
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Education in remote and complex environments

**House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training**

November 2020
Canberra

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Foreword

This inquiry examined how education meets the learning needs of students in regional, rural and remote communities and how barriers in education can be overcome. The committee found that Australians growing up in regional and remote areas have lower educational attainment rates in school, in Year 12 and in tertiary education, compared to those living in metropolitan areas, and that a range of factors contribute to gaps in access and equity across a child's education journey.

The committee was mindful that significant work is being undertaken to address the issues outlined in this report, including government responses to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review, 2018) and the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review, 2019). Evidence to this inquiry supports the findings of both the Halsey and Naphthine reviews, which are current, detailed and comprehensive. While noting the government accepted the findings of both the Halsey and Naphthine reviews, the committee has recommended that further detail and clarity is required to show how the government is implementing the recommendations and actions proposed by these reviews.

The committee has made 14 recommendations to improve access to quality education, and outcomes for students in regional, rural and remote communities, including:

- Ensuring all Australian students can access secondary school education, to a nationally-consistent minimum standard, regardless of their geographic location
- Providing greater opportunities for families and communities to have more say in how schools apply the Australian Curriculum
- Ensuring that the education available to children and young people with disability in regional, rural and remote locations is inclusive

- Improving access to mental health treatment and support in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Improving access to quality early childhood education and care in regional, rural and remote communities
- Providing up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Supporting early learning programs provided through distance education, and providing greater flexibility and surety in funding for:
 - ⇒ mobile early childhood education services, and
 - ⇒ wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Providing adult literacy campaigns in communities with low levels of adult English literacy
- Improving access to English as an Additional Language or Dialect support and bilingual education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Supporting the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce
- Establishing trauma-informed, cultural induction and training programs for educators working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and
- Enhancing the integration of Australia's Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education sectors.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank those who contributed rich and varied written submissions to the inquiry, and who participated in the limited public hearing program. The committee would have welcomed the opportunity to hear first-hand from regional and remote communities about the education challenges they face. When the inquiry commenced in late 2019, we could not have foreseen the extent of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I would also like to thank the communities who had been prepared to host hearings and visits during the inquiry, and those who assisted with planning prior to the interruptions and uncertainty over recent months.

The pandemic has significantly disrupted the education of Australian students in 2020 and has placed huge strain on the capacity of education systems, schools and teachers to deliver education outside of classrooms. The shift to online learning disadvantaged many students, particularly vulnerable children and those in their early years of schooling, and exposed the digital divide between families with access to the internet and internet-enabled devices, and those without.

While online education has the potential to bridge gaps in education access, it is no substitute for in-classroom teaching and it is clear that many issues still need to be worked through including the need for broader access to ICT, and improved online pedagogy and teacher training. While the individual health advice of the states and territories will guide whether children learn in classrooms in the coming months, jurisdictions are encouraged to prioritise the safe delivery of in-classroom teaching over home-based learning.

Mr Andrew Laming MP
Chair



Membership of the Committee

Chair Mr Andrew Laming MP

Deputy Chair Ms Lisa Chesters MP

Members

Ms Angie Bell MP	Ms Ged Kearney MP
Ms Celia Hammond MP	Ms Joanne Ryan MP
Mr Andrew Hastie MP	Ms Rebekha Sharkie MP
Mr Barnaby Joyce MP	Mr Terry Young MP

Committee Secretariat

Secretary Ms Julia Morris

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Terms of reference

The House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training will inquire into and report on the education of students in remote communities and the role of culture, family, community and country in delivering better outcomes.

The Inquiry will focus on but not be limited to consideration of:

- A child's journey through early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary education in remote communities, like the tri-border region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory
- Key barriers to the education journey, including the effects of environmental factors such as drought on families and communities
- The role of culture and country in a child's learning
- Community and family structures that support a child's education and their attendance at school
- Effective government initiatives, past and present, that support remote communities to enable greater educational outcomes, including those that have improved attainment in literacy and numeracy
- Innovative approaches to workforce, including recruitment, professional learning, retention and support, and lessons from communities that could be more generally applied
- Access and support to deliver the Australian Curriculum (including STEM) in a flexible way to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students, including examples of innovative ways in which the curriculum is being delivered in remote schools, and
- Successful pathways to ensure students have the knowledge and skills they need to enter further education and the workforce.



List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
AEU	Australian Education Union
AHISA	Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
AIC	Assistance for Isolated Children
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
ANSTO	Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation
APY	Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara
ARIA+	Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia
ASGS	Australian Statistical Geography Standard
ASPA	Australian Secondary Principals' Association
ASSETS	Aboriginal Summer School for Excellence in Technology and Science
ASU	Australian Services Union
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
BBF	Budget Based Funding
BoCAR	Bureau of Communications and Arts Research
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

CAMHS	Child Adolescent Mental Health Service
CCS	Child Care Subsidy
CCSA	Community Connections Solutions Australia
CEP	Country Education Partnership
CGS	Commonwealth Grant Scheme
CLAWs	Centres for Learning and Wellbeing
CLC	Central Land Council
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CSPs	Commonwealth Supported Places
CSU	Charles Sturt University
CTC	Capacity to Contribute
CYDA	Children and Young People with Disability Australia
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
DET	Distance Education Tutor
DMI	Direct Measure of Income
DSS	Department of Social Services
EAL/D	English as an Additional Language or Dialect
ECA	Early Childhood Australia
FLO	Flexible Learning Options
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HELP	Higher Education Loan Program
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program
I2S2	Inquiry for Indigenous Science Students
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICPA	Isolated Children's Parents' Association
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage

ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDL	Interactive Distance Learning
IEBA	Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia
IES	Indigenous Education Strategy
IHC	In Home Care
ISCA	Independent Schools Council of Australia
KICS	Katharine Isolated Children's Service
MACS	Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services
MCSA	Mobile Children's Services Association of New South Wales
MGSE	Melbourne Graduate School of Education
NACCHO	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NATSIPA	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association
NBN	National Broadband Network
NCEC	National Catholic Education Commission
NCEF	Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation
NDIA	National Disability Insurance Agency
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
NPY	Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standard
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
OES	Online Education Services
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
RATE	Remote Area Teacher Education

RFW	Royal Far West
RIPA	Remote Indigenous Parents Australia
RRR	Regional, Rural and Remote
RSAS	Remote School Attendance Strategy
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
SEAM	School Enrolment and Attendance Measure
SES	Socio-economic status
SNAICC	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TFA	Teach for Australia
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TSS	Temporary Skill Shortage
TSU	Transition Support Unit
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VETiS	Vocational Education and Training in Schools
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
YBFS	Year Before Fulltime Schooling



List of recommendations

Recommendation 1

To reduce barriers to education, the committee recommends the Government develop policies and programs that:

- generate investment, economic development and employment, and deliver essential infrastructure, including reliable and affordable access to electricity, in regional, rural and remote areas
- improve access and affordability in regional, rural and remote communities to:
 - ⇒ medical, ancillary and mental health services
 - ⇒ services and support for people with disability, including addressing thin markets in the National Disability Insurance Scheme
 - ⇒ public transport
 - ⇒ services and support for communities in times of crises or during periods of rural hardship, including access to Centrelink, and
 - ⇒ broadband and mobile phone reception, in particular extending the Sky Muster Education data offering to tertiary and vocational students in remote, regional and rural areas.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the government reaffirm its commitment to inclusive education in the new National Disability Strategy in 2021, and include a focus on ensuring inclusive education for children and young people with disability in regional, rural and remote locations.

In the development of the new Strategy, the government should consider whether a national inclusive education act is required to protect the right to inclusive education for students with disability.

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth set out a roadmap for improving the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including improved access to mental health treatment and support.

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends the Minister for Education develop proposals to be incorporated in the new children's education and care national workforce strategy in 2021 that:

- address barriers to access to quality early childhood education and care in regional, rural and remote communities, including cost
- improve the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and
- support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce.

Recommendation 5

The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth provide greater flexibility and surety in funding for wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Recommendation 6

The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Recommendation 7

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth modify funding arrangements for mobile early childhood education to provide flexibility and surety of funding for these services in the 2021 Budget.

Recommendation 8

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth support early learning programs through the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Distance Education Allowance in the 2021 Budget.

Recommendation 9

The committee recommends that, by May 2021, the Minister for Education publish a comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions outlined in the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review).

Recommendation 10

The committee recommends that the Education Minister develop, for inclusion in the new National School Reform Agreement, commencing in 2023:

- a proposal to introduce a needs-based school funding model that aims to address barriers to accessing education in remote and regional communities
- a proposal to ensure that all Australian students can access secondary school education, to a nationally-consistent minimum standard, regardless of their geographic location, and
- a proposal to enhance family and community engagement in shaping how schools apply the Australian Curriculum.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth:

- provide adult literacy campaigns in communities with low levels of adult English literacy
- ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can access English as an Additional Language or Dialect support and instruction at school
- ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can access bilingual education where Standard Australian English is not the first language spoken, or where school communities have expressed a desire for this to occur
- establish programs that support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce, and

- establish trauma-informed, cultural induction and training programs for educators working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Recommendation 12

The committee recommends that, by May 2021, the Minister for Education publish a comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions outlined in the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review).

Recommendation 13

The committee recommends that the Minister for Education, as soon as practicably possible, consider evidence as to whether the regional loading to address the higher cost of delivering higher education at regional universities sufficiently recognises the higher costs.

Recommendation 14

The committee recommends the Minister for Education develop a proposal for the Education Council to consider implementing in 2021 to enhance the integration of Australia's Vocation Education and Training and Higher Education sectors.

Introduction

- 1.1 On Wednesday 27 November 2019, the committee adopted an inquiry referred by the Minister for Education, the Hon. Dan Tehan MP, to inquire into and report on the education of students in remote and complex environments.
- 1.2 The Terms of Reference are set out in the front pages of this report.
- 1.3 In undertaking this inquiry, the committee was concerned that regional, rural and remote students' achievement in school, in Year 12 and in tertiary education has been lower than that of metropolitan students for many years.
- 1.4 Regardless of where they live, young Australians should be supported to meet their potential with high quality education and meaningful pathways to further education and employment.
- 1.5 The committee examined how education meets the learning needs of students and how barriers in education can be overcome.
- 1.6 The committee was mindful that significant work is being undertaken to address the issues outlined in this report, including responses to recently concluded reviews, and has sought to consolidate and extend on those findings and recommendations.

Scope and conduct of the inquiry

- 1.7 The committee called for submissions from interested individuals and organisations, and held initial public hearings in Canberra on 5, 12 and 26 February 2020.
- 1.8 Submissions are listed at Appendix A.
- 1.9 Details of public hearings are listed at Appendix B.

- 1.10 As a consequence of the disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee deferred plans to visit regional and remote communities in New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland.
- 1.11 The committee would have welcomed the opportunity to hear first-hand from regional and remote communities about the education challenges they face. The committee is grateful to those who had been prepared to host hearings and visits during the inquiry, and who assisted with planning prior to the interruptions and uncertainty imposed by the emerging pandemic.
- 1.12 The committee invited further submissions addressing adaptations and solutions to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to education.
- 1.13 To further examine the issues highlighted in the written submissions, while respecting constraints around travel, the committee held a series of roundtable public hearings via teleconference. The roundtable hearings focussed on school education and further education on 26 August 2020, and early childhood education, and barriers to education on 2 September 2020. Testimony at the hearings reinforced the excellent evidence received in written submissions.
- 1.14 The committee is aware that a limited number of stakeholders could be included in the public hearing program, but acknowledges the thoughtful and comprehensive contributions made in written submissions. All contributions, written and verbal, have been given careful consideration.

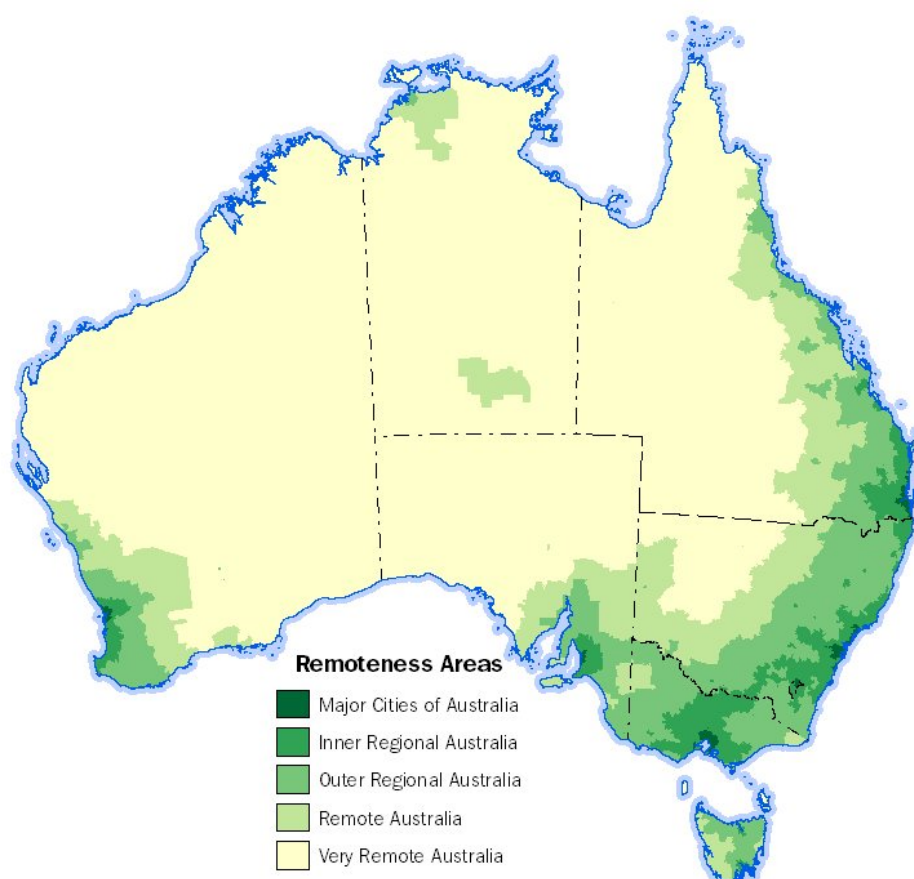
Structure of the report

- 1.15 This introductory chapter provides an overview of:
- the education attainment gap between students living in regional and remote areas and those in metropolitan areas, and
 - the current policy context for education in remote and complex environments, including a discussion of recent reviews.
- 1.16 The remaining chapters examine the inquiry evidence across four themes:
- Chapter two - barriers to education that are external to education systems
 - Chapter three - early childhood education
 - Chapter four - school education, and
 - Chapter five - further education and employment.

A note on definitions

- 1.17 Geographical categories used in this report, such as ‘regional’ and ‘remote’, follow the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). The ASGS has five classes of remoteness based on relative access to services: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) notes that access to services are measured using the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+).¹
- 1.18 In this report, the term ‘remote’ is used to describe both remote and very remote areas. The term ‘rural’ does not correspond to any specific class of area within the ASGS framework. The term ‘metropolitan’ has been used and refers to the major cities category in ASGS.

Figure Map of Remoteness Areas for Australia



Source Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 5 - Remoteness Structure*, 1270.0.55.005, July 2016.

¹ ABS, *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 5 - Remoteness Structure*, 1270.0.55.005, July 2016.

The education attainment gap

- 1.19 Australians growing up in regional and remote areas have lower educational attainment rates in school, in Year 12 and in tertiary education, compared to those living in metropolitan areas. They are around 40 per cent less likely to gain a higher-level tertiary education qualification and less than half as likely to receive a bachelor and above qualification by the time they are 35 years old, compared to people from metropolitan areas. This gap is most pronounced in remote and very remote areas and at university level.²
- 1.20 Achievement in education in regional and remote areas has been lower than in metropolitan areas for decades, as evidenced by:
- National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results
 - two international tests of school students – the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and
 - rates of successful completion of year 12 or equivalent qualification (at the level of Certificate III or higher) by the age of 19.³
- 1.21 In relation ‘to a student’s transition to university and the proportion of persons aged 25–34 years with a bachelor degree or above, there is a decreasing trend with increasing remoteness.’⁴
- 1.22 In relation to ‘vocational education and training (VET), non-metropolitan participation rates are comparable with urban rates and completion rates for Certificate III exceed urban (38 per cent compared to 35 per cent), but at the diploma level the situation is reversed (10 per cent compared to 16 per cent).⁵
- 1.23 In 2019, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that ‘the proportion of young people fully engaged in work and/or study has been

2 Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

3 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey review), January 2018, p. 4.

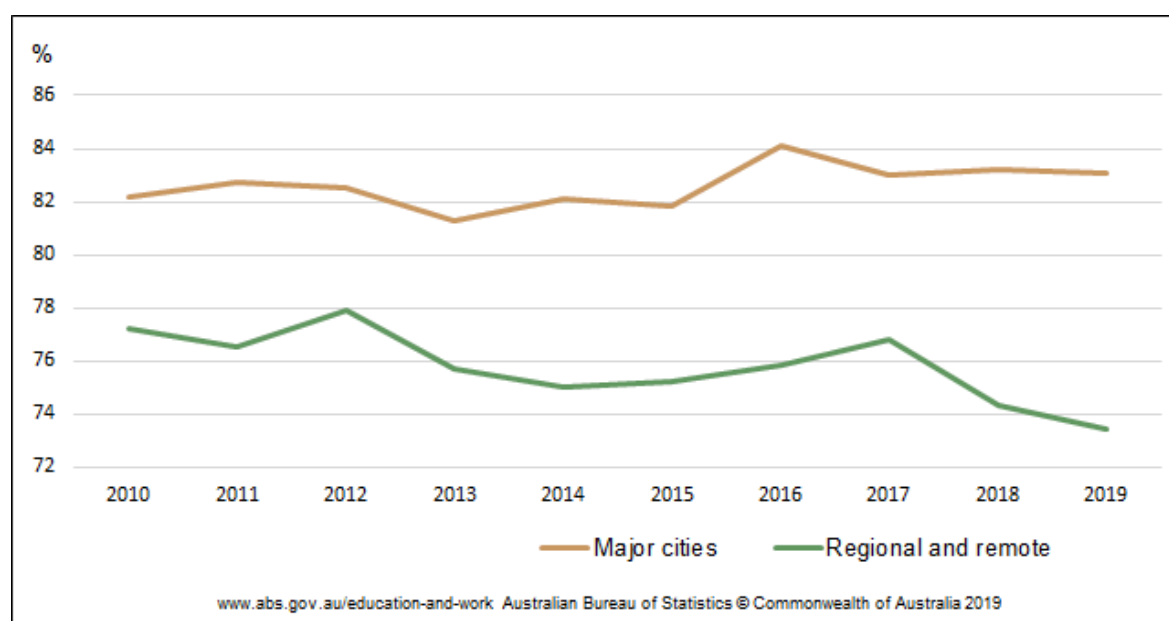
4 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 4.

5 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 4.

consistently higher in major cities than in regional and remote Australia' over the past decade.⁶

- 1.24 The ABS also reported that the gap in engagement in further educational and training is widening between metropolitan and regional and remote areas. The proportion of 15-24 year olds fully engaged in work and/or study decreased in regional and remote areas between 2017 and 2019, which correlates with the duration of the current drought (see Figure 1.1).⁷

Figure Proportion of 15-24 year olds fully engaged in work and/or study, by remoteness, 2010-19



Source ABS, 6227.0 - *Education and Work, Australia*, 13 November 2019.

- 1.25 The gap in the engagement of young people in work and/or study between non-remote and remote areas is similar among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, however overall levels of engagement are significantly lower. According to the 2016 Census, more than half (52 per cent) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 to 24 years were fully engaged in work or study. Those living in urban areas (55 per cent) were more likely to be fully engaged in work or study than those living in non-urban areas (42 per cent). In contrast, 67 per cent of non-Indigenous people were engaged in some mix of education, employment and training in 2016.⁸

6 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 6227.0 - *Education and Work, Australia*, 13 November 2019.

7 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 6227.0 - *Education and Work, Australia*, 13 November 2019.

8 ABS, 2076.0 - *Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 'Community Engagement'*, 19 February 2018.

- 1.26 In 2019, the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine review) reported that, compared to their metropolitan peers, regional and remote students are:
- **Less likely to complete secondary schooling:** 80.3 per cent of students in metropolitan areas complete Year 12 or equivalent by the age of 19, falling to 63.9 per cent in inner regional areas and 40.3 per cent in very remote regions.
 - **Less likely to apply for higher education:** Young people from RRR areas who do complete schooling are far less likely to go onto higher education. Even when controlling for differences in ATAR scores, regional students are less likely to attend university than those from metropolitan areas.
 - **Less likely to accept their university offer:** While university applicants from regional areas are more likely to receive an offer when they apply, they are less likely to accept it (70 per cent compared to 77 per cent for metropolitan students).
 - **More likely to defer university offers:** RRR students are twice as likely to defer their university offer.
 - **Less likely to complete tertiary education:** The completion rate for domestic, bachelor-level university students six years after commencing in 2012, is 65.5 per cent for students from metropolitan areas, compared to 61.4 per cent for inner regional, 58.5 per cent for outer regional, and 48.7 per cent for remote areas. Similarly, projected VET completion rates are lower for students in RRR areas.⁹

Social and economic costs of the education attainment gap

- 1.27 In the 2017 review conducted on behalf of the Department of Education and Training, Emeritus Professor John Halsey estimated that ‘people not in full-time work or study by age 24 and who continue in this way over a 40-year period, produce a cost impact on society of around \$412,000 per person’.¹⁰ He noted that ‘the total fiscal and social cost of a lifetime of disengagement is \$69.3 billion’, representing approximately 15 per cent of all Australian government budgeted expenditure for 2016/17.¹¹

9 Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine review), *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 13.

10 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 24.

11 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 24. Calculation is based on 2014 data.

1.28 Professor Halsey also said:

In a similar vein, it is well documented that one consequence of young people becoming disengaged from education before they complete their schooling is a greater propensity for them to drift into crime and then becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. The financial costs associated with this far exceed those of providing a 'top quality' education and there are major social implications and costs as well.¹²

Recent reviews and policy context

International treaty obligations

1.29 Both World Vision¹³ and the Australian Human Rights Commission noted that a child's right to education is enshrined in the following international treaties:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)(1989), ratified by Australia in 1990, and
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966), ratified by Australia in 1975.¹⁴

1.30 World Vision commented that Australia has undertaken to 'respect and ensure' rights under these treaties for every child, 'without discrimination of any kind' and that 'geography, remoteness, distance, language, culture, religion, disability and sex cannot be used as excuses when a child's right to education is at stake.'¹⁵

Closing the Gap

1.31 In July 2020, the new national agreement on Closing the Gap was released, which includes 16 targets to reduce the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.¹⁶

1.32 Given the centrality of the Closing the Gap agreement in shaping Commonwealth policy in partnership with the states and territories, and

12 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 24.

13 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 3.

14 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 6

15 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 3.

16 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020.

with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, relevant targets are included in chapters two to five of this report.

Halsey review

- 1.33 In 2017, the Government commissioned Professor Halsey to examine the challenges faced by students in regional and remote areas and find innovative solutions to help them succeed at school and beyond.
- 1.34 In January 2018, the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey Review) made eleven recommendations and suggested fifty-three actions as examples of how to progress them. Professor Halsey remarked:
- Together the recommendations and actions encompass curriculum and assessment, principals and teachers, ensuring that students get the best start possible to their education, expanding VET and university opportunities and pathways, philanthropy and entrepreneurship, ICT, improving the support available to move away from home, and building a high level national focus on regional, rural and remote education and training.¹⁷
- 1.35 In May 2018, the government accepted all 11 recommendations of the Halsey review, noting:
- Many of the actions are very specific and may cut across existing initiatives, work plans, funding arrangements and levels of government. In these circumstances, the actions provide a starting point for the many conversations that will continue to flow from the IRRRRE [Halsey Review] final report.¹⁸
- 1.36 Given similarities in the scope of the Halsey review with this inquiry, relevant recommendations are provided along with the government's response to those recommendations at the end of chapters two and four of this report.

Naphthine review

- 1.37 On 12 November 2018, the Minister for Education, the Hon Dan Tehan MP, announced that the government would develop a National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review) focused on improving tertiary education participation and outcomes for students from regional, rural and remote areas, as part

17 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 5.

18 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 6.

of a broader regional education package. The review's advisory group was led by former Victorian Premier, the Hon Dr Denis Napthine.

- 1.38 Minister Tehan said that the Napthine review would build on the government's response to the Halsey review.¹⁹
- 1.39 The final report of the Napthine review was released on 28 August 2019. It made seven recommendations and proposed 33 related actions.²⁰
- 1.40 In 2019, Minister Tehan said 'the government accepted the aims of the seven key recommendations' and noted:
- The government would consult on the 33 specific actions and respond in due course. Many of the actions involve a different approach to current policy settings, require possible reform of the sector and budgetary considerations. These actions also require engagement with state and territory governments and different portfolio areas.²¹
- 1.41 Minister Tehan also acknowledged that this strategy would take ten years to realise.²²
- 1.42 In June 2020, the Morrison Government announced an additional \$400 million package to increase opportunities for regional, rural and remote students to access tertiary education and support regional university campuses. As part of the package of reforms, Minister Tehan announced that a Regional Education Commissioner will be appointed 'to drive the Napthine reforms and support the implementation of the government's Regional Education Strategy.'²³
- 1.43 Given similarities in the scope of the Napthine review with this inquiry, the review's recommendations are provided along with the government's response to those recommendations at the end of chapter five of this report.

19 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, *Media Release*, 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy', 12 November 2018.

20 Department of Education, Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 13.

21 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education and The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Minister for Regional Services, Decentralisation and Local Government, *Joint Media Release*, 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy', 28 August 2019.

22 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education and The Hon Mark Coulton MP, Minister for Regional Services, Decentralisation and Local Government, *Joint Media Release*, 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy', 28 August 2019.

23 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, *Media Release*, 'Tertiary reforms to unleash potential of regional Australia', 19 June 2020.

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

- 1.44 On 12 December 2019, a new national declaration of education goals was endorsed by all Council of Australian Governments (COAG) education ministers. The Alice Springs (*Mparntwe*) Education Declaration sets out two education goals for young Australians:
- Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.
 - Goal 2: All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.²⁴
- 1.45 The *Mparntwe* Education Declaration notes that:
- Achieving these education goals is the responsibility of Australian Governments and the education community in partnership with young Australians, their families and carers and the broader community.²⁵
- 1.46 Education Ministers also agreed to fast-track a review of the entire Australian Curriculum with an initial focus on maths and science.²⁶

National School Reform Agreement

- 1.47 The government released the National School Reform Agreement in November 2018, a joint arrangement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories to improve student outcomes across Australian schools. The Agreement was informed by the findings and recommendations of the Halsey review, the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, and the final report of the *STEM Partnerships forum*.
- 1.48 The Agreement identifies ‘students living in regional, rural and remote locations’ as a ‘priority equity cohort’.²⁷

Previous parliamentary inquiries and other reviews

- 1.49 The former House of Representatives Employment, Education and Training Committee conducted two education related inquiries during the 45th Parliament: an inquiry into school to work transition (2018), and the

24 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe), Education Declaration*, December 2019, p. 4.

25 COAG Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe), Education Declaration*, December 2019, p. 4.

26 COAG Education Council, *Communiqué*, Alice Springs, 12 December 2019, p. 2.

27 COAG, *National School Reform Agreement*, 5 November 2018, p. 7.

- status of the teaching profession (2019). Evidence received for the latter noted challenges in retaining experienced teachers in remote locations.²⁸
- 1.50 Government responses to these two reports remain outstanding at the time of writing.
- 1.51 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs conducted an inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (2017). It found that ‘the persistent gap in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students indicates that, in many cases, the education system is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students.’²⁹
- 1.52 The government responded to the inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in August 2020. Of the 20 recommendations contained in the final report of the committee, the government agreed or agreed in principle with five recommendations, noted 14 recommendations and did not agree with one recommendation.³⁰
- 1.53 The former House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs conducted an inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities (2012). It found that ‘Indigenous language is inseparable from culture, and is the foundation upon which the capacity to learn and interact productively with other people is built.’³¹
- 1.54 The government response to the language learning inquiry noted that the ‘importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and culture has been recognised in the development of the Australian Curriculum.’³² It also noted that ‘decisions about how schools offer

28 House of Representatives Employment, Education and Training Committee, *Unique Individuals, Broad Skills: Inquiry into school to work transition*, May 2018; House of Representatives Employment, Education and Training Committee, *Status of the teaching profession*, October 2019.

29 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, December 2017, p. xv.

30 Government response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, August 2020.

31 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, September 2012, p. 1.

32 Government response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, June 2013, p. 7.

learning programs, including bilingual education, are matters for state and territory education authorities.’³³

Other recent education related reviews

- 1.55 More broadly, multiple reviews have been conducted into issues relating to education. These reviews include:
- *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (2018), the final report of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group
 - *Optimising Stem Industry-School Partnerships: Inspiring Australia’s Next Generation* (2018), the final report of the *STEM Partnerships forum*
 - *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (2018)
 - *Australia 2030: Prosperity through Innovation* (2017), and
 - *Red Dirt Education: A Compilation of Learning from the Remote Education Systems Project* (2016). The Remote Education Systems research project considered how education could better meet the needs of those living in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

33 Government response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, June 2013, p. 9.

Barriers to education

- 2.1 Australian governments have expressed a vision for ‘a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face.’¹ Yet, as the previous chapter has shown, there remains significant and persistent gaps in the educational attainment of students from regional, rural and remote communities compared to other Australian students.
- 2.2 There are a range of barriers to education for regional, rural and remote students that can lead to poorer outcomes and lower aspirations than their peers in metropolitan areas, and can mean that families choose to move to cities and larger towns in order to educate their children.²
- 2.3 While much can be done within education systems to make services better and more equitable (chapters three, four and five), some of the greatest barriers to education are beyond the capacity of schools to address.³ Furthermore, many of these external challenges, such as depressed local economies, a lack of local employment opportunities, and limited access to ancillary services (such as occupational and speech therapies) and mental health services, increase as remoteness increases.⁴
- 2.4 A range of other factors that negatively impact on students’ education experience and aspiration also increase with remoteness, including issues relating to language (chapter four) and limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning (chapter three).⁵

1 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe), Education Declaration*, December 2019, p. 2.

2 Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Australia (ICPA Australia), *Submission 7*, p. 2.

3 Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA), *Submission 2*, p. 7.

4 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 7.

5 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 10.

- 2.5 This chapter examines a range of barriers to education in regional, rural and remote contexts that are external to education systems and may require reform across multiple portfolios, including:
- issues relating to geographic isolation
 - socioeconomic factors
 - health challenges, and
 - access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT).
- 2.6 The chapter concludes with a summary and discussion, including relevant Closing the Gap targets and recommendations from the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review).

Geographic isolation

- 2.7 Australia's unique combination of diversity, distance and demographics presents many challenges for the provision of education and other services.⁶ Aside from areas of relatively dense population located either on the eastern seaboard or clustered around the major capital cities in the north, west and south of the continent, much of Australia is sparsely populated, often with large distances between major population centres.
- 2.8 Remoteness increases the costs of service delivery and prevents some services from being delivered at all.⁷ Due to their size, many communities and schools are unable to benefit from the economies of scale that enable services to be delivered in locations where there is a larger population.⁸
- 2.9 Families living in regional, rural and remote areas have limited choice in where and how they educate their children⁹ and limited access to other services and supports that families in towns and cities rely on.¹⁰

6 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, January 2018, p. 15.

7 Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA), *Submission 22*, p. 14; Productivity Commission, *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, 2017, p. 268.

8 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 16.

9 Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc. (ICPA Qld), *Submission 4*, p. 1; Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 13; ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 16; Isolated Children's Parents' Association Northern Territory (ICPA NT), *Submission 45*, p. 2; Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

10 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 15; National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), *Submission 40*, p. 5; ICPA NT, *Submission 45*, p. 3.

- 2.10 The size and remoteness of many communities means that they may not be able to support full time services, and some communities can be cut off from services for weeks or months each year.¹¹
- 2.11 In some communities, low private vehicle ownership and limited options for public transport are barriers to accessing education and other services.¹²
- 2.12 Students living in geographically isolated locations may have fewer opportunities to play sport and music, to participate in the arts and other cultural activities, or to socialise with others of their own age, compared to their peers in metropolitan areas.¹³
- 2.13 Students who are located vast distances from major regional centres have limited access to secondary school education and opportunities for tertiary or vocational education pathways while remaining within their communities.¹⁴
- 2.14 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) expressed concern that a person's geographic location impacts negatively on their ability to have their rights realised, particularly when it comes to education.¹⁵
- 2.15 Similarly, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland (ICPA Qld) commented that 'distance is a fundamental impediment to learning', and explained:

For geographically isolated families it limits choice across all levels of compulsory education. For students to engage with other students and develop their individual personalities through exposure to cultural and social activities there is a dramatic increase in expense. Distance necessitates the need for students to attend boarding school to complete their compulsory educational journey which has multiple effects on the family dynamic including increased emotional and mental stress upon all family members. In times of extreme environmental circumstances such as drought, fire and flooding, these stresses are compounded as families and communities also struggle financially. Geographical

11 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 14; Productivity Commission, *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, 2017, p. 268; Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA), *Submission 23*, p. 2.

12 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, pp. 13-6; Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 6; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

13 ICPA NT, *Submission 45*, p. 3; National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA), *Submission 33*, p. 6; RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 2; ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 1.

14 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 6.

15 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

isolation has also proven a disincentive for tertiary education due to significant costs associated with attending university and having little to no familial support.¹⁶

Socioeconomic factors

- 2.16 Australians living in remote and very remote locations have, on average, shorter lives and poorer health, experience higher levels of poverty and have lower rates of educational attainment at both secondary and tertiary levels than their counterparts in metropolitan locations.¹⁷
- 2.17 This gap is particularly pronounced in many remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where issues of income, food and energy insecurity, inadequate and overcrowded housing, and high rates of preventable diseases linked to poverty have been reported.¹⁸
- 2.18 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory are also subject to higher rates of substantiated child protection notifications (four times the national average) and higher rates of out of home care (with only about a third in kinship care).¹⁹
- 2.19 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and there is a strong link between school disengagement and interactions with the juvenile justice system.²⁰
- 2.20 Save the Children commented that 'education does not take place in a vacuum' and noted that 'poverty is strongly associated with developmental vulnerability in children when they reach school and with reduced developmental outcomes in general.'²¹ Save the Children said that educational outcomes could be improved by 'addressing underlying sources of disadvantage and their effects, such as lack of access to secure housing, and poorer nutrition and general health.'²²
- 2.21 Similarly, Children's Ground stated:
- Educational engagement and outcomes are primarily influenced by family and community environments. For many children, these
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16 ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 2.

