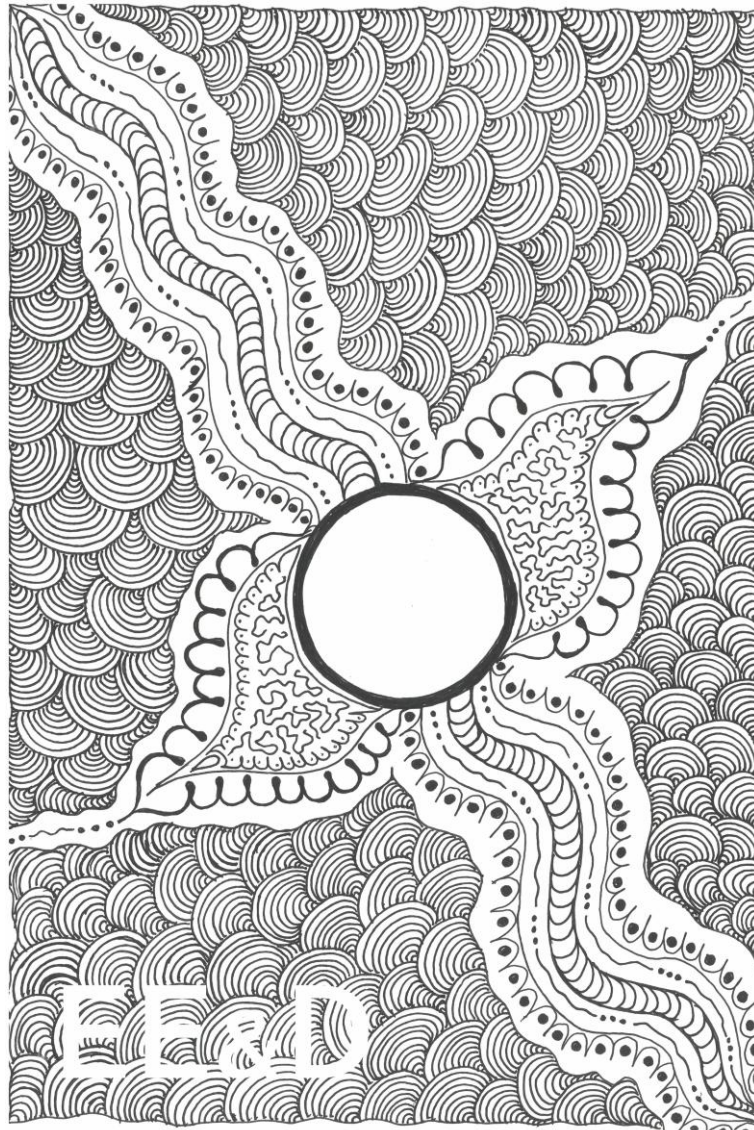




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“LIKE OIL AND WATER”: EXPLORING DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR ‘REMOTE’ FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS

W. FOGARTY, C. HOLMES, L. TAIT AND C. EVA

Education, Equity and
Development (EE&D)
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EE&D Commissioned Report

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"Like Oil and Water" - Exploring Distance Education for First Nations Students

W. Fogarty, C. Holmes, L. Tait and
C. Eva.

Abstract

This interjurisdictional report critically examines the provision of distance education for First Nations students in 'remote' Australia, highlighting systemic barriers, cultural mismatches and opportunities for reform. Drawing on historical analysis, international comparisons and mixed-method research, it reveals how distance education models, founded in settler-colonial pedagogies and reliant on digital infrastructure, often fail to meet First Nations learners' needs. Key challenges include inadequate Information and Communications Technology (ICT) access, lack of culturally relevant curriculum, limited family and community engagement, and policy frameworks prioritising boarding or centralised schooling over local solutions. The report advocates for a place-based approach grounded in First Nations knowledge systems, languages and governance structures. It details the progress of four On Country Distance Education case studies: two from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (Pukatja and Fregon/Mimili) and two from the Northern Territory (Maningrida and Galiwin'ku including surrounding Homelands). Based on these case studies, the authors propose a hub-and-spoke delivery model supported by reliable infrastructure, local workforce development and community-led monitoring. International case studies from Canada, Aotearoa and Sápmi underscore the importance of culturally responsive, community-controlled education. Recommendations focus on co-designing curricula, investing in infrastructure, building local capacity and securing sustainable funding to ensure equitable, culturally safe education for First Nations students. Ultimately, this report calls for systemic transformation toward models that uphold First Nations sovereignty, promote educational equity and strengthen cultural continuity. While respondents described distance education in 'remote' First Nations contexts as "like oil and water," this report argues a way forward is possible — but only through a nuanced, culturally grounded approach. Success depends on moving beyond generic models toward solutions co-designed with communities and embedded in local knowledge systems. Development and infrastructure are critical enablers: reliable power, robust internet connectivity and safe transport must be treated as matters of spatial justice, not optional extras. Equally important is investing in local workforce capacity and governance structures that uphold self-determination. Without these foundations, distance education risks perpetuating inequity, with them however, it can become a powerful tool for educational inclusion, cultural continuity and community empowerment.

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We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the Traditional Owners (TOs) of the communities who generously supported and participated in this report about distance education. For more details on each pilot site, please see [here](#).

- Galiwin’ku - West Arnhem Land
- Manayingkarírra (Maningrida) - West Arnhem Land
 - Gamardi
 - Buluh Kaduru
 - Gochan Jiny Jirra
- Pukatja (Ernabella) - Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands
- Kaltjiti (Fregon) and Mimili - Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands

Terminology

Throughout this report, several terms are referred to and used respectfully, as outlined in this annotated list. The authors recognise these terms may not be used consistently by all readers, we are mindful of the diverse and evolving nature of language within First Nations communities and the intersecting disciplines.

Access	The ability to reach, utilise, or acquire information, resources, or services to provide equitable education.
Asynchronous learning	Learning that occurs flexibly, allowing students to engage with materials at their own pace outside real-time learning activities.
Country	The capitalisation of the word Country is intentional in Aboriginal English to refer to the land, waters and skies which are a source of knowledge, identity, Law/Lore and life. See 'On-Country' for more.
Distance education	A form of education provision that facilitates flexible learning for students unable to attend or access curriculum through an in-person school due to personal circumstances and/or course selection.
Equity	Ensuring fairness and inclusion in education by ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of personal or social factors, to reach their educational potential.
Face-to-face	Interactions or activities that can take place either in-person, online or a combination of both, giving flexibility for learning in various situations.
First Nations	The term 'First Nations' refers to the original peoples of a region. It acknowledges the unique cultural, historical and legal status of these communities. First Nations is a collective term that encompasses diverse groups, each with their own distinct languages, traditions and social structures. When used in research, it is important to recognise and respect the specific identities, sovereignty and self-determination of First Nations peoples. This term highlights the importance of incorporating First Nations perspectives, knowledge systems and methodologies into the research process to ensure cultural relevance and accuracy.
Flexible learning	Teacher-directed options where students may choose when and where they learn, adjusting pace, content, and assessment to suit their needs.
Hybrid/blended learning	Teaching and learning that can occur in-person or online, occurring independently and not simultaneously.
Learning Management System (LMS)	An online space for asynchronous student, teacher or peer interactions.
Mainstream	The term mainstream relates to "typical Australian conventional, Western values orientated and urban- based" (Fasoli & Moss, 2007, p. 265).
Off Country	The term 'off Country' denotes the experience of First Nations peoples living away from their ancestral lands and cultural connections. It encompasses the physical and emotional disconnection from Country, which can impact cultural practices, identity and wellbeing. Research on off Country experiences often explores how First Nations individuals maintain their cultural

	connections, language and spirituality despite being geographically separated from their ancestral lands.
On Country	The term ‘on Country’ signifies the physical and spiritual connection that First Nations peoples have with their ancestral lands, waters and skies (Fogarty, 2010). It encompasses the idea that Country is not just a place, but a living entity that includes the land, sea, flora, fauna and the cultural and spiritual practices tied to it. This connection is deeply rooted in the belief that Country is a source of identity, belonging and sustenance and that it holds the stories, cultural practices and knowledge systems of the ancestors.
Remote	The term ‘remote’ is used to characterise schools and locations where more than 80 percent of the population consists of First Nations peoples and are situated in areas classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), noting that most of these locations are in ‘very remote’ areas.
Synchronous learning	Real-time interactions between students and teachers typically through a video conferencing platform.
Virtual classroom	Online space for real-time student, teacher, or peer interactions.
Virtual learning	Utilising digital tools to replicate, enable or enhance learning experiences, typically encountered in physical classrooms.
Western	The term ‘Western’ typically describes knowledge systems, methodologies and epistemologies that originate from European traditions.

Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACC	Australian Christian College
ASSoA	Alice Springs School of the Air
ANU	Australian National University
APY	A ⁿ angu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara
BIITE	Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CIPR	Centre for Indigenous Policy Research
CSRM	Centre for Social Research and Methods
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ICPA NT	Isolated Children's Parents' Association Northern Territory
ILSM	Indigenous Land and Sea Management
LoC	Learning on Country (model)
LoCP	Learning on Country Program
NLC	Northern Land Council
NT	Northern Territory
NTCET	Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training
NTSDE	Northern Territory School of Distance Education
RTE	Remote Education Tutor or Home School Teacher
SA	South Australia
SACE	South Australian Certificate of Education
SIDE	School of Isolated and Distance Education
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
VET	Vocational Education Training
VSV	Virtual Schools Victoria
WA	Western Australia

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Executive Summary

This executive summary synthesises the findings of the report "Like Oil and Water: Exploring Distance Education for 'remote' First Nations Students". The interjurisdictional report examines systemic challenges, policy landscapes, and innovative approaches to improve educational outcomes for First Nations students in 'remote' Australia. The report draws on historical analysis, international comparisons, quantitative data, and qualitative insights from stakeholders.

Background

Distance education is a form of schooling initially introduced to serve the settler population dispersed across the vast Australian continent. From the early 1900s, distance education was delivered through correspondence schools located in regional centres, with teachers mailing printed course materials to geographically isolated students living on pastoral stations, mine sites, and other such 'remote' locations (Lopes et al., 2011). From 1951, School of the Air launched out of Alice Springs and utilised two-way radio to deliver 'remote' lessons for settler students. First Nations students were not included until 1992, by this time computers were made available to senior settler students (ASSOA, 2020). Today, distance education is closely linked to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), with computers, internet and mobile phones replacing prior forms of communication technology (Halsey, 2018). Despite the promises of online learning to close the equity gap between 'remote' and urban education settings however, studies have reported a paradoxical effect, with the gap widening (Anthony & Keating, 2013; Wilks et al., 2017).

Secondary schooling options for First Nations students in 'remote' Australia are limited. Current policies prioritise off-Country boarding, creating a 'choice-less choice' for families. This report critiques deficit discourses framing 'remote' education as a problem and advocates for spatial justice, emphasising equitable distribution of resources and culturally grounded education models.

Research Aims and Methodology

The report investigates how distance education is conceptualised and delivered in 'remote' First Nations contexts. A mixed-method approach was adopted: quantitative analysis of enrolment and census data, and qualitative interviews with educators and stakeholders. Ethical clearance was obtained from AIATSIS.

Key Findings

- Current distance education providers are generally not well equipped (staffing, ICT, on ground connections, etc) to provide quality programs for First Nations students in 'remote' contexts.
- Discourse perpetuates deficit framing, marginalising First Nations students.
- Technology acts as both enabler and barrier; poor connectivity and over-reliance on screens hinder engagement.
- Students experience isolation, wellbeing challenges, and cultural disconnect in virtual settings.
- Limited family involvement and lack of consultation reduce cultural alignment.
- High staff turnover and insufficient cultural training compromise program quality.
- Curriculum lacks cultural relevance; experiential and place-based approaches are needed.
- Policy and funding favour centralising solutions like boarding; infrastructure gaps persist.

- Place-based, culturally governed models integrating language and land improve engagement and outcomes.

For how these key findings link to the recommendations see Appendix 4.

International and National Context

Global trends show increasing privatisation and commodification of distance education, often exacerbating inequities. Models from Aotearoa, Canada, and Sápmi demonstrate the benefits of culturally responsive, community-led approaches. In Australia, enrolments in distance education are rising, but mainstream models remain misaligned with First Nations' needs.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Local Governance

Develop and support strong local governance structures to ensure the local community has decision making powers in the education of their children.

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in 'remote' areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their Homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

Recommendation 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability

Invest in solar-powered charging stations and backup generators to mitigate power outages that disrupt learning to uphold equity in education by ensuring that reliable power is universally accessible to all learners, regardless of geographic location, so no student is disadvantaged by infrastructure gaps.

Recommendation 4: Reliable Internet Access

Prioritise expansion of broadband and satellite internet services to 'remote' communities, ensuring consistent connectivity for students and educators, as a matter of spatial justice to address geographic inequities and guarantee equal access to educational opportunities regardless of location.

Recommendation 5: Device Accessibility

Provide laptops, tablets and mobile devices to students who lack access to essential technology to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities and reduce the digital divide for students in 'remote' and disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 6: Scam Monitoring

The Australian distance education sector must have monitoring and evaluation practices in place to ensure local communities are not being targeted in scams or other fraudulent practices that exploit financial, personal or cultural vulnerabilities.

Recommendation 7: Enrolment Policies and Procedures

'Remote' education enrolment policies and procedures need to be simplified and streamlined to ensure equitable access for all students. Regardless of location, all Australian students and their families should have clear knowledge of and access to high-quality, culturally grounded education. Enrolment must never be the barrier to equity and inclusion.

Recommendation 8: Remove Effective Enrolment Policy in the Northern Territory (NT)

The Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT often disadvantages ‘remote’ First Nations students because it is overly complex, digitally dependent and culturally disconnected. These processes assume urban conditions, ignore mobility and cultural obligations, and lack community involvement, turning enrolment into a barrier rather than an enabler of equitable, place-based education that guarantee access to high-quality, place-based education for all students regardless of location.

Recommendation 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Work side-by-side with local communities in a development capacity to build place-based approaches to education provision to understand the localised needs of distance education provision. Where requested, develop and support blended flexible learning models of delivery that focus on cultural responsiveness.

Recommendation 10: Local Teacher Training Support

Develop strong, culturally appropriate adult training programs for local employment pathways into distance education provision with contextual training that is culturally appropriate, guided by local aspirations, and aligned with career pathways to ensure sustainable, community-led education solutions.

Recommendation 11: Staffing Innovation

Develop innovative staffing models that leverage the expertise of past educators who have previously worked in local communities and built strong relationships with students and families. These educators can play a critical role in distance education programs by maintaining cultural continuity and trust. Their involvement would help address the relational gaps often experienced in virtual learning environments. Additionally, incorporate structured opportunities for these educators to visit the community in person at least once per quarter to strengthen connections, provide face-to-face support, and ensure culturally responsive engagement.

Recommendation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge

Work towards future staffing models that support cultural safety, promotes equitable access to education. This should focus on: culturally framed inductions, ongoing evidence-based professional development and place-based curriculum models.

Recommendation 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR

Investigate and implement multimedia technologies — including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) — to make distance education more culturally appropriate, engaging and student-centred in ‘remote’ Australia. Traditional distance education often reflects mainstream pedagogical norms that may not align with the cultural values, learning styles, or lived experiences of students in ‘remote’ and Indigenous communities. Multimedia tools offer a powerful opportunity to shift the educational experience from teacher-directed instruction to student-driven exploration, while honouring local identities and knowledge systems. This could include options like:

- Culturally responsive multimedia content: storytelling through video and animation; community generated media;
- AI powered personalisation: adaptive learning platforms, conversational AI tutors;
- Virtual reality for immersive learning: place-based simulators, role play scenarios;
- Shifting the media frame from teacher-led to student-led: perspective-taking, agency and control, codesign multimedia tools with local students, educators and cultural leaders.

Recommendation 14: Develop data on the number of students undertaking distance education.

Whilst Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) maintains information on the number of students enrolled with distance education providers, the number of students who are enrolled by distance partially or entirely with schools who primarily provide in-person education, but who provide online education as well. Without this additional information, it is not possible to understand the full scope of the number of distance education students.

Recommendation 15: Generate a more robust determination of Indigenous access to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC).

Analysis in this report suggests that Indigenous school-aged children may not be accessing the AIC to the extent to which they are eligible. Further data collection may uncover a more robust understanding of the extent to which this is the case, understand the reasons why this is the case, and thereby inform how the AIC may better support Indigenous families.

Recommendation 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education.

If the distance education model is to be relied upon to provide education for ‘remotely’ located Indigenous students, a better understanding of student outcomes from these providers needs to be developed.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for First Nations students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

For how these recommendations link to the key findings see Appendix 4. Considering these recommendations, eight next steps are outlined.

Next Steps: Developing a Place-Based Approach to Distance Education

Developing a place-based approach to distance education is essential for ensuring that learning is culturally grounded, community driven, and responsive to the unique needs of First Nations learners. Our next steps prioritise self-determination, local knowledge systems and equitable access to resources while leveraging technology to bridge geographic barriers. The following framework (

Figure 1. Next Steps: Place-Based Distance Education) outlines eight interconnected steps, from establishing community governance to securing sustainable funding, together create a holistic model for delivering education that honours Country, culture and community aspirations. Below, each of the eight steps of the place-based distance education model are expanded.

Figure 1. Next Steps: Place-Based Distance Education



1. Establish Community Governance

- Form local education governance committees comprising Elders, parents, and community leaders.
- Ensure decision-making authority rests with the community to uphold self-determination.
- Develop protocols for co-designing curriculum and delivery models that reflect cultural priorities.

2. Co-Design a Place-Based Pedagogical Framework

- Embed First Nations knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices into the curriculum.
- Use two-way learning principles that integrate Indigenous and Western pedagogies.
- Prioritise experiential learning on Country, supported by digital tools for flexibility.

3. Pilot a Hub-and-Spoke Model

- Identify central hubs (community schools or learning centres) equipped for blended learning.
- Connect smaller Homelands (spokes) through mobile teaching teams and virtual classrooms.
- Schedule regular face-to-face intensives to maintain relationships and cultural continuity.

4. Address Infrastructure Gaps

- Invest in reliable power supply (solar systems, backup generators).
- Expand internet connectivity through broadband and satellite solutions as a matter of spatial justice.
- Provide devices (laptops, tablets) and culturally relevant digital resources.
- Ensure safe transport options for students and staff between hubs and spokes.

5. Build Local Workforce Capacity

- Develop contextual teacher training programs aligned with local aspirations and career pathways.
- Recruit and support community-based educators, including past teachers with strong local ties.
- Offer ongoing professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy and digital delivery.

6. Implement Monitoring and Evaluation

- Create community-led evaluation frameworks to measure success against local indicators.
- Monitor equity outcomes, cultural relevance and student engagement rather than only standardised metrics.
- Include safeguards against exploitation, scams and inappropriate content in digital platforms.

7. Secure Sustainable Funding

- Advocate for long-term government and philanthropic investment in community-controlled education.
- Link funding to infrastructure development, workforce training and culturally grounded curriculum design.

8. Develop Research about Best Practice International Models

Introduction

Secondary schooling options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (hereafter respectfully, First Nations) students living in ‘remote’ and ‘very remote’¹ Australia are limited. Over the past two decades, investments and policies have promoted ‘off Country’ boarding as a prominent education attainment option for secondary school students living across ‘remote’ parts of Australia’s north, specifically Northern Territory (NT), Western Australia (WA), Queensland (QLD) and parts of South Australia (SA) (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020). The corresponding reduction of secondary provisions in these areas has left students and families with limited options: either send students to board in a larger city within or outside the state, or remain in the community. However, this is often referred to as a “choice-less choice” (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Mander, 2012).

This interjurisdictional report reviews literature on secondary and distance education options for First Nations students living in ‘remote’ Australia. Much of the existing literature on distance education is focused on settler contexts, particularly higher (post-secondary) education (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Downes & Roberts, 2020; Harris et al., 2022; Lopes et al., 2011). There is a notable lack of research and data on secondary distance education outcomes for First Nations students in ‘remote’ Australia. This is largely due to government efforts to centralise secondary education in regional centres, away from ‘remote’ communities (Guenther, Ober, et al., 2024). It may also stem from the incompatibility of existing distance education models with ‘remote’ First Nations contexts, resulting in minimal adoption and completion (Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024; Mander, 2012). The reasons for this incompatibility will be explored later in this review. Firstly, the concept of geographical ‘remoteness’ is examined through the lens of spatial justice, as this theoretical framework is integral to the argument presented in this literature review.

The authors acknowledge that remoteness is a concept imposed by government as a scale that stems from administrative and policy frameworks to categorise regions based on their distance from urban centres. This classification often influences the allocation of resources, services and infrastructure. However, this approach can overlook the unique cultural, social and historical contexts of First Nations communities leading to disparities in access to essential services and opportunities. The imposition of such scales can also perpetuate systemic inequalities and hinder self-determination for these children, families and the wider community. For many First Nations peoples living in ‘remote’ communities, their Country is the centre of their worldview, knowledge systems, cultural and linguistic practices.

Employing the concept of spatial justice (Randell-Moon & Hynes, 2024; Tsatsou, 2022) to education in these contexts highlights the critical need to address the geographic disparities that affect First Nations communities. Here, the term social justice is defined by “linking social justice to space, examining how the distribution of resources, services and opportunities across different geographical areas can lead to inequalities” (Guenther, Holmes, et al., 2024, p. 9). When considering the spatial dimensions of inequality, it becomes evident that equitable access to quality, locally-led education that supports community aspirations and indicators of success requires not only the distribution of resources but also, culturally appropriate curricula and support systems that are tailored to the unique needs and contexts of ‘remote’ First Nations communities (Guenther, Holmes, et al., 2024; Tsatsou, 2022). This approach emphasises the importance of creating educational policies and practices that promote fairness and inclusivity, ultimately

¹ The term ‘remote’ is used to characterise schools and locations where more than 80 percent of the population consists of First Nations peoples and are situated in areas classified as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’ by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Australian Statistics Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure. (noting that most of these locations are in ‘very remote’ areas).

contributing to the overall wellbeing and empowerment of the students, their families and wider community (Randell-Moon & Hynes, 2024).

This review acknowledges that First Nations people have been practicing education on this continent for tens of thousands of years (Bishop, 2024). As the world's oldest continuing culture, Australian First Nations people have demonstrated their success in this domain (Marika, 1999). However, since colonial invasion, established First Nations pedagogies have largely been replaced with education systems imported from Western contexts, which were based on beliefs of Western superiority (Morrison et al., 2018; Rigney, 2001). In this context, schooling was used as a vehicle to instil Western values and Christianity, thereby assimilating First Nations children into a colonial agenda by undermining their culture and identity (Morrison et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2017). Such assimilation goals were officially sanctioned in government policy until 1977 (Morrison et al., 2018).

Although much has changed since First Nations people were first permitted and then compelled to attend school, systemic racism and discrimination continue to impact First Nations students, contributing to poor attendance, poor outcomes and ongoing policy interventions (Bishop, 2021). Senior Arrernte Elder, M.K. Turner with Children's Ground (2023) highlights these harms and the urgent need for education reform:

Our children too often fail or are harmed in Western education, Western assessment and Western standards. They are set up to fail. The evidence clearly demonstrates both the harmful effects of the current education system and the benefits of reform. It is time for assimilation to be dismantled (Turner & Children's Ground, 2023, p. 5).

First Nations people have consistently been proactive in advocating for educational services (Bishop, 2021, 2024; Morgan, 2019; Turner & Children's Ground, 2023). Specifically, Gumilaroi scholar Bob Morgan (2019, p. 3) emphasises the need for educational services that provide "culturally affirming learning opportunities and the formal recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty". Michelle Bishop, another Gamilaroi scholar, refers to this concept as Indigenous Education Sovereignty, which encompasses education on Indigenous terms, founded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003).

These aspirations are not exclusive to the Australian continent (Gallagher et al., 2015; Goodyear-Ka 'ōpua, 2017; Kitson & Bowes, 2010; Kukutai & Walter, 2015). First Nations communities globally have long sought self-determined education systems,² leading to Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) stating that "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning" (UN General Assembly, 2007). As a signatory to the UNDRIP, Australia has committed to upholding the rights of First Nations people to develop culturally appropriate education systems. An example of an international project that employs a human rights approach is led by The Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health. The project is focused on building a First Nations led early years education system founded upon the concept of 'home' and Country in Canada, Aotearoa (New Zealand), North America and Australia.³

Beyond international obligations, the importance of First Nations-led education models is increasingly supported by academic research (Fatima et al., 2022; Moore, 2024; Pertame Language Nest, 2024; Rong et al., 2023; Shay et al., 2022; Smith, 2003). In particular, place-based pedagogies that incorporate culture,

² See for example, the work of First Nations scholars in transforming colonial education systems in Aotearoa (G. H. Smith, 2000; L. T. Smith, 1999); Hawai'i (Goodyear-Ka'opua, 2013; Meyer, 2001), Canada (Battiste, 2019; Battiste & Barman, 1995); the United States (Deloria, 2001) and Scandinavia (Aikio-Puoskari, 2009; Keskitalo & Olsen, 2021).

³ See link for more details. <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2022/johns-hopkins-center-for-indigenous-health-awarded-278-million-through-lego-foundation-build-a-world-of-play-challenge>

kin and Country have been identified as key determinants for educational success (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020; Fogarty & Schwab, 2012; Guenther et al., 2019; Moodie et al., 2021; Turner & Children's Ground, 2023). These findings emphasise the importance of centring First Nations people as drivers of policy development to advance Indigenous education towards excellence (Shay, Miller, et al., 2024), sovereignty (Bishop, 2021) and future-orientation (Shay, Raciti, et al., 2024).

To set the scene for the report, next we outline the research questions, aims, methodology and methods to guide the reader through the discussion. The ethical considerations for the project are also discussed.

Research Questions, Aims, Methodology and Methods

In light of the literature presented above, the questions this research seeks to explore:

- What is distance education, who is it for and who decides these classifications?
- How does distance education cater to 'remote' First Nations contexts?
- What are the successes and barriers of distance education in 'remote' First Nations contexts?
- What is considered best practice 'remote' First Nations contexts?

The aim of this research is to investigate how distance education (pedagogy and practice) is used in First Nations contexts within 'remote' Australia. To do this, we take a mixed methodological approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the ways distance education is conceptualised, governed and delivered in First Nations contexts.

Place-Based Research

Philosophically, this report is underpinned by the synergy of Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2018, 2021) and place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003; Wilson, 2021). Critical Pedagogy is a powerful theoretical framework in education as it provides a lens through which educators, researchers and activists can analyse the role of education in shaping society. Place-based education is a pedagogical approach that connects experiential, contextual learning to local environments, communities and cultures. Researchers such as Gruenewald (2003), Sobel (2004), Fogarty (2010), Wilson (2021) alongside others have utilised this approach to make education relevant and meaningful to student's lived realities. As a result, the approach has greater community involvement; increased real-world learning; and deeper understandings of environmental and social issues. Bringing together the two educational traditions, a 'critical pedagogy of place-based education' (Gruenewald, 2003; McInerney et al., 2011) can uncover how education becomes a force of social change, while remaining connected to the lived experiences of the students and their wider community.

Methodology

This research utilised a mixed method approach to yield both quantitative and qualitative data. Together, these datasets are analysed in terms of their inter-related effects (Section 7: Findings).

Part 1 presents a quantitative analysis of Enrolment and Census data to provide a broad overview of the number of First Nations students enrolled in distance education and their geographical specificities.

Part 2 presents a quantitative analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Distance Education service providers. Here we analyse responses around how distance education is delivered on the ground, how content is developed and received, and what successes and barriers have emerged (see Draft Interview Guide below). We then present a summary of findings, bringing the two datasets into conversation to allow for deeper analysis to understand how distance education is used in First Nations contexts within 'remote' Australia.

See Appendix 3 for a list of all the providers invited to participate.

Ethical Considerations

An ethics application was submitted to and approved by The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) for clearance of research activities (Approval Number REC-0442). The project complies with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research (2020).

Report Overview

Taking this literature into account, this report will analyse existing literature and will incorporate several provider overviews.

- Section 1: Definitional Landscape
- Section 2: Distance Education Internationally
- Section 3: Distance Education Trends in Australia
- Section 4: Boarding as a Secondary Education Option
- Section 5: On Country/Place-Based Models
- Section 6: On Country Distance Education Project

The second part of this report introduces the qualitative and quantitative research component of this commissioned research.

- Section 7: Findings
 - o Part 1: Quantitative analysis of Enrolment and Census Data
 - o Part 2: Qualitative Data from Interviews

At the end of the report, we outline a summary of the findings, Recommendations and next steps.

Section 1: Definitional Landscape

Before exploring the literature, it is crucial to examine the definitional landscape of terms related to this field. This is particularly relevant when analysing discourse, as the definitional landscape establishes clear parameters for understanding key concepts. By carefully defining terms and themes related to literature, a critical assessment can be made of how language shapes perceptions, influences policy and reinforces systematic barriers. To set the scene, we describe what deficit discourse is and why it is significant in this literature review.

Discourses of Distance and Deficit

Discourse plays a crucial role in shaping what is accepted as ‘truth’ and influencing both individual and societal dynamics (Fogarty et al. 2018). It extends beyond language, encompassing interconnected systems of thought, ideas, beliefs, attitudes and practices that actively construct realities and define subjects (Kerins, 2012). In academic discussions, the term ‘deficit discourse’ is used to describe a way of thinking that portrays First Nations identity in terms of deficiency, failure and negativity (Fforde et al. 2013). Decolonising methodologies have grown in response, offering tools to identify and challenge deficit discourse to reveal the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape present day realities for First Nations people (Smith, 2012; Dudgeon, Milroy & Walker, 2014; Sherwood, 2013; Geia & Sweet, 2015).

Since colonisation, deficit-based assumptions have shaped interactions between Australia’s First Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Colonial ideology, grounded in racial paradigms, imposed constructed ‘truths’ that framed First Nations peoples through a lens of deficiency and primitivism, views that did not align to how they understood themselves (Dodson, 1994; Langton, 1993; Russell, 2001). These perceptions were developed in comparison to an ill-defined, idealised ‘white’ assumption of success, which shifted First Nations identity from a lived sociocultural worldview to a “problem to be solved” (Dodson, 1994, p. 3). Such thinking has real world consequences and research has demonstrated the harmful effects of racism and discrimination on the health and wellbeing of Australia’s First Peoples (Anderson, 2013; Lowe et al. 2023; McCallum et al. 2018; Paradies, Harris & Anderson, 2008). It is well documented, for example, the influence of deficit discourse in shaping First Nations policy relating to education (Fforde et al., 2013; M. Hogarth, 2017), health (Browne et al., 2018; Chittleborough et al., 2023; Fogarty, Bulloch, et al., 2018; Fogarty, Lovell, et al., 2018) and Indigenous Affairs more broadly (Pyle et al., 2018). In the field of education, deficit discourse is found to be particularly pronounced, shaping how First Nations students are treated as well as how ‘success’ is understood (Gorriage & Spillman 2008; Gray & Beresford, 2008; Lowe et al 2023; McCallum et al, 2018; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Christie, 2011; Sarra 2011).

Importantly, the purpose of examining deficit discourse is not to dismiss existing and persistent socio-economic disadvantages faced by First Nations Australians (AIHW, 2024; NIAA, 2024; Walter, 2018). Rather, it is to be mindful of how discourse shapes solutions, to identify and challenge the situations in which conversations and policies aimed at addressing disadvantage become dominated by narratives of failure and inferiority, reinforcing the idea that First Nations peoples themselves are the problem and limiting possibilities for meaningful change. Within First Nations education contexts, it is particularly critical to examine dominant terminology to reveal the definitional frameworks that shape perceptions of First Nations learners and to critically assess how these terms influence educational policies, classroom practices and student outcomes (Holmes, 2022; McCallum & Waller, 2022). By interrogating language and its underlying assumptions, educators and policymakers can work toward fostering more inclusive, culturally responsive approaches that empower First Nations students and support their success (Guenther, et al. 2024; Holmes. et al, 2025).

This is particularly relevant in the context of ‘distance’ education in which the terms used to describe the off-site mode of education provision – such as ‘correspondence’, ‘isolated’, ‘distance’ and ‘remote’ – tend to be used without definition or analysis into their historical implications. For example, the 2018 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, also known as the Halsey Review, used terms including ‘other than urban’, country, regional, the bush, outback, ‘remote’ and isolated and even ‘the back of beyond’ and ‘the sticks’ (p. 8) to describe the locations students were studying from. Absent from the review however was any attempt to define or interrogate the hierarchical implications of these terms, presenting them as neutral spatial descriptors. The role of cartography has been particularly instrumental in this spatial construction, representing one form of language that must be interrogated to understand its influence on discourse.

In the following section, the terms ‘correspondence’, ‘isolated’, ‘distance’ and ‘remote’ are investigated to reveal the nuances of deficit discourse rooted in the Australian geographical context. To do so, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach is adopted to analyse how race, power and systemic inequalities shape the education sector and the experiences of individuals within the education sector (Fairclough, 2013). CDA focuses on how ideologies, identities and social inequalities are reproduced through communication, institutional practices and discursive formations (Liu & Guo, 2016). By critically analysing education discourse, CDA investigates how meaning is constructed, how policies and curriculum shape perceptions of truth and legitimacy and, how discursive practices influence both individuals’ self-perceptions and interactions with others (Van Dijk, 1993). Here we demonstrate how such terms are used to construct a spatial hierarchy in education with real world consequences in terms of the type of education children in these locations receive.

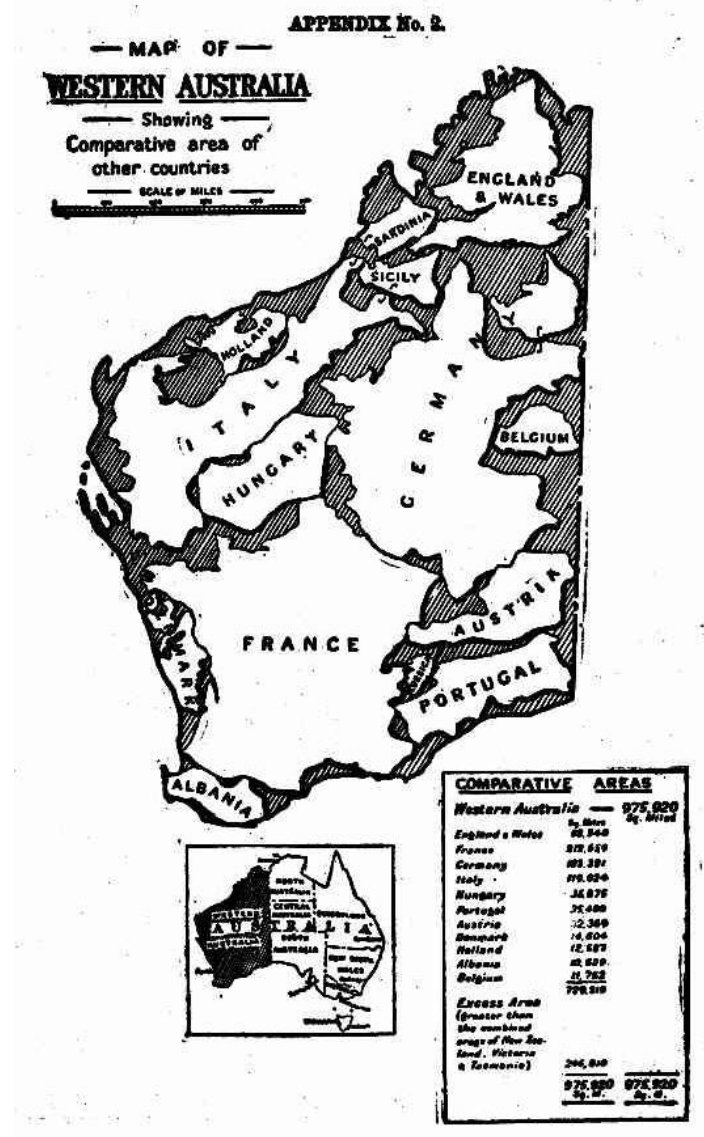
(Un)mapping of ‘Distance’

Historically, cartography has been “a weapon of colonists used to demarcate land stolen by empire” (Benson et al., 2018, p. 1). Working on behalf of the Crown, early cartographers sought to chart Australia’s ‘uncharted territory’, constructing the continent’s diverse and populated landscapes as “empty, unknown and waiting for (white) settlement” (Howitt and Jackson 1998:158). Far from neutral representations, maps have played an active role in constructing and maintaining dominant narratives about land ownership and governance. They have been used, for example, to carve up Country in terms of its resources and white ownership, becoming “tools of domination” to justify the dispossession, dispersal and inhumane treatment of First Nations peoples (Benson et al., 2018, p. 1). Over recent years, critical cartographies have emerged as a mechanism for speaking back to colonial discourses, joining efforts across the globe to decolonise the discipline of geography and academy more broadly (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Louis, 2007; Ngalakgan Country et al., 2022; Noxolo, 2017; Mesquita, 2018).

By contesting dominant cartographic practices, scholars present the project of ‘unmapping’ (Razack, 2018), a practice described as ‘counter cartography’ (Mesquita, 2018). The counter mapping process offers a framework whereby colonial cartographies can be disrupted through overlaying and recentering First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. Such practices have the potential to shift power dynamics by asserting “decolonising geographies grounded in Indigenous profoundly different ontologies” (Hunt & Stevenson, 2016, p. 373). As a process, unmapping aims to reveal the “ideologies and practices of conquest and domination” that sought to erase areas of people and livelihoods, rendering implausible “the idea of white settler innocence” (Razack, 2018, p. 11). Such efforts seek to dismantle the mirage of the colonial project as a “finished product of total epistemological and political control” to make visible First Nations presence, practices and sovereignty (Benson et al., 2018, p. 2).

Within the field of education, the concept of ‘unmapping’ and ‘counter cartography’ offers a powerful framework for disrupting settler colonial narratives embedded in current education systems (Moreton-Robinson, 2021). It draws attention to the particular spatial imaginaries produced through education materials and other media, all of which shape the ways people understand and relate to this continent. In Figure 2, for example, the state of Western Australia is depicted against comparative areas of other countries. The figure is part of a newspaper article discussing the state’s intention to withdraw from the Australian Federal Commonwealth in 1934. Concerned with the effect of federation on the prosperity of Western Australia, the paper juxtaposes European nations onto the state’s landmass as a way of communicating their argument for secession, claiming the vast size of Western Australia demands its own nationhood in order to reach its full economic potential.

Figure 2. ‘The Case for Secession’ - *The West Australian* (March 27, 1934).



(Source: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/33002219/2819154>)

From a CDA perspective, Figure 2 shows how settler-colonial spatial imaginaries become normalised within society. By delineating Western Australia with European countries, the map presents space and distance in terms familiar to colonisers, imposing a Eurocentric spatial logic that prioritises colonial governance, economic utility and territorial control. Marginalised by this cartographic representation,

however, are First Nations sovereignties, including the multitude of nations living, caring and deeply connected to that portion of land. The exercise of critical discourse analysis draws attention to the way maps, like other forms of discourse, transmit ideological positions that influence perceptions of legitimacy, authority and historical narratives.

The construction of space and distance within a settler-colonial spatial hierarchy has its roots in the early establishment of the colony, and particularly the colonial postal service. The first organised colonial postal service commenced in Warrane (Sydney Cove) in 1809 to manage the growing volume of incoming mail for the increasing population. Before 1809, mail delivery in the colony was unreliable, relying on informal agreements between transporters, storekeepers and settlers.⁴ Beyond the colony, mail distribution remained inconsistent, carried by horseback or in coaches, often taking weeks or even months to arrive.⁵ The centralisation of mail delivery at Warrane (Sydney Cove) however set into motion a spatial hierarchy in which perceptions of distance, governance and access to resources were conceptualised in relation to the colonial centre. In this case, the prioritisation of ship arrivals at Warrane as the key reference point established a Eurocentric spatial logic that positioned other locations as ‘distant’ or ‘subordinate.’ This discourse not only determined postal distribution but also informed broader frameworks of control, legitimacy and territorial authority within colonial settings.⁶

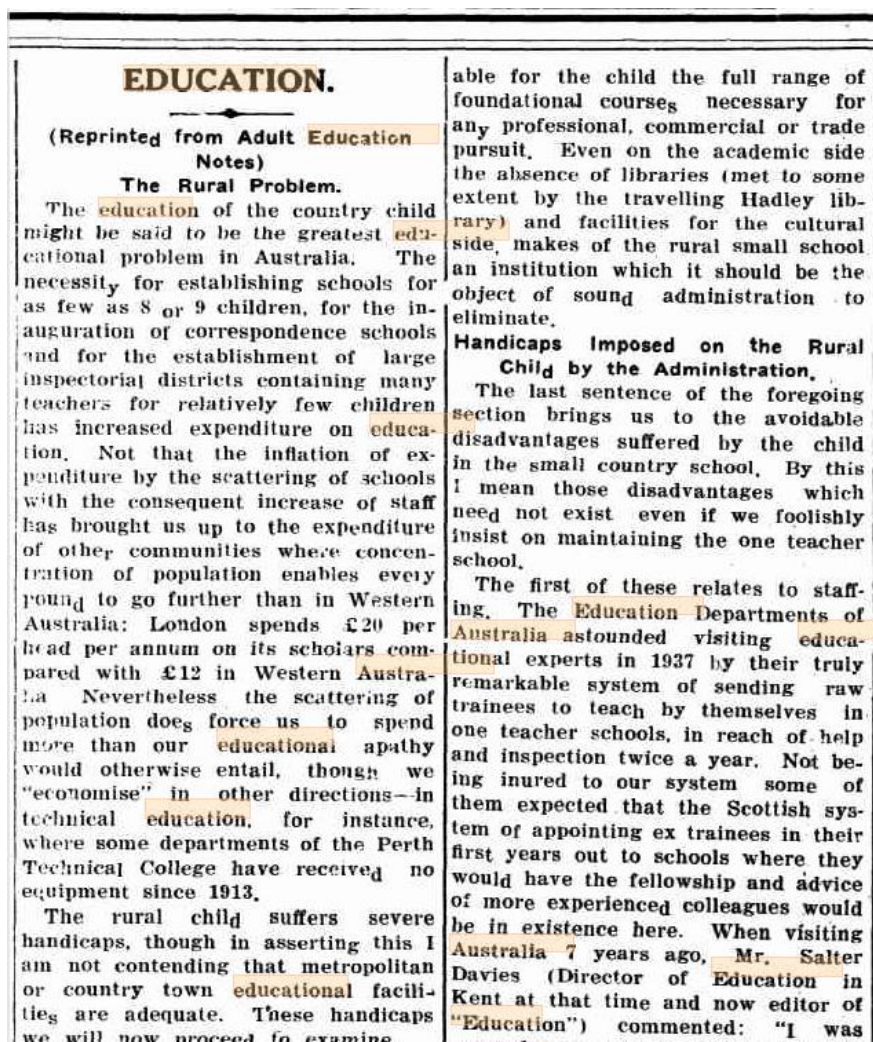
The framing of rural as problematic has been further entrenched through popular media, seen for example in the below excerpt from the *Pingelly-Brookton Leader*, a Western Australian paper July 20, 1944 (Figure 3). The article was titled: ‘The Rural Problem’ and stated: “The education of the country child might be said to be the greatest educational problem in Australia.” (p. 3). The statement positioned ‘rural’ education as a distinct and pressing challenge within the broader national framework, problematising the ‘country child’ as inherently disadvantaged due to their limited access to educational resources, qualified teachers and structured learning environments.

⁴ <https://www.naa.gov.au/help-your-research/fact-sheets/post-office-records>

⁵ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/first-post-office>

⁶ Today, Australia Post plays a pivotal role in delivering essential mail services to ‘remote’ communities. Delivery frequency of mail and smaller packages is typically once a week in remote and very remote locations however, for larger packages the recipient must travel to the Community Postal Agent (CPA) centre to collection mail, which can be 100-1000s of kilometres. Recently, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2023) put forward a submission about the modernisation of the postal service. While non-discrimination and equal access; supporting Australians in regional and remote Australia; and supporting diverse communities was discussed, the positioning of the discourse in the inquiry is framed from a western centric worldview, where mail delivery points remain relative to the colonial settler assumption of ‘close’ and ‘distant’.

Figure 3. 'The Rural Problem' - *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* (July 20, 1944).



(Source:

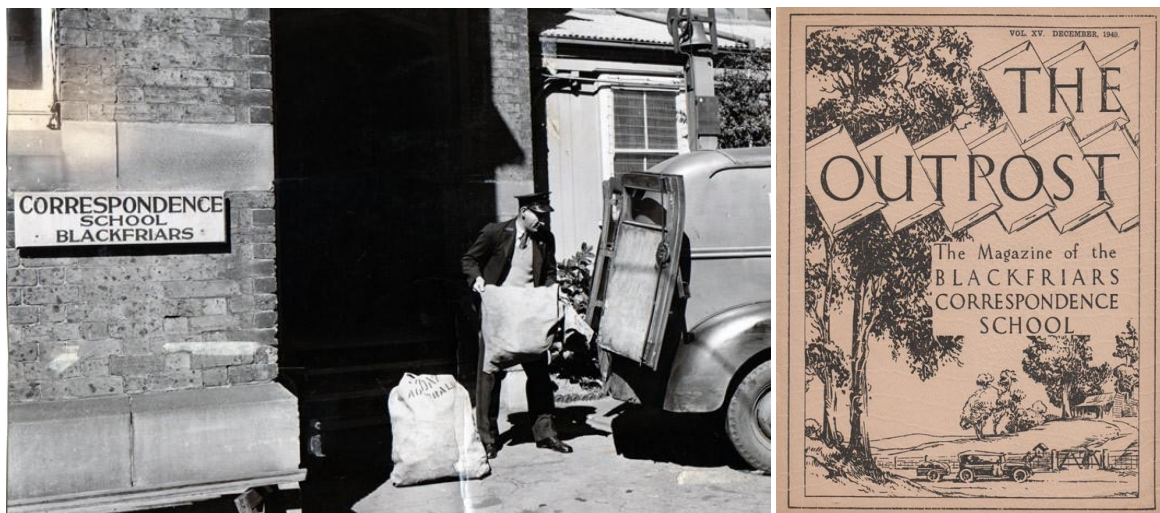
[https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/252286016?searchTerm=distance%20education%20remote%20australia\)](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/252286016?searchTerm=distance%20education%20remote%20australia)

While these examples are far from comprehensive, they serve to highlight how settler-colonial spatial imaginaries become normalised through the implicit – and at times explicit – framing of situations. By critically examining the language and symbolism embedded in these descriptive practices, we can better understand how colonial ideologies persist and shape contemporary spatial understandings. Within the field of education, the negative framing of remote and rural environments spurred advancements in 'correspondence schooling' for settler students.

‘Correspondence Schools’

In Australia, the *Education Act of 1872* led to the establishment of compulsory, secular and free schooling for settler children in Victoria, and by 1908 the remainder of the colony had followed suit. To cater for geographically isolated settler students, the number of ‘correspondence schools’, or schools that provided correspondence options, grew from early 20th century (see Figure 4) onwards (Radcliffe, 2023; Freeman, 1993). Predominately based in urban centres, correspondence schools operated through the postal service, delivering learning materials and collecting student work. Educational materials were developed from the urban centres where teachers lived, reflecting the values and worldviews of settler-colonial urban contexts. Victoria began this approach, introducing secondary-level correspondence education in 1909, followed by primary-level courses in 1914, a model soon adopted by other states - New South Wales (1916), Tasmania (1919), South Australia (1920), and Queensland (1922).⁷ It is important to note, correspondence schooling did not cater for First Nations students during this time (1909-1950s) as many First Nations children were either being forced into unpaid (slave) labour or Christian run missions with classes delivered in-person by missionaries (HREOC, 1997). While settler students had the option of secular schooling, the education received by First Nations children during this period was firmly grounded in Christian evangelism, forcing children to eschew their kin and culture to become God-fearing, ‘clean’, and hardworking disciples (Christie, 1995).

Figure 4. Blackfriars Correspondence School (left) and Magazine Vol XV, December 1949 (right)



(Source: <https://sydneyh-d.schools.nsw.gov.au/about-our-school/history-of-distance-education--de-.html>)

For settler children in ‘remote’ areas, correspondence schools faced many challenges as learning packages often took weeks to arrive, marking would take months to be returned and there was a social disconnect as students never met fellow peers or their teachers. The logistical challenges involved providing education – from colonial centres to ‘remote’ locations – contributed to the portrayal of rural living people as being on “the ‘edge’ of civilisation” (Reid, 2017, p. 95) . This issue is further illustrated in the following excerpt from the May 1 1922, edition of *The Daily Mail Brisbane* (see Figure 5).

