INFLUENCES ON SENIOR SCHOOLING PATHWAY CHOICES OF FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS FROM REMOTE COMMUNITIES

A Thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

When preparing to enter the senior years of secondary education, Australian students choose whether to undertake a vocational or an academic pathway. For all students, this decision-making process is complex, and existing research suggests even more so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities studying at boarding schools away from their homes and families. By drawing on critical theory to conduct this qualitative study, the voices of past students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander were centred while investigating the senior schooling pathway choices made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities at Queensland boarding schools. The past student experiences were triangulated with a focus group interview with select staff at a Queensland boarding school, and my own autoethnographic reflections. The findings of the thematic content analysis was further augmented through a process of descriptive statistics to summarise publicly accessible data. The key finding that emerged from this study was that First Nations students from remote communities are more likely to undertake a non-academic pathway in their senior years at boarding schools in Queensland despite the possibility that this choice does not align with their genuine pathway preferences. Historical and hegemonic constructs continue to permeate the education system, and unless change occurs at a systemic level, individual staff or school-based initiatives will not result in shifts in available opportunities for First Nations students to freely select from either an academic or a non-academic pathway.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I Emma Sheppard declare that the Thesis entitled *Influences on senior schooling pathway choices of First Nations students from remote communities* is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, and references. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Date: 7 May 2023

Endorsed by:

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Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

i Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia as the Traditional Owners of the land on which the University of Southern Queensland's campuses have been established. Specifically, I acknowledge the Giabal, Jarowair and Western Wakka Wakka peoples of the Toowoomba area, the Kambuwal peoples of Stanthorpe and the Gadigal peoples of the Eora nation, Sydney. I especially acknowledge the Jagera, Yuggera and Ugarapul peoples, as not only the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Ipswich and Springfield campuses stand, but also as the Traditional Owners of the area that I am privileged to have spent my youth and to where I have returned while completing my thesis. Additionally, I pay my respect to Elders past, present and emerging from all nations of Australia and am inspired by the important contributions they have made, and continue to make, as keepers of ancient knowledge; I am hopeful that this study will actively move towards further reconciliation, justice, equity and healing.

ii Personal Acknowledgements

The completion of this research would not have been possible without the ongoing guidance and support that I have received.

Foremost, I am thankful for my supervisors, who have persevered with supporting my progress through various challenges over the last few years. Their unfaltering patience is deeply valued. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Associate Professor Renee Desmarchelier who has played a pivotal role in my academic journey for the past seven years; your kindness has helped me to keep pushing through to the end. I also extend my sincere gratitude to Doctor Ian Davis for stepping in and playing a crucial role in bringing everything together; you have continuously encouraged me to keep moving forward during the challenging final stages. Even though she was unable to remain a part of my supervisory team, I am profoundly grateful for Doctor Jacinta Maxwell's dedicated support throughout the research formation process; your valuable insights and meticulous guidance were integral to the foundational development of this study.

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TERMINOLOGY

i A note about terminology when referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples

Language is key to the communication of ideas and can convey cultural values and attitudes through its use, thus it is necessary to articulate the terminology that has been employed in this thesis when referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. I recognise that many groups constitute First Nations Australia and that there is not a definitive singular term to use when referring to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. As such, the following naming conventions have been used within this thesis and have been guided by guidelines from the Queensland Studies Authority (2010):

- Aboriginal – to refer to First Nations peoples from mainland Australia
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander – to refer to peoples who identify as either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or both
- First Nations – to refer to a member of the nations of people who were in this country from the beginning, prior to colonisation
- indigenous (lower case 'i') – to refer to First Nations peoples of other continents generically
- Indigenous – to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within Australia
- Non-Indigenous – to refer to a member of the Australian population who does not identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person
- Peoples – (plural) used with the understanding that First Nations peoples of Australia are not a homogenous grouping, but rather that there are many groups or nations who have distinct cultures, languages and histories

- Torres Strait Islander – to refer to First Nations peoples from the 274 islands in the Torres Strait

ii A note about terminology when referring to subject types

Throughout this thesis, categories have been referred to when describing subjects' alignment to either a vocational or an academic pathway. The following ways of categorising have been used:

Ways of categorising subjects mostly aligned with an academic pathway:

- Academic
- General
- OP

Ways of categorising subjects mostly aligned with a non-academic pathway:

- Non-academic
- Applied
- Non-OP
- Vocational

iii A note about acronyms

In the field of education, frequently used terminology consisting of multiple words are often shortened by way of acronyms in both written and spoken forms. Throughout this thesis acronyms have been used both within the text that I have constructed and within the interview text. The following acronyms can be found within:

- ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics

- ABSTUDY: (A group of payments for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students or apprentices)
- ACARA: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
- AE: Aboriginal English
- AIME: Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience
- AQF: Australian Qualifications Framework
- ATAR: Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
- CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis
- CEO: Chief Executive Officer
- CRICOS: Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students
- CTG: Closing the Gap
- EAL: English as an Additional Language
- EAL/D or EALD: English as an Additional Language or Dialect
- ESL: English as a Second Language
- HPE: Health and Physical Education
- ICSEA: Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
- ICT: Information and Communication Technology
- IEW: Indigenous Education Worker
- ILO: Indigenous Liaison Worker
- ISMG: Instrument Specific Marking Guide
- LBOTE: Language Background Other Than English
- LOTE: Language Other Than English
- NAPLAN: National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
- OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

- OP: Overall Position
- PAT: Progressive Achievement Tests
- PC: Pastoral Care
- PE: Physical Education
- PISA: Program for International Student Assessment
- QCAA: Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority
- QCE: Queensland Certificate of Education
- QCIA: Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement
- QTAC: Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre
- RE: Religious Education
- RSA: Responsible Service of Alcohol
- SAE: Standard Australian English
- SES: Socio-economic Status
- SET Plans: Senior Education and Training Plans
- TAFE: Technical and Further Education
- TCA: Thematic Content Analysis
- UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
- VET: Vocational Education and Training

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

My role as a Queensland secondary boarding teacher has been formational to my position as the researcher in this project. Many of my experiences and observations while working in a boarding school ultimately led to the research topic and project.

Through this chapter, I position myself as the researcher by discussing my professional background, and most importantly my position as a white Australian in the sphere of education and society in general. It is an important step at the outset to establish the context of decisions made during the process of research. The introduction, as well as much of this thesis has a narrative self-reflective tone. This mode of thinking is core to my critical paradigm and ultimately to who I am as a person and how I interact with the world. It also sets the tone for the interweaving of autobiographical reflection throughout the latter chapters of this thesis.

1.2 Positioning the context

1.2.1 Context of setting

The context of this study is on boarding schools in Queensland (the majority of which are non-state schools) who work with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities in the senior years of school. For this study a boarding school is classified as a government registered secondary education facility that offers provisions and services such as accommodation and meals for the pupils during term time. Not considered are boarding facilities that are a separate entity and not explicitly and directly connected to, and governed by, a secondary educational facility.

Prior to the establishment of the numerous longstanding boarding schools still in operation today, following the beginning of colonisation and the extension of white settlement/invasion around the country, in the early 1800s the first boarding schools were founded for young 'gentlemen' and 'ladies' to attend (Lawry, 1965). In the New South Wales colonial government (which included the region that now makes up the state of Queensland), there were many private establishments which stood as schools with enrolments of both boarders and day students; but many of these were short-lived (Department of Education and Training, 2013).

Official historical reports about the first boarding schools in Queensland refer to those that catered for the children of white settlers (Lawry, 1965). However, there were also institutions established that housed, and sometimes to some extent educated, Australia's First Nations peoples. The purpose of these facilities and the reasons for their creation was vastly different to those for the children of white settlers. Since the early times of European settlement, First Nations children were removed from their families to inculcate European values and work habits in children (Ramsland, 1986, as cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). In response to the brutal treatment of First Nations peoples by settlers, the government collaborated with missionaries to establish a 'civilisation project' in which children were housed in dormitories with limited or no contact with their families (Smith, 2009). These facilities often involved training institutes that prepared the children to be sent off the missions to work at 12 years of age (Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland, 2017). Even though these missions and dormitories are not comparable to boarding schools today, the endurance of the historical objective is noteworthy and has been further explored in this research to consider how this legacy continues to contribute to those in boarding schools today.

Boarding schools continue to be used as access to secondary educational facilities by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities. Across Australia, in 2020, First Nations peoples represented 14.5% of all boarders at independent boarding facilities (Independent Schools Australia, 2021), in contrast to 3.2% of the wider Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022a). In Queensland specifically, First Nations peoples make up 4.6% of the population (ABS, 2022a). Queensland has the largest number of First Nations boarding students out of all the states in Australia and has experienced a significant increase of 30.5% in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarders between 2014 and 2020, rising from 492 to 642 students respectively (Independent Schools Australia, 2021).

Whilst there are no clear statistics indicating how many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools are from remote communities as opposed to regional areas or major cities, it is known that the percentage of First Nations peoples who reside in remote areas far outnumber the percentage of non-Indigenous people. In 2016 the percentage of First Nations peoples who lived in a remote or very remote location was 18.6% in contrast to 1.5% of non-Indigenous peoples (ABS, 2018).

1.3 Positioning the researcher

1.3.1 Professional background

Prior to gaining official teaching qualifications, I worked as an English as a Foreign Language teacher and then as an English Language Proficiency Examiner. It was through this work that I began to gain an appreciation for the challenges faced when accessing academic studies by people who spoke a first language other than English. Over time I came to understand that these difficulties went beyond the long

and arduous road to gaining the language skills required to attain entrance to educational facilities. I also noted that there were additional barriers once in university, particularly pertaining to what knowledge was accepted and the methods of study and level of support. This was a realisation that remained with me into my future career transition to teaching.

In due course, I undertook studies to gain an official teaching qualification to gain registration as a secondary teacher in Queensland. As part of the interview process for my very first teaching position I recall being asked what my two teaching areas were. When I stated that one of them was English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) I was informed that my skills as an EAL/D trained and qualified teacher would not be of particular benefit as there were no international or immigrant students enrolled at the school. Contrarily, within the first few hours of my inaugural day of teaching, I discovered that my EAL/D skills were in fact useful in the role as there was a significant proportion of students who had travelled from remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities to attend this boarding school, many of whom spoke at least one, and often two or three, languages other than English at home. Within that initial week, it was evident that there persisted misunderstandings within the system that the students were, by default, a part of. Over the following years of employment at this school, I accepted positions of added responsibility in which I worked more closely with the College's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, specifically regarding their English language and academic support. My professional observations and experiences within the field of First Nations education, combined with theoretical knowledge gained from further master's level studies have provided a foundation for this project. Through combining scholarly theory with reflexive processes surrounding my professional

perspectives I have found that systemic structures within Queensland position First Nations students to undertake less academically rigorous studies throughout their educational journey. For example, schools in remote and regional areas often have a higher percentage of First Nations learners and also have the preponderance of offering more vocationally aligned subjects than schools in urban locations.

