Boarding Australia's mission is to work with boarding schools and residences with the simple aim of “Making Boarding Better”.

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Please note our new details

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We landed in Darwin on a hot Sunday afternoon. It was two days before I was officially due to commence as Chief Executive of Boarding Australia but my new career was underway. In any case I was glad to be away from wintry Adelaide.

I was in Darwin for review of a boarding facility and I was working with a team with a tremendous amount of experience in boarding: Steve Florisson from Boarding Training Australia and Boarding Australia Director; Trevor Schubert, a former head of boarding with international experience; and Marie Wood, Boarding Australia Director and formerly with Catholic Education SA. It wasn’t a planned induction but it was the best live induction I have ever enjoyed and I learned a lot from being in the field.

While I had barely got my legs under the desk, two weeks later I was in Tonga. Although not work related but a long booked (and well deserved) holiday with my wife Linnell, I was to see another perspective of boarding. Linnell’s grandfather, Rev. Dr. Alfred Harold Wood, had been the Principal at Topou College (a boarding college) from 1924 to 1937, and we had been invited to an assembly at 7.45am on a Monday morning.

We arrived to well-dressed boys in clean and pressed white shirts marching unsupervised in groups towards the impressive chapel. The sounds of the choir warming their voices emanated from the cavernous building. The Principal, Feleti (“we use first names”), greeted us and we walked with the staff down the aisle between the boys, to be seated as special guests at the front.

Topou College has 800 boarders, all boys. Its fees for the year are a few hundred dollars. They farm from their own lands a large portion of the food consumed. And the prefects run each boarding house of around 30 boarders with minimal supervision. The prefects are truly young men who take their responsibility seriously and with diligence.

Linnell’s grandfather commenced a music program at Topou that remains the pride of the College today. We were privileged to hear a choir that was world-class with an exceptional boy soprano. The brass orchestra which also played was extraordinary. We were listening to professional standard musicians who happened to be boys and boarders.

Feleti took us on a tour of the campus that was in three zones – spiritual (including music), physical (including boarding) and academic – mind, body and soul. It was also surrounded by their farming enterprise zone. Feleti expressed a desire for all boys to achieve and find what they were good at. This was reflected in the College’s values of ORDER:

- **O** - Organised structure; there is order
- **R** - Restoration of traditions; founding values and outstanding achievements
- **D** - Directions; directed vision, clarity, clear directions for guiding students
- **E** - Empowering; inspiring students to achieve best possible outcomes
- **R** - Renewal; born again and renewed strength

Tupou College’s brother school is Newington College in Sydney. Newington is supporting Topou in developing their academic standards.

Back at Boarding Australia we are reshaping our future with a clear focus on Indigenous students who are boarding to further their education...and there is a lot to do.

How do we help the boarding sector, remote families and communities, schools and teachers, and governments all contribute to ensure Indigenous boarders have a positive experience and attain an education that will provide opportunities for their adult lives? What is our ORDER?
I have already seen some of the challenges and the dynamics that drive and restrain boarding. However, I am keen to know and understand the big issues that need to be addressed from your perspectives.

Over the next months we will start this process with a membership survey to identify issues that we can then explore in detail and share with members.

It is now spring in Adelaide and after 21 days on the job I am also warming up to the role as Chief Executive. I know our greatest resource is the collective knowledge of our members. It was great to meet many of you at the conference on the Gold Coast and I look forward to getting to know more of you over coming months.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with your suggestions and comments for improvements in our sector.

Greg Franks
Chief Executive Officer
Boarding Australia
We need to know the true cost of Indigenous boarding school scholarships on communities

By Jessa Rogers - Associate Professor, University of Canberra

Every year, over 3,000 Indigenous students leave home to attend boarding schools. While many consider Indigenous boarding programs a “solution” generally aimed at remote students who don’t have access to local high schools, most Indigenous students at boarding schools are not from remote Australia.

Some come from cities, but the majority of Indigenous boarders come from regional and rural Australia.

With the government spending millions of dollars each year to encourage Indigenous students to attend boarding schools, what is the true cost of Indigenous boarding on regional communities, Indigenous families and students?

Many more will leave remote areas

By 2026, only 8% of all Indigenous Australians are projected to be living in remote Australia.

Within this decade, our Indigenous population is projected to reach upwards of 900,000 people, from 669,900 in 2013.

Huge amounts of government and state funding continue to be spent on boarding programs that enable students to leave their home communities and attend boarding schools in major cities and large towns.

While the government financially supports individual scholarship foundations and providers, private schools often fund their own scholarships.

Students and boarding schools can also access funding from the government’s ABSTUDY initiative. Figures specific to boarding schools have not been released, but in 2015-16 ABSTUDY payments to secondary school students alone cost around $145 million.

