

Away from Base Futures

Discussion Paper

October 2018

A joint initiative of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Department of Social Services and the Department of Human Services

1. Purpose

The Commonwealth Government offers supplementary support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who learn by distance through one of two Away from Base (AFB) programs. AFB funding assists eligible students to travel to, and stay, at an education or training institution for blocks of face-to-face study and assessment or when they are required to participate in placements or field trips. Both programs generally assist with the costs of:

- travel;
- accommodation; and
- meals.

One of the AFB programs also assists higher education, training providers and students with pre-enrolment testing and assessment as well as helping students with other costs of living where a regular source of income is lost as a result of attending the course activity.

The purpose of this paper is to gather feedback on current AFB support and views on how arrangements might be improved in the future. The Government wishes to ensure that existing resources allocated to AFB are being used efficiently, effectively and appropriately and are leading to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

2. Context

Australian students can access VET student loans, the Higher Education Loans Program and other forms of assistance to reduce the up-front costs of study. Many students may also be eligible for income support payments such as Youth Allowance, Austudy or ABSTUDY Living Allowance provided they meet the eligibility criteria including studying full-time. In addition, students may be eligible for other supplementary payments including Rent Assistance, Relocation Scholarships and Student Start-up Loans. This support is designed to cover ordinary living costs for students.

Students from regional and remote areas often use income support and philanthropic and government-funded scholarships to assist them to move away from their home in order to undertake training or higher education studies in cities or larger regional centres.

However, not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are able to leave their homes to study as they may have work, caring, or cultural responsibilities at home. For these people, distance (all off-campus) or mixed-mode (combination of off-campus and on-campus) learning offers the only means of receiving a tertiary education or to build on existing qualifications. AFB assistance enables students to undertake distance or mixed-mode study and participate in the necessary academic components of their course that require travel away from their home or study location for a short period of time.

This purpose means that AFB payments are considered an 'access' payments, designed to overcome disadvantage, due to location or circumstance. This aligns with many other access payments for

people from remote and isolated areas, where the payment is not linked to income, but instead linked to circumstance (e.g. Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme). Youth Allowance (student) and Austudy students undertaking external courses can also access some level of Fares Allowance where the external course has a compulsory residential component.

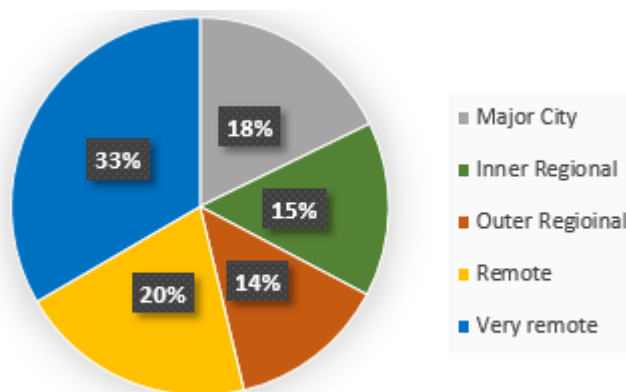
For generations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have experienced particular difficulties accessing education and therefore employment. In 2016, the employment rate of Indigenous Australians was 47 per cent compared to 72 per cent for other Australians. This represents a 25 percentage point gap which has not improved over the preceding decade. Australian governments are committed to closing the gaps that exist between the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians.

Progress is being made, but further efforts are required. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been enrolling in higher education in increasingly greater numbers, an additional 11,000 Indigenous students would have needed to be enrolled in higher education in 2016 to reach population parity. In the training sector, Indigenous student enrolments are already above population parity, but Indigenous students are under-represented in program completions at certificate level III and above – the qualifications that are more likely to lead to employment. The employment rates for Indigenous higher education graduates and other Australian higher education graduates are comparable. For those with a certificate level III or higher, the difference in employment rates is significantly reduced. Further education is a key to closing the gaps, having many positive intergenerational effects.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also over-represented in regional and remote areas, where the barriers to accessing education and training are highest. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who study by distance or mixed-mode learning, AFB support offers exposure to opportunities outside community, but also assists the take-up of local jobs as students continue to live in their community. Local jobs may include those in the National Disability Insurance Scheme, aged care, health, education, mining and land management.