1.3.2 Non-Indigeneity

As this research project is focussed on a topic that directly impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is crucial to make clear that I am an Australian researcher of European descent; I do not identify as, nor do I claim to understand the nuances that come with being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. I acknowledge that there is a multitude of knowledges in existence, and I do not wish to name "that which (I have) no right to own" (LaDuke, 2005, p. 149) as I understand that my worldview is shaped by my personal experiences in my position within Australian society. I acknowledge that due to my cultural heritage and the insular nature of completing a research project, that it is inevitable that I have subconsciously viewed and responded to topics and issues from a Western viewpoint. In an effort to mitigate the potential influence of my non-Indigenous background on my perspectives and research outcomes, I engaged in insightful discussions with a fellow researcher who was also completing her PhD. This researcher, who identifies as Aboriginal, served as a valuable sounding board for exploring various angles related to my research methodology and data interpretation, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the information at hand. In terms of peer validation of autoethnographical accounts about my professional experiences, regrettably, the only former colleague from that school who identified as First Nations has passed away. As an alternative, I took the initiative to discuss my accounts of

events with another previous colleague to ensure the accuracy of my recollections. I have consistently reflected and considered the impacts of the research, from its design to its findings, on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those who have directly participated as well as those extraneous to the study.

1.3.3 Worldview

One of the key factors for recognising and stating my non-Indigeneity is the acknowledgement that my worldview has been shaped by my status as a non-Indigenous Australian. This worldview will be explored further in the methodology chapter where I will discuss my paradigmatic position and how that has influenced the design of this project. At this point, it is important to note that my experiences, both personally and professionally, have impacted the way I see the world, society, and its structures within which I exist.

I have progressively come to realise that people have had differing experiences resulting in unique understandings and knowledges about their worlds. This was exemplified during my time as a teacher working with students who had grown up within remote communities with a strong connection to their traditional cultures and practices. When students spoke to me about spiritual and cultural understandings such as Feather Foot and the Little People, and showed me photographs with evidence of spirits by their sides, I came to reflect on how their experiences within the world were so vastly different to mine and that just because I did not have that knowledge or understanding, did not in fact make what they were so gracious to share with me non-factual. Likewise, the way I view the school system and its inner workings is likely to be vastly different to the way a student from a remote Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community views and experiences that very same system. The impacts of colonialism, invasion and hegemony have

created a multi-generational difference in experiences that means that my truths about education will likely diverge from those of First Nations students and their families due to systemically racist structures.

This acknowledgement of how worldviews are formed is a necessity in this research project as my interpretation of results is likely to have been impacted to some extent based on this. It has been a necessary responsibility to consider deeply what these impacts might be and to strive to ensure that my interpretation of results from data, extracted from interviews with past students for example, have not been misinterpreted by my understandings based on my worldview.

Ultimately, it is from my personal and professional experiences that I came to realise this topic was one that necessitated further exploration through a detailed research project. It must be noted however that the research topic has been created from the perspective and experiences of a non-Indigenous educator and to remember that whilst interpreting the findings my perspective may have impacted on my understandings differently than if a First Nations person were conducting the research. This asymmetry is critical to consider because the relationship between a non-Indigenous researcher and Indigenous peoples is rooted in historical, political and cultural constructs (Skille, 2022; Smith, 2012).

1.4 Positioning the research

1.4.1 Where/how the research idea originated

In accordance with Anderson's (1997) assertion that First Nations protocol usually requires a declaration of involvement to tell a story, I will outline my connection to the background of this research. Over the years working directly with the school's First Nations students, I had noticed that the majority were studying subjects that were geared towards a vocational future, and only on the rare occasion

was an academic pathway undertaken. Additionally, through my learnings during my Master of Education studies, and as I established stronger formalised academic support systems, I began to analyse the school data pertaining to students with a different frame of reference and noted that there were systemic factors that contributed to students being pigeonholed into particular stereotypes when undergoing the process of selecting a study pathway in Years 11 and 12.

It must be stated at this point that I in no way consider an academic pathway to be a superior line of study to a vocational one, rather my concern was that the option seemed to be out of the equation for my students by the time they reached their senior years of their secondary education. I interminably saw students coming in in the junior years with many having academic goals and dreams. I could see that something was happening in the system that I was not only observing, but partaking an active role in, and I wanted, and needed, more than anecdotal evidence to establish exactly what was happening.

This made me begin to reflect on what my contribution was both personally and systemically. The more I pondered this, the more I came to realise that I could not live the life of a gadfly. Schools have certain hierarchies and systems that must be adhered to and what I was participating in, was a system in which success was measured on attendance, retention, and how many students graduated with their Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). When these are the measurements of success, questioning the appropriateness of the system does not bode well for career longevity and progression. Whilst in hindsight I realise that my decision to continue with the status quo was a privileged choice supported by my hegemonic position in society, the reality of the practicalities whilst working within this system must be acknowledged. While major systemic changes were not achievable, I tried

within the boundaries of my position to affect a variance to the status quo through both my work with my students and with my peers. With students, discussions were had about options post-school and ways to circumnavigate perceived barriers such as academic skillsets, missing home and financial stresses. With staff I frequently advocated for students who were denied their choices in senior study areas and worked explicitly with teaching staff on ways to make content academically rigorous while also supporting and valuing students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, grassroots changes without major disruption to systemic constructs equates to an overall minimal impact.

After a number of years in this position and becoming discouraged by my role as another cog in the system that reinforced oppression, I left to try my hand at something different, moving from the Queensland context. However, I was unable to stop thinking about what I had noticed in my previous position. It was at this point that I decided that the pathway choices Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make in the senior years of school was an area that I wanted to know more about and to examine possible reasons why, despite my intentional efforts, I did not see any noticeable change while working in this field. Thus, this research journey began.

1.4.2 Rationale and significance

The findings from this study link several key areas of research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. It combines perspectives of staff, First Nations peoples who have been through this system themselves, my own reflections on my professional experiences and observations, as well as drawing on publicly available data and curriculum documents. It investigates the systemic influences that emerged from the observations and experiences as voiced by the past students and

staff participants and considers how they may impact on the decision-making process about senior schooling pathway choices of boarding students from remote communities who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

This research addresses several gaps in current literature as detailed in the Literature Review Chapter. The gaps in the existing theoretical knowledge were identified in the literature surrounding the specificities of pathway choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities at boarding schools. The interviews with staff and past students, combined with my own reflections and vignettes, has resulted in a tangible contribution to practice by examining the context and constructs of schools and how they align to facilitate preferred senior schooling pathway choices of First Nations students from remote communities.

1.4.3 Aim

The overall aim of this research is to investigate the senior schooling pathway choices made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities at Queensland boarding schools by building theory through a qualitative bricolage approach to answer the following research questions:

1.4.4 Research questions

Research Question:

- What factors influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities when selecting a senior schooling pathway in Queensland boarding schools?

Sub-Questions:

- In what ways do historical and hegemonic societal structures continue to be evident within Australia's education system in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- In what ways do hegemonic structures in the Australian education system impact on the senior schooling pathway choices made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities at boarding schools in Queensland?
- How can genuine alignment with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' pathway preferences be supported by staff, boarding schools and governing bodies?

1.5 Chapter summary

Positioning myself as the researcher and exploring my own background, while examining my personal motivation for undertaking this study, has positioned the research and the warrant for further investigation of the senior schooling pathway selections of First Nations students from remote communities at boarding schools, and the reasoning behind these choices. The following Literature Review will move from the anecdotal nature of the Introduction Chapter to demonstrate the gaps in current literature that will benefit from further investigation, in particular in terms of critical impacts, societal impacts, and systemic impacts. A critical paradigm shaping the analysis of the project is explained, drawing on the theoretical resources of Foucault (theory of power and relationship) and Said (Orientalism). Chapter three presents the research design for this investigation which is a holistic qualitative bricolage approach situated within a critical paradigm. This approach and paradigm is used to determine the project's data sources and the analysis possible via these sources. Chapter four then moves on to present the findings from this analysis

through a data narrative that focuses on three domains of influence: relationships, subject accessibility, and wider education systems. Chapter five will then move on to discuss these findings with four key learnings: student positioning in the construct of the system of education, impact of support systems on senior schooling pathway choices, redefining success, and systemic shifts.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the review of pertinent literature related to the senior schooling pathway choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities attending secondary boarding schools is presented. This literature can be broadly divided into four main areas: the historical background of education and boarding in Australia, societal and cultural considerations and impacts, senior schooling pathway options, and systemic impacts and considerations. However, at the outset, an overarching consideration has been made about the need for a critical perspective. Areas of both academic and public/societal interest within the realm of First Nations education in general, including the four broad areas that will be explored in this chapter, are framed by dominant educational discourses in the public, educational and research domains.

2.2 Critical Impacts

2.2.1 Critical framework

At its core a critical paradigm is focused on power, inequality and social change. As per this focus, this research project has been framed by a combination of Foucault’s Critical Theory of Power and Relationship (Foucault, 1982) and Said’s Postcolonial Theory of Orientalism/Other (Said, 1978). Despite there being some distinctions as noted throughout Said’s own reflections on the impacts of drawing on Foucault’s scholarship, the two theories appropriately conduce as a theoretical framework because of the notable similarities between the works of these two philosophers, as can be seen through Said’s extension of Foucault’s work into a postcolonial context (Nichols, 2010).

Accompanying my critical paradigm is a background and interest in linguistics; so given the study of language is a central tenet to post-structuralism (Ellis, 1991), and the notion of power being found and sustained in language was at the heart of Francophile philosophy (Derrida, 1969), I naturally gravitated toward Foucault in the design phase of this research as he is renowned for his contribution to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). My original intention was to incorporate CDA in the analysis process, but this did not transpire as the research developed and it became clear that the key findings arising from participant interviews did not warrant a comprehensive CDA analysis. However, what Foucault offers to both the world and to me as a researcher, is so much more than a focus on discourse, but rather a critical theory of power and relationship. Foucault believed that power and knowledge are used as a form of social control through societal institutions, and that there are possibilities for action and resistance by questioning socialised norms and constraints (Foucault, 1977).

