Submission to the

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into the Education of Students in Remote and Complex Environments

March 2020

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Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) welcomes the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry in to Education in Remote and Complex Environments, conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. The AEU represents more than 189,000 members including principals, teachers and allied educators working in government schools, TAFE institutes, Corrections Education, Adult Migrant Education Services, and early childhood education centres across Australia.

In the report *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools,* David Gonski states:

> *Australia can and should aspire to provide every school student with a world-leading education. This is an ambitious but achievable goal, given Australia's prosperity and our educational heritage. It is also a critical goal as work becomes more highly skilled, and education increasingly determines lifetime opportunity.*

The AEU has a longstanding strong commitment to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, including those in remote and very remotes areas and particularly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and has made a number of submissions to various enquiries and reviews in recent years on the changes needed to improve resourcing, staff attraction and retention and improved pathways and outcomes for students in remote and rural environments. These submissions include the House of Representatives Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students (2015), the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools (2017), the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (2017) and the National Review of Teacher Registration (2018), the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession (2018) and the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training (2019).

This submission will build upon the evidence presented in those previous submissions and will include a particular focus on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote and complex environments. This submission draws on research and presents insights from AEU members working in remote areas to address some of the systemic issues that impact on student achievement in remote areas for the consideration of the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. In this submission the AEU argues that a significant needs-based long-term investment of Commonwealth resources in to government schools, preschools and TAFE institutes, is required to address the systemic barriers faced by students living in remote areas.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data shows that 81% of students living in remote or very remote areas attend government schools[1], and data form the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) shows that 84% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attend government schools, compared to 65% of non-indigenous students.[2]

The recent Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education[3] (IRRRE) (Halsey 2018) found that, on all measures, students living in regional, rural and remote areas 'have in the main lagged behind urban students for decades'; that there is 'a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures is aggregated.'

The IRRRE further found that, whilst there is already a lot of activity between the federal, state and territory governments to ensure educational 'access and successful transitions'[3] for people living in remote areas:

> *Much remains to be done to bridge the gap between the achievements and opportunities of RRR students and those most commonly associated with their urban counterparts.*

Despite decades of policies and programs designed to improve outcomes for those living in remote areas, governments are yet to address the number of interrelated issues which impact upon the outcomes of those residing in remote locations in any long-term systemic way. As the IRRRE states:

> *the contexts, factors, relationships and resources that impact on learning and opportunities don't exist as discrete entities. Their interactions influence the learning, growth and nurturing of students from their early years through to school graduation and beyond.*[4]

A key priority recommended by the IRRRE is the need to establish a national focus on 'RRR education, training and research'. Whilst the AEU broadly concurs with this recommendation, we continue to assert our primary argument that addressing achievement gaps is resource-intensive, and cannot be achieved in a political environment where actions by Federal, State and Territory governments undermine and diminish their responsibility for the provision of long-term sustainable public services.

The AEU has long argued that in order to ameliorate living conditions caused primarily by poverty, better address the challenges of remote education provision, and improve educational outcomes for students in remote communities, the federal government (and indeed, state and territory governments) must increase and stabilise support for government schools and public education institutions located in remote areas. This support must take account of the levels of compound disadvantage experienced by many children and young people living in remote communities and must ensure that sufficient resources are provided,

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[1] Numbers and proportions of students in ABS remoteness categories by school sector, 2016 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017
[2] ACARA data portal, retrieved from https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal/student-numbers
[3]Halsey, J. *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education – Final Report,* 2018, p.8.

by all levels of government, to public education to help lessen the impact of these compound disadvantages.

Meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote areas

The primary focus of this submission is on the nature and level of government education system responsiveness (or lack thereof) to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and communities, who reside in remote areas. The AEU has consistently argued that meeting the aspirations and diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities living in remote and very remote locations, requires fully equipped and resourced public education facilities in order to expand educational opportunities and models of delivery.

In 2016, approximately 120,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (18% of the total population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) lived in remote and very remote Australia[7]. Data from the 2016 Census shows that residing in a remote area impacts on all dimensions of social and economic well-being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including early development indicators, educational outcomes, employment outcomes, economic outcomes and life expectancy.[8] For the tenth time in as many years, the Prime Minister's 2020 Report to Parliament on Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (CTG 2020) reinforced this message, stating that:

> *... the most recent data against each of the seven targets… (shows) how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to experience disparity with non-Indigenous people in important areas of their lives. (p.9)* [9]

The Closing The Gap (CTG) 2020 report is a salient reminder of how much work as a nation we all have to do, because again, for the tenth time in a decade, the message is repeated:

> *The disparity is even greater for people living in remote areas.*[10]

As outlined above and argued further in this submission, inadequate resourcing of public pre-schools, schools and TAFE colleges contributes to a lack of policy and program stability in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live in remote areas and further exacerbates existing disparities.