Figure 1 illustrates that of students assisted by AFB administered by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) in 2016, 82 per cent had a home location in a regional or remote area.

Figure 1. Enrolments by geolocation – PM&C administered AFB, 2016



AFB programs were designed in the 1990s to assist students to undertake multiple trips between their home and the education provider. However, higher education and training delivery has changed since that time, with increasing use of technology and improved ability of staff to deliver a wider range of training in or near communities. This growth in delivery flexibility is occurring across

an increasing range of different types of courses including those more traditionally offered only on-campus (e.g. allied health qualifications).

Over the last decade, there has been a 140 per cent growth in the number of Australian students enrolling in mixed-mode higher education courses. However, the rate of Indigenous students accessing mixed-mode higher education courses grew by only half the rate of other Australians over the same period. While part of this difference can be explained by a preference for Indigenous students to access wholly externally delivered courses, the largest part of the difference is unexplained.¹ AFB support is the main form of assistance that Indigenous students use to access mixed-mode higher education courses.

While technology is leading to improved access to education, there are still large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional and remote parts of Australia with little or no access to the internet, computers and other information technology.

In 2017, Indigenous Australians were 69 per cent less likely than other Australians to have an internet connection. Even in urban areas, where access to the internet is higher, digital inclusion was seven per cent lower than the Australian average. Indigenous Australians face additional barriers around skills, affordability and access to culturally appropriate technology. The basic digital literacy skills of Indigenous Australians in urban and regional/rural areas were almost 12 percentage points lower than the national (urban and regional/rural only) average.²

In 2016, half of the Indigenous households in the remote communities of Apatula (NT) and 45 per cent in Kununurra (WA) were unable to access the internet. In 2016, 24 per cent of Indigenous households in Geraldton (WA) and 22 per cent in Port Augusta (SA) were unable to access the internet. This digital divide contrasts starkly with Melbourne where only 2.5 per cent of Indigenous households were unable to access the internet.³ Issues with access to technology for students in regional and remote areas is another reason why AFB support continues to be an important form of assistance for Indigenous Australians in these areas.

We need to look forward to the next 10 years and beyond and consider how an improved distance education support framework can ensure Indigenous Australians acquire the skills required for future jobs and leadership positions in their communities and elsewhere.

Government support for distance education has to be easy for both students and providers to navigate and manage. We also need to assure Government and taxpayers that we are utilising existing funding in the most efficient way possible so those that need help the most can receive this support.

¹ Unpublished data received from Department of Education and Training
22 August 2018 – Reference 18-452

² Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, C, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Tucker, J & Rennie, E, 2017, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra – Accessed 03.09.18

<https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Australian-Digital-Inclusion-Index-2017.pdf>

³ 2017 P Radoll and B Hunter Dynamics of the Digital Divide - Accessed 20.08.18

http://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/Working_Paper_120_2017_1.pdf