According to Foucault, power is a 'regime of truth' that pervades society and is in a constant state of flux and negotiation. Each society has mechanisms that enable one to distinguish between truth and falsehoods by determining which statements are sanctioned, which are accorded value, and the status of those who are charged with saying what is considered as true (Foucault, as cited in Rabinow, 1984). Foucault was not trying to challenge power by seeking an absolute truth, but rather to recognise that 'truth' comes in the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural domains dependent on its era (Foucault, as cited in Rabinow, 1984). Revisiting my worldview, I understand that my perception of the world has been influenced by my position in it. In other words, my position in terms of 'power' has determined what I view as 'truth'; my knowledge is tied to my power. Likewise,

Foucault asserts that knowledge and power are not separate entities; the two are inextricably linked. He argues that the knowledge that exists at any given time, the facts that are deemed to be incontrovertible, and the discoveries that it is then possible to make, are in fact heavily influenced by that same era's power relations (Foucault, 1970).

Foucault does not argue that power is necessarily wielded by acts of domination or coercion, but rather that it is dispersed and pervasive. His position is that power is everywhere, and it comes from everywhere. Even if keeping knowledge unheard is not a conscious notion, societies across eras have subconsciously maintained positions of power through knowledge acceptance. Those who are allowed to have their knowledge heard and have influence (and those who are not) exist within the same system of power relationships in their shared contexts. If you are able to speak and yield influence, it is because of the relationship of power that has made that possible (Foucault, 1982).

One of the main tenets of Foucault's position is that truth is dependent on the era in which it exists. Knowledge, rather than being universal and incontrovertibly objective, is in fact historically contingent. This theory seeks to explain how dominant structures of thought or ways of thinking have changed over time and how these changes might have enabled new discoveries that may have previously been untenable. Unlike the definitive stance of 'knowledge is power' (Bacon, 1597, as cited in Azamfirei, 2016), Foucault's notion is that the relationship between power and knowledge means that certain knowledge is suppressed, and other knowledge is produced. These notions of power and knowledge change and adapt with time, allowing new knowledge to emerge that would not have been possible in previous eras.

Foucault argues that power and knowledge are not able to be separated even in principle; they can never exist separately. When one speaks of power, one also speaks of knowledge by default, and vice versa. There is never mere power or mere knowledge; there is only power *and* knowledge. Those who generate knowledge and have it accepted are only able to do so because of their forms of power. These power relations allow some things to be said and disallow others, aligning with Said's (1978) postcolonial theory of Orientalism in which subjects deeply believe in what 'power' tells them, thus reinforcing societal positions.

Said's (1978) theorising has been drawn on in the development of postcolonial theory by many contemporary scholars such as Gayatri Spivak (1993). The theory is based on the false image of the Orient that has been constructed by Western writers, philosophers, theorists and administrators. He asserts that the study of Orientalism was used to justify the domination of the East by the West which impeded the works of Orientalists (those who studied the Orient) by recasting the term Orientalism to be a codeword for prejudice, racism and oppression.

Said used the terms Orient meaning East and Occident meaning West. However, the term Orient is not referring to an arbitrary geographic location. Rather, it is a notion of 'difference' from Western cultures and societies (Clines, 2020). In Said's theory, to be of the Orient equates to being Other, and being Other equates to being seen as a homogenous group. Husserl (2013) positioned the Other as constituting an epistemological problem, or an alter ego which is only a perception of the consciousness of the Self. The study of Orientalism was not an objective one; knowledge about the East is generated, not through facts, but through imagined 'Eastern' societies as being fundamentally similar and sharing characteristics not possessed by the 'West'. Said, unlike Foucault, established that knowledge is

definitively power. The Orient was studied, so those being studied (the Other) were the observed or the subject, positioning scholars from the West as the observers. The Orient (East) was passive, and the Occident (West) was active (Said, 1978). The Orient was a hegemonic 'European invention' that had nothing to do with actual reality and played a major role in determining the prevailing discourse of empire and conquest (Said, 1978). By setting up the practice of 'Othering', it establishes non-Western peoples as being in an oppressed position. The knowledge that the Occident uses and asserts by studying the Other and creating policies based on those assumed knowledges, results in the conception of knowledge as power. The Occident holds the knowledge, thus maintaining their position through political domination.

A key component of the theory is that people who study the Orient cannot help but to misrepresent the 'Other' due to being entrenched in the system that they come from. The 'Other' is a result of people's preoccupation with the 'Self' (Hegel, 1807/1977). Said advocated for members who fit the classification of being of the Orient, to speak for themselves. This is a point that I have grappled with throughout the research project. Said's scholarship can help to build what Burney (2012) determines as the pedagogy of the Other, in which postcolonial theory and praxis can bring non-Western cultures and scholarship from the margins to the centre of learning.

I find Foucault's position especially relatable as it is not about placing blame on the person who yields the power, but rather it is an important consideration about who holds power and how that influences what knowledges are accepted and whose are not accepted by society. Foucault's notion of power and relationships helps me to consider which viewpoints are included or excluded from being 'truth' or

‘knowledge’. Foucault’s framework has influenced this project when looking at both the design (how I interact with the data gathered so as to minimise the risk of my interpretation taking precedence over the knowledge my past students have shared with me, I need to continuously reflect on whether my interpretation of data gathered is being influenced by my power.

Also, since all knowledge is produced within shifting fields of power (Foucault, 1976), research must be historically engaged (Bhavnani, 1993). Foucault’s idea of knowledge being specific to a moment in time has directed this project towards a consideration of the historical structures in the past as opposed to now. The theory has also guided me to consider the historical context of power and knowledge and how that has played out through Australia’s education system over time.

Beyond asking who can be a knower and what can be known, it is important to consider how knowledge is created. Foucault and Said’s theories work together to provide the foundations for the knowledge building process of this research by facilitating a framework for me as the researcher to consider my conscious and unconscious assumptions and beliefs and to position knowledge gathered through data within a framework to consider what is truth and why it is considered truth. Is it truth *because of* relationships of power and knowledge, or is it truth *in spite of* relationships of power and knowledge?

2.2.2 Hegemony

Postcolonial hegemony has resulted in the maintenance of the overall domination of First Nations peoples in Australia. Hegemony is the preponderant influence of authority over others (Lentner, 2005). The concept of hegemony was coined by Antonio Gramsci during his long confinement during the Italian Fascist regime (Bates, 1975). The roots of hegemony are partly in Marxist ideals about the

pervasiveness of ideology, values and beliefs in reproducing class relations (Heywood, 1994). According to the concept of hegemony, cultural production is seen as a tool that secures the consent of the oppressed and thus maintains domination by the oppressors (Dremel & Matić, 2014). In modern days, we see a domination or ideological hegemony in which a ruling group establishes and maintains their domination (Robinson, 2005) by developing yardsticks for measurement or judgement that have been developed by those doing the dominating (Sarra, 2014). Critical scholars suggest that the consideration of hegemonic systems is required for systemic change (Aronowitz, 2013; Foucault, 1977; Giroux, 1991). As Attwood (2015) affirmed in his discussion about the paradox of Australian Aboriginal history, First Nations Australians should not be the object of inquiry, but rather the focus should be on the relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Discourse should be considered critically for its hegemonic presuppositions as this can precondition society, including those most impacted by this hegemonic state, to blame Others for their own oppression and failings (Dremel & Matić, 2014).

2.2.3 Racism

Racism has been evident within the school system, including in the construction of knowledge which informs curriculum content. As posited by Fahd and Venkatraman (2019), the link between racism and the history of early settlers is inextricable with colonisation practices such as forced labour and eviction from lands affecting Australia's First Nations peoples (Paradies, 2016). Racism can be evident in schools through actions such as name-calling, injury, taunting, insults, and physical attacks. It can sometimes be hard to differentiate the abuse between racist violence and bullying (Priest et al., 2016). Of even more perturbation, racism is

systemic and structural, being embedded in systems, laws, policies and practices and permeates all sectors of society (Braveman et al., 2022). The impact on students from racism can be either direct or indirect and result in students being discriminated against from accessing services and participating in sport, learning or social activities (Fahd & Venkatraman, 2019; Priest et al., 2016).

There is an international experience of “the devaluing and subjugation of Indigenous knowledges in colonised, Western schooling” (McKnight et al., 2018, p. 1). This is evident in Madden’s (2015) study that examined how the negative experiences of racism in schools of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can result in the exclusion of Indigenous knowledges. On the other hand, “schools that work effectively with Aboriginal students are characterised by strong leadership that is committed to confronting and working against covert discourse that disenfranchise Aboriginal students and families” (Gollan & Malin, 2012, p. 325).

Students can value their identity, ability to learn and culture when learning in a Western education system which may reinforce connections and similarities (Wilson, 2008) but would require the state allowing something from the margins to be included within the dominant mainstream (Vass, 2012). Ideas of culture can become code for ‘race’ and when used under this context that can become harmful with some using the term ‘culture’ to signify individuals who do not value education or cannot comprehend Standard Australian English (SAE) (Madden, 2015). When adequate cultural education is lacking, students can “encounter many misconceptions and stereotypes concerning Indigenous culture and communities” (Bobongie, 2017, p. 134). Students have reported a hesitation to engage in class discussions as they can be afraid of giving the wrong answer and being singled out for their Indigeneity (Bobongie, 2017). These factors internal to the education system, may impact on

students' future career and study choices (Gool & Patton, 1999), thus, there is a need for teacher training to provide teachers the opportunity to experience "how teaching and learning occur in an Indigenous world" (Tanaka, 2009, p. 19).

2.2.4 Discourse of education

Research is interwoven with colonisation and the problematisation of Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). To date, Indigenous education discourse has been dominated by non-Indigenous scholars (Vass, 2012) which acts to continue silencing and marginalising those with less powerful voices (Hall, 2007). Indigenous Australians are under-represented in the higher education sector (Coates et al., 2021) with approximately 430 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander academics in universities across Australia (Thunig & Jones, 2021). In 2013, when looking at the spread of Indigenous academics across faculties, only just over 10 percent worked in the field of Education, the second lowest out of the five defined faculties (ATSIHEAC, n.d.). With non-Indigenous researchers like myself reporting on a topic that impacts directly on First Nations peoples, especially while voices like mine are overrepresented, careful consideration needs to be made about the messages conveyed through this discourse.

In Australia's modern history, the schooling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been framed in terms of a deficit in public discourses. Discourses are a means of representing a subject that produces meaningful knowledge influencing social practice with real consequences (Hall, 2007; Vass, 2012). Language is a form of social practice (Wodak, 2005) that is socially and historically related to its context making it both socially shaped and socially shaping of the speech community who own it (Hassen, 2015; Resta, 1998).

Whilst discourses can be a reinforcer of the status quo of social systems, they can also be a facilitator of social change (Fairclough, 2003; Hassen, 2015).

Influencing the discourse surrounding First Nations education, politicians and policymakers have committed to 'close the gap' and the 'progress' of this agenda is routinely disseminated to the public via the media which consistently frames the identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a narrative of deficiency (Dawson et al., 2021; Fforde et al., 2013; Vass, 2012). Most significantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are centrally impacted by this discourse by being categorised and some, in turn, self-identifying as 'Other' (Buxton, 2017; Fogarty et al., 2018; Vass, 2012).