The IRRRE Report found that whilst rigorous and transparent processes for funding schools matched with appropriate accountability are essential (and that) funding for education is not a 'bottomless pit':

> *visits to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools and discussions with elders, leaders, teachers, parents and students show there is still work to be done to ensure the basis for resourcing remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools is authentically informed by culture and language, ceremonial obligations and the Australian curriculum.'* (p.77)

The importance of appropriate resourcing for remote education

Recent research by the Gonski Institute[11] highlights the importance of appropriate resourcing by estimating the cost to Australia's economy of the disparity in educational outcomes between students living in remote communities and those in urban centres. The report argues that there are a range of long-term social, human development and economic benefits to be gained if outcomes for students living in regional, rural and remote areas were improved, and that "compared to some proposals for regional development, the education gap is particularly large and offers a high return on investment". Therefore increased resourcing should be seen by the federal government as an investment in the future of Australia, rather than merely a cost.

The Gonski Institute estimates that closing the achievement gap between students in urban areas and those living in regional, rural and remote communities could add a potential $56 billion to Australia's GDP. Similarly, the IRRRE found that the financial cost of inaction "far exceed(s) that of providing a 'top quality' education and there are major social implications and costs as well."[12]

The gaps in outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are primarily driven by the gaps in systems. Unstable, under-funded and/or poorly targeted education funding models result in lack of stability in the system as a whole and impact on the roll out of policies, programs and accountability frameworks, which in turn impact on student access and outcomes.

A child's journey through early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational education in remote communities

It is crucial to the wellbeing of all communities, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in regional and remote Australia that the public education system in all states and territories provides access to quality, culturally appropriate early childhood, school, vocational and tertiary education and strives for equitable outcomes for all students.

Preschool

The AEU has long campaigned for universal free provision of early childhood education for all three and four year old children, with priority access to two years of high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education for all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

This position is informed by a strong body of national and international evidence on the importance of quality programs in the early childhood years to a child's social and educational development, with flow-on benefits to better health, education and employment outcomes later in life, and the long-term disadvantage for children without access to quality early childhood programs. In addition to the significant short and long term individual benefits for children, and for families, the research establishes that there are long-term cost benefits associated with investment in the provision of universal access to quality ECE which will pay significant national dividends in the future.

We would urge the Inquiry to take note of the OECD's strong focus on the importance of quality early childhood education programs in mitigating social inequalities and promoting better student outcomes overall, but particularly for students who come from a disadvantaged background. The 2019 OECD Education at a Glance report shows that sustained public funding is critical for supporting the growth and quality of early childhood education programmes. It also shows that from 2010-2017 Australia's enrolment rate, measured according to OECD standards, improved from 74% to 84% of 3-5 year olds, but still lags behind the OECD average of 87% which has improved from 82% since 2010. Only 67% of three year olds are enrolled in ECE in Australia, far behind the OECD average of 79%. Only 86% of four year olds are enrolled in ECE in Australia, again lower than the OECD average of 88%.[4]

The Lifting our Game 2017 report[5] stated that:

> *Quality early childhood education and care is best considered as an investment, not a cost. Investment in early childhood education provides a strong return, with a variety of studies indicating benefits of 2-4 times the costs. Significant fiscal benefits flow to both the Commonwealth and state and territory governments.*

> *These benefits are greater – often substantially so – for programs targeted at vulnerable or disadvantaged children. Support for these children is vital – children who start school behind their peers stay behind. Quality early childhood education can help stop this from happening, and break the cycle of disadvantage.*

It is for these reason that the serious issues of inequality between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians revealed by the Closing the Gap (CTG) 2020 report should be of the utmost concern to this Inquiry. The most concerning example of this lack of commitment is the decline in the achievement of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) enrolment target. The target of having 95% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four-year-old children enrolled in ECE by 2025 was achieved in 2017 yet fell to only 86.4% in 2018. This compares with the 91.3% enrolment rate for other children. These falling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECE enrolment rates are of particular concern, as preschool is such a fundamental foundation for future achievement.

A comprehensive literature review and quantitative analysis by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) of preschool participation among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children shows that the value of preschool education is supported by many Australian and overseas studies which identify a range of specific preschool attendance benefits. Improved language, literacy, numeracy, cognitive and problem-solving skills at the start of formal schooling are just some of the established individual gains identified by the study. As children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than those who are not disadvantaged to reap the educational benefits, it is vitally important that accessible and high quality preschool is available to children living in remote Australia, and particularly that it is

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[4]OECD, *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, 2019, retrieved from https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2019_f8d7880d-en#page3
[5] Pascoe, S & Brennan, D, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions,* 2017, p.6.

available to those children living with multiple compound disadvantages, including one or more of remoteness, poverty, disability and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status.

Furthermore, the AIFS review confirms higher receptive vocabulary and school-readiness capacities among children who participated in preschool, but who have a set of compound disadvantage factors related to lower participation. The review also found that while this group gained the most from preschool participation, "Children from households with lower maternal education; with more financial stress; with more children in the household; living in a less advantaged neighbourhood; who speak a language other than English; and who have a mother with higher levels of psychological distress or poorer parenting behaviour were less likely to be enrolled."[6]

The study also makes the very pertinent point that for the 78% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families living in urban and regional areas engagement with preschool occurs within social, cultural and physical environments that are not necessarily based in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures, whereas children in remote areas, preschool will take place in an environment intrinsically linked to culture.[7]

The National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education 2018 and 2019 supports universal access to, and improved participation of children in quality early childhood education in the year before full-time school, with a focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

This agreement between the Commonwealth and State and Territory has a very clear purpose in improving the educational outcomes for all children, but especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through their engagement with quality early childhood education programmes.