17 Early Childhood Australia (ECA), *Submission 27*, p. 2.

18 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, pp. 11-2; Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF), *Submission 66*, p. 5.

19 Central Land Council (CLC), *Submission 9*, p. 6.

20 Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 5; National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), *Submission 44*, p. 3.

21 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

22 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

environments include extreme disadvantage, economic poverty, political and social exclusion – all of which are preventable. The major service sectors of education, health and wellbeing, and economic and social support cater to the mainstream but are failing those at the margins of economic, cultural and social privilege. Currently, data indicates that for these families, very few are benefiting through improved life outcomes from current investment in education, health and child and family services.²³

- 2.22 The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) explained that disadvantage and overcrowding are key barriers to education for many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

Disadvantage impedes families' ability to afford and access health services, resulting in students experiencing poorer health outcomes than their peers, including hearing loss which impedes learning. Overcrowding contributes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' psychological stress and related behavioural problems, and impedes their ability to do homework, remain healthy and get adequate sleep and support to succeed at school.²⁴

- 2.23 Tangentyere Council reported that about 45 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households in the Northern Territory live below the poverty line, and that poverty in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is increasing.²⁵ Tangentyere Council commented that many residents of the Alice Springs town camps face 'multidimensional disadvantage'.²⁶
- 2.24 Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA) noted that 'the current lack of genuine and sustainable employment in many, if not most, remote Indigenous communities results in high levels of unemployment', meaning that families 'rely on Centrelink and welfare'.²⁷
- 2.25 Tangentyere Council commented that one 'way forward would be to ensure basic food and income security. In the short term this could be achieved by some reform of Centrelink requirements and increasing the amount of benefits.'²⁸

23 Children's Ground, *Submission 56*, p. 16.

24 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 3.

25 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 10.

26 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 9.

27 RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 4.

28 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 27.

- 2.26 The AHRC noted that young mothers experience significant challenges in continuing their education and reported that there are much higher rates of teenage parenthood outside of major cities, in low socioeconomic areas and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.²⁹ The AHRC noted that the challenges faced by young mothers are more acute in remote areas due to lack of services and supports, such as early childhood education and care.³⁰ The AHRC provided examples of wrap-around models of schooling for young parents, which aim to re-engage young parents with education while providing support in developing parenting and other life skills.³¹

Health

- 2.27 A range of health challenges disproportionately affect Australians living outside of metropolitan areas.³² Australians living in remote locations also have more limited access to health services, which can exacerbate health challenges and lead to poorer educational outcomes.³³ For example, the AHRC noted that 'as many as 32 per cent of children living in rural or remote NSW are unable to access the health services they need.'³⁴
- 2.28 AHISA commented that 'student wellbeing is such an important part of learning' and explained:
- Unless a student is physically, emotionally and intellectually well, they're not going to learn. One of the greatest gaps that our heads identified in remote and regional areas is the access to GPs [general practitioners], occupational therapists, counsellors and psychologists. Without that access, you're not going to be able to sustain the learning of those students.³⁵
- 2.29 AHISA noted that 'limited or no access to medical services, ancillary services or mental health services in regional and remote locations can also

29 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 17.

30 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 18.

31 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 18.

32 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Rural & remote health*, 2019, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-remote-health>>, viewed 23 July 2019.

33 RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15; Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), *Submission 30*, p. 2.

34 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

35 Ms Beth Blackwood, Chief Executive Officer, AHISA, Committee Hansard, 26 February 2020, Canberra, p. 5.

present a challenge to recruitment and retention of staff, with flow-on effects in education provision for students.’³⁶

- 2.30 Health challenges are particularly acute for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities. For example, Tangentyere Council reported that:

Central Australian Aboriginal people residing in the Alice Springs Town Camps have poor nutritional intake, low levels of physical activity, are more likely to smoke and suffer from hypertension. In addition, there is a significant proportion of this population that is overweight or obese. Aboriginal people are 13 times more likely to suffer from diabetes, 5 times more likely to suffer from heart disease and 7 times more likely to suffer from chronic kidney disease. Mortality rates for Aboriginal people are high and life expectancy is comparatively low. The reality for Central Australian Aboriginal people is that the risk factors and the prevalence of chronic illness contrast with the non-Indigenous population.³⁷

- 2.31 Speech Pathology Australia reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience the world’s highest rates of middle ear disease and conductive hearing loss, noting that ‘children with hearing losses often report feeling isolated, and do not catch up with their peers without intervention.’³⁸
- 2.32 Similarly, NACCHO noted that ‘hearing loss is a significant barrier to school success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ that can result in children disengaging from school and becoming involved with the criminal justice system.³⁹ NACCHO noted that ‘ear infections and hearing loss can be prevented through improved environmental health and reduced overcrowding.’⁴⁰
- 2.33 The Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF) reported that approximately 50 per cent of all students attending a remote community school in the Pilbara in Western Australia in 2019 were confirmed as having ongoing poor ear health and hearing impairments and are recognised as having a hearing disability.⁴¹

36 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 25.

37 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 22.

38 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 7.

39 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 3.

40 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 3.

41 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 5.

- 2.34 NCEF also reported that poor nutrition, suspected Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, scabies, boils, conjunctivitis, and head lice, were 'not uncommon within the student population', while diabetes, heart, and kidney problems were also prevalent in the adult population.⁴²
- 2.35 The Western Australian government reported that it has provided soundfield systems to regional and remote schools in the Pilbara, Kimberley, Goldfields and Midwest to amplify teachers' voices to improve classroom listening environments. Schools in Western Australia 'with an Aboriginal student population greater than 60 per cent could request systems due to the prevalence of middle ear infections and conductive hearing loss among Aboriginal students.'⁴³
- 2.36 In Western Australia, Earbus mobile ear health clinics offer comprehensive ear screening, surveillance and treatment for Aboriginal children and young people in schools, day care centres, kindergartens and playgroups.⁴⁴

Early intervention

- 2.37 It is important that families have access to services that identify any specific needs and supports that children require, at the earliest possible stage, to help children be the best they can be.⁴⁵
- 2.38 Speech Pathology Australia commented:
Early identification of speech, language and communication needs and access to appropriate interventions during the pre-school years can have a profound effect on a child's health, development, educational and wellbeing outcomes in the longer term.⁴⁶
- 2.39 Royal Far West (RFW) noted that 'early intervention means more young people have the best possible start in life. It also makes good economic and social policy sense.'⁴⁷
- 2.40 Children growing up in regional, rural and remote areas are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, and have less access to screening and early intervention than those in metropolitan areas.⁴⁸ Furthermore, a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in

42 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 5.

43 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 20.

44 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 20.

45 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6; RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 4.

46 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6.

47 Royal Far West (RFW), *Submission 32*, p. 4.

48 RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

regional and remote areas are developmentally vulnerable compared to their non-Indigenous peers in those areas.⁴⁹

2.41 Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA) reported that 45.5 per cent of children in very remote areas were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of child development when they commenced school in 2018, as compared to 20.8 per cent of children living in major cities. CCSA further reported that 6 in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains in 2018.⁵⁰

2.42 RFW expressed concern about 'a lack of access to adequate services to sustainably meet the developmental, behavioural and mental health needs of all children, including basic assessment and screening.'⁵¹ RFW commented:

This lack of access is characterised by services being unavailable locally and requiring significant travel to access them; inconsistent access, characterised by intermittent availability (staffing and funding changes and gaps); and challenges to access such as extensive waiting lists, inappropriate services for child needs (quality/required expertise), and the unsustainably high cost to access alternative private services when public service access is unavailable or taking too long.⁵²

2.43 RFW recommended that 'a developmental screening and early intervention program for 3-5 year olds be made available to areas of greatest need, and be free of charge.'⁵³

2.44 NCEF expressed concern that, given the health challenges facing communities in the Pilbara, there is limited access to services that identify and support students with learning difficulties:

Whilst often suspected (especially in the case of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders or FASD), official diagnoses of such learning difficulties are not being made due to the lack of services and available resources. This can often have life-long implications. Children from the community have seldom had the opportunity to benefit from the services of speech therapists or occupational therapists.'⁵⁴

49 Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), *Submission 12*, p. 4

50 Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA), *Submission 24*, p. 2.

51 RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7.

52 RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7.

53 RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 6.

54 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 18.

2.45 The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) noted ‘evidence suggests that early intervention programs are best delivered in a coordinated, planned, family centred manner that reflects a life course approach to health and wellbeing outcomes.’⁵⁵

2.46 A number of examples of early intervention programs were highlighted during the inquiry. RFW reported that it has partnered with the Fitzroy Crossing community in the Kimberley, Western Australia, to increase services and support for children with complex needs:

As part of this community led model, RFW has been piloting the use of telehealth to provide speech, OT [occupational therapy] and psychology assessment and therapy directly into a remote pre-school and a remote school, as well as providing professional development and support to teachers and Aboriginal educators. The program works with children aged 3 -12 years, the vast majority of them Aboriginal. Through this model, children with speech/language and behaviour/regulation issues are receiving regular, direct therapy for the first time and teachers report greatly increased confidence in working with children with complex trauma based developmental challenges.⁵⁶

2.47 RFW advocates that ‘the model used in Fitzroy Crossing be scaled into a “Remote Communities Model” and become a critical component of remote education, working in partnership with local communities.’⁵⁷

2.48 Save the Children commented that, in order to improve children’s educational outcomes, ‘there needs to be more focus on supporting parents and families to engage in children’s learning and provide a safe and nurturing home environment, and on addressing underlying sources of disadvantage.’⁵⁸ Save the Children said:

This requires a place-based and integrated approach to addressing need and disadvantage. In pursuing these aims, we recommend that government prioritise 'bundles' of initiatives and interventions which are scalable, already demonstrating success, and readily able to integrate with each other and operate within a system of supports, particularly during children’s first 1000 days and up to age six.⁵⁹

55 National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), *Submission 63*, p. 4.

56 RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 2.

57 RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 3.

58 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 2.

59 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 2.

- 2.49 Save the Children gave the example of its Play2Learn model that 'provides integrated early childhood education and family support to around 12,000 highly vulnerable children and parents each year, including in remote areas across the country.'⁶⁰
- 2.50 Similarly, Children's Ground works with children from pre-birth to eight years of age, together with their families, to address disadvantage. Children's Ground stated this approach 'recognises that the physical, social, emotional and economic health and wellbeing of all family members impacts children's education, health and wellbeing.'⁶¹

Students with disability

- 2.51 Children and young people with disability in regional, rural and remote areas have limited access to services such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, and early intervention.⁶² These services play an important role in supporting children with disabilities to participate in education on an equal basis with others.⁶³
- 2.52 The AHRC commented that 'the lack of services in regional areas not only restricts choice, but sometimes results in people with disability being forced to leave their communities in order to access specialist disability services and support.'⁶⁴
- 2.53 Speech Pathology Australia noted that communication disabilities 'may mean that a student's capacity to understand and use language can be severely compromised and the effects on their access and participation (including literacy and learning) can be significant.'⁶⁵ These students 'require additional support to access and participate in the curriculum and achieve expected educational outcomes.'⁶⁶
- 2.54 The AHRC reported that a lack of accessible transport in regional and remote areas 'has a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, particularly physical disability'.⁶⁷ This lack of access 'affects their ability to access education, employment and, critically, health services.'⁶⁸

60 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 2.

61 Children's Ground, *Submission 56*, p. 9.

62 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15; CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 2.

63 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 2; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

64 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

65 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6.

66 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6.

67 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 16.

68 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 16.

Inclusive education

- 2.55 Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) noted that the participation of students with disability in remote areas in education can be limited by school and teachers' access to training opportunities around disability and inclusive education.⁶⁹
- 2.56 CYDA described the daily experiences of students with disability as 'far from ideal, with significant lack of support for students and many traumatic experiences.'⁷⁰ CYDA reported that around 50 per cent of students with disability experience bullying at school, including from teachers, and that the majority of students did not receive appropriate support or information around planning for their futures and their careers.⁷¹
- 2.57 At the roundtable on 2 September 2020, CYDA expressed concern that students with disability in regional, rural and remote communities continue to be segregated from the general school population and this has a negative impact on their educational experience and attainment:
- From the evidence base of over 40 years, when students with disabilities are included in regular education settings along with their many non-disabled peers, we know that not only their educational outcomes but their lifelong outcomes are better. However, in Australia, including in rural and remote areas, we still continue to segregate disabled students from their non-disabled peers, under the belief that this will be better for them, despite the fact that this is in contravention of international law, Australia's responsibilities under the UN [United Nations] convention and also the best evidence.⁷²
- 2.58 CYDA reported there 'is a significant lack of support' provided to young people with disability in the later years of school around 'what they would like to do after school, planning for their careers and thinking about other training options'.⁷³
- 2.59 CYDA advocated for a national inclusive education act be developed, noting that 'at the moment, responsibility for adherence to inclusive education sits under discrimination law, through the Disability

69 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 2.

70 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

71 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

72 Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer, CYDA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 11.

73 Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer, CYDA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 13.

Discrimination Act, but that is insufficient to actually realise inclusive education.⁷⁴

National Disability Insurance Scheme – thin markets

- 2.60 The capacity of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to provide adequate support services can be constrained by thin markets in regional and remote areas (where there are very few providers and limited demand).⁷⁵
- 2.61 The Department of Social Services (DSS) and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) have commissioned the NDIS Thin Markets Project to develop strategies to address supply gaps in thin markets in the NDIS. The project is expected to develop a framework for addressing thin market challenges, including for rural and remote areas, and a roadmap for developing and delivering practical trial projects.⁷⁶
- 2.62 CYDA commented that the ‘development and implementation of a strategy to address thin markets for disability supports and allied health services in remote areas is likely to support schools and boost participation of students with disability.’⁷⁷ However, CYDA also noted that ‘these measures will require additional investment from governments across jurisdictions, as well as cross-collaboration with other systems like health and the NDIS.’⁷⁸
- 2.63 Yirrkala School suggested that one solution to the lack of disability services in remote communities would be to allow schools to provide NDIS services directly. It said this would also allow schools to ‘develop fantastic on-site interdisciplinary initiatives’ such as school-based Interdisciplinary Health Teams.⁷⁹ Yirrkala School noted that the ‘groundwork for such an initiative already exists in our school through our fantastic relationship with our local Aboriginal Controlled Health Organisation, Miwatj which helps operate the only regular, doctor-led school clinic currently in the remote NT.’⁸⁰

74 Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer, CYDA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 13.

75 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 16; CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 4; Early Childhood Australia (ECA), *Submission 27*, p. 12.

76 Department of Social Services, *NDIS Thin Markets Project*, 2019, <<https://engage.dss.gov.au/ndis-thin-markets-project/>>, viewed 23 July 2020.

77 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 4.

78 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 4.

79 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 19.

80 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 19.

- 2.64 Yirrkala School also advocated for schools to be able to fund a special needs teacher position outside the Global School Budget for schools with enrolments over 100 students and, for Northern Territory legislation to be changed to allow remote schools to provide quality education to students with special needs, including establishing special needs annexes.⁸¹

Skills shortages in health, community and disability services

- 2.65 The Australian Services Union (ASU) noted that the highest growth in the services sector in regional Australia is in the health, community, and disability sector.⁸² This growth is being driven by the implementation of the NDIS, the needs of an ageing population and increasing demand for childcare and home-based care services.⁸³
- 2.66 The ASU reported that many regions have skills shortages in these sectors, which may mean ‘intensifying competition across regions to secure the people that each region needs in order to grow.’⁸⁴ The ASU commented:
- Longer term, healthcare and social assistance (community and disability support services) is expected to require another 85,000 workers in regions through to 2023. With long lead times on professionals in these industries it is vital that action starts now to create the skills development pathways. These new areas of job growth require a policy focus on ensuring people in regional areas are ready and equipped with the right skills, knowledge and aspiration to successfully engage in and drive these growth areas in their local communities.⁸⁵
- 2.67 The ASU stated that ‘the challenge for policy makers is to ensure that workers who already live in regional areas have a real opportunity to participate in the jobs growth and other opportunities that accrue to the projected economic benefits to those regional communities.’⁸⁶

Mental health

- 2.68 Students who experience poor mental health are less likely to attend school and have poorer educational outcomes. Improvements to prevention, early intervention, treatment and management of mental

81 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 20.

82 Australian Services Union (ASU), *Submission 19*, p. 6.

83 ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 7.

84 ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 8.

85 ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 8.

86 ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 8.

- health conditions can lead to significant improvements in school attendance and engagement in learning.⁸⁷
- 2.69 However, in many regional, rural and remote locations, particularly in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there is limited access to mental health service.⁸⁸ A lack of access to and continuity in these services can lead to young people feeling increasingly isolated and vulnerable.⁸⁹
- 2.70 For example, NCEF reported that, in the Pilbara:
- There is a crying need for greater access to and support from youth workers and counsellors, clinical psychologists, and psychiatrists. This need is not only limited to within the remote community context as there is also a dire need for such services within the regional centres as well. Existing services are stretched to capacity and waiting lists are extensive.⁹⁰
- 2.71 Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region reported that, despite extremely high rates of youth suicide in the tri-border region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, there are currently no specialised mental health or suicide response supports available outside of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands in South Australia.⁹¹
- 2.72 Similarly, the NPY Women's Council reported:
- There remains significant gaps in mental health support for remote youth. There is no dedicated youth mental health service across the NPY region except for the Child Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the APY South Australian lands, which is tremendously under resourced. Young people and families need better support. They currently have minimal to no options available to them. Families are dealing with this in isolation.⁹²
- 2.73 The AHRC noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience trauma at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous students,

87 Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9. See J. Reid, 'Mental health impacting student outcomes, study shows', *The Educator*, 18 December 2017, <<https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/mental-health-impacting-student-outcomes-study-shows/245005>>, viewed 24 July 2020.

88 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 14; AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 8; Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 12; RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 4; NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

89 ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 1.

90 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 18.

91 Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 17.

92 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

which causes distress and makes it difficult for children to engage in education.⁹³ The AHRC commented:

A myriad of complex factors contribute to this trauma including systemic intergenerational discrimination and increased exposure to traumatic incidents within families and communities such as bereavement, suicide, health concerns, incarceration, forced removal of children, poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and violence.⁹⁴

- 2.74 The AHRC further commented that the prevalence of trauma in school communities 'creates challenges for staff who may not be equipped with skills to work in a trauma-informed manner to adequately respond to the needs of students, potentially causing further traumatisation.'⁹⁵
- 2.75 Speech Pathology Australia commented that a 'lack of access to support services is particularly problematic when children have experienced maltreatment and trauma.'⁹⁶ Speech Pathology Australia explained that 'maltreated children experience difficulties recognising, expressing and understanding their own emotions. These children exhibit more aggressive and reactive behaviours and are more predisposed to display angry emotional expression.'⁹⁷
- 2.76 The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) called for schools, systems and sectors to 'be equipped to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and teachers in remote and complex environments.'⁹⁸

Impact of disasters and pandemic on mental health

- 2.77 The recent droughts, bushfires and other natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated existing challenges and further highlighted the need for improved support for the mental health of Australians in regional, rural and remote locations.⁹⁹
- 2.78 Save the Children noted that a focus on mental health is particularly important for children who have experienced natural disasters, such as bushfires. Save the Children commented 'without early intervention,

93 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.

94 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.

95 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.

96 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 8.

97 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 8.

98 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), *Submission 34*, p. 8.

99 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 4; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 20; ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 6; ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 21.

children experiencing trauma may experience negative developmental effects which impact educational and functional outcomes later in life.’¹⁰⁰

- 2.79 Professor Lisa Gibbs noted that disaster events such as 2019-20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an increased risk of mental health problems and violence against women. Professor Gibbs said that ‘children’s sense of safety and stability is undermined by a disaster experience and their educational outcomes are likely to be poorer as they progress through primary and secondary school.’¹⁰¹
- 2.80 Professor Gibbs advocated for initiatives to be developed to guide and support school communities after a mass trauma event, which promote a sense of safety, calm, hope, self and community efficacy, and connectedness.¹⁰²

Overcoming racism and discrimination

- 2.81 The harmful impact of racism and discrimination on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families was highlighted.¹⁰³ Just Reinvest NSW reported:
- We consistently hear from young people, Aboriginal education staff and families in the communities we work with that racism is prevalent in the school system. This has a negative impact on school attendance and performance in classrooms. Racism in schools impacts not only young people but also their families and communities.¹⁰⁴
- 2.82 World Vision reported that ‘racism remains a common experience for First Nations children’ and explained:
- This racism can be from peers, teachers or administrators and the way the system is structured which marginalises First Nations children. This racism can be direct and overt, or it can be through the racial bias of teachers and administrators who develop subconscious negative biases towards First Nations children.¹⁰⁵
- 2.83 NACCHO said that racism could be reduced and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students improved by:

100 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 4.

101 Professor Lisa Gibbs, *Submission 62*, p. 2.

102 Professor Lisa Gibbs, *Submission 62*, p. 3.

103 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 27; Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 5; NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4; World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6.

104 Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 5.

105 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6.

- increasing the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories and faces in teaching materials
- reducing culturally inappropriate and offensive representations of Aboriginal people
- increasing the use of teaching materials in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to better assist students who speak English as a second language
- engaging all students in excursions and incursions (e.g. guest speakers) that effectively showcase Aboriginal histories, lifestyles, languages, music, rituals, stories, weapons, clothing and food, and
- teaching Aboriginal perspectives and unbiased accounts of Australian history (truth telling).¹⁰⁶

Environmental factors

- 2.84 Environmental conditions, such as extreme heat, drought, storms, cyclones, flooding, insect attack, disease and fire can have serious and lasting impacts on regional, rural and remote communities and economies.¹⁰⁷
- 2.85 These factors cause negative financial pressures for families and businesses and intensify other educational challenges, including mental health and wellbeing.¹⁰⁸
- 2.86 Environmental factors can affect the safety of students and staff, limit the availability of staff, and make it difficult for families to pay for services or for extra-curricular activities.¹⁰⁹
- 2.87 The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Australia) noted that 'drought and rural hardships impact all types of schooling in rural and remote communities, both for students in the towns as well as out on properties as the communities struggle to provide an education for their children.'¹¹⁰ During times of rural hardship, students often 'forego normal supplementary educational activities like school camps, excursions or other events due to added expenses.'¹¹¹
- 2.88 As a consequence of the drought, ICPA Australia reported it has been hearing of:

106 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4.

107 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 6.

108 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 21.

109 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 6; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 6; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.

110 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 6.

111 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 6.

...heartbreaking cases where families cannot pay boarding and tuition fees and the students are no longer able to continue at their school. In some instances, families are delaying their children going away to school or bringing them home early and in some cases choosing which of their children they can educate. Some are not going away to school at all while others are being brought home which can mean that education then stops for the most part, especially for boys as they may be needed to work on the property.¹¹²

- 2.89 In the Pilbara, tropical cyclones and flooding during the wet season can severely limit accessibility. NCEF reported 'it is not uncommon for community members to be stranded in or away from the community for weeks at a time due to flooding and road closures.'¹¹³
- 2.90 In Central Australia, there are concerns about the impact of hotter, longer and drier summers on school education, and the effects this has on children's capacity to engage in formal education. The Central Land Council (CLC) noted that the combination of overcrowded housing, inadequate air conditioning and persistent heat can lead to 'inadequate sleep, physical discomfort, family stress and food spoiling more quickly (particularly as many houses do not have effective refrigeration)', and can 'reduce children's ability and willingness to attend and engage with school'.¹¹⁴
- 2.91 The CLC further noted that extreme heat can also make it difficult for children to get to school:
- Many children in remote Aboriginal communities walk to school. This prospect is made extremely challenging on very hot days. A lack of formed paths and shade means children are exposed to hot sun and are walking on surfaces with temperatures of between 61°C and 68°C. At this temperature, a child could sustain instant and severe burns to their feet.¹¹⁵

Energy security

- 2.92 Tangentyere Council is concerned that the installation of new pre-paid smart meters in Central Australia 'has coincided with a significant

112 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 7.

113 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 15.

114 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 9.

115 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 10.

increase in electricity prices. This has led to increased debt and increased power outages.’¹¹⁶ Tangentyere Council reported:

In one Town Camp (with 23 tenanted houses) the average house will use a projected 8,437 kWh per annum (\$2,342 per annum). This average house will have 51 periods without power (involuntary self-disconnection) for a period of 238 hours. This means the average house loses power for about 5 hours every week in the last year.¹¹⁷

- 2.93 Tangentyere Council said that ‘self-disconnections occur when energy consumers are unable to purchase power for their prepayment meter’ and attributed this to the former Newstart payment rate. According to Tangentyere Council ‘the current rates of Newstart undermine household energy security and this impacts upon the storage of food and the maintenance of safe internal ambient temperatures.’¹¹⁸

Information and Communications Technology

- 2.94 While Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has the potential to enhance learning for students, bridge gaps in access and increase opportunities for teacher training, there remains a ‘digital divide’ between Australians who have access to the internet, computers and other devices, and those who do not. This gap in access is particularly acute for Australians on low incomes and those living in geographically isolated locations.¹¹⁹
- 2.95 For example, the NCEF commented that the lack of remote community ICT access is exacerbating existing issues of disadvantage and inequality ‘in a world that is increasingly becoming dependent and inter-connected through technology’.¹²⁰
- 2.96 ICPA Australia said that ‘connectivity is key’, and noted the provision of the curriculum in remote areas is largely dependent on ICT access, especially for those studying via distance education.¹²¹

116 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 12.

117 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 12.

118 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 13.

119 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 71; Melbourne Graduate School of Education, *Submission 59*, p. 5; Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 11; NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 49; Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 21.

120 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 49.

121 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 5.

- 2.97 The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) reported that ‘across Australia, households in rural and remote areas continue to be less likely to have reliable, fast broadband internet and are more likely to share computing devices among household members than those in metropolitan areas.’¹²²
- 2.98 When technological problems arise in the delivery of education using ICT, the availability of trained support technicians is critical. The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales reported that a common problem in remote schools is a lack of suitably trained personnel:
- Where these technicians exist, they are of immense value, however they are not widespread and are typically part-time. Consequently, technological problems in schools can take days to be addressed, and teachers and students lose valuable teaching and learning time when struggling with technical issues.¹²³

Access and equity

- 2.99 The Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) commented that the affordability of devices and internet access remains a challenge for many Australians:
- In general, Australians with low levels of income, education, and employment are significantly less digitally included. The digital inclusion gap between Australians with a disability and other Australians is also substantial and grew in 2018.¹²⁴
- 2.100 Tangentyere Council noted that the cost of internet access in remote and regional areas is more expensive due to the type of services available and reported that the National Broadband Network (NBN) is cost prohibitive for people on income support. Tangentyere Council commented that the ‘lack of digital inclusivity creates financial exclusion and reduces participation.’¹²⁵
- 2.101 Similarly, ICPA Qld expressed concern about a lack of affordable and reliable internet in geographically isolated locations, noting that ‘although there have been definite improvements in affordability and accessibility there remains no comparison to the prices offered to their urban counterparts.’¹²⁶

122 DESE, *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 11.

123 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 20*, p. 3.

124 Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), *Submission 59*, p. 5.

125 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 21.

126 ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 2.

- 2.102 Research undertaken by the Bureau of Communications and Arts Research (BoCAR) found that broadband costs in Australia have reduced but remain prohibitive for many low income earners:
- While prices have fallen and average mobile data allowances for mobile phone plans have increased, these changes have not necessarily led to services being more affordable for low income individuals. Similarly, while prices for NBN fixed-line services have fallen, these changes have not necessarily led to these services being used by lower income households.¹²⁷
- 2.103 Anecdotal evidence suggests that many low-income earners use prepaid accounts because they cannot afford to sign up to a bundled plan. BoCAR's research suggests that many of these people are paying what has been referred to as a 'poverty premium'¹²⁸ on their mobile data because cheaper low data plans have a higher cost per unit of data than high data plans.¹²⁹
- 2.104 DESE reported that NBN Co is 'providing up to \$50 million to assist phone and internet providers to support low-income family households with school aged children who do not currently have an active broadband connection at home.'¹³⁰ DESE said that 'the funding will assist participating phone and internet providers to create more affordable offers to connect eligible families' during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³¹

Satellite internet

- 2.105 The Sky Muster satellite service delivers NBN broadband access to homes and businesses in regional and remote Australia, via two satellites operated by NBN Co.
- 2.106 The MGSE noted that while satellite internet is often put forward as an alternative to fixed-line services, it 'is not always reliable and is very expensive for people living in remote areas.'¹³²
- 2.107 ICPA Australia stated that data restrictions for Sky Muster satellite customers are 'particularly problematic', noting that while NBN Co. offers education plans with an additional data allowance, this is only available to

127 Bureau of Communication and Arts Research, *Affordability of communications services for low income households*, 30 April 2020, p. 19.

128 A Branley, *ABC 7:30*, 'NBN structure means those who can afford the least pay the most', 30 June 2020.

129 Bureau of Communication and Arts Research, *Affordability of communications services for low income households*, 30 April 2020, p. 19.

130 DESE, *Supplementary submission 49.1*, p. 11.

131 DESE, *Supplementary submission 49.1*, p. 11.

132 MGSE, *Submission 59*, p. 5.

students enrolled in Schools of Distance Education for primary and secondary education.¹³³ Tertiary and vocational education students do not qualify for the additional data offered by the Sky Muster Education Service.¹³⁴

- 2.108 Similarly, M & S Consultants described NBN Co.'s Sky Muster as 'a brilliant service' but are concerned it is 'prohibitively expensive for the relatively small number of geographically dispersed students and schools to individually take advantage of.'¹³⁵ M&S Consultants noted that each state and territory have to negotiate individual agreements for the provision of distance education with NBN Co., which drives up the cost.¹³⁶
- 2.109 M&S Consultants advocated for the Commonwealth to take a greater role in distance education (DE) provision, noting that 'if the Federal Government were responsible for the DE students' provision of the internet for education, they would have the 'buying power' to broker a far more inexpensive solution from NBN.'¹³⁷ Alternatively, they suggested the Commonwealth provide a single centralised DE service that can be accessed by multiple small remote schools, which would save money and 'expand the base student cohort for which educational opportunities could be increased.'¹³⁸
- 2.110 Ms Julie Bailey reported that while the Northern Territory Education Department has 'the most sophisticated IDL [Interactive Distance Learning] system in the country using REACT', it 'does not provide programs to remote Indigenous communities.'¹³⁹ Ms Bailey said that satellite technology could help overcome barriers to education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and recommended that 'the Federal government allocate funds and regulate satellite delivery of appropriate education programs to Indigenous remote communities.'¹⁴⁰

133 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 9.

134 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 9.

135 M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

136 M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

137 M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

138 M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.

139 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 53*, p. 3.

140 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 53*, p. 3.

Summary and discussion

2.111 There is a range of barriers to education that are external to education systems and may require wider reform to benefit regional, rural and remote students and their families and communities. These include:

- **Geographic isolation:** Australians living in regional, rural and remote areas have limited access to and choice in the services and supports which families in towns and cities rely on. Areas of concern included: the provision of health, ancillary and mental health support services, and disability support services through the NDIS
- **Socioeconomic factors:** Australians living in remote and very remote locations have, on average, shorter lives and poorer health, experience higher levels of poverty and have lower rates of educational attainment at both secondary and tertiary levels than their counterparts in metropolitan locations

This gap is particularly pronounced in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where issues of income, food and energy insecurity, inadequate and overcrowded housing, and high rates of preventable diseases linked to poverty have been reported.

- **Other issues negatively affecting educational outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities** include experiences of racism, discrimination and trauma, and high rates of out-of-home care, developmental vulnerability in young children, youth suicide and poor mental health, family violence and engagement with the criminal justice system
- **Environmental factors** such as bushfires, droughts and cyclones exacerbate issues associated with geographic isolation (e.g. service delivery), cause negative financial pressures for families and businesses and intensify other educational challenges, including mental health and wellbeing, and
- **Access to ICT:** there is a 'digital divide' between Australians who have access to the internet, computers and other devices, and those who do not. This gap in access is particularly acute for Australians on low incomes and those living in geographically isolated locations.

Relevant Closing the Gap targets

2.112 As previously noted, the new Closing the Gap agreement will shape Commonwealth policy in addressing disadvantage in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in partnership with the states and

- territories, and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations.
- 2.113 In relation to issues of socioeconomic disadvantage, Closing the Gap includes new targets to:
- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent by 2031
 - increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent by 2031
 - reduce the incarceration rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults by 15 per cent by 2031
 - reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in youth detention by 30 per cent by 2031
 - reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent by 2031, and
 - achieve a significant and sustained reduction in violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children towards zero.¹⁴¹
- 2.114 In relation to health, the Closing the Gap agreement includes the targets to close the gap in life expectancy experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People within a generation,¹⁴² and to ‘increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91 per cent’ by 2031.¹⁴³
- 2.115 In relation to early intervention, the Closing the Gap agreement includes the target to ‘increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent’ by 2031.¹⁴⁴

141 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, pp. 24-32.

142 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 17.

143 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 18.

144 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 20.

- 2.116 In relation to mental health, the Closing the Gap agreement seeks to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a target to achieve a significant and sustained reduction in suicides.¹⁴⁵

Relevant Halsey review recommendations

- 2.117 The Halsey review made two recommendations relevant to issues covered in the chapter: access to early intervention services and ICT. A range of actions were encouraged to progress these recommendations. Relevant recommendations and sections of the government response are provided below. The government did not detail how or whether it would implement all the actions to progress the recommendations of the Halsey review.¹⁴⁶

- 2.118 Recommendation 4 related to improving access to early intervention services to ensure children start school ready to learn:

Recommendation 4: Ensure RRR children start school with a strong foundation for learning

- 2.119 **Actions to progress this recommendation:**

- ensure that early intervention trained personnel and programs are in place to help families and to connect them to relevant support agencies, and
- substantially reduce the waiting time (say to a maximum of three months) for specialist assessments of students with learning difficulties and disabilities and the subsequent development of specific learning plans for them.¹⁴⁷

- 2.120 In its response, the government indicated it is supportive of this recommendation but did not state if it would be undertaking specific new work in this area. The government response noted that:

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) had asked the Education Council, comprising Education Ministers from the Australian Government and all states and territories, to provide advice in 2018 on early learning reform principles informed by the *Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational*

145 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 33.