The notion of the 'Other' was conceived by Edward Said and was transmitted through his work 'Orientalism' (1977) which is widely viewed as his postcolonial canon. The term 'Other' represented the Occident as the 'Self' and the Orient as the 'Other' with the geographical line between the Occident and the Orient being an arbitrary one. Said considered the Self to be privileged, thus being able to define and reconstruct the 'Other' as being passive, silent and weak (Moosavinia et al., 2011; Said, 1977).

The concept of the 'Other' has transcended to 'Othering'. Through the action of 'Othering', you are excluding and displacing a group of people to the margins of society (Mountz, 2009; Rohleder, 2014). 'Othering' can result in students being unable to create meaningful academic identities and can have negative effects on students' education by making them feel as though there is a gap between 'normal' and 'Indigenous' ways of life, and that they do not belong or are not on the same level as their peers (Borrero et al., 2012; Rogers & Biddle, 2015), or according to

Said's (1977) conjecture, the students are defined and reconstructed as being passive, silent and weak.

In the Indigenous education domain, non-Indigenous student outcomes are often referred to as the benchmark (Buxton, 2017) leading to a reinforcement of the notion of 'deficiency' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and simultaneously a sense of non-Indigenous superiority. In a study investigating primary teachers' perceptions of their capacity to demonstrate proficiency in Aboriginal pedagogy, history and perspectives as part of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, Buxton (2017) found that the deficit positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remains evident with teacher-participants discussing Indigenous students as 'underachieving' and staff needing to 'close the gap'. Underachievement is when "general academic achievement is at a level significantly below that which is predicted by the students' intelligence quotient" (Gross, 2002, p. 225) or when their potential is less than their actual potential in the classroom (Chaffey et al., 2003).

Both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander critical theorists have proposed a number of alternative approaches. Despite their pedagogical differences, Chris Sarra and Noel Pearson, both renowned for their work within the field of Indigenous education, have advised of the necessity to be aware of the destructive effect of a discourse of deficiency which assumes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are automatically underachievers at school (Pearson, 2014; Sarra, 2011). In a proposal to change the narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, Fogarty et al. (2018) suggest Australia should take note of the direction that New Zealand took when, after not seeing success in health outcomes for the Maori population, the

government moved from a deficit framework to a strengths-based approach. When considering the classroom, habits of the dominant culture are too often privileged to the detriment of other cultural ways of knowing (Tanaka, 2016). Similarly, Perso (2012) suggests a need in educational discourse to use a strengths-based approach while recognising the distinct identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Further, as an alternative to educational practices that regularly position the outcomes of non-Indigenous persons and their knowledges as the objective, Nakata (2001) has espoused the cultural interface theory in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'lifeworlds' are the starting point before extending learners through the overlap of non-local realities, counteracting deficit views of culture. This consideration of a critical perspective on the discourse of education is important on two fronts. Initially, I have reflected on this throughout the course of this study to consider the position I am taking and that it does not place non-Indigenous student outcomes and choices as the benchmark. In a broader sense, the importance of a critical discourse is important for this study as there has been no direct investigation into the impact this deficit discourse has on student decisions about pathway options in senior school and whether these discourses become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which students believe that one particular pathway is the only option available to them.

2.3 Societal impacts

The history of "invasion, dispossession, and social exclusion has shaped the lives of Indigenous peoples" (Helme, 2005, p. 169). Helme (2005) posits that racism that is experienced within society impacts on students' career aspirations. Studies have identified structural racism, such as a failure to acknowledge the culture of Indigenous peoples within the everyday practices of the school, and low

expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016; Cubillo, 2019; de Plevitz, 2007; Gannaway et al., 2021; Riley & Pidgeon, 2019;).

2.3.1 Remoteness

The population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been gradually shifting toward major cities yet remain more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to live outside of urban centres. In 2016, almost 1 in 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons live in remote (7%) and very remote (12%) areas compared to around 1 in 100 non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018). The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia describes remote and very remote locations as having very little accessibility of goods, services and opportunities for social interaction (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2022).

Jones (2002) posits that a person's residential geography can impact on their educational outcomes. The 2020 Closing the Gap report asserts that "the more remote a community, the poorer the levels of education engagement and attainment" (p. 38). This is supported by the statistics of 63.2 percent of Australians living in remote areas attaining Year 12 certification in 2021 as opposed to 79.1 percent of Australians in major cities (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.f). Higher education qualifications can also be affected by remoteness. Whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are more likely to have certificate level qualifications than undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications regardless of remoteness, those living in non-remote areas are nearly three times more likely to attain a bachelor's degree or postgraduate qualification (ABS, 2019).

Research suggests there are a number of societal factors associated with living in a remote community that may contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander pathway choices. One of the most commonly discussed factors is the availability of employment in their home communities. Perso (2012) indicates the limitations on the availability of jobs being due to the realities of many communities and how this may then result in a higher importance being placed on the employment-based skills obtained through a vocational education. Further to this, Guenther et al. (2017) found that the primary purpose of education for Indigenous peoples living in remote communities are identity, being strong in both worlds, and lastly preparation for employment. Many studies indicated finances as a key determinant in post-schooling pathway choices; intergenerational unemployment, debt through student loans, the cost of relocation, unaffordable accommodation options and the high cost of transport all impacted on student choices for post-schooling pathways (Fleming & Grace, 2015; Golding et al., 2007; Helme, 2005; Kinnane et al., 2014; Parkinson & Jones, 2019; Wilks & Wilson, 2012).

2.3.2 Language

Another factor that may influence year 11 and 12 pathway decisions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities is language. In 2016, 9.8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples spoke a language other than Standard Australian English (SAE) as a first language (ABS, 2020). Of those who speak English as an additional language, less than 50% reported speaking SAE very well as opposed to nearly 70% of those who live in non-remote locations (ABS, 2020). It is noted in ABS data that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Creoles are not adequately represented as some may not know the name of the language they speak or it may be a new contact language, so these percentages may be inaccurate (ABS, 2020).

Of the 74 recognised First Nations communities in Australia, the majority (27) are found in Queensland. Of these, all except 3 are in the northern Queensland region. (Australian Government Indigenous, n.d.). There has been considerable research conducted specifically about the language ecology of northern Queensland, much of this research has been instigated and facilitated by the Language Perspectives team of linguists and teachers on behalf of the Indigenous Schooling Support Unit in Education Queensland. Traditionally, there were 50 languages that were spoken by First Nations groups across Queensland (Angelo & Carter, 2015). Because of Queensland's history of colonisation resulting in Indigenous peoples being dispersed across the state, a large number of English-lexified creoles or non-standard dialects of English are spoken by school-aged children today (Dixon & Angelo, 2014; McIntosh et al., 2012). Unique to Queensland, this was enhanced on two fronts in the mid 1800s by the pastoral frontier spreading north in the 1840s moving an English-based pidgin with it (Dutton, 1983) and the maritime-based industries moving language and dialects through coastal communities (Tryon & Charpentier, 2004). These movements contributed to Queensland's linguistic situation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the state (Angelo & Carter, 2015).

First Nations peoples have been 'educated' in the language of the colonists since the arrival of Europeans. The first recorded instance of the teaching of English language to an Aboriginal man was in 1789 with the capture and English education of Bennelong by Governor Arthur Phillip (Heiss & McCormack, 2002). Today, SAE continues to be the dominant 'mainstream' and national language (Angelo & Carter, 2015). In Australian schools today, not only is learning accessed through SAE, but also achievement is demonstrated through it (ACARA, 2014). In schools specifically,

the state-wide curriculum implements an undifferentiated English-medium instruction (Angelo, 2013).

There is a societal view that being an Aboriginal English (AE) speaker hinders academic progress (Freeman & Staley, 2018). The reinforcement of this notion through the media was also noted by Sharifian (2008) through a survey reported in The Australian newspaper (Bank, 2006) which stated “English needs to be adequately taught to Aboriginal students to break the cycle of academic failure, chronic absenteeism and low retention rates”.

Struggling with SAE language literacy levels can potentially affect all facets of academic learning (Purdie & Buckley, 2010). If an education system assumes that speakers of an Aboriginal English are speakers of SAE, they will be at a disadvantage (Malcolm, 2013). Students are often taught by teachers who are not trained in linguistic awareness and English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) awareness (Angelo, 2013). For students who are attending schools outside of their home communities, the support for additional language learning and teachers’ awareness of students’ linguistic backgrounds may be further limited (McIntosh et al., 2012; Shnukal, 2002). First Nations peoples have produced varying forms of AE through a reconfiguration of English language within Indigenous language(s) structures (Munro & Mushin, 2016). Aboriginal Englishes vary to Standard Australian Englishes by degree on a continuum with some having phonology nearly identical to the local traditional Indigenous language (Butcher, 2008), and others having only slight differences with sounds, grammar, words and their meanings (Butcher, 2008; NSW Government Education Standards Authority, n.d.). Yet some SAE speakers, including teachers, might judge an AE speaker as using bad, lazy or incorrect English (Butcher, 2008; Khamchuang et al., 2022).

If a student is in a setting without appropriate linguistic support, it places them at a disadvantage. It has been shown that there is a link to outcomes for First Nations students' ability to communicate in the classroom and to acquire vocabulary associated with specific curriculum areas (Edmonds-Wathen, 2015; Mushin et al., 2013). The impact is exemplified through an interview with a year 11 student who discussed how she was unable to keep up with the class due to English being her fourth language, thus needing to change from an academic pathway to a vocational one (Bobongie, 2017, p. 3). This is why one of the research sub-questions is to investigate in what ways and to what extent a student's linguistic background will impact on the decision-making process about senior schooling pathways by First Nations students from remote communities.

2.3.3 Shame

Another area that is evident in the literature surrounding First Nations education in general is the concept of 'shame'. Students at schools experience shame in multiple ways innately through the learning process (Koelwyn, 2018). The meaning of shame can be viewed through multiple lenses linguistically, culturally and academically. Specifically through a cultural lens, the connotation can differ between Western ways of viewing, and First Nations peoples' concepts of shame.

From a Western standpoint, shame is a self-focused social threat system founded in a person's need to prove themselves acceptable to others (Gilbert, 2003). Internationally, the concept of shame and its role in education has been written about across different nationalities and cultures (Dache et al., 2019; Russell, 2022; Thomas Flores, 2019). Of particular interest is Koelwyn's (2018) research focussed on the act of reconciliation being a response to the historical shame derived from the education provided through residential institutions that was forced on the First

Nations peoples of Canada. Koelwyn argued for making shame a social, ethical and pedagogical project in the education space as a way of 'unsettling settler shame'. Closer to home, the understanding of shame as being a fear of failure features in much literature about the education of First Nations Australians (Louth, 2012; Martin, 2006), particularly when studying the teaching of English as an additional language (Sharifian, 2005; Wigglesworth & Billington, 2013).

