



NIAA Submission to the Productivity Commission National School Reform Agreement Inquiry Interim Report

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the Productivity Commission Interim Report of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) Review.

NIAA notes that the Department of Education has responsibility for delivery of schools funding to state and territory governments and non-government bodies through the NSRA. NIAA provides complementary funding through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) for education activities to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; noting that essential education services should be covered by recurrent schools funding.

In line with Interim Report recommendations, NIAA encourages future NSRAs and bilateral agreements to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure that First Nations voices are listened to in the early stages of developing education policy and actions. This includes providing transparency on how funding to support priority cohort students is being used and ensuring reporting holds agencies to account for its use. NIAA acknowledges access to and participation in culturally safe education is fundamental for improving outcomes and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. To support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes, classrooms and schools need to be culturally safe for students and the school community, including teachers, education aides and families/careers.

Analysis of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlights the need for a person-centred approach, culturally responsive pedagogies and curriculum and a sense of belonging.

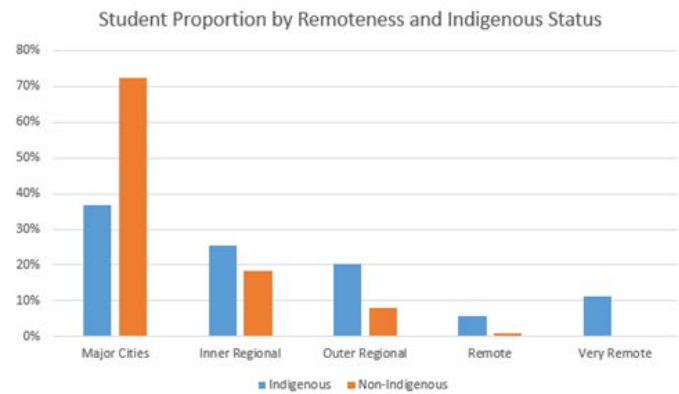
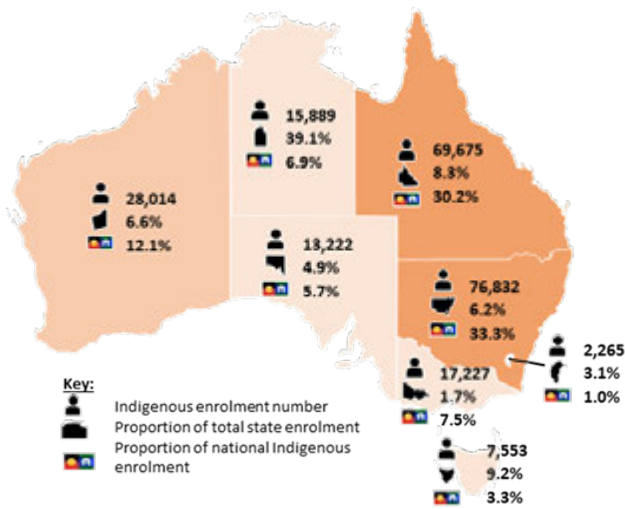
Background – Facts and Figures

While successive governments have worked to implement policies and actions with the aim of supporting improved education outcomes, data shows school attainment and engagement remains a significant issue for First Nations students as reported in the Productivity Commission Dashboard on Closing the Gap¹.

In 2021, there were 249,103 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students comprising 6.2% of all students, representing a 3.7% increase from 2020. Jurisdictional distribution is mixed with Northern Territory having the greatest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (39%) and Victoria having the lowest proportion (1.9%), however New South Wales and Queensland have the highest overall population of students².

¹ In 2016, 63.2 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 20–24 years had attained Year 12 or obtained a non-school qualification at Certificate III or above (figure 1). There are no new data since the baseline year of 2016