146 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018.

147 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 56.

Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions.¹⁴⁸

2.121 Recommendation 9 related to improving access to and the affordability of ICT for regional, rural and remote students and their communities:

Recommendation 9: Improve the availability, accessibility and affordability of ICT for RRR schools, teachers, students, parents and communities.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- establish a RRR ICT taskforce with the necessary expertise, authority and resourcing to substantially improve access to and use of ICT in education
- ensure that students and families who are reliant on distance education have continuous and affordable access to all of the teaching and learning delivered by Distance Education providers
- work with ICT providers to ensure that sufficient bandwidth on the NBN Sky Muster satellite service is always prioritised for bona fide educational purposes, and
- expand the NBN Sky Muster public interest premises definition to include homes in remote locations where school and tertiary students return out of term.¹⁴⁹

2.122 In its response, the government stated:

While this is much broader than regional, rural and remote settings, this Government recognises the impact of the digital divide among the most disadvantaged students, including those living in rural and remote areas. For example, the National Broadband Network (NBN) Co's Sky Muster satellite services became available on 29 April 2016. This Government prioritised work with NBN Co, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association and the education sector to develop a special product so distance education students could have the additional data they need to get the most out of their studies. As of 25 January 2018, 683 students across regional, rural and remote Australia were benefitting from the Sky Muster distance education product.

One of the priorities for this Government in 2018 will be to further improve the delivery of education services over Sky Muster, including home-schooled students that are isolated for

148 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 11.

149 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 72.

geographic/medical reasons. In addition, schools, emergency services and health facilities in the Sky Muster footprint are also able to access special NBN 'Public Interest Premises' packages to help them do their vital work for regional, rural and remote communities. A data allowance of up to 300GB per month may be allowed. As of 25 January 2018 there were 103 primary and secondary schools in the Sky Muster footprint using the PIP satellite service.

On 29 January 2018 NBN Co announced a trial of multicast technology over the Sky Muster service for 15 distance education schools across the Northern Territory. The technology will enable satellite retailers to deliver content simultaneously to multiple users with uninterrupted, quality streaming and improved video conferencing. These services are intended for use by schools delivering distance education services to remote students such as School of the Air. Subject to the results of the trial, NBN Co plans to roll-out the technology to regional and remote locations across Australia from late 2018.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

- 2.123 Students in regional, rural and remote communities experience a range of barriers to education that are external to education systems and may require reform across multiple portfolios to address, including:
- issues relating to geographic isolation, such as access to services
 - socioeconomic factors
 - health challenges
 - environmental factors, and
 - access to ICT.
- 2.124 It is beyond the scope of this inquiry to consider and recommend a comprehensive suite of recommendations that address disparities in economic, social and health outcomes, and service provision between regional, rural and remote areas and metropolitan areas. However, it is the committee's view that the government should continue to develop policies that address these complex issues.

¹⁵⁰ Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 10.

Recommendation 1

- 2.125 **To reduce barriers to education, the committee recommends the Government develop policies and programs that:**
- **generate investment, economic development and employment, and deliver essential infrastructure, including reliable and affordable access to electricity, in regional, rural and remote areas**
 - **improve access and affordability in regional, rural and remote communities to:**
 - ⇒ **medical, ancillary and mental health services**
 - ⇒ **services and support for people with disability, including addressing thin markets in the National Disability Insurance Scheme**
 - ⇒ **public transport**
 - ⇒ **services and support for communities in times of crises or during periods of rural hardship, including access to Centrelink, and**
 - ⇒ **broadband and mobile phone reception, in particular extending the Sky Muster Education data offering to tertiary and vocational students in remote, regional and rural areas.**
- 2.126 Professor Halsey examined a similar range of barriers to regional, rural and remote education in his review and evidence to this inquiry supports his findings. While noting the government has agreed with the recommendations of the Halsey review, the committee welcomes the provision of a clear plan for how the government will implement many of the specific recommended actions.
- 2.127 For example, Professor Halsey recommended that the government ensure regional, rural and remote children start school with a strong foundation for learning by improving access to early intervention. The committee notes that in its response to the Halsey review, the government was supportive of this recommendation but it did not outline specific new work in this area.
- 2.128 In chapter four, the committee recommends that the government provide an updated, comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions contained in the Halsey review.
- 2.129 While the committee does not seek to duplicate the recommendations of the Halsey review, it is particularly concerned that children growing up in regional, rural and remote areas are more likely to be developmentally

vulnerable, and have less access to screening and early intervention than those in metropolitan areas. If children are to have their best start in life, and thrive in education, it is critical that developmental vulnerabilities are identified and addressed early. The committee would like to see detail regarding increased early intervention services in regional, rural and remote communities in the government's implementation plan for the Halsey review.

- 2.130 Professor Halsey also recommended the government improve the availability, accessibility and affordability of ICT for regional, rural and remote schools, teachers, students, parents and communities. The committee notes that the government's response to this recommendation does not include ongoing actions beyond 2018, although significant work is being done in this space. The committee expects the government to outline how it will improve ICT availability and affordability in regional, rural and remote education contexts in its implementation plan for the Halsey review.
- 2.131 The committee is concerned that education for many students with disability in regional, rural and remote communities is not inclusive.
- 2.132 The committee recognises that students with disability have better education outcomes when they attend school in the general school community, rather than being provided education separately. Children and young people with disability require reasonable adjustments and support to allow them to access the curriculum and participate at school. Teachers need to be trained and supported to provide inclusive education for students with disability.
- 2.133 The committee is concerned that current discrimination laws may not adequately protect the right to inclusive education for students with disability. Options for inclusive education legislation should be more fully investigated.
- 2.134 The committee notes that the current National Disability Strategy, which sets out a national approach to supporting people with disability to maximise their potential and participate as equal citizens in Australian society, is due to expire in 2020.¹⁵¹
- 2.135 Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments across Australia are currently working, in consultation with people with disability, to

151 Department of Social Services, *Developing the new National Disability Strategy*, December 2019, <<https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers-a-new-national-disability-strategy/developing-the-new-national-disability-strategy>>, accessed 9 September 2020.

develop the new National Disability Strategy to take effect from the start of 2021.¹⁵²

- 2.136 The previous National Disability Strategy included policy directions to:
- Strengthen the capability of all education providers to deliver inclusive high quality educational programs for people with all abilities from early childhood through adulthood
 - Focus on reducing the disparity in educational outcomes for people with a disability and others
 - Ensure that government reforms and initiatives for early childhood, education, training and skill development are responsive to the needs of people with disability, and
 - Improve pathways for students with disability from school to further education, employment and lifelong learning.¹⁵³

Recommendation 2

- 2.137 **The committee recommends that the government reaffirm its commitment to inclusive education in the new National Disability Strategy in 2021, and include a focus on ensuring inclusive education for children and young people with disability in regional, rural and remote locations.**

In the development of the new Strategy, the government should consider whether a national inclusive education act is required to protect the right to inclusive education for students with disability.

- 2.138 There may be merit in allowing schools in regional, rural and remote communities to provide NDIS services directly to students with disability. The committee encourages the Minister for Education to work with the Minister for the NDIS to investigate the benefits and feasibility of allowing schools to become NDIS providers.
- 2.139 The committee recognises the profound disadvantage that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience, particularly in remote areas of Australia.
- 2.140 The committee is aware that significant work is required to develop policies to meet the new Closing the Gap targets and reduce the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

152 Department of Social Services, *Developing the new National Disability Strategy*, December 2019, <<https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers-a-new-national-disability-strategy/developing-the-new-national-disability-strategy>>, accessed 9 September 2020.

153 Department of Social Services, *National Disability Strategy 2010-2020*, pp. 54-6.

peoples. This will require the Commonwealth to work in partnership with the states and territories, and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations. It will also require a sustained commitment to, and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations, particularly those that provide health care and family support services.

- 2.141 Evidence to this inquiry has shown the benefits of wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services. In the following chapter, the committee recommends the government provide greater flexibility and surety in funding for integrated family services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- 2.142 Other examples of innovative service provision that show potential for wider application include RFW's Fitzroy Crossing model that brings health specialists to remote schools via telehealth. The committee encourages the government to consider scaling up this model to support other remote communities and schools.
- 2.143 The committee is concerned that racism continues to be experienced by many Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This requires a renewed commitment to respect and understanding across the Australian community and in schools. Evidence in chapter four suggests that the wider incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, culture and languages in schools and improved teacher training in cultural awareness and the skills required to work competently and sensitively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will assist in reducing racism and discrimination in schools.
- 2.144 The burden and scale of mental health challenges in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been recognised in a new Closing the Gap target that seeks to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and achieve a significant and sustained reduction in suicides. The committee supports this new target and sees an urgent need for policies and programs that better support the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommendation 3

- 2.145 **The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth set out a roadmap for improving the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including improved access to mental health treatment and support.**
- 2.146 The committee is concerned by evidence that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families go without access to electricity, particularly in regions that regularly experience extreme heat.
- 2.147 The committee notes that, as part of the new Closing the Gap agreement, the government has committed to developing a community infrastructure target by July 2021 that will measure progress towards parity in infrastructure, essential services (such as electricity supply), and environmental health and conditions.¹⁵⁴
- 2.148 The committee encourages the government to consider the impact of pre-paid smart meters and the rate of income support payments on energy security in the development of policies to meet the new community infrastructure target.

154 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 36.

Early childhood education

- 3.1 Early childhood education in Australia can take a variety of forms, including child care services, which provide education and care services to children between 0-12 years of age, and preschool services, which involve a structured, play-based learning program delivered by a qualified teacher to children in the year or two before they start full time schooling.¹
- 3.2 Whereas the importance of early childhood education to overall educational and health outcomes is well documented,² barriers to access in regional, rural and remote communities have resulted in lower participation in these areas.³ The previous chapter examined a range of barriers to education that are external to education systems and impact on outcomes across a child's education journey, including in the early years.
- 3.3 This chapter examines the importance of early childhood education in rural, regional and remote communities and steps that can be taken to improve quality and participation. Current issues with the provision of early childhood education in regional, rural and remote communities include cost, difficulties with access including the unavailability of services and staff, variable quality and funding.

1 Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2020*, 4 February 2020, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care/rogs-2020-partb-section3.pdf>>, accessed 23 June 2020.

2 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 12; Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 4; Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc. (ICPA Australia), *Submission 7*, p. 3; Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), *Submission 12*, p. 3; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Submission 15*, p. 2; Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA), *Submission 24*, p. 3; Early Childhood Australia (ECA), *Submission 27*, p. 2; Australian Education Union (AEU), *Submission 43*, p. 5.

3 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 2; ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 7; AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 6.

Importance

3.4 A large number of children participate in some form of early childhood education. In 2018, 533,889 children were enrolled in a preschool program and in 2019, around 31.5 per cent of children between 0-12 years of age attended government approved child care centres.⁴

3.5 Research indicates that early childhood education can improve long term education and health outcomes for its participants. As noted by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA):

There is a large body of research that shows high quality early childhood education and care leads to better health, employment and education outcomes later in life. Brain architecture and function develops rapidly during early childhood, making it a vital time for establishing competencies which will support children's medium and long term outcomes.⁵

3.6 The Australian Education Union (AEU) also emphasised the importance of early childhood education to health, education and employment outcomes:

This position is informed by a strong body of national and international evidence on the importance of quality programs in the early childhood years to a child's social and educational development, with flow-on benefits to better health, education and employment outcomes later in life.⁶

3.7 Similarly, Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA) stated:

Child development research indicates the importance of engaging young children in the formative years from birth through to starting formal school: language and problem-solving, self-regulation, creativity and collaboration with others are all skills that develop throughout the early years.⁷

3.8 The Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF) noted that the provision of pre-formal schooling opportunities is particularly essential for young children from disadvantaged communities. It said that these services are vital 'in nurturing the emotional, physical, and

4 Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2020*, 4 February 2020, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care/rogs-2020-partb-section3.pdf>>, accessed 23 June 2020.

5 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 3.

6 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 5.

7 CCSA, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

intellectual development of the young children of the community, ensuring smoother transitions into schooling'.⁸

Quality

3.9 ACECQA reported that improved outcomes are dependent to some extent on the quality of the programs delivered, and noted the findings of an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) study:

The ABS analysed the links between developmental vulnerabilities of children when they started fulltime school, their experiences of approved education and care programs in the previous two years, and their teachers' perceptions of their home learning experiences. The project found a moderate relationship between service quality as measured by performance against the NQS [National Quality Standard] and lower developmental vulnerability in the language and cognitive domain.⁹

3.10 The quality of services is an issue for many regional, rural and remote communities. All National Quality Framework (NQF) approved early childhood education services are given a public quality rating. As noted by ACECQA, education and care services in remote and very remote areas are less likely than other services to be rated as meeting or exceeding quality standards.¹⁰

Access and equity

3.11 While the benefits of early childhood education are reportedly greater for children from low income families and those living in isolated areas,¹¹ there is a 'range of barriers [that] may hinder access, including cost, lack of transport, staffing issues, lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and a lower availability of high quality education and care in low income and disadvantaged areas.'¹²

3.12 These barriers have resulted in lower participation among vulnerable groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. For example, World Vision reported that there is a range of 'key structural barriers that need addressing if First Nations children in many remote

8 Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF), *Submission 66*, p. 13.

9 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 4.

10 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 5.

11 CCSA, *Submission 24*, p. 3.

12 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 7.

communities are to make successful transitions to formal education', including a lack of physical infrastructure to support families and a lack of well-developed, holistic transition programs for children commencing formal schooling.¹³

- 3.13 The AEU raised concerns that in 2018 only 86.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four-year-old children were enrolled in early childhood education, compared with a 91.3 per cent enrolment rate for other children.¹⁴
- 3.14 The Central Land Council (CLC) reported that just 43 per cent of students enrolled in early childhood education in very remote areas of the Northern Territory attended for the recommended 600 hours per year.¹⁵
- 3.15 According to Goodstart Early Learning, 'Indigenous children and children likely to be vulnerable or experiencing disadvantage are not participating at the same rates as their peers, with the lowest attendance rates in very remote areas.'¹⁶
- 3.16 Attendance at preschool was noted to be one of the factors affecting school attendance in later years, with children who had attended more than 30 days of preschool also attending 18 more days at school per year.¹⁷
- 3.17 The AEU suggested that there could be a return on an investment in quality early childhood education, as 'there are long-term cost benefits associated with investment in the provision of universal access to quality ECE which will pay significant national dividends in the future.'¹⁸
- 3.18 The provision of universal access to early childhood education was also recommended by the Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions ('Lifting Our Game', 2017), which stated:

Quality early childhood education and care is best considered as an investment, not a cost. Investment in early childhood education provides a strong return, with a variety of studies indicating benefits of 2-4 times the costs. Significant fiscal benefits flow to both the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. These benefits are greater – often substantially so – for programs targeted at vulnerable or disadvantaged children.¹⁹

13 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6.

14 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 6.

15 Central Land Council (CLC), *Submission 9*, p. 7.

16 Goodstart Early Learning, *Submission 26*, p. 1.

17 Goodstart Early Learning, *Submission 26*, p. 1.

18 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 5.

19 Pascoe, S & Brennan, D, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in*

Breaking down the barriers

- 3.19 To reduce some of the barriers to early childhood education access, the AEU recommended the Commonwealth:
- Guarantee permanent, adequate funding for Universal Access to 600 hours per year of quality early childhood education program in the year before school
 - Promote and support full participation by three- and four-year-olds in quality early childhood education programs, in particular to maximise participation by vulnerable or disadvantaged children
 - Agree to a new national early childhood education and care workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalisation of the workforce, thereby improving service quality and children's outcomes
 - Give priority attention to achieving the Closing the Gap target of 95 per cent Indigenous enrolment in preschool education across all regions of Australia
 - Give priority attention to the advocacy and implementation of best practice ECE measures shown to be effective in maximising enrolments and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.²⁰
- 3.20 State and territory initiatives have attempted to address access barriers, with initiatives such as:
- Families as First Teachers (NT): A dual generational early learning program that works with families and children in remote Indigenous communities prior to school entry, and
 - eKindy Pods (QLD): Kindergarten (preschool) experiences for groups of 2-4 children, delivered in community venues or state schools in rural and remote communities.²¹
- 3.21 The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) highlighted the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services, including Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, in reducing 'service-level barriers and facilitating access to early childhood education and care, as well as other forms of child and family support.'²²
- 3.22 At the roundtable hearing on 2 September 2020, Early Childhood Australia (ECA) said that 'services in small communities need to be

Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, 2017, p. 6.

20 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 9.

21 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 9.

22 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 4.

multifaceted, integrated child and family supports as well as early childhood education.’²³ ECA commented:

Currently, the funding models don’t allow for that to happen very easily and we’re relying on organisations piecing together a patchwork of funding from different sources and different levels of government. We would like a more integrated approach to that.²⁴

3.23 ECA reported that the biggest barrier for providing integrated service models such as MACS is:

the lack of a coordinated approach to funding parenting and family support programs, early childhood education, maternal child health and allied health services in one location and being able to pool funding across different sources of that. From the perspective of the childcare subsidy system, we would need to be able to cash out the childcare subsidy for a particular community and provide that as a grant to be combined with other grants.²⁵

3.24 ECA argued that a national approach is needed and recommended the development of a national early learning strategy for regional, rural and remote Australia. ECA noted that a national program of work will require coordination across jurisdictions, and advocated for the Education Council of the Council of Australian Governments to take on this role.²⁶

Child Care Subsidy

3.25 There is evidence that financial support can significantly improve participation in early childhood education. For example, when New South Wales implemented the Preschool Funding Model, which provided funding for two years of preschool for disadvantaged and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the enrolled number of children in the lowest socio-economic group increased by 27 per cent and the number of Indigenous children enrolled increased by 52 per cent.²⁷

3.26 As reported by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), the government provided \$8.6 billion to families through the

23 Ms Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer, ECA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

24 Ms Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer, ECA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

25 Ms Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer, ECA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

26 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 9.

27 Pascoe, S & Brennan, D, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*, 2017, p. 33.

Child Care Package in 2019-20, with this investment to increase over the next few years to approximately \$10 billion a year. This package included the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and the Additional Child Care Subsidy for families and children suffering disadvantage.²⁸

- 3.27 The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc. (ICPA Australia) noted that while all jurisdictions offer early learning programs delivered by distance education, families accessing the programs bear 'the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons.'²⁹ ICPA Australia noted that no support is available for early learning programs through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) distance education allowance, and that CCS payments are unavailable because these children are still in their parents' care. As a result of this, 'less than 200 children access recognised 4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education'.³⁰
- 3.28 CCSA expressed concern that Budget Based Funding (BBF) early education services are being encouraged to transition to a CCS funding model, which 'will require close monitoring to ensure that this doesn't result in a further reduction in the availability of services in remote areas.'³¹
- 3.29 CCSA also reported:
- Many Aboriginal owned and operated early childhood services are anxious about their future due to funding uncertainty – either because they are concerned about the transition to mainstream subsidy arrangements or because of they have experienced a reduction in Commonwealth funding for Aboriginal Child and Family Centres or have concerns about short term funding they are receiving under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.
- 3.30 World Vision was 'distressed by the lack of community-based early childhood programs in the communities in which we work', including those in the West Kimberley.³² It reported that with 'the introduction of a user pays child care system, these services lost their operational funding over time and, with the loss of secure operational funding, the State government stopped investing in the upkeep and maintenance of the buildings which are now unusable in many cases.'³³

28 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 8.

29 ICPA, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

30 ICPA, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

31 CCSA, *Submission 24*, p. 4.

32 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 10.

33 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 10.

- 3.31 SNAICC was concerned that the 'Activity Test introduced by the Child Care Package in 2018 halved the minimum number of subsidised hours of child care available to families that do not meet specified work and study requirements from 24 to 12.'³⁴
- 3.32 SNAICC contrasted this with evidence supporting 'a minimum of 30 hours per week in age-appropriate early education and care programs for children experiencing disadvantage, with the potential for flexibility based on an individual child's needs', noting that this is 'far more than what current government subsidies allow.'³⁵
- 3.33 According to SNAICC, the changes to the Child Care Package have resulted in 'a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families dropping out of early education and care services altogether.'³⁶
- 3.34 SNAICC called for the government to 'amend the Activity Test within the Child Care Subsidy to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without parents having to meet any work or study requirements.'³⁷

Mobile services

- 3.35 The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) noted that early childhood attendance rates decrease with remoteness, with only 79 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in very remote areas attending pre-school, compared with 88 per cent of children in remote areas and 95 per cent of children in major cities. The NIAA noted many of these communities are 'some distance from the nearest provider', citing the example of Maningrida in the Northern Territory, where the nearest early childhood services are up to 170 kilometres away.³⁸
- 3.36 There are several mobile services that deliver early childhood education in remote areas of Australia, such as the Katharine Isolated Children's Service (KICS). KICS operates a mobile supported playgroup service, involving teams travelling to remote families and setting up outdoor playgroups.³⁹

34 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 6.

35 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 7.

36 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 7.

37 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 13.

38 National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), *Submission 63*, p. 6.

39 Katharine Isolated Children's Service (KICS), *Submission 31*, p. 4.

- 3.37 KICS reported that the provision of mobile services in remote areas is particularly challenging. Operators face the usual transport challenges applicable to remote areas, such as high transport costs and navigation of dirt roads, as well as more specific funding issues. KICS also reported that the funding is not tailored to their particular needs, citing as an example their inability to obtain funding for a new vehicle.⁴⁰
- 3.38 ECA noted that some early learning services, such as mobile services, are not eligible for operational grants and fee subsidies because they work within the Early Years Learning Framework, rather than the National Quality Framework. ECA suggested that 'in order to support early learning in remote areas, the Australian government must be prepared to look beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to business support.'⁴¹
- 3.39 ICPA Australia expressed concern that funding for mobile playgroups is provided on a temporary basis, and that there is no funding available for KICS to expand into surrounding areas. ICPA Australia called for 'flexibility and surety of funding for these services'.⁴²

Workforce issues

- 3.40 The availability of appropriately qualified early childhood educators was raised as a significant challenge for the sector. As noted by ACECQA, 'there are persistent and increasingly pressing issues relating to the attraction, supply and retention of educators and early childhood teachers, particularly for providers in remote, regional and low socio-economic status areas.'⁴³
- 3.41 The relatively low wages of early childhood educators reportedly add to the already significant retention issues faced by services in remote areas. This issue is particularly challenging for small businesses.
- 3.42 KICS advised that it is unable to provide its staff with the same pay and conditions as the NT government's Families and First Teachers educators, who work alongside KICS staff at mobile playgroup venues.⁴⁴
- 3.43 The Town of Port Hedland reported that both small businesses and not-for-profit organisations in the area had high operational costs, noting that

40 KICS, *Submission 31*, p. 6.

41 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 13.

42 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

43 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 10.

44 KICS, *Submission 31*, p. 1.

the resource sector dominates the region's economy and provides high wages and subsidised housing to its employees.⁴⁵

- 3.44 According to the Town of Port Hedland, staff recruitment and retention for businesses that offer lower paid categories of employment such as childcare, 'struggle to navigate these challenges which are exacerbated during boom periods when wages and other costs escalate.'⁴⁶
- 3.45 Regulatory requirements, particularly around education and training for staff, were also raised as an issue for remote services. For example the Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland (ICPA Qld) were concerned that recent changes to child care qualification requirements 'have seen a shortage of suitably qualified educators to be employed as governesses on remote properties.'⁴⁷
- 3.46 Similarly, the Town of Port Hedland noted that educator-child quotas and qualifications 'are key to achieving child learning and safety outcomes', but reported that 'the capacity to meet recruitment and training needs in the context of low childcare wages and a high cost scenario is challenging.'⁴⁸
- 3.47 To address these workforce issues, the Town of Port Hedland advocated for:
- Co-contributions for infrastructure where private sector investment in early learning and care centres cannot be effectively secured to meet demand
 - Reasonable average rates of pay for childcare workers as an incentive for attraction to the profession
 - Mechanisms for staff attraction and retention (i.e. regional incentives/subsidies)
 - Funding for remote childcare training packages.⁴⁹
- 3.48 SNAICC called for the government to 'deliver an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early education and care workforce development strategy to expand and build capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and strengthen the cultural competence of the mainstream workforce.'⁵⁰

45 Town of Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 4.

46 Town of Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 5.

47 Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland (ICPA QLD), *Submission 4*, p. 2.

48 Town of Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 5.

49 Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 6.

50 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 13.

- 3.49 ACECQA provided a number of examples of state and territory initiatives to overcome workforce issues in remote communities, but noted that these issues are 'systemic and require high level (national or multi-jurisdictional) solutions to make a meaningful impact on quality.'⁵¹ ACECQA also noted that Education Ministers recently endorsed the development of a new children's education and care national workforce strategy (December 2019).⁵²

Summary and discussion

- 3.50 Key issues examined in this chapter are:
- The provision of adequate, quality early childhood education is critical to ensuring all children receive the best start to their education journey
 - The benefits of adequate, quality early childhood education are greater for disadvantaged and developmentally vulnerable children
 - As with other stages of education, improved outcomes in early childhood education are dependent on the quality of the services delivered. The quality of early childhood education is lower in regional, rural and remote locations compared to metropolitan areas
 - Barriers to access to early childhood education in regional, rural and remote communities are consistent with those examined in chapter 2, and include cost, a lack of availability and choice in providers within a reasonable distance, lack of transport, staffing issues (including the lack of trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff), and concerns about quality
 - Financial support such as the CCS can significantly improve participation in early childhood education. Concerns were raised that changes to the Activity Test in the CCS in 2018 reduced the minimum number of subsidised hours of child care available to families that do not meet specified work and study requirements
 - Early childhood attendance decreases with remoteness. Options to deliver early childhood education in very remote locations include mobile services and delivery via distance education:
 - ⇒ It was reported that mobile services have high transport costs and require greater flexibility and surety in their funding, for example to enable the purchase of vehicles; and, are not eligible for operational

51 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 10.

52 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 10.

grants and fee subsidies because they work within the Early Years Learning Framework, rather than the National Quality Framework, and

⇒ It was reported that very few families access recognised early childhood programs in their homes through distance education. It was suggested this is because there is no support available for early learning programs through the AIC distance education allowance, and that the CCS is unavailable because these children are still in their parents' care.

■ A range of workforce issues were raised, including:

⇒ Concerns about the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators in regional, rural and remote communities and in low socio-economic status areas. Low wages were cited as a factor limiting recruitment and retention

⇒ Concerns about the capacity of child care providers to meet the high costs of recruitment and training needs, and

⇒ Concerns about the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities.

■ To address these challenges, there was support for:

⇒ Universal access to early childhood education in the year before school

⇒ Amending the Activity Test in the CCS to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without parents having to meet any work or study requirements

⇒ The development of a national early learning strategy for regional, rural and remote Australia to improve coordination across jurisdictions

⇒ Improving the training of early childhood educators

⇒ Improving the cultural competency of non-Indigenous early childhood educators in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and

⇒ The provision of early childhood education as part of holistic family support services, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to play a greater role in delivering these services to their communities.

3.51 The committee is aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption to Australia's early childhood sector and has

challenged the viability of many providers. The government has made a range of significant changes to respond to these challenges,⁵³ and the major shutdown of the Victorian economy in August 2020 suggests that further changes may be required.

Relevant Closing the Gap target

- 3.52 In relation to early childhood education, the Closing the Gap agreement includes the target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education to 95 per cent by 2025.⁵⁴

Conclusion

- 3.53 Access to quality early childhood education gives children the best chance to thrive when they reach school and sets them up for success later in life.
- 3.54 While quality early childhood education is important for all children, it is particularly vital for children who are experiencing disadvantage or are developmentally vulnerable.
- 3.55 The committee is concerned that children in regional, rural and remote communities are more likely to experience disadvantage and developmental vulnerability than those in cities; are less likely to access early childhood education; that the quality of early childhood education is lower than in metropolitan areas; and, that early childhood education providers in regional, rural and remote locations struggle to recruit and retain quality staff.
- 3.56 Under the current system, services choose their employees' wages and the minimum wage is determined by the independent body, the Fair Work Commission. The Government does not set wages and services are not limited to the minimum wage.
- 3.57 The committee is aware that all Australian education Ministers have endorsed the development of a new children's education and care national

53 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, 'COVID-19: Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package - from Monday 6 April additional support for Early Childhood Education and Child Care Services and their families', *Media release*, 2 April 2020; The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, 'Additional funding for Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package', *Media release*, 22 May 2020; The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, 'Transition arrangements for the end of the Early Childhood and Care Relief Package', *Media release*, 8 June 2020.

54 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, pp. 19-20.

workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and quality of the early childhood services workforce.⁵⁵It is the committee's view that the children's education and care national workforce strategy should outline how Australian governments will improve access to early childhood education and care in regional, rural and remote communities.

- 3.58 All governments, state and federal, along with service providers, should work together to develop workforce training, recruiting and retention strategies.
- 3.59 Measures that improve the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce are supported by the committee.

Recommendation 4

- 3.60 **The committee recommends the Minister for Education develop proposals to be incorporated in the new children's education and care national workforce strategy in 2021 that:**
- **address barriers to access to quality early childhood education and care in regional, rural and remote communities, including cost**
 - **improve the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and**
 - **support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce.**
- 3.61 There are clear benefits associated with the provision of wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services. The provision of integrated family services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities could be enhanced by providing greater flexibility and surety in funding for these important services.

55 Education Council, *Communiqué*, 12 December 2019, Alice Springs, p. 5.

Recommendation 5

- 3.62 **The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth provide greater flexibility and surety in funding for wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**
- 3.63 The provision of universal access in Australia to early childhood education in the year before schooling has many potential benefits. The committee recognises this potential, but notes that such a policy would come at a significant financial cost that would need to be balanced by the government against other considerations as Australia emerges from recession. The current child care policy settings already provide financial support to families who need it. Under the child care safety net, eligible families are able to receive up to a 120 per cent subsidy, which in most cases is free child care. Furthermore, families transitioning to work can already receive a 95 per cent subsidy and for all families, the child care subsidy rate is set at rate that was deemed affordable by the productivity commission, ensuring more support is given to those that need it. In addition programs such as the Inclusion Support Program and the Community Child Care Fund also support services to deliver care. Finally, regarding preschool, the year before school, the cost to parents is a jurisdiction matter of each state and territory.
- 3.64 The quality standards of the early childhood education and care sector in Australia are held in high esteem globally. In preschool, the year before school, a universal access national partnership is already in place with all jurisdictions and the jurisdictions are responsible for the quality of preschool. Furthermore, regarding child care, the Government is committed to providing financial support to families to have access to affordable and high quality care. ACECQA is the Commonwealth quality agency, of which all states and territories are active board members. ACECQA provides the national quality standards and the states are responsible for the delivery of quality in the child care sector.
- 3.65 The government has made a number of announcements about early childhood education in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the committee expects that further updates are likely in the coming months.
- 3.66 The committee notes that the government has introduced an Additional Child Care Subsidy that supplements fee assistance to support vulnerable

or disadvantaged families and children. Assistance is also available for families that have been impacted by COVID-19.

- 3.67 The committee notes that, nationally, the activity test has been eased until 4 April 2021 for Australian families whose employment has been affected by COVID-19.⁵⁶
- 3.68 The committee recognises that in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, opportunities for work and study can be limited, and therefore the application of the activity test requirement risks penalising children for circumstances that may be outside of their families' control.
- 3.69 As part of the government's commitment to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in YBFS early childhood education to 95 per cent by 2025, the committee supports the activity test in the CCS being amended to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Recommendation 6

- 3.70 **The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.**
- 3.71 The committee recognises that, due to geographic isolation, many families cannot access early childhood education in the usual way. These families rely on mobile services and early learning programs provided by distance education.
- 3.72 The committee is concerned that mobile early childhood education services are not eligible for operational grants and fee subsidies because they work within the Early Years Learning Framework, rather than the National Quality Framework.

Recommendation 7

- 3.73 **The committee recommends that the Commonwealth modify funding arrangements for mobile early childhood education to provide flexibility and surety of funding for these services in the 2021 Budget.**

56 DESE, *COVID-19 information for the early childhood education and care sector*, 20 September 2020, <<https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare>>, accessed 24 September 2020.

- 3.74 The committee is concerned by evidence suggesting fewer than 200 children access recognised 4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education.

Recommendation 8

- 3.75 **The committee recommends that the Commonwealth support early learning programs through the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Distance Education Allowance in the 2021 Budget.**

School education

- 4.1 School education is compulsory in Australia until at least the age of 16, extending from the first year of primary school to year 12. The mandated age of entry differs across the states and territories. Primary schools provide education until year 6 (or 7 in South Australia). Secondary schools provide education from the end of primary school to year 12. There are also schools that cater for students with specific needs.
- 4.2 The schooling system has three sectors, state and territory government public schools, Catholic schools and independent schools. Together these sectors educate 3.8 million students in over 9,000 schools annually.¹
- 4.3 Chapter one showed that students in regional, rural and remote communities have poorer educational and vocational outcomes than their peers from metropolitan areas.
- 4.4 Chapter two examined a range of factors that are external to the education system that negatively impact on students' school education. Many of these barriers increase with remoteness.
- 4.5 This chapter examines a range of issues relating to school education in rural, regional and remote environments, including:
- the provision of locally-accessible education
 - school resourcing
 - student, family and community engagement
 - the Australian Curriculum
 - linguistic and cultural factors
 - boarding
 - distance education

1 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey review), January 2018, p. 13.

- participation in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects
 - entrepreneurialism
 - workforce issues, and
 - cross-jurisdictional issues, as highlighted by the experiences of communities in the tri-border region of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.
- 4.6 The chapter also examines the response of Australian schools to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the rapid adaptation to home and online learning.
- 4.7 The chapter concludes with a summary, noting relevant Closing the Gap targets and recommendations from the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review).