Little research on impact of Australian Indigenous boarding

During my years coordinating an Indigenous program for boarding students at a private girls’ college, I struggled to find data and research related to the experiences and outcomes of Indigenous boarders in Australia.

Through a PhD I decided to add to the small body of studies in this area through analysing the experiences of 25 Aboriginal girls attending boarding schools away from home.

Boarding better option than local school?

The majority of students in my study explained that they had chosen not to attend their local school because, based on their own and others’ experiences attending such schools, they believed the teaching and management to be of poor quality.
Students spoke of wanting better educational opportunities, as well as access to extracurricular activities, which were not provided at their local school.

They also described how local schools in their home towns, mostly in regional and rural Australia, struggled to keep teachers for longer than a year. They said that learning often consisted of copying down lines from a whiteboard or “mucking around” in unruly classrooms.

Students saw this as an example of “the teacher not caring”, “not trying” and “not thinking Aboriginal kids deserve a good education”.

But a few students I spoke to were attending boarding school in the city they lived in, and were able to catch the train home to visit their families.

Some saw boarding school as opening doors to better opportunities in the future, by being able to put the name of a “big school” on their resume.

Having a good education was seen as a stepping stone toward a better life, even if students felt their education did not support their Indigenous identity and culture.

The pull between wanting a good future and wanting to maintain their identity was palpable, and unresolved. This was often the reason given for Indigenous students dropping out of boarding school.

Statistics show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in non-remote areas are more likely than those in remote areas to have completed Year 12 or equivalent (28% compared with 18%).

And while boarding school is a way for students from remote areas to move to regional and urban schools, the completion rates of remote students in boarding schools are unclear.

Recent research indicates that in some remote towns where secondary schooling is unavailable, up to 50% of secondary school aged students who are supported to attend boarding school return as a result of de-enrolling (through self-exclusion, withdrawal, exclusion or cancellation of enrolment).
Other reasons for attending boarding school

Students choose to attend boarding for individual reasons. In my research, one student spoke of leaving home because her mother was in a violent relationship, and she wanted to move away to escape the hurt of watching her mother being bashed after letting her boyfriend return each time he left her, bruised and crushed.

Another student spoke of how she and her mother had often searched for boarding scholarship advertisements in the hope of a “better education” and “making her family proud”. The same student told me that getting into boarding school granted her grandmother’s dying wish.

Impact on communities

Three in four students in my study said they had been subjected to racism and discrimination while at boarding school. This included name calling, taunts based on being scholarship recipients, and social isolation by non-Indigenous students.

Many of the events students described were not heard, but were felt. “You just know,” one student said, “it’s the way they look at you”.

Students also described problems with feeling homesick; a lack of understanding of Indigenous content in classwork; their need for Indigenous teachers – who comprise of just 1.2% of the Australian teaching workforce. They also wanted more access to Indigenous support people in schools.

They talked about feeling disconnected with family, culture and identity when they returned home after boarding.

They also retold painful stories of feeling lost and trapped, not knowing who they were when they returned home after changing to fit in at boarding school.

Desire to stay in city in further education

Despite this, the majority of Aboriginal students I spoke with said that they planned to remain in major cities and regional centres, to go to university or in getting a job after boarding school.

They saw this future, away from their communities, as bright, exciting, and worth it as an “end goal”.

While scholarships are providing students with opportunities to attend boarding schools that are well out of reach for most families, the cost to identity, culture and connection to community has not been fully explored – and is rarely discussed with students and families before they embark on such journeys.

Boarding scholarships worthwhile?

What is clear is that boarding school is not for everyone. Some students will thrive, and others will not, regardless of whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

Indigenous boarding school scholarship foundations openly state this to potential applicants.

It’s also a reality that a small number of Indigenous students must leave their homes if they wish to receive a high school education in Australia.

More data, however, must be collected if the government is to continue to spend millions on sending Indigenous young people to boarding school.

More research into boarding school models, more discussion around the aims of such initiatives, and an understanding of the true cost of boarding school on students, and their communities, is also required.

This article can be found online on ‘The Conversation’ website.
About the author

Jessa has a breadth of experience as an educator, having worked as a teacher in primary and secondary schools, then as a school principal opening an Indigenous girls’ boarding school in Far North Queensland for teenage mothers and their children.

Jessa’s PhD explored Aboriginal and Māori girls’ contemporary boarding school experiences in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand through photoyarn, an Indigenous arts-based method she developed.

Prior to commencing as an Assistant Professor at the University of Canberra, Jessa was Course Coordinator in postgraduate Indigenous education and Indigenous research courses at Macquarie University and previously lectured in education at the University of the Sunshine Coast, and at the

University of Canberra in Indigenous Studies. She also worked in the Centre for Aboriginal Policy and Economic Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University.

