

# Response to Symposium Common Themes and Priorities

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## Introduction

This document represents a collective research response to the key themes and priorities distributed following the Canberra Symposium in March 2018.

First, we want to acknowledge the hard work and value associated with bringing together a large group of boarding stakeholders. The selection of keynotes was excellent and their contribution to the discussion and thinking around boarding is highly significant.

As researchers with an interest in boarding we are keen to make a constructive contribution to the thinking work, the policy work and the practice of boarding to ensure the best possible educational outcomes for First Nations young people and the communities they came from. We also appreciate the invitation that was extended to us to be a part of these important discussions.

## Common themes

In general, we agree that the common themes reflect a large part of the discussions that played out over the Symposium.

## Missing themes

While it is always a challenge to capture and distil all of what is said we believe there are key omissions from the common themes.

We will briefly discuss these in terms of:

- Choice/unchoice
- Free prior and informed consent
- Evidence and accountability
- Policy development and implementation
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Professional and workforce development in schools

## Choice/unchoice

While we recognise that this was a *boarding* symposium, we would encourage stakeholders to consider the lack of choice that parents have as a consequence of programs that promote boarding as the solution. The rights of young people to receive an education in their own community (as most Australians have) and in their first Australian language, as most Australians do, must be protected. Boarding should not be seen as a default educational provision option for remote students, nor should it be seen as the only way to provide a quality education. While boarding stakeholders of course have an interest in promoting high quality boarding they also should be interested in promoting the rights and best interests of children are

upheld. The evidence we heard from the Royal Commission, the Study Away Review and the House of Representatives report was sobering and should give us all cause to consider what choice might look like from a parent and community perspective.

If families choose to send their children away to boarding school, then an important adjunct would be for boarding schools to examine ways in which they can maximise parental engagement, particularly ways in which they can support parents to prepare their children during the years prior to the impending transition to boarding school and reduce the likelihood of an abrupt disjuncture if/when it happens.

While a lot of effort has been placed on urban or regional boarding facilities, the need to investigate remote or on-country boarding as an option should also be considered.

## Free Prior and Informed Consent

Following on from the choice/unchoice paradigm is the issue of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). This is of particular relevance in remote and very remote contexts. Understandings by community, parents and students themselves about the potential benefits and disadvantages of a boarding education 'off country' can be limited. This is particularly true given the lack of hard evidence upon which to base decisions (see below). In addition, the removal of students from home communities can have opportunity costs in terms of potential leadership capacity for community governance, disruption in cultural continuity and effects upon local education provision. These are serious potential unintended outcomes that need to be understood. The issue of FPIC also raises questions about which intuitions or people are best placed to provide independent advice to families, communities and students given that there is a potential 'moral hazard' in boarding providers taking on this role. FPIC should be a central consideration in boarding provision and relates strongly to the United Nations Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), specifically articles 13,14 and 23.

## Evidence and accountability

The need for evidence and accountability was raised several times throughout the symposium. The three Reports all point to evidence of what has failed and yet we are still left with no publicly available independent research (beyond the small body of mainly doctoral studies) or evaluation that explores for example:

- The net economic benefit or cost of boarding to individuals and communities;
- The relative benefit or cost of boarding in terms of employment and further education pathways;
- The amount of 'churn' that results from student exclusion or educational disengagement
- The cost of boarding in terms of cultural disconnection, language loss
- The relative educational benefit of boarding versus community-based education

Coupled with the need for evidence, is a need for accountability. When things go wrong for students (for example because of exclusion) who is then accountable for providing equitable alternatives? Where is the accountability back to parents, from boarding schools in terms of ensuring safety, support, and adequate care? What accountability do funders/policy makers have?

## Policy development and implementation

The absence of any clearly articulated policy on boarding is a major concern. We are left to deduce policy from resource provision. The lack of policy means that those who speak with the most influence (and possibly with self-interest) garner resources to pursue their own agendas. The need for transparency in funding provision should be a priority, and again this is a point that is raised in the House of Reps report.

## Mental health and wellbeing

While the common themes pick up on health and wellbeing, the importance of mental health is ignored. We know from the small amount of independent evidence we have that mental ill-health is a major concern both for students transitioning and transitioning out of boarding. Further, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are at significantly higher risk of mental ill-health and suicide than their same aged peers. The psychological costs for young people who are already going through the challenges of adolescence must be taken into account by schools, transition support services, and boarding facilities in terms of ensuring adequate psychological support and assessment at all stages of the boarding journey.

Current training in mental health available to boarding staff is inadequate, often culturally inappropriate and generic to contexts other than boarding. What we know is that those school environments that foster stable, high-quality teacher-student relationships have been associated with lower levels of student emotional difficulties. However, what we equally know, is that a significant gap exists in that boarding staff knowledge of mental ill-health indicators, as well as factors that promote positive social and emotional wellbeing. Boarding staff would specifically benefit from further training in developmental milestones, attachment, as well as bio-psycho-social changes during adolescence, as well as targeted education about mental ill-health during early adolescence (12-15 years old) so that they can identify early indicators and make informed decisions about the overall health and wellbeing of boarding students.

Recognition of the impact of systemic and institutional racism and mechanisms to eliminate these must be considered.

## Professional and workforce development in schools

While the common themes raise boarding workforce development training, we should not lose sight of the need for training and workforce development in schools and for pre-service teachers in universities. There is a risk of a disconnect between the academic and boarding experiences of students. Academic staff are arguably just as important as boarding staff in terms of ensuring high quality education and ensuring safety, health and wellbeing. Boarding staff could offer their knowledge and professional development opportunities to school staff where possible to maintain connection and consistency for staff and students.

## Conclusion

We look forward to being part of the ongoing conversations about boarding for First Nations students and welcome the opportunities Boarding Australia has provided for us to engage with stakeholders. We applaud the efforts made so far to strengthen the thinking work behind high quality boarding and look forward to supporting this as critical friends.