Locally-accessible education

- 4.8 Families living in regional, rural and remote areas have limited choice in where and how they educate their children.² Concerns were raised that many students have limited access to primary schooling within a reasonable distance and with suitable transportation options, and no access to secondary schooling apart from boarding school, particularly in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.³
- 4.9 For example, Ms Jeanie Adams reported that, at Aurukun in Queensland, ‘there is now no secondary school in the town so teenagers are sent away from their community to boarding school, often to elite city schools, or miss out on post-primary school altogether’.⁴ This means that ‘children are not able to live and be educated on their own country/land (outstation) even if their families want to live away from the problems of “town”’.⁵

2 Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association Qld Inc. (ICPA Qld), *Submission 4*, p. 1; Empowered Communities, Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region, *Submission 17*, p. 13; Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA), *Submission 22*, p. 16; Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association Northern Territory (ICPA NT), *Submission 45*, p. 2; Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

3 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 28; Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 1; Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA), *Submission 23*, p. 2; Central Land Council (CLC), *Submission 9*, p. 8; Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF), *Submission 66*, p. 12.

4 Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 1.

5 Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 1.

- 4.10 The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) noted that ‘many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in remote communities do not have access to a full secondary education up to Year 12’ and that ‘the majority of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia are more than 100 km from a school with a full secondary education program.’⁶
- 4.11 In the Northern Territory, secondary education is delivered according to the Indigenous Education Strategy (IES). To enable remote students to have a pathway that is comparable to students living in a metropolitan area, the Northern Territory government provides ‘a strongly supported boarding school process supported by the Transition Support Unit’, which it states ‘is proving a successful model for getting young remote and very remote students through to Year 12.’⁷ Students who remain in their community can access a ‘post primary literacy and numeracy’ program delivered through their local primary school.⁸
- 4.12 A study conducted by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) examined the education opportunities available to and outcomes achieved by secondary school aged young people from one remote community in the Northern Territory. CAEPR found that ‘under the IES, access to secondary education for families was problematic’, reporting:
- Not only was supply of boarding places inadequate to meet demand, because the only alternative program was delivered in a primary school setting, teenagers were disinclined to participate. The gap in secondary education infrastructure in community became increasingly visible over the course of 2020, when all secondary aged young people were repatriated to community as a result of the Covid pandemic. By mid-way through the year, all students attending interstate schools had dropped away from education altogether.⁹
- 4.13 CAEPR reported that ‘community members were unanimous that what they want in terms of secondary education is a school “on country”’.¹⁰

6 National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), *Submission 63*, p. 9.

7 Northern Territory Government, *Submission 37*, p. 4.

8 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Remote secondary school choices*, 2020, <<https://nt.gov.au/learning/primary-and-secondary-students/remote-students-and-parents/remote-secondary-school-choices>>, accessed 14 September 2020.

9 Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), *Submission 67*, p. 7.

10 CAEPR, *Submission 67*, p. 11.

- 4.14 Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation reported that while there are choices available for families to educate their children in cities and regional centres, options are limited in rural and remote communities to:
- families leaving the area
 - families sending their children off to boarding school if they do not choose the local public offering, or
 - accepting a local offering which often does not have the breadth of opportunity available in either its programs, and often in its subject offerings, particularly at the higher levels of maths, science and English studies.¹¹
- 4.15 Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation commented:
- Anecdotally, when people leave an area to access schooling and other opportunities, they are unlikely to return, or if they do it is later in life. For our rural and remote communities to thrive we need to encourage people to stay and make their whole lives in those areas.¹²
- 4.16 The Town of Port Hedland noted that Pilbara people are concerned by ‘the significant gap in education attainment for all levels of schooling between regional, rural and remote areas, and metropolitan areas’.¹³ Furthermore, the need to move to access improved schooling options was reported as a prominent reason for people in the 30-39 year age range to leave the Pilbara region.¹⁴
- 4.17 There is a strong preference among families living in geographically isolated areas¹⁵ and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities¹⁶ for access to locally accessible, quality education at all levels.
- 4.18 Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association Australia (ICPA Australia) said that the viability of rural and remote schools was ‘essential’ and that it is imperative for ‘families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions.’¹⁷ ICPA Australia further commented:
- Rural schools are often the centre of their communities and ensuring that these schools are well supported, resourced and
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11 Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

12 Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

13 Town of Port Hedland, *Submission 58*, p. 7.

14 Town of Port Hedland, *Submission 58*, p. 7.

15 ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 1; ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

16 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29; Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 13; Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 3.

17 Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association Australia (ICPA Australia), *Submission 7*, p. 3.

staffed is vital to the children's learning in these towns. Good schools can retain and even attract families to the regions, but families will quickly move away if they have concerns regarding their children's education.¹⁸

- 4.19 ICPA Australia noted that 'due to geographic isolation from services, many rural and remote families are expected to cover out-of-pocket costs for the education of their children from early childhood through to tertiary education, which is not experienced by urban families.'¹⁹
- 4.20 It was reported that there are many communities where there exists a perception that regional, rural and remote schools offer a sub-standard quality of education.²⁰
- 4.21 The current system of school education was described by the Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA) as being 'high quality but low equity.'²¹ ASPA said that 'universal access to education does not currently translate to a nationally consistent minimum standard of education provision for all students.'²²
- 4.22 ICPA Australia advocated for a 'national approach that ensures educational delivery of a consistently high standard, no matter where the education is provided' in order to 'improve provision of education outcomes, options and pathways for remote students'.²³

School resourcing

- 4.23 The Australian Government currently provides a \$314.7 billion investment in recurrent funding for all Australian schools over 2018 to 2029 under its Quality Schools package. Commonwealth funding for Australian schools is estimated to grow from \$18.7 billion in 2018 to \$26.4 billion in 2023 and \$32.7 billion in 2029. This represents an average per student increase of 5.5 per cent per year over 2018 to 2023 (from a 2017 base).
- 4.24 The Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings review is underway by the National School Resourcing Board (the Board), established under section 128 of the Australian Education Act 2013 (the Act). The Board considers funding to regional and remote schools, provides findings and

18 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 4.

19 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 2.

20 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 28.

21 Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA), *Submission 5*, p. 1.

22 ASPA, *Submission 5*, p. 1.

23 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 2.

makes recommendations relating to the current settings for the school location, school size loadings and the data informing the loadings. The Board will provide its final report to the Australian Government Minister for Education by 1 May 2021.

- 4.25 Concerns were raised about school resourcing arrangements for regional, rural and remote schools, in particularly funding based on enrolment numbers or school attendance. For example, the CLC noted that school funding arrangements in the Northern Territory, which are tied to school attendance during the year rather than school enrolment, are volatile, 'can delay funding of staff positions and makes it difficult for schools to plan ahead.'²⁴
- 4.26 The CLC is concerned that 'special programs that are considered additional to the general literacy and numeracy focus of many schools, such as Indigenous Language and Culture and the provision of linguists and support staff, may be the first programs to be cut when funding is uncertain.'²⁵
- 4.27 At the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020, the Australian Education Union (AEU) said that changes to school resourcing introduced by the *Australian Education Amendment Act 2017* have reduced funding:
- There is the Schooling Resource Standard, which is the minimum benchmark for funding. By 2023, the Northern Territory will be at 79 per cent, which is around 21 per cent less than the actual benchmark. That's a direct result of the imposition of the 20 per cent cap from the Commonwealth. It has reduced the funding to the Northern Territory, but there is also a lack of commitment in terms of the funding that is needed across the system.'²⁶
- 4.28 According to Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF), Strelley Community School in the Pilbara 'continually strives to provide "equal and every opportunity" but truthfully, it is constrained in its capacity to do so by its available resources (i.e. human resources, physical resources, and most importantly financial resources).'27
- 4.29 Gunnedah Shire Council reported that declining enrolments at the Gunnedah High School has reduced the variety of subject choices

24 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 3.

25 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 3.

26 Ms Correna Haythorpe, Federal President, Australian Education Union (AEU), *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 6.

27 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 12.

- available for students and has, 'in turn resulted in lower Higher School Certificate marks, reducing future choices for our young people.'²⁸
- 4.30 Gunnedah Shire Council further noted that 49.8 per cent of students at the Gunnedah High School left school at Year 10 or below and only 32 per cent completed Year 12, compared with the New South Wales state averages of 33.5 per cent and 52.1 per cent, respectively.²⁹
- 4.31 Teach for Australia (TFA) reported that remote that rural and remote schools can 'struggle to provide the standard of educational experience metropolitan schools can offer', noting that these schools 'are more expensive to run, harder to staff, and students have less choice in the subjects they study, especially in their senior levels of schooling.'³⁰
- 4.32 To address funding issues, ASPA advocated 'for the full implementation of the needs based funding model to enable school leaders to put in place sustainable interventions and staffing to address the needs of students in their communities.'³¹

Capacity to Contribute

- 4.33 Government funding to non-government schools is affected by a Capacity to Contribute (CTC) score. This score has previously been based on the Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA), which is a measure of educational advantage calculated from student factors (parents' occupation and parents' education) and school factors (geographical location and proportion of indigenous students).
- 4.34 The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) is introducing a new Direct Measure of Income (DMI) to replace the area based socio-economic status measure component of the CTC. The DMI will be based on the median income of parents or guardians, as calculated using income tax data.³²

Student, family and community engagement

- 4.35 Students are more likely to succeed in education if their caregivers encourage them to attend school, are involved in the school's programs,

28 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 2.

29 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 2.

30 Teach for Australia (TFA), *Submission 14*, p. 1.

31 APSA, *Submission 5*, p. 2.

32 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), *Response to Questions on Notice*, 13 March 2020, p. 6.

are aware of the importance of sleep, routine and nutrition on learning, and who engage with school staff about the student's progress or challenges.³³ Other factors that support education and school attendance include strong school leadership and engagement with families and communities on a range of issues including cultural and linguistic needs, and access to services that support the health and wellbeing of students and their families.³⁴

- 4.36 Conversely, where the aims and methods of education delivery are not wholly supported by families and communities, students' education suffers. In some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the legacy of past injustices and trauma has created distrust about the role of institutions, including schools, and there is a low level of engagement with and understanding of the benefits of education.³⁵ World Vision commented:

The personal experiences of parents, carers and community members mean they are often fearful of engaging in the school environment, particularly when there are real language barriers to overcome, when they do not recognise the value of the education being offered, and particularly when they cannot see the connection between education and improved wellbeing for their children and communities. These attitudes can be passed on to children in their care. The engagement of these key people in a child's life – parents, carers and community members – is critical for their engagement in school processes, priorities and curricula.³⁶

- 4.37 At the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020, the AEU commented that:

...local people want to have some more control over things like ensuring that their children are taught appropriate practices for their culture, that they have access to language programs, and that there are school leadership bodies that encompass staff but also local leaders who have some say over the direction of the school and making sure that its philosophy is in accordance with people's aspirations.³⁷

33 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 16.

34 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 16; NCEF, *Submission 66*, pp. 19-20, p. 30.

35 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4; ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 5.

36 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6.

37 Mr Jarvis Ryan, President, Northern Territory Branch, AEU, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 4.

- 4.38 Pivot Professional Learning similarly noted that ‘when communities and parents are involved, students do better. They stay in school longer. They have better educational outcomes.’³⁸
- 4.39 NCEF reported that the Strelley Community School in the Pilbara has been guided by clear aims set by the community since its first registration in 1976 and that, ‘with some variations, because of the changing nature of the community, these expectations have remained essentially the same.’³⁹
NCEF reported:
From the outset, there was an innate desire to teach their own culture and language. Subsequently there is a great sense of ownership of the school. The community is heavily emotionally and historically invested in the success of their school and support it unreservedly.⁴⁰
- 4.40 This experience is contrasted with communities in the tri-border region, which have had less opportunity to shape their own education goals. Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region commented:
Many Anangu throughout the region have told us they have little understanding of what goes on inside schools or involvement in the decisions that affect their children and their learning. Decisions about services and programs are often made externally with little or no local input.⁴¹
- 4.41 Dr David Brooks said that, in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands of Western Australia, ‘there is a need for a sense of purpose about the possible pathways that life offers and the role of school education to support this’.⁴² Dr Brooks said that the community, through the Ngaanyatjarra Council, ‘has a role in stating its goals for the region and exploring realistic pathways towards achieving these goals.’⁴³
- 4.42 Yirrkala School called for governments to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with ‘the autonomy to make decisions about what and how we educate our young people’, noting that ‘we believe that

38 Ms Amanda Bickerstaff, Chief Executive Officer, Pivot Professional Learning, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 3.

39 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 6.

40 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 30.

41 Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 12.

42 Dr David Brooks, *Submission 64*, p. 1.

43 Dr David Brooks, *Submission 64*, p. 1.

the problems of educational opportunity in remote community schools have local answers.’⁴⁴

4.43 The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) advocated for more local representation on school executives in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools ‘so that the subtleties of culture and country are holistically reflected in the mission and vision of each community school.’⁴⁵

4.44 Both the Northern Territory government and the NIAA reported that work is progressing on a Community-led Schools initiative in the Northern Territory.⁴⁶ According to the Northern Territory government:

It is about providing decision making to local school communities in all aspects of the school to the extent desired by that community. There are seven schools that are advanced with this work, and a further three starting their community led pathway. Fourteen schools have established committees to further facilitate community engagement. While it is early days for this initiative, the desire to be engaged in school decision making is very clear and is anecdotally having a positive impact on school and community interactions.⁴⁷

School leadership

4.45 The importance of strong leadership in schools was highlighted at the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020. The Association of Independent Schools Western Australia commented:

If there’s a strong leader with strong relationships with the community, everything works. The community will come in. They’ll help do maintenance around the school. Where there isn’t a strong leader, or that good relationship with community is not there, the school just doesn’t work – the kids don’t go to school, and they don’t get supported with what they’re doing. So, getting really good leaders out there is key...Financial incentives to get good leaders with good experience out to those schools is essential to make them work.⁴⁸

44 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 11.

45 National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), *Submission 40*, p. 6.

46 National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), *Submission 63*, p. 4; Northern Territory government, *Submission 37*, p. 2.

47 Northern Territory government, *Submission 37*, p. 2.

48 Ms Valerie Gould, Executive Director, Association of Independent Schools Western Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 3.

- 4.46 Similarly, the NCEF said that ‘the role of Principal is enormously important’ and commented:

As school leader, the principal needs to go out of their way to engage with the school community; build positive relationships; be knowledgeable of what works and doesn’t work; have vision and commitment to improvement; maintain high expectations; and be supportive of the staff, students and parents.⁴⁹

Attendance

- 4.47 Concerns were raised about poor school attendance in regional and remote communities. For example, the CLC reported that ‘school attendance continues to be a huge concern in very remote NT communities’, noting, ‘in the CLC region, 18 out of the 27 schools in Central Australia had an attendance rate below 55 per cent, with the lowest rate being 35.2 per cent in Papunya.’⁵⁰
- 4.48 The Western Australian government noted that ‘the family and social factors that result from poverty can have an impact on the capacity of some students to attend or to do well when they are attending school and a negative impact in the community.’⁵¹
- 4.49 The AEU expressed concern that the school attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is declining, citing research from the University of New South Wales that found there has been a steady decline in school attendance rates from outer regional areas to remote areas.⁵²
- 4.50 NCEF reported a range of out of school factors that influence non-attendance at Strelley Community School, including funerals and sorry business, health, ceremonies, sporting activities and cultural activities. Other factors contributing to non-attendance were:
- lack of food; lack of clean clothes; lack of hot water for showers;
 - lack of sleep attributed to overcrowding of housing and disturbances caused by other occupants; inability to return to community due to weather events (flooding, cyclones and associated road closures); inability to return to the community due to lack of transport or money for fuel; cultural/family obligations (such as the need to assist elder family members and/or younger

49 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 35.

50 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 7.

51 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 11.

52 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 16.

family members both in the home or in town); or lack of action/connectivity in the community.⁵³

- 4.51 To encourage improved attendance rates, Strelley Community School ‘implemented many successful solutions-focused strategies’ including the provision of laundry facilities and hot showers.⁵⁴ The school has a healthy living program that ‘provides all students attending each campus with nutritionally balanced meals and snacks throughout the school day’ and educates students and the community about ‘healthy food preparation and making healthy food choices.’⁵⁵
- 4.52 Strelley Community School also conducts ‘regular roundups’ of students in Port Hedland and returns them to the community.⁵⁶ A teacher commented:
- When the student returns, instead of chastising the student and making them feel shamed, we welcome them back and make a fuss. We let them know that we are glad to have them back. After all, most of the time their absence has not been the student’s choice, it has been the family’s choice. We want the student to feel valued and good about being back at school.⁵⁷
- 4.53 The Western Australian government commented:
- There is a need to continue to find creative solutions to transience and low attendance of students. Mainstream learning curriculum, environment and pedagogical practices do not always meet the learning needs of remote Aboriginal children and may not align closely with their culture and priorities. Often cultural and family imperatives result in high levels of transience and interrupted attendance, which limit the impact of traditional school and classroom routines.⁵⁸
- 4.54 Both the AEU and Dr Sam Osborne were critical of existing strategies to increase attendance. The AEU said that programs such as the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) ‘have no impact on school attendance.’⁵⁹ Similarly, Dr Osborne reported that attendance-focused strategies such as the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM)

53 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 20.

54 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 20.

55 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 19.

56 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 21.

57 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 21.

58 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 7.

59 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 23.

trial in the Northern Territory and RSAS have resulted in a decrease in school attendance.⁶⁰

4.55 To improve school attendance there was support for greater community involvement and cultural sensitivity in education. For example, the AEU stated that 'for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students there are a number of defining characteristics of schools which are more effective in resolving the attendance issue', including:

- Schools that have strong, effective leadership
- A positive culture and a positive sense of identity for students
- Teachers and support staff with the skills and knowledge to effectively engage and develop relationships with students
- High levels of community involvement in the planning and delivery of school processes, priorities and curriculum.
- Genuine understanding of cultural competencies, and
- Collaboration in the development of school curriculum with communities.⁶¹

4.56 Dr Osborne reported there was a statistically significant relationship between the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and improved attendance and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.⁶²

Student engagement

4.57 The AEU noted that 'there is an obvious relationship between school engagement and student attendance. Students who are engaged and motivated at school, will see greater benefits in attending school more regularly.'⁶³

4.58 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students 'are more likely to be affected by a range of social, cultural and economic factors that can adversely impact on their ability to engage with their education.'⁶⁴

4.59 TFA reported that students of rural and remote schools 'demonstrate poorer educational outcomes, higher rates of absenteeism, and engage less with tertiary education' and also 'report more challenges with emotional

60 University of South Australia, *Submission 29*, p. 3.

61 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 16.

62 University of South Australia, *Submission 29*, p. 3.

63 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 16.

64 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.

wellbeing and with feelings of belonging, self-confidence and perseverance.’⁶⁵

- 4.60 NCEF emphasised the difficulty with maintaining engagement among older students. They reported that:

Student engagement and learning at Strelley Community School for our older students (especially our senior secondary students) is much more problematic than for our students in the lower year levels. Despite the expressed intentions of the community, the greatest challenge is keeping these students in the community and at school.⁶⁶

- 4.61 NCEF commented that boredom and a lack of future aspirations are two key drivers of student disengagement:

Currently, there are extremely limited opportunities for students and community members of the school to engage in purposeful and directed educational and recreational activities on a regular basis within the community and outside of school operational hours...[t]he lack of internet connectivity and technology within the communities is increasingly influencing teenagers’ decisions to stay in town. In modern society, social media and other technology platforms are an important vehicle for young people to stay connected with each other and the world and this is simply not possible in the community except within the school grounds.⁶⁷

- 4.62 NCEF also said that ‘our children do not have the same opportunities available within the community to attend sport and recreational activities and clubs that are so readily accessible to their peers living in regional towns and centres’, and that schools end up bearing the responsibility to deliver extra-curricular programs.⁶⁸

- 4.63 In addition, common strategies used to discipline students can exacerbate disengagement. Just Reinvest advised that school suspensions can make it difficult for students to catch up, ‘leading young people to further disengage from school...suspension from schools removes protective factors and increases a kid’s chance of getting in trouble.’⁶⁹

- 4.64 World Vision was critical of the use of expulsions:

First Nations communities and parents are rarely given the opportunity to have self-determination in the education of their

65 TFA, *Submission 14*, p. 1.

66 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 14.

67 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 14.

68 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 22.

69 Just Reinvest, *Submission 42*, p. 4.

children. The system seems punitive in expelling for truancy. While truancy should not be supported, it is counter intuitive to expel a student from not attending, which then leads to further educational exclusion. The onus for educational engagement and achievement is often directed at students and parents, rather than exploring deficits in the education model as some of the reasons why the student is not engaging. This same misplaced onus is reflected in government policy linking welfare payments to school attendance.⁷⁰

- 4.65 The consequences of disengagement can extend beyond the classroom. According to Just Reinvest:

There is a strong link between school disengagement and interactions with the juvenile justice system. Current government policy around school suspensions, including the over-use of long-term school suspensions, is a key driver in the 'school-to-prison pipeline', which sees marginalised and excluded young people at an increased risk of juvenile and, eventually, adult incarceration.⁷¹

- 4.66 Just Reinvest commented that feedback it received from young people, their families and frontline services indicated support for 'in-school suspensions rather than being forcibly excluded from learning.'⁷²

- 4.67 Save the Children suggested that:

Addressing disengagement requires fostering students' connection to school, capacity (including how much students feel they learn and develop skills at school), and sense of meaning (including how much students feel that what they are doing matters).⁷³

- 4.68 The AHRC argued that, to address disengagement, whole-of-family supports are needed to assist students and their families with issues relating to poverty, overcrowded housing, and higher rates of trauma.⁷⁴ The need for trauma-informed approaches to education was also discussed in chapter two.

- 4.69 At the roundtable hearing on 2 September 2020, the AHRC further commented:

Learning methods need to be trauma informed, healing and restorative, with an aim to revitalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society to full health and wellbeing. We cannot

70 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 9.

71 Just Reinvest, *Submission 42*, p. 5.

72 Just Reinvest, *Submission 42*, p. 4.

73 Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

74 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.

underestimate the need for therapeutic, well-informed approaches and school spaces becoming trauma-informed service providers.⁷⁵

Adult literacy

4.70 The strong links between levels of adult literacy and the educational attainment of children were highlighted.⁷⁶ For example, Associate Professor Bob Boughton noted that low rates of adult English literacy is a key barrier to education outcomes in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and explained:

This is both a product and an ongoing cause of the failure of school and post-school education systems over many decades, which have left the majority of adults in these communities unable to operate in English at anything but the most basic level (e.g. Level 1 or below on the Australian Core Skills Framework), including most of the significant adults in the lives of school children. Because literacy is a social practice, which must be developed and supported in family and community to flourish, the absence of a culture of literacy in homes and communities means that most Indigenous children in remote communities start school well behind their non-Indigenous and urban peers, and only a small number ever catch up. Moreover, the parents and community leaders who are products of this failed system rarely have the English language competence and confidence to intervene effectively and assist the schools to do better with their children.⁷⁷

4.71 There was support for the provision of whole-of-community programs, such as mass adult literacy campaigns, to improve English language proficiency, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.⁷⁸

75 Ms June Oscar, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, AHRC, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 13.

76 Associate Professor Bob Boughton, *Submission 35*, p. 1; Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 3.

77 Associate Professor Bob Boughton, *Submission 35*, p. 1.

78 Associate Professor Bob Boughton, *Submission 35*, p. 1; CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 16; Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 3; NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 34.

Australian Curriculum

- 4.72 According to DESE, 'the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum sets the expectations for what all Australian students should be taught, regardless of where they live or go to school.'⁷⁹ DESE stated:

The Curriculum is designed to be implemented to meet the needs of priority cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote locations, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.⁸⁰

- 4.73 Despite this, concerns were raised that the Australian Curriculum does not meet the needs of all students in regional, rural and remote locations. For example, the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) reported receiving feedback from its member schools that:

The Australian Curriculum has been developed by writers with a metropolitan or city-based focus, simply because that is their lived knowledge and experience. There are few references to remote or other contexts within the curriculum, simply because the writers did not have those frames of reference. Therefore, students in and from remote communities and complex environments will not 'see themselves' within the Australian Curriculum and will not be able to as easily relate to the content.⁸¹

- 4.74 ISCA further reported that delivering the Australian Curriculum can be complicated in remote classrooms where multiple year levels learn together in the same classroom. ISCA stated:

Such a scenario can be challenging even for experienced teachers, especially given the construct of the Australian Curriculum which has year level achievement standards in the core subjects of English, Mathematics, Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences. Even highly experienced and capable teachers can struggle with the tensions of trying to support the differing educational needs of younger learners and older students in the same learning space.⁸²

- 4.75 The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) noted that 'school subjects often do not equip Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in rural and remote communities with

79 DESE, *Submission 49*, pp. 29-30.

80 DESE, *Submission 49*, pp. 29-30.

81 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 20.

82 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 20.

knowledge and skills to improve their quality of life’ and stated that struggling students in particular can ‘benefit from engaging in health literacy, home economics, and other family, community and life skills.’⁸³

4.76 Yirrkala School was critical of policies and programs being imposed on remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools ‘that are not developed with community and most often not supported by any local evidence base.’⁸⁴ Yirrkala School advocated for more flexibility in the Australian Curriculum to allow communities to develop their own policies and programs:

- Adopt a principle of localised decision making for policy decisions affecting remote communities
- Work with schools to develop high quality assessment tools in both the local language and English that reflect the actual language acquisition progressions of bilingual learners
- Cease NAPLAN as a compulsory requirement in remote schools with large cohorts of EAL/D learners and particularly in bilingual school settings, and
- Provide Departmental support for research into community-led curriculum and pedagogy programs towards developing a locally-contextualised evidence base for effective education.⁸⁵

STEM

4.77 DESE stated that ‘high quality STEM education is critically important for Australia’s productivity. However, Australia’s recent results from the 2018 cycle of PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] have not shown gains, particularly in mathematics and science.’⁸⁶

4.78 To address this issue, the National STEM School Education Strategy 2016-2026 outlined an agenda to support ‘all young people to become more STEM capable’ and to increase ‘participation in challenging STEM subjects in the senior secondary years.’⁸⁷ The Strategy aims to increase the access of groups under-represented in STEM, such as non-metropolitan students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and students from low

83 National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), *Submission 44*, p. 4.

84 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, pp. 14-15.

85 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, pp. 14-15.

86 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 31.

87 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 31.

- socioeconomic backgrounds, to the opportunities STEM-related occupations offer through improved STEM education.⁸⁸
- 4.79 DESE reported that ‘online accessibility is a feature of many of these initiatives, providing a way around issues associated with remoteness and complexity.’⁸⁹
- 4.80 There are currently a number of government projects aimed at improving STEM participation for students from regional rural and remote communities. For example, the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) provide a range of innovative programs and educational initiatives, ‘with a focus on multisensory learning where students are engaged in STEM through sight, sound and touch.’⁹⁰ ANSTO’s programs, such as school excursions and videoconferences, are ‘accessible to students nationally and have been successful in engaging and educating students in rural and regional communities.’⁹¹
- 4.81 The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)’s Indigenous STEM Education Project has offered a number of programs to increase participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in STEM education and careers, including the Aboriginal Summer School for Excellence in Technology and Science (ASSETS) program, Science Pathways for Indigenous Communities and Inquiry for Indigenous Science Students (I2S2).⁹²
- 4.82 The I2S2 program aims to help students build ‘skills and capability through hands-on, inquiry-based projects in an Indigenous context.’⁹³ CSIRO stated:
- Students reported that they found it encouraging that Indigenous knowledge was included in the curriculum, and teachers reported a high level of interest and engagement demonstrated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.⁹⁴
- 4.83 The Western Australian government reported it is funding a STEM skills strategy, initially \$3.3 million over 2018-2021, to provide ‘professional development of more than 1 000 teachers in lower socioeconomic public schools, STEM communication, mentoring programs, and digital and

88 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 31.

89 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 31.

90 Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO), *Submission 3*, p. 2.

91 ANSTO, *Submission 3*, p. 2.

92 CSIRO, *Submission 10*, p. 4.

93 CSIRO, *Submission 10*, p. 5

94 CSIRO, *Submission 10*, p. 5

technology programs.’⁹⁵ The Western Australian government has a target to have 85 per cent of Year 12 students completing two or more STEM courses and/or STEM-related VET qualifications by 2024.⁹⁶

4.84 Ms Julie Bailey advocated for the STEM curriculum to be adapted ‘to the environment in which the learning occurs. This needs local consultation which can be achieved through distance communication. The teachers, students, parents and communities can all be involved in localising the curriculum.’⁹⁷

4.85 Similarly, World Vision suggested that:

additional hours before or after standard school time could support improved STEM outcomes for First Nations students by focusing on traditional practices which can embed STEM as an approach rather than embedding traditional knowledges into STEM which has often been the method. For example, biology could be taught through bush tucker and medicine and land management. Maths, for instance, could be taught through traditional story-telling and technology could be taught in the context of using technology to maintain traditional practices, particularly with digital technology.⁹⁸

Language, culture and country

4.86 There is increasing recognition that being strong in language and culture are protective factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s health and wellbeing, and support mainstream educational attainment.⁹⁹ This recognition has not translated into widespread support for first language learning and the integration of culture into curriculum for

95 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 26.

96 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 26.

97 Julie Bailey, *Submission 53*, p. 7.

98 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 12.

99 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 4; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 26; Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 4; SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 10; Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 12; AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 43; Dr. Carmel O’Shannessy and Prof. Jane Simpson, *Submission 8*, p. 2; NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4; Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 14; Dr Sam Osborne, *Submission 29*, p. 2; CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 15. See also, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, *Our land, our languages: language learning in Indigenous communities*, September 2012, pp. 21-31, 79-86.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly those who have grown up speaking a language other than English in their home.¹⁰⁰
- 4.87 While the Australian Curriculum sets expectations about what all Australian students should be taught, each state and territory has the flexibility to deliver curriculum that is best suited to students in local schools, including programs that incorporate local languages and cultures.¹⁰¹
- 4.88 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have advocated strongly for approaches to education that acknowledge and promote the use their languages and cultures.¹⁰²
- 4.89 In December 2019, all Australian governments expressed their commitment to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their potential and to shape their own futures. The Alice Springs (*Mparntwe*) Education Declaration noted:
- All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples must be empowered to achieve their full learning potential, shape their own futures, and embrace their cultures, languages and identities as Australia’s First Nations peoples.¹⁰³

Language

- 4.90 Standard Australian English is the dominant language in Australia and there is broad agreement that all Australian children should be proficient in the English language. However, existing language skills, for example in an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, can complement and enhance a student’s ability to become proficient in English.¹⁰⁴
- 4.91 The importance of supporting students’ development in English through recognising students’ existing language skills has been highlighted as being essential to literacy and numeracy development.¹⁰⁵ For example, the Minister for Indigenous Australians, the Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP said:

100 NPY Women’s Council, *Submission 47*, p. 12; Children’s’ Ground, *Submission 56*, p. 6; Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 8; Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 1; NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4.

101 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, January 2018, p. 15.

102 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 18; RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 3; CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 11; NPY Women’s Council, *Submission 47*, p. 12.

103 COAG Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, December 2019, p. 16.

104 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 4; Dr. Carmel O’Shannessy and Prof. Jane Simpson, *Submission 8*, p. 2; NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4; AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 22.

105 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 26.

There was an old adage when I was training as a teacher – teach from the known to the unknown – and understand the culture of a child to enable a better outcome. While everyone understands and learns differently in the way they access knowledge we have an obligation to build on the knowledge of their prior learning.¹⁰⁶

- 4.92 The NIAA noted that a significant proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools are English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners:

In 2014-15, around one-third (34 per cent) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 4-14 years spoke an Australian Indigenous language (including those who only spoke some words). This increases to two-thirds (66 per cent) in remote, compared with 26 per cent in non-remote areas.¹⁰⁷

- 4.93 Despite this, NACCHO reported that ‘most schools do not allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to speak in a language other than English when at school, and there is no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language learning.’¹⁰⁸

- 4.94 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) commented that ‘language can act as a significant barrier to accessing and engaging in early education in remote communities’ and noted that ‘the year one school curriculum presumes a level of English that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote communities do not have.’¹⁰⁹ SNAICC expressed concern that this means ‘children are beginning their school journey from a position of disadvantage.’¹¹⁰

- 4.95 Evidence from Cape York in Queensland indicates that the use of local languages at school is discouraged. Ms Adams reported that while ‘children at Aurukun, like the whole community, speak Wik Mungkan almost exclusively at home’, they ‘are not taught in their own language(s), and there is no pressure for staff to learn the local language, as there would be if they were to teach in another country. Wik Mungkan is actively discouraged in classrooms.’¹¹¹

106 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 4; The Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP, *Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture*, University of New England, 19 November 2019.

107 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 5.

108 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4.

109 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Submission 15*, p. 10.

110 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 10.

111 Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 1.

English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)

- 4.96 Dr Carmel O’Shannessy and Professor Jane Simpson recommended that if students speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as their main everyday language, they require ‘targeted, explicit, appropriate instruction in Standard Australian English as a second or additional language in order to learn English well.’¹¹²
- 4.97 NIAA reported that the key characteristics of effective school English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) programs include:
- Specialist support for students in standard Australian English and their first language;
 - Interactive and engaging classroom-based language teaching and learning; and
 - Teachers who are knowledgeable in English as a Second Language (ESL) pedagogy and multicultural education and have high expectations of student achievement.¹¹³
- 4.98 NIAA commented:
- While specialist EAL/D teachers can and do provide expertise for EAL/D students, once beyond the initial stages of learning English, the majority of EAL/D students’ time is spent in mainstream classes. For this reason, it is important that teachers in mainstream classes have the cultural capability and training to adopt effective practices that address EAL/D learning needs.¹¹⁴
- 4.99 The Western Australian government noted that many students in remote Aboriginal communities grow up speaking Aboriginal English, Kriol, a traditional language or a combination of these, and that these students learn Standard Australian English through EAL/D pedagogy. According to the Western Australian government, EAL/D support is provided to all Western Australian remote community schools at all phases of learning.¹¹⁵

Bilingual education

- 4.100 The most significant difference between bilingual education and EAL/D is that, in bilingual programs teachers must speak both English and the local language, whereas in EAL/D programs, teachers may only speak English. The goal of bilingual programs is for students to be fluent in both English and the local language.¹¹⁶

112 Dr. Carmel O’Shannessy and Prof. Jane Simpson, *Submission 8*, p. 1.

113 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 5.