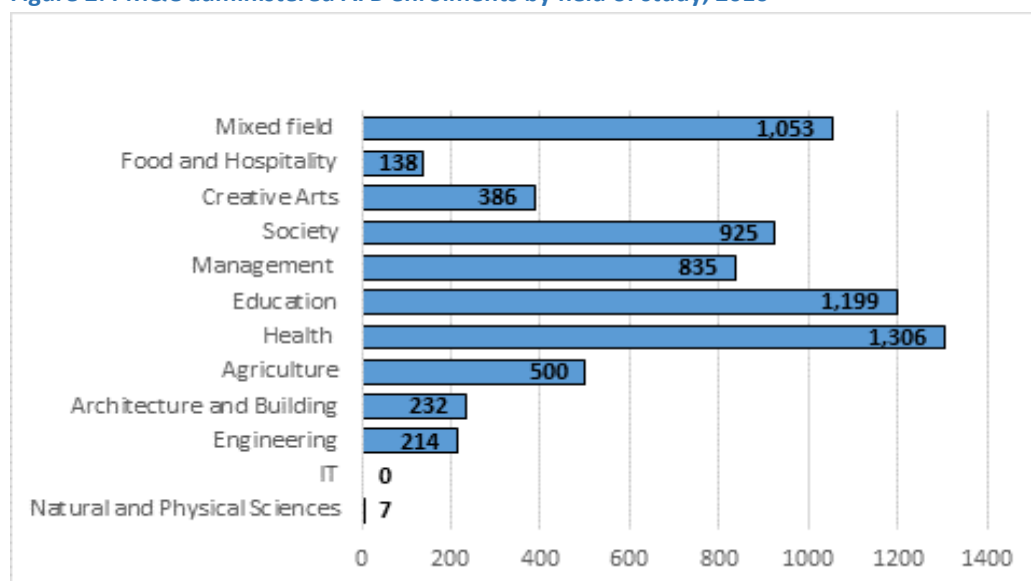
3. Two Away From Base Programs

AFB programs were once administered as a single program, but split two decades ago to offer flexibility to providers to arrange travel on behalf of their students. Over time, this flexibility has become available under both programs. Since the programs separated, there has been no thorough investigation as to whether two separate programs continue to offer eligible students the most effective assistance.

The two AFB programs currently offered by the Commonwealth are:

- ABSTUDY AFB assistance, administered by the Department of Human Services (DHS) on behalf of the Department of Social Security (DSS), is demand-driven and supports students participating in secondary courses, Vocational Education and Training (VET - including for profit providers), 'VET in schools' and higher education. ABSTUDY AFB is funded under the *Student Assistance Act 1973*, with the DSS having policy responsibility. Payments are based on submissions of cost estimates or reimbursement of cost by students or providers, generally across an academic year, semester or term. In 2017, there were 25 providers, who assisted hundreds of students at a cost of approximately \$4.4 million.
- PM&C's AFB assistance is offered under PM&C's Indigenous Advancement Strategy. PM&C's AFB program is a capped financial year allocation, payable to eligible not-for-profit training providers and universities through an agreement that spans an academic year. Payments are made to providers based on an average funding rate per full-time equivalent student. In 2017, there were 28 providers, who assisted 6,800 students at a cost of approximately \$26 million. Around 82 per cent of students assisted are from regional or remote areas. More than 8,500 of assisted students graduated between 2013 and 2016, receiving qualifications from Certificate I up to Masters Degrees. More than 3,000 of those were at Certificate III and IV levels and almost 650 at Bachelor Degree and above. Figure 2 below disaggregates enrolments by field of study.

Figure 2: PM&C administered AFB enrolments by field of study, 2016



Students must be eligible for ABSTUDY to access AFB payments under either program. Students can be eligible for AFB assistance under one program even if they are ineligible under the other program. Further detail of the two programs is provided at [Attachment A](#) to this discussion paper.

4. Scope

The Commonwealth Government has been investing in measures to improve access to education for students in regional and remote areas for more than 20 years. AFB is one part of the Commonwealth's support for these students.

However, the two current AFB programs have evolved separately over the last 20 years. The Commonwealth needs to consider whether current AFB arrangements are the most efficient and effective way of supporting Indigenous students studying mixed-mode tertiary education courses. This includes considering whether the two program model might benefit from clearer delineation or perhaps some form of consolidation. This will establish a foundation to consider how AFB could better interact with other support available to eligible students into the future. It will also enable Government to better consider the development of quality standards across AFB education delivery consistent with recommendations 15 and 16 of the 2012 *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*.

As this is a complex process, this review will be undertaken through a phased approach, with the Commonwealth Government working closely with providers, students, governments and industry across the different phases.

This discussion paper seeks to engage with those that use and administer AFB support, with the aim of considering the two program model currently in place. It is designed to seek feedback on activities currently funded through AFB programs. While the Commonwealth is interested in interactions with other forms of assistance, the review is initially considering how AFB arrangements can be improved, rather than how other programs can be improved. Given the complexity of AFB, the tables below offer some guidance on what is considered in-scope and out of scope in this phase of the review.