⁷ <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/australia-learning-at-home-since-1914>

Figure 5. Education by Post' - The Daily Mail Brisbane (May 1, 1922).



(Source: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/213151814?searchTerm=distance%20education%20remote%20australia>)

The article titled 'Education by Post' focused on the challenges of equitable access to education in the early twentieth century, highlighting how distance shaped the availability of 'civilised' resources for remote settlers. As the article notes,

Australia being a land of magnificent distances, naturally has a number of its remote settlers outside the radius of the regular refinements of civilisation (The Daily Mail Brisbane, 1922, p. 6).

From a CDA perspective, the use of language – largely characteristic of its era – can be analysed for its implicit assumptions. The 'magnificent distances', for example, implies the space between one location and another, or one colonial outpost to another. Those located in the space between, considered outside the radius of civilisation, therefore lacks the refinement gained through a formal education, which their geographical location excludes them from. Here the notion that 'isolated' settlers remain outside 'civilisation' feeds into a spatial imaginary that presents remoteness on deficit terms. Significantly in this example, the issue of remoteness only applies to settlers. First Nations children and their families remain absent from the narrative. By the middle of the century however, new forms of technology were emerging, and this had an impact on remote education practices for both settlers and First Nations students, bringing new discourse.

'Isolated'

During the late 1950s and 1960s, the Royal Flying Doctor Service's two-way radio network was repurposed to establish the School of the Air (Evans & Jakupc, 2023), enabling real-time communication between teachers and students (Figure 6). The schools aimed to connect settler children in 'isolated' areas, bringing a sense of community and belonging. In 1971, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) formed to advocate for the educational needs and aspirations of their children. Two years after, the Commonwealth introduced the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme in 1973, providing financial assistance and support to isolated students and their families. While the School of the Air was developed to address geographic 'isolation' (see Figure 6), its first 40 years of operation was solely focused on the settler cohort. First Nations students were not included until 1992, the same year Toshiba laptops were made available to senior settler students (ASSOA, 2020).⁸

Figure 6. 'World First School Of Air Opened' - *The Adelaide Advertiser* (June 9, 1951).



(Source: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/45718205>)

The term 'isolated' is defined as 'being set apart from others', used in this context to refer to the isolate student, geographically separated from their teacher, classmates and urban centres (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Within a settler-colonial logic, isolated is framed on negative terms where the distance from urban centres is assumed to equate to disconnection. This perspective reinforces a hierarchical spatial structure that privileges settler urban spaces while marginalising First Nations ontologies (Moreton-Robinson, 2021). In particular, Country is central to many First Nations students' ontology, it is a source of strength and being on Country is described as foundational to First Nations identity and wellbeing (Biddle & Sweet, 2012; Fatima et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2021). As a result, isolation – as understood within a settler-colonial logic, that is, separated from the settler urban centre – is not seen as a negative within many First Nations contexts. Indeed, for many First Nations children living in these areas, being isolated or sheltered from colonial centres is linked to positive outcomes (Fogarty et al., 2024). Being isolated from Country, kin and culture, on the other hand, is more commonly linked to negative outcomes including education drop-out, poor mental wellbeing and ill-health (Guenther, Ober, et al., 2024a, 2024b; Holmes et al., 2024; Lowe et al.,

⁸ 5.4.3 Acceptable study locations Students for whom these allowances are paid normally study from home. However, the following study arrangements are also acceptable: • The student studies at and uses facilities of a school that does not offer tuition at the student's level (e.g. a secondary student who has access to a local primary school). • The student studies at premises that are not classified as a mainstream school and do not provide formal tuition by qualified teachers. • The student studies at a 'Homeland Learning Centre'. Note: Applicants whose students study at Homeland Learning Centres and do not direct payment of their Distance Education Allowance to the school may have their allowance quarantined under the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Act 2007. <https://guides.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2025-02/991-february-2025-aic-0.pdf>

2023; Moodie et al., 2023). By critically examining these linguistic choices, scholars expose how colonial ideologies continue to shape education policies and perceptions. Challenging these narratives is a form of decolonial resistance, pushing more than just recognition of First Nations knowledge systems and spatial understandings.

‘Distance’

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a shift in terminology from ‘isolated’ to ‘distance’ schooling. This was due to innovations in technology, particularly the internet and digital technologies, as well as the idea ‘distance’ was a more positive framing that emphasises flexibility and accessibility. The Australian Education Act (2013) defined distance education as a specific type of education provision that is categorically distinct from homeschooling. In policy terms, the word distance is primarily used in geographical terms, to describe the space between where the student is located in relation to the teacher, and hence where the course materials are produced (NSW Department of Education, 2025b). Technology is thus positioned as a means to close or shorten this gap between teacher and student (Fryer et al. 2023, AITSL 2023). A key assumption of distance education is that *greater* accessibility (through digital infrastructure) will improve educational outcomes by closing what Moore (1972) described as the ‘transactional distance’, referring to the psychological and emotional distance between the teacher and student, and among students themselves (Moore, 2013; Ottenheim et al., 2025). For students whose ontological foundations align with the curriculum this may be accurate. For example, innovations in distance education technology have been successful in improving connectivity and opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration, as well as introducing broader curriculum options than what was available locally and providing solutions to course scheduling clashes. For many First Nations students living in remote locations however, innovations in technology alone fail to address the distance – understood here as both geographical and ontological – between the teacher and student, as the foundational knowledges, values and worldviews taught through the curriculum remain grounded in settler-colonial urban contexts (Downes and Roberts 2020). As a result, First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing remain largely absent from curriculum content, reinforcing underlying structures that continue to foreground settler-colonial perspectives as the ‘norm’ while marginalising First Nations knowledge systems.

This shift in terminology reflects how discourse shapes perceptions of education and accessibility. Fundamentally, the discourse surrounding distance education continues to reproduce settler frameworks, shaping educational policies in ways that overlook First Nations-led models of knowledge transmission.

‘Regional,’ ‘Rural’ and ‘Remote’

In contemporary times, the education sector often uses the terms ‘regional,’ ‘rural’ and ‘remote’ to define schools on geographical terms. The phrase ‘remote schools’ is often employed to describe schools that have high proportions of First Nations student enrolment – greater than 80 per cent – and that are located in regions the Australian Bureau of Statistics defines as ‘remote’ or ‘very remote’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). This practice continues to reinforce a discourse that often frames education as an inherent problem and should be addressed.

'Regional' and 'Rural'

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) to classify "Australia into a hierarchy of statistical areas" (ABS, 2025, p. 1).⁹ The ASGS¹⁰ uses the terms, 'regional' and 'rural' to articulate areas outside of major cities. 'Regional' is used more broadly (i.e., towns, small cities). 'Rural' encapsulates areas not considered part of any urban area (i.e., farms, rural communities). In Australia, 'rural' and 'remote' can be used together however, often 'remote' is associated with First Nations communities. There is a large body of scholarship that examines the concept of rurality and the specificities of rural education (Guenther et al., 2023). While this has primarily been articulated from the perspective of settler populations (Corbett, 2015), increasingly, First Nations issues and perspectives have gained prominence, particularly as they relate to experiences of racism in rural education (Dunn, 2001; Hogarth, 2019) and place-based pedagogies (van Gelderen & Guthadjaka, 2019). In a 2023 review of 30 years of literature from the *International and Australian Journal of Rural Education*, Guenther et al. (2023) note the most prominent and recurring theme was the centrality of community and relationships in rural education, intersecting with the importance of place in education and the prevalence of deficit discourse. Rural scholars have highlighted, for example, the stereotyping of rural localities as isolated, peripheral, disadvantaged and culturally backwards and yet, ironically, at the same time, as "the essence of the national character and founding mythology" (Corbett, 2015, p. 12). Throughout the literature, there is a widespread acceptance that the entrenched practice of problematising the rural perpetuates deficit framings of 'gaps', 'challenges' (McConaghy, 2006) and 'wicked problems' (Reid, 2017), thereby constraining possible solutions (Guenther et al., 2023). Again, these terms, 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' are constructed through a settler colonial geographical lens, positioning communities in relation to urban centres. This framing assumes that proximity to cities equates to progress, opportunity and access, while 'remoteness' is associated with disadvantage, isolation and underdevelopment.

'Remote'

The term 'remote community' refers to discreet settlements established by and/or for First Nations people spread across the NT, WA, SA and northern QLD. While some of the larger 'remote' communities or 'townships' are the product of disestablished Christian missions, cattle stations and government settlements, many if not most are sites are ancestral Homelands that were focal points of residence prior to colonisation. Many of those who were 'moved off' their ancestral Homelands as part of the process of colonisation, moved back to these sites during what is known as the 'Homelands Movement' – or Outstation Movement¹¹ of the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, some First Nations peoples moved away from government established missions, towns, and settlements as a rejection of assimilation policies, seeking to formally (re)establish communities on their ancestral Homelands (Myers & Peterson, 2016; Palmer, 2016).

In principle, Homelands were formed as a means for First Nations peoples to reclaim autonomy, maintain cultural connections and escape the social challenges prevalent in larger towns (Rowse, 2016; Steele, 1995). From a policy perspective, the term 'remote community' is largely framed as a challenging environment, characterised by geographical isolation, educational disadvantage and social dysfunction (Guenther et al., 2019; Roberts & Guenther, 2021). Education policies targeting 'remote' communities often seek to address these issues, for example combatting geographical isolation by sending students to boarding schools (Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016; O'Bryan, 2022; O'Bryan et al., 2020; Shay et al., 2023);

⁹ The ASGS was introduced in 2011 as a replacement for the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC), which had been in use since 1984. Designed as a social geography framework, the ASGS represents the distribution of people and communities and serves as a basis for releasing and analysing statistical data. To accommodate shifts in Australia's population, economy and infrastructure, the ASGS undergoes updates every five years.

¹⁰ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/statistical-geography/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs>

¹¹ It is worth noting the term 'outstation' plays into settler-colonial spatial paradigms as well. This was initially a term used by Missionaries to refer to settlements outside of the central Missions.

addressing educational disadvantage through targeted numeracy and literacy interventions (Fogarty & Kral, 2011; Fogarty, Riddle, et al., 2018; Gutierrez et al., 2021; Kral, 2007; Prior, 2013) and tackling non-attendance through punitive attendance regimes (Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014; Guenther, 2022; Holmes, Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2025; Purdie & Buckley, 2010; White, 2022). By reinforcing a discourse that often frame 'remote' education as inherently a problem, rather than acknowledging the strengths and cultural significance of learning in these communities, we argue the term 'remote' must be definitionally challenged.

For many First Nations peoples, their Country is not 'remote' (Marika et al., 2009). As Yolŋu educators Rarriwuy Marika et al. (2009, p.405) assert, "We are not remote, but at home on our Country despite its distance (geographically and ontologically) from 'mainstream' administrative centres". Indeed, Country is central to language, kinship, Law and culture. Government policies, however, often fail to reflect this perspective, treating remoteness as synonymous with disadvantage in predominately First Nations education contexts (Carson & Koster, 2012; Roberts & Guenther, 2021). Increasingly, studies are challenging deficit-based narratives by highlighting the cultural, social and ecological strengths of these locations (Fogarty, Lovell, et al., 2018; Walter 2018). For example, research has explored how remoteness fosters strong First Nations governance (Hunt & Smith, 2006; Smith & Hunt, 2008; Smith, 2005, 2016), cultural practice continuity (Holmes, Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2025) and land-based education (Fogarty, 2010; Fogarty & Schwab, 2015; Fogarty & Schwab, 2012). There is now a significant body of research showing the positive health outcomes of being on Country. These themes are returned to in the 'On Country' place-based education model section of this paper.

Summary

By examining terminology such as 'correspondence', 'isolated', 'distance', 'regional', 'rural' and 'remote' in a First Nations education context through a CDA approach, it becomes evident that education discourse is heavily shaped by colonial ideologies and Western knowledge systems. Over the course of eight decades, 'remote' education has been negatively framed as 'The Rural Problem' (Pingelly-Brookton Leader, 1944), a 'wicked problem' (Corbett & Tinkham, 2014), and more recently, a 'complex environment' (Laming, 2020). The analysis of language choice allows us to expose how colonial ideologies continue to influence education policies and wider community perspectives today. The artificial boundaries created by colonial mapping practices have left damaging legacies through their classification of Country as 'isolated', 'regional', 'rural', 'remote' and 'complex', cementing spatial hierarchies that privileges urban spaces as sites of 'modernity' while marginalising First Nations connection to Country. For First Nations peoples, however, Country is central – not peripheral or complex. Such classifications disregard the fact that these places are at the heart of cultural, law and governance structures.

Too often government policies and programs employ the terms 'isolated', 'distance', 'regional', 'rural', and 'remote' to justify interventionist approaches (particularly in education, health, economic development and infrastructure). McCallum et al. (2022) refer to these paternalistic classifications as "deficit metrics" (p. 226). Projects aiming to address deficits often leads to data collection that reproduces deficit narratives, as Walter (2018) terms "5D data" focused on disparity, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction, and difference (p. 1). Rather, this report calls for the reframing of spatial classifications to encompass First Nations-centred approaches that challenge settler-colonial assumptions embedded in these terms. Researchers such as Robyn Ober, Michelle Bishop, Jon Altman, Seán Kerins, Bill Fogarty, Kate Webb, Marnie O'Bryan, Yananymul Mununggurr, Barayuwa Mununggurr and Tony Dreise have called for terminology that acknowledges First Nations sovereignty, governance and connection to Country. Guenther, Disbray and Osborne (2016) use the term 'red dirt' to emphasise a contextualisation of the

communities. Other researchers use the term 'Homelands' instead of 'remote' as it better reflects First Nations perspectives on place and identity (Altman et al. 2018; O'Bryan et al. 2025).

Recommendations associated with Section 1: Definitional Landscape

Recommendation 1: Local Governance

Develop and support strong local governance structures to ensure the local community has decision making powers in the education of their children.

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in 'remote' areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their Homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

Section 2: Distance Education Internationally

Distance education has become popular in global education policy, driven by advances in digital technology, the need for flexible learning pathways and the imperative to reach underserved populations. Internationally, governments and institutions have embraced distance learning as a means to expand access, promote lifelong learning and respond to disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Over Section 2, we outline the policy landscape, current trends and provide an overview of distance education provision in various international contexts.

Policy Background

Education policy refers to the principles and government decisions that shape the structure, funding and goals of educational systems (Stacey & Mockler, 2024). It encompasses a wide range of issues, including curriculum standards, teacher qualifications, school governance, equity and access, and the role of technology in learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023). These policies are designed to ensure that education systems meet societal needs, promote economic development and uphold values such as inclusivity and lifelong learning (OECD, 2023). As education continues to evolve in response to global challenges and innovations, policy plays a critical role in guiding reform and ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to succeed.

Education policy plays a pivotal role in shaping public discourse and the patterns through which knowledge, values and ideologies are communicated and reinforced (OECD, 2023). Depending on the government in power and its prevailing agenda, education policy can either promote inclusive, critical thinking or reinforce specific narratives aligned with political, economic or cultural priorities (Stacey & Mockler, 2024). For instance, curriculum reforms may emphasise national identity, economic competitiveness, or social equity, reflecting the administration's broader goals. These policies influence not only what is taught but how it is taught — affecting pedagogical approaches, teacher training and assessment standards (Loughran, 2017). As a result, education becomes a tool for legitimising certain worldviews while marginalising others, subtly guiding the discourse within classrooms and across society (Fogarty, Lovell & Dodson, 2015).

In today's dynamic and fast changing world, it is critical for education policy to be evidence-informed and built on local decision making to support effective education policy and practice (OECD, 2023). Unpacking the assumptions behind education policy is critical to ensure that such policies are not seen as neutral, but rather reflect specific ideologies, interests and power structures (Morgan, 2009). By interrogating what is both included but also, excluded from policy, we begin to recognise the voices, experiences and worldviews that are amplified and those that are marginalised (Regmi, 2019). Such scrutiny reveals how dominant narratives are supported and how often these dominant narratives are in conjunction with specific political or economic agendas while, marginalised peoples are historically underrepresented (Pontis & van der Waarde, 2020).

By using Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) approach to policy analysis, known as 'What's The Problem Represented To Be' (WPR), we can understand how 'problems' are represented in policies. The WPR tool allows us to interrogate the "underlying assumptions that render these representations intelligible and the implications that follow for how lives are imagined and lived" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 6). It is important to observe the way global trends influence national policy making, thereby affecting how education is delivered on the ground.

Paying attention to power dynamics guides the process of understanding how policy shapes not just education outcomes but also, social norms and values (Thomas, 2001; Elliot, 2017). For example, a policy that emphasises standardised testing may prioritise accountability however, it can silence more holistic, place-based approaches that emphasise culturally responsive approaches to learning. Similarly, curriculum decision-making often reflects political and economic priorities, which subtly reinforces whose knowledge matters, is recognised and is reflected within curriculum. By delving into the systemic and organisation level of education policy, we can understand concrete examples of research that guide efforts in education-based research engagement (OECD, 2023).

Over this section, we outline the policy landscape internationally to better understand the Australian distance education context. In particular, we focus on international trends around commodification and privatisation of distance education models. We also explore some of the technologically driven approaches to pedagogy that are being used in several international contexts.¹² To contextualise this discussion, the following table lays out the differences between school sectors both internationally and nationally. We have adjusted Jha and Buckingham (2015) in Table 1, to reflect the Australian context.

Table 1. Differences Between School Sectors

	How is the school managed?	Fully government funded?	Can charge tuition fees?	Does the school have budget autonomy?	What is the enrolment process for students?	State/ National curriculum?	What are the teacher requirements?
Traditional public school	Government	Yes	No	In some states	Residential zoning, some selective	Yes	Must have registered teachers; school-based hiring varies between states.
Independent public school	Government/ School Boards or Councils	No	No	Yes	Residential zoning	Yes	Must have registered teachers; school-based hiring
Charter/ free school	Charter Management Organisation / Education Management Organisation / private organisation	Yes	No	Yes	Application and lottery	No	Charters: depends on district but most have school-based hiring. Free schools: school-based hiring.
Non-government school	Private organisation/ Charity	No – partly government funded	Yes	Application, some selective	Application, some selective	No	Application, some selective

Table source: Adjusted (Jha & Buckingham, 2015, p. 53).

¹² Please note that each specific international context employs its own terminology that may or may not directly translate in the Australian distance education landscape.

Policy Trends

Over the past two decades, digital technologies and online education have emerged as a critical feature of global education reforms (Molnar et al., 2023; Parreira do Amaral & Fossum, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated developments of online learning around the world as schools were forced to adapt to online delivery. Yet evidence suggests online enrolments were on the rise prior to the pandemic (Barbour & LaBonte, 2024; Barbour & Wenmoth, 2024; Digital Learning Collaborative, 2024; Woodworth et al., 2015), spurred by global education discourse that promoted distanced and online forms of learning as a key solution to educational inequity by enabling all children access to quality education, regardless of their location, economic status and personal circumstances. In this section, we briefly review the global trends which influence how education policy is shaped in Australia. Through discussion of policy trends, we trace how distance education has become an increasingly dominant force in the global education landscape more broadly. The following section delves deeper into the particular landscapes of distance education in comparable settler-colonial nations.

In Australia, as in 195 countries around the world, all children have the right to education under international treaty obligations. In particular, the 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, recognise that no child should be denied their right to education due to factors such as location, distance, language, cultural background, religious beliefs, disabilities, or gender.¹³ These circumstances must never serve as barriers to access and opportunity in learning. How different nations address these obligations is shifting, from strong state investments in public education to increasingly more market-based approaches (Adamson et al., 2016).

In the United States, the ‘school choice’ movement is positioned as a way of protecting educational freedom for all children (AFPI, 2024). Proponents of school choice policies claim it empowers parents to choose schools that best suits their child’s needs and provides incentives for public schools to improve performance (AFPI, 2024; Trump, 2025). The movement has been described by the America First Policy Institute (AFPI, 2024, p. 1) as a “new era in American education” reshaping educational and political landscapes in the US. Though not exactly new, the movement is influencing educational and political reforms beyond the United States, shaping reforms in Australia, the UK, many parts of Latin America, Nordic countries, and an increasing number of countries in the developing world (Sahlberg, 2011b).

The school choice movement is often traced back to the desegregation era, from 1954 onwards, when it became legally enforceable for public schools to accept African American students (Carlson et al., 2025; Clotfelter, 2004). This ruling then prompted many white families to seek out private providers as a way of evading the mandate, a phenomenon referred to as ‘white flight’ (Rossell, 1975). In the decades since, a ‘school choice marketplace’ has developed involving the emergence of charter schools, voucher programs, tax-credit scholarships and education savings accounts, all offering avenues for students to choose alternative schooling options beyond their district-level public school¹⁴ (Mann & Rogers, 2025). Proponents of school choice argue that if public schools were forced to be competitive, and thus behave more like they were in a marketplace, then ‘excellence would prevail’ (Adamson et al., 2016; Sahlberg, 2023, p. 2). This school of thought, today known as neoliberalism, was popularised in the 1970s and 80s by US economist

¹³ Although Australian children’s right to education should be protected through the CRC and ICESCR treaties, some state and territory governments have nevertheless chosen to ignore these obligations.

¹⁴ As a topic of substantial research, there is much evidence to suggest these initiatives, particularly charter schools, have resulted in increasing segregation along racial and economic lines as predominately white families with higher resources have the agency to choose the schools they perceive to be the best (Edwards & Anderson, 2025; Lareau & Goyette, 2014).

Milton Friedman who advocated for the privatisation of public service delivery in order to improve efficiency, promote competition and lead to higher quality services (Adamson et al., 2016).

Evidence has not always supported this hypothesis however. In Australia, investigations into neoliberal interventions within the public sector have shown the damaging impacts of privatisation, seen for example across the health sector (Anaf et al., 2024), aged-care sector (Henderson & Willis, 2020; Strachan, 2023), and early childhood education sector (Moss & Mitchell, 2024), linked to adverse population health, increases in inequalities and neglect. Within Indigenous affairs, studies have highlighted how market-driven governance models undermine community-controlled organisations and erode culturally responsive service delivery (Sullivan, 2011; 2013; 2018). Nevertheless, over the past five decades, neoliberal ideologies continue to drive the growth of private and for-profit centred approaches to education around the world, informing what Hargreaves (2001) referred to as a “new educational orthodoxy” that has since become part of what Sahlberg (2011a) described as a Global Education Reform Movement (GERM).

Global Education Reform Movement (GERM)

GERM is characterised as a series of policy approaches that promote the *commodification*, *privatisation*, *standardisation* and *digitalisation* of the education sector (Parreira do Amaral & Fossum, 2021). As discussed above, *commodification* positions education as a product to be traded, whereby consumers (parents) are free to choose the format of education that best aligns with their values, including religious, political and socio-cultural preferences (Parreira do Amaral & Fossum, 2021).

Privatisation involves the shifting of public money into the private sector for education services, conducted for example via state reform in Chile and the UK; as an incremental reform in the US; or, in social-democratic welfare states such as Netherlands and Spain, as public-private partnerships (Verger et al., 2016). Across Nordic countries – where education is valued as a universal public good – privatisation is highly contested (Ahonen, 2014; Blossing et al., 2014; Buchholtz et al., 2020; Dieudé, 2021; Frønes et al., 2020; Gustafsson & Yang Hansen, 2018). Sweden was the first of the Nordic countries to open their educational sector to private profit-making school providers in 1992, introducing a ‘free school choice’ policy that encouraged families to choose schools based on preference rather than geography (Gustafsson & Yang Hansen, 2018). This led to the growth of publicly funded private schools primarily selecting students based on ability, with students from Swedish backgrounds consistently outperforming those of immigrant background, resulting in intensifying school segregation along cultural lines (Buchholtz et al., 2020). Though Finland and Norway have been less inclined to follow suit, studies have indicated that the gradual adoption of neoliberal education reforms have similarly led to increasing segregation and polarisation between schools relating to socio-economic background (Ahonen, 2014; Dieudé, 2021; Frønes et al., 2020).

The *standardisation* of education refers to the sector-wide implementation of “uniform indicators for levels, paces, paths and outputs of education” (Parreira do Amaral & Fossum, 2021, p. 305). An integral part of standardisation involves the narrowing of curriculum combined with high-stakes testing to maximise “levels of quality, compatibility/comparability and interoperability” (Adamson et al., 2016; Parreira do Amaral & Fossum, 2021, p. 306). Student performance data then becomes currency within the education marketplace, used to attract new consumers and sell product. At an international level, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is used to measure and compare the success or failure of education systems of participating countries (Sahlberg, 2011a). Operated by OECD, PISA evaluates student performance across a range of core subject areas. Critics of PISA argue it homogenises education policies and practices worldwide, reducing diversity in place-based pedagogical approaches by encouraging participating nations to adopt ‘proven methods’ to achieve high results (Zhao, 2020). In Australia the national implementation of standardised testing, such as the National Assessment Plan –

Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and adoption of imported readymade literacy and numeracy programs such as Direct Instruction, are further examples of this attempt to control and standardise education delivery (Fogarty et al., 2015).

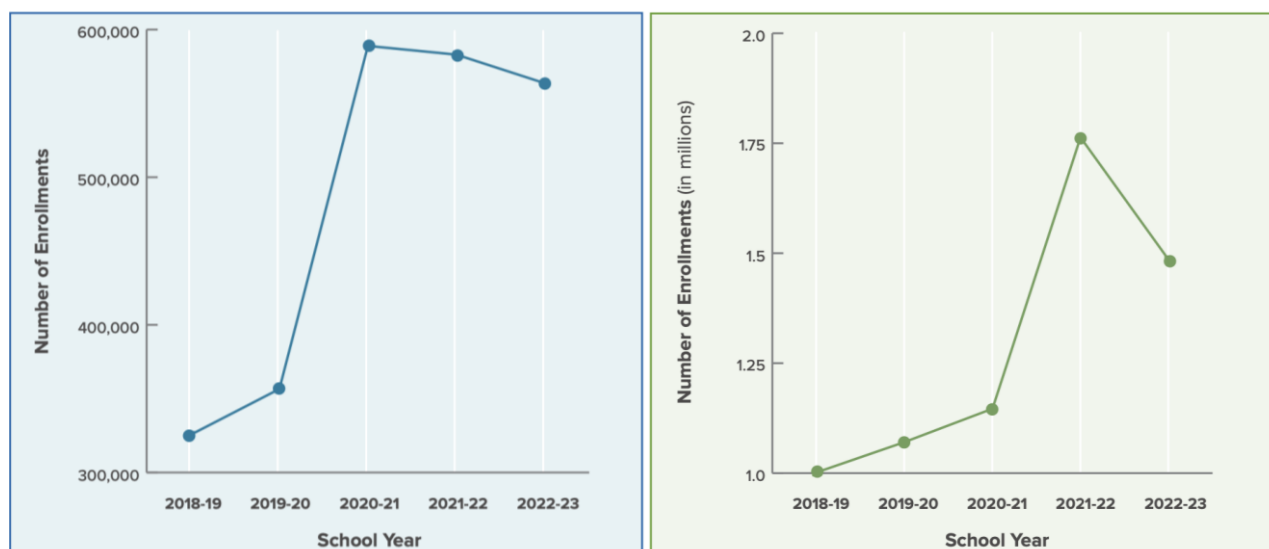
More recently, *digitalisation* has become a “hyper-trend” in the global education market with rapid improvements in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) driving education improvement discourse. Here, “digital learning environments and learning analytics have come to stand for the optimization and individualisation of learning... where access to the internet is heralded as enabling access to knowledge” (Parreira do Amaral & Fossum, 2021, p. 306). According to Parreira do Amaral and Fossum (2021, p. 306), “the so-called e-learning market is expected to be valued in the hundreds of billions of US dollars.” Critical features of the digitalisation of education involve the advent of online full-time and supplemental education providers.

Online, virtual, cyber schools

Across the world, enrolments in online learning have increased through both supplemental and full-time virtual learning programs (Woodworth et al., 2015). USA has largely been at the forefront of this trend, playing a pioneering role in the development and adoption of virtual learning. From the mid-1990s, state-wide publicly funded virtual high school operators began to emerge, such as the widely successful Florida Virtual School (Gemin et al., 2015). State Virtual Schools primarily provide supplementary programs that “complement, rather than replace, traditional schooling”, by offering, for example, expanded or specialist curriculum options, assisting with teacher shortages and/or fulfilling professional development needs (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2024, p. 8). Full-time virtual schools, on the other hand, refer to online providers of kindergarten to Year 12 (K-12) education in which all or most of the instruction is provided online. These may be operated by public, private or – in the case of charter schools - independent providers. Charter schools are considered public schools, receiving state funding based on enrolment numbers yet are independently operated as either for- or not-for-profit entities. There are a number of private for-profit companies providing education services either direct to students (as supplemental or full-time offerings) or via online courses to schools.

The diversity of online learning providers (state, private, charter) means that it is notoriously difficult to obtain accurate nationwide enrolment data as there is “no single source of K-12 online or hybrid enrolment data” (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2024, p. 1). Rather, researchers must comb through state, district, private and charter school data to weave together enrolment estimates. In a 2023 Snapshot of online learning in the USA, Figure 7 depicts both full-time (left) and supplemental (right) enrolment numbers between the 2018 – 2023 school years, highlighting the sustained growth in online learning across the nation in the post-Covid-19 environment (p. 12).

Figure 7. Full-time virtual school enrolment (left) and State Virtual School Course (supplemental; right) enrolment numbers over the 2018-2023 school years.



(Source: Digital Learning Collaborative, 2024, p. 12)

As depicted in Figure 7, there is a higher proportion of supplemental virtual enrolments versus full-time virtual school enrolments, measured in the millions rather than thousands. Additionally, the graphs chart a steady rise in (both) enrolments prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The year 2020 saw a dramatic uptake in online learning due to the pandemic¹⁵ however the years since have seen a stabilisation of enrolments well above pre-pandemic levels, with full-time online enrolments experiencing less of a decline than supplemental programs. According to the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), since Covid enrolment in virtual charter schools was faster than enrolment in other types of public schools (GAO, 2022).

Full-time online schools are primarily targeted at students who require extra flexibility due to work commitments, illness, disabilities, bullying, caring duties, natural disasters, poverty or high rates of mobility. They promote an improved educational experience for students however the growing number of providers has led to a crowded marketplace, making it difficult for families to choose the best option for their children (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2024). While the majority of virtual learning providers are either state run (or affiliated entities) and/or not-for-profit entities, student enrolments tend favour for-profit entities. For example, in the 2021-22 school year, private for-profit organisations operated 32% of all full-time virtual schools yet accounted for 52% of enrolment (Molnar et al., 2023). Student enrolment at these schools was on average four times higher than at non-profit or public online providers, meaning each school caters for significantly higher numbers of students, thereby receiving higher proportions of state government funding. Growing evidence suggests that for-profit models are not always the best options for students however (Molnar et al., 2023; Raymond et al., 2023; Woodworth et al., 2015).

As the sector with the highest rate of enrolments, the for-profit charter model of full-time virtual schooling provides an interesting case study for closer analysis. In a 2015 study by the Stanford University Centre for Research on Educational Outcomes, cyber charter schools are reported as having a graduation rate of 40%, lower overall academic growth compared to brick-and-mortar schools, and students receiving less days of learning across both maths and reading than traditional students (Woodworth et al., 2015). A

¹⁵ While the pandemic saw an increase in online learning, it is important to note there are clear differences between the 'emergency remote learning' delivered during lockdowns and the kind of 'online learning' developed by experienced educators over decades. See (see Digital Learning Collaborative, 2024 for further discussion of differences)

2023 update by the same research team concluded online charter schools produced strongly negative results (Raymond et al., 2023). The 2022 GAO review of K-12 virtual charter schools found that compared to students enrolled in brick-and-mortar public schools, those enrolled in virtual charter schools were less likely to undertake state achievement tests and their overall scores were significantly lower in the 2018-19 school year (GAO, 2022). The review further notes virtual cyber charters represented a “system of schools that resist oversight, presents “increased financial risks” to states, and produces poor student results” (GAO 2022).

The ‘Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow’ (ECOT), one of USAs largest cyber charter school of its era, presents a salient case study into the for-profit cyber charter movement. Opening in 2000, ECOT was registered as a community school in the state of Ohio, classed as a ‘public school without a school district’ and received state funding based on student enrolment. ECOT had high enrolment numbers and relatedly high student-to-teacher ratios, however the graduation rate was the lowest in the country with reports that “for every 100 students who graduate on time, 80 do not” (Rich, 2016, n.p.). It was widely reported that ECOT inflated its enrolment numbers to attract more funding, while simultaneously donating substantial contributions to the political campaigns of local Republican candidates (E. L. Bishop, 2019). In 2018, ECOT was forced to close after a review into its reporting found inconsistencies between enrolment versus participation, with students logging into the school platform an average of 1 hour per day versus the required 25 hours per week (E. L. Bishop, 2019). While students consistently performed worse off than traditional students on standardised testing, private companies associated with ECOT and its founder were financially rewarded, enriching for-profit companies associated with ECOT by significant margins (Rich, 2016). Upon closure, ECOT was ordered to pay the State of Ohio \$80 million in tuition reimbursement.

The story of ECOT is not unique to the online charter school movement. A number of other high profile, for-profit, online charter schools have been found to be acting fraudulently over the past two decades by manipulating student attendance to obtain millions in state funding (see for example K-12 Inc/Stride). Despite recurrent scandals, cyber charters continue to receive government support and investment, enabling continued operations. Such examples of for-profit cyber charters should serve as a warning to the Australian context against opening the sector to for-profit providers. More recently, for-profit artificial intelligence (AI)-powered distance education has emerged, such as Alpha Schools, which operates across the USA. Alpha schools promotes a 2-hour learning model, whereby a 6-hour school day is synthesised into an AI-tailored 2-hour learning block. Although it is too early to comment on the program’s effectiveness, lessons from ECOT and K-12 Inc/Stride offer cause for caution.

Beyond North America, online charter and private schools are taking off, with Europe and the Asia-Pacific expected to grow substantially over the next decade. This growth in online education is supported by a global education reform movement presenting commodified, privatised, standardised and digitalised approaches to education as the solution to ensuring educational access and inclusion for all children. As the following section explores, such reforms continue to shape Australian education policy in myriad ways.

Overview of Distance Education Internationally

Here, we explore the global landscape of distance education across comparable settler-colonised nations. Specifically, Canada, Aotearoa, the United States and Scandinavia will be discussed, with particular focus on education provision for First Nations students. As in the Australian context, much of the published academic literature surrounding distance education globally concerns non-Indigenous and post-secondary contexts. There is also a lack of common language internationally regarding distance education,

contributing to the difficulty of researching the field (Barbour et al., 2011; Rood, 2022). In Aotearoa, videoconferencing was once the dominant terminology, which has now been replaced by synchronous virtual classrooms using much the same pedagogy. In Turtle Island, what is now Canada and the USA, virtual schooling and K-12 online learning are becoming more prevalent (Barbour, 2019; Barbour & Reeves, 2009). In Sápmi, that is, the ancestral land of the Sámi people stretching across the countries of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia, distance and remote learning is used predominately as a mode of teaching Sámi language and culture to those living away from their Homeland. In what follows, we unpack the distance education landscape internationally with particular focus on education provision for secondary aged First Nations students in 'remote' areas.

Aotearoa

Aotearoa has much to offer the Australian education context. As another settler-colonised nation, colonial relations between the two nations differ considerably. The Treaty of Waitangi negotiated between the colonising government and the Māori people ensures Māori retain decision-making authority over their own affairs including education. Te Reo Māori (Māori language) is an official language taught in school with the dual naming of places and institutions widely visible around the country. Kaupapa Māori is an established education pedagogy taught in some schools, based on Māori worldviews, substantial use of te reo Māori as the medium of education delivery, significant Māori leadership, and strong relationships with whānau (extended family), local iwi (nation or tribe) and Māori communities (Ministry of Education, 2024). In 2023, Māori learners constituted 25% of all school students. Evidence suggests Māori students have higher rates of success when engaged in Kaupapa Māori Education (Ministry of Education, 2024).

Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura) is Aotearoa's official state distance education provider for early childhood to year 13. In 2022, Te Kura accounted for over 90% of secondary distance learning (Barbour & Wenmoth, 2024). According to the school website, Te Kura has the highest number of Māori students. Te Kura is working towards becoming a bilingual organisation and is expanding their implementation of te reo Māori and Kaupapa Māori learning programs across the school (Te Kura, 2021).

Aotearoa also have two well-established virtual learning networks, Kōtui Ako and NetNZ, which connect schools into e-learning clusters as a way of providing students with supplemental extended course offerings. Beginning in the early 2000s, Kaupapa Ara Whakawhiti Mātauranga (KAWM) was the first e-learning cluster in Aotearoa to form, involving a group of Māori boarding schools networking together to provide students with a wider curriculum in te reo Māori via video conferencing technologies (Waiti, 2005). Following the establishment of KAWM, e-learning clusters grew exponentially, providing virtual learning opportunities across Aotearoa to all students (R. Roberts, 2009, p. 96). E-learning clusters were founded in a model of reciprocity in which online resources, teaching approaches and administration is shared within and across clusters (Alexander, 2022; R. Roberts, 2009). Each cluster contained its own ePrincipal, eDean, and eTeachers made up of existing staff from the satellite schools. In practice, this allowed smaller schools access to a wider curriculum by drawing on the skills or expertise of teachers from other schools within the cluster using a virtual classroom. E-classes required supervision from a local teacher while the role of the eDean was to ensure support mechanisms were in place for each student (Alexander, 2022).

Distance education researcher Carolyn Bennet (2016, also known as Alexander-Bennett and Rood) suggests virtual learning provides equity for Māori learners by allowing them to stay in community with family support structures in place, while also allowing smaller schools to maintain sustainable school populations without threat of closure (Rood & Barbour, 2024). Both Tiakiwai and Tiakiwai (2010) and Rood and Barbour (2024) concluded, however, there was a scarcity of research specifically examining the needs and experiences of Māori students in virtual learning environments and called for further research to

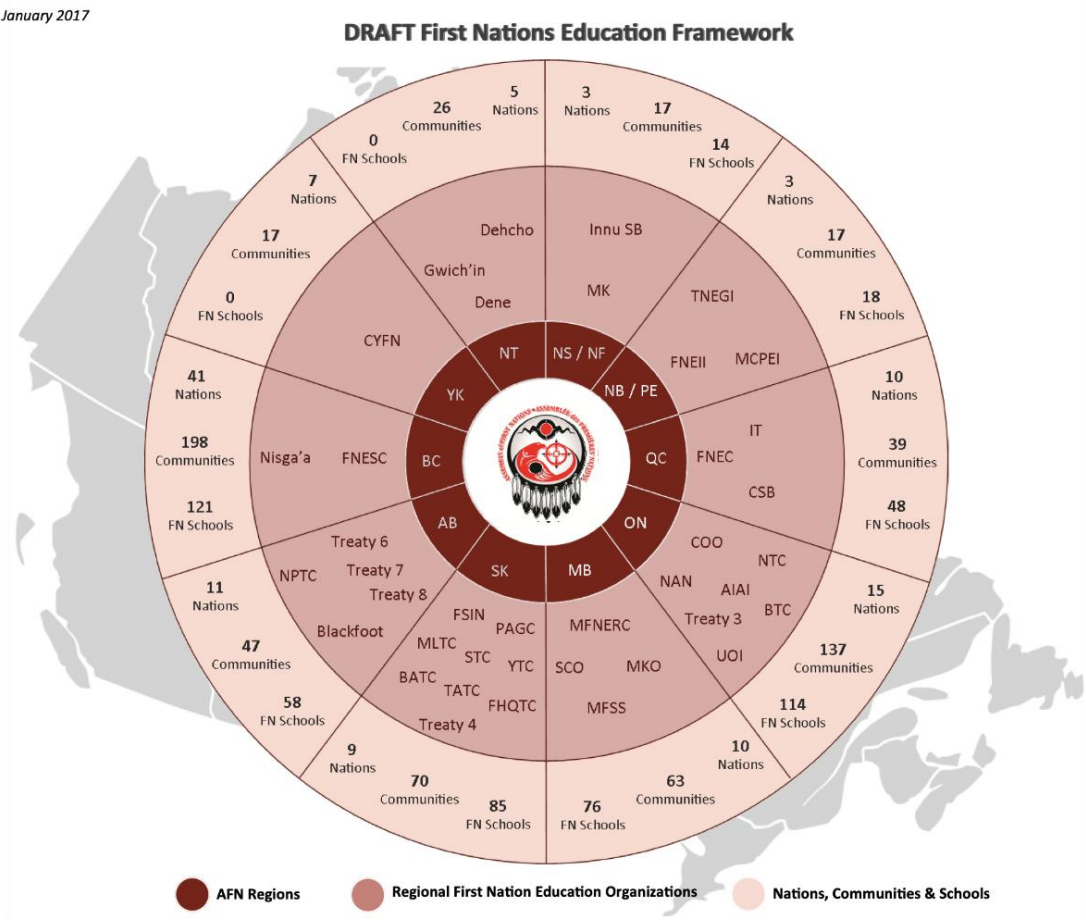
ensure culturally responsive and equitable educational opportunities. Nevertheless, Aotearoa offers significant learning opportunities for the Australian context through its inclusion of Māori language and pedagogy in distance education provision.

Canada

Canada is a settler-colonised nation comparable to Australia in that it is a nation made up of hundreds of First Nations spread across vast territory. Similarly, those who colonised and settled in both nations implemented related regimes of cultural erasure by removing First Nations children from their families, culture and land to assimilate into dominant Euro-Christian societies. Despite similar colonial beginnings, however, Canada’s negotiation of treaties with First Nations groups as well as its formal recognition of the intergenerational trauma caused by the residential school system through a truth-telling commission sets it apart from the Australian context (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Today, Canada is a confederation of 13 regions: 10 provinces and three territories that each have their own Ministries for Education (LaBonte & Barbour, 2024). Schools within First Nations lands often fall under Federal jurisdiction, rather than provincial or territorial however in some cases they fall under both. First Nations have inherent Treaty right to assert jurisdiction over education, and this looks different in each region. As depicted in Figure 8 below, each region has varying numbers of Nations, Communities and First Nations schools:

Figure 8. First Nations Elementary-Secondary Education bodies across Canada



(Source: https://education.afn.ca/afntoolkit/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/book_11_1_1_glance.png)

In British Columbia (BC) for example, four First Nations have taken jurisdiction over education, meaning they are now the recognised law-making authority over their K-12 education systems including authority over teaching certification, school certification, graduation requirements, curriculum and course approvals. They are supported by the First Nations Education Authority (FNEA) to develop their capacity to provide education on First Nation land. Under the *Principals of First Nation Control of First Nation Education*, sharing data is a First Nations decision and as a result, between 2017 - 2026, no program level data was publicly available (Barbour & LaBonte, 2023). In the 2023-24 school year, it was estimated that there were approximately 4000 students engaged in distance and online learning based on school surveys, however the number of students involved in supplemental or blended programs is unknown.

Across Canada, distance education is referred to using a variety of terms in legislation or regulation including distance learning, distance education, online learning, online education and remote learning. At present, there are four identified¹⁶ First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit K-12 E-learning programs or schools. Two are in Ontario (i.e., Keewaytinook Internet High School and Wahsa Distance Education Centre), one in Manitoba (i.e., Wapaskwa Virtual Collegiate), and one in Alberta (i.e., SCcyber E-learning Community). It is important to note that there have been a number of other First Nations, Métis and Inuit e-learning programs which have ceased operation in recent years (in part due to changes in federal regulations on the funding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit education) (Barbour & LaBonte, 2023). All four schools follow curriculum set out by the Ministry of Education within their jurisdiction while two of the providers (Wahsa and SCcyber) offer courses for adult learners as well. In Ontario, where Keewaytinook and Wahsa are based, the government has committed to making distance education widely available by ensuring all communities have access to broadband. It is also the only jurisdiction that requires online learning for a student to graduate. Other jurisdictions have been slower to adapt.

First Nation controlled e-learning schools emerged in response to the lack of local options for First Nations students living in geographically 'remote' parts of Canada. As in Australia, many schools in Canada's 'remote' communities finish at year 7, requiring students to either attend boarding schools in larger urban centres, away from family, culture and land, or drop out of education entirely. E-schools such as the Keewaytinook Internet High school (KIHS) were designed to keep students in community (State of the Nation, 2025). KIHS is a private, asynchronous online high school servicing 14 First Nations communities in Northern Ontario since 2000. The e-school has a physical distance education classroom in each community, re-purposing space within a library or community centre to deliver classes. All teachers that work with KIHS live and work from one of each of the communities, teaching from the distance education classroom in their specialist area to KIHS students across the region (Beaton & Carpenter, 2016). The remainder of the teacher's time is spent supporting and mentoring students in the community, whose attendance is required to complete required work presented online. This approach is supported by the evidence, notably a study into distance education for First Nations students in a Western Canadian college found personal interaction with instructors and peers was essential to success (Cochrane and Maposa, 2018). Teachers stationed in each community work closely with parents and community members to support families to understand what is involved and what educational options exist for their children.

One enabler for educational success for First Nations students has been an initiative called Teach for Canada (TfC), inspired by the Teach for All (TFAll) model. TFAll is a global network of programmes spread across 50 countries focused on radically transforming education systems by recruiting high-achieving graduates to teach for two years in under-resourced schools (Thomas et al., 2020). Emerging from the USA and the UK, TFAll is described as a free-market 'philanthro-capitalist' solution to educational disparity, as part of the globalisation of education (p. 53). While TfC is inspired by elements of TFAll, it remains an

¹⁶ Note there may be others that are not specifically identified for First Nations students.

unaffiliated entity adapted to the northern Canadian context. In Canada, TfC is a non-profit organisation which “partners with northern First Nations communities to recruit, prepare and support committed teachers” (TfC website 2025). This program recognises the unique skills teachers need for working in First Nations communities, where past education policies have disenfranchised and traumatised many older generations. TfC provides training and ongoing support for teachers to ensure communities are receiving quality, culturally appropriate education, following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action on Education (TfC, 2025). This ensures teachers with the right personalities, motivations and competencies are being recruited. TfC has much to offer the Australian context where high financial incentives and minimal oversight or support for teachers in ‘remote’ locations has become the norm, attracting and retaining teachers that may not have the required skills, attitudes and mindsets for ‘remote’ teaching.

The United States of America

Like Canada and Australia, the United States is made up of hundreds of sovereign First Nations groups, or tribes. The US similarly implemented regimes of cultural erasure through the use of boarding schools with the stated aim to “kill the Indian to save the man” (M. J. Mann, 2024). According to government reporting, there were more than 400 such government-run boarding schools across the nation, many of which were in operation until 1969 (Murkowski, 2025). At the time of writing, a bill for the establishment of a Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies is under consideration with the US Congress. In the period between 1778-1871, the United States negotiated 378 treaties with Native American tribes, 147 of which included provisions for education (Reinhardt et al., 2020). Federally recognised tribes are eligible to operate and control their own schools and there are approximately 187 schools for Native American students, 130 of which are tribally controlled elementary and secondary schools and 55 operated by the Bureau of Indian Education.

For many Native American students however, tribally operated schools remain out of reach. According to a US Government Accountability Office review (GAO, 2019), 84% of school districts with high numbers of Native American students do not have options other than traditional public schools. The report notes that because Native American students account for small percentages of all students in these districts, “schools are less likely to have curricula that reflect Indian students’ cultural identity” (GAO, 2019, p. 2). These findings help to contextualise data by Reinhardt et al. (2020) which states 90% of Native American students attended public schools under state (rather than tribal) jurisdiction while less than 7% attended Bureau of Indian Education schools (Reinhardt et al., 2020, p. 6).

Some virtual schools, predominately online charters, propose to fill this gap by promoting culturally relevant curricula. Epic Charter Schools (ECS), Oklahoma’s largest online school, is one such provider. Its website advertises a Native American Program which provides language revitalisation efforts, hands-on cultural camps and culturally enriched academic support (Epic Charters website 2023). Though officially registered as a not-for-profit organisation, ECS is affiliated with a for-profit management company who manage the school’s finances. As of 2022, the school’s two co-founders, who also run the for-profit management company, are facing charges of defrauding taxpayers of tens of millions of dollars over a decade (Palmer, 2024). Summit Virtual Academy is another online education provider with a targeted Native Student Program. The virtual academy is registered as a private school though is part of a traditional public school district. The Native Student Program is described as a supplemental program designed to assist students with “culturally unique academic needs” through additional academic support, cultural programs and activities and culturally relevant curriculum (Summit Virtual Academy website 2025). There is little information online to gauge how this program works in practice nor the experiences of Native students.