114 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 5.

115 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 2.

116 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 15.

4.101 There was strong support for the provision of bilingual education programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools.¹¹⁷ For example, the AEU commented:

Learning an Indigenous language and becoming proficient in English are complementary rather than mutually exclusive; rather than acting as a barrier to the learning of English, bilingual programs actually strengthen it (provided they are adequately supported and resourced).¹¹⁸

4.102 Similarly, the CLC commented:

In the NT, the available evidence shows that [students in] bilingual programs generally attained better literacy and numeracy scores than their peers in non-bilingual schools. It is significant to note here, that in the remote Indigenous context of the Northern Territory, a key aim of bilingual education programs is to improve English language outcomes, and that there is no credible evidence to support the assertion that giving attention to Indigenous languages comes at the expense of English language development.¹¹⁹

4.103 It was noted that, in the past, bilingual programs were common in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community schools, but have been largely abandoned.¹²⁰ For example, Tangentyere Council noted that ‘between 1974 and 2008 the multilingual nature of Aboriginal populations in the NT was supported through bilingual education.’¹²¹ Tangentyere Council reported that bilingual education was abandoned in the Northern Territory following the review of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), despite the review recognising bilingual education ‘as a universal success factor.’¹²²

4.104 At the roundtable hearing on 2 September 2020, World Vision Australia remarked:

We have generations of Aboriginal people who are in their late 50s, early 50s and late 40s who have actually grown up in a

117 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 18; AEU, *Submission 43*, pp. 21-2; Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 7; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 26; Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 4; CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 15; NPY Women’s Council, *Submission 47*, p. 15.

118 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 22.

119 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 15.

120 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 18; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 26; Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 2; Children’s’ Ground, *Submission 56*, p. 6; SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 10.

121 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 18.

122 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 18; See also: Northern Territory Emergency Response Review Board, *Report of the NTER Review Board*, October 2008, p. 31.

bilingual education system who can speak and write both languages in their communities, but younger parents and children can't read or write in English. I think there's something that we can learn from bilingual programs that have been in place before.¹²³

- 4.105 There is a debate around the benefits of other pedagogies such as Direct Instruction compared to bilingual education; however the evidence for the effectiveness of these pedagogies is contested.¹²⁴

Culturally-relevant education

- 4.106 There was strong support for education to be provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that is culturally relevant and reflects 'two ways' or 'both ways' modes of learning that incorporate both Standard Australian English literacy and numeracy and local languages, concepts and values.¹²⁵ The importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students having the opportunity to learn on country was also highlighted.¹²⁶

- 4.107 For example, NPY Women's Council commented:

We wholeheartedly endorse the need for culture and country to play a key role for young people's learning and development. This should sit alongside mainstream education so that young people in the NPY region can realise their goals, achieve their dreams and overcome these challenges.¹²⁷

- 4.108 The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) noted a range of benefits associated with the provision of culturally safe education and care that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and perspectives and provide continuity with prior learning in children's homes. These benefits include 'supporting children's learning, affirming their identity and encouraging participation by

123 Ms Teresa Hutchins, Manager, Program Development and Effectiveness, Australia First Nations Program, World Vision Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

124 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 18; Good to Great Schools, *Submission 64*, p. 1; Dr Sam Osborne, *Submission 29*, p. 4.

125 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 15; Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 18; Dr Sam Osborne, *Submission 29*, p. 2; World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 8; Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 8.

126 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 8; NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 15; Northern Territory government, *Submission 37*, p. 2; Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 10; NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 7; CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 15.

127 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 24.

children and families where historically there has been distrust fear and disengagement from educational institutions.¹²⁸

4.109 The AHRC reported that its consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and stakeholders have highlighted the 'potential for increased engagement with an education system that adequately reflects their values, recognises their histories and embraces their cultures and languages.'¹²⁹

4.110 Children's Ground expressed concern that 'First Nations children are often sent into culturally damaging educational environments' and stated:

these environments do not reflect their identity, language, family, history or knowledge-systems and often they deny and diminish the culture and identity of children. Too often children feel like failures and too many drop out of school.¹³⁰

4.111 Successful approaches to the provision of culturally-relevant education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were highlighted. For example, ACECQA noted that Yirrkala Preschool in the Northern Territory had been awarded an 'excellent' rating, which is the highest rating a service can achieve under the National Quality Framework (NQF):

The service was recognised for collaborative partnerships with professional, community or research organisations, commitment to children that respects, reflects and celebrates culture and diversity, including place of origin, inclusive partnerships with children and families and practice and environments that enhance children's learning and growth.¹³¹

4.112 A community based curriculum is employed by Tangentyere Council's Land and Learning project, which has been supporting 'Aboriginal community schools and Elders in central Australia to teach two-way science about the bush since 1998.'¹³² The program supports:

- Training teachers to deliver two-way science in schools with Aboriginal teachers, teacher aides and/or elders;
- Providing on-ground support for schools to plan topics integrating Aboriginal ecological knowledge and Western Science, including facilitating learning on country trips;

128 Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), *Submission 12*, p. 5.

129 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 25.

130 Children's Ground, *Submission 56*, p. 6.

131 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 11.

132 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 30.

- Supporting Aboriginal teachers, assistant teachers and elders to deliver Aboriginal language and culture programs in schools; and
 - Producing bilingual resources on Aboriginal ecological knowledge for schools.¹³³
- 4.113 ‘Two way’ learning has been central to the curriculum offered at the Strelley Community School in the Pilbara for many years. NCEF reported that the learning day at Strelley Community School is divided into two main sections:
- literacy and numeracy involving ‘mainstream skill learning and reinforcing to levels of automaticity with agreed age-level standards appropriate to EALD students from a non-western cultural family and community background’,¹³⁴ and
 - an integrated curriculum of project-based, ‘two way’ learning that connects science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) with traditional ecological knowledge, and oral language development in both Nyangumarta and Standard Australian English.¹³⁵
- 4.114 As previously noted, CSIRO has several programs that ‘promote the importance and support both Western, scientific epistemology and First Nations ecological knowledge’, including the ASSETS program and I2S2.¹³⁶
- 4.115 Strelley Community School has partnered with CSIRO’s Science Pathways for Indigenous Communities program ‘as a vehicle to provide more structure and robustness to the Two-Way Science curriculum already in place. To date, this is proving to be a highly engaging strategy.’¹³⁷
- 4.116 CSIRO commented that an evaluation of the Science Pathways for Indigenous Communities program has found that:
- embedding a two-way learning approach into the curriculum;
 - immersive two-way teacher professional development led by local Elders; and
 - incorporating on-country learning into curriculum to support subjects such as Science, Mathematics, English and general capabilities, are all factors that improved the involvement of community and family in student education.¹³⁸

133 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 30.

134 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 39.

135 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 40.

136 Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), *Submission 10*, p. 4.

137 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 40.

138 CSIRO, *Submission 10*, p. 6.

Boarding

- 4.117 Concerns were raised that boarding is the only option to attend secondary school for many students living in remote areas of Australia¹³⁹ and that there is limited choice in boarding providers. For example, ICPA Australia were concerned 'there are relatively few government-run boarding school options available to families, which leaves most having to pay the ever-increasing high costs of independent or private boarding schools to educate their children.'¹⁴⁰
- 4.118 It was reported that the experience of boarding school can have a negative impact on the wellbeing of many students from regional, rural and remote communities.¹⁴¹ For example, Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA) noted that boarding 'often proves to be too difficult for some students to adjust to. This can result in a student's disengagement from school.'¹⁴²

Support

- 4.119 The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) reported that the 'additional costs of educating students from remote communities in boarding school away from their families and communities is significant', and noted:
- These additional costs include not only living and educational support, but also substantial physical and mental health support to meet the often complex and high-level needs of students including those from disrupted and traumatic backgrounds, pastoral and cultural support, and costs associated with maintaining links to home communities.¹⁴³
- 4.120 ICPA NT reported that the cost to send children to boarding school 'can be crippling' and there is 'very little support in regard to travel and fees for families in the NT.'¹⁴⁴
- 4.121 To address these issues, several support programs have been implemented at state government, school and community levels. For example, AHISA reported that independent schools adopt a range of strategies to help students overcome the challenges they experience living away from home, including targeted literacy and numeracy

139 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 4; CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 3.

140 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 7.

141 ICPA QLD, *Submission 4*, p. 2.

142 RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 2.

143 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 12.

144 ICPA NT, *Submission 45*, p. 4.

- teaching/tutoring, visits by school staff to students' homes, buddy systems with day students and school families and facilities for students to videocall parents.¹⁴⁵
- 4.122 AHISA also noted the importance of residential scholarship programs in providing opportunities for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas, stating 'not only is this support of direct benefit for students, it also encourages contributions from private individuals, school communities and philanthropic organisations.'¹⁴⁶
- 4.123 The Northern Territory's Transition Support Unit (TSU) provides support to students who may wish to access support to enrol in secondary schools outside of their local communities. In 2019, the TSU 'provided 450 students from 78 school communities with transition planning and preparation support with a focus on attending boarding school in 2020.'¹⁴⁷
- 4.124 The NPY Women's Council provides support for young people and their families to attend boarding school, including case management, advice, and practical and financial assistance, including helping families to maintain contact with their children while at boarding school. The NPY Women's Council Boarding School Program has 'been able to streamline processes between scholarship providers, boarding schools and Abstudy and advocate with young people and their families to make access easier.'¹⁴⁸
- 4.125 Despite the existing supports for boarding students, concerns were raised that more is needed. Empowered Communities NPY Region reported that there was demand for the NPY Women's Council Boarding School project to be expanded across the NPY region and generally 'an extension of boarding school support programs to increase the secondary education choices available to families across the region.'¹⁴⁹
- 4.126 ISCA reported that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students 'need significant health and social and emotional support in order to be 'school ready' at the beginning of the term but 'the additional support Indigenous students need to actually get to school, stay at school and be ready to learn is not part of standard educational funding.'¹⁵⁰

145 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 19.

146 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 22.

147 Northern Territory Department of Education, *Submission 37*, p. 4.

148 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 17.

149 Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 10.

150 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 12.

Gender equity

- 4.127 The Committee asked DESE about equity of schooling, in particular the lack of boarding schools for girls outside of metropolitan areas. DESE responded that this was a matter for the states.¹⁵¹
- 4.128 While the committee did not receive specific evidence on the issue of shortages of gender segregated boarding schools, ICPA NT expressed concern regarding the lack of boarding school options for families in the Northern Territory. ICPA NT noted that ‘families have many reasons for choosing a particular boarding school for their children which will relate to extended family support, origins of parents, curriculum, cost and what is the ‘right fit’ for the child.’¹⁵²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students

- 4.129 As previously noted, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students encounter difficulties accessing secondary school without moving away from home. Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia (IEBA) reported that:

For young Indigenous people living in regional and remote Australia there are few education options after primary school other than to leave their family and country to become boarding students in unfamiliar cities large distances from home. For many, boarding is their only access to secondary education.¹⁵³

- 4.130 School resourcing issues were raised that are unique to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example IEBA reported that:

No Commonwealth government agency has direct responsibility for resourcing Indigenous student boarding and the State governments do not currently provide effective secondary education in many remote communities that produces outcomes commensurate with their wider Australian peers.¹⁵⁴

ABSTUDY

- 4.131 There were concerns that the current rate of ABSTUDY did not fully cover the cost of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools. For example, ISCA reported that:

151 Mr David Pattie, First Assistant Secretary, Improving Student Outcomes Division, DESE, *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 5 February 2020, p. 2.

152 ICPA NT, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

153 Indigenous Education and Boarding Australia (IEBA), *Submission 28*, p. 1.

154 IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 1.

Independent schools which provide boarding facilities for Indigenous students in remote communities operate at half the expense of boarding services provided by government facilities. While government funding, including ABSTUDY payments play a central role in funding these services, the current ABSTUDY payment covers only half the cost. This situation leaves a significant funding gap.¹⁵⁵

4.132 The NCEC expressed concern that Catholic schools that educate high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (particularly in the Northern Territory and North Queensland) have higher costs than other schools and changes to ABSTUDY, including the introduction of means testing to eligibility criteria for the boarding supplement and altered attendance requirements, have reduced funding.¹⁵⁶

4.133 NCEC advised that some of its schools have to find additional sources of funding to cover shortfalls:

Without access to programs like ABSTUDY and without the cross-subsidisation of other Cairns Catholic schools, Catholic schools at Herberton and Cooktown would not be able to fulfil their mission. For example, to remain financially viable Herberton required annual cross subsidisation (a transfer of Commonwealth recurrent grants from other Cairns Catholic Schools) of more than \$500,000.¹⁵⁷

4.134 NCEC also describes the administration of ABSTUDY as 'onerous and difficult' and notes that delays in processing applications can lead to students disengaging.¹⁵⁸

4.135 NIAA reported that 'there are around 5,700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students who receive ABSTUDY assistance as they need to study away from home. Over three-quarters of these ABSTUDY students are from a remote area.'¹⁵⁹

4.136 The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) (now the NIAA) commissioned Grant Thornton Australia (GTA) to undertake analysis of the investment in support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary boarding students. Recommendations in the report *Boarding: investing in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* (September 2019) include the need for national boarding

155 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 29.

156 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 8.

157 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 9.

158 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 9.

159 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 9.

standards, strengthened communication between government and the boarding sector, further changes to ABSTUDY and improvements to wrap-around and transition support services for boarders. The report also showed there is a shortfall in funding for boarding providers with a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁶⁰

- 4.137 According to ISCA, 'the gap between income and costs for schools providing this critical educational service for Indigenous students must be addressed urgently, in order for the viability of schools educating large numbers of Indigenous boarding students to be maintained.'¹⁶¹

Cultural competence

- 4.138 CAEPR's study of secondary school education opportunities in one remote community in the Northern Territory found that the cultural competence of boarding schools is variable and this has a negative impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student's engagement with education and subsequent attainment:

We found that over a ten-year period, 100 members of the research cohort had been dispersed among 38 different schools located in 16 cities or towns in every state or territory of mainland Australia. Our study produced no evidence of a consistent standard of cultural competence in the boarding schools which community members attended: some were enrolled in schools which have a long history of working with First Nations students, in other situations they were the first and only First Nations student the school had ever had. A concerning pattern of early disengagement from education and low levels of academic attainment emerged.¹⁶²

- 4.139 IEBA suggested that building cultural competence in boarding schools will result in better student outcomes:

If students are culturally strong it follows that academic outcomes will be enhanced. The evidence to date suggests that if organisations are not culturally intelligent then Indigenous students are far more likely to leave those educational settings and not be able to take advantage of the educational opportunity offered in a secondary boarding setting.¹⁶³

160 DESE, *Response to Questions on Notice*, 13 March 2020, p. 8; G Thornton, *Boarding: investing in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, June 2019.

161 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 13.

162 CAEPR, *Submission 67*, p. 7.

163 IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 4.

- 4.140 IEBA noted that the Boarding Standard for Australian schools and residences (AS 5725:2015) ‘does not include any specific references to addressing cultural safety or the cultural intelligence of the boarding school’¹⁶⁴ and expressed support for the implementation of an Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard (Recommendation 15 of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs’ 2017 education inquiry).¹⁶⁵
- 4.141 IEBA stated that an Indigenous Cultural Boarding Standard:
- will assure consistent culturally safe boarding practices, address specific health and well-being needs and support effective parent and community engagement. It will also support appropriate policies, procedures and identify the required competencies by boarding school staff. Importantly in doing so it will boost retention and academic outcomes for Indigenous students.¹⁶⁶

Distance education

- 4.142 Many students living in geographically isolated areas of Australia, for example on remote cattle stations, boats and islands have little choice but to access distance education.¹⁶⁷
- 4.143 According to DESE, ‘while government schools offer distance education this is usually provided for specific purposes and for limited periods. Distance education at non-government schools is more freely available, although still limited.’¹⁶⁸
- 4.144 The need for supervision was identified as one of the most significant challenges associated with distance learning. ICPA NT noted that ‘either a parent is the supervisor, meaning the family is foregoing an income or has to employ somebody to replace the supervisor in other roles, or the family has to employ a governess to supervise DE.’¹⁶⁹ ICPA NT further noted that recruiting appropriate supervisors, such as governesses, is ‘notoriously difficult’.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁴ IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁵ IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 2. See: House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, December 2017, p. 112.

¹⁶⁶ IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁷ ICPA NT, *Submission 6*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 24.

¹⁶⁹ ICPA NT, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ ICPA NT, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

- 4.145 ICPA NT reported a range of other challenges with the provision of distance education, including:
- Limited face-to-face contact with trained teachers
 - Limited access to extra-curricular including sport, art, music and STEM/science
 - Limitations of technology in the delivery of DE
 - Limited access to support services and socialisation opportunities
 - Lack of prioritised and clear pathways for intervention, diagnosis and management of special learning needs and the costs of accessing, and
 - Financial and time costs of accessing activities and services in urban centres.¹⁷¹
- 4.146 ICPA Australia also noted that distance education for secondary students ‘can be very difficult to commit to and be successful at, especially if a student has attended a local school for their primary years and does not have a previous distance education background.’¹⁷²
- 4.147 Mrs Elizabeth Burnett and Mrs Hayley Howe noted that a barrier to the provision of distance education for geographically isolated students is the availability and affordability of appropriately qualified Distance Education Tutors (DETs or ‘governesses’).¹⁷³
- 4.148 Mrs Burnett and Mrs Howe said that a DET Payment is ‘critically required’ with eligibility based on remoteness and distance from available schooling.¹⁷⁴ They commented that appropriate qualifications for DET payments should include all school teachers, in-training teachers, early childhood professionals with more than 3 years’ experience with age groups 4 years and above, and individuals with relevant qualifications outside the common education field which add value to the education of remote children.¹⁷⁵
- 4.149 Mrs Burnett and Mrs Howe suggested that an alternative to a Distance Education Tutor Payment would be to relax transitional provisions for the current In Home Care (IHC) for Early Childhood program to allow qualified teachers to be eligible for IHC payments as DETs. Currently, primary educators ‘cannot operate within the IHC model without the support of an early childhood professional for 20 per cent of their

171 ICPA NT, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

172 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 7.

173 Elizabeth Burnett and Hayley Howe, *Submission 61*, p. 1.

174 Elizabeth Burnett and Hayley Howe, *Submission 61*, p. 2.

175 Elizabeth Burnett and Hayley Howe, *Submission 61*, p. 2.

employed weekly hours'.¹⁷⁶ Mrs Burnett and Mrs Howe noted that 'in urban schools a Bachelor of Primary qualified teacher provides Early Childhood education to children aged 5-8 years via Prep-Yr. 2, but in remote areas under the IHC model as educators they cannot.'¹⁷⁷

Entrepreneurialism

- 4.150 AHISA noted that schools in regional and remote locations are adopting a greater focus on entrepreneurial activity among students and are 'active in seeking ways to expand provision for students to help equip them to contribute to their local communities, and prepare them for existing work opportunities or to create new opportunities.'¹⁷⁸
- 4.151 In addition to a focus on entrepreneurialism as part of the business studies curriculum, schools have established programs or ventures such as:
- Encouraging students to engage in social entrepreneurialism
 - Making it a requirement for students studying the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) to establish ventures to raise money for attendance at a VCAL camp
 - Making it a major assessment task for Year 11 Business Studies students to create a business proposition which they then present to a panel of business professionals from the local community (in the style of the TV program, Shark Tank)
 - Using a Conservation and Land Management course as a platform for growing trees for the community and land care organisations
 - Establishing a student run café to put into practice financial literacy skills
 - Making and posting YouTube clips on learning a language other than English, and
 - Helping young mothers develop a business in partnership with their Aboriginal elders in fabric design and clothing and fashion accessories.¹⁷⁹

176 Elizabeth Burnett and Hayley Howe, *Submission 61*, p. 3.

177 Elizabeth Burnett and Hayley Howe, *Submission 61*, p. 3.

178 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 12.

179 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 12.

Workforce issues

- 4.152 The Halsey review found that ‘in order to increase the achievements and expand successful transitions and pathways for RRR [regional, rural and remote] young people in and across the board, committed and highly effective teachers and teaching in every location for every year level is essential.’¹⁸⁰
- 4.153 Yet, as with other professions in regional, rural and remote communities, there remains significant attraction, retention and training issues for the teaching profession.
- 4.154 SNAICC reported that ‘service-level barriers are major contributors to our children in remote areas of Australia being significantly behind children in other areas in early education participation and outcomes’ and include a lack of service infrastructure, workforce shortages and a lack of housing for staff.¹⁸¹
- 4.155 Empowered Communities NPY Region advocated for ‘structural changes to improve the retention and skills of non-Anangu teaching staff coming to the region, and upskilling with ESL and language training’.¹⁸² They also advocated for ‘increased opportunities for supported Anangu employment and professional development in order to increase the Anangu workforce in NPY schools.’¹⁸³
- 4.156 The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA) expressed concern about high staff turnover in remote schools, noting that one school in the Tiwi Islands has had seven principals in two years. NATSIPA stated:
- It is extremely difficult for students and community to build trust and rapport with staff who continue to leave and yet the community is stable. There is no consistency in personnel or learning. The turnover of teachers is enormous yet the knowledge keepers and educators who stay in these locations are from these communities.¹⁸⁴

180 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, *Department of Education and Training, Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, January 2018, p. 38.

181 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 4.

182 Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 15.

183 Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 15.

184 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA), *Submission 33*, p. 2.

Teacher training

- 4.157 A national survey by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) of over 4,000 educators found that access to high quality professional learning was particularly challenging for teachers in regional, rural and remote settings.¹⁸⁵
- 4.158 ISCA commented that schools in remote communities and complex environments often employ a higher proportion of younger and/or inexperienced staff, resulting in heightened costs of upskilling, developing and nurturing of new staff through professional learning and other related opportunities.¹⁸⁶
- 4.159 ISCA stated:
- Even for experienced staff, a lack of specialised locally available professional learning...can be a challenge. Similarly, it can be difficult for principals and other school leaders to have the opportunity to interact with and learn from other similarly placed leaders...
- Often only a small percentage of staff professional learning and development can be provided locally. While staff are increasingly able to undertake online professional learning, for nonsystemic Independent schools finding and accessing relevant and appropriate online opportunities can be difficult.¹⁸⁷
- 4.160 There are also training issues associated with low teacher numbers and high turnover in isolated schools. The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales cited 2016 research showing that 'many schools require teachers to teach subjects outside their field of expertise to make up for the shortfall' and that, 'in remote locations, about 41 per cent of Years 7-10 teachers teach out-of-field at least some of the time, compared to 24 per cent of metropolitan teachers.'¹⁸⁸
- 4.161 The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales advocated for:
- teachers to be encouraged to 'undertake experience exchange programs in other RRR schools...This would allow the teachers to gain exposure to different teaching methods and expectations, and to foster fresh ideas', and

185 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), *Submission 34*, p. 5.

186 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 18.

187 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 18.

188 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 20*, p. 3.

- 'all university teaching degrees include teacher training with a specific focus on RRR schools, and teacher 'pracs' include a RRR school.'¹⁸⁹

4.162 AHISA suggested that universities could have an ongoing role in teachers' professional development:

...partnerships between regional and remote schools and universities could be a viable option for the provision of higher education and professional development opportunities for teachers - contributing to quality schooling provision in regional and remote locations and supporting recruitment and retention of teachers.¹⁹⁰

4.163 A range of programs were highlighted that aim to improve the training of regional, remote and rural teachers including:

- TFA's Leadership Development Program recruits and trains exceptional teachers to become Associates by completing a two-year placement in schools serving low socioeconomic communities while studying to attain their Masters in education.¹⁹¹ TFA Associates are provided with a professional coach, an academic mentor employed by the Australian Catholic University (TFA's university partner), and a School Mentor employed by their placement school.¹⁹²
- The Western Australian government has several programs to develop the teaching workforce in regional and remote schools, including:
 - ⇒ The Regional Learning Specialists Project, 'designed to strengthen the teaching of science, humanities and social sciences, mathematics and English for senior secondary ATAR students', and works with 'teachers in these schools to build their capacity to deliver the courses locally in the longer term'¹⁹³
 - ⇒ The Country Practicum Program provides financial support for student teachers and school psychologists to undertake their final practicums in schools in the Goldfields, Midwest, Kimberley, Pilbara and Wheat belt,¹⁹⁴ and
 - ⇒ The Rural and Remote Training Schools project promotes rural and remote teaching to university students and helps prepare them for, and encourages them to teach in, public schools with a focus on the Pilbara, Kimberley, Midwest and Goldfields regions. The Western

189 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 20*, p. 4.

190 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 5.

191 TFA, *Submission 14*, p. 1.

192 TFA, *Submission 14*, p. 2.

193 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 20.

194 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 19.

Australian government reported that ‘the project has delivered a significant increase in the number of pre-service teachers undertaking final practicums in rural/remote schools in these regions.’¹⁹⁵

- Centres for Learning and Wellbeing (CLAWs) have been introduced in rural and remote areas in Queensland to provide ‘support, professional learning, mentorship and a wellbeing focus for teaching staff.’¹⁹⁶

Preparing teachers to work in culturally and linguistically diverse schools

- 4.164 The importance of non-Indigenous teachers being trained to competently include relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into the curriculum and receiving induction programs to ensure they have an adequate awareness of the cultural environment within which they work was highlighted.¹⁹⁷
- 4.165 The AHRC noted that the provision of culturally-relevant education depends upon the ‘quality, knowledge and preparedness of teaching staff’, and reported that ‘remote schools are often staffed by a largely external workforce with extremely high turnover which can have a significant impact on teaching quality.’¹⁹⁸
- 4.166 IEBA stated that teachers need to ‘have the skills to effectively teach Aboriginal students’ and that school staff need to be culturally proficient, listen to and support families, and to work with local Aboriginal education workers to assist in teaching and to engage with the community.¹⁹⁹ IEBA said there is also a need ‘to ensure that all teaching staff understand Aboriginal histories, languages, spirituality and cultures’ and that ‘school principal must assess their school-wide cultural competencies, connect with the local Indigenous community and engage their Aboriginal education staff.’²⁰⁰
- 4.167 Empowered Communities NPY Region advocated for structural changes to improve the retention and skills of non-Anangu teaching staff, including providing staff with ESL/D and language training.²⁰¹

195 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 23.

196 IPCA QLD, *Submission 4*, p. 3.

197 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 25; Dr Sam Osborne, *Submission 29*, p. 4; Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 53*, p. 5; NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 7; World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6; NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 3.

198 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 30.

199 IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 6.

200 IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 6.

201 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 15.

- 4.168 The Western Australian government reported that pre-service teachers in that state are provided training in the specific language learning needs of Aboriginal students whose first language is not Standard Australian English. The Tracks to Two-Way Learning resource 'positions Aboriginal English to be recognised and valued alongside Standard Australian English'; 'encourages the accepted use of diverse languages and dialects in schools'; and, 'improves teachers' knowledge and ability to teach and engage with Aboriginal staff, students and community.'²⁰²

Mobilising a local workforce: training and accreditation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers

- 4.169 The importance of mobilising a local workforce to teach in community schools was highlighted, however it was reported that there are barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people becoming fully accredited teachers. For example, Yirrkala School noted that 'our most important teachers are home grown' but expressed concern that 'there are few truly accessible pathways for First Nations educators in the Northern Territory to become fully qualified teachers.'²⁰³

- 4.170 As previously noted, Dr Sam Osbourne reported that there is a positive relationship between the employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in schools and improved educational outcomes for students:

Myschools data shows a statistically significant relationship between the number of non-teaching staff (almost exclusively local Aboriginal community members working as education support, administration, grounds, bus driving and so on) and improved attendance and NAPLAN scores. This suggests there is a significant need for investment in local employment and workforce development in remote Aboriginal schooling.²⁰⁴

- 4.171 NIAA noted that there is an important role for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support staff in schools 'in providing bridges between students, the local community and teachers', and commented:

These staff are critical to the delivery of bilingual education programs, particularly in remote and very remote schools. They are able to assist both teachers and students in first language learning and in translating concepts across languages.²⁰⁵

202 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 5.

203 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 16.

204 Dr Sam Osbourne, *Submission 29*, p. 4.

205 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 5.

4.172 NACCHO reported that there is a severe shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australia:

Only 0.7 per cent of all teachers in Australia identify as being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, although around 3 per cent of the Australian population identify as such, and low numbers as set to worsen as older teachers retire. There is also a general lack of visible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models in school communities.²⁰⁶

4.173 At the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020, the AEU referred to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce as ‘an untapped resource’ and noted:

...over six per cent of all public school enrolments are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; however, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators make up just over two per cent of the total workforce. Research shows that, when you employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education workers in schools, it’s directly linked to improved attendance rates, improved student outcomes and improved connections with the community.²⁰⁷

4.174 The CLC noted that there is currently ‘an ageing Aboriginal teacher and Assistant Teacher workforce within very remote schools’ in the Northern Territory, as a result ‘of the withdrawal of well-resourced teacher training programs in the 1980s and 1990s, which contributed to the establishment of a highly professionalised remote Indigenous language workforce.’²⁰⁸ The CLC called for ‘an expansion of Aboriginal Assistant Teacher allocations and a strategic and resourced program to address the barriers to increasing the numbers of trained Aboriginal teachers from very remote locations.’²⁰⁹

4.175 NATSIPA advocated for:

a greater focus on developing the skills of our Aboriginal workers and traditional language speakers to be trained as teachers, to be recognised as teachers and remunerated accordingly to work alongside fly-in teachers who are failing our children. The best qualified and most experienced teachers should be targeted to

206 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4.

207 Ms Correna Haythorpe, Federal President, AEU, Committee Hansard, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 6.

208 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 17.

209 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 18.

work in our communities and low SES schools not the teachers who are least qualified and suitable.²¹⁰

- 4.176 NCEC noted that Catholic Education Northern Territory has collaborated with Charles Darwin University to deliver the Growing Our Own Project. NCEC reported:

This project works with assistant teachers who would like to undertake pre-service teacher training in the school they are working at. This project has had a high success rate with local community members becoming teachers in their community school.²¹¹

- 4.177 Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) programs were highlighted as a way to increase the training and accreditation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers and teachers.²¹² For example, the CLC reported that the RATE program formerly delivered through Bachelor College in the Northern Territory 'contributed to the establishment of a highly professionalised remote Indigenous language workforce' and was a 'successful approach to ensuring fully qualified teachers.'²¹³

Recruitment and retention

- 4.178 DESE reported that remoteness makes it more difficult to recruit and retain high quality principals, school leaders and teachers, especially in science and mathematics.²¹⁴
- 4.179 Various factors that negatively impact recruitment and retention in regional, rural and remote schools were identified, including the preparation of teachers to work in non-metropolitan locations. For example, ICPA Australia reported that 'often young inexperienced teachers take on hard to fill positions in isolated locations, unprepared for rural living, isolation from family, friends and colleagues, and the impact lack of educational services has on student outcomes.'²¹⁵
- 4.180 SNAICC reported that recruiting and retaining quality staff, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, is a major difficulty in remote communities and can be attributed to a lack of local training opportunities, culturally unsafe training processes, recruitment and workplace culture,

210 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 18.

211 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 6.

212 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 16; Ms Jeanie Adams, *Submission 57*, p. 3; NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 34.

213 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 17.

214 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 28.

215 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 5.

structural and language barriers and inflexible workplaces, lack of access and support for relevant qualifications and a lack of recognition of the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge in educational services.²¹⁶

- 4.181 According to the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales:

A constant challenge for schools in remoter areas is gaining and retaining a sufficient number of specialist qualified teachers able to deliver the curriculum. The disincentives for teachers to move to remoter areas – such as the costs of moving, the remoteness itself – can often counteract attempts to address this challenge.²¹⁷

- 4.182 NCEF said that resourcing can exacerbate recruitment problems for some schools:

NCEF is unable to offer the attractive remote employment incentives that the bigger public and catholic sectors can offer. There is no 'carrot dangling' offer of permanency in a regional or metropolitan position after fulfilling a teaching tenure in our remote community school. Qualified staff come to our school through their own choice as part of their own professional and personal life goals.²¹⁸

- 4.183 There are also issues when teachers are not required to move in order to teach in remote areas and work on a fly-in, fly-out basis. IEBA were concerned that due to industrial conditions preventing travel during school holidays, teachers who resided outside of the community they worked in did not arrive in the community until after the school term had started and left before the school term ended, resulting in students missing around four weeks of school each year.²¹⁹

- 4.184 An inability to recruit and retain appropriately trained teachers can negatively affect student learning outcomes. NIAA noted that 'teacher quality has been found to be the largest in-school determinant of educational success' and quality is reduced by turnover as 'strategic classroom planning and curriculum implementation is interrupted.'²²⁰

216 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 5.

217 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 20*, p. 3.

218 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 34.

219 IEBA, *Submission 28*, p. 3.

220 NIAA, *Submission 63*, p. 3.

- 4.185 NCEF noted that staff retention is critical in remote schools, stating that ‘the longer a teacher stays, the greater the relationships and trust that are developed with the students and community.’²²¹
- 4.186 Empowered Communities NPY Region noted ‘the transience of staff through remote community schools results in poor continuity for students – within a culture that values relationships as foundational to all interactions’, and teachers are often new, inexperienced and ‘lacking specialist skills required to support high-needs students.’²²²
- 4.187 NPY Women’s Council stated that ‘government incentives currently favour new graduates with limited experience to come and teach in remote communities’, however ‘there needs to be experienced teachers to promote innovative models to engage young people.’²²³
- 4.188 NCEF suggested that teachers need to have several characteristics in order to teach successfully in remote schools:
- Working in a remote community school requires a special type of person. It is essential the applicant is genuine in their intentions, culturally sensitive, has the right professional skills, the tenacity and resilience to live in harsh remote conditions. The school is no place for a martyr or a crusader as both have the potential of creating more harm than good.²²⁴
- 4.189 To reduce recruitment and retention difficulties in regional, rural and remote communities, Mr Phil Brown of the Country Education Partnership (CEP) suggested there needs to be ‘a holistic view about what the preparation needs to look like, how we then recruit staff, how we support new graduates in those communities and then how we continue to grow them.’²²⁵
- 4.190 DESE noted that the Commonwealth has:
- committed over \$28 million in funding for La Trobe University and Teach For Australia to deliver the High Achieving Teachers Program and support schools experiencing teacher workforce shortages. Commencing in 2020, the High Achieving Teachers Program is offering two alternative, employment-based pathways into teaching.²²⁶
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221 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 35.