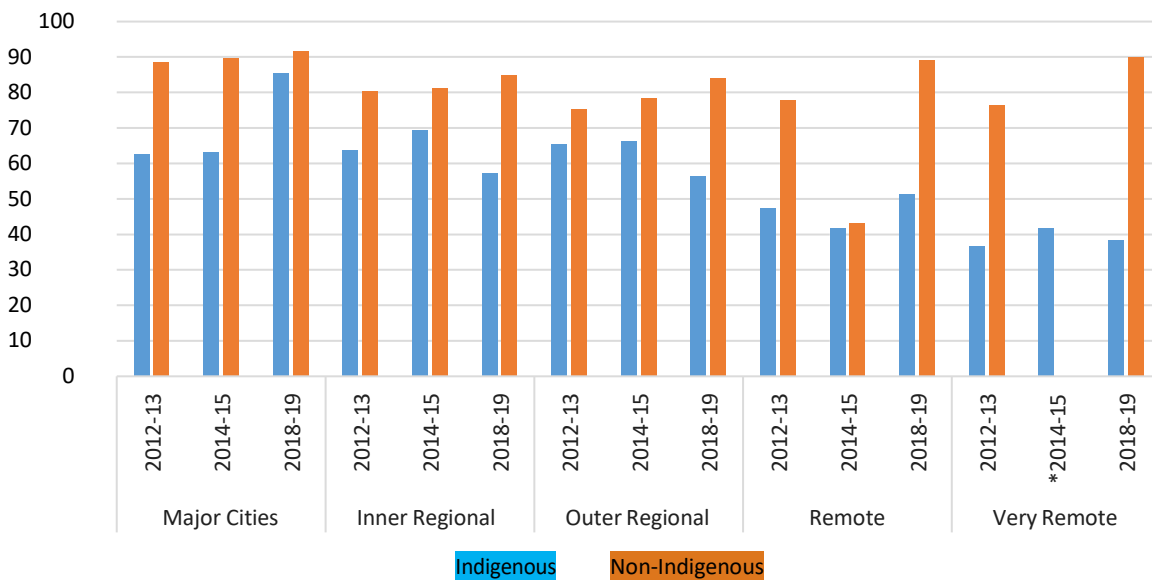
² Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Schools*. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/2021>.



Year 12 attainment decreases by remoteness and has a flow-on effect to post-school pathways

In recent years there have been improvements in outcomes for students, however, Year 12 attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is still lower than for their non-Indigenous peers. Major cities have seen the gap reduce but outcome gaps grow the further from metropolitan centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students live³. In 2018–19, only 43% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote and very remote areas finished Year 12 compared with 90% of remote and very remote non-Indigenous students.

Year 12 attainment by remoteness, per cent



The years 7 to 12 full-time apparent retention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 59.0%, an increase from 2011 (48.7%).

³ ABS unpublished data

NIAA Recommendations

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are a priority cohort in the NSRA and, as such, should be a high priority in consideration of bilateral negotiations, noting state and territory governments are the responsible authorities for the delivery of education. This includes responsibility for infrastructure and maintenance funding, the payment of teachers, principals and non-teaching staff and the administration and management of all resources within schools.

NIAA recommendations in this submission will focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as a priority cohort in the following areas:

- Transparency and accountability in bilateral agreements with a focus on how funding is being used to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Authentic engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the development of NSRA, bilateral actions and reporting.
- Ensuring NSRA alignment with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including the Priority Reforms.
- State and territory support of Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs).
- Targeted action to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Cultural capability in schools and education authorities.

Transparency and Accountability

Draft recommendation 3.1

Implementation plans, developed in consultation with affected groups, should be used to improve the transparency of reform actions and to hold parties to account for the outcomes they commit to achieve

In the next intergovernmental agreement, Australian, State and Territory Governments should ensure:

- there are reforms directly addressing the unique barriers and ambitions of students from priority equity cohorts
- bilateral agreements, developed in consultation with stakeholders, identify how jurisdictions will lift outcomes for students in each of the priority equity cohorts identified in the agreement, recognising their specific learning needs
- progress reporting contains sufficient information (and has sufficient oversight) to provide the public with confidence that measures to lift outcomes for students in priority equity cohorts are being implemented and achieving their intended outcomes.

Draft finding 2.2

The National School Reform Agreement has weaknesses that undermine its effectiveness in facilitating collective, national efforts to lift student outcomes

- Relying too much on National Policy Initiatives (NPIs) that are a single solution to common issues has delayed reform outcomes.
- A lack of transparent, systematic, independent and meaningful reporting means there is little effective accountability.

Draft finding 2.2**The National School Reform Agreement has weaknesses that undermine its effectiveness in facilitating collective, national efforts to lift student outcomes**

- Outcomes do not adequately capture non-academic domains such as wellbeing.
- Insufficient prominence has been given to lifting outcomes for students from priority equity cohorts or a core of students who do not meet minimum standards.
- There is a poor connection between policy making and implementation in the classroom.

NIAA agrees with draft recommendation 3.1 and draft finding 2.2 that transparency and accountability is currently lacking in the NSRA. Development of the next NSRA is an opportunity to address the needs of priority equity cohorts, with a focus on strengthened accountability and transparency in relation to the how and why policies and activities are developed and how they will support priority cohorts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Bilateral agreements and implementation plans between the Commonwealth and states and territories should ensure jurisdiction-specific actions to measure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' outcomes. Strengthened reporting will enable governments to gain better insight into the impact of policies and funding.