Across the board, there is scant research into the experiences of Native American students studying virtually. One exception is a doctoral study published in 2011 recounting the experiences of five Native American students enrolled in a Virtual High School (Grant, 2011). The research found that essential factors for successful course completion included the support of mentors; provider and programme flexibility over rigid academic expectations; engagement activities including culturally grounded field trips; and incorporating tribal language and culture throughout course delivery and curriculum. The research notes, however, the cost of educating each student per year was approximately 10 times greater than the state average and three times higher for any school serving high numbers of Native American students (p. 94). As a result, the program faced constant scrutiny by the district leadership who challenged its feasibility, suggesting that culturally sensitive distance education is not primarily a cost-effective option. It is important to note that enrolment numbers of First Nations students in virtual schools remain relatively low, averaging around 0.6% during the 2015-16 school year (GAO, 2019, p. 5).

Sápmi

Sápmi refers to the ancestral Homeland of the Sámi people, geographically stretching across four countries: Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. As in other settler-colonised nations across the world, policies of assimilation and segregation led to the forced removal of Sámi from their Homelands. Governments forbade the speaking of Sámi language rendering the nine Sámi languages critically endangered (Lindelöf & Toropainen, 2023). Today, many Sámi people live outside Sápmi, for example in Finland, 75% of children and young people with a Sámi background live outside the Sámi Homeland (Keskitalo et al., 2024a). As a result, many of the distance education programmes targeting Sámi students are geared towards teaching Sámi language and culture to those living away from their home regions. ‘Distance’ here has difference connotations to the discourse discussed at the beginning of this review. Rather than describing the geographical and cultural distance from the colonial centre, here the distance is from Sápmi, seen in this context as the centre of language, identity and culture.

Across the Nordic countries, Sámi have developed their own parliamentary model – *Sámediggi* (Sámi Parliament) – to address Sámi matters. Norway officially opened its *Sámediggi* in 1989, Sweden opened theirs in 1993 while Finland had established a Sámi Delegation advising on Sámi issues from 1973 before transitioning into *Sámediggi* in 1996 (Josefsen & Saglie, 2024). In Russia, a Sámi Assembly was established in 2010 following the *Sámediggi* model, however, it is not recognised as a political or legislative entity by Russian federal or local governments. In the Nordic countries, the *Sámediggi* is politically autonomous with varying levels of decision-making power. For example, in Norway, *Sámediggi* has regulatory authority under legislation over curricula in Sámi-specific subjects (Josefsen & Saglie, 2024); while in Sweden the *Sámediggi* advises on education matters but does not have jurisdictional authority.

Across these regions, accessing Sámi language and culture education is largely supplemental or extra-curricular offered in addition to mainstream education. In Finland, Sámi Education Institute (SAKK) established a pilot distance education program for elementary, middle and high school students allowing students to opt into online synchronous Sámi language class. As of 2022, there were around 70 schools participating in the pilot program, using innovative pedagogical models to provide culturally responsive education involving play, traditional storytelling and land-based pedagogies via online Sámi language teaching (Keskitalo et al., 2024b).

Summary

There are a multitude of models and approaches internationally that Australia can learn from, both positively and negatively. In a positive sense, we have demonstrated that in other First Nations contexts, provision of distance pedagogy is an ongoing part of different educational systems. It's difficult for us, without researching further, to make too many claims about how successful these models are or to recommend any in particular. This could be a focus for further work.

As a note of concern, there is growing evidence that distance education – as seen primarily in the US – has the potential to lend itself to commodification and the development of privatised for-profit models of delivery. While privatisation in and of itself is not problematic (within Canada it has been a necessity to access public funding), it is clear across the literature and through our consultations, that privatisation can encourage financially motivated malpractice to the detriment of the schools and communities. Similarly, school communities and regions with higher social economic status tend to garner higher quality provision of privatised distance education models leading to further exacerbations of inequity in the systems. Given the vulnerabilities of 'remote' Indigenous educational communities, any privatisation or commodification of distance learning packages must be regulated with hyper vigilance. This regulation should pertain to quality of product, appropriateness of business practice and accessibility in the cross-cultural context.

Recommendations associated with Section 2: Distance Education Internationally

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in 'remote' areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

Recommendation 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability

Invest in solar-powered charging stations and backup generators to mitigate power outages that disrupt learning to uphold equity in education by ensuring that reliable power is universally accessible to all learners, regardless of geographic location, so no student is disadvantaged by infrastructure gaps.

Recommendation 4: Reliable Internet Access

Prioritise expansion of broadband and satellite internet services to 'remote' communities, ensuring consistent connectivity for students and educators, as a matter of spatial justice to address geographic inequities and guarantee equal access to educational opportunities regardless of location.

Recommendation 5: Device Accessibility

Provide laptops, tablets and mobile devices to students who lack access to essential technology to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities and reduce the digital divide for students in 'remote' and disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 6: Scam Monitoring

The Australian distance education sector must have monitoring and evaluation practices in place to ensure local communities are not being targeted in scams or other fraudulent practices that exploit financial, personal or cultural vulnerabilities.

Recommendation 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR

Investigate and implement multimedia technologies — including AI and virtual reality (VR) — to make distance education more culturally appropriate, engaging and student-centred in ‘remote’ Australia. Traditional distance education often reflects mainstream pedagogical norms that may not align with the cultural values, learning styles, or lived experiences of students in ‘remote’ and Indigenous communities. Multimedia tools offer a powerful opportunity to shift the educational experience from teacher-directed instruction to student-driven exploration, while honouring local identities and knowledge systems. This could include options like:

- Culturally responsive multimedia content: storytelling through video and animation; community generated media;
- AI powered personalisation: adaptive learning platforms, conversational AI tutors;
- Virtual reality for immersive learning: place-based simulators, role play scenarios;
- Shifting the media frame from teacher-led to student-led: perspective-taking, agency and control, codesign multimedia tools with local students, educators and cultural leaders.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

Section 3: Distance Education Trends in Australia

In Australia, distance education is experiencing a surge in popularity (Harris et al., 2022; Radcliffe, 2023). Though originally designed for geographically isolated students, or those whose personal circumstances prevent them from regular school attendance, distance education is increasingly being taken up by students in urban or large regional centres (Radcliffe, 2023). The rise in enrolments follows global trends and is attributed to a broader cohort of students choosing distance learning over – or in addition to – attending ‘brick and mortar’ schools. For example, in Queensland there has been a 52% increase in enrolments in independent distance education providers during the 2016-2021 period (Radcliffe, 2023, p. 44). While the global Covid-19 pandemic explains part of this growth, the upward surge of enrolments preceded the pandemic (Independent Schools Queensland, 2021). Increasingly, bullying and aspirations for improved academic outcomes are primary drivers, leading parents to choose distance education over conventional ‘brick and mortar’ schools for their children (Radcliffe, 2023). The 2023 Senate inquiry into the national trend of school refusal recommended the education sector investigate ways to increase flexibility of education, including through facilitating easier access to distance education (Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment, 2023).

Section three reviews the policies which impact how distance education is delivered on the ground. In particular, national policies regarding education and First Nations contexts are reviewed before delving into the jurisdictional specificities in each state and territory. Following policy analysis, this section explores how mainstream distance education is delivered in Australia, with a focus on ‘remote’ First Nations contexts. The section then concludes with case studies of particular providers.

National Education Policy and Review Landscape

In Australia, Global Education Reform Movements have combined with a long tradition of deficit discourse in Indigenous affairs policy, as described in section one of this report (Fogarty et al., 2015). Critical analysis in education policy allows educators and researchers to challenge inequities and advocate for more inclusive practices in education that serve a broader, more democratic purpose grounded in social justice. This section summarises the relevant national policies and frameworks impacting education provision for First Nations students in ‘remote’ Australia.

Schooling Resource Standard (SRS)

The financing of public schools is based on the [Schooling Resource Standard \(SRS\)](#). The SRS stems from the Gonski Review and is made up of a base amount and six needs-based loadings. The SRS base amount is the base level of funding provided to schools each year, which is calculated at a per student basis. In 2025, this was \$13,991 for primary students and \$17,582 for Secondary students. Additional to this, there are four student-based loadings that increase the base funding for schools per student that attract one or more of the loadings. These are:

1. Student with disability loading:
 - This has three tiers of funding ranging from 33% to 312% increase in the SRS per student based on need and whether they are Primary or Secondary level.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander loading:
 - This loading increases per the proportion of Indigenous students at the school. If there is one Indigenous student, the SRS funding they attract increases by 20%, and if 100% of the students are Indigenous, the SRS loading increases to 120%.

3. Socio-educational disadvantage loading:

- This is based on the percentage of students in the lowest two quartiles of socio-educational advantage.

4. Low English language proficiency loading:

- This applies to students from a language background other than English.

More than one loading can apply where students fall into multiple brackets. Additional to student loadings there are school-based loadings, which acknowledge the economies of scale in distributing funding, and the additional costs in providing schooling in more geographically 'remote' areas. Finally, whilst non-government schools also attract this funding, this is subject to reduction per their capacity to contribute.

In totality, the calculation of the SRS for each school aims to reflect the funding required to ensure schools are adequately resourced. The SRS for each school is funded by both Federal and State governments. Prior to 2025, the Australian Government paid 20% and the relevant State or Territory the other 80% however this is due to shift under the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034 (discussed below).

Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019

The Mparntwe Declaration puts forward a vision for Australian education policy, building on three previous declarations (1989, 1999, 2008). It was signed by all Australian education ministers (i.e., state, territory and federal) in 2019. The Declaration has two distinct overarching goals with 11 'commitments to action'. Goal 1 is that the "Australian education system promotes equity and excellence", and Goal 2, "all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active informed members of the community (Education council, 2019, p. 1). The Declaration is criticised, however, for its continuation of deficit positioning of First Nations people as 'problems' to be 'fixed', using 'gap language' which ultimately ensures whiteness remains the "benchmark for what constitutes the 'ideal'" (Properjohn et al., 2024, p. 305). In addition, Burgess and Lowe (2022) criticise the privileging of neoliberal western values within the Declaration, framing the purpose of schooling as to provide skills for economic participation and thus parents who do not teach their children values and attitudes required for economic prosperity are characterised as irresponsible. What is missing, Burgess and Lowe suggested, is First Nations voices articulating success in terms of individual and community aspirations and the significant socio-cultural and economic changes needed to advance these" (p.19). The Mparntwe Declaration guided the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* and the subsequent *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* discussed below.

Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034

The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA) 2025-2034 is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, states and territories with the ambition to create a fairer education system for all, recognising that Australian schools have some of the highest levels of social segregation (OECD, 2018). The BFSA replaces the previous National School Reform Agreement expired in 2024. Under the BFSA, the Commonwealth will increase its contribution to the SRS of government schools from 20% to 25% in all states including the ACT by 2034, and from 20% to 40% in the NT by 2029. This is in recognition of the underfunding of schools in the NT per the NT government, who did not meet the SRS funding requirements. Ultimately this means that schools in the NT, despite qualifying for additional financial resources, have not historically received this, but may do once the new agreement comes to fruition.

Accountability and transparency are emphasised throughout the BFSA, with rigorous reporting mechanisms implemented to enable increased funding for the neediest schools. While the BFSA is a step

towards fairer funding, Kenway and Boden (2025, p. 2999) argue that in reality, it “barely scratches the surface” of Australia’s educational inequity crisis. The authors argued that the private school sector continues to be privileged in the Agreement, allowing them to accumulate funding at the expense of a depleting public-school sector, ultimately reducing its chances of achieving its stated aims of a fairer and more transparent school funding regime (p. 3015). In regard to First Nations education contexts, the BFSa emphasised the commitments of all levels of government towards the targets laid out in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Department of Education, 2025). The Agreement also noted the development of a First Nations Education Policy to be developed with First Nations stakeholders and released in 2026 that would work towards supporting First Nations self-determination in education (discussed below).

National Agreement on Closing the Gap, ongoing

Since its initiation in 2008, the Closing the Gap Framework has been the Australian Government’s centralised strategy for both quantifying and aiming to address areas of Indigenous disadvantage across multiple socio-economic areas. The agreement has been marred by limited progress (Productivity Commission, 2024), and criticisms over its framings (Moodie, 2020), nevertheless it represents the overarching policy strategy of Federal and State governments relating to Indigenous peoples. Of the seventeen outcome areas in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, five directly relate to educational attainment and/or participation ranging from preschool to Tertiary education. Of these five outcome areas, only one is on-track to meet its target, that being pre-school enrolment. Target 4 relates to the proportion of commencing Indigenous primary students that are assessed as developmentally on track via the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), and Target 5 relates to the proportion of Indigenous 20–24-year-olds who have attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification. Neither target is on track to meet their 2031 targets, with target 4 currently worsening. Despite the normative framings of the outcome areas themselves, the evidence base drawn on by the Productivity Commission (2025) in detailing success in Indigenous education exceeds these framings, and similarly the policy focus highlighted in the Commonwealth Government’s Annual Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (2024) looks to address issues within the education system that have served to exclude Indigenous peoples. In contrast, the 2014 Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report was explicit in its focus on attendance as its key metric, stating: *‘Getting children to school is the Australian Government’s number one priority in Indigenous Affairs’*. This priority was attempted to be met through punitive approaches to non-attendance (Mather, 2014), which is to be re-introduced in the Northern Territory (Parry, 2025) despite evidence to suggest it has the opposite effect (Cobb-Clark, 2023). Thus, though there is some shift in the political discourse and policy environment relating to Indigenous education, the normative frameworks of attendance and competition are still built into the Closing the Gap framework.

First Nations Education Policy, 2026

At the time of writing, a First Nations Education Policy (FNEP), is currently under development and is due for release in 2026. The policy is being developed in collaboration with First Nations stakeholders with a focus on implementing evidence-based approaches to build the cultural responsiveness of teaching, curriculum and resources.

Distance Education

Increasing numbers of Australian schools are interested in delivering distance education (Department of Education, n.d.). According to the Distance Education factsheet released by the Department of Education (DoE), schools interested in establishing their own distance education provision are required to ensure they meet four requirements:

1. Approval from relevant state/territory authorities;
2. The student must reside in the same state/territory as the enrolling school;
3. The student cannot already be registered as home education student; and,
4. The state/territory provides funding to the school for the distance ed students.

Non-government schools that only provide distance education are not considered a school under the *Australian Education Act 2013* and therefore are not eligible for funding (DoE, n.d.). In order to receive government funding, independent schools who meet the criteria can report students in the census only if students are enrolled on census day, have a pattern of regular attendance during the year and attend (not physically) the delivery of distance education on at least one day during census period. It is up to the school to determine what constitutes attendance for a distance ed student. The Act provides students with 45% of the SRS.

Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme

The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme¹⁷ began in 1973 to provide financial support (i.e., payments and allowances) to families whose children cannot attend local schools due to geographical isolation. There are specific guidelines¹⁸ for students of primary, secondary and certain tertiary students. Services Australia, specifically Centrelink, conduct the assessments, process the claims and make the payments on behalf of the department. Depending on student circumstances, there are a range of allowances that the AIC Scheme provides such as: Basic Boarding Allowance, Additional Boarding Allowance, Second Home Allowance, Distance Education Allowance and Pensioner Education Supplement. With the exception of the Additional Boarding Allowance, all allowances are free of means testing. In 2025, the maximum amount for the Distance Education Allowance is \$5,169 per year.¹⁹ The AIC Scheme is supported by the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA). The ICPA was established in 1971 and is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated children's educational needs and aspirations are not disadvantaged because of where they live. See Section 7: Part 1 for further discussion of the AIC.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buBYdfcl59s&t=75s>

¹⁸ <https://guides.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2025-02/991-february-2025-aic-0.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/payment-rates-assistance-for-isolated-children?context=22121>

State and Territory Level Education Policy Landscape

In Australia, jurisdiction over education lies predominately with the states and territories. Each jurisdiction – aside from the ACT – conduct some form of distance education. Jurisdictions such as Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania have largely centralised provisions, some operate multiple campuses or with curriculum supplementation programs, whereas jurisdictions such as NSW, NT, WA and QLD have multiple geographically dispersed providers including several School of the Air campuses. Similarly, each jurisdiction has some form of First Nations education policy, strategy or guiding framework. The following discussion summarises the specificities of each jurisdiction regarding First Nations and distance education. The ACT is omitted due to its lack of distance education provision and absence of ‘remote areas’ as defined by the ABS census.

Northern Territory

Historically in the Northern Territory (NT), education policy has been “characterised by policy failure” (Fogarty et al. 2015, p. 1) marked by persistent policy shortcomings. Over recent times, there have been attempts to address the complex education policy landscape however, such approaches have been geared towards conventional ‘mainstream’ educational models.

The NT has a significantly higher proportion of ‘remote’-living residents than other Australian jurisdictions with 38% of the population living in ‘remote’ and ‘very remote’ areas as defined by the 2021 ABS Census. Just over half (50.8%) of those living ‘remote’ and ‘very remote’ identify as First Nations people. This broad population dispersal has impacted education provision for First Nations students with distance education re-emerging every couple of years as a policy solution to the challenges of ‘remote’ education provision.

The 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (known as the Intervention) placed punitive restrictions on First Nations families in ‘remote’ areas, tying welfare to school attendance and forcing many people off their Homelands into increasingly overcrowded ‘prescribed communities’. Associated reforms sought to end bilingual education programs, despite strong community support. A 2020 evaluation of the Intervention noted that overall, secondary school attendance rates decreased considerably while NAPLAN results indicated little change in literacy and only incremental improvements in numeracy despite millions of dollars in investment (The Castan Centre, 2020). Under the Intervention, Homelands were seen as administratively problematic, particularly regarding the provision of standardised education. In a 2009 discussion paper released by the NT Department of Education and Training (DET), distance education was proposed as a model for primary schooling that would provide a consistent approach under ‘focused leadership’ building on initiatives such as the Katherine and Alice Springs School of the Airs (DET, 2009).

Distance education as a model for ‘remote’ First Nations students was again proposed in a 2014 review into Indigenous Education (the Wilson Review), recommending the expansion of distance education for primary students and related ICT infrastructure in Homeland communities. On the topic of secondary schooling, however, the Wilson review recommended the disestablishment of secondary provision in ‘remote’ communities in favour of boarding ‘off Country’ in urban schools due to the challenges of providing “education of quality” in ‘remote’ settings (Wilson, 2014, p. 75). This is despite findings from Biddle et al. (2004) that identify distance from a secondary school as a strong indicator for reduced attendance and completion of schooling for First Nations students (see Section 4 for further discussion into the impacts of this policy on student outcomes and wellbeing). While distance education for secondary aged students was effectively dismissed as unlikely to “deliver an education that would attract the enthusiasm of most Homelands students” and is not proposed for students “without literate adults to provide support” (Wilson, 2014, p. 144), it was nevertheless recommended for the ‘remote’ secondary

provision model, that is for students who do not move away for boarding. The Review notes that distance education could provide “potential savings and efficiencies” (p. 213) and provide a “more systematic delivery of education” for ‘remote’-living First Nations students (p. 16).

The ensuing Indigenous Education Strategy (2015-24) (IES), following recommendations of the Wilson Review, did not allocate any targeted funding to ‘very remote’ communities for secondary student engagement (Deloitte, 2023). Over the strategy period, the Health Education And Literacy (HEAL) Program was developed by the NT School of Distance Education (NTSDE) as a re-engagement and intervention program for disengaged students who remained in ‘remote’ communities. NTSDE staff support on-the-ground teachers with planning and delivery of curriculum-aligned course content. For some educators, the program addressed a key gap for student learning, however others argued it requires significant time and energy to tailor it to the learning context, with one teacher stating “you may as well design it yourself” (p. 92).

A 2023 review of Secondary Education in the NT found the IES was ultimately unsuccessful in supporting educational access and outcomes for many First Nations students (Deloitte, 2023, p. iv) with the NT regressing on multiple closing the gap targets. In response, the 2023 review recommended moving away from IES policies towards reinvesting in quality local secondary education provision that is culturally responsive, meaningful and engaging for students in ‘remote’ areas (p. 28). The 2023 review recommended ‘enhancing and embedding the systemic role of distance education schools’, as well as expanding models of practice that emphasise two-way learning, First Nations governance, ownership and authority, and cultural safety, such as the Learning on Country Program. All recommendations have been accepted as part of the Secondary Reform Program. As part of the 2024-2034 Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, increased Commonwealth funding to the SRS is conditional upon the Northern Territory Government (NTG) implementing its response to the 2023 Review of Secondary Education in the NT including the provisions around distance education expansion and implementation of culturally appropriate models of learning (Department of Education, 2024).

Western Australia

In Western Australia (WA), approximately 5.6% of the population live in ‘remote’ and ‘very remote’ areas, with 18.9% of that identifying as First Nations, according to the 2021 census. WA delivers distance education through the School for Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) and five regionally based School of the Airs, as well as a Selective Academic Program Online for those with exceptional abilities. WA also has a Virtual School Network (ViSN) established by Catholic Education Western Australia to provide high-quality online education to senior secondary students.

First Nations education policy in WA has, since colonisation, emphasised the removal of children from their home communities to attend secondary schooling in urban centres, supported through a range of government initiatives (Mander et al., 2015). As a result, ‘remote’ secondary schools have historically been under-resourced with inexperienced teaching staff, contributing to a severe lack of support for young people (Mander, 2015). A 2016 inquiry into the high rate of youth suicide found that decades of siloed, uncoordinated service provision and a lack of meaningful consultation or partnership with First Nations people have resulted in culturally and contextually inappropriate ‘solutions’ consistently failing to address youth disadvantage (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2019). The Inquiry noted greater support mechanisms are needed within schools to support students’ social and emotional wellbeing (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2019). In recognition of past failures, the Department of Education developed an Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework in 2015 with the aim of developing culturally responsive schools through setting standards for staff when working with First Nations students, families and

communities (Department of Education, 2015). Yet ongoing chronic teacher shortages and high staff turnover in 'remote' WA schools limits schools' ability to provide consistent support (Lock et al., 2012).

To address teacher shortages, the state government has implemented a Remote Teaching Service scheme designed to attract teachers to work at 'remote' schools through financial incentives and specialised leave options. The wage is significantly higher than equivalent schools across the border and upon completion of a 3-year contract, dedicated case managers help the teacher secure a position in a location of choice.²⁰ This has been expanded through the temporary 'Regional Attraction and Retention Incentive', offering up to \$7000 per teacher and up to \$20,870 per school psychologist depending on location as long as they remain at the 'remote' or 'regional' school until the end of the 2026 school year.²¹ Anecdotally, there is a commonly held belief that financial incentives such as these encourage teachers for wrong reasons (see Section 7 of this report for further discussion).

South Australia

In South Australia (SA), 3.2% of the population live in 'remote' and 'very remote' parts of the state according to the 2021 census. Of this, 9.9% identify as First Nations. The SA government provides distance education via the Open Access College (OAC) which caters to both K-12 and adult learners. OAC offers full-time and supplemental enrolments, providing a broader curriculum than what is available in local schools. OAC has a dedicated Aboriginal Education Team to support First Nations students and work with staff to embed First Nations perspectives across the curriculum and ensure culturally responsive learning,²² in line with the state government Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019-2029. Within the Strategy, First Nations cultural knowledges and languages are acknowledged as critically important and integral to educational success. Despite this acknowledgement however, all the indicators of success listed on the Strategy document rely on standardised testing, attendance and metrics of comparison with non-Indigenous peers (Department for Education, 2019). At the time of writing, the SA Australian Department of Education is currently undertaking a review into non-mainstream schooling to better understand how to support students with complex needs including those undertaking distance education (Department for Education, 2025).

Queensland

At the 2021 Census, about 2.4% of the population of Queensland lived in 'remote' or 'very remote' areas in the state with 25.7% of which identifying as First Nations. Queensland is Australia's second largest state in terms of geographic size and the most decentralised in terms of its population spread across a substantive geographic area. The process of colonisation in Queensland is regarded as one of the most violent in Australia's history. During 1820-1920, calculations of First Nations people killed by the Queensland Native Police and white pastoralists range between 24,000 -50,000, estimated by some to have represented a quarter of the population (Baldry et al., 2015; Bottoms, 2013; Evans & Ørsted-Jensen, 2014; Finnane & Richards, 2024). Queensland's interior has since been taken up by large pastoral stations that are subsequently geographically isolated from local schooling. As such, distance education has a long history in the state and maintains the highest number of providers.²³ Moreover, Queensland has a substantive and long history of missions and Christian schools, and now has the highest proportion of Pentecostals in Australia. This has created an intersection between distance and faith-based education provision, with Queensland also maintaining a number of faith-based distance education providers. The

²⁰ <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/remote-teaching-service>

²¹ <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/attraction-and-retention-incentive-for-remote-and-regional-schools>

²² <https://www.openaccess.edu.au/about-oac/aboriginal-torres-strait-islanders-community>

²³ <https://education.qld.gov.au/schools-educators/distance-education/history>

'Bringing Them Home' Report details the segregationist and subsequent assimilationist policies that permeated education provision throughout the 20th century (HREOC, 1997). Similar to other States and Territories, the 21st century has seen targeted policy making intended to improve education outcomes for Indigenous children in the state (Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal, 2004) and endeavouring to incorporate shared decision-making frameworks into designing and pursuing Indigenous educational success (Queensland Department of Education, 2025).

Victoria

Distance education in Victoria appears to have commenced in earnest from the early 1920s, catering to remotely located students via mail. Per the most recent classifications from the ABS, Victoria does not have any very 'remote' geographies, and less than 0.1% of the state's population live in 'remote' geographies. Home to Australia's 2nd largest state population, 'remote' towns in Victoria all maintain proximate state schools. As such, the development of online learning in the state is influenced more by alternate demands to geographic isolation. For example, Virtual School Victoria, the only public distance education provider in the state, offers most Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) units, catering to students who wish to undertake VCE subjects that their physical school does not provide. Therefore, online learning appears to primarily serve as a supplementary option for Victorian students, rather than a central educational provider. As the state with the longest and most extensive COVID related lockdowns, Victoria learned extensively from the experience of distance education during this period which has informed subsequent²⁴. Through the Yoorrook Justice Commission, a truth-telling commission tasked with recording evidence of historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation, significant information is available on historic practices relating to Indigenous peoples and education in Victoria. The collation of evidence by the commission details the exclusion of Indigenous children from education, the use of education as a tool of assimilation, and as a structure not designed to serve the needs of Indigenous children (Yoorrook, n.d.). Today, the Marrung strategy informs the State government's current strategy to ensure First Nations students in Victoria to 'achieve their learning aspirations' (Victorian Government, n.d).

New South Wales

New South Wales (NSW) is Australia's most populated state with the majority living along the eastern coast. According to the 2021 Census, approximately 0.4% of the NSW population live in 'remote' and 'very remote' areas, of which 19.6% identify as First Nations. The NSW Department of Education provides preschool to Year 12 distance education to over 8000 students via 11 distance education schools and the Aurora College (NSW Department of Education, 2025a). Six of the 11 provide secondary education from regionally distributed sites, while Aurora College offers a selective virtual school for 'high potential and gifted' kids in years 5-10, as well as Higher School Certificate classes for years 11 and 12. Aside from Aurora which is a selective school, eligibility to undertake distance education is based on geographical isolation, special circumstances preventing students from attending school regularly and/or those who are unable to access appropriate curriculum in their local school. According to the policy, enrolment in distance education will only be considered once all other departmental supports have been explored to ensure it is the most appropriate provision for the student (NSW Department of Education, 2025b).

A 2024-25 review into distance education across the state found that equitable access to quality education is hindered by restrictive enrolment policies and procedures, inconsistent delivery, inconsistent monitoring of student outcomes and attendance, staffing issues and high administrative responsibilities. The review made 12 system-wide recommendations including the centralisation of leadership;

²⁴ <https://learningfirst.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Remote-and-Flexible-Learning-LF-Final-report-Sep.pdf>

standardisation of data systems; implementation of consistent, flexible virtual education models of delivery; consistency in monitoring student attendance; and to realign funding to better reflect the complexities of online provision. Additionally, the review notes the increased demand for flexible learning over the past 10 years and recommends updating eligibility policy to support equitable student access regardless of location and circumstances. In regards to First Nations education contexts, the review notes that while “there are some effective practices and programs in place that support equity and excellence [for First Nations students]... access to quality education and resources remain inconsistent” (NSW Department of Education, 2025a, p. 2) As of 2024, there were 801 First Nations students enrolled in distance education, equivalent to around 10% of overall enrolment. It is reported that schools actively embed Aboriginal perspectives in their learning programs courses and resources.

Tasmania

Tasmania has one state distance education provider, the Tasmanian eSchool. Under a previous name, the eSchool has operated since 1919, providing correspondence education to primary aged students who lived three miles from their nearest school, and expanding to Secondary aged students in the 1950s. Eligibility for enrolment now has expanded beyond geographic considerations, to factor in a broad range of factors which may mean students will benefit from online learning. In 2020, 3 out of 10 students in Tasmania lived in outer ‘regional’ or ‘remote’ areas,²⁵ with Tasmania having the most decentralised population in Australia. Digital access for students in Tasmania has been a focus for the Department for Education, Children, and Young People (n.d.), including through loaning devices to students to learn online through the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual Learning Tasmania provides the opportunity for year 11 and 12 Tasmanian students to enrol in courses online that are not offered at their school.²⁶ Tasmania is also expanding a trial for virtual attendance of in-person classrooms to facilitate school attendance for students.²⁷ Tasmania’s recent review into the State’s education system aiming to improve educational outcomes in the state, did not assess the needs of First Nations students, citing time restrictions.²⁸ Educational attainment rates are lower in Tasmania than the national average, with First Nations students’ maintaining rates of educational attainment lower still (Stone et al., 2020). While in recent decades several state policies and programs have attempted to improve educational metrics for Aboriginal students in the state, the evidence to date suggests these have been unsuccessful (Stone et al., 2020).

²⁵ https://www.education.gov.au/system/files/2023-12/consultation-17829/6_Tasmania_DoE_Feedback.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au/institution/vlttasmanian-eschool/>

²⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-10-05/tasmania-remote-learning-technology-trial-for-missing-school/105583408>

²⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-01-22/independent-review-into-tasmanias-education-system/104845146>

Distance Education Providers

There are a number of public and independent providers in each state and territory providing full-time, supplementary and/or blended distance learning (Table 2). This report utilises the distance learning taxonomy outlined by Barbour and Wenmoth (2025) to describe the landscape of distance education in the Australian context. As discussed in section two, ‘full-time’ distance learning is where students undertake all their learning remotely and “do not attend a brick-and-mortar school at all” (Barbour, 2020, p. 4); ‘supplemental’ distance learning is “where students are enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school but take one or more courses [at a distance] to supplement their [in person] studies” (p. 4), and blended is when there is a mix of face-to-face and distance. Over recent years, there has been an increase in ‘brick and-mortar’ independent schools offering distance learning in addition to their face-to-face delivery.

Table 2. Distance learning landscape in Australian states and territories

State/ Territory	School vs programme	Public/ Private	Type	Name of provider	Mode of delivery
Northern Territory	School	Public	Distance school	NT School of Distance Education	Full-time & Supplemental
			School of the Air	Alice Springs Katherine	Full-time & Supplemental
		Private		Haileybury Pangea	Full-time & Supplemental
Western Australia	School	Public	Distance school	School of Isolated and Distance Education	Full-time & Supplemental
			School of the Air	Carnarvon Kalgoorlie Kimberley Meekatharra Port Hedland	Full-time & Supplemental
		Private	Catholic	Australian Christian College (ACC) – Southlands Campus	Full-time
	Programme	Private	Catholic	Virtual School Network (ViSN)	Supplemental
			Transition support	Alta1: ConnectED Program	Full-time
South Australia	School	Public	Distance school	Open Access College	Full-time & Supplemental
			School of the Air	Port Augusta	Full-time & Supplemental
		Private	Catholic	Australian Christian College	Full-time
	Programme	Non- Profit		Nature Foundation – Kids on Country™	Supplemental
Queensland	School	Public	Distance school	Capricornia School of Distance Education (Emerald) Cairns School of Distance Education Longreach School of Distance Education Charters Towers School of Distance Education	Full-time & Supplemental

				Charleville School of Distance Education Queensland Virtual STEM Academy	Supplemental
			School of the Air	Mount Isa	Full-time & Supplemental
		Private		Australian Christian College – Moreton Campus	Full-time
				Faith Christian School of Distance Education	Full-time
				Silkwood School – Virtual Learning Program	Full-time
				Hillcrest Christian College	Full-time
				Groves Christian College	Blended
				Pinnacle Academic College	Blended
				Arcadia College	Blended
				Angelorum College	Blended
				Hinchinbrook Christian School	Blended
				Jubilee Christian College	Blended
				Kingsley College (Christian)	Blended
				Riverside Christian College	Blended
				Haileybury Pangea	Full-time & Supplemental
	Programme	For profit	Homeschool	Modern Waldorf Sunshine Bridge Education	Full-time
New South Wales	School	Public	Distance school	Dubbo School of Distance Education	Full-time & Supplemental
				Finigan School of Distance Education	Full-time
				Southern Cross School of Distance Education	Full-time & Supplemental
				Sydney Distance Education High School	Full-time & Supplemental
				Camden Haven High School	Blended
				Sir Eric Woodward School	Full-time
				Bourke-Walgett School of Distance Education	Full-time & Supplemental
				North East Public School Distance Education	Fulltime
				Sydney Distance Education Primary School	Fulltime
				Aurora College	Supplemental
		Private		NSW School of Languages	Supplemental
Victoria	School	Public		Broken Hill Hay	Full-time & Supplemental
				Australian Christian College Bishop Druitt College Horizon Online Warakirri College	Full-time Full-time Blended
				Virtual School Victoria	Full-time & Supplemental
				Victorian School of Languages	Supplemental

				Victorian Virtual Learning Network	Supplemental
		Private		Haileybury Pangea	Full-time & Supplemental
				Australian Christian College Melton Christian College	Full-time Full-time
Tasmania	School	Public		Tasmanian eSchool Virtual Learning Tasmania	Blended Supplemental
		Private		Australian Christian College	Full-time
Nationwide	School	Private		Crimson Global Academy BlendED National LTD	Full-time Full-time
	Programme	Non-profit		MTC Future Ready UpSchool	Supplemental

There is a significant proportion of distance education providers located in the state of Queensland ($n=22$) versus NSW ($n= 16$), Western Australia ($n= 9$), Victoria ($n= 6$), the Northern Territory ($n= 4$) and South Australia ($n= 4$). See Section 7, Part 1 - Quantitative Analysis of Enrolment and Census Data for further discussion.

The following section reviews the available literature around how distance education works within ‘remote’ First Nations contexts.

Mainstream Distance Education in Australia: How It Works

To enrol in distance education, there are a number of preconditions that must be in place before a student can enrol. The Northern Territory School of Distance Education (NTSDE) frames these preconditions as the ‘Home School Teacher’, the ‘Third Teacher’ (learning environment) and the ‘Student.’²⁹ This framing is used to structure the discussion on how distance education works in practice, showing that for many First Nations students living in ‘remote’ communities, such conditions present significant barriers or are wholly absent.

The Home School Teacher

In mainstream distance education models, such as School of the Air and distance education schools, qualified teachers located in regional centres lead ‘remote’ classes of students. In order to be eligible to partake in distance education, each student requires an adult supervisor, what is referred to as a ‘Home School Teacher’ or ‘Remote Education Tutor’ (RET) to assist with daily school activities (Downes & Roberts, 2020; Peel et al., 2023).³⁰ Supervisors are responsible for delivering elements of the course content and overseeing student learning, which requires complex skills with minimal training or financial support (Downes & Roberts, 2020; Peel et al., 2023). In mainstream distance education, this role often falls to a parent of the student – requiring families to forego an income - or, a paid governess – a role which is reportedly difficult to recruit for (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020; Douglas, 2019). Both options require a high level of financial resources to be sustained.

The Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association Northern Territory (ICPA NT) notes in their submission to the Inquiry for Education in Remote and Complex Environments, the need for supervision is one of the most

²⁹ 2026-ntsde_student_subject_handbook_v3_final.pdf

³⁰ Other countries use different terms, such as mentor teachers, site facilitators, and learning coaches for example.

significant challenges associated with distance learning, impacting the sector's ability to provide fair and equitable access to quality education for all (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020; Peel et al., 2023).

Often, in 'remote' communities, access to supervision is further complicated by the narrow focus of mainstream curriculum, which often excludes local support networks. For instance, in the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) in 2000 found that many First Nations parents perceived their limited literacy and numeracy skills as barriers to their children's participation in distance education programs (HREOC, 2000; Mander, 2012). The intergenerational impact of negative schooling experiences, combined with a western-centric curriculum, has left many families without the knowledge and confidence to assume supervisory roles.³¹ Without adequate supervision, students are unable to access classes. For example, the community of Woodycupildiya in the NT reported that both primary and secondary students lost access to School of the Air classes when their supervisor became unavailable, resulting in months without schooling (Bardon, 2018).

The reliance on external supervisors presents additional challenges for First Nations students and families in 'remote' Australia, which already struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers in 'remote' schools (Hall, 2012; Mander, 2012). Even when an appropriate supervisor is found, inconsistent access to a 'Third Teacher' – dedicated learning spaces with sufficient ICT – poses further barriers to students completing their studies under mainstream distance education models.

The 'Third Teacher'

The NTSDE describes the Third Teacher as the learning environment. For students to be successful in distance education, the Third Teacher requires adequate space, desks, chairs, individual laptops, headsets and internet (Northern Territory School of Distance Education, 2024). However, in 'remote' communities, access to such facilities can be limited (Anthony & Keating, 2013; Mander, 2015; P. Roberts & Downes, 2020). In 2024, only half of Australia's 'remote' communities were reported to have mobile reception (Parke, 2024). Additionally, access to computer technology and reliable internet at home is reported to be generally low or inconsistent (Featherstone, 2024; Featherstone & Ormond-Parker, 2023; Featherstone et al., 2024; Guenther, Holmes, et al., 2024; Lovell et al., 2024). These findings suggest that undertaking distance education at home, as in mainstream distance contexts, is not an accessible option for many First Nations students in 'remote' Australia.

In 'remote' communities, the 'Third Teacher' is predominately located within the local primary school, making up a composite class that often contains multiple year levels in the same classroom (Northern Territory School of Distance Education, 2024). According to the NT Government website, students opting for the in-community composite class option will have access to "post primary literacy and numeracy and an employment pathways program may be offered which will provide skills...to gain employment" (Northern Territory Government, 2017). However, Guenther and Osborne (2020) found that it is a differentiated curriculum that is not equivalent to mainstream secondary provision and does not lead to a Year 12 Certificate or qualification for university entrance. The late Yolŋu Elder Dr. G. Yunupingu (2016; n.p.) described it as a "Mickey Mouse education" provided to First Nations communities, representative of the lower standards First Nations students in 'remote' Australia are forced to accept in comparison to their 'non-remote' peers.

³¹ An extensive body of literature has identified First Nations parents feeling ostracised and marginalised from their child's educational journey (see for example Lea et al., 2011; Bishop et al., 2021; Hayes et al., 2009; Mander 2012).

Reports from 'remote' WA and NT suggest that the in-community option presents an illusion of choice, as the resources and facilities required for students to continue secondary schooling in their community often do not exist (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Mander, 2012; O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). The lack of investment in On-Country attainment options is attributed to state and territory government policy settings which limit options to complete secondary schooling (or the full range of subjects) in remote and very remote settings.³² For example, community members in 'remote' WA reported that local schools did not have dedicated classrooms, computers or desks for secondary classes, and that access to course options in Year 11 and 12, and consequently, post-school courses and career choices, were wholly absent (Mander, 2012). Students living in these contexts have little choice but to move away for boarding or disengage entirely (Guenther & Osborne, 2020).

Similar circumstances are reported throughout the NT. O'Bryan and Fogarty (2020) indicate that there are up to 78 'remote' or 'very remote' communities without any secondary pathway. In their study of education options for 'remote' students in one NT community, O'Bryan and Fogarty (2020) found that composite secondary classes were severely under-resourced and dependent on one unsupported, graduate-level teacher who faced difficulties in comprehending the complex curriculum documents. Consequently, these classes experienced low attendance rates and high levels of dropout. Young people who remain in or return to the community after dropping out of boarding school perceive local secondary options as "school for little kids" rather than "real school" (O'Bryan & Fogarty 2020, p. 65-7). This negative perception is reflected in low completion rates with Guenther and Osborne (2020) showing that only 10 percent of those who remain in or return to community complete Year 12. Thus, despite the language of 'choice' regarding whether students stay in the community or attend an off-Country boarding school, both Mander (2012) and Guenther and Osborne (2020) argue that this is, in reality, a 'choice-less choice', as staying in the community is not a viable option for completing secondary education.

Given that states and territories have long prioritised boarding as a policy solution to First Nations secondary education attainment in 'remote' Australia, research on distance education has almost exclusively focused on post-secondary programs. This includes both Vocational Education and Training (VET) and university course delivery via online distance learning modules. It is important to note that insufficient access to a 'Third Teacher' – dedicated learning space with sufficient ICT – is reported across various studies as a common barrier to post-secondary course completion (Anthony & Keating, 2013; Prayaga et al., 2017; Rennie et al., 2010; Wilks et al., 2017).

Studies have highlighted that one of the major challenges of online learning for First Nations students living in 'remote' Australia comes down to ICT access (Anthony & Keating, 2013; Featherstone, 2024; Guenther, et al., 2024; Lovell et al., 2024). Yet Prayaga et al. (2017) suggest that while ICT access is a significant issue, it alone does not explain the lack of course engagement. In their study of online higher education completion in 'remote' communities across WA, NT and Queensland, Prayaga et al. (2017) found that the provision of computing devices and mobile internet assistance from course providers did not correlate with higher online education completion. Instead, factors for non-completion included the lack of access to a physical, dedicated learning space, such as overcrowded housing (see Grealy et al., 2024), the obligation to share provided ICT equipment (see demand sharing, Peterson, 1993) and persistent technical

³² It should be noted, however, investments by the Commonwealth government in on-Country education engagement initiatives, such as the Education Engagement and Attainment Initiatives (formally known as the Remote School Attendance Strategy) and School Nutrition Programs. The Commonwealth also funds Junior Ranger Programs and Learning on Country Programs located in remote settings, as well as various girls academies and Clontarf academies funded by the Department of Education who deliver activities on-Country.

issues (see Featherstone, 2024; Guenther, et al., 2024; Lovell et al., 2024). as well as the isolation of online learning, with many students preferring group and face-to-face learning (Prayaga et al., 2017).

Similarly, Wilks et al. (2017) suggest that while ICT access is part of the challenge, engagement is further hindered by social and cultural responsibilities, financial pressures, content not tailored to learners for whom English is a second language, and a lack of confidence and digital literacy. Together, these factors make it difficult for the student to focus on their studies in the self-regulating environment of online learning.

The Student

Distance education requires a high level of self-discipline amongst students (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Wilks et al., 2017). Historically, distance education materials have been designed for students whose first language is English and whose literacy levels enable them to engage with predominately written content (Lopes et al., 2011). Much of the literature on distance education agrees with Barbour and Reeves (2009) who assert that “the only students typically successful in online learning environments are those who have independent orientations towards learning, are highly motivated by intrinsic sources, and have strong time management, literacy and technology skills”. However, when the content being taught lacks relevance to students’ daily lives and aspirations, engagement becomes an issue. It is well documented that the failure to incorporate First Nations perspectives in the classroom leads to the disengagement of First Nations students (Disbray & Guenther, 2017; Fforde et al., 2013; Fogarty, 2010; Fogarty & Kral, 2011; Fogarty et al., 2018; Fogarty & Schwab, 2015; Guenther, Disbray, et al., 2016; Guenther et al., 2019; Guenther et al., 2022; Guenther, Ober, et al., 2024a, 2024b; Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024; Holmes, Guenther, Morris, et al., 2024; Lowe et al., 2023; Lowe et al., 2021; O’Byrne & Fogarty, 2020; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Osborne et al., 2022).

In settler contexts, mainstream distance education content has been critiqued for lacking cultural relevance and appropriateness (Downes & Roberts, 2020). For example, Downes and Roberts noted that parent-supervisors perceived secondary-level lesson plans to have an implicit bias towards metropolitan-cosmopolitan perspectives, making them often unsuitable for rural settler contexts, which led to student disengagement from their studies. The authors reported that students expressed dissatisfaction with the volume of written materials, the repetitive nature of the lessons, the need to remain passive during lessons, and the irrelevance of the lesson content to their experiences. Parents felt that certain aspects of the curriculum conflicted with rural settler values, leading them to make concerted efforts to incorporate rural perspectives. Although First Nations people, values and worldviews were not mentioned in this paper, similar findings are reported by Anthony and Keating (2013) in their review of higher education distance learning challenges facing First Nations students in ‘remote’ Australia. The authors report that online pedagogy largely failed to account for culturally appropriate learning mechanisms which have been a proven factor in the success of adult learning. Building on this, Wilks et al. (2017) suggest that online pedagogy should accommodate the diverse learning approaches of First Nations cultures and individuals. They emphasise the importance of learning methods centred on storytelling, relationships and experiential activities rather than predominantly text-based media. Wilks and their colleagues also highlight that visual and emotional learning styles, such as attention to body language, visual-spatial acuity, context-based learning and a sense of connection, are critical to the learning processes of First Nations adults. However, these aspects are often challenged in online learning environments.

Selected Provider and Association Overviews

School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), Western Australia

SIDE was established in 1918 to serve the needs of 'isolated' children living in 'regional' and 'remote' environments across the vast state of Western Australia. Initially established to provide primary years education, SIDE has since evolved into an online K-12 program, transitioning from correspondence to a wholly online model. SIDE is based out of Perth and is part of the Department of Education. Over the years, the student cohort has evolved from rural students located far away from schools to include school-based students in partnering schools.

Northern Territory School of Distance Education (NTSDE)

NTSDE is the largest provider of online senior secondary education in the Northern Territory. The school is located in Darwin with course materials available online to students across the NT and internationally. NTSDE began as the NT Secondary Correspondence School in 1989, posting out printed booklets along with audio and video cassettes. By 1999, the school changed its name to the NT Open Education Centre. During this period large volumes of printed books were posted out while telephones, fax machines and internet access became available to increasing numbers of students. By 2009, the school was adapting to advancing technology, using the newly introduced STARS satellite network to expand the delivery of Interactive Distance Learning. By 2019, the school was known as the NT School of Distance Education and courses were delivered online through Moodle with one IDL per course per week. Forever adapting to new technologies, NTSDE is trialling virtual and augmented reality, apps and lightboards. The online senior secondary courses are aligned to Australian Curriculum and South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) with optional VET certification and accreditation based on experience-based activities.

Alice Springs School of the Air (ASSoA)

The Alice Springs School of the Air (ASSoA) was the first of its kind in Australia launching in 1951. Delivered out of Alice Springs Primary School, SoA mobilized radio technology used by the Flying Doctor Service to deliver radio lessons for settler children in the 'outback'. At first, children listened to three-hour lessons without being able to interact with the teacher. However, after time, a question-and-answer segment was introduced. From 1974, ASSoA became autonomously governed and represented the largest correspondence school for Central Australia. The enrolment of First Nations students began as a trial from 1994, the same year satellite televisions and Toshiba laptops were trialled. As technology developed, so did the school and by 2006 it was completely reliant on satellite technology, delivering interactive distance learning to students across the NT, SA and internationally. The middle years (years 7, 8 & 9) program began in 2012. In 2013, SoA had 140 enrolled students and was providing in-person teaching services to three Aboriginal communities – Corella Creek, Mulga Bore and Bonya. By 2018, there were 104 students and two teachers permanently stationed at Corella Creek. The emergence of COVID in 2020 forced a nation-wide shift to online distance learning, with many schools turning to SoA for help in developing their remote learning capabilities.