222 Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 14.

223 NPY Women’s Council, *Submission 47*, p. 10.

224 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 34.

225 Mr Phil Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Partnership (CEP), *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2020, Canberra, p. 3.

226 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 12.

- 4.191 DESE reported that work is underway on a teacher workforce strategy under the National School Reform Agreement. The work is being undertaken by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership with the states and territories and is examining 'where the workforce demands are and the skill sets of teachers that may be required.'²²⁷
- 4.192 DESE also noted that the government has implemented measures in response to recommendations provided by the Special Envoy for Indigenous Affairs, the Hon Tony Abbott MP, including:
- teachers engaged as a teacher at a school campus in a very remote area of Australia will not be charged indexation on their accumulated Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt while they are teaching in a very remote area, and
 - teachers who have worked as teachers in schools for at least four years in a very remote area of Australia, from the start of the 2019 school year, may be eligible to have all or part of their outstanding HELP debt remitted.²²⁸
- 4.193 The Western Australian government reported that they provide a range of incentives to attract and retain teachers in regional and remote schools, including employee housing and relocation assistance, location-based allowances and other conditions.²²⁹
- 4.194 A range of actions were recommended to improve the recruitment and retention of staff in regional, rural and remote schools:
- APSA suggested an incentive package to attract and retain staff serving in rural, remote and complex schools that included pay, accommodation, relocation allowances and other conditions²³⁰
 - ASPA suggested that high achieving graduates be appointed to rural or remote schools 'with a guarantee of return to their (nominated) preferred region after the agreed period of time'²³¹
 - NATSIPA suggested an extension of Queensland's recruitment strategy to include the Remote Ambassador program, which 'identifies suitable teachers and principals who would be willing to be a champion for the benefits of remote teaching'²³²

227 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 6.

228 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 45.

229 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 26.

230 ASPA, *Submission 5*, p. 3.

231 ASPA, *Submission 5*, p. 3.

232 NATSIPA, *Submission 33*, p. 6.

- Yirrkala School suggested funding ‘a pilot of a Community-Based Teacher Education Program (such the program formerly known as Remote Area Teacher Education or RATE in the NT) to provide pathways for remote people to become fully qualified school teachers, in community, without having to leave,’²³³ and
- Yirrkala School suggested optimising ‘the support through Centrelink for local students studying to become teachers and school support officers whilst working part time in remote schools’.²³⁴

Temporary Skills Shortage visa program

- 4.195 AHISA noted that some regional and remote schools have sought to recruit teaching and non-teaching staff from overseas, however this has been affected by ‘the reclassification of occupations eligible under the Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) visa program, from the medium-term and long-term Skilled Migration occupation list to the short-term list’²³⁵.
- 4.196 AHISA called for a ‘more nuanced approach to determining skills shortages for the purposes of TSS processes, to avoid restricting the capacity of schools to fill skills gaps.’²³⁶ Specifically, AHISA advocated for a number of occupations to be re-instated to the medium-term and long-term occupation list, including ‘Education Manager’, ‘Specialist Manager’ and ‘Education Adviser’ (all of which could cover a school leadership role such as Head of Senior School or Director of Curriculum not carrying a teaching load), ‘Primary School Teacher’, ‘Middle School Teacher’, ‘Residential Care Officer’ and ‘Student Counsellor’.²³⁷

Cross-jurisdictional issues: the tri-border region

- 4.197 The Committee was interested in hearing about the education challenges faced by communities in the tri-border region including NPY lands in the central desert region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY lands) in the remote north west of South Australia. These communities are located in one of the most geographically isolated areas of Australia, which makes the delivery of education and other services challenging.

233 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 17.

234 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 17.

235 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 15.

236 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 15.

237 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 15.

- 4.198 Responsibility for education delivery in NPY and APY communities is shared between four different jurisdictions (Commonwealth, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory) and includes a mix of government and independent schools.
- 4.199 Anangu people living in the tri-border region maintain strong links to their land, languages, traditional laws and family but have extremely limited educational outcomes and pathways to employment due to complex historical, geographic and structural barriers.²³⁸
- 4.200 NPY Women's Council reported that 93 per cent of Anangu speak their local language at home, with English as a second, third or fourth language.²³⁹
- 4.201 Anangu have expressed their desire for their children to receive bilingual education,²⁴⁰ delivered through a 'red dirt curriculum'.²⁴¹ Empowered Communities NPY Region describes this approach as:
- an Anangu-led view of culturally appropriate, place-based education – designed and delivered by Anangu (within the parameters of the Australian Curriculum), whereby children learn locally relevant content in an integrated and contextual way. This means drawing on local examples, knowledge, stories and opportunities and combining an Anangu world view into everyday learning – rather than as isolated subjects or standalone activities.²⁴²

Access and equity

- 4.202 Empowered Communities NPY Region expressed concern that 'resourcing for education varies widely across jurisdictions and the region has no consistent strategy or coordinated approach amongst education providers across borders.'²⁴³
- 4.203 Empowered Communities NPY Region noted that the NPY region consists of 25 communities with a population of about 4500, and reported that:
- Half of the population is under the age of 25 years and 80 per cent of adults are unemployed²⁴⁴

238 Emeritus Professor Max Angus, *Submission 38*, pp. 1-7; Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 3.

239 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 7.

240 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 12.

241 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 12.

242 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 12.

243 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 6.

244 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 6.

- In 2015, 74 per cent of children under 5 years from the NPY region were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains²⁴⁵
- In 2018, the average annual school attendance at NPY schools was 29 per cent²⁴⁶
- In 2016, only 18 per cent of those aged 20 to 24 years in the NPY region had completed Year 12,²⁴⁷ and
- In 2016, 13 percent of young people aged 17 to 24 years in the NPY region were participating in work or study. Only 3 per cent had completed a Certificate III or above qualification.²⁴⁸

4.204 Empowered Communities NPY Region reported that:

- 'access to early childhood programs are variable across the NPY region', noting that some communities have dedicated playgroup and pre-school facilities and regularly operating programs, others run a fly-in-fly-out or occasional service as an add-on to existing family wellbeing programs, while other communities have few or no programs at all²⁴⁹
- 'anecdotal evidence suggests that many communities receive less than 15 hours per child per week recommended under the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education'²⁵⁰
- while the Northern Territory government has plans to integrate child and family centres as 'place-based hubs that encourage family participation in early childhood education and development', there are currently no centres of this type, or integration of early education and primary schools except in a handful of APY (South Australian) communities within the region, and²⁵¹
- secondary schooling in the NPY region is delivered through primary school facilities in most communities and the range of subjects is 'extremely limited'.²⁵² It noted that the Finke community in the Northern Territory has 'no secondary provision at all and students must attend boarding school in order to pursue secondary education.'²⁵³

245 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 7.

246 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 7.

247 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 8.

248 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 9.

249 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 6.

250 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 7.

251 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 11.

252 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 8.

253 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 8.

- 4.205 NPY Women's Council reported that a range of programs and services available to students in South Australia are unavailable to students in nearby communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory:

For example, in South Australia APY lands there are vocational providers, connection with the Wiltja Anangu boarding school in Adelaide and the Umuwa Trade Training Centre, as well as flexible learning options (FLO) program. This is in addition to the primary and secondary schooling available. Apart from primary and secondary schooling, these additional resources...do not exist in the Ngaanyatjarra lands and the Southern NT remote communities that are within the NPY region.²⁵⁴

- 4.206 While noting the disparity in educational opportunities and services across jurisdictions, Empowered Communities NPY Region commented that 'there is considerable demand for equivalent facilities and support to be available for all students throughout the region.'²⁵⁵

- 4.207 The Western Australian government noted that there is 'very limited access to training and tertiary education' on the NPY lands, stating that:

Currently there are no students undertaking formal vocational or tertiary courses. There is sporadic access to TAFE courses, which operate with the support of school personnel and are always short-term courses.²⁵⁶

- 4.208 NPY Women's Council commented that 'Anangu do not traditionally identify via the standard geographical boundaries imposed on their environment' and, consequently, 'Anangu youth do not conveniently stick to the mainstream tristate borders.'²⁵⁷ NPY Women's Council noted 'as young people move through these borders, they encounter different curricula, methods of teaching and variable support structures' and advocated for a 'flexible and consistent approach across the tristate region.'²⁵⁸

- 4.209 NPY Women's Council called for a partnership to be developed between the education departments of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory to pilot a cross border educational agreement.²⁵⁹

254 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

255 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 8.

256 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 9.

257 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

258 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

259 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 11.

Rollout of online education in response to COVID-19 pandemic

- 4.210 The response of Australian schools to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the rapid adaptation to home and online learning, has further highlighted the digital divide between Australians with ready access to the internet and internet-enabled devices, and those without.
- 4.211 DESE noted that COVID-19 'has had a dramatic impact on the lives of millions of people worldwide. In Australia, schools supporting nearly four million students were required to move rapidly to alternative delivery models and embrace distance and digital learning for most students.'²⁶⁰ DESE commented that 'schools, school systems, parents, students and their educators were at vastly different stages in terms of preparedness for such an immediate change.'²⁶¹
- 4.212 DESE reported that school communities faced a range of challenges, including:
- the basic resources of families needed to support home learning, including physical space for learning
 - the availability and suitability of information, communication and telecommunications resources and know-how
 - the capability and willingness of students and parents to engage remotely
 - the capability and familiarity of teachers to support online learning, and
 - the ability for the education system to address those adjustments for students that may benefit from being in the classroom.²⁶²
- 4.213 DESE also noted that some communities experienced greater difficulties than others due to biosecurity restrictions. For example, in the APY lands in South Australia, schools were closed for an additional two weeks at the start of term two due to the requirement for school teachers and staff to quarantine for 14 days prior to re-entering the community.²⁶³

Vulnerable students disadvantaged

- 4.214 DESE commissioned six studies to examine the impact of remote learning on educational outcomes for vulnerable cohorts of children, and barriers

260 DESE, *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 4.

261 DESE, *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 5.

262 DESE, *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 5.

263 DESE, *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 5.

to access.²⁶⁴ The studies indicated that the shift to online education will disadvantage many students, with vulnerable children and those in early years, in particular, facing long-term impacts on their education.

- 4.215 For example, the Rapid Research Information Forum, chaired by Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel AO, reported:

The limited and varied evidence in primary and secondary schools, both from Australian and international sources, suggests an extended period of remote learning is likely to result in poorer educational outcomes for almost half of Australian students, including those in early-years students (those five and under), students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those with English as a second language, those with special learning needs, and students who are generally less engaged with school.²⁶⁵

- 4.216 Evidence to this inquiry has shown that the rollout of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on many students, particularly those who were already experiencing disadvantage.²⁶⁶ For example, ASPA stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has 'caused the significant inequities in the Australian education system to be magnified.'²⁶⁷

- 4.217 The NCEC commented:

While there is presently insufficient detail to understand the full ramifications of the remote learning experiment, observable patterns are emerging, and it is becoming clear that students who were already experiencing disadvantage pre-COVID will suffer the worst.²⁶⁸

- 4.218 Similarly, the Western Australian government reported:

The COVID-19 situation has highlighted a significant gap for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Aboriginal students, in their ability to access support for home learning. This

264 DESE, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) information for schools and students*, <<https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/schools>>, 19 June 2020, viewed 27 July 2020.

265 Rapid Research Information Forum, *Differential learning outcomes for online versus in-class education*, 4 May 2020, <<https://www.dese.gov.au/document/dr-alan-finkel-ao-faa-ftse-fahms-rapid-research-information-forum>>, viewed 27 July 2020, p. 1.

266 NCEC, *Supplementary submission 40.1*, p 2; ASPA, *Supplementary submission 5.1*, p. 1; Western Australian government, *Supplementary submission 6.1*, p. 6; Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), *Supplementary submission 30.1*, p. 1.

267 ASPA, *Supplementary submission 5.1*, p. 1.

268 NCEC, *Supplementary submission 40.1*, p. 2.

is an indication that school is the best place for learning to occur, particularly for vulnerable students.²⁶⁹

- 4.219 Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) reported that ‘the COVID 19 pandemic has exacerbated the daily inequities faced by children and young people with disability and their families and caregivers’.²⁷⁰ CYDA commented:

During the COVID-19 crisis, existing interface issues between the education system and the NDIS were exacerbated, with students with disability learning from home and missing many of the supports they usually receive at school and through the NDIS. There is also evidence that students in rural areas were unable to learn from home during the pandemic, due to a lack of equipment and reliable internet access at home.²⁷¹

- 4.220 CYDA said that online learning ‘did not work for all students particularly for those with complex needs where supervision was required at all times. Parents reported a loss of income or a reduction in working hours as they were required to monitor online learning without extra assistance.’²⁷²

- 4.221 ICPA Australia expressed concern about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on future tertiary students and noted that ‘uncertainty surrounds the cohort of students who would have been planning to apply for independent Youth Allowance in 2021’ because ‘they may be unable to qualify due to not being able to meet the requirements which apply due to limited job opportunities and job losses during COVID-19.’²⁷³

- 4.222 DESE noted that it will be ‘important to understand any longer-term impacts on the movement to remote learning at scale on educational outcomes’ and commented:

Longitudinal research tracking whether there are lasting effects on students’ education outcomes and access to post school pathways for different groups of students will be important to identify effective strategies for addressing any negative outcomes.²⁷⁴

269 Western Australian government, *Supplementary submission 6.1*, p. 6.

270 CYDA, *Supplementary submission 30.1*, p. 1.

271 CYDA, *Supplementary submission 30.1*, p. 1.

272 CYDA, *Supplementary submission 30.1*, p. 5.

273 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 4.

274 DESE, *Supplementary submission 49.1*, p. 20.

Impact of COVID-19 on education in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

- 4.223 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in some remote communities did not have the opportunity for their education to be continued via online learning at all. In these communities, hard copy learning packs were provided to students.²⁷⁵
- 4.224 Some remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experienced an increase in population in response to concerns about COVID-19 in major centres. This made already overcrowded living conditions worse, increased family and community violence, and made home learning more difficult for students already experiencing disadvantage.²⁷⁶ Other communities experienced a decline in population, which affected student attendance and enrolments in the latter half of term two.²⁷⁷
- 4.225 Aboriginal and Torres Strait boarding students from remote communities were particularly disadvantaged by the shift to online learning and alternative modes of education delivery.²⁷⁸ For example, NPY Women's Council reported that, of the 10 boarding school students who returned to their communities in the tri-border region due to COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020, only one student had access to Wi-Fi in their home. NPY Women's Council commented:

None of the students has home computers or access to a laptop in their homes. One school sent laptop computers and dongles for their students. The boarding school posted the equipment, which went from Cairns in Queensland, to Amata Community APY lands in South Australia. It took five weeks to arrive. Most of the work provided for boarding school students was printed and posted in the mail. These work packs took weeks to arrive as well, with some not arriving at all. Thus significantly delaying students work progress. During this time, NPYWC boarding school students had no access to computers or printers at home and questionable access to quiet spaces for study.²⁷⁹

275 Western Australian government, *Supplementary submission 6.1*, p. 2; NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 46.

276 RIPA, *Supplementary submission 23.1*, p. 2; NPY Women's Council, *Supplementary submission 47.1*, p. 2.

277 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 47.

278 RIPA, *Supplementary submission 23.1*, p. 3; NPY Women's Council, *Supplementary submission 47.1*, p. 1.

279 NPY Women's Council, *Supplementary submission 47.1*, p. 1.

- 4.226 NPY Women's Council's boarding school support staff found places where the boarding school students could do their schoolwork, although this was challenging:

Social distancing rules made it difficult to find adequate spaces. It was also difficult to find ensure supervision for these students both in the home and in alternative venues. In most cases communities' schools were willing to support boarding school clients, but not in all cases.²⁸⁰

- 4.227 NPY Women's Council noted that, in the transition to home learning, 'the expectation falls to parents and caregivers to provide support for work packs to be completed by students.'²⁸¹ NPY Women's Council commented that, in some remote Aboriginal communities, 'it is likely that parents/care givers, with English as a second language, would not have comprehension skills to interpret instructions with students.'²⁸²

- 4.228 IEBA expressed concern that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may disengage from education as a consequence of the disruptions caused by the pandemic. IEBA advocated for 'an effective ongoing communication campaign' to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students 'are not lost to the education system and return to their schooling.'²⁸³ IEBA has developed a proposal for a 'Bringing them Back to School Campaign' to support students in regional and remote communities to continue to engage with their schooling and return to boarding schools when it is deemed safe to do so.²⁸⁴

Impact of pandemic on schools

- 4.229 In addition to having a range of negative impacts on the education of vulnerable students, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed significant financial stress on some remote schools and boarding schools that provide education for students from regional and remote areas.
- 4.230 NCEF reported that, as a consequence of families moving away during the pandemic, a community school in the Pilbara was in danger of losing funding:

With the August Federal Government student census looming and lower than usual student numbers due to COVID-19, the potential impact to the total per capita funding is of grave concern. Whilst

280 NPY Women's Council, *Supplementary submission 47.1*, p. 2.

281 NPY Women's Council, *Supplementary submission 47.1*, p. 2.

282 NPY Women's Council, *Supplementary submission 47.1*, p. 2.

283 IEBA, *Supplementary submission 28.1*, p. 2.

284 IEBA, *Supplementary submission 28.1*, p. 1.

community assurances have been given and there is no doubt that the community and their children will return, this needs to occur in time for the census count. This is the cruel dilemma imposed by the limitations of a once a year per capita funding model and its inflexibility in times of crisis.²⁸⁵

- 4.231 The NCEC reported that the disruption to boarding schools caused by the pandemic has had a significant financial impact on boarding income for Catholic schools:

Many of our boarding schools have lost much, if not all of their boarding income for term 2 and even with prudent financial management, there is little capacity to absorb the once-in-a-century shock of COVID-19 within the lean budgets of Catholic boarding schools.²⁸⁶

- 4.232 ISCA was critical of 'mixed messages and conflicting advice from state and territory governments and the Australian government on who should be attending school and who should be learning from home', in particular guidance on who should be classed as essential workers, vulnerable students and vulnerable staff.²⁸⁷

- 4.233 ISCA said that independent schools have also been managing a variety of issues and concerns, ranging from reporting requirements to staffing 'without systemic support, such as that available to government schools.'²⁸⁸

Realising the potential of online and flexible learning

- 4.234 For many students the experience of online or home based learning has been positive and education systems have shown remarkable adaptability and resilience in challenging circumstances.

- 4.235 The response of many schools has demonstrated that, where students have access to suitable devices, a reliable internet connection and appropriate bandwidth, quality education can be delivered online and provide continuity during extreme events.²⁸⁹

285 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 47.

286 NCEC, *Supplementary submission 40.1*, p. 3.

287 ISCA, *Supplementary submission 22.1*, p. 4.

288 ISCA, *Supplementary submission 22.1*, p. 4.

289 AHISA, *Supplementary submission 2.1*, p. 4.

- 4.236 Universities have been delivering online and flexible learning for many years and were well placed to move their courses online in response to the pandemic.²⁹⁰
- 4.237 Online Education Services (OES) suggested that the delivery of online education in universities has demonstrated the potential of online and flexible learning to improve equity in education. OES stated 'online education has offered learning opportunities to many people who otherwise would never have studied through a university or major vocational institution.'²⁹¹
- 4.238 Some schools have found aspects of new remote learning practices beneficial. For example, NCEC commented:
- Some approaches may well continue as they have led to improved efficiencies and more positive student and parent feedback. These include online parent-teacher interviews, a greater understanding about individual student's home learning environments enabling more targeted teaching, and improved collaboration amongst teaching staff across the sectors.²⁹²
- 4.239 The importance of teacher training in online modes of education delivery was highlighted.²⁹³ For example, DESE reported that a national survey of over 10,000 Australian teachers conducted during April 2020 found that 'only 30 per cent of teachers had been trained to deliver remote learning prior to the pandemic, and the majority (80 per cent) felt unprepared for the transition, particularly in non-metropolitan areas.'²⁹⁴ DESE commented:
- For teachers, effective remote learning and use of online mechanisms requires more than simply knowing how to use technology or transferring existing materials to an online platform. It requires new or adapted pedagogies, management and organisation of content, institutional support and new or adapted ways of engaging and interacting with students.²⁹⁵
- 4.240 AITSL advocated for the adoption of evidence-informed practice related to online and distance learning.²⁹⁶ Similarly, Mr Tom Worthington argued for
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290 La Trobe University, *Supplementary submission 36.1*, p. 1; Charles Sturt University, *Supplementary submission 41.1*, p. 2.

291 Online Education Services (OES), *Submission 25*, p. 2.

292 NCEC, *Supplementary submission 40.1*, p. 2.

293 MGSE, *Submission 59*, p. 4; Mr Tom Worthington, *Submission 50*, p. 1; AITSL, *Supplementary submission 34.1*, p. 2.

294 DESE, *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 12.

295 DESE, *Supplementary submission 49.1*, p. 11.

296 AITSL, *Supplementary submission 34.1*, p. 2.

teachers to be trained to teach online, noting that ‘while we have the technology for teaching, what has been lacking during the COVID-19 pandemic are university and school teachers trained to use that technology effectively.’²⁹⁷

Summary and discussion

4.241 A range of barriers to education were identified that are within the scope of education systems to address. To address these barriers there was support for:

- providing locally-accessible, quality education within a reasonable distance, and with appropriate transportation options
- a national approach to education that supports consistently high standards and outcomes for students, regardless of where education is provided
- a needs-based school funding model that addresses regional and remote student disadvantaging families and communities in children’s education, including allowing communities more say in how their children are educated, within the parameters of the Australian Curriculum
- improving student engagement in STEM subjects, including through innovative and collaborative delivery of the Australian Curriculum
- encouraging greater school attendance by engaging students in education that is meaningful to them and providing whole-of-family supports to help achieve this; and, increasing the use of in-school suspensions to discipline students, and reducing the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions to reduce the rate of vulnerable students disengaging from education
- improving adult literacy, for example through the provision of mass adult literacy campaigns
- responding flexibly to local cultural and linguistic needs in the provision of education, particularly when a child’s first language is not Standard Australian English
- providing a range of supports to help students overcome the challenges they experience living away from home at boarding schools

297 Mr Tom Worthington, *Submission 50*, p. 1.

- improving resourcing for boarding schools that educate students from regional, rural and remote communities, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- improving access to and support for distance education
- addressing a range of workforce issues, including: improving teacher training, recruitment and retention in regional, rural and remote schools; improving the capacity of teachers to work in culturally and linguistically diverse schools; and, increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers
- improving the capacity of schools to fill skills gaps through a more nuanced approach to determining skills shortages for the purposes of the TSS visa program, and
- improving coordination across state and territory boundaries to address cross-jurisdictional issues in the delivery of education.

4.242 Stakeholders reported a range of issues relating to the response of education systems to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including that:

- the rapid adaptation to home and online learning has further highlighted the digital divide between Australians with ready access to the internet and internet-enabled devices, and those without
- the shift to online education disadvantaged many students, with vulnerable children and those in their early years of schooling, in particular, facing long-term impacts on their education
- schools reported a range of difficulties as a consequence of the pandemic, including potential funding shortfalls, and
- there is a need to improve the capability and familiarity of schools and teachers to support online learning.

Relevant Closing the Gap targets

4.243 In relation to school education, the Closing the Gap agreement includes the target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent by 2031.²⁹⁸

4.244 The new Closing the Gap National Agreement also includes outcome areas, targets and indicators that support the cultural wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in areas of languages; cultural

298 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 21.

practices; land and waters; and access to culturally relevant communications.²⁹⁹ In particular, Closing the Gap now includes targets to achieve a:

- sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken by 2031
- 15 per cent increase in Australia's landmass subject to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests by 2030, and
- 15 per cent increase in areas covered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's legal rights or interests in the sea by 2030.³⁰⁰

4.245 The target to increase the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages has the following drivers (factors that significantly impact the progress made against a target):

- proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages categorised as strong
- number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken
- number and age profile of the speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, including children
- proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who speak an Indigenous language.³⁰¹

4.246 In relation to languages, the Closing the Gap Agreement noted several areas where outcomes are not currently measured and where further work is required on data development, including measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being:

- spoken in Aboriginal community settings, and
- taught in early-learning, primary and secondary schools.³⁰²

299 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 4.

300 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, pp. 34-35.

301 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 35. Explanation of indicators and drivers, p. 16.

302 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 35. Explanation of data development, p. 16.

Relevant Halsey review recommendations

4.247 In relation to the issues identified in this chapter, the Halsey review made several relevant recommendations and encouraged a range of actions to progress those recommendations. Relevant recommendations and sections of the government response are provided below. As previously noted, the government did not detail how or whether it would implement all the actions to progress the recommendations of the Halsey review.³⁰³

4.248 Recommendation 1 related to improving the flexibility of education delivery and assessment:

Recommendation 1: Establish and/or refine processes for ensuring the relevance of the Australian Curriculum and state/territory assessment processes for RRR students and communities.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- increase opportunities in the Australian Curriculum for students to learn about the historical, economic, social, political and environmental importance of rural, regional and remote contexts and communities in Australia
- create and resource as required opportunities for direct consultations with RRR stakeholders and communities in the review of the Australian Curriculum in 2020
- facilitate and resource as required more opportunities for RRR teachers to participate in state-wide and national assessment and moderation processes
- support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to continue to develop, implement and evaluate community valued blends of traditional culture, language and ceremonial life with the Australian Curriculum
- provide illustrations of good practice to RRR schools to demonstrate how the Australian Curriculum can be interpreted and used flexibly to suit local contexts, and
- reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and leading learning.³⁰⁴

4.249 Recommendation 2 related to improving the quality and capacity of teachers in regional, rural and remote schools:

Recommendation 2: Ensure RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-

303 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018.

304 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 37.

service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- ensure that the challenges and opportunities of RRR schools and contexts are explicitly included in the selection processes for teacher education degrees/programs
- ensure that a candidate's academic and personal requirements for admission to a teaching degree/program are commensurate with developing the skills, knowledge and attributes to be a successful teacher
- provide funding and opportunities for initial teacher education students to undertake high quality extended professional experience placements in RRR schools and communities
- introduce a topic (suggest that it is weighted at the equivalent of a semester in size) into teacher education degrees on teaching and living in RRR schools and communities that students complete successfully as part of graduation requirements
- increase the number and diversity of experienced teachers appointed for extended periods to RRR schools by using targeted salary and conditions packages which include an absolute guarantee to return to their originating/preferred school or workplace at the end of a fixed term appointment
- improve the availability and diversity of in-school/locally based professional development for teachers in RRR schools and communities including by using visiting curriculum and pedagogy specialists
- implement up to a ½ term handover and induction period for teacher transfers to foster continuity of students' learning in RRR schools where there is a history of frequent teacher turn-over and substantial student under achievement, and
- continue to improve the availability of quality accommodation, cost of living allowances, access to essential human services, and partner employment where applicable to attract and retain high quality teachers for RRR schools³⁰⁵

4.250 Recommendation 3 related to improving the quality and capacity of school leaders in regional, rural and remote schools:

Recommendation 3: Ensure RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection, preparation, appointment and on-going professional support of educational leaders.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

305 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 45.

- continue improving how educational leaders for RRR schools and communities are identified, prepared and supported
- increase the number and diversity of experienced educational leaders in RRR schools by using targeted salary and conditions packages which include an absolute guarantee to return to their originating/preferred school or workplace at the end of a fixed term appointment
- implement up to ½ a term handover and induction period for leaders to foster continuity of students' learning in RRR schools where there is a history of frequent leadership turn-over and substantial student underachievement
- substantially expand mentoring and coaching by experienced principals for inexperienced educational leaders as a key strategy to building RRR leadership capabilities and capacities
- investigate the appointment of 'turn around teams' (such as a principal, a curriculum leader and a business manager) to schools with a persistent long term record of underachievement
- develop nationally consistent initial and renewal teacher registration requirements which fully recognise the diversity of RRR contexts and conditions, and
- continue improving the availability of quality accommodation, cost of living allowances, access to essential human services, and partner employment where applicable to attract and retain high quality leaders for RRR schools.³⁰⁶

4.251 In its response, the government indicated it was supportive of recommendations 1, 2 and 3 of the Halsey review and noted:

With the Australian Government's leadership role, we will consider these issues in the development of a new national school agreement and the ensuing bilateral agreements with states and territories from 2019. We will also work with all education ministers through Education Council to implement curriculum and assessment initiatives, and support programs and incentives to place quality teachers and leaders into regional, rural and remote schools.

In parallel to this work, and to inform Education Council, the Government will task the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership to undertake research into best practice approaches to teacher and school leader training, professional

306 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 49.

development and support for regional, rural and remote settings.³⁰⁷

4.252 Recommendation 7 related to facilitating a greater role for philanthropy in supporting education:

Recommendation 7: Encourage the philanthropic sector to play a greater role in raising achievements and improving opportunities for RRR students.

Action to progress this recommendation:

- in partnership with philanthropy develop and promote widely a set of core principles to enable government, philanthropy, schools and communities to work together more collaboratively.³⁰⁸

4.253 In its response, the government indicated it is supportive of this recommendation but did not state if it would be undertaking specific new work in this area.³⁰⁹

4.254 Recommendation 8 related to improving opportunities for entrepreneurship in education:

Recommendation 8: Improve opportunities for RRR schools to implement entrepreneurship in education through curriculum, teaching, system and cultural changes and building on good practice.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- encourage and resource schools in partnership with others involved and/or interested in entrepreneurship to design, implement, and drive changes required to expand entrepreneurship in RRR education
- provide funding to Primary Industries Education Foundation Australia to develop and in-service food and fibre entrepreneurship teaching and learning resources, and
- provide funding to expand the Country Education Partnership's Rural Inspire initiative.³¹⁰

4.255 In its response, the government indicated it was supportive of this recommendation and noted:

307 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 9.

308 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 66.

309 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 11.

310 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 69.

The Australian Curriculum: Work Studies and Economics and Business has specific content that details entrepreneurial skills and behaviours. Critical and creative thinking is also one of the seven general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum. Through critical and creative thinking, students are encouraged to develop enterprising behaviours, such as showing initiative and adaptability, and to develop entrepreneurial approaches to imagine possibilities, consider alternatives, test hypotheses, seek and create innovating pathways and draw conclusions. Our challenge is to bring these worlds together – of entrepreneurs and curriculum – and how to best engage, including through initiatives such as P-TECH and the National Career Education Strategy.

The Department of Jobs and Small Business's Entrepreneurship Facilitators helps young entrepreneurs access assistance to start their own business and connects them to existing programs including the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme. The Entrepreneurship Facilitators work in Cairns, the Hunter Region and Launceston.

The Australian Government will work across departments and agencies to identify the most appropriate way to engage entrepreneurs in education, including assessing relevant funding program guidelines to ensure explicit links to education and training are included.³¹¹

- 4.256 Recommendation 10 related to implementing innovative approaches to education in regional, rural and remote communities to improve equity and access:

Recommendation 10: Support RRR communities to implement innovative approaches to education delivery designed to improve education access and outcomes for students living in remote communities.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- ensure that high quality distance education services delivered by states and territories are available to every student who cannot access face-to-face schooling on a regular basis
- formally recognise using Recognition of Prior Learning processes or similar the expertise and contributions of distance education home tutors
- ensure that boarding services (including the provision of extra small scale facilities closer to the source of need), transport

311 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 9.

(including for pre-schoolers) and associated payments to students and/or parents optimise access to education

- examine the resourcing allocations for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools to ensure they are authentically informed by culture and language, ceremonial obligations, the Australian curriculum, and enrolments, and
- investigate the impact of appointing cluster administration managers on learning opportunities and outcomes.³¹²

4.257 In its response, the government was supportive of this recommendation but did not outline any new areas of work. It noted:

There is an increasing focus across Australia on digital access, literacy and application as the future of education and the world of work changes. That is why the Australian Curriculum includes a focus on digital skills and why this Government is continuing to invest in education initiatives such as the Inspiring all Australians in Digital Literacy and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) measures as part of the National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA).³¹³

4.258 Recommendation 11 called for a national focus on regional, rural and remote education to improve coordination in education delivery:

Recommendation 11: Establish a national focus for RRR education, training and research to enhance access, outcomes and opportunities in regional Australia.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- establish a national RRR education strategy and associated taskforce to drive greater coherence, coordination and access to high quality education and training in RRR Australia
- establish a dedicated national RRR education and training fund to fund the work required to improve the achievements and opportunities of young people living in these locations
- ensure that education providers, higher education and vocational education and training providers are eligible to apply for funding under existing regional funding schemes
- provide advice and support to all Regional Development Australia Committees so they can engage with education as an active partner
- ensure legislation and programs which frame and impact on rural, regional and remote Australia recognise place and

312 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 79.

313 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 10.

location as legitimate bases for resource allocation including the provision of essential services.³¹⁴

4.259 In its response, the government was supportive of this recommendation:

In recognition of the significant role of skills development in regional development, the Government will explore options to expand regional program funding eligibility to incorporate funding to vocational educational providers and ensure they remain eligible to access a range of regional programs.³¹⁵

4.260 The government response did not outline how greater coordination would be achieved in education delivery in regional, rural and remote locations. However, the response noted that the Australian government would monitor the work of Regional Development Australia Committees with 'key stakeholders to identify opportunities to grow their regional economies, including engaging with governments, industry, business, education providers and communities.'³¹⁶ The government indicated it would report annually on this work 'through the Regional Ministerial Statement on progress in delivering improved access, outcomes and opportunities for regional, rural and remote Australians in education, employment and training.'³¹⁷

Conclusion

4.261 The committee is aware that significant work is currently underway to respond to the findings and recommendations of various policy reviews, including the Halsey review and the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy (Naphthine review). In addition to this work, the government has made a number of announcements in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the committee expects that further updates are likely in the coming months.