The AEU supports the following objectives and outcomes from the agreement.

> *Objectives:*
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> *12. The objective of this Agreement is to facilitate children's early learning and development and transition to school, by maintaining universal access to, and improving participation in, affordable, quality early childhood education programs for all children.*
>
> *13. This objective is to be achieved through universal access to quality early childhood education programs for all children enrolled in the year before full-time school for 600 hours per year, delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher who meets NQF requirements, and with a focus on participation by Indigenous and vulnerable and disadvantaged children, regardless of the setting in which programs are delivered.*

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6 Hewitt, B, & Walter, M, *Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia,* Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014, retrieved from https://aifs.gov.au/publications/family-matters/issue-95/preschool-participation-among-indigenous-children-australia

[7] *Ibid.*

14. Children living in remote Indigenous communities remain a focus for universal access.

Outcomes:

15. This Agreement will facilitate achievement of the following outcomes:

(a)all children, including vulnerable and disadvantaged children, have access to, and participate in, an affordable, quality early childhood education program

(b)all Indigenous children have access to, and participate in, an affordable, quality early childhood education program; and

(c)all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education

AEU Recommendations:

That the Commonwealth Government must:

- Guarantee permanent, adequate funding for Universal Access to 600 hours per year of equality early childhood education program in the year before school.
- Promote and support full participation by three- and four-year-olds in quality early childhood education programs, in particular to maximise participation by vulnerable or disadvantaged children.
- Agree to a new national early childhood education and care workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalisation of the workforce, thereby improving service quality and children's outcomes
- Give priority attention to achieving the Closing the Gap target of 95% Indigenous enrolment in preschool education across all regions of Australia
- Give priority attention to the advocacy and implementation of best practice ECE measures shown to be effective in maximising enrolments and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

Schools

In our Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2015 Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, the AEU asserted:

> *Meeting the needs of Indigenous communities in education) is resource-intensive, and cannot be achieved in a political environment where actions by Federal, State and Territory Governments undermine and diminish their responsibility for the provision of long-term sustainable public services. Equity for disadvantaged students cannot be achieved unless a high priority is given to addressing the achievement gaps which confront Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.[8]*

This submission outlined a range of initiatives and programs that have demonstrated positive results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, Northern Territory schools funded under the National Partnership Agreement on Low SES School Communities saw funded primary schools make greater literacy and numeracy gains than unfunded schools.[9] The 2015 submission also contains accounts of schools which have successfully invested extra funding gained under the National Education Reform Agreements (NERA) arrangements to make tangible improvements to outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.[10]

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[8] Australian Education Union (2015), *Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students*, 2015, pp.4–5.

[9] *Ibid,* p.10

[10] *Ibid,* p.11

Geographic location and socioeconomic stratification are also important factors when considering the Commonwealth Government's obligations to appropriately resource schools to meet the educational needs of rural, regional and remote students, and particularly of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The most recent Closing the Gap Report (CTG) shows that whilst there have been improvements across the three schools-based CTG targets (attendance, reading and numeracy, and year 12 attainment) over a decade, there remains an acute difference in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.[11] Whilst it is positive that the target for year 12 attainment is on track to be met this year, the target to halve the gap in reading and numeracy for students in years 3, 5, 7 & 9 and the target to close the gap in school attendance by 2018 have not been met.[12] Furthermore, the data shows that the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students increases with remoteness.[13]

Resources are a crucial component of closing the gap in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities.

As noted by Riddle and Fogarty:

> *"Closing the gap in education is intrinsically linked to multiple aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage, including access to quality health, employment, incarceration rates and housing. These combine to form the social determinants of educational success."* [14]

It is evident that the changes made to state and territory Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) contributions and the imposition of the 20% Commonwealth Government contribution cap found in the National School Reform Agreements (NSRAs) will make it more difficult to capitalise on gains that have been made since the introduction of the Closing the Gap framework in 2008. This is particularly the case in the Northern Territory, which under the NSRA will have the lowest level of base SRS funding of any jurisdiction through to 2023. Despite having the highest levels of student disadvantage in the country, the proposed combined territory and commonwealth contributions to public schools, where 44% of all enrolments are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students[15], will peak at 79.0% of SRS in 2023.

The inequity of funding in Australia's school system has a direct impact on the teaching and learning opportunities for young people in public schools and those in remote areas in particular. With one in four young Australians not completing their Year 12 certificate, and an even higher proportion outside of major metropolitan and regional centres not completing

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[11] Commonwealth of Australia (2018) Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report,* 2018. pp.51 – 64

[12] *Ibid* pp.51 – 64

[13] *Ibid*

[14] Stewart Riddle and Bill Fogarty (2015). 'Closing the Gap in education report card: needs improvement', The Conversation, retrieved from https://theconversation.com/closing-the-gap-in-education-report-card-needs-improvement-37455

[15] Northern Territory Department of Education (2018) Annual Report, Northern Territory Government, pp. 72

secondary school, serious questions must be asked of government policy settings where school funding is concerned.