Virtual School Victoria (VSV)

Originally established in 1909 to support teachers from Melbourne Teachers' College who were unable to attend class, VSV grew rapidly over its initial two years and by 1911 had 600 student-teachers studying by correspondence. By 1914, students began using the system by receiving work by mail every fortnight and by 1922, 212 children were enrolled at VSV. Ten years later, the school was officially renamed as the Correspondence School, later being changed to the Distance Education Centre Victoria and again in 2018 to the Virtual School Victoria.

In 2018 the Victorian Government invested \$22.6 million in the Expanding the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in Rural and Regional Victoria Initiative. This has impacted VSV with improved and expanded virtual and blended learning opportunities, as well as being able to offer all VCE subjects from 2023. VSV has become the largest state government school in Victoria. According to My School data (2024), VSV currently has 5,942 enrolments, with First Nations students making up 2% (118.84). First Nations enrolments have risen 1% since 2014. VSV offers 137 courses online. The school includes Bellum Bellum Learning Hub.

VSV states via My School that 'Instantaneous, real-time, interactive learning is a key to teaching at Distance Education Centre Victoria. Teachers develop engaging learning materials and *DECVOnline* Learning Management System to create real time and asynchronous collaborative teaching and learning opportunities for students' (2024). For students to enroll with VSV, they must fall into one of the six enrolment categories being: Medical: Physical Health or Mental Health, Travel, Sports/Performance, Distance, Previous Home Schooler or Young Adult.

AADES (originally known as the Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools)

AADES is a community of 'connected virtual educators who lead evidence based, innovative practice to influence the education agenda' (AADES, 2025) that was founded in 1993. They advocate for equitable access to remote learning across Australian and New Zealand and connect schools, teachers and support staff with likeminded similarly invested professionals in flexible education options. AADES offers membership options to the above groups. Across Australian and New Zealand, there are currently more than 1200 members. Member schools can apply for grants through AADES in order to promote distance education teacher practice and professional development at relevant learning conferences that link to AADES strategic plans. The values of Mahi Tahi (we work with shared purpose, together, as one); Respect; Curiosity; and trust are embedded through the association. Through the AADES website, the members can be viewed by territory or state. Each member has a brief description explaining what they respectively offer, as well as contact details.

Nature Foundation - Kids on Country™

The Nature Foundation is a not-for-profit foundation based in South Australia that invests in the conservation, restoration and protection of Australian landscapes, flora and fauna. One element of their portfolio of activities involves the Kids on Country™ Junior Ranger Program designed to engage Aboriginal high school students (aged 14 – 19) in future careers in conservation and land management. The Program combines e-learning with 'on-Country' experiences, involving a one-day induction workshop, access to an e-learning program, and a five-day 'on-Country' camp facilitated by the Nature Foundation, Traditional Owners and industry experts. Through their involvement and completion of the course, students can earn 10 credits towards their South Australian Certificate of Education.

Australian Christian College (ACC)

Australian Christian College is an independent school. As a registered large charity, it receives government funding, tuition fees from families and other forms of revenue. It provides primary and secondary education via campus learning and distance education. ACC runs distance education programs from Moreton (QLD), Marsden Park (NSW), Victoria (for students in years 5 – 10 only), Southlands (WA) and Launceston (TAS). In person campus' include Southlands, Darling Downs, Swan Hill, Echuca, Casey, Benalla, Bairnsdale, Launceston, Hobart, Burnie, Moreton, Singleton, Port Macquarie, Medowie, Marsden Park and Brightwaters. ACC states that they provide distance education to over 2,500 students across NSW, QLD, WA and Tasmania. Marsden College has over 700 fully online students. Moreton has a total enrolment of 1,180 and Launceston at 1,400; this does not specify online vs on campus students. Victoria and Southlands schools also do not release online enrolments publicly. Information is not released as to percentages of First Nations enrolments for online education. When reviewing publicly available data on My School, the school has over 6000 students enrolled however, they do not disclose the proportion of distance students (see Table 3).

Table 3. Australian Christian College (ACC) - Locations and Enrolments

Campus Name	Location (State)	City/Suburb	Number of Students Enrolled	Indigenous student Percentage
ACC – Burnie	Tasmania	Somerset	20	25
ACC – Darling Downs	Western Australia	Brookdale	140	1
ACC – Hobart	Tasmania	Geilston Bay	111	12
ACC – Launceston	Tasmania	Newnham	128	5
ACC – Marsden Park	New South Wales	Riverstone	2,155	1
ACC – Moreton	Queensland	Caboolture	2,026	4
ACC – Singleton	New South Wales	Singleton	358	11
ACC – Southlands	Western Australia	Albany	905	3
ACC – Casey	Victoria	Skye	Not disclosed	Not disclosed
ACC – Victoria	Victoria	Benalla	230	2

Source: MySchool website, 2025.

Stronger Smarter Virtual Secondary College Pilot

The Stronger Smarter Virtual Secondary College (SSVSC) is a pilot project developed by the Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI), a First Nations-led organisation focused on transforming educational outcomes for First Nations students. Established in 2005, SSI partners with schools to provide professional learning programs for teachers around the Stronger Smarter Approach, involving research-backed, culturally responsive practices that “foster positive identities, excellence and equity” (SSI, n.d.). A scoping study has been funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) to establish what a culturally-responsive virtual learning model could look like.

The SSVSC builds on the knowledge and successes of the Stronger Smarter Approach to design a “blended learning model combining culturally grounded pedagogy, local community para-professional support, and high-quality digital delivery” (SSI, 2025, pp. 2). The pilot will embed the Stronger Smarter philosophy into the Big Picture Learning Australia (BLPA) learning design to engage secondary-aged students currently disengaged from schooling or employment, seeking to provide a sustainable option for those wishing to remain in community to access high-quality learning pathways.

As part of the scoping process, the virtual college has identified the communities of Lockhart River and Kowanyama as potential partners. The pilot proposes to engage eight students from each location, as well as their broader families. A First Nations Reference Group has been established to guide the pilot’s development and implementation, and the plan is to establish a local Community Advisory Group in each community. It is yet to be determined whether the virtual college will provide a supplementary program to students enrolled in their local state school or regional distance education network in partnership with SSI and BLPA, or develop into its own bespoke full-time option, separate from established school networks. This will be determined in consultation with the First Nations Reference Group and Community Advisory Groups.

The pilot will establish on-site learning hubs in each community. Two para-professional advisory mentors (one male, one female) will be employed in each site, supported by BLPA and SSI trained teacher coaches. The blended delivery model will involve highly personalised, culturally responsive learning plans combining online instruction with on-Country learning opportunities. As part of the Big Picture Learning design, the SSVSC can enrol students in specific VET courses as needed, in the completion of particular aspects of their designed course. Monitoring and evaluation will be built into the program design and implementation.

Summary

Mainstream distance education in Australia often falls short for First Nations students in ‘remote’ communities due to a combination of systemic and logistical challenges. Throughout the literature, there is a widespread acknowledgement that secondary distance education, rooted in Western metropolitan ontologies, catered for English-speaking students with high levels of literacy, and dependant on consistent ICT access, is not well suited to the unique conditions of ‘remote’ communities (Anthony & Keating, 2013; Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024; Guenther & Osborne, 2020; O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Additionally, the exclusion of local support networks and the lack of incorporation of First Nations perspectives further alienate these students, leading to disengagement. Supervision by an adult who may lack the necessary training and resources for the particular context poses another significant barrier. Moreover, the learning environments in ‘remote’ communities, often referred to as the ‘Third Teacher,’ are inadequately equipped with essential facilities such as individual laptops, headsets and stable internet

access. These factors contribute to low educational attainment and engagement among First Nations students in 'remote' areas.

As a result, many families wishing to provide their children a 'good' education are forced to send students away from their home communities and into the boarding system, encouraged through scholarship programs, policy initiatives and education campaigns (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020). As the dominant approach to secondary education for First Nations students in 'remote' contexts, there is considerably more research into the effectiveness of boarding schools for secondary education outcomes. However, as the following section reveals, evidence suggests this practice too falls short in providing meaningful, long-term solutions to secondary education attainment in 'remote' Australian contexts.

Recommendations associated with Section 3: Distance Education Trends in Australia

Recommendation 7: Enrolment Policies and Procedures

'Remote' education enrolment policies and procedures need to be simplified and streamlined to ensure equitable access for all students. Regardless of location, all Australian students and their families should have clear knowledge of and access to high-quality, culturally grounded education. Enrolment must never be the barrier to equity and inclusion.

Recommendation 8: Remove Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT

The Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT often disadvantages 'remote' First Nations students because it is overly complex, digitally dependent and culturally disconnected. These processes assume urban conditions, ignore mobility and cultural obligations, and lack community involvement, turning enrolment into a barrier rather than an enabler of equitable, place-based education that guarantee access to high-quality, place-based education for all students regardless of location.

Recommendation 10: Local Teacher Training Support

Develop strong, culturally appropriate adult training programs for local employment pathways into distance education provision with contextual training that is culturally appropriate, guided by local aspirations, and aligned with career pathways to ensure sustainable, community-led education solutions.

Recommendation 11: Staffing Innovation

Develop innovative staffing models that leverage the expertise of past educators who have previously worked in local communities and built strong relationships with students and families. These educators can play a critical role in distance education programs by maintaining cultural continuity and trust. Their involvement would help address the relational gaps often experienced in virtual learning environments. Additionally, incorporate structured opportunities for these educators to visit the community in person at least once per quarter to strengthen connections, provide face-to-face support, and ensure culturally responsive engagement.

Recommendation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge

Work towards future staffing models that support cultural safety, promotes equitable access to education. This should focus on: culturally framed inductions, ongoing evidence-based professional development and place-based curriculum models.

Recommendation 15: Generate a more robust determination of Indigenous access to the AIC.

Analysis in this report suggests that Indigenous school-aged children may not be accessing the AIC to the extent to which they are eligible. Further data collection may uncover a more robust understanding of the

extent to which this is the case, understand the reasons why this is the case, and thereby inform how the AIC may better support Indigenous families.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

Section 4: Boarding as a Secondary Education Option

Boarding school education for ‘remote’ Indigenous students has long been a contentious area of educational provision. Some families in ‘remote’ communities have a long history of successful partnerships with boarding schools. Similarly, there have always been sectors of ‘remote’ communities who have felt that boarding is the right choice for their families. In more recent times, boarding has increasingly been promulgated as a key policy option. This has seen investment in transition programs and larger scale boarding options being provided to families and students in ‘remote’ areas. With this has also come increased stories of success along with stories of educational failure and social malaise (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020; O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). At the same time, investments in boarding have corresponded with a retraction of full secondary program provision in communities, particularly in the NT. While boarding is not the focus of this report, the crossover with distance provision necessitates an exploration of boarding schools and their place in the ‘remote’ educational landscape.

Across colonised regions, boarding schools, also referred to as ‘residential schools’ or ‘mission schools’ in the literature, have been used to force policies of assimilation and cause cultural disruption (Dean & Roberts, 2023; Minton, 2019). In Australia, the negative impact of such policies is immeasurable and deeply traumatic as children were forcibly removed from their families and communities (O’Bryan et al., 2020). While there have been reports of student success and cost effectiveness of boarding schools, it is important to review the literature to determine whether boarding, as a secondary schooling option for First Nations students in ‘remote’ Australia, is viable. In this section, the history of boarding schools in Australia is outlined, then the evidence around how it works including student and community outcomes are explained. The section concludes with two case studies: Geelong Grammar, an elite private school branded as an ‘off Country’ boarding option, located on the ancestral lands of the Wadawurrung, Wurundjeri and Taungurung people of the Kulin nation, Victoria, and, Yiramalay Studio School, branded as an ‘On Country residential school’ located on Banuba Country, Western Australia. The differences in terminology between ‘on’ and ‘off’ Country will be further unpacked.

History of Boarding Schools in Australia

Boarding schools for First Nations students have a complex history in Australia (HREOC, 1997). From the 1840s onwards, all schools for First Nations children were converted into boarding schools to “maximise control over children”, restricting their interactions with family, culture and language (HREOC, 1997, p. 103). Children’s attendance was procured through various ways, including coercion or forcibly removing children from their families, leading to what is known as the Stolen Generations (HREOC, 1997). The Bringing Them Home Report (HREOC, 1997) documents the ongoing hardships faced by First Nations communities as a result of this policy of forced dislocation.

From 1955, the Commonwealth implemented a scheme in which First Nations children were believed to have “greater opportunities” if they left their families and their Country, to live in foster homes or boarding schools in southern states (HREOC, 1997, p. 125). This continued until the late 1960s. Government reports during this period identified boarding as the preferred secondary education option for First Nations students, with the belief that assimilation could be achieved through successive stages of acculturation (Spiers, 2021).

Although assimilation ceased to be an official policy after the 1967 referendum, the practice of sending First Nations children off-Country to boarding schools remained the preferred option for secondary education completion by successive State and Territory governments. For many, the boarding system is

viewed as a means to enable young people to navigate both Western and First Nations worlds (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018; Guenther, Milgate, et al., 2016; Ober, 2004, 2009; Ober & Bat, 2007, 2008). Support for boarding schools comes from both First Nations and settler advocates alike and has received significant media attention as a potential education solution to secondary education completion for First Nations students in ‘remote’ contexts (Mundine, 2014; Pearson, 2014). Presented by governments as an “unequivocal good”, much of the support for boarding frames it as a logical and cost-effective response to the lower educational achievements of ‘remote’ schools (O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020, p. 11). For example, the high costs involved with establishing and running ‘remote’ schools – largely seen to be underperforming in terms of attendance and performance metrics – is often positioned as constraining the Government’s ability to invest in multiple remote locations verses a centralised boarding option. As a key proponent for boarding, Noel Pearson (2014) argued that the challenges of offering *quality* secondary education in ‘remote’ communities were simply too high, resulting in the closure of secondary programs across 78 ‘remote’ NT communities from 2015 onwards (O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020; IES 2015-2024). As discussed in Section 3, this retraction of secondary provision in ‘remote’ areas has left students without authentic choice over their educational pathways, contributing to high rates of disengagement and drop-out (Guenther & Osborne, 2020; O’Bryan & Fogarty, 2020).

The promise of a quality education through boarding, however, is not guaranteed. In a systematic review of the literature, Guenther et al (2016) suggests ‘remote’ students do not receive an equitable quality of education through boarding either. Rather, the authors found a “disturbing picture compared to the positive images often portrayed in the media” (Guenther et al., 2019, p. 329). The following sections examine the evidence around how boarding works in practice for many First Nations students coming from ‘remote’ locations across Australia, with a focus on student and community outcomes.

How It Works

From 2015, boarding has been a policy priority of state and territory governments regarding First Nations secondary education attainment. In practice, this involves students and their families deciding whether to send adolescents away to a high school within the state or territory, or travel interstate to attend a private boarding school. Private school enrolment tends to involve a selection process whereby school staff conduct a number of interviews with students, parents and others to determine whether the student is ready to attend boarding school (English & Guerin, 2020).

There are typically four types of living arrangements for students studying away from home. These include living at the boarding school residence, a residential college, a student hostel or a family group home arrangement. There is significantly more research into boarding school residence and residential colleges, the difference between the two being that the latter is not always located on school grounds. Both however are part of the school organisation, tend to be founded upon religious principles and governed by staff employed by the school (p. 33). A hostel, while also a common arrangement has had less research attention. Hostels tend to be small privately run facilities located off school grounds, providing meals and supervision by staff who are independently employed. Family group home arrangements, or homestay, has similarly had less research attention and involves students lodging with a family either alone or in part of a small group.

More recently, there has been a shift in terminology from ‘off Country boarding schools’ (such as Geelong Grammar) towards ‘On Country residential schools’ (such as Yiramalay studio school). The terminology around what constitutes off-Country versus On-Country is unclear as both options are situated on the ancestral Country of one or multiple Nations. While ‘On-Country’ schools are generally located in ‘remote’

locations, their student cohort can include First Nations students who have travelled far away from their ancestral Country. Nevertheless, On-Country boarding models represent a genuine priority for government investment, particularly in relation to community supported and/or led models.

Student Outcomes

The success of boarding schools for First Nations students in 'remote' Australia in terms of educational outcomes has been varied. For some families, boarding is seen to offer an 'excellence pathway' for First Nations students to attend top boarding schools, such as Geelong grammar discussed below (Macdonald et al., 2018; Mander et al., 2015). For these families, boarding will continue to be an appealing option. For some students, boarding offers a wider range of educational experiences compared to local options (Lloyd, 2020; Macdonald et al., 2018). Additionally, others argue boarding schools equip students with skills and knowledges that facilitate their transition into the workforce (Bobongie, 2017; Osborne, 2018). While there has been a small increase in the number of Year 12 completers (Guenther, Ober, et al., 2024), there is evidence indicating the lack of cultural safety at boarding school acts as a barrier to engagement and attainment (Mander, 2015; O'Bryan, 2021; Rogers, 2016).

In particular, there is considerable research which indicates that boarding can negatively impact on student well-being and high school completion rates (Dadi et al., 2024; Guenther & Osborne, 2020; Macdonald et al., 2018; Mander & Lester, 2023; O'Bryan, 2021; O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020; Rogers, 2016). Much of the literature on boarding suggests the negative impacts for First Nations students can include compromised cultural connections (Guenther et al., 2016; Guenther & Osborne, 2020), feelings of homesickness (Mander & Lester, 2023), relational challenges (Benveniste et al., 2015), struggles with identity (Guenther & Fogarty, 2020; O'Bryan, 2021; Rogers, 2016), and exposure to both overt and covert racism (Macdonald et al., 2018; Mander et al., 2015; Rogers, 2016). Additionally, the risks of sexual abuse in 'closed' institutions such as boarding schools are noted in the report of the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).³³ Transition experiences (from home communities into boarding schools) are often associated with high levels of stress and relatively low levels of resilience, with some students reporting feelings of unfair treatment and a lack of cultural safety, which can hinder their engagement and attainment in educational settings (Bobongie, 2017; Dadi et al., 2024; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2021). Parents experiencing a loss of agency are also noted (Mander, 2012; O'Bryan, 2021), alongside students who perceive opportunity however often at the expense of their own holistic wellbeing (Mander et al., 2015; Mander & Lester, 2023).

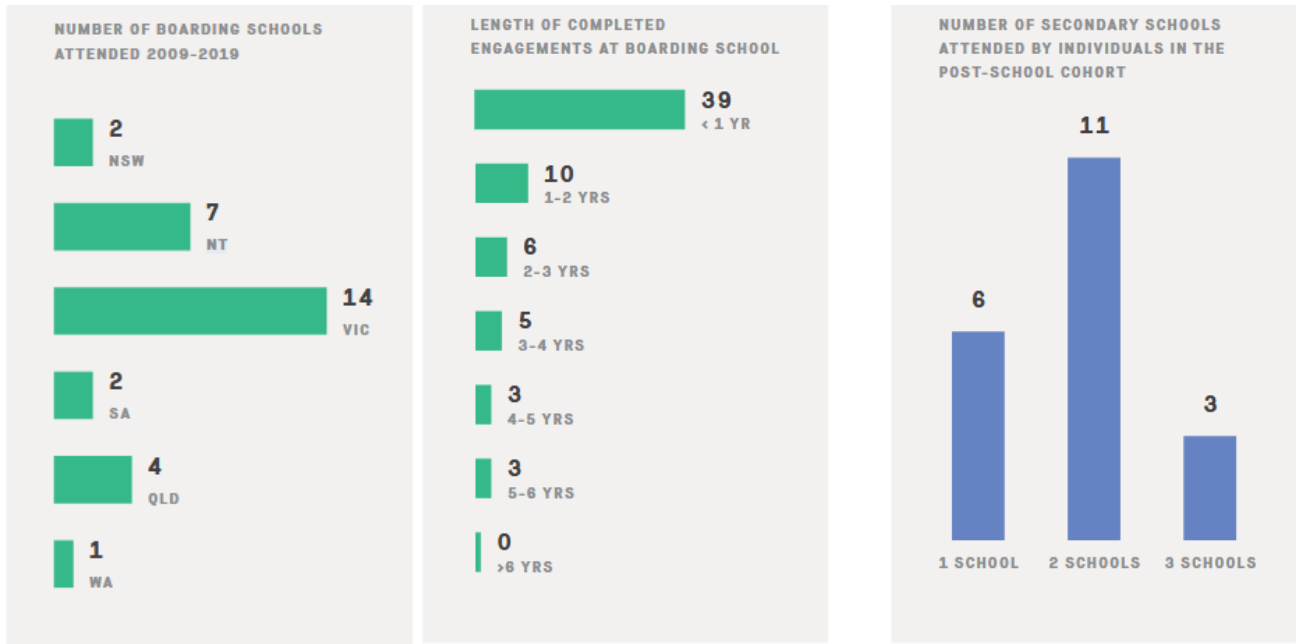
Proponents of boarding suggest it provides educational equity for First Nations students living in remote parts of Australia by providing access. Guenther et al. (2016) and Guenther and Osborne (2020) query this however, noting that at the time of their research there were insufficient boarding places to meet the demand, leaving approximately 1500 secondary-aged students without sufficient secondary options. The lack of adequate boarding places is supported by findings from O'Bryan & Fogarty (2020), who cited Commonwealth data projections which predicted an increase in demand of more than 40% (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Even if there were enough places, evidence suggests that students often do not meet entry requirements for boarding schools, such as the minimum numeracy and literacy standards for example (Guenther et al., 2016). In a case study of the educational pathways for one 'remote' First Nations community, O'Bryan & Fogarty (2020) observed that up to two-thirds of the student cohort exhibited academic proficiency levels 3–4 years below their chronological age at the start of secondary school. While students who boarded at NT schools accessed targeted academic programs within a class group, interstate schools provided individual learning support outside the mainstream class, contributing

³³ We note however that much action has been done in response to the Royal Commission including the National Redress Scheme.

to feelings of inadequacy and dropout rates. Such conditions were found to contribute to situations where students return to their communities and disengage from education entirely (Guenther et al., 2016; O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020).

Challenges such as language barriers, health issues, internet access, digital literacy, and generational exclusion from education systems were found to hinder communities' engagement with students learning journey as well as the school's capacity build relationships essential for holistic support (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). For example, in their case study of one community, O'Bryan and Fogarty calculated that over the space of a decade, 100 participants in the research cohort attended 38 different schools across 16 cities or towns within Australia. This wide distribution made it unrealistic for families and community members to develop meaningful relationships with such a wide range of schools. Figure 9 depicts the dispersal of students across states (left), as well as the length of completed engagement (middle) and number of secondary schools attended (right). As depicted, the vast majority of students did not remain at boarding school for more than one year, with many students attending at least two schools.³⁴ This broad dispersal of boarders indicates that young people are being set up to fail, entering a "revolving door" of boarding school experiences (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. 116).

Figure 9. Boarding Data from One First Nations Community in the Northern Territory



(Source: O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020, pages 42- 51)

Strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of leaving Country include providing transition support (Stewart, 2021), attending to mental health and wellbeing (McCalman et al., 2020), implementing resilience building approaches at boarding schools (Rutherford et al., 2020) and fostering supportive relationships between staff, students and home communities (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Effective relationships between home and school, along with the ability for young people to maintain a strong connection to their home community while attending school, are essential to educational engagement and social-emotional wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Gee, 2016; O'Bryan, 2017).

³⁴ It should be noted that this data is from one community and may not be reflective of remote experiences across all Northern Australia however there is no data available to make a comparative fine-grained assessment.

Community Outcomes

There is an argument that pooling resources into high performing boarding schools is more cost effective than funding smaller community-based schools. However, Guenther et al., (2019) argue that the economic outcomes of 'remote' education are largely overlooked. Boarding schools can be expensive and place a significant financial and administrative burden on families. O'Bryan and Fogarty (2020) report that less than one-third of families involved in their research received assistance from the NT Government's Transition Support Unit.

For some, the practice of sending First Nations children away to gain an education is viewed as a temporary solution embedded in deficit and assimilatory logics (Mander et al., 2015; Turner & Children's Ground, 2023). Turner and Children's Ground (2023) argue the boarding model focuses on isolating and "fixing the child" rather than addressing issues of systemic failures within the education system (p. 44). They note that up to \$50,000 can be spent per child annually to attend boarding school off-Country, including fees, flights and other expenses. They argue that this focus on the individual child perpetuates a lack of access and equity for the collective:

If the same funding was invested in local community-led schools, high-quality education could be created for every First Nations child. The evidence is clear — investment that prioritises first culture, language and the leadership of local communities improves education outcomes, protects language and culture and builds social and economic capital within the community" (Turner & Children's Ground, 2023, p. 44)

A senior Elder quoted in O'Bryan and Fogarty (2020) similarly critiques the individualised focus on students in boarding school/community relations: "Don't treat our kids as individuals. They are not individuals, they are part of a collective, so if you are going to deal with the kids, deal first with the collective" (p. 59).

Such critiques echo those of 'mainstream' distance education. The individualistic focus of Western education is often seen as being at odds with community values, where educational success is understood in relational terms (Moodie et al., 2021; Wilks et al., 2017). Harrison et al, (2019) argue that First Nations and Western curricula are largely irreconcilable due of the differing concepts of success and the ontological foundations applied in these teaching.

Selected Provider Overviews

Geelong Grammar, Victoria

Geelong Grammar is one of Australia's leading boarding schools, located on the ancestral lands of the Wadawurrung, Wurundjeri and Taungurung people of the Kulin nation. The school was established in 1855. In 2006, Geelong Grammar began to accept First Nations students from 'remote' and regional communities through its 'Indigenous Programme'. According to Geelong Grammar website, since the Programme begun approximately 80 First Nations students have attended the school though it is not reported how long they remained. In the first five years of the 'Indigenous Programme' it is reported that more than half of the students returned home within a year or two for many of the reasons discussed above (Carey, 2022). The school has received significant media attention as the focus of a four-part series titled 'Off Country' following seven First Nations students in their transition to Geelong Grammar. In the documentary, students recount the racism and microaggressions they face from fellow students and reflect on the perceived necessity to suppress their First Nations identity in order to fit into the "white" institution (Off Country). In 2024, My School website reports the Indigenous enrolment rate at 1%.

Yiramalay Studio School, Western Australia

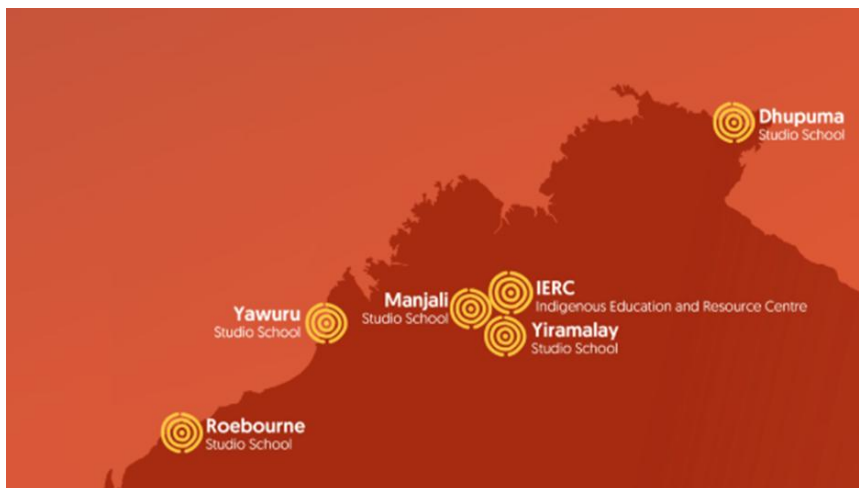
The 'Studio School' model is one example of on-Country boarding. Yiramalay Studio School is located on Banuba Country in the Fitzroy Valley, West Kimberley region of northern Western Australia (Figure 10). The 'Studio School' emerged out of a collaboration between Banuba people and Wesley College in Melbourne to create two-way learning opportunities for students and families from both communities. It began as a Year 10 Induction Program whereby Wesley students travelled to Banuba Country to learn from Banuba Custodians. It has since developed into a "residential On Country" program offering Years 10-12 for First Nations students "across the remote north" (Yiramalay website). Notably, there is a distinct shift in terminology away from boarding to emphasise On Country residential schooling. It is not clear what this means in practice and whether it has implications for curriculum development. For example, the emphasis of 'On Country' suggests that Country – specifically Banuba Country- is integral to curriculum development and residential activities. Yet, according to Wesley College, the Studio School model "provides new pathways for Aboriginal students to access *mainstream* education" (italics added for emphasis), suggesting that students are receiving a mainstream, rather than Country-led curriculum. It is worth noting that students attend Yiramalay from across the "Fitzroy Valley, the greater Kimberley, the Pilbara and the Northern Territory" (Studio Schools 2024, p. 21), leaving their own Country and culture to live and study on Banuba Country.

As part of the Studio Schools consortium, Yiramalay was the first to begin operation with four other sites marked for development. Manjali Studio School, located 10km away from Yiramalay was set to open 2025, offering Years 7-9. An Indigenous Education and Research Centre (IERC) is co-located on-site at Manjali to support the development and delivery of the Studio Schools unique learning framework across both sites. The Studio Schools website describes their middle and senior years learning framework as embedded in Indigenous culture and language, balancing academic learning, personal and social learning and industry/enterprise learning within the unique cultural context of each school location. As Osborne et al. (2018, p. 173) note, however, there has not been an independent evaluation of the Yiramalay model.

For Wesley College students in Year 10, Yiramalay Studio School offers "an opportunity to live and learn side by side with and from *their* Australia's first people" (Wesley College 2025, italics added). In 2024, there were 6 induction programs on Banuba Country for 120 Wesley students, 24 Wesley staff and 44 local First Nations students, and one exchange to Melbourne for 12 First Nations students (Studio Schools 2024, p. 21). According to the MySchool website, in 2023 Yiramalay had 53 enrolled fulltime students

(98% Indigenous) and received \$189,750 per student, had a capital expenditure of \$3,457,836. Wesley College, on the other hand, had 3395 fulltime students (0% Indigenous), received \$40,288 per student, and had a capital expenditure of \$11,166,138.

Figure 10. Map of Studio Schools



(Source: Studio Schools Australia, 2025)

Summary

While boarding schools have been utilised as a solution for providing education to First Nations students in ‘remote’ Australia, they often fail to address the cultural, social and emotional needs of these students. The lack of cultural safety, feelings of homesickness and the challenges of maintaining connections with their communities and Country can lead to disengagement and lower educational attainment. The emerging developments in Studio School models to provide ‘On Country’ boarding represents important efforts to repair the damage caused by mainstream boarding. In the absence of external evaluation and literature, it remains to be seen whether “On Country” boarding within a mainstream education system will lead to meaningful outcomes for First Nations students. In contrast, place-based education models grounded in the cultural and linguistic contexts of First Nations students, their families and their community have demonstrated significant potential for success. The next section investigates existing literature around On Country, place-based models of education, delving into the history, evidence-base and outcomes for First Nations students.

Recommendations associated with Section 4: Boarding as a Secondary Education Option

Recommendation 1: Local Governance

Develop and support strong local governance structures to ensure the local community has decision making powers in the education of their children.

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in ‘remote’ areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

Recommendation 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability

Invest in solar-powered charging stations and backup generators to mitigate power outages that disrupt learning to uphold equity in education by ensuring that reliable power is universally accessible to all learners, regardless of geographic location, so no student is disadvantaged by infrastructure gaps.

Recommendation 4: Reliable Internet Access

Prioritise expansion of broadband and satellite internet services to ‘remote’ communities, ensuring consistent connectivity for students and educators, as a matter of spatial justice to address geographic inequities and guarantee equal access to educational opportunities regardless of location.

Recommendation 7: Enrolment Policies and Procedures

‘Remote’ education enrolment policies and procedures need to be simplified and streamlined to ensure equitable access for all students. Regardless of location, all Australian students and their families should have clear knowledge of and access to high-quality, culturally grounded education. Enrolment must never be the barrier to equity and inclusion.

Recommendation 8: Remove Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT

The Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT often disadvantages ‘remote’ First Nations students because it is overly complex, digitally dependent and culturally disconnected. These processes assume urban conditions, ignore mobility and cultural obligations, and lack community involvement, turning enrolment into a barrier rather than an enabler of equitable, place-based education that guarantee access to high-quality, place-based education for all students regardless of location.

Recommendation 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Work side-by-side with local communities in a development capacity to build place-based approaches to education provision to understand the localised needs of distance education provision. Where requested, develop and support blended flexible learning models of delivery that focus on cultural responsiveness.

Recommendation 10: Local Teacher Training Support

Develop strong, culturally appropriate adult training programs for local employment pathways into distance education provision with contextual training that is culturally appropriate, guided by local aspirations, and aligned with career pathways to ensure sustainable, community-led education solutions.

Recommendation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge

Work towards future staffing models that support cultural safety, promotes equitable access to education. This should focus on: culturally framed inductions, ongoing evidence-based professional development and place-based curriculum models.

Recommendation 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR

Investigate and implement multimedia technologies — including AI and virtual reality (VR) — to make distance education more culturally appropriate, engaging and student-centred in ‘remote’ Australia. Traditional distance education often reflects mainstream pedagogical norms that may not align with the cultural values, learning styles, or lived experiences of students in ‘remote’ and Indigenous communities. Multimedia tools offer a powerful opportunity to shift the educational experience from teacher-directed instruction to student-driven exploration, while honouring local identities and knowledge systems. This could include options like:

- Culturally responsive multimedia content: storytelling through video and animation; community generated media;
- AI powered personalisation: adaptive learning platforms, conversational AI tutors;

- Virtual reality for immersive learning: place-based simulators, role play scenarios;
- Shifting the media frame from teacher-led to student-led: perspective-taking, agency and control, codesign multimedia tools with local students, educators and cultural leaders.

Recommendation 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education.

If the distance education model is to be relied upon to provide education for ‘remotely’ located Indigenous students, a better understanding of student outcomes from these providers needs to be developed.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

Section 5: On Country / Place-Based Education Models

We see the brilliance of children come to life when their environments of learning are founded in their cultures and languages. Our learning systems are the oldest in the world. It is time for a national education policy with a pathway, a timeline and the resources to create a First Nations-led and designed learning system as part of our national education system. (Turner & Children's Ground, 2023, p. 5)

For decades, First Nations communities have advocated for the recognition and implementation of a First Nations learning system (Turner & Children's Ground, 2023). Despite the diverse languages, lore and knowledges of each Nation, common elements link First Nations knowledge systems, such as the recognition of Country as living, authoritative entity that requires relational reciprocity through knowledge sharing, gratitude and care (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Hughes & Barlo, 2021; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020; McKnight, 2016; Spillman et al., 2023). Within this framework, learning begins at birth and continues through to Eldership, with learners being responsible for using knowledge appropriately (Turner & Children's Ground, 2023).

Envisioning this in practice, Bishop (2024) describes an education system where:

... young people feel safe and connected; where Elders and Indigenous community members are seen as knowledgeable and are actively involved in decision making and educating; where Country and culture are foregrounded; where learning is purposeful, complex, interconnected and intergenerational (p. i).

This vision is not new, rather it has been practiced on this continent for tens of thousands of years (Bishop, 2024; Karulkiyalu Country et al., 2020; Turner & Children's Ground, 2023). Despite the efforts of First Nations advocates, there has been limited support for delivering education in First Nations languages or including local knowledge systems. The largest systematic review of empirical research on First Nations education in Australia confirms this, revealing that despite decades of research, First Nations voices have not been adequately heard by those in positions of power (Moodie et al., 2021). In what follows, Section 5: On Country / Place-based education models discusses the literature surrounding Country as pedagogy, the correlation between Country and wellbeing and broader community outcomes. Firstly, we describe the history of independent, community controlled First Nations schools.

History of Independent, Community Controlled First Nations Schools

In Australia, over a dozen independent, community controlled First Nations schools were established during the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these schools continue to operate, providing culturally and linguistically relevant education that reflects First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. Research by Thomas (2024) examined self-determination in First Nations community-controlled schools in Australia. It discovered that these schools can foster self-determination and enhance educational outcomes for First Nations youth. Thomas (2024) identified that movement in the 1970s and 1980s arose in response to a long history of inadequate government-mandated education, forced exclusion from mainstream schools and compulsory attendance at missionary and reserve schools.

Examples of First Nations community-controlled schools include Yipirinya School in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The school was founded by families from the town camps who developed a curriculum in Eastern Arrernte, Western Arrernte (also known as Western Aranda), Luritja and Warlpiri, alongside English and Aboriginal English. Initially, classes were conducted within the town camps (Holmes, Guenther, Morris, et al., 2024; Kral, 2017; Thomas, 2023; Willmetts, 1993). Today, Yipirinya remains a community-controlled

school that uses a two-ways approach to education and the practice of taking students out on Country regularly.

Other notable examples include the Black Community School in Townsville, established in 1973 by Torres Strait Islander land rights activists Eddie “Kioki” Mabo, Bonita Mabo and Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta author and activist Burnum Burnum (Reynolds, 1981). The school provided an educational approach that privileged First Nations knowledge systems alongside Western education. Another institution is the Northland College for Koori students in Richmond (Barrington, 2005; Lane, 2020; Meyer, 1999), however, the college was closed due to “Ministerial discretion” (Lane, 2020, p. 1151), not due to engagement of students.

The Hughes Report (1988) became a cornerstone for First Nations policy over the following decade. It recognised First Nations controlled schools as pivotal in addressing the longstanding issue of educational exclusion. The report advocated for self-determination in education, the training of First Nations teachers and the development of curricula that incorporated First Nations languages and knowledge.

Bilingual and multilingual education emerged from community-led initiatives in First Nations communities (Devlin et al., 2017; Gray, 1975; Hoogenraad, 2001; Jacobs, 1988; McKay et al., 1997; Nicholls, 2005). These initiatives demonstrated that locally controlled schools could provide secure and supportive environments for First Nations youth. During this period, there was a significant increase in First Nations participation in education, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university enrolments rising by 50% in the 1980s and primary school enrolments increasing by 40% in the 1990s (Ministerial Council on Education & Youth Affairs, 2000). However, from the late 1990s onwards, policy began to shift its focus (Holt, 2016). Educational debates started to prioritise attendance (Guenther, 2013) and the measurement of English-only literacy and numeracy data as indicators of educational success (Kral et al., 2020; O’Keefe et al., 2012; OECD, 2017a; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Schwab, 1998/2018).

In 2011, Children’s Ground was established. It is a First Nations led not-for-profit organisation delivering a First Nations system of education focusing on prevention, early intervention and empowerment rather than crisis and deficit (Children’s Ground, 2024). Like the schools above, Children’s Ground was formed due to an increasing unease with the longstanding history of inadequate government-mandated education. The M.K. Turner Report (M.K. Turner & Children’s Ground, 2023) calls for the establishment of a First Nations education system. This insight is also reflected in the children’s book and feature film, “In My Blood It Runs” by Arrernte and Garuwa man, Djuwan Hoosan. The book and film narrate Djuwan’s experience of navigating an educational system that was not designed for him and highlights the benefits of First Nations-controlled education. Being on Country is crucial for the Children’s Ground approach because it fosters a deep connection to the land, culture and community where overall wellbeing can be enhanced (Children’s Ground, 2024) .

How it works

As the name suggests, place-based models of education are unique to each place-based culture and Country. In this section, we outline three key critical components shared by On Country/Place-based models. These include Country as pedagogy; Country and wellbeing; and broader community outcomes.

Country as Pedagogy

Country, understood as knowledge holder and teacher (Spillman et al., 2023), functions as ‘critical pedagogy of place’ (Gruenewald, 2003; McInerney et al., 2011). Place-based education approaches and pedagogies emphasise teaching young people how to care for the ecological and social wellbeing of their communities (McInerney et al., 2011). The primary objective is to cultivate reciprocal relationships with Country and kin for ecological and social wellbeing of their communities (Spillman et al., 2023). Place is central to both individual and collective identity formation (Fogarty & Sollid, 2022).

In recent times, there have been discussions about the importance of Country to Australian school pedagogy (Ober, 2024; Spillman et al., 2023; Wilson, 2021). Integrating Country into the curriculum facilitates students’ connection to their cultural identity (Burgess et al., 2022; Lowe et al., 2023) and their ways of being, knowing, and valuing (Guenther, Rigney, et al., 2023), thereby fostering greater educational engagement (Guenther, Ober, et al., 2024b). Moreover, incorporating Country enables a more accurate representation of history by acknowledging the impacts of colonization and the resilience of First Nations communities (Turner & Children’s Ground, 2023). This approach promotes inclusive and truthful understandings of Australia’s past (Barolsky & Berger, 2023; O’Byrne, 2022). Additionally, embedding First Nations learning systems, which have been practiced for millennia, into contemporary pedagogy allows for the honouring of cultural knowledge systems while integrating Western knowledge and practices (Holmes, 2022; Ober, 2024; Turner & Children’s Ground, 2023), a stance long advocated by First Nations Elders.

Additionally, Britton et al. (2020) found that education models in ‘remote’ First Nations contexts that ensure cultural connectedness and awareness, are contextually designed, foster relationships and consider their programming, teaching and learning strategies, yield holistic outcomes. A systemic review on First Nations education in Australia found that incorporating First Nations epistemologies and methodologies into classrooms, with the active participation of First Nations individuals, positively impacts learning outcomes for both teachers and students (Moodie et al., 2021). Turner and Children’s Ground (2023) also recognised the benefits of On Country, place-based approaches as they include increased engagement and improved learning outcomes; better health and wellbeing for children (including mental health); increased employment for First Nations individuals; the revitalisation of declining first languages; greater family engagement in children’s education; reduced early school leaving and; enhanced economic wellbeing and independence upon exiting school.

One such example of On Country, place based educational approaches includes the Learning on Country (LoC) Program. LoCP is linked to First Nations land and sea management, providing local learning opportunities and expanding employment pathways. A recent evaluation of the Learning on Country Program (LoCP) with the Northern Land Council (NLC) articulates that there has been a positive impact on student outcomes as they incorporate First Nations epistemologies and methodologies into the teaching and learning approach. There is demonstrated growth of the VET training and completions, Year 12 retention and completion of Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET) (Fogarty et al., 2024). LoC Programs foster an intergenerational approach to education, which in turn strengthens community engagement. By integrating First Nations knowledge systems and practices into the

educational framework, these programs promote the revitalisation of First Nations languages and cultural practices that may otherwise be at risk of decline. Additionally, LoC enhances the mental and physical wellbeing of participants by (re)connecting them with their land, kin and ancestral stories. Due to the success of the program, the LoC Program has now expanded from 4 pilot sites to 14 locations. The LoC approach empowers First Nations communities by affirming their cultural identity, improving educational outcomes, fostering sustainable development and directly contribute to broader community outcomes.

Country and Wellbeing

First Nations students residing in ‘remote’ locations, like their peers across Australia, may become disengaged from or discontinue their education for a range of reasons. Recent research highlighted negative self-concept (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2012), reduced overall wellbeing (Tomin et al., 2015) and racism (Moodie et al., 2019) as key contributing factors. This aligns with the international trend signifying racial discrimination plays a critical role in the determinants of health for children and youth (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2012; Priest et al., 2013).

For many First Nations peoples, health and wellbeing is strongly linked to cultural connections through Country, family and language (Dudgeon et al., 2014; Osborne, 2013; Verbunt et al., 2021). Country holds a particularly important cultural role as it is more than a physical location, but a living entity that embodies stories, practices and ancestral connections (Fogarty & Schwab, 2012; Ober, 2024). Country serves as an educator and curriculum in its own right (Harrison, 2011; Moodie et al., 2023; Oliver et al., In press) and supports wellbeing (Knight et al., 2024). Yet, for many First Nations students there is a cultural mismatch between school and home life (Lowe et al., 2021) and as a result, ‘pedagogical readiness’ is impacted (Anderson et al., 2022).

For First Nations students in ‘remote’ Australia, cultural mismatch raises concerns about the relevance of the Australian curriculum (Lowe et al., 2021). This misalignment contributes to disengagement, as well as declining attendance and retention data (Guenther, Ober, et al., 2024a, 2024b; Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2023; Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024; Holmes, Guenther, Morris, et al., 2024; Holmes, Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024). To address this, education programs should be tailored to the local context, reflecting societal values and incorporating First Nations knowledge systems, languages and societal practices (Burgess et al., 2022; Holmes, Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024; Kral & Ellis, 2020; Oliver et al., In press). Integrating local knowledge and students’ perspectives into teaching and learning processes can enhance student engagement (Disbray & Guenther, 2017; Osborne & Guenther, 2013) as well as attendance and retention (Guenther, Ober, et al., 2024a, 2024b; Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2023; Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024; Holmes, Guenther, Morris, et al., 2024). Further, when educational programs are aligned with community aspirations and measurements of success, they can yield positive outcomes (Krakouer, 2016; Moore & Fry, 2011; Osborne & Guenther, 2013; Rong et al., 2023). In particular, when families and the wider community are engaged in the educational programs that are culturally purposeful and aligned, participation is greater (Holmes, Guenther, Oliver, et al., 2024; Miller & Berger, 2022; Moodie et al., 2021; Oliver et al., In press). It is equally critical to determine the conditions necessary for families and the wider community to thrive as it is to identify those required for the flourishing of children (Moore, 2024).

Broader Community Outcomes

Place-based approaches to education, such as the LoCP, yield numerous positive outcomes for the broader community because they foster an intergenerational approach to education, which in turn strengthens community engagement. The programs also contribute to economic development by creating employment opportunities for local Elders and community members who serve as educators, cultural

advisors and through employment opportunities with the Indigenous Ranger Program (Fogarty et al., 2024).

Engaging younger generations in the caring for Country facilitates the transfer of knowledge systems and cultural practices (Fogarty et al., 2024). This involvement not only nurtures cultural continuity but also provides employment opportunities within communities (Fogarty et al., 2024). By participating in the care and management of their lands, seas and waters, young people gain valuable skills and experiences that contribute to their personal and professional development while strengthening their connection to their cultural heritage. This integrated approach supports sustainable community development and fosters a sense of responsibility and pride among the younger generations.

Selected Provider Overviews

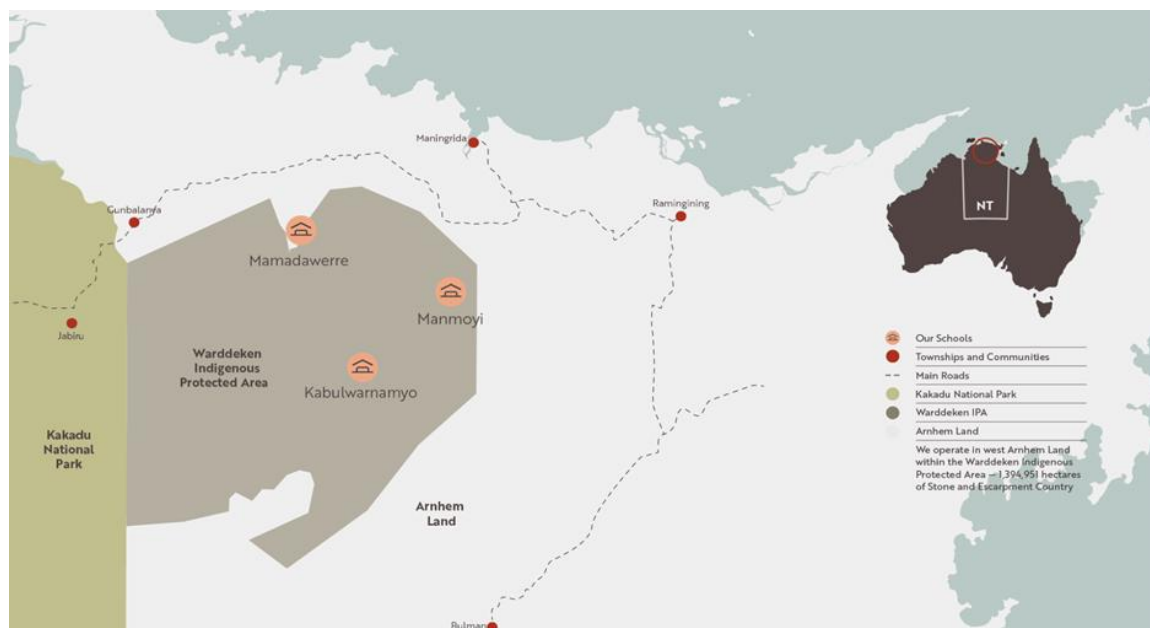
Nawarddeken Academy

Based in the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area (IPA), the Academy operates three registered independent schools at Kabulwarnamyo, Manmoyi and Mamadawerre (Figure 11). The Academy began in 2015 at the request of Elders from the IPA who wanted to see their children educated in community. Across the campus' early learning, primary learning, and secondary learning are offered. Nawardekken's secondary learning model is based out of Kunmayali School and includes tailored learning to the local context, flexible delivery of subjects, relevant career pathways and regionalised delivery models.