4.262 As previously noted, evidence to this inquiry supports the findings of the Halsey review. The committee does not seek to duplicate the recommendations of the Halsey review, which directs the government to:

314 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 83.

315 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 7.

316 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 7.

317 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 7.

- address workforce issues
 - develop greater coordination across jurisdictions
 - improve distance education provision
 - ensure that boarding services, transport and associated payments to students and their families optimise access to education
 - examine funding for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools to ensure these schools can offer a balance of culture and language, ceremonial obligations and the Australian curriculum,
 - to ensure the relevance of the Australian Curriculum and state and territory assessment processes for regional, rural and remote students and their communities, and
 - encourage philanthropy and entrepreneurialism.
- 4.263 The committee is concerned that, while the government has agreed with the findings of the Halsey review, there is no clear implementation plan currently available.
- 4.264 Furthermore, the committee is concerned that many of the government's responses to individual recommendations contained in the Halsey review may not adequately address the substance of those recommendations.
- 4.265 For example, Professor Halsey called for a national focus on regional, rural and remote education and proposed a range of actions to improve coordination in education delivery. The government agreed with this recommendation but did not outline how greater coordination between education systems would be achieved in regional, rural and remote locations.
- 4.266 Evidence to this inquiry, particularly from the tri-border region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, shows that there is a critical need to improve coordination across state and territory boundaries to address cross-jurisdictional issues in the delivery of education. The committee expects the government to outline how it intends to improve coordination in education delivery in regional, rural and remote communities in its implementation plan for the Halsey review.

Recommendation 9

- 4.267 **The committee recommends that, by May 2021, the Minister for Education publish a comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions outlined in the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review).**

- 4.268 The committee notes that, in relation to school funding, the current Government made the decision outlined in the 2014 Budget to cut school funding associated with the former Labor Government's Better Schools funding model, because the latter model had a disproportionate impact on regional and remote schools. Many of the challenges highlighted in the evidence presented to the committee may have been reduced if the original funding had remained in place. The compounding impact of this funding not being received by these schools has limited their ability to address many of the barriers outlined in this report.
- 4.269 The committee is concerned that while Australia aspires to universal access to school education, it does not currently provide a nationally consistent minimum standard of education that can be accessed by all students.
- 4.270 Many students have limited access to primary schooling within a reasonable distance and with suitable transportation options, and no access to secondary schooling apart from boarding school, particularly in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is unsurprising that, in these circumstances, many children and young people disengage from education after primary school. The committee notes there is a strong preference among families living in geographically isolated areas and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for access to locally accessible, quality education at all levels.
- 4.271 The lack of secondary school access and the limited curriculum available to many students living in regional, rural and remote communities is particularly concerning. The committee is aware that the current National School Reform Agreement is due to expire in 2023. There is scope for the new National School Reform Agreement to provide a renewed focus on universal access to secondary school provision for all Australian students, regardless of their geographic location, and to a nationally consistent minimum standard.
- 4.272 Several other issues that have a bearing on student, family and community engagement in education were highlighted during this inquiry.
- 4.273 A lack of family and community engagement in education contributes to poor school attendance in many regional, rural and remote schools. There is more scope for the Australian curriculum to be flexibly applied by individual schools to suit local linguistic and cultural needs based on ongoing processes of community engagement and feedback.
- 4.274 The development of a new National School Reform Agreement should seek to enhance opportunities for families and communities to have more say in how schools apply the Australian Curriculum.

Recommendation 10

- 4.275 **The committee recommends that the Education Minister develop, for inclusion in the new National School Reform Agreement, commencing in 2023:**
- **a proposal to introduce a needs-based school funding model that aims to address barriers to accessing education in remote and regional communities**
 - **a proposal to ensure that all Australian students can access secondary school education, to a nationally-consistent minimum standard, regardless of their geographic location, and**
 - **a proposal to enhance family and community engagement in shaping how schools apply the Australian Curriculum.**
- 4.276 Children who are suspended and expelled from school are more likely to disengage from education. The committee is concerned by the use of suspensions and expulsions and strongly encourages education systems and schools to develop and deploy alternative behaviour management strategies that keep students engaged with school.
- 4.277 Parents and caregivers who are literate are more likely to support children to engage with education. The committee is concerned that low levels of adult literacy in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is impeding progress towards the Closing the Gap education targets.
- 4.278 The committee recognises that it is unreasonable to expect children who arrive at school speaking a language other than English to achieve parity with their peers if they are taught English without appropriate EAL/D instruction. Yet, the evidence suggests that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are expected to learn English and other school subjects without EAL/D support. The committee acknowledges strong evidence suggesting students who are not supported in their language development early will disengage from education.
- 4.279 Approaches to education that focus on providing EAL/D support and integrate local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and culture in curriculum through bilingual education are likely to improve the engagement of students and their families in education.
- 4.280 The committee notes that Closing the Gap now includes language and culture targets. These targets will need to be supported by policies that encourage the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and culture.

- 4.281 The committee is concerned by evidence from the Northern Territory, in particular, that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may be disengaging from education because secondary school is unavailable in their local communities and that not all boarding schools offer culturally inclusive education.
- 4.282 The committee is aware the government has agreed in principle with the House Indigenous Affairs Committee's 2017 recommendation to establish a National Indigenous Cultural Standard for boarding schools. The government supports an industry-led approach that is being developed by peak bodies and the NIAA.³¹⁸ It is the committee's view that the establishment of a National Indigenous Cultural Standard should be a matter of priority.
- 4.283 The committee recognises the importance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and is concerned by evidence suggesting that pathways for the recruitment, training and accreditation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education support workers are currently limited.
- 4.284 The committee is concerned that many schools and teachers require more training and support to work safely and competently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly those who have experienced trauma.

318 Government response to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, *The power of education: From surviving to thriving Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*, August 2020, p. 24.

Recommendation 11

The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth:

- provide adult literacy campaigns in communities with low levels of adult English literacy
- ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can access English as an Additional Language or Dialect support and instruction at school
- ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can access bilingual education where Standard Australian English is not the first language spoken, or where school communities have expressed a desire for this to occur
- establish programs that support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce, and
- establish trauma-informed, cultural induction and training programs for educators working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

- 4.285 The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the education of Australian students in 2020 and has placed huge strain on the capacity of education systems, schools and teachers to deliver education outside of classrooms.
- 4.286 The shift to online learning disadvantaged many students, particularly vulnerable children and those in their early years of schooling, and exposed the digital divide between families with access to the internet and internet-enabled devices, and those without.
- 4.287 The committee is concerned that many students may have disengaged from education during the remote learning period and is aware that further work will be required to assess and address this disengagement.
- 4.288 The committee recognises that the COVID-19 pandemic has also interrupted important transitions in many children's lives, as highlighted in media reports. For example, many children will begin early childhood education after having limited opportunities for socialisation during 2020.³¹⁹ Likewise, many Year 12 students face uncertainty around

319 E Seselja, 'Coronavirus restrictions cut young children's opportunities to socialise. What does this mean for their development?', *ABC News Online*, 9 May 2020, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-09/what-coronavirus-restrictions-mean-for-childhood-development/12222866>>, accessed 15 September 2020.

assessments and their transition to further education, and will miss out on many of the rites of passage associated with school completion.³²⁰

- 4.289 This experience has shown that while online education has the potential to bridge gaps in education access, it is no substitute for in-classroom teaching and it is clear that many issues still need to be worked through including the need for broader access to ICT, and improved online pedagogy and teacher training.
- 4.290 While noting that the individual health advice of the states and territories will guide whether children learn in classrooms in the coming months, the committee strongly encourages jurisdictions to prioritise the safe delivery of in-classroom teaching over home-based learning.

320 D Pendergast and S Prestridge, "It really sucks": how some Year 12 students in Queensland feel about 2020', *The Conversation*, 17 August 2020, <<https://theconversation.com/it-really-sucks-how-some-year-12-students-in-queensland-feel-about-2020-144004>>, accessed 15 September 2020.

Further education and employment

- 5.1 Previous chapters have noted that participation and achievement in higher education decreases with remoteness. The National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review) found that individuals who grow up in regional, rural and remote communities are around 40 per cent less likely to gain a higher-level tertiary education qualification, and less than half as likely to gain a bachelor and above qualification by the time they are 35 years old, compared to individuals from metropolitan areas.¹
- 5.2 The Naphthine review also found that, conversely, Vocational Education and Training (VET) participation is higher in regional, rural and remote areas and increases with remoteness, but noted participation ‘tends to focus on lower level qualifications (Certificate I, II and III).’²
- 5.3 This chapter examines:
- a range of factors influencing the low participation of regional, rural and remote students in higher education including the importance of building aspiration, and receiving advice and support about options for further education and employment
 - the potential of online and flexible learning to bridge gaps in access and equity in further education
 - the importance of pathways for school students to gain skills at school through Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS)
 - a range of factors limiting VET provision in regional, rural and remote areas, including increased costs, funding and workforce issues, and

1 Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review), *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

2 Naphthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

- the need for the VET sector to address regional skills shortages so that Australians in regional, rural and remote communities can fill skilled vacancies in their local areas.
- 5.4 The chapter concludes with a summary, noting relevant Closing the Gap targets, and recommendations from the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review) and the Napthine review.

Higher education

- 5.5 The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) noted that there are substantial benefits associated with supporting people from regional and remote areas to access higher education, including broadened career opportunities, increased earning outcomes, and improved life expectancy and health outcomes.³
- 5.6 DESE estimates that halving the gap in higher education attainment rates between metropolitan and regional, rural and remote higher education could increase Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by \$25 billion by 2050.⁴

Aspiration

- 5.7 Lower participation rates of students from regional, rural and remote areas in higher education have been attributed to both fewer opportunities and differences in students' aspirations.⁵
- 5.8 Charles Sturt University (CSU) suggested that a lack of awareness of opportunities contributes to these differences in aspiration. CSU noted that distance is 'a barrier to access to higher education – not only because of the additional costs it can impose on remote and regional students, but because it reduces their awareness of higher education as an option.'⁶
- 5.9 Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA) noted the significance of role models such as teachers, doctors and specialists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, stating:

...they are really significant, because other young people can see what they can be, and you don't know what you can be unless you

3 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), *Submission 49*, p. 41.

4 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 41.

5 Department of Education, Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, *Framing Paper*, 2019, p. 6.

6 Charles Sturt University (CSU), *Submission 41*, p. 3.

can see what you can be, and those opportunities often aren't there in those areas.⁷

5.10 The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) similarly noted that awareness of career pathway initiatives needs to commence early in high school, with students 'being presented with the option of pursuing further education and training in a supported environment'.⁸

5.11 Queensland University of Technology (QUT) suggested that low expectations of students may be a barrier to increasing awareness of higher education opportunities. They reported that a recent jobs fair held in the Moreton Bay North region 'featured a high proportion of offerings for unskilled or low-skill work', and noted:

In light of the low aspiration for higher learning recorded in the area (22.4 per cent of year 12 completers at the local public school expressed interest in studying for a bachelor degree, which is 36.6 per cent lower than national enrolment rate), the Fair's list of exhibitors and scheduled workshops suggests that this event was designed to fit within a narrow conception of the local culture rather than extend or diversify it.⁹

5.12 QUT expressed concern about the effect of cultural issues on higher education participation. They advised that 'the low rates of determination to enter tertiary education post year 12 for students' in the inner regional area to the north of Brisbane was affected by 'social and cultural drivers'.¹⁰

5.13 QUT also noted that many in the Moreton Bay North region are disadvantaged and that the 'social determinants that underpin the opportunity and potential for the future of a young person who lives in this region, are driven by barriers which are not generally experienced in the same range as those in the inner city'.¹¹

5.14 According to QUT, communities can have a 'gravitational pull' on student aspiration.¹² QUT explained that this effect:

...can inhibit residents from developing goals that will see them vary from the norms around them, whether professional, cultural

7 Ms Beth Blackwood, Chief Executive Officer, Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA), *Committee Hansard*, Canberra, 26 February 2020, p. 6.

8 National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), *Submission 44*, p. 6.

9 Queensland University of Technology (QUT), *Submission 39*, p. 4.

10 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 5.

11 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

12 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

or educational. This can include the inhibition of students' development of aspiration to proceed to tertiary education (whether university or VET), even where the student harbours an enthusiasm to continue on to further study. Students require a supportive network to succeed. While a student's aspiration may be to 'push' ahead with a determination to further their education, the 'pull' of family expectations and demands can hold students back to a future of horizontal mobility.¹³

- 5.15 CSU advised that being the first in the family to attend higher education is a 'well-recognised barrier to participation in higher education'.¹⁴ CSU stated:

Such students often experience a kind of 'impostor syndrome': a sense that they do not belong at university, that they are less capable of meeting the challenges of their studies. These feelings can be exacerbated by relatively lower levels of attainment for students in regional and remote areas. First-in-family students are often less likely to ask others for help, and likely to take poor results much harder than their fellow-students. And as is the case for many other students from regional and remote areas, they may have to struggle with these challenges away from the support of their family and friends.¹⁵

- 5.16 Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA) was concerned that 'there is a lack of effective pathways' to employment and training in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and that 'the only pathway leads to the Centrelink office.'¹⁶ RIPA commented:

The current lack of genuine and sustainable employment in many, if not most, remote Indigenous Communities results in high levels of unemployment. This therefore requires families to rely on Centrelink and welfare.'¹⁷

- 5.17 The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales noted there are many challenges faced by students in remote areas when transitioning to post-school life, including lack of access to career advice, lack of focus on vocational options and lack of opportunities in remoter areas. They advocated for students in regional and remote areas to receive

13 QUT, *Submission 39*, p. 3.

14 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 4.

15 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 4.

16 Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA), *Submission 23*, p. 4.

17 RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 4.

more career information at school and for trade jobs to be promoted and supported with high quality trade training centres.¹⁸

- 5.18 CSU suggested that outreach activities in regional rural and remote communities could reduce barriers to participation. CSU provided the example of its 'Future Moves' project, which is funded through the Australian government's Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP). In 2019, the project engaged with 91 partner schools to deliver 65 events and 200 school workshops, resulting in almost 15,000 points of contact with school students. CSU reported:

The project has had a noticeable impact on Indigenous students, who made up 17 per cent of the participants and reported significant shifts in their awareness of, aspiration to, and likelihood of participating in higher education – as did other participants in Future Moves.¹⁹

- 5.19 To increase the availability of career information in regional, rural and remote communities, La Trobe University (La Trobe) recommended supplementing career information practices in schools with a whole-of-community approach to career advice. According to La Trobe, 'such an approach, potentially coordinated at national level, should be designed to increase community aspiration and knowledge to translate into better outcomes for students.'²⁰

- 5.20 Currently, La Trobe operates the Pathway Program, which is available at the university's Albury-Wodonga and Shepparton campuses and funded by the university and through philanthropic means with a contribution from the HEPPP. The program 'consists of a structured framework of mentoring, well-being workshops, academic capacity building and university preparedness which is embedded in the curriculum of participating government schools over an 18-month period.'²¹ La Trobe reported that the program 'has been highly successful – with a 44 per cent increase in student enrolment from 2018 to 2019 from participating schools.'²²

- 5.21 The Country Education Partnership (CEP) provides a range of programs to help build the aspirations of students in regional, rural and remote areas, including the Rural Youth Ambassadors Program and the Rural Inspire Initiative. Recommendation 8 of the Halsey review (chapter 4)

18 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 20*, pp. 4-5.

19 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

20 La Trobe University (La Trobe), *Submission 36*, p. 8.

21 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 2.

22 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 2.

supported the provision of funding to expand the CEP's initiatives. Mr Phil Brown from the CEP reported that the Education Minister has allocated some funding to allow the CEP to extend its programs to South Australia and New South Wales this year and 'will hopefully go nationwide by 2021.'²³

Access and equity

- 5.22 According to DESE, in 2018 there were 172,187 domestic undergraduate students from regional and remote Australia enrolled in higher education. 30.1 per cent (51,875) of these students were also from low SES backgrounds.²⁴
- 5.23 The Naphthine review found that various factors can prevent students in regional, rural and remote communities from successfully undertaking tertiary study, including:
- fewer local study options and the need to relocate
 - problems accessing high quality career advice, and
 - lack of access to reliable, high speed internet.²⁵
- 5.24 CSU suggested that caps on student numbers are impeding the ability of universities to produce skilled graduates in regional, rural and remote communities. They advised that 'the continuing cap on Commonwealth Supported Places imposes a firm limit on the University's ability to meet growing demand for higher education and for skilled graduates in regional and remote areas.'²⁶
- 5.25 CSU recommended removing the cap on places in universities with a strong presence outside major metropolitan centres, or providing additional funding to them.²⁷
- 5.26 Online Education Services (OES) also advocated for an increase in the number of Commonwealth-funded university places offered to regional students.²⁸
- 5.27 DESE advised that the government has accepted the recommendations of the Naphthine Review and they are developing a response.²⁹

23 Mr Phil Brown, Executive Officer, Country Education Partnership, *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

24 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 44.

25 Naphthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 13.

26 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

27 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

28 Online Education Services (OES), *Submission 25*, p. 5.

29 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 42.

Regional universities

- 5.28 Regional universities provide valuable opportunities for students to study locally and make important contributions to their regional economies. For example, the Regional Universities Network contributed \$1.7 billion to GDP in their regions through employing staff, spending, research and innovation.³⁰
- 5.29 La Trobe reported that there are higher costs associated with delivering higher education in regional areas and that a 'number of federal and state policy settings are making it increasingly difficult to maintain regional higher education delivery.'³¹ According to La Trobe, these include:
- The current regional loading for universities being insufficient to cover the higher costs of education provision, estimated at 17 per cent higher for regional students
 - The 'funding freeze introduced at the end of 2017' which 'had a disproportionate impact on universities with regional campuses, which unlike metropolitan universities, have limited means of raising funds from other sources such as international student revenue', and
 - 'At a state level, the 2019 introduction of free TAFE in Victoria, while opening welcome opportunities to regional communities, has impacted demand for equivalent Higher Education courses in already very thin markets.'³²
- 5.30 La Trobe advocated for the government to:
- 'Support the viability of regional higher education delivery through a regional loading which adequately reflects the cost of regional delivery' and
 - 'Provide support for the expansion of pathway programs which have been proven to raise aspiration and higher education participation in RRR communities through an additional, regional HEPPP [Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program].'³³
- 5.31 DESE advised that the government is taking the following actions to support regional universities:
- The National Priorities Pool is a component of the HEPPP and the '2019 National Priorities Pool funding round is focused on supporting low SES students from regional and remote Australia'³⁴

30 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 39.

31 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 6.

32 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 6.

33 La Trobe, *Submission 36*, p. 7.

34 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 44.

- A further commitment of \$15 million for five additional Regional University Centres (Centres) (including CSPs), as part of the government's Plan for Regional Australia. The Centres are 'community-owned facilities located in regional and remote communities that provide study spaces and high-speed internet, administrative and academic support and student support services, including pastoral care to students undertaking tertiary level study.' The total number of Centres will rise to 21 once the new Centres have been determined,³⁵ and
- The Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) regional loading to help providers offset the disparity in costs and revenue at regional campuses. In 2020, higher education providers will receive more than \$75 million in CGS regional loading.³⁶

Online learning

- 5.32 Online learning is an important tool to increase the participation of students from remote areas in higher education. As noted by OES, 'online education has offered learning opportunities to many people who otherwise would never have studied through a university or major vocational institution.'³⁷
- 5.33 Online connectivity is also becoming increasingly important for regional and remote industries and employment. South West TAFE noted that there is a 'silent revolution in agriculture as the Internet of Things, remote sensing, and the use of GPS systems to monitor machinery and livestock movements are becoming mainstream tools of trade.'³⁸
- 5.34 Chapter two suggested that effective online learning is dependent on access to high-speed, reliable and affordable broadband. The rapid adaptation to home and online learning (chapter four) has highlighted the digital divide between Australians with ready access to the internet and internet-enabled devices, and those without.
- 5.35 CSU noted that providing equity in access to broadband across Australia will require investment and capacity building over several years.³⁹
- 5.36 South West TAFE stated that 'the success of online learning will hinge on regional and remote telecommunications networks and infrastructure being able to cope with more access and applications. Regional and rural

35 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 42.

36 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 46.

37 OES, *Submission 25*, p. 2.

38 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 10.

39 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 5.

- internet services experience bandwidth issues and can be erratic or contain black spots.’⁴⁰
- 5.37 ICPA Australia were concerned about data restrictions for Sky Muster satellite internet customers, in particular that tertiary and vocational education students do not qualify for the additional data offered by the Sky Muster Education Service.⁴¹
- 5.38 South West TAFE stated:
- Like almost all TAFE ICT systems and networks we have ageing equipment and are ill-prepared for the massive increase in capacity needed in the future as more online content, webinars, video streaming, virtual reality and augmented reality applications are developed. More financial support at a State and Commonwealth level is needed to bring these systems up to standard.⁴²
- 5.39 The COVID-19 pandemic has required further education providers to rapidly move to online modes of delivery. As chapter 4 noted, for many students the experience of online or home based learning has been positive and education systems have shown remarkable adaptability and resilience in challenging circumstances. The response of many schools has demonstrated that, where students have access to suitable devices, a reliable internet connection and appropriate bandwidth, quality education can be delivered online and provide continuity during extreme events.
- 5.40 Chapter 4 also noted that universities have been delivering online and flexible learning for many years and were able to move their courses online in response to the pandemic.⁴³ Teacher training in online and blended modes of education delivery was viewed as being critical for successful outcomes in both school and further education.⁴⁴

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on universities

- 5.41 The committee heard that universities are experiencing significant challenges as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, CSU reported that it ‘has been adapting to an uncertain and complex financial environment likely to persist for several years.’⁴⁵

40 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 10.

41 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 2.

42 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 10.

43 La Trobe, *Supplementary submission 36.1*, p. 1; CSU, *Supplementary submission 41.1*, p. 2.

44 MGSE, *Submission 59*, p. 4; Mr Tom Worthington, *Submission 50*, p. 1; AITSL, *Supplementary submission 34.1*, p. 2.

45 CSU, *Supplementary submission 41.2*, p. 2.

5.42 At the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020, La Trobe commented:

We're facing a revenue downturn of up to 25 per cent by the end of next year, so that has a profound effect on the university. Up until the end of 2019, our estimate was that the subsidy we had to bear to keep our regional campuses going was somewhere in the region of \$10 million a year. In a circumstance where you're about to lose 25 per cent of your revenue, you cannot justify continuing to subsidise regional campus operations at that level.

It just so happens that we have a council that is absolutely determined to maintain the university's commitment to regional campuses, but we have to do that in a way that becomes sustainable.⁴⁶

5.43 La Trobe called for greater recognition of the costs of delivering higher education at regional universities.⁴⁷

5.44 CSU supported La Trobe's comments, and stated:

...the cost of delivering in regional areas is extremely high and we face different challenges to our metro counterparts, so potentially increasing the regional loading might be an immediate option that could assist us. Again, there doesn't appear to be any support through JobKeeper, so we are doing our best to realise savings and we'll continue to offer what we believe is a quality online offering for our students.⁴⁸

5.45 The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) also supported La Trobe's comments and was particularly concerned about universities being excluded from JobKeeper. ATN said 'that was quite a surprise to us as a sector because we support around 240,000 jobs in the Australian economy.'⁴⁹ ATN commented:

The other issue is the inability for us to take in international students due to the COVID travel restrictions. We obviously work on the principle of the health of Australians and the globe first, but international education in Australia is the largest job creator of any export industry, and it is absolutely decimated until we can revive

46 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

47 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

48 Prof. Janelle Wheat, Acting Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), CSU, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

49 Mr Luke Sheehy, Executive Director, Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN), *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

it. We want to look carefully at how we can revive international education.⁵⁰

- 5.46 CSU was supportive of aspects of the government's Job Ready Graduates Package, and stated:

Measures such as the new indexation arrangements, the prospects for growing undergraduate places in regional universities, the additional places for our Joint Program in Medicine, and the commitment to build research capability in regional universities will mean that Charles Sturt can continue to meet the education, research and workforce needs of regional communities.⁵¹

- 5.47 La Trobe said that the cap on university places will present challenges next year because universities are expecting 'a very big jump in domestic student demand for places next year and that will certainly put pressure on entrance scores and some people will be disappointed.'⁵²

- 5.48 OES agreed with this statement and commented:

With the issue of employment, far more people are going to seek university qualifications to make them more employable or to retrain. There'll be a lot of loss of jobs, as we know. There will be a big emphasis on upskilling and we feel that will create a lot of pressure.⁵³

VET

- 5.49 DESE commented that a 'strong VET sector is critical to the economy and to helping prepare Australians for the workforce opportunities of today and the future', noting that:

Australia's capacity to grow, compete and thrive in a global economy has become more dependent on employers and all individuals, regardless of background or circumstance, being able to access and use the right skills at the right time. This includes flexible and applied ways of learning, including in remote and complex environments.⁵⁴

50 Mr Luke Sheehy, Executive Director, ATN, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

51 CSU, *Supplementary submission 41.2*, p. 3.

52 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

53 Ms Sue Kokonis, Executive Director, Academic, OES, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 16.

54 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 35.

- 5.50 DESE reported that, of the four million Australians engaged in VET in 2018, 28 per cent of students were in regional areas and a further 3 per cent were in remote or very remote areas.⁵⁵
- 5.51 As previously noted, while rates of participation in higher-level tertiary education are lower in regional, rural and remote areas compared to metropolitan areas, VET participation is higher and increases with remoteness.⁵⁶ However, regional, rural and remote VET provision tends to focus on lower level qualifications (Certificate I, II and III).⁵⁷
- 5.52 AHISA reported that a higher number of Independent schools in rural and remote areas (96 per cent) participated in school-based apprenticeship or traineeship programs, compared to schools in major cities (58 per cent).⁵⁸

VET in schools

- 5.53 Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) programs provide training and credit towards a nationally recognised VET qualification for school students as part of their senior secondary certificate. VETiS programs are delivered by Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) or by a school in partnership with an RTO.
- 5.54 The Western Australian government noted that VETiS is ‘an important part of senior schooling’ because it enables students to undertake a nationally recognised VET qualification while completing their school certificate, which ‘helps them to make effective post school transitions.’⁵⁹
- 5.55 Concerns were raised that funding issues limit the provision of VETiS. For example, South West TAFE reported that Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and schools funding models in Victoria do not fully cover the cost of VETiS and noted that, ‘sadly it is often too expensive for many students from less financially secure families, and is also a loss maker for TAFE.’⁶⁰
- 5.56 South West TAFE also reported that VETiS programs are ‘becoming more challenging to offer’, noting that:
- ...students are looking for a wider range of courses, but that leads to smaller and less economically sustainable group sizes in regional areas. In fact the range of programs being offered appears to be shrinking and we like most TAFEs, have withdrawn from auspicing TAFE programs to secondary schools as there were too

55 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 35

56 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

57 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 11.

58 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 13.

59 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 6.

60 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 11.

many quality and compliance issues that schools could not satisfactorily meet.⁶¹

5.57 Similarly, the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) reported that:

Few, if any, vocational training facilities exist and there is a limited industry/business base to support traineeships and work placements. Where a mining company is located nearby, some possibilities for training may exist although minimum age restrictions apply. Trade Training Centres exist although a significant issue for schools, which have access to them, is the availability and the cost of suitable training.⁶²

5.58 NCEC noted that 'some schools face challenges in accessing TAFE, especially those in remote communities' and reported that 'schools are mostly unable to deliver VET themselves because of a lack of suitably qualified staff and equipment.'⁶³ NCEC said that 'there is a role for the federal government to widen VET access.'⁶⁴

5.59 Empowered Communities, NPY Region used the example of the Umuwa Trade Training Centre (TTC) to illustrate inconsistencies in funding arrangements across jurisdictions. A school in the Northern Territory reportedly had to pay \$7,500 plus \$160 per head to access the TTC, whereas schools from South Australia could undertake the same training for free due to subsidised access.⁶⁵

Access and equity

5.60 As noted in chapter two, students who are located vast distances from major regional centres have limited or no access to secondary school education and opportunities for tertiary or vocational education pathways while remaining within their communities, and the financial and emotional costs of relocating can be significant for the student and their family and community.⁶⁶ For example, South West TAFE noted:

the challenge rural and regional students experience when they have to leave their family support networks to study in large metro centres is significant. Financial and social pressures on these

61 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 11.

62 The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), *Submission 40*, p. 10.

63 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 10.

64 NCEC, *Submission 40*, p. 10.

65 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 19.

66 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 6; Newcastle Anglican Schools, *Submission 55*, p. 1; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 7; Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Australia), *Submission 7*, p. 4; ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 4.

students, relative to their urban counterparts, results in lower number being able to achieve success.⁶⁷

- 5.61 While participation rates in VET are higher for students in rural, regional and remote locations compared to metropolitan areas, the provision of VET is uneven across Australia. It was reported that barriers to VET provision includes geographical remoteness and the capacity of RTOs to service remote communities, transport and licensing, low literacy and numeracy, and thin markets (where the number of students enrolled is below benchmark).⁶⁸
- 5.62 Gunnedah Shire Council indicated that student number benchmarks were problematic, and reported that ‘the minimum number of students to be able to deliver a course at Gunnedah TAFE is 14 students. This number is too large for a population size such as Gunnedah’s to meet on a yearly basis.’⁶⁹
- 5.63 The Australian Education Union (AEU) expressed concern there have been ‘huge numbers of TAFE campus closures and a 60 per cent drop in the number of TAFE providers in recent years.’⁷⁰
- 5.64 South West TAFE reported that ‘some of our big challenges in Victoria are around the contestable funding model’ and commented:
- It’s not so much the contestability of it; it’s the fact that it doesn’t really cover the full cost of delivering vocational education and training in regional and outer regional areas. Some of the University colleagues find that too. When you’re managing multiple campuses there are a lot of additional costs.⁷¹
- 5.65 The Western Australian government noted that there is ‘very limited access to training and tertiary education’ on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, stating that:
- Currently there are no students undertaking formal vocational or tertiary courses. There is sporadic access to TAFE courses, which operate with the support of school personnel and are always short-term courses.⁷²
- 5.66 Cross jurisdictional issues were raised in the context of VET provision in the tri-border region. Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra
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67 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 7.

68 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 13.

69 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

70 The Australian Education Union (AEU), *Submission 43*, p. 15.

71 Dr John Flett, Executive Manager, Education, and Acting Manager, Strategic Projects, Grants and Research, South West TAFE, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 11.

72 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 9.

Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region reported that Anangu living in South Australia can access VET while remaining in their communities, while those living nearby in Western Australia and the Northern Territory cannot:

Opportunities for traineeships, apprenticeships and vocational training are limited- with no TAFE or VET campuses outside of the APY Lands. Opportunities for Anangu to develop work readiness skills are also extremely limited and even simple things such as securing a drivers licence, first aid training or other certificates required for employment (such as lifeguard certificates or White Cards) are extremely challenging due to lack of training providers and transition support in the region.⁷³

5.67 Empowered Communities, NPY Region recommended 'an urgent investment in increased access to vocational training and structured school-to-work transition activities' in the NPY Lands.⁷⁴

5.68 Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF) reported that opportunities for secondary students to participate in VET in the Pilbara are limited:

Whilst individual units of competencies have been offered throughout the years, opportunities to complete whole certificates have not been forthcoming. Partnerships with regional TAFE providers have collapsed due to funding and human resourcing deficiencies. Small student numbers, limited funding, lack of staffing and qualified trainers, distances from TAFE and RTO providers, difficulties in accessing Abstudy, transportation issues, and the negative influences of regional towns have all been compounding issues which must be resolved.⁷⁵

5.69 The Western Australian government reported that there are a range of factors that limit access to career pathways, especially VET programs, for students from regional, rural and remote communities, including:

- access to TAFE colleges;
- availability of private training providers;
- availability of qualified trainers;
- distance from larger regional centres;
- availability of facilities that meet the training package requirements;

73 Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region, *Submission 17*, p. 18.

74 Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 10.

75 Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF), *Submission 66*, p. 44.

- limited use of the flexibilities that are available through the use of technology (e.g. web-conferencing); and
- limited access to relevant and meaningful work experience.⁷⁶

5.70 There was support for measures to increase VET provision and participation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.⁷⁷ For example, NACCHO suggested that:

more innovative services in the education and training sector may assist more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander job seekers, including school leavers, overcome...barriers and increase their readiness to pursue further education and training.⁷⁸

Better integration of VET with universities

5.71 South West TAFE advocated for a range of system wide changes that 'can improve education and job pathways', including:

- Better pathway models between TAFE and university that include automatic credit transfers for completion of a Certificate IV or Diploma qualification (for non-specific university units)
- Less duplication of qualification offerings between sectors at AQF⁷⁹ and 6 level to reduce market confusion and improve the viability of VET and TAFE programs
- Encouraging and enabling funding for university students to concurrently study relevant VET skills clusters or qualifications while undertaking HE [higher education] studies, and
- Encouraging and enabling funding for secondary students to concurrently study a wider range of relevant VET skills clusters or qualifications while undertaking school studies.⁸⁰

5.72 South West TAFE suggested that TAFE campuses could be better integrated with universities operating in regional areas:

With appropriate support and relationships with universities, regional TAFE campuses can become great a location from which broader educational precincts can be established. These may be structured as digital or study hubs where a number of universities

76 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 13.

77 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 13.

78 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 6.

79 AQF levels are an indication of the relative complexity and/or depth of achievement and the autonomy required to demonstrate that achievement. AQF level 1 has the lowest complexity and AQF level 10 has the highest complexity. See: Australian Qualifications Framework, 'AQF Levels', <<https://www.aqf.edu.au/aqf-levels>>, accessed 21 August 2020.