From a cultural standpoint, Shame is different from Western conceptions and is embedded in the dispositions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Jorgensen, 2019). Yunkaporta (2009) provides an example of First Nations literature engaging with the concept of shame, in his description of shame as being a cultural necessity for Indigenous Australians as it helps with balance, groundedness and protocol. In the literature, experiences of shame are attributed to factors including novelty of experience (Butcher, 2008; Harkins, 1990; Sharifian, 2005), being singled out (Butcher, 2008; Sharifian, 2005), internalised racism (Kwok, 2012), being forced to not conform to social obligations (Maher, 1999), and responding to colonising power dynamics (Kwok, 2012; Wigglesworth & Billington, 2013). The term shame is so common in First Nations students' discussions about education that a large organisation with a goal of Indigenous student engagement, Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME), has a key rule for its participants: 'No shame at AIME' (McKnight et al., 2018).

Schools are designed to assess and differentiate students through normalising judgements (Foucault, 1995). Thus, the western education system has contributed to the production of shame within Indigenous educational contexts (McKnight et al., 2018). This issue with how shame is frequently cast as a barrier for First Nations students when accessing education (Grace & Trudgett, 2012; Martin,

2006) is that the placement of shame back on students hinders their relational contexts with schooling (McKnight et al., 2020). Similarly to Koelwyn's (2018) research proposing education in Canada as a potential site for working through historical shame, in Australia researchers have proposed repositioning concepts of shame to work in unison with education affecting First Nations students. McKnight et al. (2018) argue that rather than seeing shame as a negative, it could be repositioned to better align with cultural educational practice. In an effort to do this, AIME mentoring program communicates that there is no shame in being Indigenous and doing well at school (McKnight et al., 2018) in an attempt to balance the acknowledgement of shame as a cultural necessity (Yunkaporta, 2009) and addressing shared shame about one's culture that has stemmed from colonisation effects of internalised racism (Kwok, 2012; McKnight et al., 2018).

From my Western viewpoint, I am unable to completely understand the concept of shame from an Indigenous perspective. However, this study hears from past students about their experiences and has presented an opportunity to see how shame interacts with student relationships and in turn may impact on pathway choices.

2.3.4 Cultural events

When looking at possible social influences for First nations students from remote locations, it is not just geographic isolation that needs to be considered; just as significant is the cultural distance students experience (Guenther et al., 2019). Schools that are operating on a Western-style system may have opposing views to families about the necessity of returning home for cultural events such as 'Sorry Business'. Schools may expect students to return swiftly, not understanding the cultural importance of the event, whereas family may expect students to remain

absent for some time. This clash in expectations may leave students unable to meet the responsibilities of either party (Gray & Beresford, 2001; Rogers & Biddle, 2016). It has been reported that such events may impact on attendance and retention, especially for boarding students when you add travel into the mix (Rogers & Biddle, 2016). In addition to the grief such events would naturally cause, the consequences of the need for extended travel may result in missed school work, increased stress and noticing teacher frustration about the missed learning (Rogers & Biddle, 2016) and may impact on undertaking training pathways (Wheatley & Spillane, 2001).

There is minimal information about the impact that 'Sorry Business' and other cultural practices and obligations have on remote First Nations students in education. The literature available acknowledges the importance of cultural practices for First Nations peoples (Bennett et al., 2018) but also recognises that these required absences may impact negatively (Rogers & Biddle, 2016). It is not my intention to assert that these practices need to change, as it is not my belief, nor my right to do so as a non-Indigenous researcher. However, consideration of the impact of such practices is important to consider when looking at a holistic view of what might be happening with senior schooling pathway choices. The knowledge that prolonged absences due to cultural circumstances may be because of incompatibilities between formal schooling systems and the life circumstances of the students (Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017) is not being examined in this research as a reason to limit cultural practices, but rather to consider how it might impact choices and what could happen from the school end to facilitate a less bumpy return to engagement in school and goals.

2.3.5 Resilience

Resilience is an area that often arises in teacher dialogue about their students (Dryden et al., 1998; Johnson, 2008). Resilience can be defined as a process 'characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development' (Masten, 2001, p. 228). Literature about resilience is focused on both the mental health and well-being of students and the academic implications of resilience. A major study about resilience focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools in Queensland was developed in response to increased suicide risk and investigated the impact of mentoring intervention to increase psychosocial resilience (McCalman et al., 2016). Specifically about educational resilience, social and academic competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and sense of purpose are identified as individual resilience factors (Waxman et al., 2003).

Research also tells us that relationships are key to a young person's resilience with importance placed on a secure relationship with a supportive adult, access to role models and positive school networks (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; McCalman & Bainbridge, 2021; Wright et al., 2013). A study about psychosocial resilience and vulnerability in Aboriginal youth in Western Australia found that prosocial friendships and living near family members provided protection from the effects of harsh parenting and exposure to family violence (Hopkins et al., 2018). Research shows that for First Nations students, resilience may not be situated internally within an individual, but within their relational system (Langham et al., 2018; McCalman & Bainbridge, 2021).

Questions about the systemic implications of resilience and consideration about the cost of resilience is also addressed through theoretical work. McCalman

and Bainbridge (2021) argue that whilst schools are ideal sites for resilience intervention, rather than the common focus on enhancing individual's ability to cope after a negative event, they should be building resilience systemically by accounting for individual's cultural, social and historical contexts and ascribing significance to a power analysis. Considerations of the suffering endured in order to build resilience is an important consideration (Bottrell, 2013; Luthar, 1993). Considerations should be made about how much adversity must be tolerated before systemic features, rather than individuals, are provided intervention (Bottrell, 2013).

2.3.6 Relationships

The literature shows us that relationships are a key contributor to outcomes and decisions made by First Nations students in the school setting. Relatedness affects an individual's motivation and behaviour (Martin & Dowson, 2009). In particular for students, positive relations with families, teachers and peers promote feelings of self-worth (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) which facilitates achievement motivation (Covington, 2002). The construction of relationships can either subordinate or empower students (Darder, 2012). For First Nations students specifically, relationships are vital when considering their holistic worldviews that place people in relationship with each other and the world (Mika, 2017) and can aid in healing deep historical and intergenerational trauma (Westerman & Meyer, 2016). The Coolangatta Statement was a means of representing the collective voice of Indigenous peoples internationally about ways to reform and transform education for Indigenous peoples. Despite the Coolangatta Statement being ratified just before the turn of the 21st century, its principles of aspiration as articulated by Indigenous peoples remain relevant today (Vass & Hogarth, 2022). Specifically, clause 2.4.1 asserts, among other things, Indigenous pedagogies are holistic and connected and

that they promote cooperative and unified learning (Morgan et al., 2006). The goals students adopt, and the way these goals are expressed, are not independent of the influence of the relationships students have with teachers, peers, and parents. This research has provided an opportunity to consider the relational contexts that might impact on student pathway choices.

The literature identified "the importance of the relationship between the students and staff" (Donovan, 2015, p. 615). Teacher relationships and understandings can have a positive impact such as in the study by Bobongie (2017) in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students thrived on the academic component of the school due to the expectation of achievement. Sarra et al. (2020) recognised one of the keys to a high-expectations educational agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is positive teacher-student relationships. However, in some cases students did not feel teachers expected much of them academically (Bobongie, 2017, p. 131) including instances in which teachers attributed academic struggles as reflecting a trait of the students' 'Aboriginality' (Mander et al., 2015). Also, in a study conducted with teachers at a school in Western Australia, teachers themselves identified the importance of their relationships with their students in recognising that if a relationship is not established it can cause disengagement from school activities (Thackrah et al., 2022).

Family connections also play an important role in student decisions with studies revealing a strong sense of responsibility for families and community (Ellis et al., 2008; Fleming & Grace, 2015; Kinnane et al., 2014). For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, educational aspiration is seen as a collective process (Osborne & Guenther, 2013) with the entire family working together for the child to attend school. According to Helme (2005), this may cause the student to feel

guilty for using the family resources which may impact on deciding to undertake a pathway that will lead to paid employment sooner. Families and communities may also be wary about future academic study with Smith et al., (2017) finding that some Elders preferred the young in the community to stay at home rather than undertake tertiary study because of the danger of city life. Their research then provided a specific example of a secondary school student being offered a university place on the other side of Australia but not wanting to take it up as she did not want to move away from her home, family, or Country. Bobongie's (2017) interviews indicated that looking after younger siblings far outweighed the importance of getting an education and it is not unusual to find that some students do not return to school after going back to the family home for school holidays (Bobongie, 2017). This importance of family and community is supported through vocational pathways which are often seen as "having a broader community-building role" (Helme, 2005, p. 175). Alternatively, of course, there are students who believe that the challenges faced within the community might be better navigated by those with a further education and who want to pursue an academic pathway, such as the Torres Strait Islander student who spoke of her desire to complete further studies leading to a career as a social worker in order to give back her services and skills to her community (Bobongie, 2017).

One of the key relationships that are developed in a young person's life is that with their peers (Rohrbeck & Garvin, 2014). In a study where youth aged 15 to 19 were asked to rate their relationships, 83% rated friendships as being either important or very important which was higher than their relationships with family (79%) (Tiller et al., 2020). Sometimes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, these peer relationships are seen in the research as a negative; in a study

about the Australian criminal justice system, peer relations was in the top two predictors for recidivism (Dellar et al., 2022). In a study specifically about Australian Indigenous youth, Groome and Hamilton (1995) found that when First Nations students are unable to develop positive teacher-student relationships, they can develop group identities that are influenced by pressures on each other where a climate is established in which achievement is regarded as a ‘shame job’. The development of positive relationships is key as Winch (2016), through exploring student engagement at a primary school level, identified a lack of connection with peers as being an impediment to school engagement. Peer relationships are especially important to students in a boarding context and research shows that boarding institutions are proactive at encouraging those connections through activities and social events (Mander et al., 2015). Yet students revealed through conversations with researchers that they found it easier to relate to other Indigenous students and rely on the support of their fellow First Nations students to navigate life at both boarding and school (Mander, et al., 2015).

The societal structures that First Nations peoples are situated in have a very real and specific impact on students from remote communities and their education in general. Some of these areas such as language have had significant research conducted about them (Angelo, 2013; Freeman & Staley, 2018; Nakata, 2023; Webb & Williams, 2017). However, there are gaps in this knowledge specifically about how these social and cultural factors relate to and impact on senior schooling of Indigenous students from remote communities and the pathway choices they make. Some of these gaps have been investigated, especially through the narrative with past students and staff. By seeking the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their experiences of the impact of these societal components,

this research has sought to reveal the context of such societal effects on choices made.