According to the 2023 Annual Report, this year saw 28 secondary students from years 7 – 12 enrolled and up to 39 students engaged over the dry season. Across term 1 – 4, attendance levels for all three campus' were between 74 % -100%.

Nawardekken is a registered charity. Its funding is made up of 77% Commonwealth funding; 15% from philanthropic funding, largely coming from Karrkad Kanjdji Trust (KKT); Northern Territory government funding, commonwealth grant funding, other income and interest making up the other 6%.

Figure 11. Map of Nawarddeken Academy Schools



(Source: Nawarddeken Academy Annual Report, 2023. <https://nawarddeken.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/annual-report-2023.pdf>)

Learning on Country Program

The Learning on Country Program (LoCP) is a joint initiative between 15 Top End 'remote' community schools and Aboriginal Ranger groups (Figure 12). The sites include Gunbalanya, Maningrida, Ramingining, Milingimbi, Galiwin'ku, Gapuwiyak, Yirrkala (Dhimurru), Laynhapuy Homelands, Umbakumba, Angurugu, Numbulwar, Ngukurr, Beswick, Barunga, and Borrooloola. The program integrates culture and curriculum in a two-toolbox approach to facilitate Aboriginal students to walk strongly in two worlds. Ranger and teaching staff work collaboratively to develop teaching and learning programs which are linked directly to NTCET, Australian Curriculum and VET certificate outcomes, while still embedding culturally based activities as directed by Traditional Owners. Conservation and Ecosystem Management (Certificates 1, 2 and 3), Maritime Studies and Senior first aid makes up the largest percentages of VET courses, all being directly linked to Ranger work.

LoCP emphasises local Aboriginal governance and this is achieved through the Local LoC Committee and the LoC Steering Committee. The program is funded by the National Indigenous Australian Agency and the Northern Land Council and works in partnership with the Northern Territory Department of Education.

The January - June 2025 LoCP Performance Report states that 3300 Indigenous students are involved in LoCP; 293 students are enrolled in VET courses; 45 students have attained Cert I, II or III formal qualifications; 76 students were engaged in work experience, work placement or internships and 19 students transitioned into employment.

Figure 12. Map of Learning on Country Program (LoCP) Sites

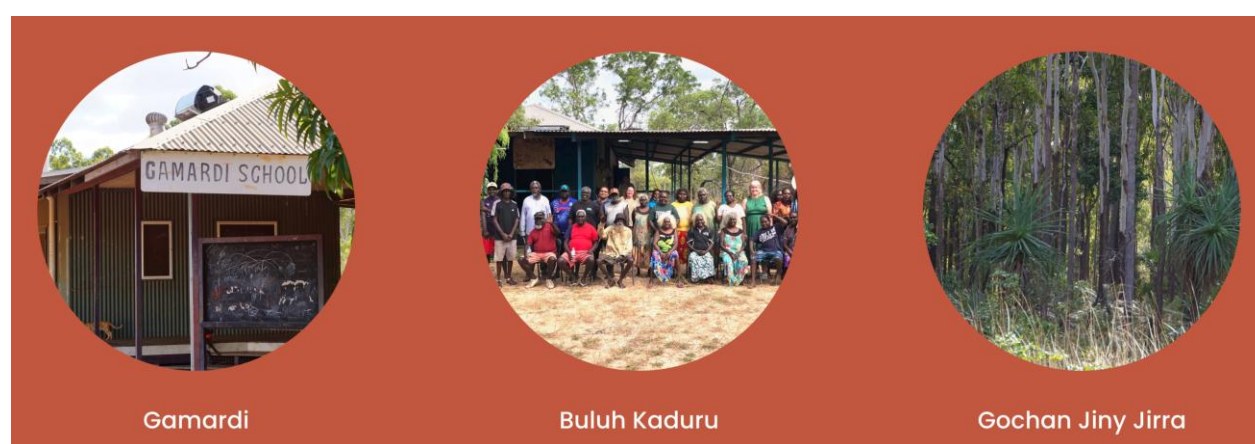


(Source: Fogarty, Bulloch, Bellchambers & Bratchendorf, 2024)

Homelands School Company (HSC)

The Homeland School Company (HSC) is a community-led educational initiative in Maningrida, Northern Territory, focused on delivering culturally grounded, full-time schooling to ‘remote’ Aboriginal Homelands. HSC was established in 2023 by Traditional Owners and community leaders from the Djelk Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) in West Arnhem Land. It emerged from a deep desire to provide consistent, high-quality education to children living in ‘remote’ Homelands — places where access to formal schooling has historically been limited or inconsistent. HSC’s mission is to create bi-cultural, independent schools that reflect and respect both Western educational standards and Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The goal is to allow children to grow up strong in their identity, connected to their land and language, while also being equipped with the skills to thrive in the modern world. HSC is currently in the process of registering three independent schools (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Homelands School Company (HSC) Locations



(Source: <https://Homelandschoolcompany.org.au/>)

These schools will initially follow the Australian National Curriculum, while integrating traditional ecological and cultural knowledge, and developing language-based resources — particularly in endangered languages like Rembarrnga and Kune. Historically, families have had to move between their Homelands and Maningrida township to access education. HSC aims to reverse this trend by enabling children to live and learn on Country, reducing disruption and strengthening cultural continuity. The company is governed by a board of Traditional Owners and community leaders, ensuring that decisions are rooted in local priorities and aspirations. HSC is also building partnerships with linguists, curriculum developers, and government bodies to support its long-term sustainability.

Summary

Place-based, On Country approaches to education have emerged as powerful models for supporting First Nations learners. Such educational models are based on the principle that learning should occur within the cultural and ecological context of a child’s Homeland, these initiatives prioritise connection to land, language and community. Historically, such programs arose in response to the limitations of centralised schooling, which often required families to relocate and disrupted cultural continuity. These models typically involve community-led governance, bilingual or bicultural curricula and integration of local First Nations knowledge systems alongside national education standards.

Recommendations associated with Section 5: On Country / Place-Based Education Models

Recommendation 1: Local Governance

Develop and support strong local governance structures to ensure the local community has decision making powers in the education of their children.

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in 'remote' areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

Recommendation 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability

Invest in solar-powered charging stations and backup generators to mitigate power outages that disrupt learning to uphold equity in education by ensuring that reliable power is universally accessible to all learners, regardless of geographic location, so no student is disadvantaged by infrastructure gaps.

Recommendation 4: Reliable Internet Access

Prioritise expansion of broadband and satellite internet services to 'remote' communities, ensuring consistent connectivity for students and educators, as a matter of spatial justice to address geographic inequities and guarantee equal access to educational opportunities regardless of location.

Recommendation 5: Device Accessibility

Provide laptops, tablets and mobile devices to students who lack access to essential technology to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities and reduce the digital divide for students in 'remote' and disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 7: Enrolment Policies and Procedures

'Remote' education enrolment policies and procedures need to be simplified and streamlined to ensure equitable access for all students. Regardless of location, all Australian students and their families should have clear knowledge of and access to high-quality, culturally grounded education. Enrolment must never be the barrier to equity and inclusion.

Recommendation 8: Remove Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT

The Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT often disadvantages 'remote' First Nations students because it is overly complex, digitally dependent and culturally disconnected. These processes assume urban conditions, ignore mobility and cultural obligations, and lack community involvement, turning enrolment into a barrier rather than an enabler of equitable, place-based education that guarantee access to high-quality, place-based education for all students regardless of location.

Recommendation 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Work side-by-side with local communities in a development capacity to build place-based approaches to education provision to understand the localised needs of distance education provision. Where requested, develop and support blended flexible learning models of delivery that focus on cultural responsiveness.

Recommendation 10: Local Teacher Training Support

Develop strong, culturally appropriate adult training programs for local employment pathways into distance education provision with contextual training that is culturally appropriate, guided by local aspirations, and aligned with career pathways to ensure sustainable, community-led education solutions.

Recommendation 11: Staffing Innovation

Develop innovative staffing models that leverage the expertise of past educators who have previously worked in local communities and built strong relationships with students and families. These educators can play a critical role in distance education programs by maintaining cultural continuity and trust. Their involvement would help address the relational gaps often experienced in virtual learning environments. Additionally, incorporate structured opportunities for these educators to visit the community in person at least once per quarter to strengthen connections, provide face-to-face support, and ensure culturally responsive engagement.

Recommendation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge

Work towards future staffing models that support cultural safety, promotes equitable access to education. This should focus on: culturally framed inductions, ongoing evidence-based professional development and place-based curriculum models.

Recommendation 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR

Investigate and implement multimedia technologies – including AI and virtual reality (VR) – to make distance education more culturally appropriate, engaging and student-centred in ‘remote’ Australia. Traditional distance education often reflects mainstream pedagogical norms that may not align with the cultural values, learning styles, or lived experiences of students in ‘remote’ and Indigenous communities. Multimedia tools offer a powerful opportunity to shift the educational experience from teacher-directed instruction to student-driven exploration, while honouring local identities and knowledge systems. This could include options like:

- Culturally responsive multimedia content: storytelling through video and animation; community generated media;
- AI powered personalisation: adaptive learning platforms, conversational AI tutors;
- Virtual reality for immersive learning: place-based simulators, role play scenarios;
- Shifting the media frame from teacher-led to student-led: perspective-taking, agency and control, codesign multimedia tools with local students, educators and cultural leaders.

Recommendation 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education.

If the distance education model is to be relied upon to provide education for ‘remotely’ located Indigenous students, a better understanding of student outcomes from these providers needs to be developed.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

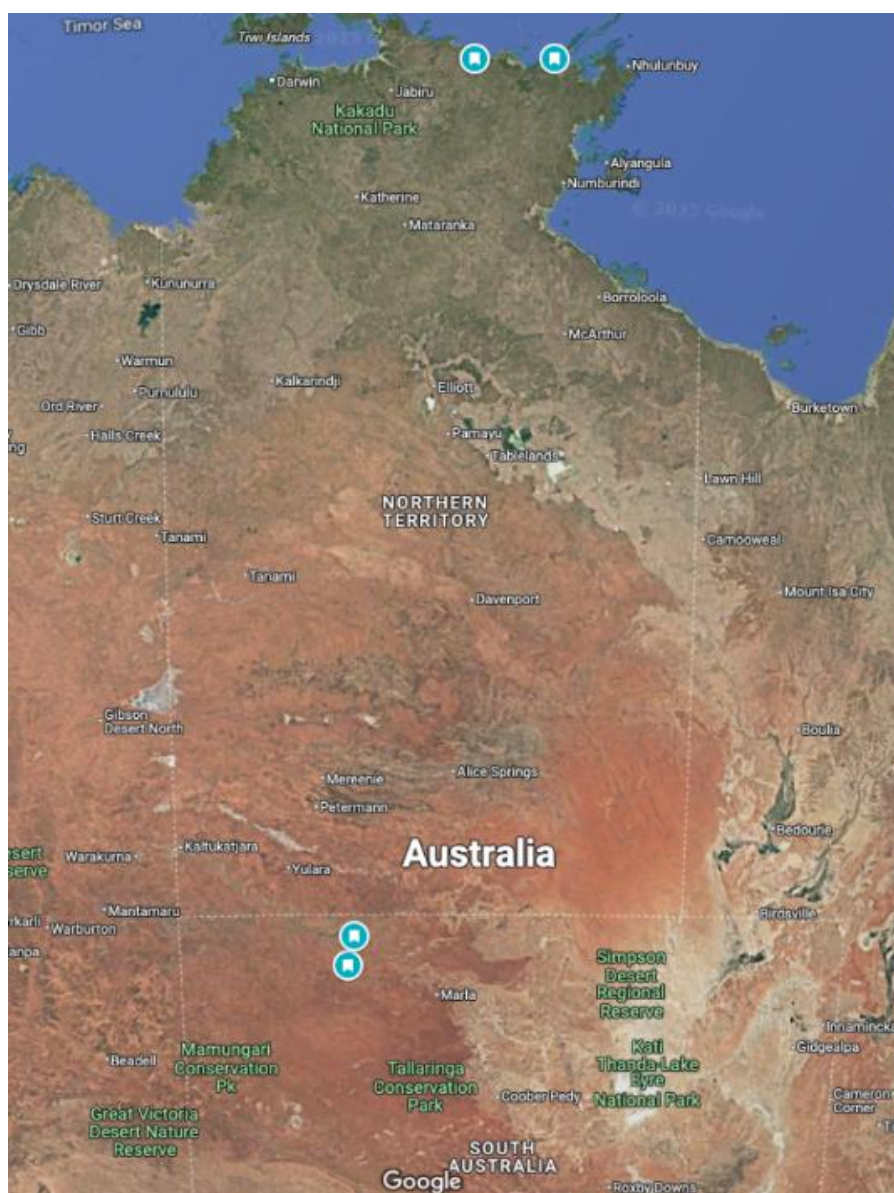
For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

Section 6: On Country Distance Education Project

As part of this current project, the research team is in the process of developing On Country distance education pilot programs with local partner organisations to target ‘remote’ and disengaged secondary students. Pilot programs are specifically designed to build on existing strengths and relationships to ensure that education approaches are community-controlled, culturally responsive and strengths-based, in-line with the evidence base on best practice.

The research team has identified four pilot sites, two in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Galiwin’ku and Maningrida) and two in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, South Australia (Pukatja and Kaltjiti/Mimili) (Figure 14). The following discussion presents site backgrounds and updates from the four pilot projects before providing some interim observations on the potential role of distance provision in On Country learning.

Figure 14. Map of the Four Sites - Two in Arnhem Land and Two in the APY Lands



(Source: Google, 2025).

Since June 2024, the ANU Research Team has completed the following steps:

- Identified pilot sites and auspice organisations for grant management,
- Extensive scoping phase in each community, including several trips to the participating communities and meetings with Traditional Owners (TOs), parents and caregivers of students, principals, and community members,
- Agreement from cultural and institutional authorities to proceed with project,
- Distance Education evaluation literature review completed,
- Distance Education data search completed,
- Entered the ongoing co-design process with partner organisations, schools and community members at each site,
- Formulated a project plan for each site,
- Costed indicative budget for each pilot,
- Ethics clearance from AIATSIS,
- Governance models co-design in process,
- Conducted qualitative interviews with distance education providers,
- Qualitative and quantitative data analysis completed,
- All four pilot sites have exchanged contracts and are due to receive funding before the end of the year.

Below the four pilot sites across the two regions, NT and the APY Lands, are described.

Northern Territory

The research team chose two pilot sites in the Northern Territory due to the high levels of secondary student disengagement in the region, as well as to build on the research teams' history of successful education development and experience in Arnhem Land. Consultations with Indigenous communities identified Galiwin'ku and Maningrida as suitable pilot sites. Both have a strong need for programs that re-engage secondary school level children in school, especially young adults from the Homelands. After numerous meetings 'on Country' between July and September to present the project to stakeholders and community, the research team began the codesign process in Galiwin'ku and Maningrida.

Galiwin'ku and Homelands

Galiwin'ku is a community in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Figure 15). Together with its surrounding Homelands, the area has a population of 2,588 people, according to the 2021 Census data. There are roughly 600 children in secondary schooling age, of which 212 are counted in the census to attend secondary school. In September, the research team held initial consultations with education stakeholders and members of the community about the possibility of a pilot site in Galiwin'ku. This visit was followed up by the research team in November. Shepherdson College was undergoing a change in leadership however the Acting Principal issued a letter of support for the project. The team visited Galiwin'ku again in February and March 2025 to discuss and formally endorse the project with the school and community leadership.

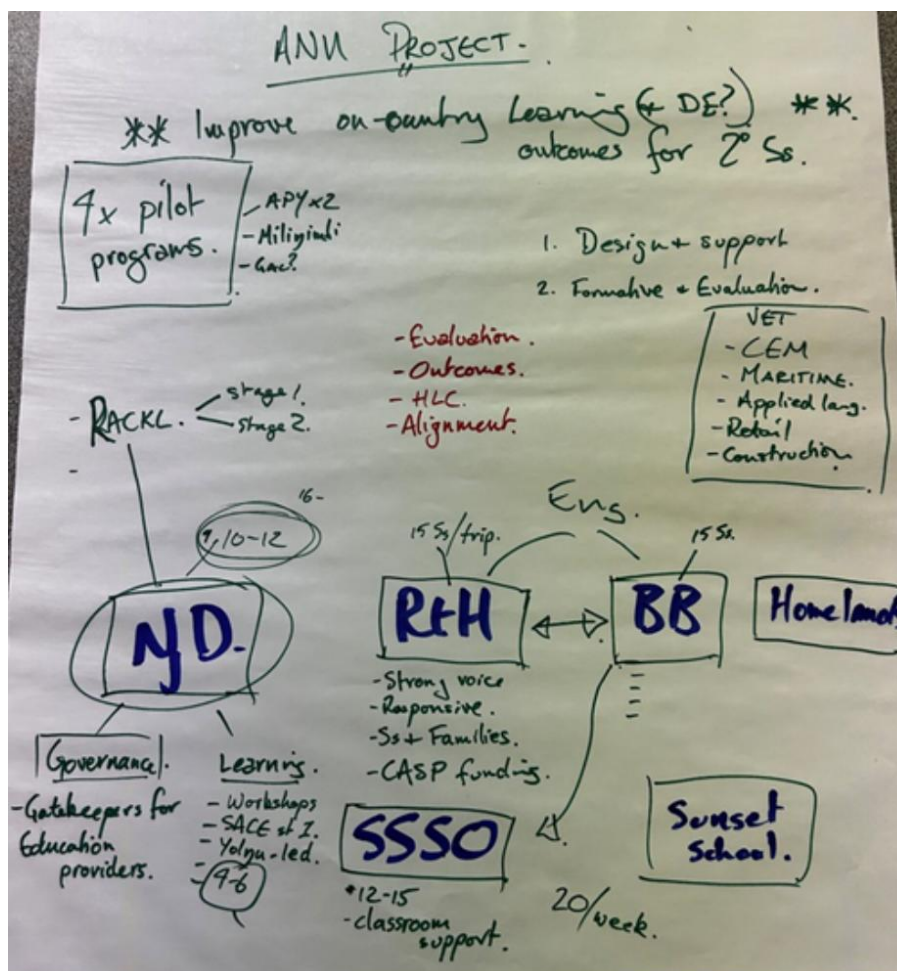
Figure 15. Land and Sea Surrounding Galiwin'ku and Homelands



(Source: Google, 2025)

During the meeting in November 2024, participants identified two interconnected programs at Shepherdson College on Galiwin'ku Island as fitting for a pilot and worthy of support. These are the 'Bounce Back' program and the interconnected 'Return to the Homelands' program. Below is a Mind Map of discussion in Galiwin'ku with the research team, the school's principal, two Student Support Officers and a key staff member of the Bounce Back program in November 2024 (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Mind Map of Discussion in Galiwin'ku, November 2024



(Mind map developed with the ANU Research Team, the school's principal, two Student Support Officers and a key staff member of the Bounce Back program).

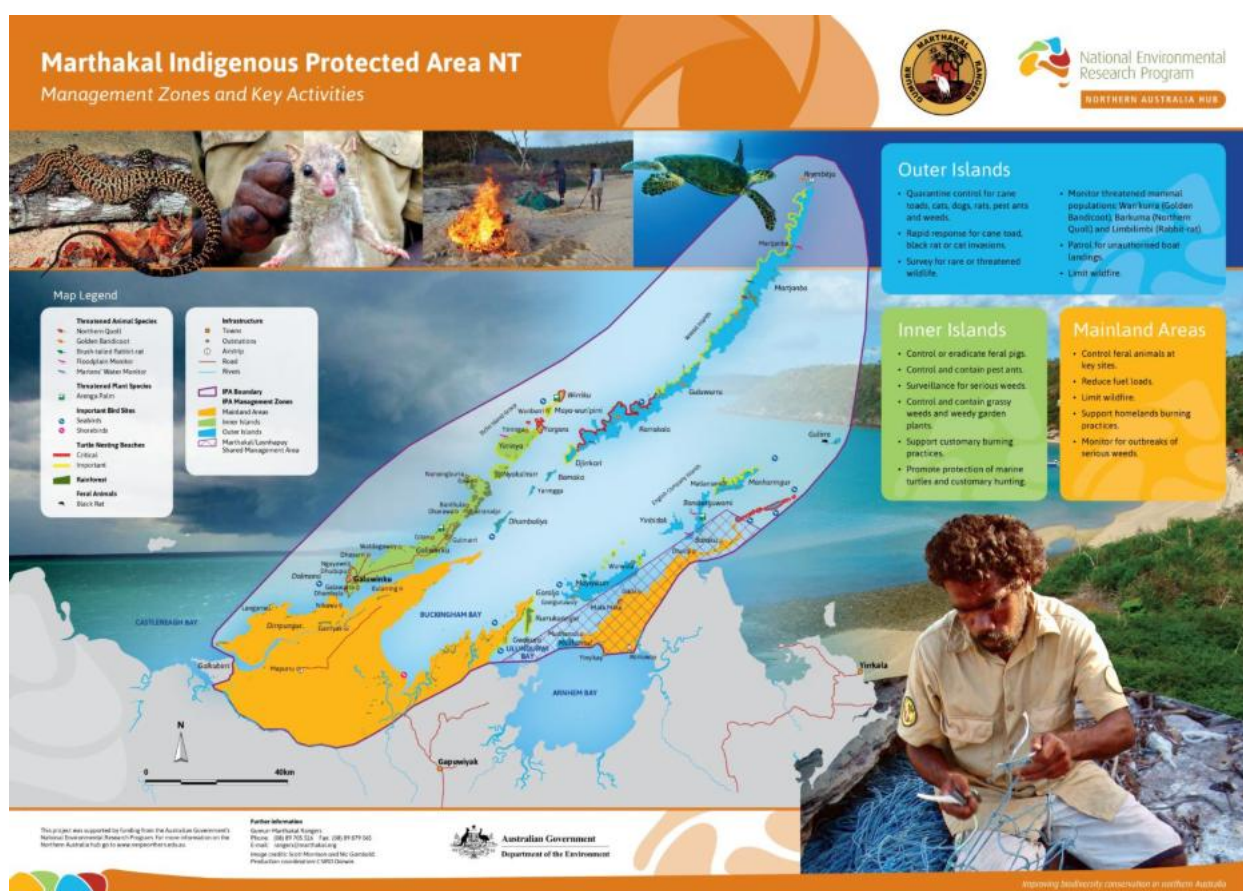
About the Program

Bounce Back is a five week program run by the Outreach Team at Shepherdson College. Bounce Back aims to re-engage disengaged students using a 'soft start' approach. Participants for each Bounce Back cycle are identified from a list of 'passive enrolled' and 'at risk' enrolled students (20 consecutive days of non-attendance). Once they have agreed to participate, each participating student is assigned a Student School Support Officer (SSSO). These are local Yolngu community members employed in this 'for purpose' role. Participating students are assigned an SSSO based on the 'right relationship' via the Yolngu kinship system. This is organised and decided by Yolngu staff. SSSOs provide participants with wrap-around, one-on-one support for the duration of the program. This wrap-around support is initially provided for the entire

school day each day. The wrap-around support is then gradually tapered off over the course of the five-week program. There are two cycles of 'Bounce Back' per term at Shepherdson College.

Return to the Homelands is the 'On Country' component of the 'Bounce Back' program. The Outreach Team work with the Learning on Country team to deliver this aspect of the program. Return to the Homelands is a week-long 'On Country' camp run during the first or last week of each Bounce Back cycle. The camp serves to 'ground' participating students and reward them for participating in the program. The aim of this aspect of the program is to provide an opportunity for students to reconnect with their ancestral Country and cultural identity. The Homeland locations are all within the Marthakal IPA (see Figure 17). During the final day of the camp the students are guided through a process of identifying their strengths and writing a plan to set future schooling goals.

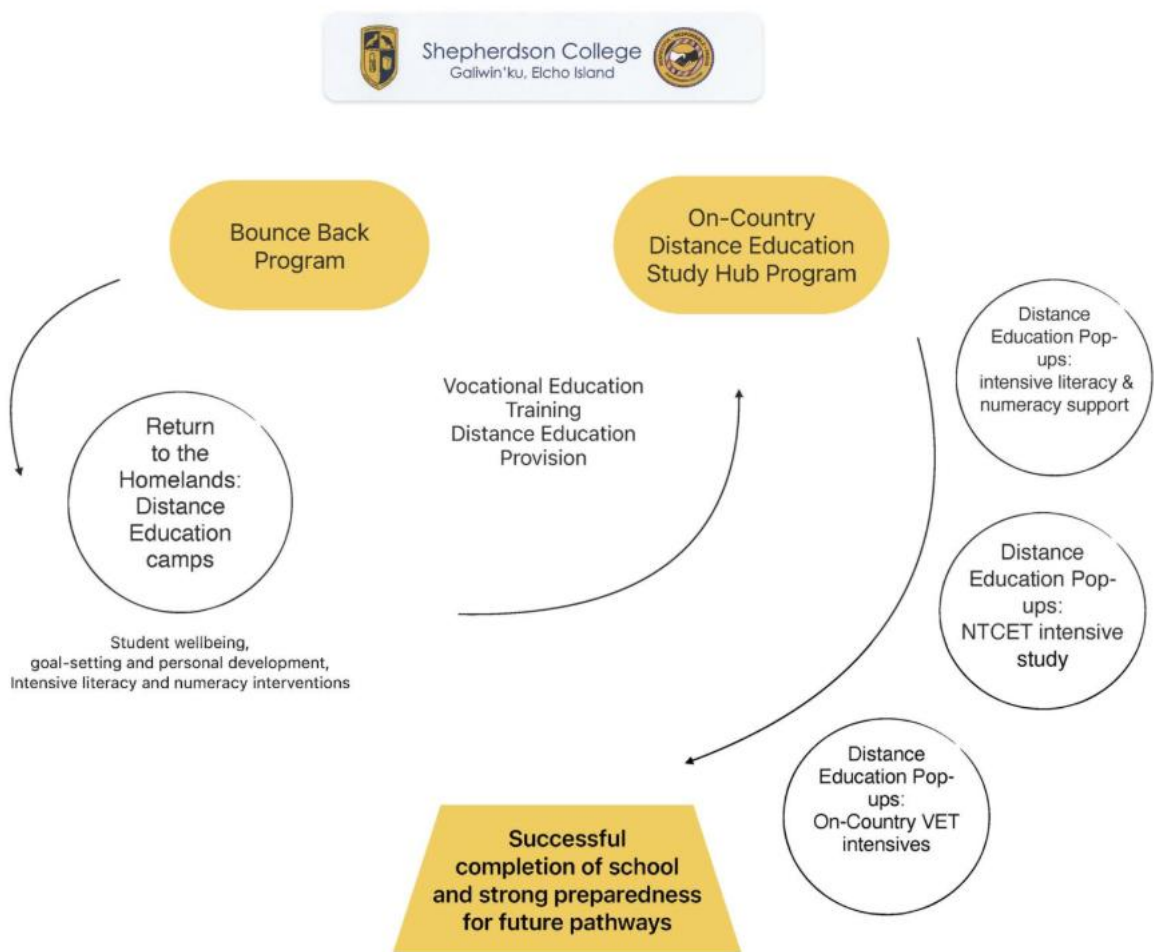
Figure 17. Marthakal Indigenous Protected Area (IPA)



(Source: nerp-2_1_marthakal_indigenousprotectedarea_a2poster.pdf; image used with permission)

The Shepherdson College On Country Distance Education pilot will include two streams (see Figure 18). Those students engaged through the 'Bounce-Back' re-engagement program, and those students engaged through the On Country Distance Education Study Hub. The On Country Distance Education Study Hub will offer a series of intensives including Intensive Numeracy and Literacy Support camps, NTCET Intensive Study Support camps', and On Country VET Intensive camps. The aim, wherever possible, is for students to transition from the Bounce-Back stream into the Study Hub Program stream with a view to successfully completing school.

Figure 18. Galiwin'ku Program Mapping, March 2025 (Source: ANU Research Team)



In early 2025, the Nurrunginy Goli Gänhamirri Yolŋu advisory Body and Shepherdson College School Council approved the pilot proposal and evaluation in early 2025. The ANU Research Team then met with the new Principal, Mr. Bryan Hughes, and other senior staff at Shepherdson College in March 2025. The pilot has developed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining each party's roles and responsibilities and formalised a steering committee to direct the program.

The next steps are for the Shepherdson College On Country Distance Education pilot is to begin the recruitment process for all roles and continue to expand the On Country element of the programs on offer.

Consultation Overview

November 2024

Three members of the ANU Research Team visited the pilot site at Galiwin'ku Island, northeast Arnhem Land, NT to meet with education stakeholders, and members of the community about the pilot and potential development design

March 2025

Bill Fogarty and Bree Blakeman held a consultation with incoming Shepherdson College Principal, Bryan Hughes, and relevant staff (Hillary Snaize, Clare Jelley, Dhambiŋ Burarrwaja, Isaac Jansens).

July 2025

Extended fieldtrip to Galiwin'ku Island. Bree Blakeman met with Marthakal Rangers, Yaŋu, Learning On Country, and Shepherdson College over a period of ten days. Blakeman conducted eight interviews with six individuals and two groups on the topic of project design, and project goals/values with the aim of developing the project design and drafting the evaluation framework. Blakeman also met with Anne-Marie Southall (NIAA) at Galiwin'ku to discuss the project and introduce herself.

September 2025

Letter of support for the pilot and project signed by Acting Principal and members of the School Council.

Bill Fogarty and Bree Blakeman held a consultation with Shepherdson College Principal, Clare Jelley, and four Shepherdson college staff. They discussed the progress of the NIAA Special Grant application and plans for the commencement of official pilot activities.

October 2025

Bree Blakeman met with Shepherdson College educators and Yolŋu community members at Galiwin'ku Island to consult further on the draft goals/values for the evaluation framework and project design. Blakeman discussed project design refinement and governance with Alex Payne (Assistant Principal Secondary). Blakeman met with Anne-Marie Southall (NIAA) at Galiwin'ku to discuss project updates.

Maningrida

Maningrida is one of the largest ‘remote’ towns in the Northern Territory and is located approximately 500 kilometres east of Darwin in Arnhem Land at the mouth of the Liverpool River (see Figure 19). The TOs of Maningrida are Kunibídjí people. They call the area Manayingkarírra, which is the name of a fresh-water spring near the barge landing. The name comes from a Kunibídjí phrase meaning ‘the place where the ancestral totemic beings changed shape’. Maningrida is an anglicised version of the Manayingkarírra.

Figure 19. Land and Sea Surrounding Maningrida



(Source: <https://www.bawinanga.com/>)

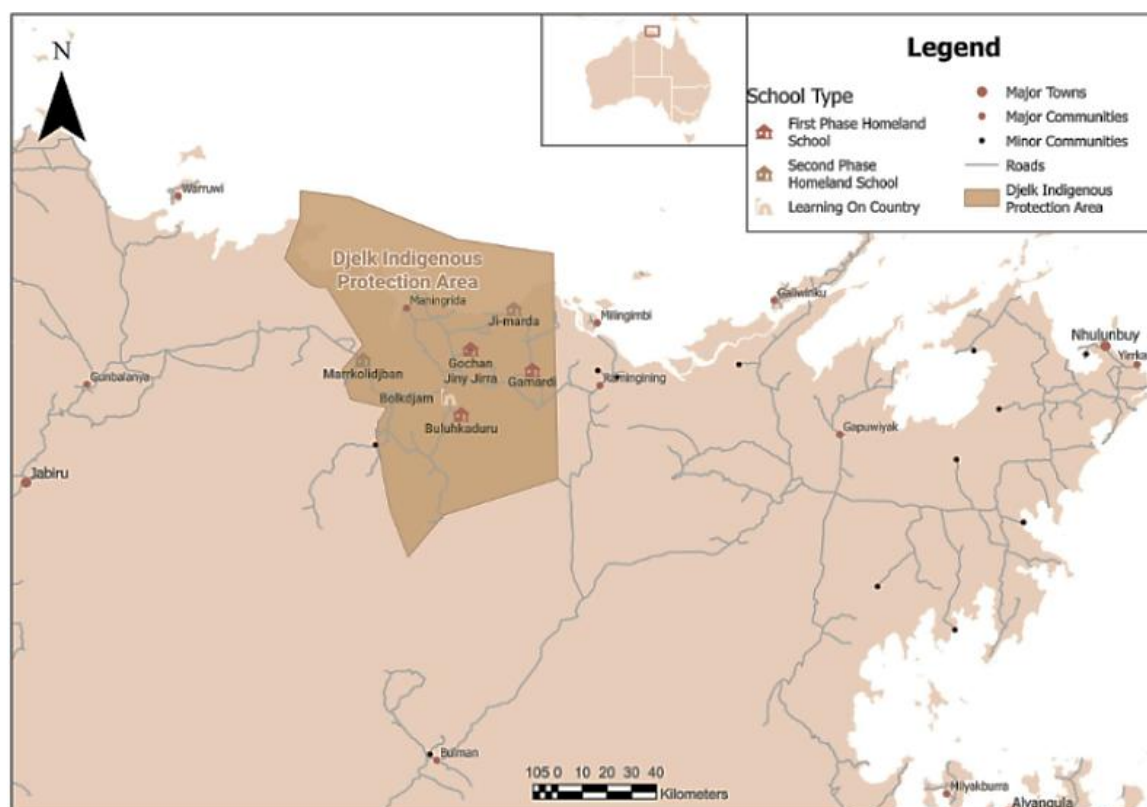
The township of Maningrida was initially set up as a trading post in 1949 and it was made into a permanent settlement by the Northern Territory’s welfare department in 1957. From the 1960s onwards, the outstation movement led to many people returning to live on their traditional lands, which led to the establishment of the Bawinanga Homelands Aboriginal Corporation (BHAC) in 1970. Today Maningrida is home to approximately 3000 people, 93% of whom are Indigenous. The region serviced by Bawinanga extends includes the traditional lands of more than 100 clans and 32 Homeland communities, many of which are home to landowners and their families. Maningrida is situated within the Djelk Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) which stretches 6700 square kilometres from central Arnhem Land plateau to the Arafura Sea extending west and east of Maningrida in the Northern Territory of Australia. The Djelk IPA is managed by Bawinanga Rangers.

About the Program

The Homeland School Company (HSC), based at Maningrida, was founded by TOs from the Djelk IPA to establish independent bi-cultural schools in the region (Figure 20). The HSC is currently in the process of registering three independent schools at the Homeland communities of Gamardi, Buluh Kaduru, and Gochan Jiny Jirra.

Currently, there is only one full-time public school across the entire 6,700 square kilometre IPA and its many ‘remote’ Homeland communities – an area that is home to more than 4,000 people. The HSC initiative comes in response to the lack of educational facilities in the area. Drawing inspiration from successful Homeland projects in the neighbouring Warddeken IPA, the HSC was established in 2022.

Figure 20. Djelk IPA and HSC



(Source: <https://Homelandschoolcompany.org.au/our-schools>)

Collaborating with partners such as Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, the Karrkad Kanjdji Trust, and the Nawarddeken Academy, HSC aims to provide culturally rich curriculums tailored to the seasons, languages, and stories of each location. The HSC's Directors and leaders have been working closely with Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation to formalise a vision for a revitalisation of Homeland communities across the Djelk IPA, including upgrades to roads, teacher houses, power, internet and water, as well as the establishment of local enterprises. HSC envisage that the Homelands schools will become hubs of employment and activity.

The HSC Homelands School Ranger Program is an important part of these efforts to revitalise education on the Homelands. The HSC Homelands School Ranger Program aims to establish a culturally responsive On Country Distance Education program focused on the independent school at Gamardi. Drawing on connections between existing cultural knowledge and land management practices the Homelands School Ranger Program seeks to enhance well-being, boost academic success, and pave the way for employment opportunities for Maningrida youth. Key components of the Homelands School Ranger Program include a focus on re-engaging students who have become disconnected from school, governance led by HSC, and On Country education. The Homelands School Ranger Program represents as innovative On Country Distance Education model that prioritises the creation of place-based curriculum.

Currently, there is only one full-time public school across the entire 6,700 square kilometre IPA and its many 'remote' Homeland communities – an area that is home to more than 4,000 people. The HSC initiative comes in response to the lack of educational facilities in the area. Drawing inspiration from successful Homeland projects in the neighbouring Warddeken IPA, the HSC was established in 2022.

Collaborating with partners such as Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation, the Karrkad Kanjdji Trust, and the Nawarddeken Academy, HSC aims to provide culturally rich curriculums tailored to the seasons, languages and stories of each location.

Consultation Overview

June 2025

On June 23rd, 2025, ANU researchers met with Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of HSC, Nic Sharah. Within the meeting the grant application and submission requirements were assessed, the need for an MOU between Bawinanga Rangers and HSC was identified, plans for HSC's expansion was discussed and HSC's prior involvement with NIAA was recognised. The Special Grant Application was submitted on 2nd July 2025.

July 2025

On July 31st, 2025, ANU researchers met with the HSC Board (Matty Ryan, Nic Sharah, Shaun Ansell, Karen Kehoe, Jaqueline Phillips, Olga Scholes, Teya Dusseldorp and Dale Pascoe). The main discussions centered around the co-design of the project and Key Performance Indicator's (KPIs), as well as the potential to visit other pilot sites and exchange ideas. On August 1st, 2025, the HSC Board approved the pilot project.

October 2025

In October 2025, ANU Researchers ran a workshop in Maningrida with the HSC Board on a range of activities (Figure 21).

- Continue to build shared aims and goals,
- Form the governance structure of the project,
- Identify the partnership that are desired for the project to be successful,
- Identify and discuss tasks for infrastructure and other future goals for the project (i.e. early childhood and adult learning).

Figure 21. Photos from HSC governance workshop

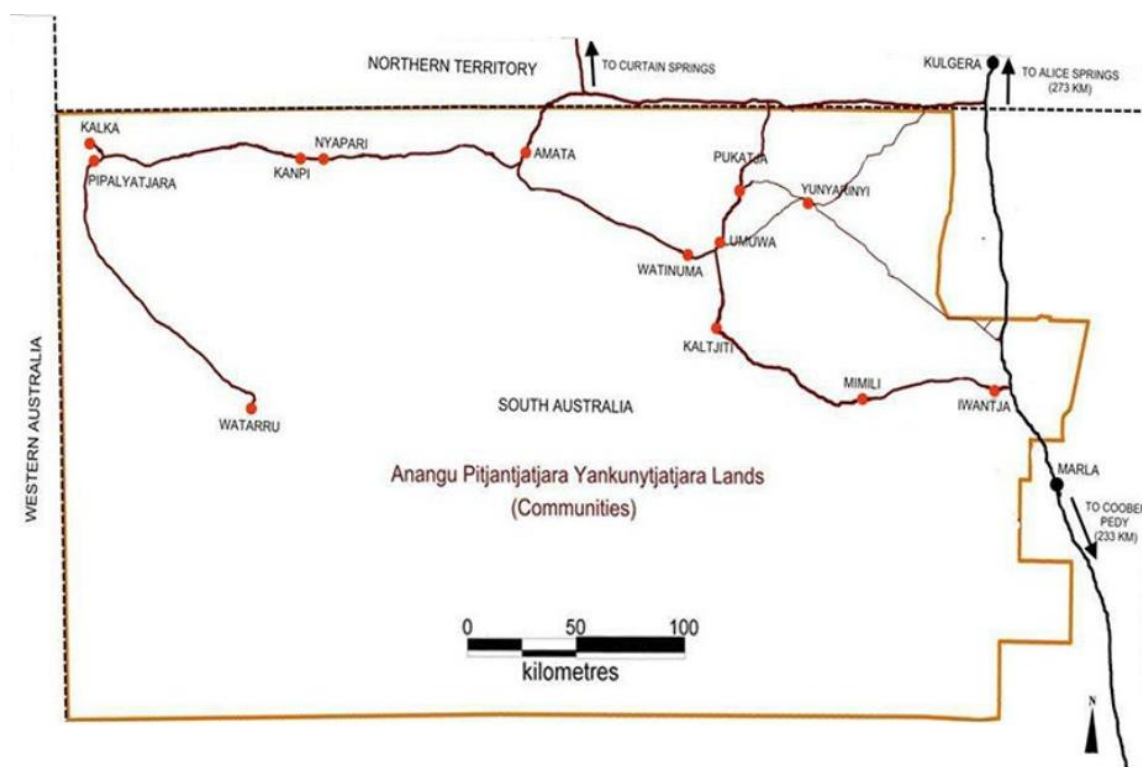


(Source: photos by ANU Research Team)

APY Lands

After extensive consultation with communities and the NIAA South Australia Team, it was decided on two pilot sites in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands (Figure 22). The APY Lands cover an area more than 100,000 square kilometres in northern South Australia and is extremely 'remote', with the nearest major town being five to six hours away in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The APY Lands is home to approximately 3,000 Anangu, the First Nations traditional owners spread across seven communities and more than 40 Homelands. The main languages spoken are Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara, as well as varying levels of English.

Figure 22. Map of Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands

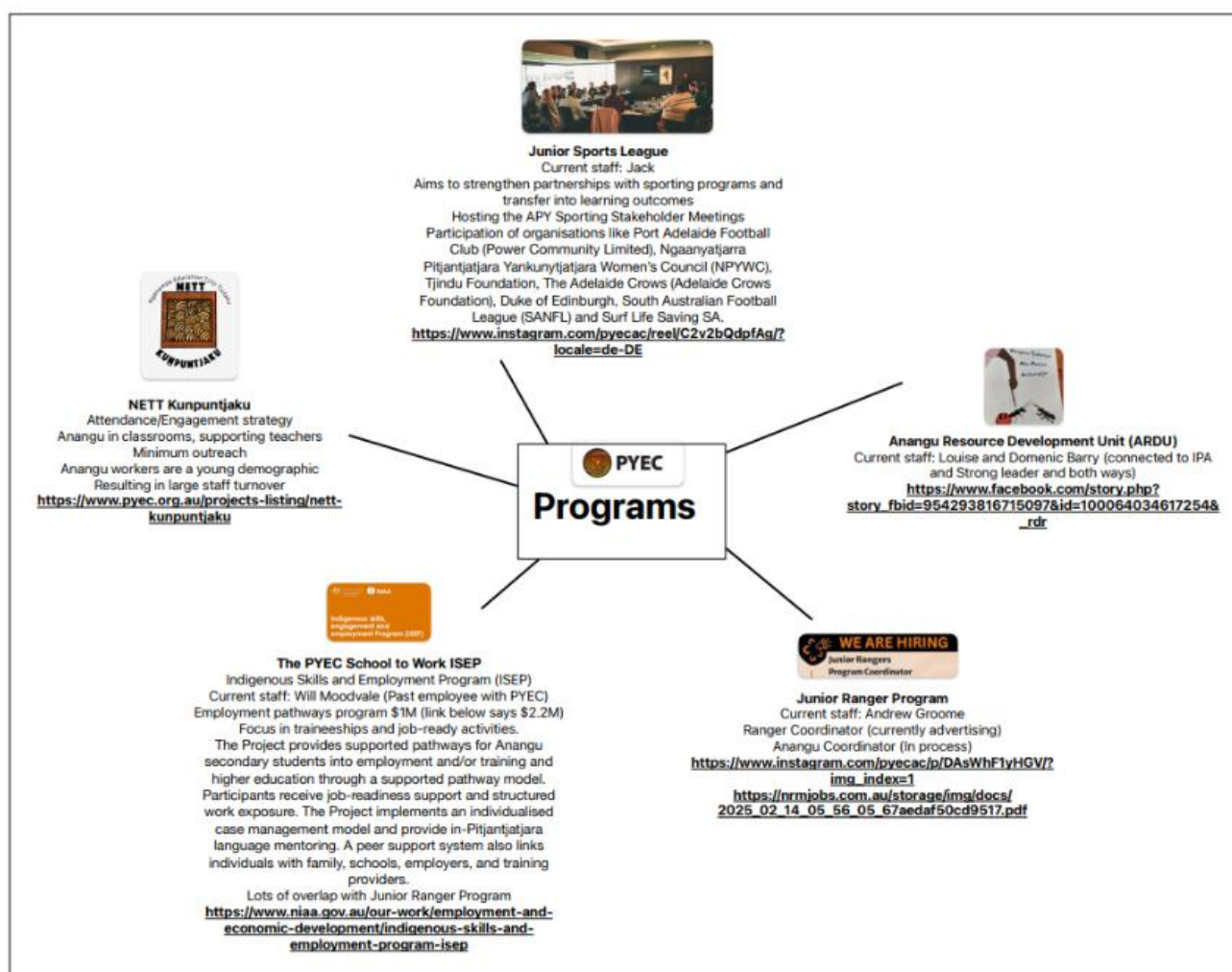


(Source: APY Regional Council).

About the Program

ANU is partnering with the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC), as the auspice organisation to develop On Country and distance education pilot sites in the APY Region. PYEC is an Anangu community-controlled organisation established in 1993 to advance Anangu self-determination in education. PYEC represents Anangu across the APY Lands, comprising educational leaders from each community to make decisions about how education is run. As such, the PYEC board represents critical authority for setting the direction of pilot programs in their region. Figure 23 depicts the range of programs PYEC delivers.

Figure 23. PYEC Programs (ANU Research Team)

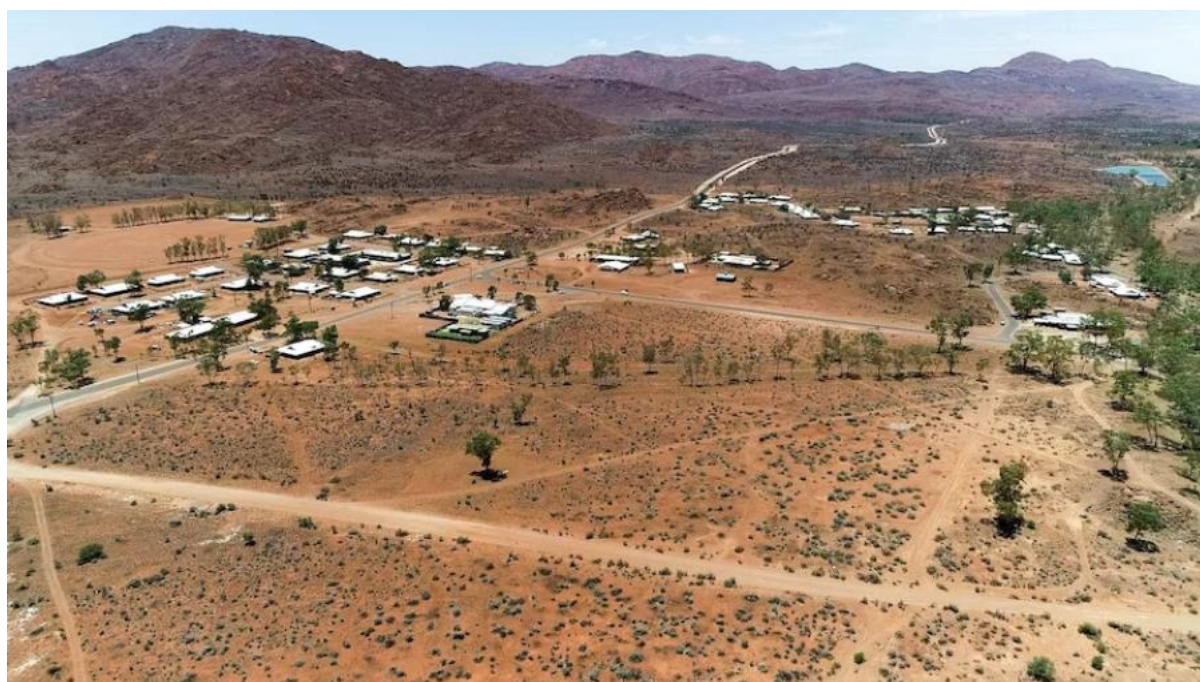


After consultation, two pilot sites were decided on in the communities of Pukatja, also known as Ernabella, and Kaltiji, also known as Fregon, in partnership with its neighbouring community Mimili. Due to the interconnected nature of the APY Lands and Anangu kinship however, it is likely more pilot sites may emerge.

