



COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT COVID-19 RESPONSE INQUIRY

DATE 15 December 2023

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The Department of Social Services quickly made positive changes to ABSTUDY payments to support Indigenous students and boarding schools during the pandemic. Under the temporary arrangements, boarding students who qualified for ABSTUDY or Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) boarding payments at the start of the pandemic continued to qualify for payments. This enabled many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding schools to stay open.

After the pandemic, funding has been provided through the National Indigenous Australian Agency (NIAA) to assist boarding providers in supporting students to reconnect to school following the impacts of COVID-19 and to enable boarding providers to better address the education, health and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students and keep them engaged in school.

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

The decision to close Australia's borders by the Australian Government caused significant disruption to international student enrolments and caused significant distress to students under 18 years who were in Australia unaccompanied and were unable to return to their home country for an extended period, as well as international students who were in their home country and were unable to return to Australia to continue their learning.

While there was significant work undertaken to support the international education sector by the Department of Education, the Department of Home Affairs, Austrade and other bodies, there was no financial assistance for international education providers in any sector except the English language sector. While eventually there was a process for exemptions to the Australian Government's travel ban for Years 11 and 12 students from China, it was complex and impractical and dependent on the agreement of states and territories. The failure of the Australian Government to implement any meaningful measures to assist the welfare of overseas students was also a source of significant concern to the international education sector and damaging to Australia's international reputation.

STUDENT WELL-BEING AND SCHOOL REFUSAL/DISENGAGEMENT

Student wellbeing was a key concern for schools during the pandemic and it continues to impact students now. Ongoing trends of school refusal suggest a link between the number and duration of COVID-related lockdowns in the state or territory and an increase in school refusal.

Despite multiple requests from the non-government sector for support for student wellbeing during the pandemic, however, none was forthcoming. More recently, the current Australian Government announced a Student Wellbeing Boost to assist schools but there is still no clarity