The current situation with regard to the funding of school education is untenable. For decades it has been widely recognised that Australia's school funding is inequitable. Funding arrangements have been characterised by ad hoc political accommodations and failed to take account of the actual needs of Australian schools, students and school communities.

Recent years have seen the Commonwealth Government continually prioritise the appeasement of the Independent and Catholic school lobbies over the maintenance of the provisions of the *Australian Education Act 2013*. The entirely unwarranted $4.6 billion funding increase to private schools in 2018, the Commonwealth Governments' insistence on an arbitrary 20% of SRS cap on federal funding to public schools and the tens of billions of dollars that public schools will now not receive due to the implementation of the five year NRSAs provide yet more evidence of the entrenched unequal distribution of resources in Australian schools.

The original Gonski report was commissioned to examine evidence and make recommendations on how school funding should be used to improve school performance outcomes. Its fundamental recommendation was for state and federal governments to work together to coordinate resources more effectively to achieve a level of fair funding – the SRS – an estimate of public funding that a school needs to meet the needs of its students. The SRS is made up of a base amount of funding for each student plus additional loadings to help schools whose students have higher needs.

However, over the last six years the Commonwealth Government has abandoned this needs based funding model by making a series of cuts to public school funding and legislating an arbitrary 20% cap on the Commonwealth's share of the SRS through the *Australian Education Amendment Act, 2017* which leaves states and territory governments having to make up the shortfall, ignoring the differences in their revenue raising ability. Most states are a long way from the remaining 80 % needed. A revised target of 75% was agreed by COAG recently but timelines for delivery have stretched out to 2029 – and beyond for Queensland. This has led to systemic underfunding and entrenched inequality between school sectors, further compounded by a $4.6 billion increase in funding to private schools announced by the Morrison Government in September 2018.

Total Commonwealth & State/Territory funding to public schools (SRS %)

	2019	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
ACT	107.5	106.1	104.8	103.3	100.0
NSW	89.1	88.8	90.6	91.4	92.2
NT	79.1	79.7	80.3	80.4	79.0
SA	92.3	93.0	93.7	94.3	95.0
TAS	92.6	93.0	93.3	93.8	94.1
WA	96.8	94.7	93.6	94.0	95.0
QLD	87.8	88.2	88.5	88.9	89.3
VIC	85.8	86.7	87.9	89.1	90.4

Public schools are already missing out on billions that should have been delivered in 2018 and 2019, and by 2023, 99% of public schools will be operating below the Schooling Resource Standard and 99% of private schools at the standard or above it.

It is critical that we distribute educational funding fairly so *all* students can reach their full potential and be supported to become confident, creative participants in society. To achieve this, every school must be funded to at least 100% of the SRS.

Children living in regional, rural and remote communities are subject to significant resource gaps in comparison to their urban peers. The severity of this inequity of resources and its impact on student learning is discussed in some detail in the AEU's submission to the Commonwealth Government's 2017 Independent Review into Rural, Regional and Remote Education.[16]

Given the greater representation of rural and remote students in public schools, and how the socioeconomic profiles of these cohorts lean toward lower SES quartiles, the long term damage done by the recent bi-lateral NSRAs struck between the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments resulting in every state and territory (except the ACT) failing to reach the full SRS by 2023 will have a disproportionate impact on students in rural, remote and regional locations. As a consequence, the agreements, particularly the 20% cap on Commonwealth SRS contributions, are likely to widen the gap between student learning and attainment in urban and non-urban areas with the long term damage extending well beyond the five year time period the agreements cover.

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[16] AEU, (2017). *Submission to the independent review into regional, rural and remote education*. Retrieved from http://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/9215/0630/3811/subRegionalRural092017.pdf

The necessity of the fair and needs based distribution of funding is of absolute importance in remote environments and communities. All the best will in the world will not close the gap and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the opportunities they deserve without access to adequate and fair resources.

A 2012 report from the Nation Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) showed that despite relatively high levels of within-school wellbeing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have relatively low expectations in terms of completing Year 12. However, the report found that the difference was driven primarily by socioeconomic characteristics. Other key findings from the NCVER report included:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander **students are more likely to drop out of school before completion than non-Indigenous students. However, this difference is driven by observable characteristics such as academic achievement at the age of 15.** Once these characteristics are controlled for, there was no significant difference. There were, however, differences in the tertiary entrance rank attained by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the completion of Year 12. These results show that the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of school outcomes as opposed to school completion can still widen in the latter years of school. This has implications for future education prospects, which in turn can impact on economic and social wellbeing across the life course.