PM&C AFB assistance

Through PM&C, AFB assistance is provided as a part of the AFB for Mixed-Mode Delivery Program under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

In scope	Out of scope
Away from Base activities established under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding provided through the Indigenous Student Success Program; Vocational Training and Employment Centres (VTEC) funding and Tailored Employment Assistance funding; and Other Indigenous Advancement Strategy funding including funding provided to organisations who support students who live away from home to study (such as scholarships or the former Indigenous Youth Mobility Program).

ABSTUDY AFB assistance

Through DHS, AFB assistance is provided as part of the ABSTUDY Scheme. Certain ABSTUDY payments may be accessed for participation in AFB activities, as well as by other students who need to live away from home to study. The following table shows the ABSTUDY AFB assistance that is in-scope compared to other ABSTUDY assistance that is out of scope of the review.

In scope	Out of scope
Fares Allowance to cover the cost of travel either for the student or the education provider, where they have been approved to participate in an AFB activity.	Fares Allowance for ABSTUDY students who need to travel away from home to attend study (except for travel to participate in AFB activity).
Meals and accommodation costs, paid as either residential expenses or travel allowance. May be paid to the student, the education provider or the driver/pilot.	Costs associated with overnight accommodation (including meals and accommodation costs and travel allowance), approved under Fares Allowance entitlement for students who need to travel away from home to attend study. (except where these costs are approved for student participating in AFB activity)
Non-means tested Living Allowance, where student qualifies for AFB activity.	Means tested Living Allowance for students eligible for Schooling B Award, Tertiary Award, and Masters/Doctorate Award.
Incidentals Allowance to undertake a course where funding for AFB activity is otherwise covered under PM&C AFB program.	Incidentals Allowance for non-AFB activity.
Administrative and audit costs, paid as bulk funding submissions.	<p>All other ABSTUDY assistance that is provided to students living away from home to study, but who are not participating in an AFB activity, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School Fees Allowance School Term Allowance Rent Assistance Remote Area Allowance ABSTUDY Pensioner Education Supplement Additional Incidentals Allowance

5. Discussion

In this section of the discussion paper, key considerations have been highlighted for either consolidating or clarifying responsibilities for AFB support in the future. A response template has been developed and accompanies this discussion paper to give you an opportunity to provide specific advice or feedback to the Commonwealth. If you think some important issues have been missed, a section has been included in the response template so you can advise the Commonwealth of these issues. Where appropriate, please include your suggested solution to any of the issues that you raise here so this can be considered in the review.

A. Importance of AFB assistance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

The context section of this discussion paper outlined some of the issues AFB seeks to address. Similarly, the 2012 *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* noted that “Regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be prevented from accessing higher education by geographical, academic, family and cultural factors. They have special logistical, academic and pastoral care requirements” (p140). The Review went on to identify key challenges like “accommodating the family responsibilities and limited capacity to travel of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students [and].... Dealing with inadequate computer infrastructure, low levels of computer literacy and lack of English language proficiency”.

AFB was designed over two decades ago, but higher education and training delivery has changed significantly since then. State and territory governments have a range of strategies in place to enable access to training. While there is limited information on the uptake of mixed-mode training by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, growth in the take up of mixed-mode higher education by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has not kept pace with the general population.

Please comment on the relevance or otherwise of AFB assistance and its components to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now and into the future. What are the gaps in State, Territory and university support to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to access distance education and training? Are there other ways than AFB to address these gaps?

B. Administration of AFB

The current two program model allows flexibility for large providers to arrange travel for their students while small providers and individuals can utilise the services of QBT to arrange travel through DHS. This comes with different administration requirements.

Requirements of PM&C’s AFB sees providers:

- seek ABSTUDY course approval (directly through ABSTUDY) and provide approval documents to PM&C;
- complete two annual checks of student enrolments;
- complete an annual expenditure report;
- complete an annual outcomes report detailing student completions and academic achievement;
- keep records of all student ABSTUDY eligibility documentation; and
- submit ongoing requests to the Department for approval of special circumstances for reverse block, field trips, practical placements and other activities.