Jessa worked as an Executive Teacher with the ACT Education Directorate creating the ACT’s first cultural curriculum embedding Ngunnawal culture in schools. In 2010, Jessa was the National NAIDOC Young Person of the Year and she now sits on the National NAIDOC Committee.

As a Registered Provider of Professional Learning with the ACT Government Teacher Quality Institute (TQI), Jessa continues her role as an independent presenter and consultant in the area of Indigenous education and Indigenous research with students in schools.
Suicide can be a traumatic event for any community

For the boarding school community the impact of a death by suicide can be greatly extended due to the multiple communities existing within, connected to or impacting on the one school.

To ensure a safe response to a death by suicide in boarding schools there are four key areas to address; the communication between teaching and boarding staff, supporting mental health in boarding students, managing the multiple communities making up the school community and managing risk issues for all students. Below is some information to assist with a safe response to a death by suicide in this setting.

Disseminate information immediately to all staff

Effective communication is critical to managing risk after a suicide. Sensitively notify all staff of the death as soon as possible. This includes staff not currently on school grounds to ensure that they are aware of the death and postvention plans before arriving for their next class or overnight shift.

Email is the quickest method to reach all staff with information, when a meeting is not possible. However it may not be appropriate to inform some staff members via email. Consider the relationship the staff member had with the student, the impact of the information and the support they may require on hearing the news.

Establish communication pathways. Teaching and boarding staff operate on different timetables and may not see each other at all but both will have responsibilities following a student suicide. Staff need to be able to communicate effectively regarding at-risk students, early warning signs for risk and risk management plans.

Understand the social location of your students

Boarding school students may originate from varied communities and cultures. Following a suicide it is important to be aware of the:

- Family and community factors for each student that may increase their vulnerability, such as exposure to family conflict, death or suicide in their community of origin
- Specific challenges faced by boarding students after a traumatic event, such as separation from their family and community supports
- Staff: student ratio and the impact this may have on students seeking support after hours
- Issues relating to the cultural and religious identity of students (e.g. a student who originates from a remote community and is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background may need to return to their community following a death).

Informal communication channels in the boarding setting mean that boarding staff are well placed to understand the background of their students and how relevant factors may contribute to risk. They are also well placed to observe changes in behaviour or mood and check in with students about how they are coping.
Ensure appropriate staff training

Appropriate staff training is critical to managing risk. Training should be reviewed annually and form a critical part of preparedness training; taking into account changes in staffing and the need for appropriate refresher training.

This should be considered over three areas:

1. Ensure both teaching and boarding staff are up to date with: identifying risk, mental health first aid, referral pathways for at-risk students
2. Specific, identified staff such as well-being staff, should be proficient in risk assessments and risk management planning.
3. Boarding staff should have a thorough understanding of their role (in general and particularly in a crisis); this should be part of their induction. Schools should offer additional support and training if boarding staff do not feel sufficiently equipped to identify and manage risk.

Support mental health in boarding students

Boarding students face specific challenges including their:

- Limited access to ‘time out’ away from the school setting and their peers
- Inability to seek face-to-face and/or physical support and comfort from their family and community
- Reliance on each other; often leading to close bonds forming between students. This has implications for risk of suicide contagion, particularly if the deceased student was a boarding student
- Connection to community and cultural identity, which has implications for their well-being.

Staff supporting students

School staff can address these challenges and promote self-care and mental health for students by:

- Normalising their need for time out and time for grieving
- Working with students and communities to maintain connections to family, community and cultural identity
- Encouraging mental health care strategies; maintaining involvement in positive activities, exercising, eating well and developing regular sleeping habits
- Providing education on study/work/life balance, resilience and coping strategies
- Promoting awareness of the relationship between suicide and mental illness, risk factors, help-seeking strategies and where to seek help.

Be aware of memorialising on school grounds

If the suicide occurred on school grounds or in a student room consider:

- Supporting safe and respectful memorials, with consideration to appropriate timeframes and locations (see fact sheet Remembering a young person: Memorials and important events)
- Use of the room and how to best address this for your school
- Structures around well-being after hours and access to support.
COMING EVENTS

- National Indigenous Education Forum
  Hilton Darwin, NT
  18th to 20th October 2017

- EduTech Australia 2018
  International Convention Centre, Sydney
  6th June to 8th June 2018

JOB VACANCIES

- NRL Cowboys House (QLD)
  Boarding Supervisor
  Applications close 22 September 2017

- Abbotsleigh School
  Boarding Resident Assistants
  Applications close ASAP

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