- As with high school expectations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are significantly and substantially less likely to expect to undertake post-school education. This difference in expectations is not driven by the relative socioeconomic background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, but the differences do disappear once other school-based characteristics such as the student's own test scores and the test scores of others in the school are controlled for. ***Once again, actual and perceived ability are driving the differences in education expectations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth.***

- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth is much less likely to undertake post-school study than a non- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian. This difference holds even after controlling for a range of important characteristics (for example, socioeconomic background and test scores). Once Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students obtain a university entrance score they go to university with about the same probability as non-Indigenous students. This points to a need for a policy focus on why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are less inclined to study towards a university entrance score. Moreover, policy should focus on the reasons Indigenous students receive lower scores on average, rather than on those students who have already received a score.[17]

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[17] NCVER, 2012, retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/potential-factors-influencing-indigenous-education-participation-and-achievement

AEU Recommendations:

- That the Commonwealth must meet its obligation to regional, rural and remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, by addressing the disadvantage faced by these communities.
- That this can be achieved through budget measures that will remove the 20% cap on Commonwealth SRS contributions and deliver 100% funding of the SRS to rural, regional and remote schools and by ensuring that loadings for disadvantage address the unmet need for our students.

Vocational and Tertiary Education & successful pathways to ensure students have the knowledge and skills they need to enter further education and the workforce.

There is a substantial body of research outlining the challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their access to post-schooling pathways. In a remote schooling context, the Remote Education Systems (RES) project[18], conducted by Ninti One, the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation[19], analyses and discusses a range of challenges and solutions to the barriers that education systems *themselves* create when defining and measuring success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Both the RES and the Remote Economic Participation and Pathways to Employment[20] project, also conducted by Ninti One, argue that:

> *by privileging non-remote and non-local assumptions in economic participation and development agendas, initiatives often fail to engage with local (capital) advantages. Both projects have argued that with increased engagement with local aspirations and strengths, education and employment initiatives would be more likely to achieve their desired outcomes (Guenther, 2015; McRae-Williams, 2014).*

Rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disengagement from the labour market are significantly higher than for the population as whole. In particular, the high rate of absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 25-54 years from the workforce is particularly concerning as people in this age group are at their most productive in terms of working lives. They have generally finished their schooling and are well before their retirement, and their absence from the labour market has important implications.[21]

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[18] Guenther, J, Disbray S, and Osborne S, *Red dirt education: a compilation of learnings form Remote Education Systems,* retrieved from
https://nintione.com.au/resource/RedDirtEducation_CompilationLearningsRES_EBook.pdf
[19] *Ibid*
[20] Eva McRae-Williams, John Guenther, Damien Jacobsen & Judith Lovell, *What are the enablers of economic participation in remote and very remote Australia, and how can we identify them?, 2016,* retrieved from https://www.cdu.edu.au/sites/default/files/the-northern-institute/10.18793-lcj2016.19.02-revised.pdf
[21] Dinku, Y and Hunt, J, Factors Associated with the Labour Force Participation of Prime-Age Indigenous Australians, Centre for Aboriginal Policy Research, retrieved from
https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/11/CAEPR_WP_131_2019_Dinku_Hunt_0.pdf

However, little is known about the underlying factors influencing their decision to participate or not in the mainstream labour market. Drawing on data from a relatively recent nationally representative survey, this study finds that disability, education and history of incarceration are the three most important driving factors for both male and female labour force participation. Education and incarceration experiences have greater associations with female labour force participation, whereas disability has a greater association with male labour force participation.

Subsequently, the Productivity Commission's National Indigenous Reform Agreement Performance Assessment 2013–14, published in November 2015, argued that there was extensive focus on monitoring broad outcome targets relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, but little evidence of what works to bridge outcome gaps.[22]

Recent research from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research[23] found that:

> *disability, education and history of incarceration are the three most important driving factors for both male and female labour force participation. Education and incarceration experiences have greater associations with female labour force participation, whereas disability has a greater association with male labour force participation.*

Similarly, there is substantial evidence demonstrating that TAFE is among the most successful approaches and responses that work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students when accessing post-secondary pathways, most recently the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education[24] (Halsey 2018), which recommended that:

> *...TAFE has to be put back into the regions, closer to people, places and the heartland of much of Australia's productivity.)*

Unfortunately, these opportunities have significantly diminished under this government's policies, which have seen huge numbers of TAFE campus closures and a 60% drop in the number of TAFE providers in recent years.[25]

Key barriers to the education journey

School Attendance

The barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote locations substantially stem from a lack of access and opportunity, a lack of relevant curriculum and a lack of ongoing provision through secondary school. There is a significant policy focus on targets (for example, the CTG target for preschool focuses on enrolment rather than attendance) and public school provision is often not available to young people in remote communities. There is no national dataset of the number of young people missing out on secondary education entirely and the continuation of poorly designed, disjointed programs

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[22] Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet , Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs, retrieved from https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2019/06/apo-nid242741-1367361.PDF
[23] Dinku, Y and Hunt, J, *Op. cit.* p.iii.
[24] Halsey, J, *Op. cit* .p.53.
[25] *Report on Government Services 2020,* retrieved from https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training

from the Federal Government (such as the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS)) do not address the core issue that a lack of provision, driven by lack of funding to public schools in remote areas make it very difficult to improve attendance.

As demonstrated by the University of New South Wales, there has been a steady decline in school attendance rates from outer regional areas to remote areas. For secondary schooling, this has grown to over 10 percentage points for the past two years. Even more significant is the further gap in attendance rates between remote areas and very remote areas, both across primary schools (from 18 to 21 percentage points) and secondary schools (from 24 to 29 percentage points). This decline in school attendance in very remote communities seems to markedly increase beyond Year 8. Further, there has been a decreasing trend overall in the attendance rates of both remote and very remote communities over the past four years.