In recognition of providers meeting the above reporting expectations and organising travel, meals and accommodation for students, they are able to use up to 10 per cent of their annual entitlement on administration costs.

PM&C's AFB offers two advance payments with acquittal and rollover arrangements. This makes government administration complicated, with the true annual costs of the program difficult to report. However, it ensures providers have sufficient funds to arrange travel in a way that balances economies of scale and the needs of individual students.

Requirements of ABSTUDY AFB sees providers:

- seek ABSTUDY course approval (directly through ABSTUDY);
- complete an annual bulk application form for advance payment or reimbursement;
- complete an annual financial reconciliation of funding spent;
- assist students where necessary to complete ABSTUDY eligibility documentation;
- complete ongoing applications and reconciliations throughout the year for individual students or groups of students in the same courses (not included in bulk application); and
- liaise with DHS in relation to student travel, meals and accommodation booked through DHS by QBT travel consultants.

In recognition of the administration and audit costs for acquittal of bulk payments, total costs paid to providers are limited to a maximum of \$4,851 per provider per year.

ABSTUDY AFB offers both advances to certain providers and reimbursements to either students or providers. Advances are made on a semester or term basis and require students in each course to be identified along with estimates of reasonable costs. These advances are then acquitted.

Under the reimbursement model, students or education providers can cover the costs of students participating in the activity and seek reimbursement of reasonable eligible costs from DHS. Government then reports on the expenditure associated with the program each year.

However, the two program model can create confusion for students and providers. It can mean that providers in a similar education "market" may receive different forms of assistance for their students. For the Commonwealth, costly controls are required to ensure students don't access both forms of assistance at once. In addition, changes to one program can have consequences on the other AFB program. For example, if a group of students are not supported under PM&C's AFB, these students may become eligible for ABSTUDY AFB.

Does the two program model provide the best outcomes for students, or are there alternatives you believe would improve administration of AFB? If you are suggesting alternative models, please provide information on the preferred process for implementing the model.

Consider the time and resources spent on administering travel arrangements and undertaking reporting as well as the funds providers receive for this work. If your institution accesses both AFB programs, how does the administration and compliance requirements compare? Also consider whether special arrangements allowing provider payments should continue and if so, whether reimbursement, advance payment or both options should remain available to providers.

C. Individual students

For Youth Allowance, Austudy and other ABSTUDY tertiary students that are eligible for Fares Allowance, it is normal practice for the students to be responsible for booking their own travel and seeking reimbursement from DHS.

ABSTUDY AFB allows eligible individual students to contact DHS directly to arrange travel. DHS contract a travel agent (currently QBT) to book the travel so students don't need to arrange what can be very complicated itineraries. The link to DHS means individuals can discuss other support they may also be entitled to receive.

PM&C's AFB does not allow individual students to apply directly to PM&C for AFB support. Students must apply through an eligible not-for-profit higher education or VET provider, who arrange the travel, meals and accommodation on their behalf.

Should individual students be able to claim AFB support, or should they be required to apply through a provider? Consider the advantages and disadvantages of a central travel agent organising travel compared to providers booking student and staff travel. Should both options be available in the future? Offer comments in support of your position and where relevant, suggestions on how any improved arrangement might be implemented.

D. Targeting and Prioritising AFB

AFB assistance is mainly available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking an eligible course with particular distance learning requirements. Both programs are designed in different ways, to ensure they are sustainable and can continue to help those most in need. For example, PM&C's AFB has a capped per student funding amount each year (\$6,283 per full-time equivalent student in 2017). For most students, ABSTUDY AFB is limited by the number of return trips and number of days for which residential costs may be paid each year. A discussion of the targeting and prioritisation of AFB is included on the following pages.

We would value your consideration on the way AFB resources are prioritised, what is working and not working and any suggestions for what might work better to meet student need, noting current resources available across both AFB programs was around \$30 million in 2017.

What is the fairest way of targeting and prioritising existing AFB resources? Please comment on how your preferred approach might be implemented.

