that they were still awaiting students while ABSTUDY issues are addressed

At the time of the survey (week 6-7 of the term), almost two-thirds of respondents (64%) indicated that students had still not arrived while ABSTUDY issues are being addressed. For most, this meant that the first term has

been wasted for that student, who may not have attended school in their local community in the meantime.

Improving ABSTUDY

Respondents were asked "What are your 'top 3' suggestions about how you think ABSTUDY could be improved?" The most frequent answers (grouped by theme) are listed below:

PROPOSED ABSTUDY IMPROVEMENTS

- 1. Simplification of processes and clarity of information, including revisions to guidelines.**
- 2. Improved information for parents to make it simpler for parents to understand the application process.**
- 3. Improved processes for travel bookings, with some flexibility to simplify travel arrangements (e.g. allocation for schools with large numbers of students).**
- 4. Lines of communication improved with ABSTUDY staff**
 - reduced waiting times;
 - additional call takers;
 - nominated contact person for a school / family;
 - call back service.
- 5. Faster approval and prompt advice if an application is not approved.**
- 6. Flexibility and case-based considerations.**

These results are consistent with feedback we receive from members. Additionally, through our work with the Remote Indigenous Parents Association (RIPA) (www.ripa.org.au), we find that parents have similar concerns.

Alternative Boarding Options

For some time, Boarding Australia has been interested in emerging practices in informal boarding environments. This may include staying with family while boarding, but also includes the use of private houses or hostels which are operated as commercial entities.

One-third of respondents reported that they are aware of these informal boarding options being used by students at their school. Four respondents indicated that they have concerns about the quality and safety of these arrangements.

Indigenous Boarding Scholarships

Scholarship programs offer many Indigenous students access to boarding options. Almost three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they had scholarship recipients in their boarding residence.

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Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (IYLP) and Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) were the most common scholarship programs, although a variety of charitable and school bursary scholarships were also identified.

Boarding Standards

Boarding Australia is keen to assist boarding providers in their quality improvement endeavours. Part of our work on this basis is to provide practical tools, training and resources that will help in identifying and collecting evidence of good practice, as well as making plans for service improvement. These activities will then translate directly to demonstrate compliance with the Standard for Australian Boarding Schools and Residences (AS5725:2015).

80% want to know more about the Boarding Standards

More than 80% of survey respondents indicated that they would like to know more about the Standard and how they can work towards compliance. This is a significant focus of Boarding Australia's work in 2016, with the Boarding Quality Framework soon to be completed.

SUPPORT FOR PRE-ENROLMENT VISITS

Boarding Australia supports any activities that make the transition to boarding as simple and positive as it can be. Part of this transition process that has worked well for many Indigenous boarding services is the opportunity for students to spend some time in the boarding facility prior to commencing as a full time boarder.

"A boarding placement as part of the selection process can make the transition much smoother, and ultimately increases the chances of successful boarding"

Wiltja Boarding, Adelaide

Some BA members report that they schedule a 2 week period for prospective boarders to live in the residence, in order to gain an appreciation of life as a boarder and to assist the boarding service to make decisions about accepting a prospective student. As noted below, this activity may be funded through ABSTUDY, assuming it is part of the interview and selection process.

Boarding Australia sought advice regarding ABSTUDY support of pre-enrolment visits and this information is presented below, with reference to relevant sections of the ABSTUDY Policy Manual (also available on Boarding Australia website).

Funding to support orientation visits

There is no specific fares allowance funding for an ABSTUDY student to *trial* different boarding schools. The only type of Fares Allowances that may meet this type of journey would be 'orientation or special purpose visit travel', described in section 89.9 of the Policy Manual.

Chapter 89.9 Orientation or Special Purpose Visit Travel

89.9.1 Purpose of Orientation or Special Purpose Visit Travel

The purpose of orientation or special purpose visit travel is to assist in the entry, orientation or adjustment of a student to a term location, so that the away from home placement may be effective. It is expected that travel would be required in the student's first term/semester only.

A secondary school/boarding residence may require prospective students to attend interviews, or other selection procedures, in the year of study or even the year prior to the student commencing. These procedures can include screening or selection interviews as part of the offer of a scholarship or to determine appropriateness of

the school/residence for the student and vice versa.

If it is in the year prior, it is acceptable and the student can be approved as long as:

- the school/residence provides a reasonable explanation as to why the selection procedure needs to occur so early, and
- the student would qualify for Fares Allowance to study at the secondary school if accepted.

The visit to the secondary school must not be just for a visit/trial/transition. It **MUST** be as part of an interview/selection process.

The documentation from the boarding school must state that it is for an interview/selection process for the student, as well as outlining the length, and why it is of a specific length. This is for approval of the Fares Allowance, PLUS it enables the Department of Human Services (DHS) to determine what constitutes a 'reasonable' amount of time for any additional travel costs that can be approved.

If the student qualifies for Fares Allowance to attend the interview/selection process, then a 'Family Member' or a 'Supervisor' can accompany the student to the boarding school/residence.

In this case, a student and family member traveller qualifies for the fares, meals and accommodation of the approved journey. A Supervisor **ONLY** qualifies for the fares to be paid for. So, when a young student is approved to attend a boarding school for a selection/interview, it is worth considering that a family member accompany them so they also qualify for the meals and accommodation for the approved stay.

What is reasonable time?

DHS will determine what is a reasonable amount of time

for the accommodation and meals to be approved for the student or the family member based on the documentation supplied from the boarding school/residence. Boarding Australia recommends that a 1-2 week visit would offer the best opportunity for student and boarding provider to determine their suitability for each other.

Is there a limit to the number of journeys?

There is no limit of assistance to Orientation or Special Purpose Visit travel. Students are able to access both Orientation and Special Purpose Visit travel where entitlement for each journey has been met. This includes students who may have had a visit in the past, but are required to attend another interview/selection visit.

Is there a simple way to check if a student has already had an ABSTUDY funded orientation visit?

Due to privacy laws, DHS can only release certain information to third party organisations regarding ABSTUDY customer's records. As the boarding residence would not be linked to the prospective students ABSTUDY record in the initial stages of the journey, it would be in their interest to request the student contact DHS and give permission for the boarding school to enquire on their behalf.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Boarding Australia is confident that boarding will continue to play a critical role in assuring access to education for Indigenous students. Boarding Australia further recognises that quality assurance, financial viability and informed choice for parents are the great challenges for Indigenous boarding providers in the short to medium term.

Boarding Australia is advocating for a review of ABSTUDY policies and information. Boarding Australia also supports the development of a National Indigenous Boarding Strategy, to create a vision that ensures all Indigenous secondary students have access to educational opportunities.