There is an obvious relationship between school engagement and student attendance. Students who are engaged and motivated at school, will see greater benefits in attending school more regularly. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students there are a number of defining characteristics of schools which are more effective in resolving the attendance issue.

- Schools that have strong, effective leadership
- a positive culture and a positive sense of identity for students
- Teachers and support staff with the skills and knowledge to effectively engage and develop relationships with students
- High levels of community involvement in the planning and deliver of school processes, priorities and curriculum.
- Genuine understanding of cultural competencies
- Collaboration in the development of school curriculum with communities

These characteristics build on the concept of genuine and appropriate engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

AEU Recommendation:

- That the Remote School Attendance strategy be abolished and replaced with a program which has increasing parent, family and community engagement in schools as its key objective.

The role of culture and country in a child's learning & community and family structures that support a child's education and their attendance at school

The Australian Child Rights Progress Report[26] highlights the importance of empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and families to support their children within the community in which they live.

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[26] Australian Child Rights Taskforce, *CR25: Australian Child Rights Report*, p. 41.

> *A right's base response must draw on these cultural strengths to increase investment in support that heals and strengthens families and empowers communities and organisations to self-determine responses. This will ensure that all decisions regarding the best interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are made with participation of families, communities and children themselves.*

Communities must be adequately resourced by government to support the positive wellbeing and aspirations of the people that reside within these remote communities. The public education systems must provide quality, culturally appropriate pre-school, primary and secondary school provision to provide equitable outcomes for these students.[27]

One of the keys to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in the delivery of education is an open, honest and explicit partnership with schools, communities and government. Culturally appropriate two-way communication with the community to assess the diverse needs and expectations of each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is essential. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, like all members of Australian society, have the fundamental right to be involved in all areas of decision-making that impact their lives and the lives of their children.

As noted in the department for education's response to the Halsey review, it is important to recognise that there are in school and out of school factors as well as the relationships and interactions between them which impact on student outcomes and beyond schooling opportunities and pathways. Sometimes the impact of out of school factors is greater than the in school factors such as discussed in the Schools Workforce Productivity Commission Report, 2012 and the Dropping Off The Edge Report, 2015 (Vinson et al., 2015). This means working at finding ways of illuminating and hopefully reducing, while at the same time, ensuring that what happens 'inside the school fence' optimises learning.[28]

Effective government initiatives, past and present, that support remote communities to enable greater educational outcomes, including those that have improved attainment in literacy and numeracy;

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be involved in and feel ownership of all aspects of education including developing relevant localised curriculum, supporting and training teachers and principals, being employed as teachers and support workers, developing broader health and lifestyle programs and supporting local language.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs Interim Report: First Steps for Improving Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students[29] noted that due to the diversity that exists across Australia in catering for needs of regional, remote and metropolitan students, flexible and responsive educational delivery is required.[30]

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[27] Johnson, P, *Educational Provision for Remote Indigenous Communities*, Cokehill Consulting, 2016, p.38.
[28] Halsey, *Op. cit*
[29] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs *Interim Report: First Steps*
[30] Johnson, *Op. cit* .p11.

The absence of an overarching evaluation framework makes it almost impossible to determine the effectiveness of government initiatives in any great level of detail. However, we can determine that Direct Instruction does not work in remote contexts. A review of school education in the Aurukun Campus of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy found that the school is not providing the full Australian Curriculum to its students through the current approach. It is the conclusion of this review that the richness of schooling has been compromised by the pressure of delivering literacy and numeracy using only the Direct Instruction approach and recommended, that "going forward, a more balanced approach, contextualised for the Aurukun community, is required."[31]

Similarly, the University of Melbourne's evaluation of the Good to Great Schools direct instruction program found that overall, there were no differences were detected in overall growth on NAPLAN assessment scores between control and program schools at the national level between 2015 and 2017 for reading or grammar and punctuation, although it did find improvements in spelling.[32]

For at least the last decade, there has been no effective national program to support the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in education.

Innovative approaches to workforce, including recruitment, professional learning, retention and support, and lessons from communities that could be more generally applied;

It is crucial to the wellbeing of all communities, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in regional and remote Australia that the public education system in all states and territories provides access to quality, culturally appropriate pre-school and school education and strives for equitable outcomes for all students.

As a measure of our commitment to these goals, AEU has long campaigned for an increase in support for teachers in remote environments. Our past and present campaign priorities include[33]:

- universal access to high quality Early Childhood Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander three and four year old children;
- mandatory Indigenous Studies for pre-service and in-service teachers;
- improved professional learning for principals and school leaders in the area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education;
- improved staffing models for schools with large cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- improved employment condition and career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, education workers and principals;

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[31] Queensland Government School Improvement Unit, *Review of School Education in Aurukun,* retrieved from: http://statements.qld.gov.au/Content/MediaAttachments/2016/pdf/Review%20of%20school%20education%2 0in%20Aurukun.pdf , p5.

[32] Dawson, G.K., Clinton, J., Koelle, M., & McLaren, P. (2017). Evaluation of the Flexible Literacy for Remote Schools Program: Main Report. June 2018. Centre for Program Evaluation, the University of Melbourne.