Courses

There are different rules regarding the eligibility for student payments for courses at different levels. For Youth Allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY:

- All Certificate I to Certificate IV level courses are approved for student payments, provided they are approved by the relevant accrediting authority;
- Vocational education and training courses at diploma level and above are only approved for student payments if both the course and the provider are approved for VET Student Loans (VSL);
 - This directs student payments to VET courses that have a high national priority, meet industry needs, contribute to addressing skills shortages and align with strong employment outcomes;

- Bachelor degrees, graduate certificates, graduate diplomas and similar are approved for student payments, provided that the higher education provider is approved for the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP);
- Masters by coursework degrees are only eligible for Youth Allowance and Austudy if the Minister for Social Services has listed them on the *Student Assistance (Education Institutions and Courses) Determination* (note all masters by coursework degrees are eligible for ABSTUDY); and
- Higher degree by research courses are only eligible for ABSTUDY, not for other student payments.

Students can receive ABSTUDY for undertaking Indigenous special courses of study, where the courses would not otherwise be eligible for student payments. Indigenous special courses are courses developed with content designed specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

However, across the two AFB programs, the level of courses for which assistance can be provided differs. PM&C's AFB supports students across Australian Qualifications Framework Certificate I to Masters Degree by Coursework (no support for higher degrees by research). ABSTUDY AFB supports students from secondary school through to Doctorate Degree. However, there are financial limits on students enrolled in Masters and Doctorate Degrees (assistance not to exceed \$2,080 per year).

The full range of eligible courses under ABSTUDY are available through both AFB programs, subject to the course meeting the respective distance learning requirements of each program. For VET courses below diploma level and for university delivered courses (with the exception of study by research) there are generally no exceptions. For VET courses at Diploma level or above, student payments are only eligible where both the course, and the provider, are approved for VSL. The approved course list for VSL has been designed with the objective of aligning course eligibility to areas of high national priority, addressing skills shortages and industry needs and aligning with strong employment outcomes. To be eligible for VSL, a course must be current and on at least two state or territory skills needs lists; or science, technology, engineering, agriculture or mathematics related; or tied to licencing requirements for a particular occupation. In addition, section 11.5.2 of the ABSTUDY policy manual makes provision for Indigenous special courses of study to be eligible courses for ABSTUDY purposes.

The full range of approved courses under ABSTUDY are available through both AFB programs, subject to the course meeting the respective eligibility requirements of each program.

Some Certificate level I and II courses can offer a way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to start a post-school qualification. While these courses might not result in a direct pathway into employment, they can offer the foundations for higher level qualifications. However, where courses target foundations skills, face to face learning is sometimes the more effective delivery mode rather than the distance learning mode supported through AFB.

[Student home locations](#)

Under both AFB programs, assistance is available to eligible Indigenous students throughout the country. There are no firm rules regarding the distance a student must be away from the provider under PM&C's AFB, but under ABSTUDY AFB one or more of the following criteria must be met:

- (a) on-campus residence during residential school or assessment program is compulsory; or
- (b) the one way travel time (by public transport) between home and location of campus/activity is 90 minutes or more;

- (c) there are special access issues that make travel difficult (e.g. impassable roads); or
- (d) the distance between home and location of campus/activity is 56 kilometres or more; or
- (e) the distance between home and location of campus/activity is 16 kilometres or more and distance between home and nearest transport service is 4.5 kilometres or more.

In 2016, 82 per cent of students assisted by PM&C's AFB were from regional and remote communities. Data indicates that Indigenous students in these areas have, on average, greater education and employment disadvantage and poorer access to training and higher education.

However, 18 per cent of students assisted by PM&C's AFB were from major cities. Often relevant courses, which are highly specialised and specific, are only offered in one or two locations. For example the Diploma of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Advocacy is a specialised course designed to develop practical skills and knowledge necessary to address the unique place of Indigenous Australians within the legal system. Only two providers offer this course, one in the Gold Coast, the other in Sydney.

AFB support helps to ensure that Indigenous students are able to undertake the necessary components of approved specialised courses that require travel away from home for a period of time, no matter whether students live in regional, remote or metropolitan locations to complete mixed-mode studies.