Authentic engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

As identified in draft recommendation 3.1, the development of implementation plans should involve consultation with affected groups. NIAA recommends the NSRA and subsequent bilateral agreements be developed in partnership with IECBs and similar organisations participate to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' priorities are considered. The need for consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is reflected in several government agreements including the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration⁴, which commits each Minister to promote equity and excellence in the delivery of education systems. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices need to be included in the design of programs and policies of each jurisdiction in order to achieve equity in education systems.

NSRA alignment with Closing the Gap

The NSRA and bilateral agreements provide an opportunity to ensure alignment with the outcomes and priority reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This includes working with and listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities about what they want from the agreements.

⁴ The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration - Department of Education, Australian Government

Information request 3.3

Implementation plans

- What would be the costs, benefits, and implementation issues associated with the Commission’s proposed enhanced accountability mechanisms (draft recommendation 3.1) for bilateral agreements and associated reporting arrangements (in general and as they relate to students in priority equity cohorts)? What would be the costs and benefits of having people with lived experience involved in shared decision making in relation to reporting arrangements?
- Are there ways parties could reduce the costs (for example, reporting burdens) and increase the benefits of implementation plans by integrating, aligning or linking them with existing government reporting processes (for example, reporting under Closing the Gap and Australia’s Disability Strategy)?

The Australian Government, state, territory and local governments, along with community members, agreed to four priority reforms under Closing the Gap. The priority reforms are central to changing the way governments work with First Nations people and communities.

Aligning the new NSRA with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap requires commitment to the priority reforms and relevant actions and considerations. This includes taking a partnership approach when developing policies and actions that will impact First Nations people and communities and providing appropriate access to data.

Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies

Information request 3.5

Embedding the perspectives of priority equity cohorts in national education policy and institutions

- What specifically could be done to embed the views of priority equity cohorts in national education policies and institutions, including outcomes, targets and policy initiatives in the next intergovernmental agreement on school education?
- What are the merits of establishing a national Indigenous consultative body on education? How might such a body be structured? If pursued, would this best occur through a successor national school reform agreement or some other avenue?
- Does the current education and research evidence base capture a representative range of cultural and community perspectives, including those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers and researchers? If not, what actions could be taken to support this?

The Australian Government has committed to re-establishing the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Council (NATSIEC). This work will be led by the Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP⁵.

A national consultative body will allow government discussions and negotiations at a national level. The national body will also advise and assist states and territories in establishing jurisdictional level bodies where one does not currently exist. In alignment with Priority Reform one of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, NIAA encourages the NSRA Review capture the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies – in this case

⁵ <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/burney/2022/world-indigenous-peoples-conference-education>

Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs) – who can assist with expert advice on overcoming identified barriers and identify priorities for First Nations communities.

Targeted action to Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

The Commission identified that while there are targeted actions for priority equity cohorts in the current reform, there are very few actions to specifically support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and teachers.

Draft finding 3.5

There are a range of educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity cohorts

- Compounding problems arise from equating Indigeneity with educational disadvantage.
- Cultural recognition by schools, and the value placed on Indigenous knowledges by them, are key in responding to the distinct educational needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies increase inclusion and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and enrich the learning of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students too.
- Indigenous knowledges, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and how to include and empower students may be poorly understood by teachers and school leadership.
- Families in regional, rural and remote areas can have limited choice in where and how they educate their children.

NIAA agrees with draft finding 3.5. There are a range of educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity cohorts, in this case, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. NIAA encourages the inclusion of specific actions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, especially those living in regional and remote communities, who face extra barriers to education such as a lack of facilities.

Too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in regional and remote communities do not have access to a full secondary education up to Year 12, often having to leave home to attend school. As such, the important teaching and learning of cultural and familial knowledges is often compromised at the cost of Year 12 attainment in the mainstream system. Specific consideration and actions should work to address these factors, along with ensuring existing education facilities are on par with their metropolitan peers.

Draft finding 5.2

There are local shortages of teachers and shortages of trained teachers in key subjects

There are teacher shortages in regional, rural and remote areas, and in subjects such as mathematics, science, English and design and technology. There is also a lack of teachers from diverse backgrounds. Factors such as changes in initial teacher education enrolment trends, an ageing workforce and growing student enrolments may contribute to teacher shortages in the future. Improving labour demand and supply data collection and developing a national model of the teacher workforce, would help Governments better manage local shortages and out-of-field teaching.