Pukatja (Ernabella)

Pukatja is a community in the APY Lands around 30 kilometres south of the Northern Territory border (see Figure 22 on the previous page). The community is located on the old Ernabella Mission, established by the Presbyterian Church in 1937. In 1974 Ernabella Mission was handed over to the community and renamed Pukatja (see Figure 24 below). At the 2021 Census, Pukatja had a population of 519 residents, with around 80 youth of secondary school age. Of these, 28 attended secondary schooling according to the Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Pukatja/Ernabella 2021). Discussions with school staff indicated actual attendance to be far lower than this. The Principal of Ernabella Anangu School emphasised that engaging secondary age children was one of the school's biggest challenges (see Figure 25 below).

Figure 24. Aerial Image of Pukatja



(Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-23/call-for-better-remote-internet-after-rats-cause-outage/13072896>).

Figure 25. Ernabella Anangu School



(Source: ANU Research Team)

Kaltjiti (Fregon) and Mimili

Kaltjiti and Mimili are two separate communities, however, they share an IPA. Together, they are one pilot site. Below we outline the two various communities.

Kaltjiti (Fregon) is a community in the APY Lands around 60km from south from Pukatja (Ernabella) (Figure 26 and 27). Originally established as an outstation of Ernabella Mission, Fregon developed as a base for First Nations stockmen and their families working in the cattle industry. According to the 2021 Census, 261 people live in Kaltjiti, of which approximately 40 children are of secondary school age. Census data indicates 11 students attend secondary schooling within the community however both the local principal in Kaltjiti and community members confirmed that most children do not attend secondary school, indicating the actual number of attending students is likely lower.

Figure 26. Aerial Image of Kaltjiti (left) and Welcome Sign in Community (right)



(Source: left: <https://www.tropo.com.au/fregon>; right: photo by ANU Research Team)

Mimili is located 78km to the east of Kaltjiti. At the 2021 Census, 277 people lived in Mimili with approximately 45 secondary school age youth, however, only 26 students are recorded as attending school (Figure 28).

Figure 27. Aerial Image of Mimili



(Source: Mimili Anangu School Facebook)

Figure 28. Mimili Youth Centre and Signage



(Source: photos by ANU Research Team)

During early consultations, PYEC members emphasised the siloed, uncoordinated service provision reaching their communities, with a mixed trajectory of success. One collaborative activity during these early stages involved mapping existing programs to identify how this program could coordinate and streamline all other programs, under Anangu direction (see, for example, Figure 29 and Figure 30 for all the youth services in the two communities).

Figure 29. Youth Services in Pukatja (ANU Research Team)

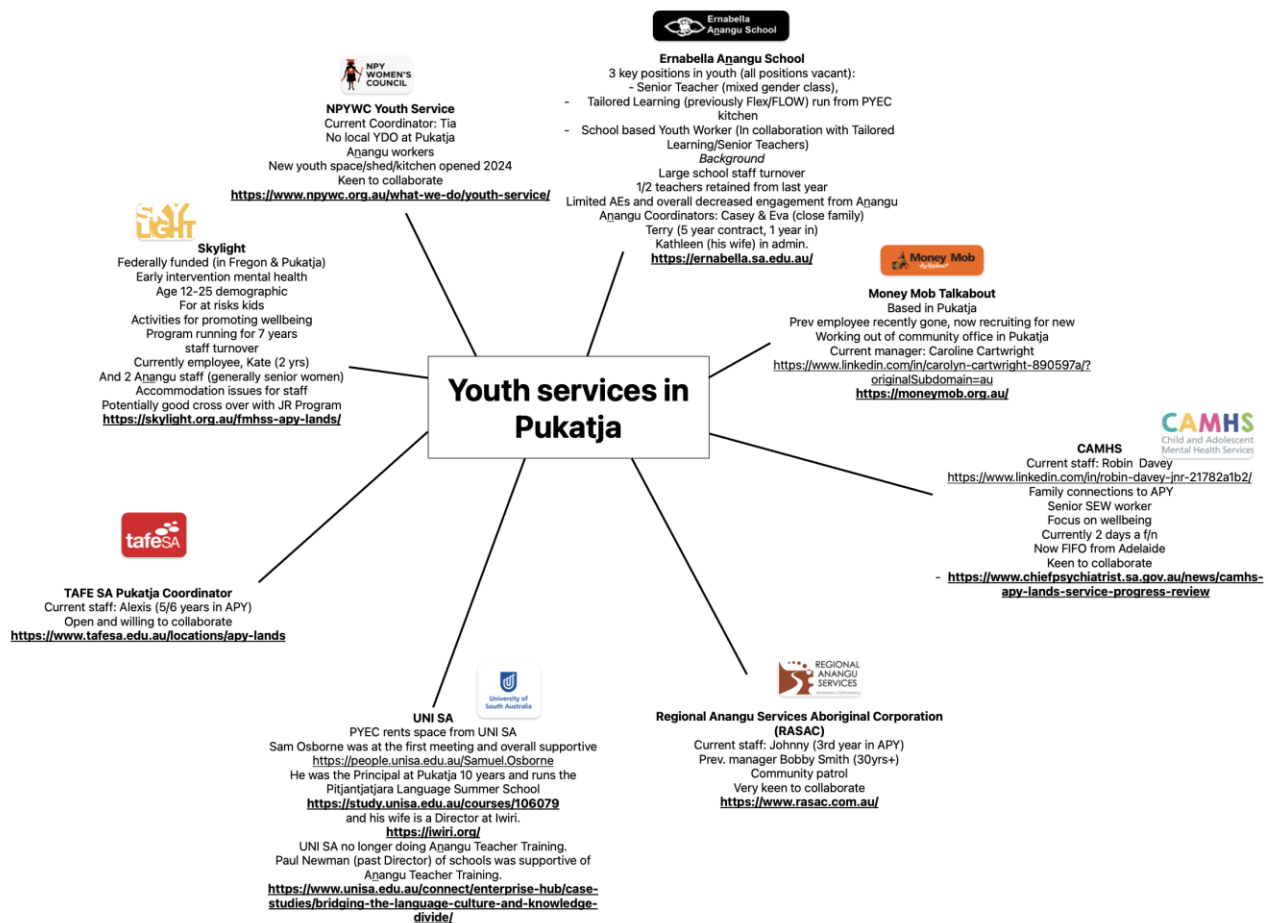
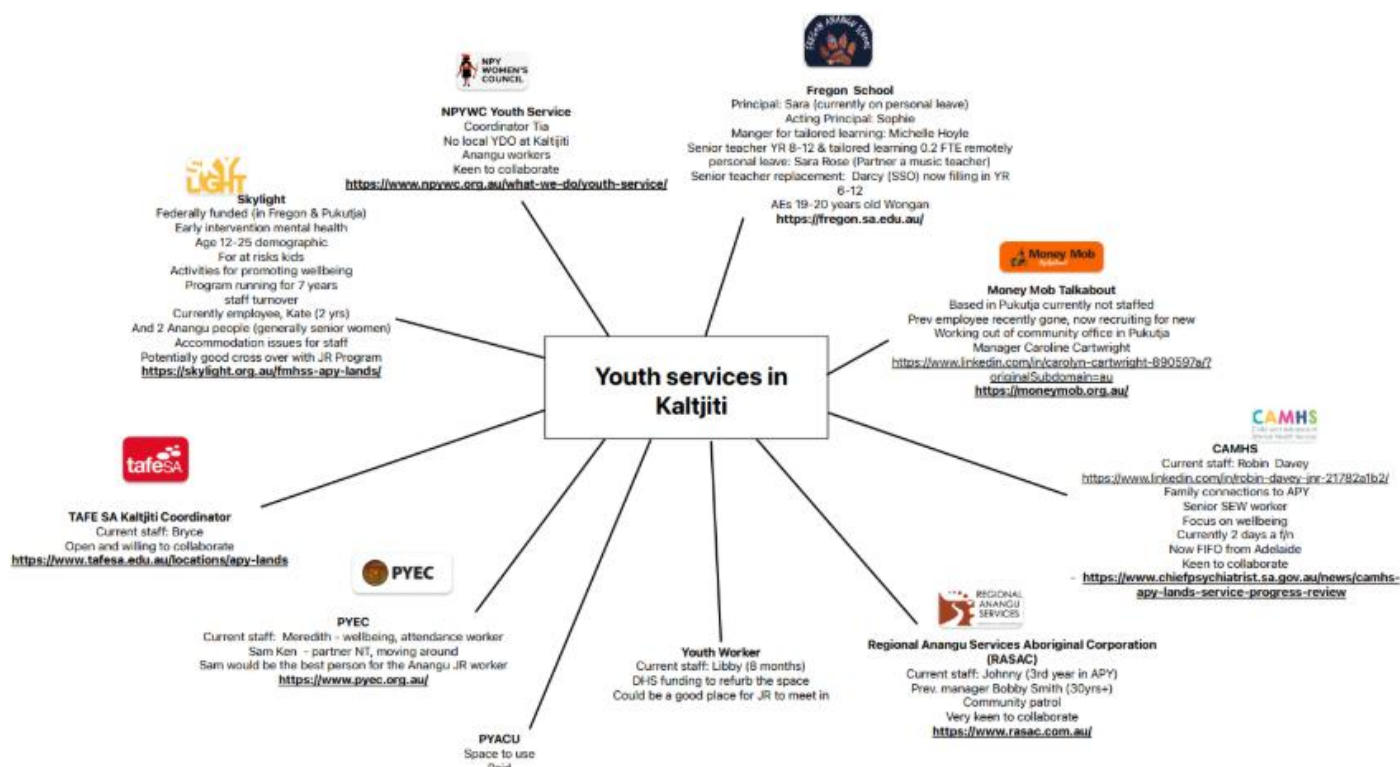


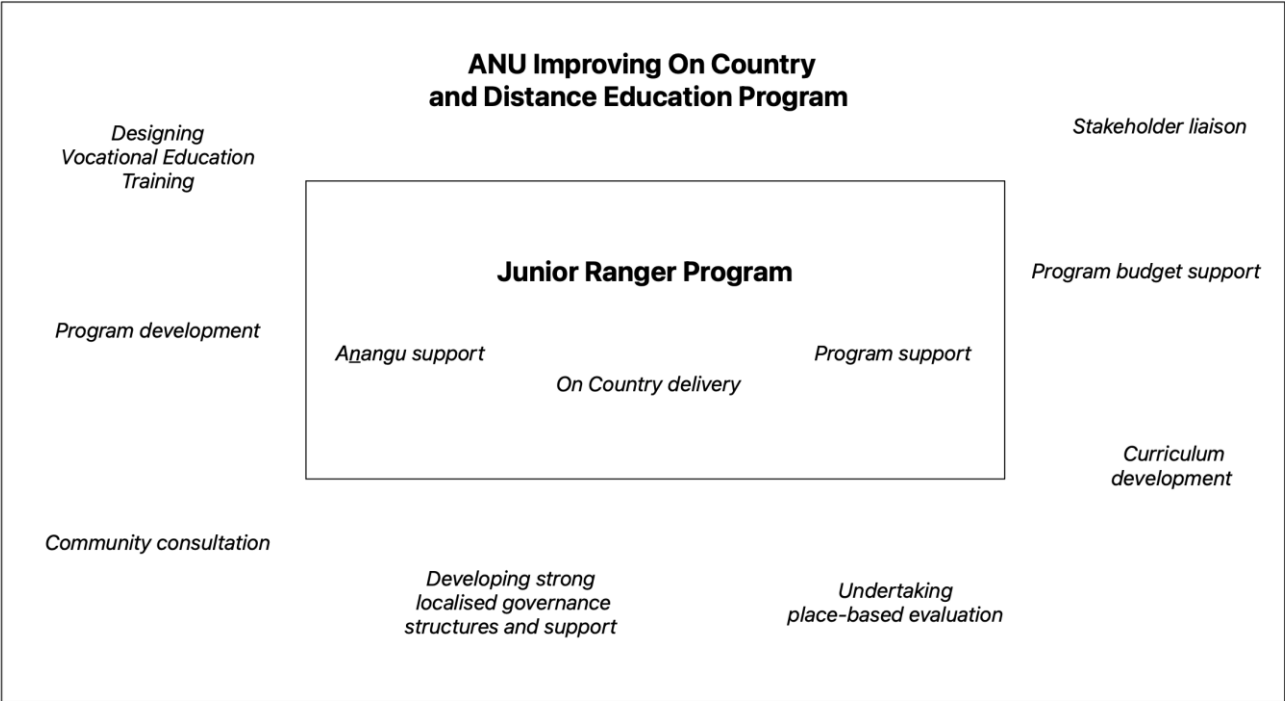
Figure 30. Youth Services in Kaltjiti (ANU Research Team)



Traditional Owners, community members, parents, educators, and representatives of the PYEC expressed frustration that despite all these programs, young people continued to disengage from schooling and engage in antisocial behaviour. The occurrence of school drop-out amongst teenage boys and dangerous online behaviour emerged as primary concerns to address through the APY pilots. It was suggested that integrating land management into the educational framework could serve as a vital strategy to re-engage students and foster renewed interest in schooling.

Through workshops with key Anangu stakeholders, the Improving On Country and Distance Education pilot developed into an overarching both-ways land management educational program, supporting the development of the newly establishing APY Junior Ranger Program. Figure 31 depicts a conceptual diagram showing the interconnectedness of the Improving On Country and Distance Education Program and the APY Junior Ranger Program.

Figure 31. Conceptual Diagram for the Interconnectedness of the Improving On Country and Distance Education Program and the APY Junior Ranger Program (ANU Research Team)



The APY Junior Ranger Program, funded by the NIAA, aims to foster connections to cultural knowledge and land management practices to enhance wellbeing, improve secondary school achievement, and support employment pathways for Anangu youth. Key features of the Junior Ranger Program include a focus on re-engaging disengaged learners, Anangu-led governance, and teaching and learning on Country. With the endorsement of NIAA, the two programs are working collaboratively to complement their shared goals and aspirations. Together, they are forming a ground-up On Country Distance Education approach that emphasises place-based curriculum development alongside the co-design and integration of a localised Vocational Education and Training (VET) program rooted in On Country principles.

Consultation Overview

September 2024

During the first visit, the ANU Research Team met with local stakeholders and potential partners and supporters of the project, including researchers from the University of South Australia (SA), board members of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC), the Department of Education, Languages and Professional Learning, Land Management and Social Workers. All participants unanimously agreed that the APY Lands often miss out on grant opportunities and expressed support for the proposed project. PYEC provided the ANU Research Team with letters of support for both sites.

November 2024

During the second visit, the ANU Research Team convened with TOs, community members, parents, educators, and representatives of the PYEC at the Ananguku Kulintja Hub (Figure 32). Discussion focused on what Anangu wanted the pilot to focus on. Participants identified several challenges, including the perception among adolescents that schooling is only appropriate for younger children, as well as the increased time spent by youth on mobile devices. A key objective identified during the discussions was to challenge and transform the perception of school as being exclusively for young children, thereby encouraging greater attendance. It was suggested that integrating a both-ways approach to land management could re-engage students in schooling, led by Anangu values and working towards meaningful employment pathways.

Figure 32. Workshops at the Ananguku Kulintja Hub, November 2024



(Source: ANU Research Team)

During these workshops, it was decided that the Improving On Country and Distance Education Program would support the development of the newly establishing APY Junior Ranger Program, to support strong Anangu governance structures, strengths-based and place-based curriculum development and ongoing, co-designed monitoring and evaluation.

February 2025

During the third trip, the ANU Research Team met with a range of stakeholders across the two pilot sites. These stakeholders included: TOs and community members at Pukatja, Mimili and Kaltjiti, representatives of the PYEC in the Junior Ranger Team, the Land Management Coordinators and Rangers with Warru Kaninytjaku APY Rangers (Pukatja), Antara-Sandy Bore and Walalkara Rangers (Kaltjiti and Mimili), as well as school principals at Fregon Anangu School and Ernabella Anangu School and TAFE SA. A key objective for the trip was to engage with the TOs and the associated Rangers in the Land Management programs to collaborate and map out the next steps for the program. The ANU Research Team also participated in a training session with PYEC about the sociohistorical background of the APY region (Figure 33).

Figure 33. PYEC Presentation of APY History and TafeSA Learning Centre, Fregon.



(Source: ANU Research Team)

March 2025

In March 2025, the ANU Research Team travelled to the APY Lands to meet with TOs, Land Management Coordinators and Rangers (plus a specific focus on women Kungka Ninti and Waru Women Rangers), NIAA representatives (Neil Fisher), the Mimili Anangu School Principal, PYEC Junior Ranger staff, APY Regional Council representatives (Figure 34). The ANU Research Team also carried out interviews for the Junior Ranger Coordinator position.

Figure 34. Ernabella Arts Centre and Anangu Kulintja



(Source: ANU Research Team)

May 2025

During May 2025, the ANU Research Team met with a range of stakeholders. These included the Trade Training Centre manager, Ernabella Art Centre Directors and manager, TAFE SA, APY Council, Fregon, Pukatja and Mimili school principals. At these meetings, baseline school attendance data was collected. The Junior Ranger Manager and Coordinator met with the ANU Research Team to undertake a calendar mapping exercise for the upcoming six months. The ANU Research Team also attended the Walalkara IPA Steering Committee Meeting to officially sign off on the project.

Figure 35. Walalkara IPA Steering Committee and Trade Training Centre



(Source: ANU Research Team)

June 2025

In June 2025, the ANU Research Team spent time with the Junior Ranger Team and helped to facilitate On Country activities with the Waru Kaninytjaku APY Rangers (Figure 35). The team joined with Junior Rangers on Country in Pintji and in Waru Protected Areas. Over this time, Junior Rangers learnt about maintaining and monitoring Waru Protected Areas including checking motion camera, droppings, water supplies and caring for native flora, as guided by rangers (Figure 36). The team also sat in on TAFE SA presenting certificates to rangers who had worked on the toilet and shower blocks pictured below. Elders talked with the Junior Rangers on this trip about the importance of being on Country as it is ‘good for your body’ (Joseph, 2025).

Figure 36. Field Trip, June 2025



(Pictured: Waru Rangers and Ranger Coordinators checking Waru Protected Area (left); Gathering for malu wipu (kangaroo tail) at Pintj (centre); Rangers and other stakeholders gathered for a photo at the newly completed toilet and shower block at Pintji (right). (Source: ANU Research Team)

July 2025

ANU hosted the PYEC Board of Directors in Canberra for a two-day workshop to co-design the values and governance of the Junior Ranger / On Country Distance Education program for both pilot sites in APY (Figure 37). The first phase focused on articulating the values of the Junior Ranger/On Country Distance Education project. The PYEC Directors, with the facilitation from ANU staff, took many concerted steps to reach this point. The second phase of the workshop focused on developing the project’s governance model. The workshop established values for the project based on Tjukurpa (Pitjantjatjara)/ Wapar (Yankunytjatjara) which refers to ‘story’, Ngura (Country), Waltytjapiti (Family), Wangka (Language) and Kurunpa (Spirit). PYEC Directors also refined a governance structure, creating an overarching and local steering committee with terms of reference.

Figure 37. PYEC Board of Directors and ANU staff in the Governance Workshop



(Source: ANU Research Team)

Interim Observations Across the Pilot Sites

Much of 2025 has focused on developing strong First Nations governance structures within each pilot program before operations can fully begin. This is essential to self-determination in education. Though it remains early days, below are some interim observations on the potential role of distance provision in On Country learning:

- Homelands have specific development challenges around food security, power security, provision of health services and climatic access issues. These should not be seen as separate from educational issues but rather are core elements of successful programs. Holistic development approaches are needed.
 - Concerns around duty of care and risk aversion to ‘On Country’ learning by education departments is a live and constant issue. Implementation of policies can vary depending on principal and/or community.
 - Homelands schooling have no proper policy settings and often falls through gaps between federal and state service arrangements.
 - Extreme difficulties in employing and retaining teaching staff are noted across all pilots. The ‘churn’ of principals is particularly concerning in some sites.
- Cultural awareness programs and proper induction for on the ground staff is often lacking or non-existent.
- Difficulties in language and cultural provision for development of culturally informed curriculums.
- Importance of developing bespoke local governance to ensure appropriate forms of distance education.
 - Provision of Vocational Education and Training (VET) can be haphazard. Much depends on access to good Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and willingness to provide service on the ground.
- Technology and infrastructure provision can be an issue. Major gains in connectivity through Star Link are noted.
 - Utilising a hub-and-spoke in ‘On Country’ learning model seems to have some promise in terms of delivery models.
- Housing is an issue for all pilot sites. The employment of a full-time co-ordinator depends on housing however often this is not available.
 - Safe and reliable transport is needed to facilitate ‘On Country’ activities. This is a constant challenge but, pilot sites are overcoming.
 - School regulation can present barriers to employing casual local staff. In particular, the requirement to possess an Ochre Card in the Northern Territory in order to work in a school can present an impediment to local First Nations community members interested in becoming involved.

Recommendations associated with Section 6

Recommendation 1: Local Governance

Develop and support strong local governance structures to ensure the local community has decision making powers in the education of their children.

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in ‘remote’ areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

Recommendation 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability

Invest in solar-powered charging stations and backup generators to mitigate power outages that disrupt learning to uphold equity in education by ensuring that reliable power is universally accessible to all learners, regardless of geographic location, so no student is disadvantaged by infrastructure gaps.

Recommendation 4: Reliable Internet Access

Prioritise expansion of broadband and satellite internet services to ‘remote’ communities, ensuring consistent connectivity for students and educators, as a matter of spatial justice to address geographic inequities and guarantee equal access to educational opportunities regardless of location.

Recommendation 5: Device Accessibility

Provide laptops, tablets and mobile devices to students who lack access to essential technology to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities and reduce the digital divide for students in ‘remote’ and disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Work side-by-side with local communities in a development capacity to build place-based approaches to education provision to understand the localised needs of distance education provision. Where requested, develop and support blended flexible learning models of delivery that focus on cultural responsiveness.

Recommendation 10: Local Teacher Training Support

Develop strong, culturally appropriate adult training programs for local employment pathways into distance education provision with contextual training that is culturally appropriate, guided by local aspirations, and aligned with career pathways to ensure sustainable, community-led education solutions.

Recommendation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge

Work towards future staffing models that support cultural safety, promotes equitable access to education. This should focus on: culturally framed inductions, ongoing evidence-based professional development and place-based curriculum models.

Recommendation 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR

Investigate and implement multimedia technologies — including AI and virtual reality (VR) — to make distance education more culturally appropriate, engaging and student-centred in ‘remote’ Australia. Traditional distance education often reflects mainstream pedagogical norms that may not align with the cultural values, learning styles, or lived experiences of students in ‘remote’ and Indigenous communities. Multimedia tools offer a powerful opportunity to shift the educational experience from teacher-directed instruction to student-driven exploration, while honouring local identities and knowledge systems. This could include options like:

- Culturally responsive multimedia content: storytelling through video and animation; community generated media;
- AI powered personalisation: adaptive learning platforms, conversational AI tutors;
- Virtual reality for immersive learning: place-based simulators, role play scenarios;
- Shifting the media frame from teacher-led to student-led: perspective-taking, agency and control, codesign multimedia tools with local students, educators and cultural leaders.

Recommendation 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education.

If the distance education model is to be relied upon to provide education for ‘remotely’ located Indigenous students, a better understanding of student outcomes from these providers needs to be developed.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

Section 7: Findings

Section 7 is divided into two parts: the quantitative data and qualitative data.

Part 1 - Quantitative Analysis of Enrolment and Census Data

The available data relating to enrolments in distance education is sparse in Australia. The responsibility for education lays with the States and Territories, and thus the level of data they collect and report can vary, especially in relation to distance learning which varies in prominence between states. Schools data reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2025) provides information on enrolments disaggregated by school type (Government, Catholic, Independent), retention rates, staffing rates, as well as the number of First Nations enrolments. This information is not, however, able to be disaggregated to quantify the number of students (or First Nations students specifically), that undertake their education via distance. At a State and Territory level, there is some data, but it is not uniformly reported. For example, NSW provides data on the number of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Primary and Secondary enrolments in distance education centres across NSW for each year between 2011-2023. This shows a reduction in the overall number of FTE distance enrolments in NSW from 2,503 in 2011 to 2,233 in 2023 (NSW Department of Education, 2025). This is not disaggregated by Indigenous status. The Queensland Government (2025) provides the number of full-time and part-time enrolments at each of its distance education providers for the years 2009-2013, but this dataset is no longer updated. In 2013, there were 2,010 full-time and 2,203 part-time students enrolled in Queensland distance education providers. Again, this data is not disaggregated by Indigenous status. Beyond this, information on distance education enrolments can be drawn at the individual school level, reported by ACARA for each year dating back to 2008. This data can be disaggregated by Indigenous enrolments. The ACARA data is therefore the strongest resource for estimating Indigenous enrolments in distance education, and able to be reported at a national, state, and school level. However, this only provides information regarding enrolments for individual specialist distance education providers. This therefore does not include, for example, distance students who are enrolled at schools who provide both in-person and distance education, such as some faith-based schools that offer this model to cater to students without a relevant faith-based school in their proximity. This means that using ACARA data is an accurate quantification of the number of students enrolled with distance education providers, but not of the number of students undertaking distance education.

At time of publication, there are 28 distance education providers in Australia, 27 of which are public schools. ACARA maintains data for 26 of these providers, with no data available on the Tasmanian eSchool or the Southern Cross School of Distance Education. The remaining schools are listed in the tables below. Given distance education providers are primarily established to service remotely located students, there are limited providers in the ACT, Victoria, and Tasmania where there are no 'remote' classifications.

Figure 38 shows the proportion of Full-Time-Equivalent (FTE) students enrolled in distance education providers that are Indigenous, between 2008-2024. Though there had been a reduction in Indigenous enrolment in the years prior to the COVID pandemic, from 2020 onwards enrolments have increased now to their highest level of 10.6%. By way of comparison, the ABS (2025) reports that Indigenous students represented 6.6% of students across all Australian schools in 2024. Of the Indigenous students enrolled at a distance education provider, 69% were enrolled at a school in Queensland, compared to 53% of non-Indigenous students.

Figure 38. Proportion of FTE Students Enrolled in Distance Education Providers that are Indigenous, 2008-2024

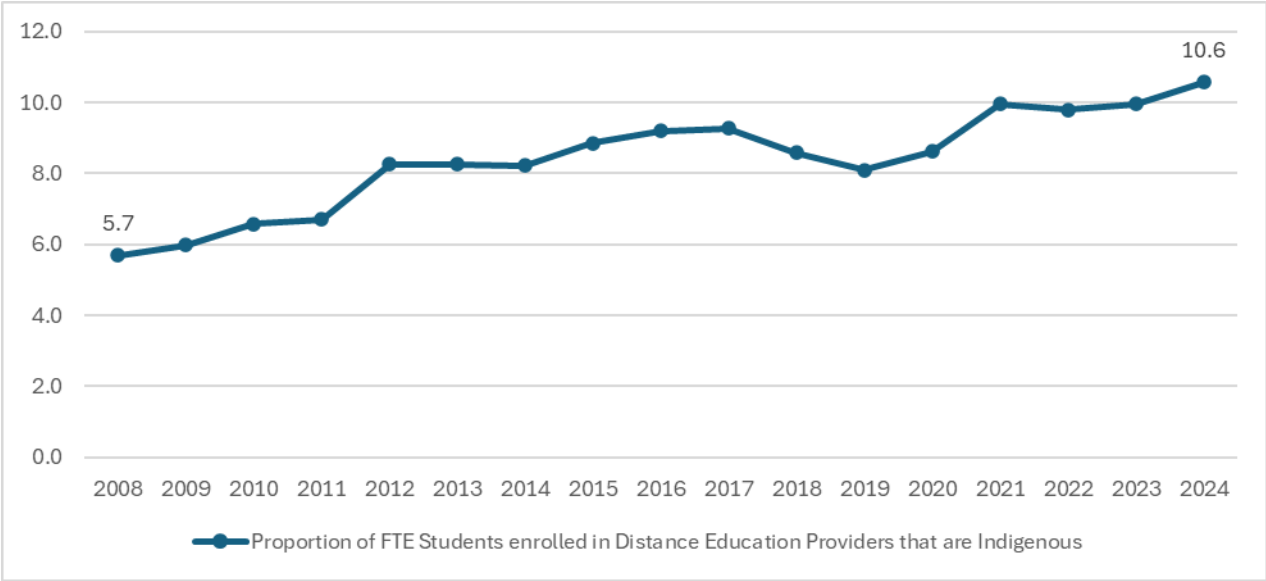
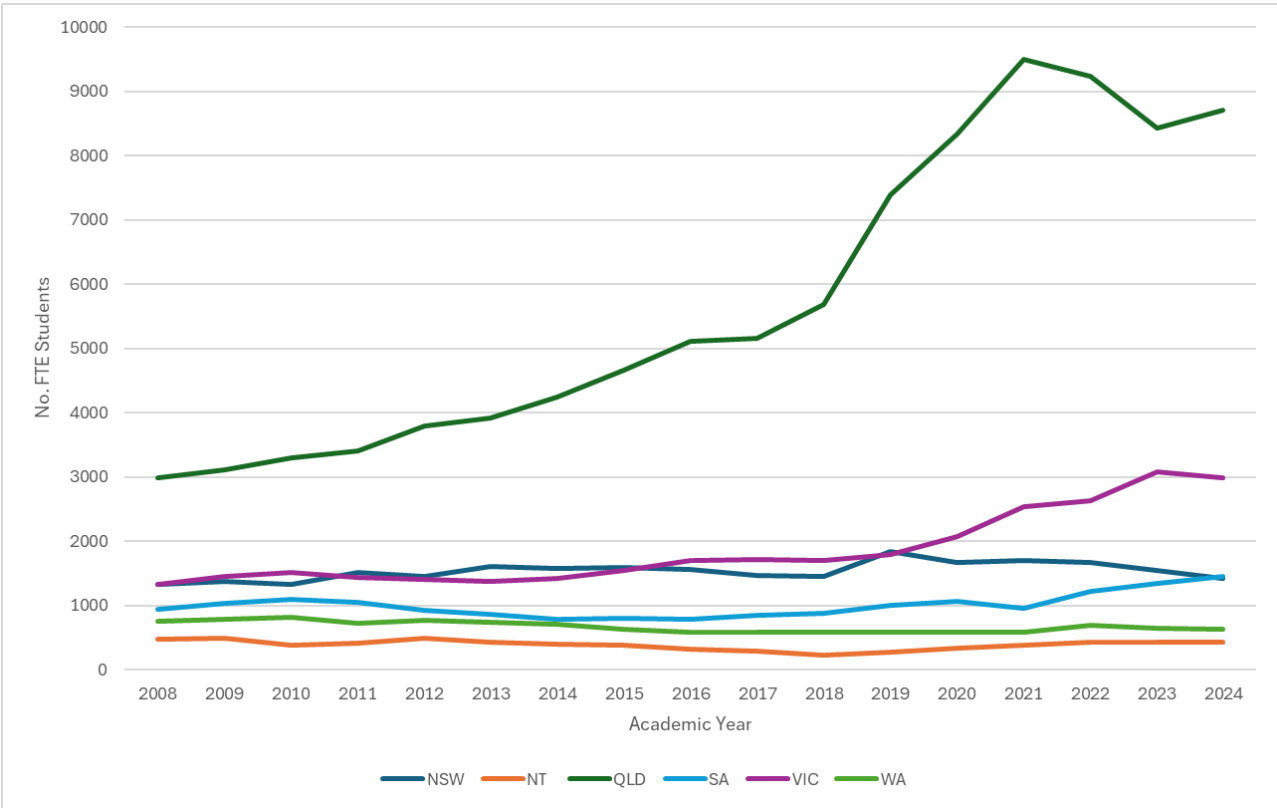


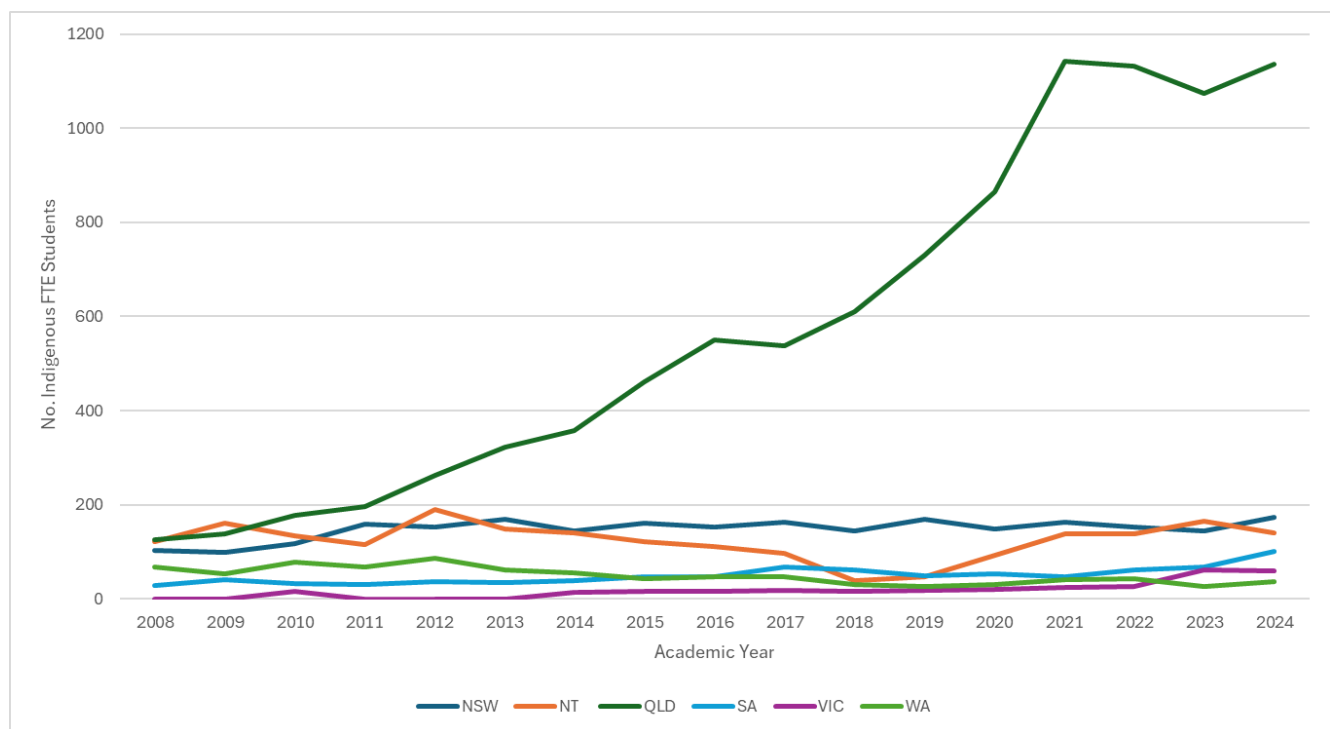
Figure 39Error! Reference source not found. shows the number of FTE enrolments for each State and Territory for each academic year between 2008-2024.

Figure 39. No. FTE Enrolments with Distance Education Providers, by State, 2008-2024



Similarly, Figure 40 shows the number of Indigenous FTE enrolments. Note that the ACT is not included as it shares a distance education provider with NSW (Finigan School of Distance Education), and Tasmania's one distance education provider, Tasmanian eSchool, does not have data with ACARA. Figure 39 shows that FTE enrolments in Queensland were at least double that of the other states in 2008, and have increased substantively through to 2024, a trend not matched by the other States. With the exception of Victoria which has seen an increase in FTE enrolments since the COVID pandemic, the other states appear to be maintaining relatively steady rates of FTE enrolments across the period of 2008-2024. Figure 40 shows a similar story for Indigenous students in Queensland, with an increase from 125 Indigenous FTEs in 2008 to 1,137 in 2024. This trend is not seen with the other States and Territories, with Indigenous FTE enrolments seemingly following the trends of overall FTE enrolments as seen in Figure 39. Notably, Figure 40 shows a decline in Indigenous enrolments in the NT through the 2010s before increasing through the COVID period, and an overall decrease in Indigenous enrolments in WA across the period.

Figure 40. No FTE Indigenous Students Enrolled with Distance Education Providers, by State, 2008-2024



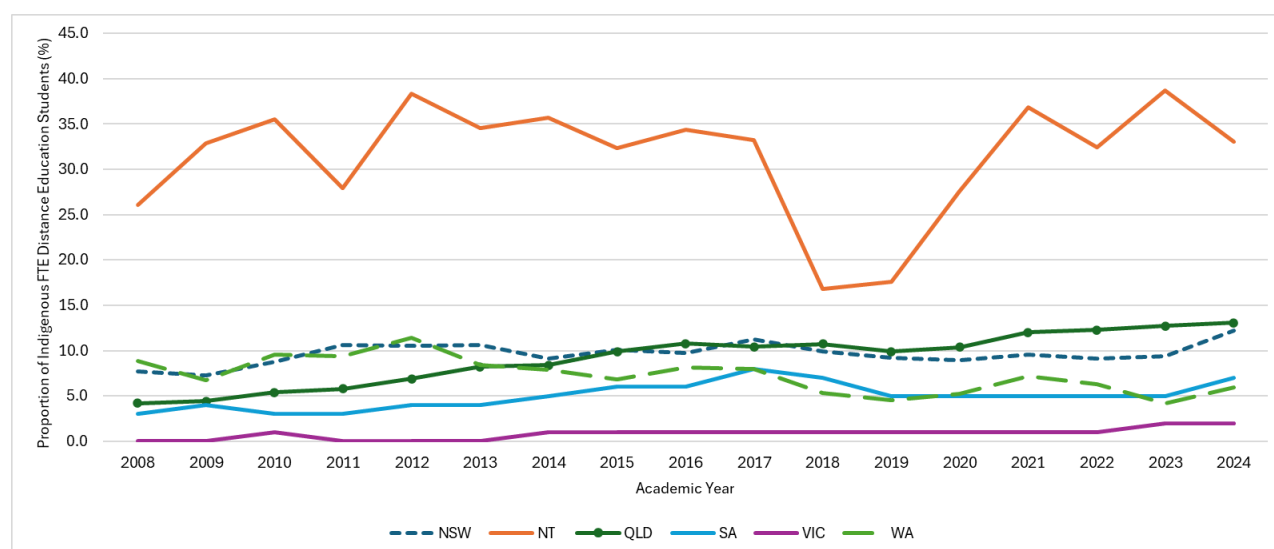
A potential factor for Queensland's high enrolments could be the different contexts of the schools in each State and Territory, for example all eight of the distance education providers in Queensland are combined schools, five of the six in WA are Primary. Another factor may be the number of school age children in each state that live in 'remote' and 'very remote' locations that may be more likely to require education via a distance provider. Table 4 shows the number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous school aged children (6-18) whose usual residence at the 2021 Census was in a 'remote' or 'very remote' area. This is disaggregated by State and shows the proportion of school-aged children in 'remote' areas that are Indigenous. Table 4 shows that WA has the highest number of school-aged children living in 'remote' areas with over 21,000, followed by QLD and NT. As depicted in Figure 39 over 9,000 FTE students were enrolled in distance education providers in Queensland in 2021, which would represent roughly half of the number of students shown in Table 4.

Yet notable in Table 4 and Figure 40 is the mismatch in enrolments in distance education providers in the NT and WA and the number of school-aged children living in ‘remote’ areas. Underscoring this disparity is the proportion of distance education students that are Indigenous. Figure 41 shows that distance education providers in the NT maintain the highest proportion of Indigenous students across the period of 2008-2021, with some downturn prior to the COVID pandemic. It is only Victoria which maintains a similar proportion in Figure 41 than what is seen in Table 4. WA maintains the second lowest proportion of Indigenous enrolments.

Table 4. No. Of School-Aged Children Living in Remotely Classified Areas, by Indigenous Status and State, 2021

	No. Indigenous	No. Non-Indigenous	% Indigenous
NSW	1,677	2,767	38%
VIC	7	384	2%
QLD	8,629	10,603	45%
SA	1,434	6,718	18%
WA	7,207	14,069	34%
TAS	171	897	16%
NT	11,381	4,924	70%
ACT	N/A	N/A	N/A

Figure 41. Proportion of FTE Students Enrolled with a Distance Education Provider that are Indigenous, by State, 2008-2024



A major element in determining the enrolment rate in distance education providers is access to a relevant school within a reasonable distance. The Australian Government has long run the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) which provides support to parents and/or carers of children who can't go to a local state school, with one of the reasons being geographic isolation, as well as due to disability or special needs. The Department of Social Services (2024) provides comprehensive detail on the eligibility requirements and the assistance amounts available, but in short, the aim of the policy is to ensure that parents and carers are not incurring additional or unreasonable costs to educate their children. Pertinent

to this report is the criteria adopted by DSS in relation to the distance from one's home to their nearest relevant state school for which they become eligible for the AIC. There are caveats regarding the ability to travel to school (such as available transport or living in an area where the climate can impact the ability to travel), but the DSS uses 56kms as the distance one needs to travel to school as the threshold to be classified as geographically isolated. Moreover, a child must be enrolled in boarding school, homeschool, or distance education to receive the payment – underscoring the purpose of the payment to facilitate educational participation despite limited local access.

Using the 56km threshold adopted by DSS, we can theoretically estimate the number of Indigenous school aged children that would be considered geographically isolated per the AIC. There are a multitude of limitations in being able to do this, but by combining 2021 Census data on the location of Indigenous school-aged children and ACARA data on the location of state schools, we can make a rough estimation.

The five-yearly Census of Population and Housing is the source of information relating the Australian population, and where individuals are living. The most recent Census is from 2021. From the Census we can generate a count of all Indigenous children of Primary (6-12) and Secondary school (13-18) age in 2021 at a suburb level. This means whilst we don't have people's actual address, we do have the coordinates of the locality in which they live. ACARA provides lists of government schools, as well as their geographic coordinates. With these datasets we can then make a very broad estimation of distances that Indigenous children are from their nearest appropriate government school. Thus, we can make a rough estimate of the number of Indigenous Primary and Secondary aged children that may be considered as geographically isolated per the AIC. This analysis comes with it a number of substantive limitations in providing an accurate estimation of Indigenous school-aged students classified as geographically isolated per the AIC rules. Firstly, individuals indicate their town, but not their specific address in the Census. Therefore, distances are estimated from the coordinates of the town, which are likely to significantly differ from the location where many people actually live. Secondly, eligibility for the AIC is measured by the driving distance door-to-door from home to the nearest relevant state school, where the estimation in this report is done by the Haversine Formula (i.e. the shortest distance between two points over the Earth's surface). There are additional limitations beyond these, however the important point to make is that this estimation is flawed by virtue of data limitations and is an underestimate of the true number. This analysis is useful, however, in its ability to provide an understanding of the geographic isolation of Indigenous school-aged students relative to the other States and Territories. That is, in States where there are higher rates of Indigenous children that may be classified as geographically isolated, we may expect these states to have higher numbers of Indigenous enrolments with distance education providers, and higher rates of access to the AIC.

Table 5 shows the number and proportion of Indigenous primary and secondary aged students who do not live within a 56km radius of a school of their relevant age. It excludes Victoria, the ACT, and Tasmania as no students are estimated to be considered as geographically isolated per the 56km benchmark. Table 5 shows that WA and the NT have the highest rates of primary aged Indigenous children 56km or more from their nearest local state primary school with 3.4%, followed by SA with 2.8%, and lastly Qld and NSW with very small proportions. The proportions largely substantively increase when looking at secondary aged Indigenous children, highlighted by 11% of Indigenous high-school aged children in the NT, followed by 5.7% in Qld, and 4.7% in WA. Qld maintains the highest number of students overall who may be considered as geographically isolated, and as such it may be unsurprising then Qld maintains the highest number of Indigenous distance education enrolments.

Table 5. Estimated Number and Proportion of Indigenous Primary (6-12) and Secondary (13-18) aged Children that are 56km or more from their nearest relevant state school, 2021

	No. Primary	Prop. Primary	No. Secondary	Prop. Secondary
WA	423	3.4%	458	4.7%
NT	270	3.4%	750	11%
Qld	12	0.03%	1,611	5.7%
NSW	17	0.04%	493	1.6%
SA	151	2.8%	92	2.2%

DSS maintains data on the number of recipients of payments through the AIC, and as such a data request was submitted to DSS on 14/08/2025, asking the Department's data team to provide available data. This data is sensitive, so only broad descriptive information was able to be shared, however, this does provide rich information on the extent to which Indigenous peoples are accessing the AIC. DSS provided data for the years 2020-2024, disaggregated by Indigenous status, state and territory, primary and secondary age range, and 'remote' classification.

In Australia in 2024, there were 16,275 recipients of the AIC, 1,050 (6.5%) of whom were Indigenous. This has grown from 5% in 2020. The majority of Indigenous children accessing the scheme are located in NSW, QLD, or the Northern Territory. WA maintains the lowest proportion of Indigenous students accessing the AIC, despite maintaining one of the higher proportions of Indigenous children considered to be geographically isolated, indicating that Indigenous parents and carers in WA may not be accessing the AIC at the rate at which they are eligible.³⁵ The AIC is applied for, so it is likely that there are more people eligible for the payments than actually receive them, but the questions is whether this access is more, or less, constrained amongst the Indigenous population. Without access to AIC payments, this may constrain children's ability to attend school. Again, the data limitations in this area severely restrict accurate enumeration of the number of children who may be eligible for the AIC based on the geographic isolation criteria. But by comparing AIC recipients in 2021 (

³⁵ This trend could be attributed to other causes, for example, families choosing to send their children to boarding schools with students receiving ABSTUDY boarding payments rather than AIC, or families may be ineligible for AIC due to parental means testing, however there is no linked data available to test this.

Table 6) to the number of school aged children living in 'remote' areas in 2021 (Table 4), we can estimate the ratio to which remotely located Indigenous children are accessing the AIC in relation to all remotely located children. This can be done for NSW, NT, WA, SA, and Qld where there is enough data for these states in both tables. A value of 1 would equate to Indigenous children accessing the AIC at the same proportion as all children, and a value of 0 representing only non-Indigenous children accessing the AIC. This calculation estimates a ratio of 0.66 in the NT, 0.14 in SA, 0.12 in NSW, 0.09 in Qld, and 0.06 in WA. This would therefore suggest that Indigenous children are accessing the AIC at much lower rates than what they may be eligible – but this is only a very rough estimation. Much more specific identification should be done to determine the extent to which Indigenous families should be receiving such payments, and the extent to which this is hindering Indigenous educational participation.

Table 6. Number of Recipients of AIC Payments, 2021

	Indigenous Recipients	All Recipients	% Indigenous
Australian Capital Territory	5	80	6.3%
New South Wales	230	3,460	6.6%
Northern Territory	235	525	44.8%
Queensland	355	6,215	5.7%
South Australia	40	1,010	4.0%
Tasmania	45	420	10.7%
Victoria	55	1,675	3.3%
Western Australia	80	2,825	2.8%
Unknown	5	65	7.7%
Total	1,050	16,275	6.5%

ACARA provides the total and per student funding streams for schools, with the most recent data available for 2023. Table 7 shows the average per student funding received within each State and Territory where there are distance education providers and where the data is available. A challenge in making meaningful comparisons is firstly the inability to understand the specific loading each school receives. Table 7 shows distance education providers in SA and VIC receive the least per student funding, though these states only maintain one school and these subsequently have the largest student numbers. The economy of scale here may then mean that whilst these schools receive higher total funding, the per student funding may be lower. Though higher, the average funding in Queensland is more in-line with VIC and SA, potentially again due to its higher student numbers.

Table 7. Funding for Distance Education Providers, 2023

	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	VIC	WA
No. Schools	7	3	8	1	1	6
Average No. FTE Students	221	142	1,054	1,344	3,085	107
Average No. FTE Indigenous Students	21	55	134	67	62	5
Average Australian government recurrent funding (per Student)	10,347	16,403	5,927	4,401	4,383	10,537
Average State / territory government recurring funding (per student)	33,345	34,710	17,643	14,800	16,143	39,574
Average Fees, charges and parent contributions (per Student)	234.6	440	308	614	529	312.3
Average Other private sources (Per Student)	205	1,556	510	75	109	344
Average Total gross income (Per Student)	44,131	53,109	24,388	19,890	21,164	50,767

Recommendations associated with Section 7: Findings

Part 1 – Quantitative Analysis of Enrolment and Census Data

Recommendation 14: Develop data on the number of students undertaking distance education.

Whilst ACARA maintains information on the number of students enrolled with distance education providers, the number of students who are enrolled by distance partially or entirely with schools who primarily provide in-person education, but who provide online education as well. Without this additional information, it is not possible to understand the full scope of the number of distance education students.

Recommendation 15: Generate a more robust determination of Indigenous access to the AIC.