Providers

PM&C's AFB only supports not-for-profit providers, with five or more AFB students requiring assistance. In 2017 there were 28 providers that received a share in approximately \$26 million to support Indigenous students to attend AFB activities. These not-for-profit providers ranged from government-funded training providers (such as TAFEs), universities and a variety of community-run training organisations such as Indigenous health organisations.

In 2017, ABSTUDY AFB supported 25 providers that, in total, received approximately \$4.4 million to assist Indigenous AFB students. These providers included government-funded training providers (such as TAFEs), universities, community-run training providers and for-profit training companies.

However, some Indigenous-specific providers are not eligible for VET Student Loans which can restrict the courses eligible through ABSTUDY and therefore AFB.

Under the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development, State and Territory governments have committed to "oversee the expenditure of public funds for, and the delivery of, training within states and territories". In addition to the commitments made by State and Territory governments, the Commonwealth contributes \$1.5 billion each year to support training in Australia. Improvements in education and training delivery have meant "reverse block" (i.e. educators travelling to groups of students) arrangements are being used increasingly as a more efficient delivery method. Despite State responsibility for training delivery, Commonwealth-funded AFB has been increasingly funding trainers to travel to communities through "reverse block" arrangements as this can reduce the costs of student travel under AFB arrangements.

Per student allocations

Under PM&C's AFB, in 2017 an average of \$6,283 per full-time student per year was available to meet the travel, accommodation, meals and administration costs of eligible students. A pro-rata of this amount was available for part-year or part-time load students. For the vast majority of students in ABSTUDY AFB, there is no financial cap. However, a cap of \$2,080 per year applies to eligible

students undertaking Masters and Doctorate Degrees accessing ABSTUDY AFB. Both caps are flat rates and there is no distinction made regarding where students are travelling from or to.

Number of trips and days of accommodation

For most eligible students accessing ABSTUDY AFB, students can receive assistance with the full reasonable travel costs for up to six return trips each year for students doing courses longer than one semester, with less trips available to students doing shorter courses. Similarly, up to 40 days of accommodation can be accessed for full-year students doing courses longer than one semester, with a lesser allowance of days accessible for part-year students doing shorter courses.

Co-contributions

Most students already contribute towards their own study costs. However, a person's capacity to contribute may be assessed to determine the amount of additional government assistance they are eligible to receive through programs such as Youth Allowance and Austudy. While these assessments can ensure there are more funds for those less able to contribute, they are very costly to administer and difficult to monitor and respond to changes in circumstances.

For students on Youth Allowance and Austudy, Fares Allowance covers the full reasonable cost of travel. Depending on the student's actual method of travel, this may or may not be the actual costs incurred by the students. As each student needs to be on either Youth Allowance or Austudy to access Fares Allowance, the student's capacity to contribute has already been considered in this eligibility.

There is currently no expectation on AFB recipients under either program to make a financial contribution to the reasonable costs of travel, accommodation and meals for eligible activities.

Employer-sponsored education and training

Employers offer professional development, education and training to staff through workplace arrangements. Ordinarily, where students receive study assistance from their employers the students are not eligible for AFB assistance, as this would shift the cost from employers to taxpayers. In addition, where the study is related to a person's work, the out of pocket costs may be tax deductible. However, currently, an exemption is available for registered charities and registered Indigenous Corporations. This is in recognition of the significant cost of travel and accommodation associated with distance education – in particular for employers in remote areas.

Type of costs covered

Pre-enrolment testing and assessment costs are covered by ABSTUDY AFB, but not PM&C's AFB.

Both Away from Base programs support students to participate in field trips, practical or professional placements and on-campus residential schools.

Both AFB programs currently include assistance for travel, accommodation and meals for students or for eligible teachers and lecturers who travel to community in lieu of groups of students travelling to attend residential blocks of study (Reverse Block). While travel costs can be a barrier for students, they are not always a barrier to larger government-funded education and training providers who send staff to communities to train groups of students.

While travel and accommodation away from home can present significant financial barriers, meals are costs students would incur at home or away from home. Under both programs, reasonable accommodation is booked via a twin share arrangement unless there are medical or cultural reasons preventing this.