Specific actions should address the critical role of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce and a workforce that has the skills to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and knowledge,

similarly, promote a non-Indigenous teacher workforce free of bias. A NSW review of Aboriginal Education found that First Nations students and families continue to be positioned within deficit discourses, regressive colonial attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also reflected in educational practice at local levels⁶. More needs to be done to change this view in education practice and training, irrelevant of whether or not there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a classroom.

An increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers also means having more role models⁷ to foster higher aspirations among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and contribute to the development of culturally safe learning environments⁸. Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers offer a cost-effective means of staffing in remote locations. Non-Indigenous teachers in remote communities have a higher turnover rate⁹, whereas local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers tend to have an ongoing connection to their area, usually stay longer and provide stability that the students often miss out on with non-Indigenous teachers¹⁰.

At the same time, it is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are not expected to provide cultural training to other staff if that is not part of their job. It is the responsibility of all school staff and school leaders to develop their own cultural awareness and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students and families¹¹. If additional expectations are placed on First Nations teachers for cultural or other training, this should be agreed to upfront and appropriately reflected and remunerated in teachers' working conditions.

Cultural Capability

Draft finding 3.5

There are a range of educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity cohorts

- Cultural recognition by schools, and the value placed on Indigenous knowledges by them, are key in responding to the distinct educational needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies increase inclusion and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and enrich the learning of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students too.
- Indigenous knowledges, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and how to include and empower students may be poorly understood by teachers and school leadership.

⁶ Burgess, C., & Cavanagh, P. P., 2016. Cultural immersion: Developing a community of practice of teachers and Aboriginal community members. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 45(1), 48.

⁷ Peacock, H., & Prehn, J. (2019). The importance of Aboriginal Education Workers for decolonising and promoting culture in primary schools: an analysis of the longitudinal study of Indigenous children (LSIC). *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 1-7.

⁸ Creating culturally safe classrooms and schools - <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/intercultural-development/building-a-culturally-responsive-australian-teaching-workforce>

⁹ Hall, L. (2013). The 'Come and Go' Syndrome of Teachers in Remote Indigenous Schools: Listening to the Perspective of Indigenous Teachers about What Helps Teachers to Stay and What Makes Them Go. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Vol 41. Issue 2

¹⁰ Whatman, S., McLaughlin, J., and Hart, V., 2020, Embedding Indigenous Knowledge's in Australian Initial Teacher Education: A Process Model. *Indigenizing Education*, pp 163-180

¹¹ Wood, A. M., Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Kashdan, T. B., & Hurling, R. (2011). Using personal and psychological strengths leads to increases in well-being over time: A longitudinal study and the development of the strengths use questionnaire. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50(1), 15–19.

Draft finding 3.5 of the Interim Report notes that in response to the range of educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity groups, culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies increase inclusion and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and enrich learning for all students.

A unified definition of cultural capability will assist with developing guidelines and curriculum that will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, noting that developing cultural awareness and safety is an ongoing process. Developing this definition requires partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) embraces the definition and state culturally capable educators¹² provide opportunities for all students to learn about the depth, wealth and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. NIAA agrees with the Commission that cultural safety should not just be a consideration for schools with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but for all schools and all students.

A culturally safe education and school provides a welcoming environment for students that often find they are not represented in the lessons being taught. Cultural safety is an ongoing process that acknowledges the unique and differing experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Drafting of the Final Report

NIAA suggests recommendations contained in the Final Report of the Review of the NSRA should provide clearer action for its audience. For example, Draft Recommendation 7.1 (currently 'The performance reporting framework of the next agreement') could be worded so that discernible action can be understood and taken (for example, 'The performance reporting framework **should be updated for** the next agreement').

Conclusion

Future NSRAs and bilateral agreements need to be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies to ensure the needs of First Nations students are being addressed. Engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisations and subject matter experts will ensure governments' policies are transparent in delivering substantive actions to close the gap, deliver culturally appropriate educational systems and improve outcomes for First Nation students.

It is essential the next NSRA also takes into account other commitments including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the Mparntwe Education Declaration, ensuring partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities when making decisions that impact First Nations peoples. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need to be specifically considered as priority cohort, including their individual needs and aspirations and the structural environment in which they are positioned.

Finally, by committing to evaluation of bilateral agreements and future NSRAs, governments must enhance transparency and accountability of funding, especially those identified to support priority cohorts, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Education is the key to improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and it is important that policies and actions are developed in partnership with those they will affect.

¹² <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/the-impact-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-educators>