Analysis in this report suggests that Indigenous school-aged children may not be accessing the AIC to the extent to which they are eligible. Further data collection may uncover a more robust understanding of the extent to which this is the case, understand the reasons why this is the case, and thereby inform how the AIC may better support Indigenous families.

For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

Part 2 - Qualitative Data

As previously stated, the findings of this report are divided into two phases: quantitative and qualitative data. This section, Phase 2 outlines the qualitative data. First an overview of the sampling and analysis is provided. Then, we outline the findings divided into eight key themes.

Sampling and Analysis

Data for Part 2 of this report was collected by Australian National University (ANU) research staff using Zoom/MS Teams platforms. A total of 30 respondents participated in 18 interviews and a focus group (n= 12 participants) including current and past staff working or with experience in distance education, school of the air, private tuition centres, flexible learning and in 'remote' education more broadly. These 30 respondents had experience in 34 different locations and represented 48 provider organisations (e.g., various schools, associations, programs and centres). A summary of respondents is shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Qualitative Respondent Characteristics, 2025.

Respondent	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	International
Jurisdiction experience/s									
Current location (n=30)	1	1	6	7	2	4	1	4	4
Experience location/s (n=34)	1	1	7	7	3	4	2	5	4
Provider type experience/s (n=48)									
Distance school	1	1	4	6	1	4	1	1	4
School of the air			2	4	2			3	
Private tuition centre				1					
Flexible learning			1				1	1	
'Remote' Community School			2	1	2	1		5	

While we recognise the sample is relatively small and is hard to make firm recommendations about distance education and on Country learning provision in Australia, it quickly became apparent from the reoccurring themes that we would be able to point to specific aspirations and concerns in the field on education in 'remote' First Nations contexts. Due to the small sample size, we have been careful to maintain confidentiality and privacy. In the findings, we have removed the names of any possible identifying information to uphold respondent anonymity.

Audio recordings were transcribed through the MS Teams transcribing platform or by turboscribe.au. All data were verified by the research team and confirmed with the respondent. The transcripts were uploaded into an NVivo (qualitative analysis software) project, where an inductive thematic analysis process was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The data set, which consisted of over 600 coded items, correlated to eight key themes and is both widespread and rich.

Findings

The following section provides a description of the qualitative findings emerging from interviews (n=13) and are presented under each of the eight key themes.

- The impact of discourse;
- The impact of technology;
- Factors affecting students;
- Factors affecting families and the wider community;
- Factors affecting staffing;
- Factors affecting teaching and learning;
- Factors affecting the school and the schooling system;
- Best practice for 'remote' First Nations contexts.

The data revealed concerns about how specific terminology within Australian educational discourse is being strategically used to advance a neoliberal agenda, with distance education serving as a key mechanism for legitimising these practices within the education sector. To reflect the participants' perceptions and to uphold the integrity of the data, wherever possible we have tried to use respondents' own words as direct quotations. As a result, the findings overlap in various sections as the thematic analysis demonstrates linkages across multiple key themes. Moreover, a theme can also be considered as both a positive and a negative. Therefore, to align the findings with the overall context of the report, we seek to situate the findings within an Australian 'remote' First Nations context.

The Impact of Discourse

A key area of focus for this study was the impact of discourse on distance education in Australian 'remote' First Nations contexts. Many of the participants discussed the types of distance education programs they had been involved in generally, which often revealed that "station kids" or "travelling kids" were commonly the target cohort. In discussions about models of distance education, the discourse is framed from a settler-colonial perspective, where the assumption that being online is accessible, normative practice and taken for granted. The data is divided into four areas:

- Terminology as discourse;
- Distance as deficit;
- Deliberate invisibility/exclusion of 'remote' First Nations students in discourses of distance;
- Policy, funding and legislation implications from discourse.

The following section outlines each area in more depth.

Terminology as Discourse

Participants discussed fully online programs which are commonly delivered via the internet. A participant with over four decades of distance education experience in the United States, Canada, and Aotearoa described the distance education system as:

Essentially these are the full-time online programmes. So instead of being a brick-and-mortar charter school where the student, you know, chooses to go to an alternative to their neighbourhood public school. They choose to do an online school full time. Most students attend one run by for profit corporations and you know they're basically, to be quite frank, in the business of making money. And you know, money in an educational kind. Well, money in any context means maximising profit per widget in an educational context - the widget is the student. So how can I educate as many students as

possible for as cheaply as possible? You know, and when you're looking at that kind of factory model, that's not exactly an Indigenous mindset. You know, that is very much a colonising mindset, at least from my perspective
(International researcher).

The researcher further responded stating that such programs “often run under the radar”, are commonly but not exclusively “private Catholic programmes” and have “specific governance structures” within various states (and countries) compared to others that “impact the activity of online programmes”. The respondent added:

It's like 70 some odd percent of cyber charter school enrolments (in the United States) are basically operated by for profit corporations. And there's two big ones here in the U.S., the Econnections Education chain that's operated by Pearson. And then the other is called Stride Inc, which operate a lot of the virtual academies throughout the U.S., and they're slightly bigger. They have about 60% of the market. Pearson has about the other 40%. Then, there are a bunch of other smaller players
(International researcher).

This respondent highlighted how current U.S. education policy is shaped by the School Choice agenda and voucher system, both of which are rooted in neoliberal principles that emphasise market-driven reforms, individual choice and minimal government intervention. Consequently, education discourse in the U.S. tends to reflect the priorities of legislators rather than those of students, especially underrepresented groups.

Now you've got a bunch of people running it (distance education) that you know, want to do it their way or the highway... as pressure from regulations, particularly from more neoliberal, legislators... as that regulation becomes much more, you know, 'school choice' and private sector friendly (International researcher).

Within the Australian distance education context, fully online programs are becoming more prevalent within certain student cohorts. This is due to the shift in using internet-based technologies to educate (refer to impact of technology for more details). Please note that on several occasions, we attempted to speak with Australian providers of fully online programs, however, they did not respond to our request (please refer to Appendix 3 for a full list of distance education providers who were contacted for participation).

Numerous responses from the participants referred to ‘blended’ or supplemental programs in Australia. A principal from a school of the air service reflected on how supplemental distance education, used to support students who are geographically isolated or require additional learning resources beyond the standard curriculum, was delivered in the past and continues to be provided today.

When I came to [school name removed] in 2020, I was horrified by the model of education that was happening here. They were still running a very historic style of distance ed where pre published work packages were sent out in the mail and the child completed them at home without a teacher and then sent them back and they were marked and then returned. And I know that is still happening in many distance education providers today, especially in WA and NT. It hurts me at my core that, you know, we're teachers, we're paid the same as every other teacher. And you were just marking work and putting stickers on it. Like, just get a monkey to do that. [It would] be cheaper (Principal, WA).

Distance as Deficit

The term 'distance' can be understood and used in many ways. One respondent referred to the way the term can be used to encompass ways of thinking about space.

There's distance that could be called transactional distance that is perceived distance or psychological distance (International researcher).

In this manner, distance can be used to legitimise an approach to education that suits the need. In the Australian context, respondents referred to the inconsistent terminology in distance education approaches and models.

A lot of the information that you get in terms of distance ed can be quite conflicting because you've got a difference between what they call synchronous and asynchronous. So, they [the legislators] can say a class of 15 is fine for distance education, but a class of 15 kindy [4 year old] students in a synchronous lesson would be chaos. You know, it's still quite broad. If you had 15 kindy students doing things asynchronously, you wouldn't know. It wouldn't be a problem. You can enrol as many kindy kids as you would, but it's harder for the teacher synchronously because they're here (online) (Principal, WA).

The differences in terminology was also outlined with concurrent lessons being provided as students undertake their own levelled lesson at the same time as their (online) peers.

We run concurrent lessons, and everybody starts with literacy, I suppose. I don't know if its research backed, but we know that kids, hopefully they're bright eyed, bushy tailed and ready to go first thing in the morning (Principal, WA).

The participant with international experience in distance education commented on the various terminology in the discipline.

Typically within the academic literature, you'll see it called a whole whack of different things. Those of us who are actually particular with the terminology, we'll tend to either call it K-12 online and distance or K-12 distance and online or just K-12 online. I tend to use distance and online, mostly because I work a lot internationally and it just depends upon where in the world you're looking working in? (International researcher).

In the Australian context, participants commonly referred to this approach to teaching and learning as distance education. However, it is important to explore the student and family cohort that they we're linking distance education too.

All the Australian-based respondents referred to distance education as typically being for 'station kids' or 'travelling kids' or 'medical kids'.

Most of our families are really smart people, successful business people. You have to be to be able to run a, you know, a million hectare cattle station and coordinate teams of people that are doing your musters for you and you know, coordinate the sale of your cattle. Its complex hard work, and you need to be pretty well educated to do it and, so they're really involved with the education of the kids as well because they want the best for them. But we do get more of those questions that are higher level and, you know, can be a more challenging dance sometimes too (Principal, WA).

You know the families that I'm working with are all pretty well off. They, you know, I don't have any families that I'm struggling to get online or anything like that. There is a level of value of the work that we're doing, which is nice. And we're trying to reach that and build relationship and all the rest of it as much as we can (Principal, WA).

Another respondent summarised distance education for a specific, often non-First Nations cohort in 'remote' First Nations contexts – for visiting service providers children.

To be honest it (school of the air) was usually just something that some visiting service providers with children used. Generally, police officers, nurses, doctors etc. They came to the (remote) community and had kids, and they would sometimes access school of the air or they would access the school but also be doing some kind of top up school of the air stuff. So I think it's just kind of like that feeling from families and they don't want their children to 'miss out' whilst they're working in the community, so they provide an opportunity for them to receive a typical Western curriculum via school of the air. I've never heard of a remote First Nations kid doing school of the Air. Partially because it's never been offered to families. It's always been, felt like it's something for farmers kids and service providers kids. I don't think Indigenous people really believe it's an option. I've never heard of anyone exploring that as an option for their child because of that perception, I think. That's what I've always perceived as well. I can only imagine if a remote family was to call up school of the air and talk about it. I don't know. I just can't. I've never heard of it happening, I don't think they want those kids (Principal, WA/NT).

However, one respondent who works for school of the air commented that they cater for “literate Indigenous students”.

When I tell people what we're doing (on this new project), we cater for the literate Indigenous students. In reality, the other students that have no or low literacy, the kids in communities, this project doesn't apply to them, they should go to boarding schools, like that cohort, they get their ABSTUDY scholarships and they head off to boarding school. So, this project is kind of, for the students what we have left... You didn't need to be able to read a lot with that... But initially it's like most remote Indigenous kids can't do the distance ed stuff. They can't even write their name... but remote Indigenous kids just couldn't do this (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Deliberate Invisibility/Exclusion of 'Remote' First Nations Students in Discourses of Distance

Numerous respondents identified that First Nations students, and their families are not accessing distance education provision in Australia.

I don't think it's possible for distance ed to work for Aboriginal children and their families, it's like oil and water – they don't go together. People go, oh if we try distance ed but really, at the core, it won't work... In remote schools, especially really remote schools, is important, you've got to have people on the ground that support that and work as a whole school community and someone externally can't do that. Yeah, because they don't have the relationship (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Not really any remote Indigenous kids access the distance education programs... the school used to have remote community students as part of its structure, but that shifted I think or would have been 10 to 15 years ago to be covered under a different section of the department (Principal, WA).

Theres different types of enrolling in school of the air. So, there's kind of like travelling students and there's students that so we've got a few kids that live in communities, and they do part time with us and

part time at their Community School because technically if you live within 50kms of a community, you're meant to go to that school, so they get around that. But most of our kids are station kids. So, kids that live on station and they're not Indigenous kids. So, we've got, yeah, we've got a couple of. I think there's a family in [remote community name removed] who are working on the meeting place stuff. Their kids are doing, at [remote community name removed], but they're not Indigenous (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Another respondent commented on the cohort of students in their experience of over 25 years of teaching in distance education, stating there were no First Nations students in the program.

None with us, yeah. There's really, there's not a lot of Indigenous families in this area (Teacher, QLD).

When students are accessing blended distance education programs, there can be some confusion in the enrolment and funding allocation (for more detail refer to Policy, Funding and Legislation).

The kids that were in remote communities were supposed to dual enrol in school of the air and that was kind of how it was supposed to get funded. But that model has changed and we're now just getting schools to pay us for the non-school of the air kids. There's only three of them (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Respondents suggested that because of the confusion (and absence of information) of the distance education system in Australia, First Nations students are not being included in distance education and are being overlooked.

There are large numbers of First Nations children that are in remote locations who, you know, from what you see from the outside are missing out on a lot of opportunities that you want all kids to have (Principal, WA).

A school of the air Principal from regional Queensland, commented that their school catered predominantly for students who “most of the time, they are students who are on the coast in the in the urban areas who are school is not suiting them” and they have “some mental health issues” or other “medical enrolments”.

We're struggling with some of our, you know, other students who have difficulty with learning. This is so... it can be an environment that works for some of our medical enrolments...some are autistic children who struggle with the social aspect of mainstreaming, and we are finding that we can be an answer for them academically. But we actually don't fill that social bucket up in any way or form, so that you know, it's really hard for us to teach them any social skills. It's very academic, so if you've got an academic autistic child who's failing at school, this can be a wonderful option (Principal, QLD).

A recently retired teacher from Central West Queensland who worked in distance education for over 25 years, also commented that their enrolments are often from families who “aren't happy with the state system” or people with “health problems”.

A lot of it's that people aren't happy with the state system or in some cases there are a lot of children who have problems, health problems or mental health problems, or because I know when I started at the school here, so we're talking about state-run school, I was there when it opened in 1987. I started there and I firstly enrolled for a term, and then had 25 years straight on full teaching, it was almost 100% rural based when we started. So, anything you talked about the kids could all relate to the place

and mustering and all of that sort of stuff. By the time I left, even though I didn't have many, I know there were in the school kids who I know one family, that there were autistic children, others had health problems you know, sort of don't cope with crowd sort of thing. All of those sorts of issues (Teacher, QLD).

Another respondent who worked in 'remote' education during the pandemic commented on the challenges of distance learning for First Nations students and their families.

I was working at [a public school in remote Australia – name removed] during COVID and I was the leader of the small groups and inclusive education programme and we were trying to work out how to cater and provide a distance education programme for our Indigenous kids and we ended up saying we can't and the reason why, is because, they didn't have the literacy to be able to follow instructions at home. They didn't have the IT access to be able to be jumping online. I mean, most of them are using like their second aunties, 5th phone that had been cracked through while standing outside a community centre to get the Internet like they didn't have the technology access, and they didn't have the family support to sort of support them to be learning at home. There wasn't that sort of 'schoolology' in the home to support distance ed. So in the end we said it wasn't actually a feasible and that our all of our students had to be considered vulnerable students and needed to be allowed to come to school, that was where we got to on that matter of distance education for Indigenous kids. Fortunately, we didn't have any lockdowns in [name of the region removed] that closed school, so we didn't have to go there (Teacher, NT).

Another participant who has experience in distance education and flexible learning in both Victoria and in the NT commented that they had been trying to work with the local school of the air and had been saddened by the school's response even referring to the school as "deplorable". They went on to compare the local school of the air to Virtual School Victoria (a public, real-time online class school), where they had previously worked.

Initially (school of the air) was for all those station kids. And I guess as time has gone on, more like medical, but they're now more so for the school refusing, bullied kids, but even that, they hardly have any in town enrolments. But obviously it (school of the air) is not for the remote students, even the teachers are based in Adelaide... school of the air here just wouldn't do dual enrolment, whereas in Victoria at Virtual School Victoria (VSV), dual enrolment was standard down there. And honestly, VSV they were fantastic. I thought they were doing an incredibly good job (Teacher, VIC/NT).

Over the course of the pandemic, technology was perceived as a way of overcoming the tyranny of distance for all students (refer to *The impact of technology* for more detail). However, one respondent suggests the argument could also be an avoidance and even an aversion strategy. To illustrate the point, the participant states:

In the olden days, it (distance education) was to cater for the stations. And now, with the advancements of IT, the education department has taken on as this what we'll do - IT will solve our problems, we can do it centrally then we don't have to worry about trying to get people to go and live in Port Hedland or Fitzroy or wherever. So yeah, I think it is a cop out. It's the short path and it actually becomes more complex for schools. It's just a reality, distanced from where? According to who? (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Policy, Funding and Legislation Implications from Discourse

Over the past two decades and with the pandemic, access to technology has drastically shaped the education discourse in relation to distance provision. From the participants' responses, several themes in discourse were identified as being linked to decision-making, legislation, funding and enrolment. Respondents questioned in the inner workings of distance education:

How is distance education regulated? (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

What counts as 'distance' for count day? Is it the number of people that log in today? Do I just have to log in and that's it? I'm there for 30 seconds and you get my, you know, the school gets my funding. Do I have to complete an assignment? Do I have to spend so much time in the course in the week leading up to like, you know, what does that look like in an online an environment...depending on what funding you get then depends on all the other stuff you do right (International researcher).

When asked specially about funding, one distance education curriculum writer for a school of the air program said:

Oh funding, it's a nightmare... so what they've done is they've taken bits and pieces of money from the different schools involved, and that's what's funded the project. Initially, the plan was for dual enrolment. So that would have been a model of distance education for schools, for school of the air where we have kids that are living in community, and I have a teacher that delivers the programmes and curriculum that we're writing. That's initially how it was supposed to be (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Another respondent, a teacher who works in a 'remote' school where distance education provides supplementary programs to students stated:

Look it serves a purpose for a lot of schools. But, like, I have a very personal opinion on it, but like, it's just that, like, I don't think any of it's bad, but, like, the fact that it's there is a byproduct of every school not being funded adequately to have their own NTCET, you know? The school loses (the FTE funding/enrolment), yeah, that too. But it's like it's never going to be fixed in my time being alive. Like it's not a good thing that NTSDE is doing well, but that's been a huge controversy all that because of like how all of these other places would promise money and then that was, like, given privately to boarding places instead of to public schools (Teacher, Arnhem Land NT).

This comment points to the missing funding provision for students in local public schools. One school of the air principal who has worked with 'remote' First Nations students described the current funding situation compared to his previous experience in education in the region (for more detail see [Funding issues](#)).

So, 15 years ago, distance ed was great. But since then, a change brought big disadvantage and that was funding. Right now, I'd love to say that we could hire an itinerant teacher, who spends all their time out at stations, rotating around doing that work out on Country and teaching kids. What they need to learn within that face to face on Country context, but we certainly don't have the funding for it, school of the air funding now, compared to what it was 15 years ago, is hugely different. You know, 15 years ago we could have an itinerant teacher. We had a couple of school cars, we were well funded. We were able to do more camps that the school just paid for. And right now I just can't afford it (Principal, WA).

Another principal who has worked for over four decades in 'remote' First Nations education contexts in WA, SA and NT commented on revolving nature of discourse, programs and funding.

From expecting kids to go to boarding school, to trying to keep them on Country, keeping students engaged in learning in their communities, everything just changes with the flavour of the day. Who has the loudest voice and pays the bill, gets the biggest light (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

The respondent, drawing on experience across the U.S., Canada, and Aotearoa, highlights the central role of funding in shaping educational practice. They argue that funding structure, whether in online or face-to-face settings, are often the primary force behind how programs are designed and delivered:

Because the reality is, that I would suggest for most programmes, regardless of if it's an online or face-to-face programme in most educational contexts, the funding regime is largely what drives (International researcher).

The respondent also remarked that in the United States and in Canada, some supplemental distance education schools were "doubly funded" by enrolling a student in the "bricks and mortar" school and in an online course.

When they (Florida Virtual School) were first operating, other than the fact that they got three and a half million dollars to operate for their first five years as a block grant, they were also set up as a public school district...which meant that they got funded additionally to this initial block grant that they got for the first five years, they also got the FTE for the students that enrolled.... So, if you were a principal and you had say, 50 students that enrolled in a single class from [school name removed], you still got the full FTE for those fifty students... And if you (the student) took at least one online class, you (the school) were doubly funded. So, what ended up happening was...when (the school) passes the class size limit, if they have too many students, what's the easiest way to solve it? They're going to put some of the students in an online class and there's funding for that because online schools are getting paid from a different pot, you know, so it encouraged that kind of funding arrangement encouraged the brick and mortar schools to take advantage of the distance programme (International researcher).

The Impact of Technology

All respondents commented on the impact of technology in distance education. This is often being used in a positive way of bridging the tyranny of distance.

So, we're making use of the technology to make up the gaps. I think the education side of things has come a long way in distance education (Teacher, Arnhem Land NT).

At least now with the screens, our kids can talk, we can have conversation. We can share ideas We can. We can do that (Principal, WA).

Some respondents stated that distance education was helpful to cater for individual needs.

So, he basically does one-on-one lessons four days a week with the support teacher, three of those, and then with May for the other day. And you know, we're trying to throw as much resources as we can to catch him up (Principal, WA).

Our participant from the United States, suggested that technology has been a way that the federal government has become involved in education because they are providing access to the internet for some rural areas.

One of the ways in which the federal government in both countries is actually sort of gotten involved in education is through the provision of technology across the country (International researcher).

However, the impact of technology was also seen as a negative. As stated earlier, many of these key themes criss-cross one another, however, it is critical to present the findings in relation to the thematic coding. Next, we outline the respondents feedback related to:

- Access to technology and internet;
- Frustration;
- Hearing difficulties;
- Technology as a solution to distance.

Access to Technology and the Internet

Access to technology in 'remote' Australia was acknowledged by all participants as a negatively impacting factor,

And we do try and work on that as best as we can. So, if the kids, you know, if we are having kids that are experiencing that, we can say to the kids turn your cameras off, just frees up a bit of bandwidth for them to then hopefully they can hear us. But there are, they try really hard and with more of them moving to Starlink, those issues are less and less (Principal, WA).

The challenges that they face there are immense, you know, and broadband being one of the biggest ones (International researcher).

In 'remote' First Nations contexts, one respondent spoke of a distance education program that was being implemented in their school. However, despite the best intentions, it was the delivery of the content and the quality of the internet that was notable.

Depends, like, there's one, like a HEAL program, which is kind of targeted to remote... They sort of sit in Darwin and they do online lessons weekly and do a lot of book work, but it's also turned into an extremely dependent on, like, computer literacy and online learning. Which, like last year I was trying to deliver it in a different school. And our internet was horrendous (Teacher, Arnhem Land, NT).

Another respondent who has worked in distance education in Central Australia and in SA spoke of a range of reasons as to why the delivery of distance education in 'remote' contexts was challenging (for more detail see Factors affecting students).

Distance education just doesn't really work for remote Indigenous kids because of their literacy levels and family support. The support of a teacher being present and also the access to technology is difficult (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

There was also a comment about First Nations students who may be able to partake in distance education, however, due to a range of other factors it may not be the best suited approach. Moreover, the respondent questioned the motives of distance education programs themselves.

There's one kid there that, I know his grandfather well, and he's a bright kid and he may cope with distance ed. I guess he may cope with learning online, but you know, they can't sit there without a face-to-face teacher all day. Kids need to have face-to-face contact with the teacher plus you have a local Aboriginal teacher supporting. But it would seem to me distance ed job's, that's about the money, not for the kids (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

The delivery of distance education programs was also commented on by a school of the air principal who noted that the online only model has in some places, become the status quo.

And I was like, you can't do everything online. There used to be booklets, but now they're strictly online (Principal, WA).

One participant who had worked in 'remote' and 'very remote' schools across WA and NT articulated their concerns about engaging First Nations high school students online when physically engaging students can be challenging.

I guess engagement's hard for high school kids, even for someone who's there physically. It's hard to get everyone engaged and on board and sometimes kids will just walk out of the room if they're not interested or maybe something else is going on in the community or they hear someone over at the shop yelling out if they're interested over there. So, I mean, it's hard to keep the classroom engaged with a physical person and I don't see how children are going to remain engaged in an online activity for an extended period of time in a way that's helpful. I think that sort of fades in and fades out and probably not really take in the content. That's my impression just from being a teacher there with kids and knowing how hard it is for shared understanding on different topics and making sure everyone's on the same page and knows what's going on. I can't see how I'd manage that if I was not there physically. Not at all. It's just, you can't, I mean it depends on who's there with them, but even then, if they're not engaged, they choose with their feet and that's what happens in community all the time, that if there's no relationship or no physical relationship that you're just a person on a computer, I can't see those kids being at all interested in, it just doesn't seem realistic to me (Principal, NT/WA).

Frustration

These difficult interactions with technology and the move towards more online learning often frustrates staff and students. When distance education students and staff log into the school day, the internet is a key player in engagement.

They're (the students) trying, they try so hard, but sometimes they will call it quits, especially if it's connectivity. If they're getting us and we're lagging or we keep glitching or we keep dropping out, it's incredibly frustrating for them (Principal, WA).

Another school of the air Principal commented on the impact of the technology when it's not working, students feel very frustrated and it decreases engagement in learning.

Yeah, and then also students just start to crack it. They were like, no, I don't want to do computer all day. I'm like, I know. And so, you could work offline, but you had to kind of input some of their work because anyway... It can, it does work some of the time, but it only works as a supplement (Principal, WA).

Hearing Difficulties

One principal also noted that technology can be difficult for students with hearing issues.

Oh, hearing issues are much more difficult to overcome. We've got one young boy who's had some hearing issues. He's had a lot of operations growing up... we invested about 400 dollars in a professional microphone setup to go out there to try and mitigate that sort of stuff... and I'm making sure that you're being heard and that you're slowing down your speech. You're using your lips in the most efficient way possible which can be tricky over the screen (Principal, WA).

Technology as a Solution to Distance

In terms of distance education provision for 'remote' First Nations contexts, the respondents noted that for education departments, online learning can be seen as a solution to the tyranny of distance, however, they argued that is just not the right approach for that demographic.

Everyone, especially education departments, get excited about technology and sure, it's great but, I don't know, I don't think it's the answer for Aboriginal kids and their families... And so, when you got someone in Perth giving the lesson online, I suppose the provider of the knowledge and skills from afar which I just don't think will work for Aboriginal students. Yeah, I can't see it (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

So, we're making use of the technology to make up the gaps and you know, I think the education side of things has come a long way in distance education. It's better but just not enough. Yeah, well the Education Department of Western Australia, who build their 'cookie cutter' buildings and approaches with whatever the current philosophy is on making your classroom sizes, and so on, they try fit this number of kids and have this furniture in it. But really, the opportunity for our kids to be on Country while they're doing learning through our school is greater in one sense, they're at home on their Country when doing distance ed. But the screen is a hindrance as well, let's be honest. That said, the screen is a massive step forward to the radio (Principal, WA).

Yeah, it's a, it almost seems like a 'cop out' to me - like the current system is too hard and it's costing too much money and having physical schools within remote communities it's never been something that's been seen as successful and this is a way of saying oh we're still offering education without actually, you know, it's there if they want it, they just need to come to the computer and do it, you know, like, it's sort of like the same story of, I don't know, everywhere we like to create these things and say it's not their problem, it's them, they are the problem, if you know what I mean, and I think this is a way of doing that again, of saying we're providing the opportunity, the opportunity is there if they want it, but they're not taking it. I think we need to give remote communities more credit than they're worth and they'll see right through that and they'll know exactly what is happening and they'll think it's absolute nonsense and will 'check out' of it. They [Communities] will say look we're not doing that, we want schools for our kids, we want schools that acknowledge us and acknowledge our culture and acknowledge our language and acknowledge our families and acknowledge us here being in community and this is where our learning needs to happen, I mean place and Country is like front and foremost the most important thing for Indigenous people across the whole nation, so how can someone who's not even there be, be within that and be respectful of that? It's just not possible. The other thing that is a risk is them having actually, the person on the other side of the line having no understanding and not having any, you know, connection to their, their culture or the way they live or the way they spend their days; all they'll see is some kid who won't come to the computer and they might assume all these negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people because they won't come to a computer, so without

acknowledging and without really understanding the deep, long history of reasons why that's the case (Principal, NT/WA).

Factors Affecting Students

From the participants' responses, several themes were identified as contributing to negative factors affecting students in distance education. These included:

- Lack of face-to-face interaction;
- Hard to build connections and relationships;
- Lack of student support;
- Difficulty in establishing trust;
- Issues in wellbeing.

The following section outlines each area in more detail.

Lack of Face-To-Face Interactions

From the data, we identified that the lack of face-to-face interaction with distance education models is challenging for 'remote' First Nations students:

Nothing can substitute being face-to-face, on Country, Two-Way Science approach – and distance ed just doesn't work in the same way (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Education provision in these 'remote' First Nations contexts needs to be delivered side-by-side with the student and the teacher physically being present, to collaborate contextually and meet the students' needs.

Like I know when I was working out bush a little too, we had a couple of kids that you know, should have been at boarding school, for lack of a better term, and so I was trying to get them connected to school of the air, but they would have needed a full time teacher or adult sitting with them. There was no space for them to have their own kind of middle years classroom and they certainly weren't at the literacy levels that would have required them to engage in the distance education model, so obviously any kind of distance education for the remote Indigenous kids context needs to cater for those particular challenges which is really hard (Principal, WA).

Two other respondents also commented on the physical presence of teachers and students plus the importance of contextualisation (refer to [Learning should be contextual and meaningful](#) for more detail).

Real teachers doing real learning with real students. In their own context (Teacher, Arnhem Land, NT).

I just don't think distance education, being the model where your educator is not present with you on a day-to-day basis, I don't know how this works for remote Indigenous kids (Principal, WA).

One respondent who had worked in distance education in higher education commented that adult students, "often mothers" were successful in online university education, however, for younger students, it was much harder.

I have students who I've met never met who are indigenous and who are succeeding. So, it's not that. It's you know. We still have built a relationship, but over the phone. So yeah, I've got two students at the moment in particular. I was thinking about, and yeah, I've never actually met them, but we have a really good rapport and they talk (Higher education distance support worker, WA).

Building Connection and Relationships

The data indicated that relationships and connections are perceived as critical for 'remote' First Nations students and their families. One respondent discussed the challenged of being "offsite".

That makes things incredibly difficult to be offsite... it means that they're (students) absent from... connection building. They're being part of this community can be a little bit trickier because they're not able to attend those things by being off site (Principal, WA).

One respondent spoke of a distance education practice in the 1980s in 'remote' Western Australia, where the specialist teacher moved between two community schools.

Even in Blackstone (Ngaanyatjarra Country) in the 80s there was this manual arts person going between two communities, I watched that and that was again difficult because he didn't live in either place and whilst he was motivated, he was moving all the time and I understand the importance of in-depth relationships with the kids and their families, it just wasn't there. The relationship with each community wasn't there (by the staff member moving between two community schools) (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Even then, this practice was deemed as unsuccessful due to the inability to form genuine strong connection to students, their families and wider community.

Relationships are so important... we're trying to reach and build relationships and all the rest of it, as much as we can (Principal, WA).

Another respondent detailed how through the position of the educator on the screen it can be difficult to create positive connections with students.

You might notice it, I sit, I'm sitting back away from the camera because they talk about that. This is confronting to a child psychologically and actually staring at someone's face is actually psychologically... so we try and do a lot with, we have document cameras where they're actually putting their camera on their work, and they're not having to be on the camera all the time, so their work is on the camera or, you know, even for our secondary students who don't even like we're trying to encourage cameras on. But you know, we'll see a picture and it'll be the top of their head and all we and they might answer verbally or they might do an answer in the chat box, but we go 'oh proof of life'. But it is a little bit like that with some of our medical students who just don't even want to turn that camera on, don't want to engage. And so, it's so hard for us to know they're actually even there and they're OK and yeah, it's an interesting model. It works for some but doesn't work for others. During the pandemic, distance learning became part of common education discourse and household conversation. However, for First Nations students in 'remote' areas there was even greater complications due to limited digital infrastructure and family support (Principal, QLD).

Lack of Student Support

Respondents described how distance education programs lack student support and the impact this has on teachers (please note the impact on staffing will be discussed in Factors affecting staffing). One participant demonstrates this through the interaction with one of their school of the air students.

But that's been quite difficult. Lovely kid, though. Just it's a hard slog when you're that far behind to get the distance program right, get the commitment right, and then for us, we obviously our remote delivery service, we're not there to support with the follow up work that needs to be done to reinforce and so, it's patchy at best and the practise to mastery side of things is a bit more tricky being far away (Principal, WA).

Another respondent described an online woodwork session they had been part of earlier in the year. The students had been making a dice while the woodwork teacher was online in Perth. The lack of student support and not meeting the students' needs intertwined with the legislation of woodwork itself, formed a barrier between the learning experience.

And then it comes down to how do they connect to the teacher in Perth? And you know, it's because they weren't using any electric machines because of legislation. They're using hand tools, there's no face-to-face relationship building and it's not contextual – so there's many things that get in the road (of distance education). You could do something creative, locally based with Elders and families in that sense, but yeah, I just don't know how distance ed could meet the needs of the kids (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Another respondent added to the sentiment of student support for First Nations students as being essential.

As soon as you've got a young Indigenous person... being told - you need to go to school and do this, so you can do this and become this, and... you know, pardon my French, but it's F that, man, why do you want to bother with that? ... So, they've got to face that barrier. Then they've got to sit down and look at all the content and go. Oh my god, you're kidding. Um, why even would you, you know? And then, they've got these people online that they've got to go to. At a certain time. Throughout the week. Good luck! Unless they've got someone there going, you need to be home, by this time, and we're going to sit down together, and you're going to get this done. Um, that's not always the case (Private tuition centre owner, QLD).

One respondent who has worked in higher education distance education programs commented that the “bureaucracy” can be overly cumbersome for adult First Nations students.

I think they can get really overwhelmed by the bureaucracy quite quickly and even just sometimes even just enrolling is really difficult. You know, and if there's a glitch in the system or something doesn't quite work, then they've got to try and ring (university helpline). But I don't know....when they have, you know, family business that needs to be attended to and often you know the just the process of applying for extensions and giving paperwork and blah blah blah. That is, we lose students because of that, I know we do. But the position that I now have also part of that is that I can grant extensions because I know what's happening, so they don't have to go through that, which I think is a huge thing. That's a really big one....i I was to go through...how many people started and then unenrolled probably 2/3, I would think by the time I got to them, they'd already dropped out (Higher education distance support worker, WA).

Difficulty in Establishing Trust

Some participants described the hardship of developing trustful relationships with students through distance education models.

It's really hard to build that interpersonal relationship as you would in a normal school. Like for me, when I was working at [name of school removed], we had a 90% Indigenous population at school. You're out every morning, you're out every recess, every lunchtime, kicking the footy, do this, do that. ... so, if you need to have a quiet word because something wasn't quite right, you know the kids liked you, they knew you, they trusted you and you know, they didn't want to upset you. It's oh, oh, look, you know, you're a good kid, but you know what you just did then that that wasn't good for school. Oh, I know. I know. And you can work around it. Whereas in this sort of a situation (distance education), it's hard to build that strong personal connection and that trust is so important to leverage different scenarios (Principal, WA).

Developing a strong relationship is critical when students need support and one respondent gave an example of the difficulty.

An example is when a young fellow is struggling a bit with his reading. You know, when I'm online with him, I do a lot of core response work, a lot of engage a lot of engagement norm work to try and get him hearing, responding, repeating to try and commit to long term memory and because I don't think we've had a lot of time together to actually build that relationship and trust, he at times, gets frustrated, probably quicker than what you normally would. You know, it's a difficult space (Principal, WA).

Another respondent added that students being online for learning would be “damaging” for relationships but overall, could present an opportunity for the local community to take ownership for teaching and learning.

Damaging, it would be an incredibly damaging result, I think if it was suddenly that it said look schools are all closed, here's a centre where you can access a computer and access digital education. But in other ways, if there was no school that children were required to go to, it's possible there could be a bit of self-empowerment and families might say you know what, we don't need you, we can teach our kids. I think that could be a really positive step but there doesn't need to be structures around that and ways of feeding back what's being taught and all those things that need to happen to assess what children are learning., I mean, that's a very Western way of thinking but yeah, it might be that families are relieved by it a little bit that they don't have to teach their kids in a Western system that doesn't acknowledge them or their culture....I just mean in terms of respecting Country, respecting land and knowing that's where teaching and learning happens and needs to occur, Western schools in rural communities rarely do that. Yeah, damaging (Teacher, NT/WA).

Not Being Able to Meet the Needs and Wellbeing of Students

While developing a trusting connection with students was identified by respondents, another element to that relationship is also the importance of understanding students' day-to-day wellbeing as this has a deep impact on engagement in education.

What is needed is for humans to actually have relationships with the people we're learning with, the student, and that is vitally important. And sure, you can build off some of it (distance education), but it's also those subtle nuances of, you're not feeling well today, and being able to contextualise the content. But you just can't do that through a screen, they should be on Country (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Trying to establish a strong connection through a screen is difficult without the face-to-face interactions and one participant commented:

Because we can't have the children on air all the time, it's just too much (Principal, WA).

Factors Affecting Families and Wider Community

Participants identified several factors affecting families and the wider community in distance education provision. These included three areas related to:

- Limited family and wider community involvement and support;
- The lack of consultation with family and wider community;
- Distance education being individualistic in nature, not community centric.

Next, we outline each area in more depth.

Limited Family and Wider Community Involvement and Support

There was a range of responses about the limited family and wider community involvement and support of distance education models in Australia. One participant commented on the physical separation of the student and their family unit from the school causing “divide”.

I suppose because they are (family) not bringing, they're not walking their kids up to the door every day. They're not, you know, seeing it, it is harder. And their lived experience with education is not always fantastic. We're very fortunate that the communities that we do work with value what we do and understand the need for the current need for the students to live in two worlds. And know how to code switch between them, there is, there was still a divide (Principal, WA).

Another participant mirrored this sentiment by families and wider community not being part of the overall agreement in education.

Distance education just doesn't really work for remote Indigenous kids because of their literacy levels and family support... so, does the (distance education) school have more connection with their students – well, no. Have they got a community education agreement and relationships with the families? No (Principal, NT/SA/WA).

Family support is critical around the students and as one participant stated:

I would think they'd probably need one-on-one family support at that age or in that situation and even probably right up until you know primary age kids would need near on one-on-one family support to manage them on a computer with a teacher. I would be very surprised if that would happen (Teacher, NT/WA).

While one respondent stated students do not have the family support, the argument could be reversed that families may possibly not be supported by their child's learning.

They (student) didn't have the family support to sort of support them to be learning at home (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Building a connection with family members, over screens can be challenging. One participant said:

Because even when we talk to parents, we don't. You know, we try and do teams meetings with parents so they can actually see us, but quite often they don't. They won't even turn their cameras on. So, it's, you know, and that's fine. At least they can see us and see that we're being as genuine as we can (Principal, QLD).

Lack of Consultation with Family and the Wider Community Aspirations

A few suggestions were made by participants about the importance of consultation with the students' families and their wider community to understand and collaborate on their own aspirations for their children. One participant described:

Aboriginal people need to be involved from the start, place-based approaches, as a process, empowers Aboriginal people and older people to be engaged in leading learning for their children. You could do something creative, locally based with Elders and families in that sense, but yeah, I just don't know how distance ed could meet the needs of the kids (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Another respondent echoed this sentiment by outlining the need for local aspirations to be established on the ground with families and the wider community.

Whether it be a small or big school - good leadership, motivated educators and with the capacity to understand local values like collaboration is key. Aspirations, local aspirations are what make a difference for that school community. If you haven't got that, even if you have a wonderful distance ed system that you are able to bring up or establish, it wouldn't work because you haven't got the people on the ground to implement (Principal, WA).

When reflecting on previous decades, one participant commented that there had been a strong connection between the school and the wider community, however, in recent times, this seems to have changed.

In the past, there was a real collaboration between the school and the community in teaching their children. And that just got flipped on its head. And the whole time I was there, I never really saw that connection and that crevice being bridged. There was always a big divide. So, in that sense, hugely important. And I think without those relationships, it makes it really hard for schools, especially around the Elders and the older people, because if they don't have the relationship with the school and they don't respect the school, then no one does. And so, it's just an uphill battle for everyone all the time. So, every principal that goes in has this incredibly hard battle because they're pushing against so much mistreatment over 30, 40, 50 years even, if you go back even further. They're just rollercoasters of it. So, you know, this needs to be a long-term relationship (Principal, NT/WA).

Individualistic not Community-Centric

One respondent who has over forty years' experience living and working in 'remote' school contexts in WA, SA and the NT stressed the argument that distance education provision addresses the student on an individual level. While this approach can be seen as a positive of distance education, from a First Nations perspective, this practice rubs up against normative practice.

Those kind of distance ed programmes, they obviously look at a child very individually, rather than from a collective as a community member, of a broader network...but I think the bigger problem is the deep understanding of what it's about and what's happening and actually what benefit is it to the school community and the kids and the family. I think it's a more holistic approach rather than just teaching

kids. Two-Way Science and Country are great tools for teaching and there's other benefits and you can't separate the two really (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Factors Affecting Staffing

From the participants' responses, several themes were identified about how staffing impacts distance education provision in 'remote' locations. These included:

- Staff motivation for distance education jobs;
- Lack of teachers in 'remote' locations;
- Staff retention;
- The absence of local First Nations staff.

The following section outlines each area in more depth.

Staff Motivation for Distance Education Jobs

Many respondents commented on the personal and professional benefits of working in distance education, however, there was an absence of the impact on students and families. One participant spoke of how distance education work was professionally beneficial.

It's been the place of opportunity for me more than anything (Principal, WA).

Another participant commented that the reason they stayed in distance education for over 25 years was because of the absence of face-to-face teaching.

I think that you didn't have to see kids coming in everyday and you know, there's the city kids, there's country town kids, then there's the country bush kids. Yeah, and the country Bush kids are the nicest. Yeah. OK. If I'd been at the primary school here, we've got there are four schools in town. The third school is distance ed. There's a state, primary state, secondary and a Catholic primary. If I'd been in the state primary school I wouldn't have lasted, you wouldn't get me near a high school. Somehow, I'd been transferred to the high school at one stage, and I was very quick to make sure that got squashed. I wouldn't. I wouldn't if I'd been forced to, I would have resigned. I don't think I would have lasted when I was teaching, as I don't think I would have lasted as long as if I'd been in a face-to-face school (Teacher, QLD).

Numerous respondents referred to the positive financial implications for teachers, and this is often the motivator for many staff. One participant mentioned the importance of "paycheques" and "mortgages" as stimuluses for working in distance education.

My sadness is for the teacher that is there just the paycheque, paying their mortgage in Melbourne, kind of thing. If teachers are keen to know more and build relationships that's the best outcome for everyone. They're going to have a lot more sense of purpose. So that's why a big part of what I push is like, yeah, we write curriculum, but in actual fact probably 100% of my job has been supporting teachers (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

People just coming for the good paycheque. Isn't that awful? (Higher education distance support worker, WA).

Another participant mirrored the motivators for staff but also, commented on the number of "leaders" and it being "top heavy".

But it would seem to me, distance ed jobs, that's about the money, not for the kids... In the Kimberley, there's lots of secondary kids not at school, but it becomes the logistics in the end I reckon. But we can do better than that, we have schools that have money, lots of money and they have lots of resources. There's a school in the Kimberley with an enrolment of 270 with only 20% secondary, 50% primary attendance and in the leadership team there are 11 leaders, 22 teachers and then a sprinkling of others. And I spoke with one of the leaders. And I said, do you think you're top heavy? He said, oh, we worked very hard. I said, I didn't ask that question. I said, do you think you're top-heavy cause 11 leaders leading a school? I go, you know, you've got a principal, 3 associate principals and all these level threes (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Lack of Teachers in 'Remote' Locations and Retention

Acquiring and retaining teachers in 'remote' locations was also mentioned by respondents. One participant spoke of hiring international teachers to fill the gap in the Australian teacher shortage who are willing to work 'remote'. They also spoke of the idea that "someone's better than no one".

The other challenge is, is we have probably so many of this cohort of teachers that I'm working with like almost half of them are from overseas... they're learning how to use the Australian Curriculum, they're learning everything, but they're thirsty. And then you've got, like, I mean, I shouldn't laugh, but we actually had a teacher that died like just when he came to our training...he was quite old and was quite unwell, so they're just struggling to get quality teachers that are suitable for the roles in the context. It wouldn't be my preference to put people straight from overseas into an Indigenous classroom, but you know...someone's better than no one (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

One participant drew on the international field of 'remote teaching, particularly in Canada, emphasising that the North Force program, now Teach for Canada, provides "badges" for "good" teachers to work in remote locations whereas in Australia, it is the reverse.

You look at (remote) schools, they can't get teachers, you know, and the problem gets ignored... You think about the North Force in Canada (Teach for Canada). You have to get a badge, for 'good' teachers that can only work in First Nations community schools. Whereas in Australia, I think it's the other way, it's the other way around... You know, I saw the Remote Teaching Service being developed. We saw it as something to be developed, to be like the North Force but, that just didn't happen. I don't know why they have it anymore. They should abolish the (Remote Teaching Service) 'pool'. 'There're people sitting in that pool that shouldn't have even got in, they're not suited to the context and the relationships that are needed out here. Good leaders have a deep understanding and knowledge of the kids and their family's worldview and know what motivates them - no distance ed program can overcome that (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Internationally, one respondent commented that staffing shortages in remote locations are not uncommon and that distance education models are being used to fill the gaps.

There's just not enough teachers to populate them all. So, you've seen distance programmes that have been used in in those kinds of environments to meet the staffing shortages (International researcher).

While the respondents agreed that acquiring staff for remote locations can be difficult, retaining staff is also a challenge.

So, staff retention and getting staff... we have seen turnover... For a couple of different reasons, when we changed our model of education, that wasn't in alignment with what some long-standing teachers wanted, and they've evaluated what they wanted and moved on (Principal, WA).

There is a range of challenges with teachers and with curriculum. Obviously one of the key ones is actually retention and actually getting teachers on board like employing teachers (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

The importance of teacher training was also spoken of by a participant who is a curriculum writer in distance education.

We want to deliver the following units with a meaningful connection to community and that's so teachers can deliver the unit but without the training, they can't do that second bit (training) (Curriculum writer, SA /NT).

One participant noted that the reason why staff may not be retained in positions is due to the lack of training and inadequate staff inclusion processes.

Again, you know the struggle when you've got teachers in a remote school who haven't had the training nor the right induction orientation (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Another respondent commented on the “tokenistic”, “ticking this box” practices of cultural competence training for new staff.

We have some mandatory modules that staff have to do. Well, when you say mandatory though, I'm not sure what happens if they don't do them. I'm sure some a lot of people don't do them, so they just get reminders. You know, and there are different levels of training, professional development, I should say for cultural competence. But I don't think that means people really take it on.... otherwise again, it's a bit tokenistic. I've been in some of those trainings where you can just even people's body language, you just go, 'oh, you are just ticking this box'... it's a huge, huge task... and I think there's a lot of it, still a lot of ignorance about our history. People just don't know and don't want to know (Higher education distance support worker, WA).

Absence of Local First Nations Staff

Numerous respondents commented on the importance of local First Nations staff in ‘remote’ education. One participant spoke of the “asset” of First Nations Teacher Assistants (TAs).

This is the stuff (remote teaching) that you really can't do without the support of your TA (First Nations Teacher Assistants)...and this is the thing that I actually promote as an asset...You couldn't do this without a TA, but I've been really emphasising the importance of bringing along your TA and planning with your TA because a lot of the knowledge for this is not held within the teacher. It's held within the community (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Another participant mentioned the important of training for both First Nations and non-First Nations staff as being critical to ‘remote’ education.

At the core for me is well-trained, well-developed educators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Other respondents highlighted that they would like to employ local First Nations staff however this remains challenging.

We would like to, and the position remains open, but it does not seem to be well liked (Principal, WA).

One respondent discussed a challenge of recruiting local First Nations staff is the lack of physical, face-to-face connection that distance education provision entails.

A lot of (First Nations) people have found the role difficult because you're not there with the kids (Principal, WA).

Another participant emphasised the importance of local First Nations staff in the school and their role in building strong community connections.

I also think we need to have Indigenous educators. From their communities, being the ones working with them. They've got respect, they know that person. Um, mob's going to listen to mob, they're going to listen to their Elders, and if you can go straight into that community and say, can you teach this group of children? Let's embed your culture. You help us write their curriculum. Hallelujah! You've got these children who may very well engage, distance ed just doesn't do that, what's the point (Private tuition centre owner, QLD).

Factors Affecting Teaching and Learning

From the data, we identified several themes related to factors affecting teaching and learning. These related to:

- Mismatch of curriculum that can be often tokenistic;
- Heavy focused on English literacy;
- Not contextual/place-based or culturally relevant teaching and learning;
- The broken architecture of distance education.