2.4 Systemic impacts

2.4.1 Historical context

The well-known quote 'Knowledge is power' (Bacon, 1597, as cited in Azamfirei, 2016) is regularly descried in modern day pop-culture. But what is that knowledge? Whose knowledge is given precedence above others? Knowledge is "not innocent but is profoundly connected with the operations of power" (Said, 1995). For generations in Australia the education system has been one in which people in power make decisions based on their values system of what knowledge/s are important (Towney, 2021) and education has become a powerful tool for the coloniser (Herbert, 2012). Thus, the education of all students has been, and continues to be, presented from a colonised view of the world (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012).

The history of the education of First Nations students has seen major shifts in policy since its inception in 1788 (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012). In the initial years of Western invasion, Australia went through a period of 'eradication' in which there was a focus on the elimination of the Indigenous population (Rogers & Bain, 2016). From 1837, according to Patrick and Moodie (2016), the nation has seen five major policy eras: the 'protection era' in which Indigenous peoples were trained as domestic workers living with Christian ideals and in accordance with British law, the 'segregation era' in which Indigenous peoples were both controlled and segregated from society, the 'assimilation era' in which First Nations peoples were forced to adopt non-Indigenous ways of being and which resulted in the forced removal of children, the 'integration era' in which the value of Indigenous cultures and identities

began to be recognised, and the ‘self-determination era’ which realised First Nations peoples’ right to preserve identity and ways of being.

It was after the 1967 referendum recognising Aboriginal peoples as part of the Australian nation (Attwood, 2007; Lippmann, 1994), that both state and federal governments began to produce more progressive policies that impacted First Nations education (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012) and culminated in the self-determination era as described by Patrick and Moodie (2016). However, there are now contentions that we are in an additional era of First Nations education: ‘normalisation’, which is focused on statistical equality and accountability to the state (Sullivan, 2011) and in turn, a reduction in autonomy (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Patrick & Moodie, 2016). This era is encapsulated by the federal government’s ongoing ‘progress’ reports, vis-à-vis, ‘Closing the Gap’, by which First Nations peoples may positively expect the same living conditions as all Australians, whilst contrarily also resulting in a possible loss of identity due to an expectation of conformity with the ‘mainstream’ (Patrick & Moodie, 2016; Sullivan, 2011).

Some argue that there is an absence in the education domain of a critical engagement with the past and how it impacts the present (Brown, 2018; Tuck & Gaztambide- Fernández, 2013). However, the literature recognises that Australia’s colonial past and continued racism impacts on the achievement of outcomes for First Nations Australians (Gray & Beresford, 2008) and that there is an intergenerational legacy that impacts on the education of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in the present (Hogarth, 2016; Maxwell et al., 2018; Rudolph, 2016). A major moment in Australian history, the forced removal of children, has created repercussions within education that has been minimally considered in official discourse (Gray & Beresford, 2008; Rudolph, 2016).

Colonial governments in Australia have removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families for the purpose of instilling 'western values' and 'work habits'. These children were placed in dormitories on reserves or at special training facilities at a young age (Smith, 2009). Historical reasoning for this position of a non-Indigenous way of life as being superior for an effective education can be seen in the words of Duncan, member of the National Board of Education in the 19th century:

> So absolute is the control of the parents or elder relatives of the children over all their acts, and so numerous the ceremonies, sports, and exercises from which they dare not absence themselves, that unless the connection between the old and the young is completely severed – an act so repugnant at first view of all our social and political notions – there is I am convinced no human possibility of civilising … the race. (Fletcher, 1988, as cited in Reynolds, 2009).

During the protectionist era, the Chief Protector was assigned responsibility for First Nations peoples' welfare and thus had the power to control Indigenous peoples. Missionaries were established and children were separated from their families and placed in dormitories, training institutes or non-Indigenous homes as part of a 'civilisation project' (Smith, 2009). For those who were placed on missions in Queensland, they were placed at local farms and stations at 12 years of age on mandatory twelve-month work contracts (Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland, 2017). The boarding structures enforced through missions continued throughout the first half of the 20th century with a focus of training boys for basic labour and girls for domestic work. No academic training beyond the level of a non-Indigenous 10 year old was provided (Smith, 2009).

In 2018, the gap in attendance rates between First Nations students and non-Indigenous students in secondary school was at 14 percentage points (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2019). A factor that can contribute to this lower attendance rate is a lack of facilities within a reasonable distance to young peoples' homes (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2001). This structural inequity means that for students from remote communities, studying in an environment connected to family/community, language, and culture is often not possible, adding to the complexities of pursuing an education that is fit for purpose.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities continue today to be likely to attend boarding school as it is one of the few options available if wishing to pursue secondary education due to limited access to full secondary schooling within their home communities (Benveniste et al., 2015; Guenther et al., 2017; O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020; Rogers, 2017). The use of boarding schools can be viewed as an ongoing technology of colonialism with often the 'brightest and best Indigenous students' from remote communities being enrolled in boarding schools and often not returning to live until adulthood, thus impacting on the structure of communities (Rogers & Biddle, 2015). In 2017, 5200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, supported by the receipt of ABSTUDY support, attended boarding schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Today's boarding schools are generally, but not entirely, administered by church schools and are sometimes seen as only catering to 'elites of Indigenous communities' (Smith, 2009). Issues of funding may sway whether a school takes on First Nations students. In a submission to an inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, a Prep to Year 12 day and boarding school that provides a holistic educational model predominantly for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

students from remote communities posited that funding models posed a risk to the school's viability to provide education for those most at need: "Under the current funding model, enrolling the most needy and difficult students imposes the risk of taking on an unfunded student and a financial burden which is then placed on the school, risking the school's viability" (Murray, 2016, p. 24).

The research surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' experiences in contemporary boarding schools in Australia is limited (Rogers, 2017) and primarily focuses on the impacts of the resilience and wellbeing of students (Mander & Lester, 2017; McCalman et al., 2016; Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017), yet the findings about the role that boarding plays on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities is not definitive. In a study that examined racism and health outcomes for young Aboriginal peoples living in remote localities of the Northern Territory, Priest et al. (2011) found that self-reported racism was associated with health outcomes including anxiety, depression, suicide risk and poor mental health. However, the same study also revealed that those young people who had attended boarding school were less likely to report racism, dissociating the impact of boarding on a young person's mental health outcomes. Alternatively, other research has established detrimental consequences for social and emotional health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending boarding schools (Gee, 2016; O'Bryan, 2016) and challenges with their identity (Bobongie, 2017; Mander et al., 2015; O'Bryan, 2016). The findings of a study conducted in response to the increased suicide risk that had been identified in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with no secondary schooling provision in their remote home communities attending boarding schools across Queensland focused on the transitioning of students to

boarding schools. In contrast to the study by Priest et al. (2011), it was found that transitioning students were often confronted with institutional discrimination and racism and faced major life changes including language, autonomy, expectations, parental influence, personal freedom and relationships (McCalman et al., 2016). Additional impacts may be felt from limited access to facilities and difficulties with living away from home (Helme, 2005). Of further concern is the finding that as students transitioned back to community after boarding school, an even lower sense of connection to peers and family and a lower resilience and psychosocial wellbeing level was reported (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2017).

With further studies required to address the social and emotional effects of students from remote communities attending a boarding school, the reasons for the compulsion to attend boarding schools needs to be addressed. There are “complex and sometimes conflicting needs of the young person, the family and the school” (Meredith & Ryan, 2014, p. 39) with some stakeholders in Western Australia who were interviewed about the reasons for sending their children to boarding school indicating that they perceive it as an opportunity to access post-school destinations, a step towards gaining the skills to enter the workforce, or simply a way to ‘extend themselves’ (Mander, 2015; Mander et al., 2015). Emerging from the literature is the theme of ‘opportunity’ (Mander et al., 2015) conceptualised as the ability to participate in Australia’s education system, but how these opportunities are translated into senior secondary pathway choices is an area that has not yet been researched (Guenther et al., 2017).

There is little discussion in the research literature about the role that policy plays on boarding in general (Guenther et al., 2017) and no attempt to theorise the foundations of boarding programmes (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018). Research into

relevant policy is needed to indicate if schools are effectively crossing thresholds of power that perpetuate historical means of assimilating Indigenous peoples into dominant societies (Bobongie, 2017) and whether this position through policy impacts on student pathway choices.

2.4.2 Education System

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled at boarding schools are participants of a system that has been in place since the beginning of colonisation, and that impacts on their learning in general and ultimately the choices they make about schooling pathways in senior school. In a qualitative study of Palawa school students in Tasmania, researchers found that academic achievement declined as students progressed through school, evidencing that when First Nations students' outcomes decline progressively throughout their schooling years, it is more likely linked to schooling and policy environments than the students themselves (Stone et al., 2017).

All schools in Australia are both advised and directed through external policy. Policy is a means for governing bodies to address public affairs including education (Hogarth, 2018) and to change behaviours and values (Le Grand, 1997). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Handbook on Education Policy Analysis (UNESCO, 2013) defines education policy as "the main goals and priorities pursued by the government in matters of education – at the sector and subsector levels" (p. 6). The oppressive history of education for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is well documented (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016) and has been exemplified through Government mandated policies such as the Clean, Clad and Courteous policy, the Exclusion on Demand policy, and those in the 1970s which were

developed for “social control” (Blackmore & Hugh, 2011, p. 191). Researchers have investigated a variety of historical and contemporary policies related to Indigenous education (Hogarth, 2018) and these have, in the main, been defined by a narrative of deficit (Maddison, 2012; Partridge, 2013; Patrick & Moodie, 2016).

Policy is inevitably incomplete in terms of how it maps into practice (Ball, 2003) with policy theorists asserting that the intentions of policy makers may not relate to what actually happens (Ladwig, 1994). Regarding the persistence and retention of First Nations students in higher education, to date, institutional efforts have been largely piecemeal and poorly integrated (Martin et al., 2017). Similarly, internal structures of the school system are informed by externally mandated policies and internal school-based ones, some of which have been constructed specifically for the needs of, and about, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and others for all students regardless of cultural background, which nevertheless also impact on Indigenous students and their educational journey. Whilst some analysis has occurred on policies affecting Indigenous education, there is little evidence of policies specifically related to pathway choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities. As posited by Guenther et al. (2017), when theorising boarding school participation, policies in that area are limited, perhaps because of little empirical evidence and little discussion on the roles that policy plays, making it difficult to link policy to research. Similarly, external policies specifically related to pathway choices are limited.