[33] AEU *Submission to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students,* 2015, p. 2

- significantly improved funding models with levels of funding sustainable over the long-term; and
- improved school infrastructure and teacher accommodation

The AEU represents approximately two and a half thousand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members who collectively hold access to not just thousands of years of traditional skills, knowledges and culture, but also cumulatively hold thousands of years of professional and cultural expertise in the education industry. Yet many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members report to us that their expertise is ignored by systems, that they feel invisible in their workplaces and that they have to curtail aspects of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity in order to 'fit in' in their workplaces.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public education workforce is the sector's greatest asset when it comes to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Research tells us that employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in schools is linked to improved attendance rates, yet underrepresentation remains a huge issue. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members tell us that they are also grossly under-valued, under-paid, micro-managed and that their well-being is suffering. Nationally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students comprise just over six percent of all public school enrolments, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators make up just over two percent of the total workforce.

The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) was a national project funded by the then Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and managed by the University of South Australia through the office of Professor Peter Buckskin, Dean, Indigenous Scholarship, Engagement and Research. The project commenced in 2011, and despite recommendations to support its continuation, based on robust research and evidence of positive outcomes, the project was finalised in 2016, with opportunities for its extension lost in changes to the machinery of government in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, following the election of the Abbott government in 2014[34].

The overarching objectives of the MATSITI project were to increase:

- the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in teaching positions in schools;
- the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers; and
- the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in teaching positions in schools.

An independent evaluation of the initiative[35] found that project partners intensified their commitment to achieving MATSITI's aims through their formal participation in the project and further, that partners and stakeholders raised their awareness of the 'direct relationship

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[34] Rose, M., (2018), *Close the Gap: More Indigenous* Graduates, La Trobe University, *accessed at* https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2018/opinion/close-the-gap-more-indigenous-graduates
[35] Johnson, P., Cherednichenki, B. and Rose, M., *Evaluation of the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative Project*: *Final Report* (2016), accessed at http://matsiti.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MATSITI-2016-Project-Evaluation-Final-Report.pdf

between the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in schools and improvements in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.'[36] Finally, the project resulted in a 16.5% increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers between 2012 and 2015, "due to recruitment and improved levels of identification."[37]

The supply of highly qualified teachers for all schools, and particularly for remote schools, must be underpinned by high standards in pre-service training. It is concerning that Australian Tertiary Admission Rankings (ATAR) for teaching courses are often low, particularly in regional universities. Improving minimum entry standards for teaching courses would go some way to safeguard the quality of teaching in all schools.

Novel, fast-tracked pathways into teaching such as the Teach for Australia (TFA) program do not serve to improve the status of the teaching profession, not do they serve to foster the trust and committeemen required to establish an outstanding remote teaching workforce.

The TFA program is expensive, saddled with high attrition rates and is counter-productive to ensuring the delivery of quality teaching. The most recent evaluation of the program found that less than half of the TFA associates remained in teaching after three years post their initial two-year placement and only 30 per cent were teaching in disadvantaged schools.27

Also essential to ensuring the supply of teachers to remote schools is a standards based promotion and transfer system that equitably ensures that these schools can access the staff they need. Regional support structures need to ensure that non-metropolitan school staff can access quality professional development either locally or in major centres and ensure that staff levels and relief teacher availability are sufficient to support this access.

Support for school leadership staff is also essential to improve the effectiveness and attractiveness of remote schools. Leaders in small and remote schools are often less experienced than their counterparts in larger schools and are also frequently saddled with a greater teaching and administrative workload. Funding to provide extra staff support for these schools would be a useful way of ensuring that school leaders are able to focus more of their attention on educational leadership.

AEU Recommendation

- That the Federal Government implement the full suite of recommendations from the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) which, despite producing a range of extraordinary outcomes, was defunded by the Coalition Government in 2014. The implementation of this recommendation should be built into a second phase of MTSITI, in order to continue to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australia.

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[36] *Ibid.,* p. 6
[37] *Ibid.,* p. 6

Access and support to deliver the Australian Curriculum in a flexible way to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students

The Commonwealth's 'What Works. The Work Program' identified school-community partnerships was one of the seven key attributes of improving remote schools with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It observed both formal and informal partnerships, concluding that "when schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities work in partnership, students get better results from their education." Elements of effective community engagement observed by the study include

- engaging in authentic two-way dialogue based on a shared vision, positive relationships and respect for cultural identity.
- recognising families as first educators and welcoming them into the school, using various forums designed to ensure the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice is heard in the school.
- connecting leadership within the school and leadership within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, often through principals using key community members as mentors.
- establishing partnerships and relationships that describe the school vision and ways of achieving it.
- providing purposeful and appropriate ways for Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs) to act as a bridge to the community.