Next, these four areas are expanded in detail.

Mismatched Curriculum that is Often Tokenistic

Respondents commented on the need for connection with curriculum which comes with a motivated and connected teacher.

What distance ed requires though, is a teacher who is really motivated to maintain the connection, understand what they're doing, and connect that across the curriculum. Rather than the child being isolated in their studies and I just don't think distance ed provides that for kids and their families (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

One participant referred to their distance education curriculum not covering all the same aspects as The Australian Curriculum but in their opinion, was better than what would have been offered in other schooling models.

So, we tell schools that we don't cover the whole curriculum...but we do have a firm belief that if you deliver this (distance education curriculum), you'll cover more curriculum than what you would have otherwise (Curriculum writer, SA /NT).

The same participant mentioned that some teachers in 'remote' distance provision were not teaching to the curriculum at all.

A challenge for the community is that they'd had the same teacher there for four or five years and she'd never taught curriculum. She just kind of, you know, played sport and made milkshakes and done that kind of stuff. And when she was told that she actually had to start planning and teaching to the curriculum, she was like, why? So, there was that mentality shift; she actually left (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

One respondent spoke of the current process of delivering curriculum to students through distance education.

Some of these mainstream distance educators, the systems can't even provide for the children you think they'd be able to provide for. Because they're almost trying to take the whole curriculum, which is such a shame, and shove it into a week... Then they're trying to take that horrible system... and then they're trying to put it online. With less support, just as much content... So, what I'm finding is we're shoving too much content into these children's buckets, and they're overwhelmed, so they're not even going to want to start. They're going to look at it and go, you're telling me I have to do that this week? That's terrifying (Private tuition centre owner, QLD).

Another respondent summarised that once the Australian Curriculum came into effect, the "expectations went up hugely".

It was getting a bit heavy towards the end 'cause when they brought in that national curriculum, the level of the expectations went up hugely. Quite a lot of extra demand. Well, the demand and that they were introducing concepts (in the curriculum) that I've never heard of and language that I've never heard of and things in English and they're talking about modalities and things like that. You know, I'm at this point I'm 50 something (Teacher, QLD).

Two other respondents attempted to highlight how tokenistic acknowledgments of First Nations perspectives are a common feature within the distance education environment.

At least one First Nations perspective book is included inside of that library box when we celebrate NAIDOC week. But try and make it about the history of NAIDOC and what the umm theme's not the right word... we try and stay away as much as possible with like the tokenistic dot painting a boomerang. Those actually, you know, things like this are just, we want them to be commonplace that it's not like, 'oh, it's made-up, let's make damper and that's it'. And then it goes way back in the cupboard (Principal, WA).

Big leaders that are trying to do reconciliation action plans and Indigenous perspectives and they don't know where to start. They get this, you know, they get a tokenistic speaker ... they don't know where to start (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Another respondent stressed the importance of having Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum however it can be "lip service" and "tokenistic".

I think it (Indigenous perspectives in curriculum) is for indigenous students critical, I know that I've talked to, you know, I've talked to obviously lots of students (First Nations) who, you know, there's lip service spun about embedding Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum, but it's very tokenistic (Higher education distance support worker, WA).

Heavy Focused on English Literacy

Numerous respondents spoke of the focus of English literacy (and maths) in distance education programs in Australia. One participant referred to the need to “maximise the impact”.

Because we (distance education providers) have to have our focus more on English and maths, the actual teaching is a lot more difficult because you've got limited time and you want to maximise the impact of what you're doing (Principal, WA).

Another respondent gave an overview of the morning literacy session with distance education students in various age groups. The school had chosen to implement direct instruction.

So yes, we all kick off with literacy. Our little kids have structured synthetic phonics first thing in the morning and that runs for about 20 minutes... The other kids use it to gear up, then they go into their literacy block, so a daily review and then explicit instruction and writing... That can go for the little kids just over an hour. And for the big kids, it runs just under an hour, so we use a lot of direct instruction programmes, so scripted programmes, we didn't go into that lightly. By using a direct instruction programme, which lots of people frown on and that's fine, it reduces the cognitive load because they know what to expect. And that's what this is about, and which is what probably what we prioritise the English and maths so much because those are the things that open doors if they're able to do that, if they're able to read it's a game changer (Principal, WA).

Another respondent referred to trying to make sure students are “functionally literate and have basic numeracy skills” and that other subject areas can be included via “video answer delivery” sessions or “set work”.

Because, you know, we want to make sure our kids are functionally literate and have basic numeracy skills to apply once they leave school. But then fitting in any form of instruction in the wellbeing space, the health space, science, it gets very difficult and that curriculum is still included in what we what we teach, but it's more of a video answer question delivery or it's part of set work that's sent out with some instructions and so on (Principal, WA).

Not Contextual/Place-Based or Culturally Relevant Teaching and Learning

The data revealed that participants thought that First Nations students need “relevant”, “tangible” “contextual” teaching and learning, something that distance education did not provide.

But actually, education for Indigenous kids, we want it to be relevant and contextual to where they are and the locals have that local knowledge and the same with community knowledge. So yeah, obviously you can't find information about Country in a textbook. I mean, you can find some things, but it's probably not a very good one, probably written by some white fellow a long time ago. Same with community resources, we talk about the tangible and intangible (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

And look, it didn't work badly because the guy had the knowledge down in Perth and (student name removed) was following, but at the end I thought it sort of work but. But they're making these funny boxes. Now I understand that, you know, when I did woodwork as a kid, you make these funny things to practise measuring, cutting angles, all that kind of thing. I get that. But I did think where's the contextual response because you could be doing something that maybe is a bit more practical than this dice. Yeah, you know, it wasn't bad but it wasn't contextual... I guess around digital technology in terms

of access, and well it's come a long way like my example of the screen kids are using in woodwork. But it's still not contextual, there's no relationships (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

One respondent spoke of a distance education woodwork class that he had recently been involved in with a group of First Nations students in the Kimberley. According to one participant, in their time working in distance education for over 25 years there “wasn’t a lot” of Indigenous perspectives included in the curriculum.

It wasn't a lot... I know there was stuff about Torres Strait Islands. Yeah, I think it was something about and it was coming in, but there wasn't a lot in what I had done (Teacher, QLD).

Broken Architecture of Delivery of Distance Education

Numerous respondents suggested that the architecture of distance education provision in Australia also failed to support quality teaching and learning. One respondent used the metaphor of a football game and playing online instead of face-to-face.

It's like saying, let's play football online. You know, I'm the coach, you go and play footy and then we'll come and talk about it. Some coaches don't like being in the box, they want to be on the sideline with their players. And It's just like that for remote schools and potentially not even for Aboriginal kids, for all kids in remote places, that empathy and care that teachers can provide and understanding and that relationship stuff from the ground, face-to-face, not on a screen – it's critical. Because still the core business comes down the quality of teaching and learning (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Another respondent highlighted that some distance education teachers use the time to chat rather than engage in teaching and learning.

So, then we took that model and applied it to the rest of the school, and some people didn't like that some people didn't want to teach more than 40 minutes. When I got here, it was 40 minutes a day on whatever you wanted. You just sat down and chattered. It wasn't teaching (Principal, WA).

Respondents also mentioned that linking up with visiting education specialists can also be challenging. As one participant noted:

A couple of weeks ago, there was a STEM group in town that contacted us the day before they had some time to do some work with us, which didn't work. We couldn't do it, but if they'd have contacted us a few weeks earlier (Principal, WA).

Another mechanical issue raised by a participant was the postal service itself.

When it leaves us, it is in the God's hands like we allow about two weeks. And sometimes it can go via the moon to get places, and if it's the wet season, it's even worse. We, like we said, we allowed two weeks, most of them, it's got to go from us to another, like small town post office. And from there it's taken by mail plane... Because some people think this is it, this is distance at distances as you get your work in, you get your work in an envelope, do it and send it back (Principal, WA).

One respondent articulated that distance education is not the same as being present with a student.

It's, yeah. Literally taking a green juice instead of eating vegetables. It's just not what should happen ... And they're investing a lot in it working better. So, I feel like they're progressing and showing progress. So, everyone's sort of saying it's working, it's working, and it's like, what? It's not. You're only just making the thing that we need further away (Teacher, Arnhem, NT).

Factors Affecting the School and the Schooling System

From the participants responses, several replies related to the factors that impact the school and the school system. These included the negative impact of regulations on school culture and issues around funding in distance education. In addition to Australian-based factors, the data poses possible global trends to be aware of in the future. While there were fewer comments than the other key themes, nonetheless important concerns were raised. These included key themes related to:

- Negative impact of regulations on school culture;
- Funding issues.

The following section outlines each area in more depth.

Negative Impact of Regulations on School Culture

From the participants responses, we identified that some distance education programs may not be as successful in their approach in 'remote' First Nations contexts because schools and the schooling system "don't want to take on the hard job".

So again, I think what's in all of this is that education departments are just throwing darts at a dart board with distance ed, with no idea on how things are going to land...I think now their (education department) taking this to the next level and they're being cheap with distance ed and they won't take on the hard job. And it's also based on the fact that there's not enough people in the system in leadership roles that actually understand the context and depth of these places. It's as simple as that. The leaders might have a logical brain and good at management but do they understand the context of the kids and the community – no... but it's also critical for really strong leadership. I don't think we can get away from the need for strong leadership. Yeah, I definitely say it's building that school culture and that comes from good leadership that links in with the children and their families (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Another respondent spoke of the importance of school culture and this is very difficult to obtain with online learning that doesn't engage students, families and the wider community from the ground up. One respondent commented:

If you look at Roebourne school, there's huge buildings, massive buildings same as Fitzroy, huge buildings and physical resources, but no school-community culture...a positive school-community culture, is where everyone's on the same page and it's the contested ground between the two cultures - that's where schools sit. The kids aren't getting what they need for their life from distance ed and the world they live in. They need to get both ways of education and so it's that contested ground in the middle that takes a lot of expertise and knowledge, and it doesn't happen with distance ed. And so when you got someone in Perth giving the lesson online, I suppose the provider of the knowledge and skills [is coming] from afar which I just don't think will work for Aboriginal students. Yeah, I can't see it... but it's also critical for really strong leadership. I don't think we can get away from the need for strong leadership. Yeah, I definitely say it's building that school culture and that comes from good leadership that links in with the children and their families (Principal, WA).

Another negative impact on the school and schooling system is the increase of legislation in schools and distance education programs have their own rules and regulations that need to be adhered to. One respondent who runs a private tuition centre for students and families who are currently homeschooling. When asked if they would consider becoming a distance school the following statement was given.

Unfortunately, the (name of council removed) said, no, you have to be on a school premises to be a school for distance education on that... and if I was to become a school. I would have to go through quite a rigorous process, and fall under...let's just be real, I'd have to do what the government tells me. So, when I say a private tuition centre, I can, um... Share with my parents what the content is, and deliver it in a holistic way, um, and being overseen by different bodies than the government. And I had to be really careful because ... the non-state schools accreditation board here up in Queensland is very strict on what you can do and what you can't do. So I've been able to get some nice, firm boxes. working with them on what I can and can't do, because before that, there...People were just opening things like what I'm doing and being shut down. And in some cases, even being fined (Private tuition centre owner, QLD).

Another respondent commented on an online distance education woodwork class that they were involved in earlier this year.

Teachers aren't supposed to step outside of legislation... at one place, we had a regional director and we saw him two times in seven years. He came to look around the school one time, and as he was leaving, he stopped halfway through the gate and he said, "you know, if I went by the department's rules and regulations and whatever, I'd have to sack you". And I went, "oh really?" He went on to say, "not because you're doing anything unlawful but just because it was different and led by the community." It was so different to his normality and the way he viewed the world. He made a dumb comment like that and instead, he could have said, 'hey, you're doing a great job' but instead he said 'I should sack you' and look, we ran a school within the guidelines of the department, but we certainly listened to our community and I think that's where he's coming from (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

While the respondent spoke of the importance of being able to listen to the community, they also reported that funding can drive schools and the school system more broadly.

Funding Issues

An area that did attract numerous critical comments concerned funding. In the 'remote' context one respondent commented that 'remote' learning is now using distance education out of "financial and staffing convenience".

Well, I think distance ed is purely being rollout out for financial and staffing convenience. It's seen as a way of out. I used to always say remote and regional schools need support. You know, you look at schools, they can't get teachers, you know, and the problem gets ignored (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

In the United States, funding scandals around distance education, charter and cyber charter schools, have become prevalent.

You know, if actually there was a complete website that's set up the charter school scandals in the U.S. and you know, they document all of these... I mean, you could go on and on, you know, going back to the late 90s with the, you know... for as long as there have been charter schools, there have been not just charter school scandals, but online charter school scandals. Oftentimes resulting in the closure of schools and literally thousands of students not knowing, like, 'OK, where the hell am I going to school

tomorrow? Because my online school just closed today.' And but I'm going to, I suspect we're going to see more of that. And you know it's a mindset because roughly 80%, I think it's like 70 some odd percent of cyber charter school enrolments are basically in for are in schools that are operated by for profit corporations (International researcher).

This respondent went on to describe the economic and demographic landscape of for-profit cyber charter schools within the United States.

And there's two big ones here in the U.S., the 'Connections Education'[1] chain that's operated by Pearson. And then 'K12 Inc' it's now called 'Stride, Inc'[2], which operate a lot of the virtual academies throughout the U.S., and they're slightly bigger. They have about 60% of the market. Pearson has about the other 40%. There are a bunch of other smaller players there in different states like the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT)[3] ... I mean, they had, I think it was 4 or 5000 students in them (International researcher).

The respondent also described another example of a United States cyber charter school becoming involved in funding scandals.

Actually I just talked with a journalist on Friday about an example of a school district in New Mexico that is now involved in a court case with Stride Inc about this contract that they signed to set up a cyber charter school that they've cancelled after a certain period of time. I can send you the websites that that both the school districts have set up, and the company have set up sort of competing propaganda sites about what's going on there and it's a fascinating tale (International researcher).

The situation that the respondent refers to is where Stride Inc have promised Gallup-McKinley Country Schools (GMCS) online schooling for its “mostly Native American students”.[4] In exchange of approximately US\$8000 per student, Stride Inc would provide teachers, laptops and hot spots to students that enrolled into the new virtual school called, New Mexico Destinations Career Academy – having “signed up roughly 1,000 students in the 2020-21 school year, a number that would quadruple over time”. The for-profit organisation has now been accused of “taking advantage” of students and the Gallup district. Given the political and policy landscape of the United States, the respondent noted that similar examples will continue to ensue.

The red states oftentimes, particularly outside of the southeast, were often tempered a little bit in their actions around these things and they've been emboldened over the last couple of years, really since the first Trump administration. To, you know, move further and further in this this direction. So a lot of these organisations could often see themselves getting funded quite nicely at the same time, you've got their (speaking about Aotearoa) virtual learning network programmes (Kōtui Ako and NetNZ) which were supposed to be consolidated down to one, although only made it down to two because, well, they just couldn't play nice with each other in the sandbox (International researcher).

Best Practice for 'Remote' First Nations Contexts

During the interviews, our participants often described what they considered best practice for 'remote' First Nations students. While each school and community is different and each requires nuanced consideration, there were commonalities across the dataset where respondents reveal what works in First Nations contexts. Considering the data, there were five key areas which included:

- The importance of strong face-to-face relationships;
- Teaching and learning needs to be place-based, from the ground up, on Country;
- Be grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, languages and local aspirations;
- Employ an empowerment model;
- Learning should be contextual and meaningful.

Next, we outline the data related to each of the five key areas in relation to their saturation from the thematic analysis supported by NVivo.

The Importance of Strong Face-To-Face Relationships

Respondents stressed the significance of strong face-to-face relationships being essential for First Nations students in 'remote' locations. Specifically, one respondent summarised relationships as the "most obvious thing for success".

I guess the most obvious thing for success in First Nations students in remote locations is relationships. It's just forming and creating relationships with whole families and knowing who the kids are and who they're connected to and who their Elders are and respecting that sort of hierarchy within the community that you speak to the Elders and maybe sometimes it's an Auntie that is the primary carer for children, all those things. It's having that knowledge and connection to the community and knowing each child how they're connected in their community and within the wider community of their Homelands. Yeah, that's probably the biggest one (Principal, NT/WA).

Another participant confirmed the importance of relationship by adding:

Doing all of that relationship building stuff which is so important for these (First Nations) kids (Principal, WA).

Another respondent spoke of the importance of connection.

I find that with First Nation students as a principal, I know that they need connection. They need a personal connection, and this (distance education) is not an environment that is conducive to it. It's so hard (Principal, QLD).

One participant stressed the importance of building rapport with students and their needs.

I think it's important to learn about who your children are as people, I think it's important to build rapport, I think it's important to write your plans based on what their needs are, and boom, I know we're going to align (Private tuition centre owner, QLD).

Another participant commented on the role of the school itself being a "central hub" and its critical position in facilitating interactions across the community.

The school itself is that central hub. If anybody needs something, they go to school. Some just need to fill in some paperwork for Centrelink. That's where everyone goes to the school. Someone's unwell, go to the school. We need your help. This is happening. You know, it's that it's becoming that place where I know I can get help here. It's just those principles and the principles that run those schools need to be recognised for the fact that they're not just principles. It's almost, you know, a de facto community coordinator in terms of helping out with all of those things. Oh 100%, schools are community hubs. I couldn't imagine what would happen if someone came in and said no, no, I won't help you with that paperwork or I won't do this or no, you need to go to this place. You know, the arms would be thrown in the air so. Relationships are so important (Principal, WA).

One respondent spoke of the interconnected ways in which face-to-face relationships link to wellbeing. Teachers and school staff more broadly can gain a better understanding of students' wellbeing through interactions and this is not possible through screens.

What is needed is for humans to actually have relationships with the people, we're learning with the student, and that is vitally important... Nothing can substitute being face-to-face, on Country, Two-Way Science approach – and distance ed just doesn't work in the same way...I just don't think distance education, being the model where your educator is not present with you on a day-to-day basis, I don't know how this works for remote Indigenous kids... wellbeing in remote schools, especially regional remote schools, is important, you've got to have people on the ground that support that and work as a whole school community and someone externally can't do that. Yeah, because they don't have the relationship... the relationships between kids, their families and the school, with the shared understanding is what learning is going is imperative, and the modern dream of distance ed through IT, cannot solve all this (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Face-to-face support was also mentioned in relation to the association of place and Country.

Nothing beats the face-to-face for those kids... the importance of place and Country is just so important for Indigenous kids. Even if there's a supported person for the distance education stuff, you could pull it back but, you have to have somebody there (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Teaching and Learning Needs to be Place-Based, from the Ground Up, On Country

Respondents often synonymously mentioned the importance of relationships and Country as best practice for 'remote' First Nations contexts. As one participant described:

(First Nations students) need to learn within that face-to-face on Country context (Principal, WA).

Another participant added that best practice in 'remote' First Nations school teaching and learning should "prioritise cultural learning" however often many schools are under resourced and are often unwilling to approve such on Country trips. The participant said:

But then on top of that (success is) sort of prioritising cultural learning I think in some way. It's something when I look back on my time as an early teacher in remote settings, I wish I did more of and I wish I could have incorporated more and brought more family into the classroom and even taken the classroom out altogether and gone out somewhere together with family and done that more often. Would have the school allowed it though? That's the tricky thing. I look back and think, would the principal have let me do that? Probably not. Were there vehicles? Probably not. But yes, that's probably

the fastest way to form connections with family and communities to just get out the bush and connect with them and their Country (Principal, NT/WA)

Another participant commented on the Education Departments lack of understanding of what on Country learning is and why it is important in these contexts.

Some people in the education department they don't see why Country is so important. They do not understand what was going on and sort of just see people out in the bush playing around and they have no idea that these kids were actually learning off their families and then teachers were using that in a collaborative manner with Aboriginal people to extend it across curriculum. I mean, kids are learning science and learning skills, observation skills, all that type of stuff. They are learning processes and they're integrating it into everything (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

The same respondent also discussed the regulatory barriers in place for engaging students in on Country learning.

One other thing is that the guidelines are so strict now to take kids out on Country. In the (department) eyes, they are crossing their T's and dotting their I's. You know, the hardest thing about being a school leader is the legalities of going out of the school fence. It's an inbuilt fear from the rules and regulations being pumped into you. And you gotta trust the kids and their families, it's different world views, different expectations. But it's about the connectivity within the school community, that's imperative and a solution has to be found. The relationships between kids, their families and the school, with the shared understanding is what learning is, is going to be imperative, and the modern dream of distance ed through IT, cannot solve all this (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Be Grounded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Languages and Local Aspirations

Being on Country and privileging local Indigenous knowledge systems in teaching and learning was also commended on by numerous respondents as best practice.

Yeah, it's something that really has a process that we can utilise, the Aboriginal families, knowledge of Country and science to support their kids learning and then integrate across curriculum... let's have a look at Two-way Science and on Country learning, it's actually no different to any other science program that happens around the world. So why differentiate? Why make it different? It's not different how we learn it is different. And the holders of the knowledge is different, but it's still science. I think there's a deeper understanding required than just being a curriculum thing... you could do something creative, locally based with Elders and families in that sense, but yeah, I just don't know how distance ed could meet the needs of the kids (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Despite trying to incorporate Indigenous perspectives, online, distance programs struggle to create connection. One respondent added:

We do find it hard to engage and sometimes we feel like they, you know, they don't necessarily feel a part of our school, despite doing acknowledgements to Country... doing all of those things to try and it's all integrated into our curriculum with Indigenous perspectives. So, none. I think it's the face-to face human factor (Principal, QLD).

Incorporating local First Nations languages was also referred to by a participant as vital for overall student wellbeing.

Then you add in the wellbeing of the child, the improved access into language to their own Country being taught in their language, the utilisation of it across a kid's life, there are all these benefits (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

This sentiment was mirrored by another respondent and while they have not been able to successfully implement languages into their program, they recognise the need for 'remote' First Nation students.

I think we'd all recognise that having (Indigenous) languages in our schools would be a huge win... but we need, you just want it to be the right person, that person that can really get the kids going, get them excited, get them using the language (Principal, WA).

Another respondent added that incorporating local languages and knowledge systems derived from understanding local aspirations.

Aspirations and local aspirations are what make a difference for that school community... it's that actual deep understanding where they actually respond to the needs of the kids from a different lens, because of the way they view the world. Good leaders have a deep understanding and knowledge of the kids and their family's worldview and know what motivates them - no distance ed program can overcome that (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Strong leadership was also another factor that contributed to best practice in 'remote' First Nations contexts. One participant stated:

The continuity of learning comes from the continuity of the leadership, continuity of agreeing upon the same values and aspirations for their kids... whether it be a small or big school - good leadership, motivated educators with the capacity to understand local values like collaboration is key. Aspirations, local aspirations are what make a difference for that school community. If you haven't got that, even if you have a wonderful distance ed system that you are able to bring up or establish, it wouldn't work because you haven't got the people on the ground to implement... and it's also based on the fact that there's not enough people in the system in leadership roles that actually understand the context and depth of these places. It's as simple as that. The leaders might have a logical brain and be good at management, but do they understand the context of the kids and the community? No... but it's also critical for really strong leadership. I don't think we can get away from the need of strong leadership. Yeah, I definitely say it's building that school culture and that comes from good leadership that links in with the children and their families (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Another respondent also commented on the impact of leadership in 'remote' school contexts and how poor leadership can be a barrier for school culture and the wider community.

I think the main barrier is the sort of people in control of the school. It doesn't feel like a safe place for them culturally. So, you've got usually a principal who's coming from out of town that's there temporarily. You've usually got classroom teachers who are coming from out of town and they're there temporarily and they might be friendly and they might be really great teachers but often there's a cultural divide there, there's language divides. There's understandings of family like I mentioned before of how that all links in and who knows who and how all those relationships work and who can talk to who and who can't talk to who as far as kinship systems work. So once a teacher's there for a number of years they start to catch up on some of these things but it takes a long time and it's usually towards the end of a tenure that the best relationships and learning happens. But I'd say I think it is just that barrier of it being a western system in a very culturally strong place. So, there's a lot of cross-cultural

understanding that needs to happen there and language barrier understanding as well. Schools often don't place enough importance on the people who are working there long term as well. So, the teacher is the one who seems like they're running the school and it should be the AIEOs (Aboriginal and Indigenous Education Officers) who are in charge. That would make the children feel like it's their school and not some out-of-towner's school (Principal, NT/WA).

Another respondent commented on the connection of Country and the need for increased local First Nations staff in 'remote' teaching and learning.

But all of the units have this space to connect with Country, so get your rangers in, get your Buffel Busters in, get your elders in, get your that kind of stuff. You couldn't do this. You couldn't do this without a teacher, but I've been really emphasising the importance of bringing along your assistant teachers and co-planning with your assistant teachers because a lot of the knowledge for this is not held within the teacher. It's held within the community (Curriculum writer, SA/NT).

Kids need to have face-to-face contact with the teacher plus you have a local Aboriginal teacher supporting (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

Employ an Empowerment Model

Numerous responses were related to the need for an empowering, locally driven, place-based approach in education.

Place-based approaches, as a process, empowers Aboriginal people and older people to be engaged in leading learning for their children. It's a way to engage cross curricular work (Principal, WA/NT/SA).

One educator who worked for a First Nations led teaching and program over COVID commented that during this time the program was able to be innovative in the way they delivered teaching and learning. The model was 'distanced' but empowering.

So what we did was listen to the families and consult with community about what they wanted to do during COVID and what we realised pretty quickly is that we had to work as much as we could household by household to reduce sizes and make sure only families were interacting with each other as they usually would to avoid the potential of infection. And then we also supported families to return to their Homelands (Principal, WA/NT).

The respondent gave an example of the approach.

Families hadn't really been going back there (to the Homelands) but there was a real want and will to go back there and spend more time there. So, I think it ended up being about 15 to 20 people all together with about 8 or 9 kids and we supported them with learning packages. We gave them a bus to be out there and come back and forth. We made sure...they had vehicles out there... they reported their learning back through photos and attendance sheets with our system. And one of our Western educators would head out there about once every week and check in and see how everyone's going... but I can see that working in a really strong way as opposed to an IT, digital (distance) model. But I just really doubt a distance online model in those contexts (Principal, NT/WA).

Learning Should be Contextual and Meaningful

Several participants emphasised the importance of culturally responsive and community-connected learning. For example, one respondent shared how students naturally relate educational content to their lived experiences. They explained:

...students will tell you a story, they'll say this is like when my uncle took me and did this and long ago. Yeah. And I said that's community experience that's connecting them. Connecting to the topic, and that's what you need to try and capture in your learning as really meaningful. So, this stuff is not possible without your AT (assistant teachers and the community (Curriculum writer, SA/NT)).

The value of place-based, culturally grounded education was powerfully illustrated by another participant who reflected on their experience with the Learning on Country (LoC) Program. After working on the Homeland for several years, they described how the program's success stemmed from its commitment to contextualised learning – bringing students together from 'remote' Homelands to camp, learn, and connect with relevant, real-world knowledge.

Once I'd worked there (on the Homeland) for a couple years, this was the first time I could really stand up and say, this is a good program (Learning on Country) and it works because it was contextualised learning... they could learn about anything that is relevant right now... they get all their students from different Homelands and bring them to one and they camp there for the whole week and they learn all week and then they go home... And something was working. And it is, like, the most inaccessible places in all of Australia getting graduates. Yeah. showing that contextualized learning and real teachers on the ground is doing a great thing. And they're still like, 'great, we'll still do distance ed'. Like, and you're like, 'no' (Teacher, Arnhem Land, NT).

Reinforcing the importance of place-based learning and reflecting on the limitations of screen-based education models, one participant added:

Being able to contextualise the content and to have all the camps, they're great. But you just can't do that through a screen, they should be On Country (Principal, WA/NT/SA)

Reflecting on the structural challenges of embedding Indigenous knowledge systems into mainstream education, one respondent questioned the disconnect between policy and place.

But you know, how do we incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous ways of learning into the formal schooling environment when it has been set up in a set fashion and be run by a Ministry of Education that's down in a capital that you know has no concept of where half of these places are, let alone the type of people that you know. And then type of students that are coming into them (International researcher).

Recommendations associated with Section 7: Findings

Part 2 – Qualitative Data

Recommendation 1: Local Governance

Develop and support strong local governance structures to ensure the local community has decision making powers in the education of their children.

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in ‘remote’ areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their Homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

Recommendation 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability

Invest in solar-powered charging stations and backup generators to mitigate power outages that disrupt learning to uphold equity in education by ensuring that reliable power is universally accessible to all learners, regardless of geographic location, so no student is disadvantaged by infrastructure gaps.

Recommendation 4: Reliable Internet Access

Prioritise expansion of broadband and satellite internet services to ‘remote’ communities, ensuring consistent connectivity for students and educators, as a matter of spatial justice to address geographic inequities and guarantee equal access to educational opportunities regardless of location.

Recommendation 5: Device Accessibility

Provide laptops, tablets and mobile devices to students who lack access to essential technology to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities and reduce the digital divide for students in remote and disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 6: Scam Monitoring

The Australian distance education sector must have monitoring and evaluation practices in place to ensure local communities are not being targeted in scams or other fraudulent practices that exploit financial, personal or cultural vulnerabilities.

Recommendation 7: Enrolment Policies and Procedures

‘Remote’ education enrolment policies and procedures need to be simplified and streamlined to ensure equitable access for all students. Regardless of location, all Australian students and their families should have clear knowledge of and access to high-quality, culturally grounded education. Enrolment must never be the barrier to equity and inclusion.

Recommendation 8: Remove Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT

The Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT often disadvantages ‘remote’ First Nations students because it is overly complex, digitally dependent and culturally disconnected. These processes assume urban conditions, ignore mobility and cultural obligations, and lack community involvement, turning enrolment into a barrier rather than an enabler of equitable, place-based education that guarantee access to high-quality, place-based education for all students regardless of location.

Recommendation 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum

Work side-by-side with local communities in a development capacity to build place-based approaches to education provision to understand the localised needs of distance education provision. Where requested, develop and support blended flexible learning models of delivery that focus on cultural responsiveness.

Recommendation 10: Local Teacher Training Support

Develop strong, culturally appropriate adult training programs for local employment pathways into distance education provision with contextual training that is culturally appropriate, guided by local aspirations, and aligned with career pathways to ensure sustainable, community-led education solutions.

Recommendation 11: Staffing Innovation

Develop innovative staffing models that leverage the expertise of past educators who have previously worked in local communities and built strong relationships with students and families. These educators can play a critical role in distance education programs by maintaining cultural continuity and trust. Their involvement would help address the relational gaps often experienced in virtual learning environments. Additionally, incorporate structured opportunities for these educators to visit the community in person at least once per quarter to strengthen connections, provide face-to-face support, and ensure culturally responsive engagement.

Recommendation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge

Work towards future staffing models that support cultural safety, promotes equitable access to education. This should focus on: culturally framed inductions, ongoing evidence-based professional development and place-based curriculum models.

Recommendation 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR

Investigate and implement multimedia technologies – including AI and virtual reality (VR) – to make distance education more culturally appropriate, engaging and student-centred in remote Australia. Traditional distance education often reflects mainstream pedagogical norms that may not align with the cultural values, learning styles, or lived experiences of students in remote and Indigenous communities. Multimedia tools offer a powerful opportunity to shift the educational experience from teacher-directed instruction to student-driven exploration, while honouring local identities and knowledge systems. This could include options like:

- Culturally responsive multimedia content: storytelling through video and animation; community generated media;
- AI powered personalisation: adaptive learning platforms, conversational AI tutors;
- Virtual reality for immersive learning: place-based simulators, role play scenarios;
- Shifting the media frame from teacher-led to student-led: perspective-taking, agency and control, codesign multimedia tools with local students, educators and cultural leaders.

Recommendation 14: Develop data on the number of students undertaking distance education.

Whilst ACARA maintains information on the number of students enrolled with distance education providers, it remains unknown the number of students who are enrolled by distance partially or entirely with schools who primarily provide in-person education, but who provide online education as well. Without this additional information, it is not possible to understand the full scope of the number of distance education students. More holistically, better data is needed to fully understand the different models First Nations students and their families in remote locations are choosing to access.

Recommendation 15: Generate a more robust determination of Indigenous access to the AIC.

Analysis in this report suggests that Indigenous school-aged children may not be accessing the AIC to the extent to which they are eligible. Further data collection may uncover a more robust understanding of the extent to which this is the case, understand the reasons why this is the case, and thereby inform how the AIC may better support Indigenous families.

Recommendation 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education.

If the distance education model is to be relied upon to provide education for remotely located Indigenous students, a better understanding of student outcomes from these providers needs to be developed. Considering these recommendations, seven next steps are outlined.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for First Nations students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

For more information about how these recommendations link to the key findings of the report, please refer to Appendix 4.

^[1] <https://www.connectionseducation.com/>

^[2] <https://stridelearning.com/>

^[3] <https://www.apptegy.com/schoolceo/ecot-how-americas-largest-cyber-school-collapsed-overnight/>

^[4] <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-mexico-school-district-stride-k12-virtual-education-rcna222598>

Summary of Findings

Overall, distance education in 'remote' First Nations contexts is under-examined. In undertaking this interjurisdictional report, we have uncovered a number of findings critical to understanding how distance education provision has been carried out in the past and how we can learn from these findings going forward.

Current Distance Education Providers are Generally Not Well Equipped

Australian distance education providers are not well resourced nor have the experience with First Nations students in 'remote' contexts to provide quality programs. There are a range of factors such as staffing, ICT and on-ground connections, etc., that require urgent attention.

The (in)Equity of Discourse

Terminology such as 'distance', 'isolated' and 'remote' reflects settler-colonial perspectives of deficit framing. Distance education discourse often excludes First Nations students, reinforcing invisibility and inequity. Policy and funding decisions are often shaped by neoliberal agendas which prioritise cost efficiency over cultural relevance.

Technology Offers a Bridge (with Tolls)

Technology is seen as both an enabler and a barrier in distance education. Positively, technology enables real time interaction and flexibility. However negatively, poor or lack of internet access, lack of devices, climate and other technical issues in 'remote' contexts hinder engagement. The over-reliance on screens creates frustrations and disengagement, especially for students with hearing difficulties or low digital literacy.

Virtual Learning Hinders Motivation, Wellbeing and Creates a Cultural Disconnect

Distance education has a lack of face-to-face interaction and there is an absence of contextualised learning which reduces engagement. Building trust and relationships is difficult in virtual settings. Students can struggle with wellbeing and motivation. Cultural disconnect is high when learning online.

Limited Family Involvement and Lack of Consultation Reduce the Cultural Alignment

There is limited family involvement and support for families and the wider community in distance education. An absence of consultation with communities about aspirations for education was also a key theme. Overall, distance education models are individualistic, which conflicts with collective cultural societal values.

High Staff Turnover and Insufficient Cultural Training for Educators' Impact Program Quality

Staffing in 'remote' contexts has a very high turnover. There is a difficulty in attracting and retaining culturally appropriate teachers. There is a lack of training for staff in culturally responsive pedagogy. A key challenge is providing on the ground support due to lack of funding and logistical constraints.

Distance Education Curriculum Lacks Cultural Relevance – Place-Based Approaches are Needed

Distance education curriculum often lacks cultural relevance and fails to integrate First Nations knowledge systems, languages and societal values. There is an overemphasise on text-based learning which disadvantages students for whom English is an additional language. There is a need for more place-based, experiential, relational and storytelling-based approaches.

Policy and Funding Favour Settler-Colonial Framed Solutions – Infrastructure Gaps Persist

Funding models and policy frameworks prioritise settler-colonial solutions like boarding over community driven approaches. Inconsistent regulations and unclear definitions of ‘distance’ education create systemic confusion. Infrastructure gaps like power, water, housing, medical and transport, undermine program delivery.

Place-Based, Culturally Governed Models that Integrate Language, Land and Local Knowledge Systems Improve Engagement Outcomes

Place-based, On Country education models show strong potential for success. Programs that integrate cultural knowledge, language, lore and land management improve engagement and outcomes. Governance by TOs, Elders and the wider local community is critical for sustainability and cultural safety.

For how the key findings link to the recommendations, please refer to Appendix 4.

Recommendations

Based on the "Like Oil and Water: Equitable Access to Education for First Nations Students – Exploring Distance Education" report, 17 recommendations are put forward.

Recommendation 1: Local Governance

Develop and support strong local governance structures to ensure the local community has decision making powers in the education of their children.

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Investment

For distance education models of education to be successful in 'remote' areas, there is a range of infrastructure needs that must be addressed for students and their families to be on their Homelands. This includes: power, water, housing, roads, internet access, early childhood provision, health services, adult education and training, etc.

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Considering these recommendations, seven next steps are outlined.

Recommendation 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for First Nations students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

For how these recommendations link to the key findings please refer to Appendix 4.

Next Steps: Developing a Place-Based Approach to Distance Education

Developing a place-based approach to distance education is essential for ensuring that learning is culturally grounded, community driven, and responsive to the unique needs of First Nations learners. Our next steps prioritise self-determination, local knowledge systems and equitable access to resources while leveraging technology to bridge geographic barriers. The following framework (**Error! Reference source not found.**) outlines eight interconnected steps, from establishing community governance to securing sustainable funding, together create a holistic model for delivering education that honours Country, culture and community aspirations.

Figure 42. Next Steps: Place-Based Distance Education



Below, each of the eight steps (**Error! Reference source not found.**) of the place-based distance education model are expanded.

1. Establish Community Governance

- Form local education governance committees comprising Elders, parents, and community leaders.
- Ensure decision-making authority rests with the community to uphold self-determination.
- Develop protocols for co-designing curriculum and delivery models that reflect cultural priorities.

2. Co-Design a Place-Based Pedagogical Framework

- Embed First Nations knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices into the curriculum.
- Use two-way learning principles that integrate Indigenous and Western pedagogies.
- Prioritise experiential learning on Country, supported by digital tools for flexibility.

3. Pilot a Hub-and-Spoke Model

- Identify central hubs (community schools or learning centres) equipped for blended learning.
- Connect smaller Homelands (spokes) through mobile teaching teams and virtual classrooms.
- Schedule regular face-to-face intensives to maintain relationships and cultural continuity.

4. Address Infrastructure Gaps

- Invest in reliable power supply (solar systems, backup generators).
- Expand internet connectivity through broadband and satellite solutions as a matter of spatial justice.
- Provide devices (laptops, tablets) and culturally relevant digital resources.
- Ensure safe transport options for students and staff between hubs and spokes.

5. Build Local Workforce Capacity

- Develop contextual teacher training programs aligned with local aspirations and career pathways.
- Recruit and support community-based educators, including past teachers with strong local ties.
- Offer ongoing professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy and digital delivery.

6. Implement Monitoring and Evaluation

- Create community-led evaluation frameworks to measure success against local indicators.
- Monitor equity outcomes, cultural relevance and student engagement rather than only standardised metrics.
- Include safeguards against exploitation, scams and inappropriate content in digital platforms.

7. Secure Sustainable Funding

- Advocate for long-term government and philanthropic investment in community-controlled education.
- Link funding to infrastructure development, workforce training and culturally grounded curriculum design.

8. Develop Research about Best Practice International Model

Appendix 1: Draft Interview Guide

Background context:

1. *Can you tell us a bit about the school here?*

History? Values and mission? Location of teachers and students? Staff retention? Post-school pathways?

2. *What would you say are the strengths of the school?*

What do you think the school does well? What kinds of positive feedback have you received?

3. *Can you tell us how the program is delivered?*

What does delivery look like - both for the teachers and for the students? Interactive platforms?

4. *How are course materials developed?*

Who develops? Where from? Examples of any year-level assignments?

5. *How many students are enrolled, roughly?*

Anecdotally, how many students attend versus enrolments? Where are students studying from? Can we access data?

Cultural context:

6. *How do you support First Nations students living in remote areas?*

Is content or delivery catered to First Nations students in remote contexts? Support mechanisms? IT? Peer support programs?

7. *Does the school engage in family and/or community outreach programs?*

How do teachers learn about cultural contexts where students are coming from? Do they build relationships with families?

8. *How are culture and/or language incorporated into course content?*

Any specific cultural or linguistic cohorts? How is content developed? How delivered? Interpreter?

9. *How does the school ensure the cultural safety of First Nations students?*

Cultural competency requirements for teachers? Support mechanisms? Teaching practice?

10. *How does course content incorporate the importance of place/Country in distance education?*

Learning environments? Homework activities? Outreach?

Student context:

11. *How do students engage with the courses?*

Observations? Feedback from students/ parents/ other teachers? What elements do you think they like/dislike?

12. *How many First Nations students complete year 12 through the school?*

Can you share any data? Anecdotes? If not year 12, what other career pathways?

13. *What are some of the barriers the school and the students face?*

Funding? Staffing? Relationships? School factors (learning environment, technology, local supervisors)? Cultural and linguistic factors? Teasing?

14. *Based on your experience, what kinds of improvements do you think could be made?*

Policy? Funding? Programs? Teachers? Leadership? Governance? Location of services? Community stakeholder partnerships? Other partnerships?

15. *Do you have any final remarks or stories that you'd like to share?*

Stories of particular (unidentified) students or families and their schooling experience?

Appendix 2: Letter of Invitation

DATE 2025

Name
Position
Organisation
Address line 1
Address line 2

Dear XX

Improving On Country and Distance Education for First Nations Students

We are writing to invite you to participate in an interview for the research project titled 'Improving On Country and Distance Education for First Nations Students'. We are a team of researchers, Associate Professor Bill Fogarty, Dr Cat Holmes and Dr Lillian Tait, within Education, Equity and Development at POLIS: Centre for Social Policy Research at the Australian National University. The focus of this research is to gain an insight into the experiences, innovations and challenges faced by education providers in delivering distance education. As part of this study, we are inviting selected organisations to participate in a one-hour interview to share their valuable perspectives.

This research is commissioned by the National Indigenous Australians Agency and seeks to understand how distance education is used in First Nations contexts within 'remote' Australia. This research has been approved by the AIATSIS ethics committee (REC-0442). The interviews in which you are invited to participate comprise one part of a larger research project looking into education models targeting First Nations students living in 'remote' areas. The interview will explore topics such as:

- How distance education is delivered and how course materials are developed.
- How culture, language and Country are accounted for in course content.
- How students are engaging with the course.
- What kinds of barriers the school and the students face.

Your contributions will help shape a more nuanced understanding of how educational communities have adapted to and evolved within 'remote' learning environments. Participation is entirely voluntary, and all insights will be treated respectfully and confidentially.

Interviews can be scheduled at your convenience, and conducted via Zoom, Teams or over the phone.

If you are interested in participating, please feel free to reply to this message with your availability or contact us directly at (02) 6125 6586. We would be delighted to provide further information and coordinate a time that suits you.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to meaningful research in education.

Sincerely,

Appendix 3: List of Distance Education Organisations and Providers Contacted for Participation

- Arcadia College, QLD
- Australian Christian College: Marsden Park Campus, NSW
- Australian Christian College: Moreton Campus, QLD
- Australian Christian College: Southlands Campus, WA
- Australian Christian College: Tasmania Office, TAS
- Australian Christian College: Victoria Office, VIC
- Cairns School of Distance Education, QLD
- Carnarvon School of the Air, WA
- Charleville School of Distance Education, QLD
- Christian Education Ministries, National
- Euka Future Learning, QLD
- Kalgoorlie School of the Air, WA
- Katherine School of the Air, WA
- Meekatharra School of the Air, WA
- NT School of Distance Education, NT
- NSW Regional, Rural, Remote and Unique Settings Directorate, NSW
- Open Access College, SA
- Port Augusta School of the Air, SA
- School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), WA
- Up School, National

Appendix 4: Summary of Findings linked to Recommendations

Finding	Finding detail	Link to recommendation
Current Distance Education Providers are Generally Not Well Equipped	<i>Australian distance education providers are not well resourced nor have the experience with First Nations students in 'remote' contexts to provide quality programs. There are a range of factors such as staffing, ICT and on-ground connections, etc., that require urgent attention.</i>	2: Infrastructure Investment 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability 4: Reliable Internet Access 5: Device Accessibility 6: Scam Monitoring 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 10: Local Teacher Training Support 11: Staffing Innovation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education. 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.
The (in)Equity of Discourse	<i>Terminology such as 'distance', 'isolated' and 'remote' reflects settler-colonial perspectives of deficit framing. Distance education discourse often excludes First Nations students, reinforcing invisibility and inequity. Policy and funding decisions are often shaped by neoliberal agendas which prioritise cost efficiency over cultural relevance.</i>	1: Local Governance 6: Scam Monitoring 7: Enrolment Policies and Procedures 8: Remove Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum
Technology Offers a Bridge (with Tolls)	<i>Technology is seen as both an enabler and a barrier in distance education. Positively, technology enables real time interaction and flexibility. However negatively, poor or lack of internet access, lack of devices, climate and other technical issues in 'remote' contexts hinder engagement. The over-reliance on screens creates frustrations and disengagement, especially for students with hearing difficulties or low digital literacy.</i>	2: Infrastructure Investment 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability 4: Reliable Internet Access 5: Device Accessibility 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR

		17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.
Virtual Learning Hinders Motivation, Wellbeing and Creates a Cultural Disconnect	<i>Distance education has a lack of face-to-face interaction and there is an absence of contextualised learning which reduces engagement. Building trust and relationships is difficult in virtual settings. Students can struggle with wellbeing and motivation. Cultural disconnect is high when learning online.</i>	1: Local Governance 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 10: Local Teacher Training Support 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education. 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.
Limited Family Involvement and Lack of Consultation Reduce the Cultural Alignment	<i>There is limited family involvement and support for families and the wider community in distance education. An absence of consultation with communities about aspirations for education was also a key theme. Overall, distance education models are individualistic, which conflicts with collective cultural societal values.</i>	1: Local Governance 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 10: Local Teacher Training Support 11: Staffing Innovation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education.
High Staff Turnover and Insufficient Cultural Training for Educators' Impact Program Quality	<i>Staffing in 'remote' contexts has a very high turnover. There is a difficulty in attracting and retaining culturally appropriate teachers. There is a lack of training for staff in culturally responsive pedagogy. A key challenge is providing on the ground support due to lack of funding and logistical constraints.</i>	1: Local Governance 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 10: Local Teacher Training Support 11: Staffing Innovation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education.

		17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.
Distance Education Curriculum Lacks Cultural Relevance – Place-Based Approaches are Needed	<i>Distance education curriculum often lacks cultural relevance and fails to integrate First Nations knowledge systems, languages and societal values. There is an overemphasise on text-based learning which disadvantages students for whom English is an additional language. There is a need for more place-based, experiential, relational and storytelling-based approaches.</i>	1: Local Governance 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 10: Local Teacher Training Support 11: Staffing Innovation 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR 14: Develop data on the number of students undertaking distance education. 15: Generate a more robust determination of Indigenous access to the AIC. 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education. 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.
Policy and Funding Favour Settler-Colonial Framed Solutions – Infrastructure Gaps Persist	<i>Funding models and policy frameworks prioritise settler-colonial solutions like boarding over community driven approaches. Inconsistent regulations and unclear definitions of ‘distance’ education create systemic confusion. Infrastructure gaps like power, water, housing, medical and transport, undermine program delivery.</i>	1: Local Governance 2: Infrastructure Investment 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability 4: Reliable Internet Access 5: Device Accessibility 7: Enrolment Policies and Procedures 8: Remove Effective Enrolment Policy in the NT 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 10: Local Teacher Training Support 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful

		international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.
Place-Based, Culturally Governed Models that Integrate Language, Land and Local Knowledge Systems Improve Engagement Outcomes	<i>Place-based, On Country education models show strong potential for success. Programs that integrate cultural knowledge, language, lore and land management improve engagement and outcomes. Governance by TOs, Elders and the wider local community is critical for sustainability and cultural safety.</i>	1: Local Governance 2: Infrastructure Investment 3: Power Supply and Overall Reliability 4: Reliable Internet Access 5: Device Accessibility 9: Localised, Culturally Appropriate Curriculum 10: Local Teacher Training Support 12: Increase employment of staff with deep local knowledge 13: Enhancing Cultural Relevance in Distance Education through Multimedia, AI and VR 16: Develop an understanding of Indigenous student success in distance education. 17: Further research be conducted specifically on successful international models of remote distance provision for Indigenous students. Contexts of particular focus should be Norway, Canada and New Zealand.

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