Literature has appealed for changes to the support in education systems that accommodate the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Helme, 2005). Those who lack targeted support at their particular boarding college struggle to survive the education process (Bobongie, 2017). The

teaching of language and culture in schooling has been advocated (Parkinson & Jones, 2019) as has assistance in English, which is not always readily available, resulting in disadvantage for those who need the additional assistance (Bobongie, 2017). Students who have no access to tutoring and extra support continue to struggle, feeling that this impacts on their overall grades (Bobongie, 2017).

There is much research into the effect school curriculum has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with reports of schools not effectively collaborating with Aboriginal educational structures and knowledges (Lowe et al., 2014; McKnight et al., 2018; Parkinson & Jones, 2019). Throughout the process of European colonisation, the focus of boarding schools has been on training in domestic work or manual labour taking away the opportunities for Indigenous children to move into higher levels or classes of society (Smith, 2012) and there continues to be a push for schools to prioritise education for employability (Parkinson & Jones, 2019). Rather than a focus on the curriculum of a school purely being on preparing students to enter the workforce of their home communities, a locally relevant curriculum can instead focus on the specificities of context, to enable students to support community development and cultivate local entrepreneurial opportunities (Perso, 2012). State and school-level policies then need to be developed that encourage "culturally inclusive curricula, in which Aboriginal students can see themselves reflected in affirming and empowering ways" (Parkinson & Jones, 2019, p. 93). Further consideration is required about how such policies are applied in the context of boarding schools which face the additional challenge of implementing relevant curriculum as students enrolled often reside in a variety of communities with unique contexts. Further, if teachers have not previously taught in environments where Indigenous students make up the majority of the school

population they may find it difficult to see the importance of ensuring the curriculum is relevant, resulting in learning becoming disconnected from personal experiences and realities (Rogers & Biddle, 2015.).

In all aspects of education, the way in which policies are executed contributes to the educational outcomes of students (Burns et al., 2016; Viennet & Pont, 2017). This research originally aimed to investigate how policies are interpreted and how they are then practically implemented within the education system, but due to limited school involvement as discussed in the upcoming discussion chapter, and minimal awareness by past student participants of the processes they undertook during subject selections, the impact of policies on this decision-making process is an area that continues to warrant future study.

A systemic element tied to policies is the focus on 'outcomes' by governments. The impact of neoliberalism on schooling has resulted in a system of tests that measure "a set of skills defined within the dominant Anglo upper-middle-class practices of living" (Connell, 2013, p. 107). This push has redefined students as clients to be managed rather than citizens with rights (Altman & Fogarty, 2010). While the yearly Closing the Gap report holds governments responsible through monitoring and evaluating action on topics including the education of First Nations students from remote communities (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008), it is an example of a product of neoconservatism that has resulted in systemic implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples such as creating a performance management approach to Indigenous affairs (Humpage, 2008).

Likewise, related to government accountability measures, in today's neoliberal market in which there is a favour of free market competition coinciding with a reduction of government intervention (Carlquist & Phelps, 2014), schools are also

pressured to meet specific outcomes. The launch of the MySchool website in 2010, which publicly displays results from competitive testing, is produced into league tables (Connell, 2013) creating a competitive environment for schools. Research has shown that neoliberal strategies produce a culture of performativity (Ball, 2003) that reinforces discriminatory practices (Grimaldi, 2012). This research project has provided an opportunity to consider how Australia's education system might create a disaccord between school's focus on 'outcomes' and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to genuinely choose a senior schooling pathway that is what they want.

2.4.3 Pathways - VET vs ATAR

Australian schools offer a variety of pathways for those in Years 11 and 12, the two most common being a vocational pathway (certificate courses that can lead to a trade) and an academic pathway (which can act as a direct entry to university). As opportunity to engage in vocational training increased in schools in Australia, so did questions by education authorities about whether Vocational Education and Training (VET) in schools should be integrated into academic pathways by contributing towards university entrance or if it should operate solely as a means to employment or further vocational training (Teese & Polesel, 2003). Increasingly, states are addressing this tension by implementing a third option, such as the Western Australian 'general pathway' that leaves both post-schooling study and work options open (Kagi, 2019) so students are more readily prepared to pursue tertiary study or to enter the workforce upon completion of their secondary certificate of education. Queensland's recently introduced Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) system also allows the study of Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate III level or higher courses to contribute

towards the calculation of university entrance scores (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2022). This is a significant change to Queensland's previous (concluding in 2019) tertiary admission ranking system of Overall Positions (OPs) (Queensland Government, 2019).

Research makes evident that the number of Australian Indigenous students attending university is increasing (Pechenkina et al., 2011; Tehan, 2019). In a study investigating the future aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students in New South Wales, it was found that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students had similar occupational aspirations, whereas "Indigenous students were much less likely to aspire to attend university" (Gore et al., 2017, p. 165). Yet, societal influences mean that increasing the possibility of higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities "will not (necessarily) make higher education desirable" (Walter, 2015). Biddle and Cameron. (2012) found that fewer Indigenous students opt to study towards university entrance, but that if they do obtain an entrance score they are just as likely to attend university as non-Indigenous students. In recent times, universities have been engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary school students through outreach programs involving mentoring, school-based visits, campus visits and early engagement, all of which have been shown to positively affect student interest in future tertiary study (Curtis et al., 2012; Fray et al., 2020; Harwood et al., 2014; O'Shea et al., 2014; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). However, proportionally Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students entering university with the requisite scores is very small (Wilks & Wilson, 2015). Langworthy and Johns (2012) report that students admitted to university on the basis of previous VET studies, thus working through the demands of tertiary study before commencing university,

perform “as well if not better than all other student populations” (p. 118). Whereas, for those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who come straight from school with an alternative entry provision, Nakata et al. (2019) and Behrendt et al. (2012) posit that they can be underprepared for the academic demands of the teaching and learning environments of higher education. It is unclear if this lack of preparation is because university outreach programs need to be further developed or if it is due to schools primarily focusing on preparing students for the world of work as opposed to the world of study. Thus, alternative entry from Year 12 does not always equate with university success.

Research has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are twice as likely as their non-Indigenous peers to participate in vocational subjects, reflecting the increasing involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in VET courses overall (Helme, 2005; Misko et al., 2019; Wilks & Wilson, 2015). For all students, vocational studies can improve engagement with school and broaden future pathway options by providing workplace experience and pathways to employment (Helme, 2005). Australian schools have increasingly taken on the role as job trainers (Giroux, 2010). Job readiness is a key focus in educational policies in Australia (Thomson et al., 2020) evident through frameworks that prepare students for the future of work such as the Future Ready Strategy (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2022). In a study drawing on a survey of 20 000 young people and a qualitative study including interviews with 118 Indigenous VET in Schools students, it was found that regardless of Indigenous status, students reported enrolling in vocational pathways because “it was more practical and less academic” (Helme, 2005, p. 172).

With the proliferation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking vocational pathways at school, researchers interviewing stakeholders about their perceptions of vocational education have expressed concern about what seems to be a preference for VET pathways over an academic one because, whilst the benefits of vocational studies are well accepted, other educational opportunities may be forgone (Helme, 2005). Parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were also concerned about the potential of diminishing leadership possibilities and career aspirations as there was evidence that VET can act as a diversion from higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012) and that "some Indigenous students were being channelled by default into vocational pathways" (Helme, 2005, p. 179) continuing with past practices of high-achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students sometimes being counselled out of academic streams and into more practical subjects and classes in Years 9 and 10 (Groome & Hamilton, 1995).

The research details to some extent what pathway choices Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are making and what post-school educational providers are doing to support these decisions. Yet, it is still not evident specifically how these processes are guided and supported through the school system and the impact that this has on student decisions and whether school-based practices can ensure both pathways are an informed and voluntary option does not exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from their desired post-schooling direction.

2.5 Chapter summary

The aim of this review was to examine the literature related to First Nations students from remote communities studying at boarding schools and the pathway choices made in their senior years of education. This chapter has justified the need

for a critical discourse in both this study specifically and when discussing the education of First Nations peoples in general. It has also contextualised both the current school and boarding experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples historically and considered what is known about the senior schooling pathways available to students. The review also examined what the literature reveals about the historical impacts of education for students from remote communities and the current systemic situation that is seen today. This research recognises that whilst education is a technology of colonialism that preserves settler-society, it can also be a means for interrupting these circumstances (Vass & Hogarth, 2022).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explain the decisions made about the methodology used in conducting this research study that investigates the factors surrounding choices made about senior schooling pathways by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities who attend boarding schools in Queensland. The decision to use critical theory with a qualitative bricolage approach is discussed in this chapter. By implementing a qualitative bricolage approach, I was able to gain a holistic understanding of factors that impact on senior schooling pathway choices.

The chapter begins with an overview of the research design, especially including a consideration of the approach I have adopted and how it fits with my paradigmatic position that underlies the design of the project. I have then provided an outline of the data drawn on throughout the research followed by a description of each data source, including an overview of the data, a description of the participants, and an outline of the method of data collection and analysis. The chapter then moves into an important discussion about the trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations of the study as a consequential conclusion to the chapter.

3.2 Approach

3.2.1 Critical paradigm

As briefly discussed in the introduction chapter I have an awareness that my position in society as a non-Indigenous person and through my experiences both personally and professionally. Over time, reflecting on my view of the world I have established and settled into a critical paradigm. The acknowledgement of my ontological and epistemological views as part of this paradigm is important to analyse how my position shapes the way I see and interpret society and the

construction of themes in this research. This consideration has been revisited throughout the project because it is the linchpin of the entire process while simultaneously mediating and interpreting the "other" in dialogue with the "self" (Riessman, 2008).

A paradigm may be viewed as:

> A set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107).

My metaphysical understanding of humans making sense of their world based on the individual's historical and social experiences positions me as a critical theorist. I am not interested in simply observing a situation, these observations need to have a purpose. A critical paradigm moves beyond recording observations and strives for reform (Asghar, 2013).

A critical approach is relevant to studies of introduced educational systems that have had a range of impacts on First Nations peoples historically as the critical theory paradigm "emphasises social realities incorporating historically situated structures" (Healy & Perry, 2000, p. 119). This is particularly relevant to the educational needs of First Nations Australians as their educational plight has been heavily influenced by historical interactions since European arrival. Subsequently, my personal alignment with the critical theory paradigm has strongly influenced the decisions made in regard to the project design, methods employed, and data collection and analysis techniques.

Critical theorists aim to critique and transform "social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values" (Healy & Perry, 2000, p. 119). A critical

paradigm also allows the researcher to consider issues within decolonising theories such as the struggle between the interests of researchers and Indigenous communities when implementing research methodology (Smith, 2012). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994) the aim of critical theory is to “transform ignorance and misapprehensions, accepting historically mediated structures might be changed and comprehending the actions required to effect change” (p. 110).