Indigenous languages in schools

An informed consideration of student achievement and engagement in remote areas must take into account the issue of Indigenous languages in schools. The importance of language learning in Indigenous communities, particularly the role of bilingualism in education and Indigenous languages in assisting student learning, has been validated by well-established national and international research and documented in previous submissions to government inquiries. It has been effectively summarised by Charles E. Grimes in his short straightforward compilation of the vast body of research showing the benefit of students receiving instruction in their first language, which highlights the deficiencies of the Northern Territory's approach in this area.72

UNESCO's 'Global Monitoring Report on Education for All, 2010', states: The degree of alignment between home and school language has a critical bearing on learning opportunities. Children who study in their mother tongue usually learn better and faster than children studying in second languages (UNESCO Bangkok, 2008; Woldemikael, 2003). Pupils who start learning in their home language also perform better in tests taken in the official language of instruction later in their school careers (UNESCO Bangkok, 2008). The benefits extend beyond cognitive skills to enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem and classroom participation (Alidou et al., 2006).[38] In Australia, a 2008 report by the Australian Council for Educational Research, 'Indigenous language programs in Australian schools – a way forward', identified a growing body of research evidence showing: Well-designed bilingual programs are academically effective and do not hold back students' acquisition of English. Research

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[38]Stronger Smarter Institute (2015) Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

suggests that if literacy is established in a child's first language, it is easier to switch to another language. Research also suggests that childhood bilingualism enhances cognitive ability by promoting classification skills, concept formation, analogical reasoning, visual-spatial skills and creativity gains and has shown that young children learn best when taught through their mother tongue. [39]

The research has also shown that there are positive effects on children's cognitive development if they are encouraged to become strong bilinguals. They note also that policy-makers seem to fail to recognise that children who are monolingual in a language other than English need explicit teaching of the English language, by trained English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, before they can learn through English as the medium of instruction.[40]

Children who are first educated at school in their own language have a capacity for learning English when introduced at around the age of eight years which is significantly better than for those children who were not taught in their own language and who are expected to learn English at school entry.

Bilingual education is not only beneficial to students' education, it is valued by local communities because it ensures the survival of languages and because it provides an honoured place for Indigenous languages in the curriculum and an honoured place for Indigenous teachers. The teaching and maintenance of Indigenous languages in schools is essential to maintain culture. It shows that schools acknowledge and respect the value of the child's language and culture, and thus the child's Indigenous identity. This requires a level of action that goes beyond 'recognising' the importance of language teaching and 'acknowledging' the degree to which Indigenous languages being spoken today are in real danger of dying out in the absence of funded and resourced implementation of the measures that have been shown to work from the existing numerous studies and reports.

The AEU supports the maintenance and revitalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Enabling Indigenous children to be strong in their own cultures and languages plays a significant role in ensuring high mainstream educational outcomes, including fluency in Standard Australian English (SAE). We believe students who have an Indigenous language or dialect as their first, second or third language should attract appropriate ESL support and funding and call for well-resourced, appropriately staffed bilingual education programs, where communities choose to support bilingual programs in local schools.

It is not necessary to downgrade the teaching and use of Indigenous languages, as has occurred at the Cape York Academy which prioritises Direct Instruction in American English. Learning an Indigenous language and becoming proficient in English are complementary rather than mutually exclusive; rather than acting as a barrier to the learning of English, bilingual programs actually strengthen it (provided they are adequately supported and resourced).

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[39] Purdie, N. (2009). A way forward for Indigenous languages. Australian Council for Educational Research. Research Developments Volume 21

[40] Simpson, J, Caffery, J. and McConvell, P., *AIATSIS Discussion Paper Number 24,* retrieved from http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/docs/dp/DP24.pdf

Conclusion

In its recent report on the 2018 PISA assessment results, the OECD said:

> *In sum, all countries have excellent students, but too few countries have enabled all of their students to excel and fulfil their potential to do so. The education that wise parents want for their children is what public policy should strive for all children. Achieving greater equity in education is not only a social justice imperative, it is also a way to use resources more efficiently, increase the supply of skills that fuel economic growth, and promote social cohesion. Not least, how we treat the most vulnerable students and citizens shows who we are as a society.[41]*

The Prime Minister's 2020 Closing the Gap Report to parliament shows that over the past twelve years there have only been marginal improvements to education and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In some areas, like preschool enrolments, there has been regression over the most recent twelve month period. The AEU's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members know what works – programs that are 'constructed with us, not for us'; programs that include building and developing connections with families and communities that are long-term, sustainable and relationally-based.

The AEU condemns the years of failed government activity evident in the statistics from this latest report. Programs initiated by this federal coalition government, such as the failed Remote School Attendance Strategy have had no impact on school attendance. Programs like the Vocational Education Training and Employment Centres have had no impact in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment. Further, 85% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia attend public schools, yet many do not have access to appropriate staffing levels, nor access to the resources required to achieve education parity with the broader Australian population.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be involved in and feel ownership of all aspects of education including developing relevant localised curriculum, supporting and training teachers and principals, being employed as teachers and support workers, developing broader health and lifestyle programs and supporting local language.
In considering its response to this submission we urge the Committee to give due attention to the importance of consultation and the consequences of inadequate consultation, noting that the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is very explicit about their inclusion in decision making that affects them:

> *Article 18: Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision making institutions.*

> *Article 19: States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous people concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.*

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[41] Schleicher, A., *PISA 2018: Insights and* Interpretations, OECD, 2019, p.24.