80 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 12.

may offer online options that are augmented by onsite tutors and learner support services. The introduction of Regional Study Hubs or Regional University Centres is a welcome start but more of these need to be established in existing TAFE campuses where existing infrastructure can be leveraged and improvements and efficiencies made in the provision of learner support services.⁸¹

- 5.73 At the roundtable hearing on 26 August 2020, La Trobe noted that ‘one of the fears that a lot of regional students and their families have about higher education is the cost and the risk of not completing but leaving with a significant debt.’⁸² La Trobe said that it worked with regional TAFEs ‘to create pathways that had exit points at just about every stage – end of first year, end of second year – which completely de-risked the whole prospect of going on to post-secondary education.’⁸³ La Trobe commented:

It meant that students could get a valuable qualification no matter the point they departed, but they would also retain the option of going on to complete a full degree. That increased the transition rate from TAFE to higher education by about 400 per cent.⁸⁴

- 5.74 La Trobe said that the government should ‘sort out the relationship’ between VET and higher education, and commented:

It's partly because vocational and TAFE are state-based things, so there's not going to be a uniform national solution, but it needs someone to really take this on and drive a good integration of the two sectors. As I said before, of all of the things we've tried that's the one that seems to have the most potential to benefit students and to benefit communities because, by signposting students through what can be a bewildering maze of choice and financial imposts, we desperately need to find a better way of reaching the pathways and articulations between the two.⁸⁵

81 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 8.

82 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 10.

83 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 10.

84 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 10.

85 Prof. John Dewar AO, Vice Chancellor, La Trobe, *Committee Hansard*, 26 August 2020, Canberra, p. 15.

Addressing skills shortages

- 5.75 The Napthine review noted that rural industries make a significant contribution to the Australian economy and highly skilled and flexible workers are needed to maximise the economic benefits of regional industries.⁸⁶ However, it was reported that there are significant skills shortages across all sectors of the regional economy.⁸⁷
- 5.76 The committee is aware of media reports suggesting that the travel bans imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19 have further exacerbated labour shortages in some regional economies.⁸⁸
- 5.77 Chapter 2 noted that there are currently skills shortages in the health, community, and disability sector in regional, rural and remote communities and that this growth is being driven by the implementation of the NDIS, the needs of an ageing population and increasing demand for childcare and home-based care services.⁸⁹
- 5.78 South West TAFE outlined a range of factors contributing to regional skills shortages:

The dearth of regionally available post-compulsory education is evidenced by the region's social demographic profile that shows far fewer people in the 18 to 29 year old age group. People leave looking for educational or employment pathways elsewhere and most do not return. This in turn is creating an ageing regional population with a low growth rate and chronic workforce shortages in the health and social assistance sectors and the food and fibre sectors.⁹⁰

- 5.79 Concerns were raised that a lack of relevant training in communities located near regional industries and sources of employment may be exacerbating skills shortages. For example, Gunnedah Shire Council reported that while agriculture is the biggest contributor to economic output in Gunnedah, 'there are no agricultural courses available at the local TAFE', and stated:

More alarmingly, where mining, fabrication and manufacturing are very significant employers in the district, the mining

86 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, p. 16.

87 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 1.

88 J Hayes, "'Heartbreaking" decision sees orchardist pull out over 1,500 trees amid long-term labour shortage fears', *ABC Rural*, 9 September 2020, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2020-09-09/orchard-labour-shortages-pulls-tree-in-heartbreaking-decision/12644302>>, accessed 25 September 2020.

89 ASU, *Submission 19*, pp. 6-7.

90 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 5.

companies are not utilising the local facility to deliver training courses. Whitehaven Coal operates four mines in the Gunnedah basin and has over forty apprentices predominately in electrical and heavy plant; they currently do not train any of their apprentices in Gunnedah due to the necessary courses not being offered.⁹¹

- 5.80 The Western Australian government reported a number of barriers to the take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships in regional and remote areas, including higher costs of living and travel, and a lack of training providers. It was also noted that there was a very low uptake of agricultural traineeships and that there are concerns around ensuring appropriate levels of supervision by agricultural enterprises.⁹²
- 5.81 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) called for Australian governments to 'promote locally available traineeships and training courses that are relevant to local industries and local employment prospects in remote areas.'⁹³
- 5.82 Similarly, the Town of Port Hedland commented:
- The focus on education approaches that retain and enhance the local skills base by delivering highly contextualised education aligned to employment opportunities, is key to ensuring that Port Hedland and other Pilbara towns are appropriately positioned to retain students in Town, meet new economic opportunities and be resilient during economic fluctuations.⁹⁴
- 5.83 Gunnedah Shire Council recommended that agriculture, automotive heavy plant, electro-technology and engineering be offered as apprentice courses as a minimum to meet the training needs of their economy.⁹⁵
- 5.84 Ms Julie Bailey suggested that locals in remote Indigenous communities need to be trained 'in simple trade skills to fix on going repair issues.' She considered that 'instead of having to wait for certified tradies to fix simple problems locals could be trained basic skills in plumbing, building, carpentry, painting, electrical, cementing and other tasks.'⁹⁶
- 5.85 Ms Bailey recommended that trade skills and certifications 'be adapted to a simplified a multi trade certificate relevant to the many jobs frequently

91 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

92 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 13.

93 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 34.

94 Town of Port Hedland, *Submission 58*, p. 9.

95 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

96 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 43*, p. 7.

required in remote Indigenous communities.’⁹⁷ She also recommended the government undertake ‘place-based collaboration with remote communities to adapt and deliver relevant courses’ using Interactive Distance Learning.⁹⁸

- 5.86 According to DESE, the Australian government is also investing \$50.6 million to trial Industry Training Hubs in ten regions across Australia. The ‘Industry Training Hubs aim to improve opportunities for young people in regions with high youth unemployment’ and will ‘work with and encourage young people to build skills and choose occupations in demand in their region.’⁹⁹
- 5.87 Training Hubs will be established in New South Wales (Grafton, Gosford), Victoria (Shepparton), Queensland (Maryborough, Townsville), Western Australia (Wanneroo, Armadale), South Australia (Port Pirie), Tasmania (Burnie), and the Northern Territory (Alice Springs).¹⁰⁰

Workforce issues

- 5.88 Consistent with skills shortages in other industries, it was reported there is a lack of qualified VET educators in rural, regional and remote communities and a high rate of staff turnover. For example, South West TAFE reported:

The availability of suitably qualified and experienced teachers in regional and rural areas is a major challenge, with wage differentials between industry, as well as more opportunities with metro and larger regional centres making talent attraction very difficult. The situation is further compounded by funding instability in the TAFE sector causing higher rates of casual and short term contract teachers. This in turn impacts on quality teaching, and workforce attraction and retention. Consideration for better financial packages that assist regional TAFEs in attracting teachers and non-teaching staff from industry and metropolitan areas and their long-term retention is warranted.¹⁰¹

- 5.89 Concerns were raised that VET qualification requirements may be contributing to staff shortages. Gunnedah Shire Council reported that the range of courses offered at Gunnedah TAFE are limited by a lack of qualified teachers:

97 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 43*, p. 7.

98 Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 43*, p. 7.

99 The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), *Submission 49*, p. 39.

100 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 39.

101 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 9.

A recent change in the qualification requirements for TAFE teachers has put a strain on the Gunnedah campus and has meant that a key course, electro-technology, is not being offered in 2020 despite significant investment in the infrastructure in this area. The fact that there is no suitably qualified teachers meant that TAFE Gunnedah were not even able to advertise the course in Semester one 2020.¹⁰²

5.90 Similarly, South West TAFE commented:

Compounding the difficulties with providing a qualified and experienced teaching workforce in rural and remote regions is the shortage of experienced industry people who hold a current TAFE teaching qualification, a factor that is contributed to by the continued changes to qualification's requirements. Unlike most other educational jurisdictions VET teacher qualifications need to be fully updated every few years.¹⁰³

Student support

5.91 The Halsey review described the transition from school to further study, training and employment as 'a major event for a young person and their family' and noted:

For many who live in rural, regional and remote areas, this stage of life can be particularly challenging (as well as highly rewarding) because it often involves having to move away from home, family, friends and the familiarity and support of a community.¹⁰⁴

5.92 A range of stakeholders reported that students from regional, rural and remote communities require more support in order to increase further education participation and attainment.¹⁰⁵ For example, CSU reported:

Students from regional and especially remote areas face greater cost barriers to higher education than their counterparts in metropolitan areas, especially in the form of long travel times or, for remote area students who want to study on-campus, the

102 Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3.

103 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 9.

104 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, January 2018, p. 22.

105 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 6; Newcastle Anglican Schools, *Submission 55*, p. 1; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 7; ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 4; ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 4; The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association, *Submission 18*, p. 4.

expense of relocating closer to a university. When these costs come on top of the accommodation and day-to-day living expenses all students have to deal with, the total can be the factor that deters them from university study.¹⁰⁶

5.93 To help support regional and remote students with the costs associated with further education, the Government introduced the Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships program in 2016. The scholarships are for up to \$18,000 each and are for students studying at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, VET students from Certificate IV and PhD candidates.¹⁰⁷ On 12 November 2018, the Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, announced an expansion of the program, increasing the number of scholarships available from 1,200 to 3,155 and opening the scholarship to all fields of study.¹⁰⁸

5.94 The Western Australian government reported it is working with universities to explore ways to encourage young people in the regions to aspire to university education. For example:

The Western Australian Government has committed to invest \$550 000 into establishing the new Pilbara Universities Centre, a not-for-profit education support service for current and aspiring students undertaking university education within the Pilbara region.' The Centre will provide 'a learning environment through which students gain access to educational support, application and enrolment assistance, guidance on courses and pathways, connections with local industry, comfortable and modern facilities in which to study and connect with other students, as well as administrative and student support.'¹⁰⁹

Summary and discussion

5.95 Key issues examined in this chapter are:

- factors limiting the participation of Australians from regional, rural and remote communities in higher education include:
 - ⇒ a lack of aspiration and awareness of further education and career options, and

106 CSU, *Submission 41*, p. 3.

107 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 43.

108 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 43.

109 Western Australian government, *Submission 6*, p. 7.

⇒ there are fewer opportunities to train or study close to home, meaning that students often need to relocate for work or study, resulting in additional costs such as travel and accommodation and the need for better access to support services.

- online delivery of further education has the potential to bridge gaps in access and equity in regional, rural and remote locations, however this is dependent on affordable and reliable access to high speed broadband
- there are higher costs associated with both higher education and VET provision in regional, rural and remote communities and a range of other issues including staffing shortages and funding difficulties
- VETiS provides an important pathway for school students to undertake a nationally recognised VET qualification while completing their school certificate, however there is uneven provision of VETiS due to funding issues and agreements needing to be negotiated between individual schools and RTOs
- barriers to VET provision includes geographical remoteness and the capacity of RTOs to service remote communities; issues with transport and licensing, low literacy and numeracy, and thin markets, and
- a range of skills shortages were reported in regional, rural and remote industries including in the delivery of further education, the health, community, and disability sector, and agriculture, automotive heavy plant, electro-technology and engineering.

5.96 There was support for:

- strategies to build student aspiration, including better advice about options for further education and careers
- better access to financial and other supports to assist students from regional, rural and remote communities to relocate to take up further education and employment opportunities
- an increase in the number of Commonwealth-funded university places offered to regional, rural and remote students
- an increase in the provision of VETiS in regional, rural and remote schools, including addressing funding gaps and better coordination between RTOs and schools to delivery these programs
- an increase in the number of regional study hubs
- streamlining of qualifications between the higher education and VET systems and more flexibility for students to undertake university and VET courses concurrently
- an increase in financial support for higher education providers and RTOs in regional, rural and remote areas, and

- strategies that ensure that workers who already live in regional, rural and remote communities are trained to fill skills shortages in growth industries in those areas

Relevant Halsey review recommendation

5.97 The Halsey review made one recommendation relevant to the issues examined in this chapter and encouraged a range of actions to progress the recommendation. As previously noted, the government did not detail how or whether it would implement all the actions to progress the recommendations provided in the Halsey review.¹¹⁰

5.98 Recommendation 6 related to supporting the transition of students from school to further education and employment:

Recommendation 6: Support RRR students to make successful transitions from school to university, training, employment and combinations of them

Actions to progress this recommendation:

- review current government income support policies and arrangements for RRR students from low income families who must move away from home to take up further study or training, to ensure they are able to commence immediately following school completion
- ensure that RRR schools can offer students and parents high quality career information and advice to grow aspirations and employment opportunities
- ensure schools or clusters of schools have access to dedicated personnel to case manage students at risk of not making a successful transition to further study, training, employment or combinations of them
- provide additional financial support to students and/or families for travel between university and home, in particular in a student's first year of study
- establish dedicated RRR accommodation advisers and brokers in all states and territories
- require universities to prioritise beds and clearly identify accommodation support for RRR students, especially those coming from remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- improve the provision of accommodation and income support information for RRR students.¹¹¹

110 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018.

111 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey review) January 2018, p. 64.

5.99 In its response, the government indicated its support for this recommendation, noting that it ‘will continue to provide programs and initiatives that support young people move from school to further education, training, or work.’¹¹² It provided the following examples of current initiatives supporting students to transition from school to further education and work:

- the Preparing Secondary Students for Work framework, a new high level National Career Education Strategy in 2018
- the Pathways in Technology (P-TECH) pilots
- the \$1.5 billion Skilling Australians Fund
- JobActive
- Transition to Work Program,
- Parents Next program
- Youth Jobs PaTH
- the National Work Experience Program, and
- the Regional and Rural Enterprise Scholarships Program.¹¹³

5.100 The Government stated it ‘will investigate further improvements for online information for career advisers and students regarding post-school options’, noting that the Job Jumpstart and Job Outlook websites are available to assist young people to find work and make decisions about study, training and employment.¹¹⁴

5.101 The Government noted:

There are numerous Government support options available to regional, rural and remote students who are making the transition to tertiary education. Youth Allowance, Austudy, and ABSTUDY all provide a fortnightly income for those eligible. Students receiving these payments may also be eligible for Commonwealth Rent Assistance, Student Start-up Loans and Relocation Scholarships.

The government also provides Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships. Additionally, the majority of universities offer

112 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

113 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

114 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

scholarships and bursaries which are available to regional rural and remote students.¹¹⁵

5.102 The Government also said it would improve regional students' access to Youth Allowance by:

- relaxing the Youth Allowance workforce participation independence criteria for students from regional, rural or remote areas who must move away from home to study, and
- lifting the parental income cut-off for the workforce participation independence criterion, noting that 'it is expected the number of regional students who qualify for Youth Allowance under this criterion will increase by 75 per cent due to these reforms.'¹¹⁶

Napthine review recommendations

5.103 The Napthine review made seven recommendations and proposed 33 related actions to improve tertiary education participation and outcomes for students from regional, rural and remote areas:

- Recommendation one: Improve access to tertiary study options for students in RRR areas by:
 - ⇒ providing demand-driven funding for university places in regional areas
 - ⇒ exploring new higher education offerings focused on professional skills development
 - ⇒ expanding access to Regional Study Hubs
 - ⇒ addressing problems with student access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet services, and
 - ⇒ improving access to high quality VET programs in RRR areas.
- Recommendation two: Improve access to financial support, to support greater fairness and more equal opportunity by:
 - ⇒ introducing a new tertiary education access payment for students who relocate for study from an outer regional or remote area
 - ⇒ allowing greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for independent Youth Allowance

115 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 13.

116 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 14.

- ⇒ providing greater assistance to students and families to meet costs associated with travel to and from their home communities, and
- ⇒ promoting and improving the clarity of online information about available financial support.
- Recommendation three: Improve the quality and range of student support services for RRR students to address the challenges of transition and higher rates of attrition by:
 - ⇒ identifying and disseminating information on best practice student support services
 - ⇒ introducing new requirements for providers to publish transparent information on available service offerings, and
 - ⇒ working with state and territory governments to improve transport options for students.
- Recommendation four: Build aspiration, improve career advice and strengthen RRR schools to better prepare RRR students for success by:
 - ⇒ implementing a regionally-based model for independent, professional career advice
 - ⇒ improving online career related information and advice
 - ⇒ establishing aspiration-raising initiatives covering both VET and higher education
 - ⇒ expanding access to high quality VET programs in RRR schools
 - ⇒ undertaking further work to improve RRR schools and Year 12 completion rates, and
 - ⇒ improving support available to teachers, principals and school leaders.
- Recommendation five: Improve participation and outcomes for RRR students from equity groups including low SES students, Indigenous students, students with disability and remote students by:
 - ⇒ modifying the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) to better target funding to cost effective RRR programs
 - ⇒ providing demand-driven funding for RRR Indigenous university students, and
 - ⇒ establishing tailored initiatives for equity groups and those experiencing hardship.
- Recommendation six: Strengthen the role of tertiary education providers in regional development and grow Australia's regions by:

- ⇒ increasing the research capacity of regional universities including identifying opportunities to establish research infrastructure
- ⇒ continuing to explore strategies to attract domestic and international students, and
- ⇒ increasing opportunities to undertake work integrated learning in RRR areas.

The Advisory Group's seventh recommendation is related to implementing and monitoring the Strategy:

- Recommendation seven: Establish mechanisms to coordinate the implementation effort and support monitoring of the Strategy by:
 - ⇒ establishing an RRR Education Commissioner, with a broad remit in relation to RRR education matters, and
 - ⇒ developing an improved geographical classification tool for tertiary education purposes.¹¹⁷

5.104 On 19 June 2020, Minister Tehan announced a number of key initiatives in response to the recommendations of the Napthine including:

- a \$5000 Tertiary Access Payment for regional students
- an increase in Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for regional university campuses
- establishing a Regional Education Commissioner
- strengthening and expanding the Regional University Centres program
- enabling Indigenous students from regional and remote areas to access demand-driven Commonwealth-supported university places.
- enhancing the research capacity of regional universities, and
- improving Fares Allowance to reduce the waiting time for first-year payment to support students to visit home during their mid-year break.¹¹⁸

5.105 These new initiatives will commence from 2021.¹¹⁹

Relevant Closing the Gap targets

5.106 In relation to further education, training and transitions to employment, the Closing the Gap agreement includes targets to:

117 Napthine review, *Final Report*, August 2019, pp. 6-7.

118 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, *Media Release*, 'Tertiary reforms to unleash potential of regional Australia', 19 June 2020.

119 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, *Media Release*, 'Tertiary reforms to unleash potential of regional Australia', 19 June 2020.

- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent, and
- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent, by 2031.¹²⁰

Conclusion

- 5.107 The committee has noted significant work is underway to respond to the findings and recommendations of various policy reviews and that the government has made a number of announcements in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The committee anticipates that further updates are likely in the coming months, but is concerned by a lack of clarity about the implementation of specific actions recommended by the Halsey and Napthine reviews.
- 5.108 Evidence to this inquiry supports the findings of both the Halsey and Napthine reviews. The recommendations and reform actions provided by the Halsey and Napthine reviews are current, detailed and comprehensive, and the committee does not seek to duplicate the findings of these reviews.
- 5.109 In the previous chapter, the committee recommended that the government provide a comprehensive implementation plan to show how it is responding to the recommendations and actions outlined in the Halsey review. The committee similarly recommends the government provide a comprehensive implementation plan for the Napthine review.

Recommendation 12

- 5.110 **The committee recommends that, by May 2021, the Minister for Education publish a comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions outlined in the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine review).**
- 5.111 The committee is aware that universities are experiencing a significant period of disruption as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduction in international students will have a financial impact on

¹²⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, pp. 22-3.

universities, particularly at regional universities where the cost of delivering higher education is comparatively higher.

- 5.112 It is expected that there will be increased domestic demand for higher education in the coming years as a consequence of COVID-19.
- 5.113 The committee notes that the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020 has the support of the House and is currently before the Senate. Under the Job Ready Graduates Package, 'University students who study in areas of expected employment growth will pay less for their degree as the Government incentivises students to make more job-relevant decisions about their education.'¹²¹ The Morrison Government 'will provide an additional 39,000 university places by 2023 to meet the expected increase in demand because of COVID-19.'¹²² However, the Committee also notes regional universities requested the additional places be rolled out fast enough to meet demand.
- 5.114 The committee calls on the Minister for Education to consider key Napthine review recommendations, which would provide funding of university places in regional areas to ensure that regional students with the required pre-COVID19 entrance scores do not miss out on places next year.
- 5.115 The committee will continue to monitor these developments.

Recommendation 13

- 5.116 **The committee recommends that the Minister for Education, as soon as practicably possible, consider evidence as to whether the regional loading to address the higher cost of delivering higher education at regional universities sufficiently recognises the higher costs.**
- 5.117 There are significant potential benefits associated with improving the integration of the VET and university sectors, including better pathways for students moving between the VET and higher education systems, and more flexibility to allow students to undertake VET and university studies concurrently.

121 Minister for Education, The Hon. Dan Tehan MP, and Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, Senator the Hon. Michaelia Cash, 'Job-ready graduates to power economic recovery', *Joint Media Release*, 19 June 2020.

122 Minister for Education, The Hon. Dan Tehan MP, and Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, Senator the Hon. Michaelia Cash, 'Job-ready graduates to power economic recovery', *Joint Media Release*, 19 June 2020.

Recommendation 14

- 5.118 **The committee recommends the Minister for Education develop a proposal for the Education Council to consider implementing in 2021 to enhance the integration of Australia's Vocation Education and Training and Higher Education sectors.**

Mr Andrew Laming MP

Chair

27 October 2020



Appendix A - submissions

- 1 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)
- 2 Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA)
 - 2.1 AHISA - supplementary
- 3 Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO)
 - 3.1 ANSTO - supplementary
- 4 Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc (ICPA Qld)
- 5 Australian Secondary Principals' Association (ASPA)
 - 5.1 ASPA and Pivot Professional Learning - supplementary
- 6 Western Australian Government
 - 6.1 Western Australian Government - supplementary
- 7 Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Australia)
 - 7.1 ICPA Australia - supplementary
- 8 Dr Carmel O'Shannessy and Professor Jane Simpson
- 9 Central Land Council (CLC)
- 10 Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)
 - 10.1 CSIRO - supplementary
- 11 Speech Pathology Australia
 - 11.1 Speech Pathology Australia - supplementary
- 12 Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)
- 13 Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA)
 - 13.1 APTA - supplementary
- 14 Teach For Australia (TFA)
- 15 Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC)
- 16 M & S Consultants Pty Ltd

- 17 Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region
- 18 Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA)
- 19 Australian Services Union NSW & ACT (Services) Branch (ASU)
- 20 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales
- 21 Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN)
- 22 Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA)
- 22.1 ISCA - supplementary
- 23 Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA)
- 23.1 RIPA - supplementary
- 24 Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA)
- 25 Online Education Services (OES)
- 26 Goodstart Early Learning
- 27 Early Childhood Australia (ECA)
- 28 Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia (IEBA)
- 28.1 IEBA - supplementary
- 29 Dr Samuel Osborne
- 30 Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA)
- 30.1 CYDA - supplementary
- 31 Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS)
- 32 Royal Far West (RFW)
- 33 National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA)
- 34 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)
- 34.1 AITSL - supplementary
- 35 Dr Robert Boughton
- 36 La Trobe University
- 36.1 La Trobe University - supplementary
- 37 Northern Territory Department of Education
- 38 Emeritus Professor Max Angus
- 39 Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
- 40 National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC)
- 40.1 NCEC - supplementary
- 41 Charles Sturt University (CSU)

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- 41.1 CSU – supplementary
 - 41.2 CSU – supplementary
 - 42 Just Reinvest NSW
 - 43 Australian Education Union (AEU)
 - 44 National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)
 - 45 Northern Territory Isolated Childrens' Parent's Association (ICPA NT)
 - 46 Gunnedah Shire Council
 - 47 Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council
 - 47.1 NPY Women’s Council - supplementary
 - 48 Yirrkala School
 - 49 Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE)
 - 49.1 DESE - supplementary
 - 50 Mr Tom Worthington
 - 51 World Vision Australia
 - 52 Save the Children Australia
 - 53 Ms Julie Bailey
 - 54 South West TAFE
 - 55 Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation
 - 56 Children's Ground
 - 57 Ms Jeanie Adams
 - 58 Town of Port Hedland
 - 59 Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE)
 - 60 Tangentyere Council
 - 61 Elizabeth Burnett and Hayley Howe
 - 62 Professor Lisa Gibbs
 - 63 National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)
 - 64 Good to Great Schools Australia
 - 65 Dr David Brooks
 - 66 The Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF)
 - 67 Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR)



Appendix B – hearings and witnesses

Wednesday 5 February 2020 – Canberra

Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment

Mr Iain Barr, A/g Assistant Secretary, Wellbeing & Engagement Branch

Mr Dom English, First Assistant Secretary, Higher Education Division

Mr David Pattie, First Assistant Secretary, Improving Student Outcomes Division

Wednesday 12 February 2020 – Canberra

Country Education Partnership

Mr Phillip Brown, Executive Officer

Ms Ellie Jones, Rural Youth Ambassador Alumni, Rural Inspire

Ms Jemma Walsh, Rural Youth Ambassador Alumni, Rural Inspire

Wednesday 26 February 2020 – Canberra

Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia

Ms Beth Blackwood, Chief Executive Officer

Wednesday 26 August 2020 – Canberra

Roundtable on School Education

Association of Independent Schools Northern Territory

Mrs Gail Barker, Executive Director

Pivot Professional Learning

Ms Amanda Bickerstaff, Chief Executive Officer

Association of Independent Schools Western Australia

Mrs Valerie Gould, Executive Director

National Catholic Education Commission

Mr Peter Hamill, Deputy Director

Australian Education Union

Ms Correna Haythorpe, Federal President

Department of Education, Skills and Employment

Ms Renae Houston, First Assistant Secretary, VET Quality and Policy Division

Ms Katerina Lawler, Assistant Secretary, Policy and Regulation Branch

Mr David Pattie, First Assistant Secretary, Improving Student Outcomes Division

Mr Mark Sawade, First Assistant Secretary, Funding and Data Collection

Ms Linda White, Assistant Secretary, Workforce and Apprenticeships Industry Branch

Australian Secondary Principals Association

Mr Andrew Pierpoint, President

Australian Education Union

Mr Jarvis Ryan, President, Northern Territory Branch

Roundtable on Further Education***La Trobe University***

Professor John Dewar AO, Vice-Chancellor

South West Institute of TAFE

Dr John Flett, Executive Manager, Education, and Acting Manager, Strategic Projects, Grants and Research

Online Education Services

Ms Sue Kokonis, Executive Director, Academic

Australian Technology Network of Universities

Mr Luke Sheehy, Executive Director

Charles Sturt University

Professor Janelle Wheat, Acting Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

Wednesday 2 September 2020 – Canberra**Roundtable on Early Childhood Education*****Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care***

Mr John Burton, Social Policy Manager

Mr Richard Weston, Chief Executive Officer

Goodstart Early Learning

Ms Myra Geddes, General Manager, Social Impact

Community Connections Solutions Australia

Mrs Meg Mendham, Chief Executive Officer

Early Childhood Australia

Ms Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer

Roundtable on Barriers to Education***Speech Pathology Australia***

Ms Jane Delaney, Senior Advisor, Early Childhood and Education

Ms Gail Mulcair, Chief Executive Officer

Australian Human Rights Commission

Mr Nick Devereaux, Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice

Ms June Oscar, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

Ms Susan Newell, Senior Policy Officer, Children's Rights Team

World Vision Australia

Ms Teresa Hutchins, Manager Program Development and Effectiveness, Australia First Nations Program

Dr Scott Winch, First Nations Senior Policy Adviser

Children and Young People with Disability Australia

Ms Maeve Kennedy, Policy and Program Manager

Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer

Additional Comments by Labor Members

The educational achievements of regional, rural and remote students have been lower than that of their metropolitan peers for many years. This is a fact that is well known and well researched and has been investigated and inquired into by Governments for decades. Promises to fix the education divide between city and country has been repeatedly made. Yet, there has been little progress when it comes to reversing this trend.

For the most part, the *Education in Remote and Complex Environments Report* is balanced and reflects the evidence the committee received. The Committee's findings, included in the Report, call on the Government to implement the findings of its own reviews including the Halsey Review and the Napthine Review. Labor members of the committee support this call to action.

However, the Labor members believe that the recommendations in the *Education in Remote and Complex Environments Report* do not go far enough and lack urgency. Real action by the Government to address inequalities in the educational outcomes of regional, rural and remote students is urgently required. Nor does this Report's recommendations acknowledge that decisions made by the current Government directly impact on the educational outcomes of students from regional, rural and remote communities.

In our view, the evidence presented to the Committee clearly indicates that the current Government's 2014 budget decision to cut school funding associated with the former Labor Government's Better Schools funding model was the wrong decision due to the disproportionate impact it had on regional, rural and remote schools.

As stated in the Report, the AEU highlights how the current Government's changes to school resourcing by the *Australia Education Amendment Act 2017* reduced funding these schools would have received. An example they cited was that schools in the Northern Territory will be funded at 21 percent less than the Schooling Resource Standard by 2023. Various other organisations stated similar concerns regarding school funding with some highlighting that 'these schools are more expensive to run.'

Noting that the most recent Census reported that the percentage of Northern Territory school aged children (5-18 years of age) who are indigenous was 44.21%, these measures will have a disproportionate impact on the Northern Territory's Indigenous school-age population.

Many of the challenges highlighted in the evidence presented to the committee may have been alleviated if the funding guaranteed by *Australian Education Act 2013* had continued. The compounding impact of this funding not being received by these schools limits their ability to address many of the barriers outlined in this Report.

At the very least, the Labor members of the Committee would have like the Report to highlight the urgent need for a fairer needs-based funding model. As the Report outlines in the School Resourcing section, there is a need for a fairer needs-based funding model that aims to address regional, rural and remote student disadvantage. Simply stating that a funding model is needs-based doesn't adequately reflect real experiences in schools. Although the Government argues that its current funding model for schools is needs-based, submissions the Committee received suggest the exact opposite (4.25).

Further, the new National School Reform Agreement, commencing in 2023 (Recommendation 10) is an opportunity for the Education Minister to agree to a long-term fairer needs-based funding model.

Without a doubt, stakeholders engaged in the education of students in remote and complex environments believe the Government's current school funding model is unfair and disproportionately favours inner metropolitan schools. Labor agrees and believes this should be a core focus of the next National School Reform Agreement.

Although the impact of the pandemic on schools is noted in the report (4.2), the recommendations fail to address with any urgency this new and emerging crisis in regional, rural and remote education. In short, the pandemic has exacerbated existing fault lines in Australia's education system and will impact students from regional, rural and remote communities more than their counterparts from inner metropolitan areas.

The Committee's Report mentions that one stakeholder commented (4.240) that 'a shift to online education has disadvantaged many students ... facing long-term impacts on their education'. The Report also highlights that schools also reported a range of difficulties as a consequence of the pandemic, including potential funding shortfalls and access to online resources.

The pandemic has also placed 'significant financial stress on some remote schools like community schools in remote communities as a consequence of families moving away during the pandemic' (4.227).

This is further evidence that the Government must immediately review and increase its share of funding to schools who are struggling with the fallout of the pandemic.

Early Childhood Education

The Labor members of this Committee argue that access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) should be universal like primary and secondary school education. The educational and developmental benefits of ECEC are indisputable and yet many families, including those located in regional, rural and remote Australia, face significant barriers in accessing affordable quality ECEC.

It is the view of the Labor members of this Committee that although a few key areas of Early Childhood Education were raised in the Report, they were not addressed in the Report's recommendations. Evidence presented to the Committee during this inquiry highlighted that the cost of attending early childhood education was a key barrier for regional families.

In the recommendations section of Chapter 3, there is no mention of cost of ECEC as a barrier despite it being recognised in the summary and discussion section (3.50) as being a key barrier to access for regional, rural and remote families. Addressing the barriers to access, including the cost of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), is vital if we as a nation want to increase participation rates for regional, rural and remote children.

This point is also illustrated in by the Child Care Subsidy (3.25) 'there is evidence that financial support can significantly improve participation in early childhood education.' The Government should strongly consider introducing Labor's proposal of universal access to ECEC by moving the Child Care Subsidy to 90% of the cost to families.

Another key area lacking force in the Committee's Report recommendations is that of addressing the low wages of workers in the sector. Low pay is a barrier to the recruitment and retention of highly skilled, predominately female workers, therefore, addressing this barrier must be part of any genuine workforce strategy. Labor members of the Committee believe the Government should play a proactive role in encouraging and supporting the sector's ability to increase wages as a workforce development strategy to help combat recruitment and retention challenges. To date, this Government has dismissed this as not their issue and attacked the previous Labor Government for working with the sector to try to find a solution to this complex problem.

Further Education and Employment

The University sector representatives were unanimously critical of the Government's support or lack thereof for the Higher Education sector during the COVID19 crisis. Whilst the report acknowledges that 'universities are experiencing a significant period of disruption as a consequence of the COVID19 pandemic' (5.112), the recommendations to address these issues are inadequate and lack the urgency required to be effective. The approach suggested in the recommendations that "the committee will continue to monitor these developments" (5.115) is quite frankly not good enough.

The financial impact of the COVID19 pandemic on Universities cannot be underestimated. The universities argued at every opportunity during the Higher Education Roundtable that funding shortfalls will have a significant financial impact on universities and their ability to deliver higher education in regional universities where the cost of delivering courses is extremely high.

The sector was also highly sceptical of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Jobs Ready Graduates Package) 2020*, arguing that these additional university places will not be rolled out fast enough to meet demand nor to address the dire financial situation that universities are in.

Uncapping universities places for regional universities would ensure that regional students with the required pre-COVID19 entrance scores do not miss out on a place next year. As a result of the COVID19 pandemic, it is widely accepted that demand for university places in 2021 will be much higher than previous years and the higher the demand, the higher the entrance score required. This will disproportionately impact students from regional communities whose entrance scores are on average lower than those of students from metropolitan areas. There is the potential for there to be fewer students from regional, rural and remote communities attending university next year as increased competition drives up entrance marks.

If the Minister for Education is genuine about implementing the recommendations of the Napthine Review, the Government would immediately implement one of its key recommendations and provide demand-driven funding for university places in regional areas.

Another way to urgently address the shortfall in funding associated with the higher cost of delivering higher education in regional universities, suggested by Latrobe University, was for the Government to increase the regional loading. It is the view of Labor members that the Minister for Education should not only consider this recommendation but also to reverse the billions of dollars cut from the sector since this Government came into office in 2013.

The Committee's report encourages the current Government to get on with addressing the educational inequality of regional, remote and rural students. However, Labor members' additional comments – which reflect evidence presented to the Committee particularly through the roundtable process – stress that urgent action is required to ensure that young Australians from all over the country should be supported to meet their potential with high quality education and meaningful pathways to further education.

Ms Lisa Chesters MP
Deputy Chair

Ms Ged Kearney MP

Ms Joanne Ryan MP