No support is available for students to participate in international AFB activities.

6. Next Steps

We are planning teleconferences with providers and other key stakeholders during October 2018 to complement this discussion paper. However, we would appreciate written comments on the template that accompanies this discussion paper by Friday **2 November 2018** sent to ITPT@pmc.gov.au.

The participating agencies will consider your comments and provide an overview of the comments we receive on the following website:

<https://www.pmc.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/education/away-base-mixed-mode-program-afb>

While your submission will not be made public, participating agencies are covered by Freedom of Information requirements and Parliamentary scrutiny. Please do not include personal or private information in your response and let us know about any submission you wish to keep confidential, noting our legislative and Parliamentary obligations.

Any changes to AFB will need to be considered by Government before they can be implemented. We will consult providers on guidelines and next steps if Government does agree to make changes to AFB arrangements in the future.

7. Contacts

Please provide all responses to this discussion paper and requests for teleconferences to ITPT@pmc.gov.au

Summary of the two current AFB models being delivered by PM&C and DHS in 2018

	Current PM&C AFB program	Current DHS ABSTUDY AFB program
Provider agreements	Yes	No
Funding	EPUC x FTE = annual entitlement Providers have flexibility to use their annual entitlement on any eligible student activity in accordance with the grant agreement and program guidelines.	Maximum of six trips and 40 days residential per year for full-year students. Less for students studying for less than the full-year. See table A below
Administration funds	Yes up to 10 per cent of entitlement	Maximum of \$4,851 per provider per year
For-profit providers	No	Yes
Not-for-profit providers	Yes	Yes
Universities	Yes, Table A Universities only	Yes
Registered Training Organisations (VET)	Yes, but only not-for-profit providers	Yes
School distance education providers	No	Yes
Up-front payments based on estimates	Yes	Yes
Reimbursements	No, except for special approved circumstances of self-drive	Yes
Individuals	No	Yes
Pre-enrolment testing and assessment	No	Yes
Study related assessment for eligible enrolled students	Yes, during approved blocks of study	Yes
Field trips	Yes	Yes
Placements	Yes	Yes
Reverse Block	Yes	Yes
Minimum face to face requirements reduced if using IT	Yes	Yes
Part-time	Yes	Yes

	Current PM&C AFB program	Current DHS ABSTUDY AFB program
Responsibility for organising travel, meals and accommodation	Providers	Providers or QBT
Reporting – financial acquittal	Yes	Yes
Reporting – student achievement and completions	Yes	No
Post-graduate courses	Yes, for Masters by coursework only. No for Masters by research and PhD students.	Yes, with a maximum \$2,080 per year ABSTUDY provides AFB for all eligible masters by coursework, masters by research and doctorate students.
Undergraduate courses	Yes	Yes
Statement of Attainment, Certificate I, II, III, IV and Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses	Yes	Yes
Preparatory courses	Yes for those delivered by eligible AFB providers	Yes - Bridging/preparatory courses for entry into VET tertiary or higher education courses undertaking residential schools
ABSTUDY eligibility required to receive AFB assistance	Yes	Yes
Secondary courses	No	Yes Distance education school students undertaking residential schools.
Program Guidelines	IAS Guidelines https://www.PM&C.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/indigenous-advancement-strategy-grant-guidelines-march-2016	ABSTUDY Policy Manual http://guides.dss.gov.au/abstudy-policy-manual

TABLE A - Limits for the ABSTUDY AFB program

Student-type	Study duration	Travel	Accommodation
Full and part-time tertiary and secondary students	Two semesters	Up to 6 return trips	Up to 40 days of residentials (and other AFB activities for tertiary students)
Full and part-time tertiary and secondary students	One semester	Up to 4 return trips	Up to 30 days of residentials
Full and part-time tertiary and secondary students	12-16 weeks	Up to 3 return trips	Up to 20 days of residentials
Full and part-time tertiary and secondary students	Less than 12 weeks	Up to 2 return trips	Up to 10 days of residential (provided that this does not exceed 50 per cent of the course length)
Full and part-time Masters and Doctorate students		Maximum of \$2,080 in one year	