On this basis, it was important to not just pay lip service to subscribing to a critical paradigm. I need to ensure my actions through the research matched what I posit as important to me. As such, Bohman’s (2002) three criteria for an adequate critical theory (strongly influenced by Horkheimer) was continuously adhered to. The first criterion is it must be explanatory about what is wrong with current social reality. This is addressed through the literature review and the findings. The second criterion is it must identify the action to change, as achieved through the discussion chapter. And the final criterion is it must provide practical goals for social transformation, as is also addressed in the discussion chapter. By following these criteria, as a critical theorist, I am moving beyond a simple exploration of the problem, to a more impactful identification of strategies that could positively transform the environment that I am focussing on.

By following these three criteria and drawing on my critical paradigm it was determined for this project to follow a holistic qualitative approach drawing on bricolage with a simultaneous analysis supported by an ongoing reflexive process. This approach was further influenced and determined by a theoretical framework that combined Foucault’s Critical Theory of Power Relationships (Foucault, 1982) and Said’s Postcolonial Theory of Orientalism/Other (Said, 1978).

3.2.2 Holistic qualitative approach

The approach that was adopted for this study was a qualitative one as it facilitates a deeper exploration of power relations and social contexts enabling researchers to uncover the hidden dynamics of domination and oppression (Fraser, 1989). Qualitative studies are optimal for research in education as they enable deeper understandings of experiences, phenomena, and context (Cleland, 2017).

Qualitative research lends itself to a holistic approach. Holism requires a researcher to take all into account and to tell all (Noblit & Engel, 1999). When we relate this to research, we are saying that the whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts. So, holism is apt for research that affects any human as it considers any social subject to be an integrated system, not just the sum of articulated parts (Colley & Diment, 2001).

The notion of holism is especially important when considering the analysis stage of the research process. Etymologically, the word ‘analysis’ means ‘to dissect or take to pieces’. Ana = “back/throughout” and lysis = loosening/cut apart (Petrina, 2019). When considering the etymology of the word analysis it is evident that it is literally a process of taking apart the data before regrouping them into categories (Wolcott, 1994).

The reason why qualitative research is holistic is that through the coaction of theory and methods, it is process driven while being reflexive, and produces culturally situated knowledge that is entwined with theory (Hesse-Biber, 2005).

Ultimately, a qualitative holistic approach lends itself to ensuring the analysis does not obscure, but rather illuminates, the wider perspective that is essential to make sense of educational processes (Colley & Diment, 2001).

3.2.3 Bricolage

This research has been conducted by drawing on multiple components of data from an array of sources as part of a bricolage approach. 'Mainstream' research practices often reproduce systems of oppression (Kincheloe et al., 2011) whereas a bricolage inquiry moves away from monological research approaches and embraces the complexity of the lived world through research that is based on critical theories (Kincheloe, 2005). A bricolage is rooted in critical theory and is concerned with issues of power relations and oppression (Wyatt & Zaidi, 2022) enabling a wider view of the issue being researched. As a critical researcher, employing a bricolage process promotes the different perspectives offered by people and views them in relation to one another in a web, appreciating the diversity of perspectives on a particular topic (Kincheloe, 2005). Pratt et al. (2022) describe bricolage as being metamethodological in that it can be used to bring forward mindfulness involved in making methodological choices. In order to gain a broader outlook of the issue being researched through immersion with the data, complex phenomena needs to be studied in a way that is holistic and retains meaning (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). However, in a research project embracing a bricolage there is no protocol in which analytical methods should be decided ahead of time (Wyatt & Zaidi, 2022), rather, as Kincheloe (2011) advocated, researchers should 'play with' interpretive contexts while engaging with reflexivity to unravel the complex reality being researched and the burden is on the researcher to ensure the arrangement of data holds tight (Pratt, 2009). Lévi-Strauss (1966) described a bricolage as an approach that builds with the tools and materials on hand, as opposed to engineering from the ground up. While a process of bricolage is not predefined, operating by utilising resources at hand and combining them for new purposes (Baker & Nelson, 2005), a bricoleur is

able to make an arrangement by cobbling things together for the purpose at hand (Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010). This convergence facilitates a greater depth in lines of inquiry and analysis (Sibbald et al., 2021) while evaluating the study's worth by establishing its trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.3 Data sources

3.3.1 Data sources overview

The data that were collected as part of this research project was drawn from a variety of sources and took multiple forms of analysis to reach the research findings in a holistic manner. The following list details the sources of data and the analysis techniques employed. Further details about each of the data sources and the procedures of collection are found in the next section of this chapter.

1. Past student interviews

   Analysis: Thematic content analysis

2. Staff focus group

   Analysis: Thematic content analysis

3. Autoethnographic reflections

   Analysis: Thematic content analysis

4. QCAA syllabus documents

   Analysis: Thematic content analysis and descriptive statistical analysis

5. Publicly available data

   Analysis: Descriptive statistical analysis

3.3.2 Data source 1: Past student interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with four Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men. I had previously taught three of the participants while they were students at the same Queensland boarding school and the fourth had also attended

the same school but had graduated prior to my arrival. Each of the students resided in a remote community while they attended the school as boarding students, and all had completed Years 11 and 12 at the school. One of the past students had completed their entire secondary education (from Year 8 at that time) at the school, two were enrolled from the beginning of Year 10 and one had attended the school, departed, then returned to complete his senior years. The school all participants graduated from is an all-male non-government boarding school in an inner-regional area in Queensland. From 2016 to 2021, the percentage of students at the school who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander was, on average, 17.67%; while the percentage of students who had a language background other than English was, on average, 10% (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2022).

Initially, potential participants were past students who I had had contact with via social media connections since leaving school. Potential participants were sent an invitation to participate via Facebook, text message, and email. From the initial outreach to past students who I had had contact with, the recruitment took a snowballing pathway with further past students (and the one participant who I had not personally taught) hearing about the research and getting in touch to participate. Once contacts indicated a willingness to take part in the study, they were sent further information including a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 1) and Consent Form. Upon receiving consent, I organised a convenient time with the participant to conduct the interview.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 situation in Queensland as well as the remote location of some of the participants' residences, the interviews were conducted online via Zoom or by phone depending on accessibility. Those interviews

conducted via phone were simultaneously recorded on Zoom with all interviews being both audio and video recorded. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were semi-structured with guiding questions (see Appendix 2) to potentially use but were directed based on the content of the discussion.

In addition to decisions about transcription procedures for the staff focus group interview, further considerations for the transcription of interviews with past students needed to be made. As all the participants in this stage spoke a language other than English as a first language, and the interviews were being conducted in Standard Australian English (SAE), it was important to consider the potential impact of how speech was represented in the written transcripts and weigh those impacts against the type of information I was seeking to discover through the interviews. A distinction needed to be made between a naturalised and denaturalised transcription practice. There are two main contributors to theory about this transcription process, Oliver et al. (2005) and Bucholtz (2000), who both discussed the transcription process using the same two terms but with inverse definitions. I opted for Oliver et al.'s (2005) theoretical work, as rather than looking at the process as being two possible extremes, it places the process on a continuum that encompasses a range of transcription practices. At one end there is naturalism which seeks to preserve the features of spoken language such as 'ums' and 'ers' (Oliver et al., 2005), whereas transversely, denaturalism is where extraneous information is removed as it might obscure the research purpose (Davidson, 2009). The idiosyncratic elements of speech such as stutters and pauses were not relevant to my analysis and might have been impacted or enhanced by the participant's English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) status and cultural conversational norms. Mero-Jaffe (2011) posited that the process of transcript approval sometimes increased

participants' embarrassment at the way their statements appeared in text as their inclusion runs the risk of portraying respondents as inarticulate or uneducated (Roberts, 1997). Full verbatim transcriptions may be especially problematic (McMullin, 2023), thus I settled on a denaturalised transcription. However, further considerations needed to be taken to decide where on the continuum the process sat. For ease of analysis verbal interactions such as false starts and repetitions were omitted to avoid cluttering the text (Tilley, 2003), however semantic and syntactic constructs were maintained as their use may hold socio-cultural significance. For example, an original quote from a transcript was: *"I think, for me, it was sort of um a more um more of a personal choice, because when asked to go through all the paperwork again, with that, we have to get Mum's brother claim for them."* This was then transcribed as: *"I think, for me, it was sort of more of a personal choice, because when asked to go through all the paperwork again, we have to get Mum's brother claim for them."*

Following the transcription of the interviews, I sent the typed transcript to the participant for member checking. Some participants chose to provide further information, either via email or through another recorded interview, which was added to the transcripts prior to conducting analysis. For example, after viewing his transcript, Keith (one of the past student participants) wanted to add more information about his experiences with ABSTUDY and to clarify a response about assessment design.

3.3.3 Data source 2: Staff focus group

A focus group interview was conducted with select members of a Queensland boarding school that enrols First Nations students from remote communities. This

boarding school is a co-educational non-government facility in a metropolitan area with students from Prep to Year 12.

Recruitment was initiated with an email introducing the study to the school leadership team. Following the leadership team providing consent to participate, the Deputy Principal, upon consultation with myself, selected staff based on their roles to invite to participate. The selected staff members were ones who worked directly with students and the processes that were involved in student subject selection for their senior years. Invitation emails which included a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 3) and Consent Form were sent to potential participants and once consent was given by those staff who opted to participate a suitable time was nominated by the Deputy Principal to conduct the focus group interview. Participating roles were Deputy Principal, Indigenous Liaison Officer (ILO), Head of Learning Support, (Vocational Education and Training (VET) Coordinator and the Careers Counsellor.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic situation in Queensland, the focus group was conducted via Zoom with each participant logging in individually to the group meeting. The focus group interview was semi-structured with a list of potential guiding questions (see Appendix 4) to draw on if required but was ultimately directed by the flow of the conversation with, and between, the participants. The interview was both video and audio recorded and lasted for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Following the interview, the discussion was transcribed. Transcription is an inherently interpretative and political act which is influenced by the transcriber's own assumptions and biases (Jaffe, 2007). Every choice that the transcriber makes shapes how the research participant is portrayed and determines what knowledge or information is relevant and valuable (McMullin, 2023). I opted to conduct a manual

transcription as it allowed me to delve further into the findings of the discussions and reflect on a deeper level. By conducting a manual transcription myself, I could be confident that the transcript was an accurate record of the interview that took place (McMullin, 2023). Furthermore, as transcription involves close observation of data through repeated listening, a familiarity with the data and attention to what is actually there, as opposed to what I expected to be there, facilitated realisations to emerge during analysis (Pope et al., 2000). The transcript was then sent to participants for member checking prior to being drawn on for analysis.

3.3.4 Data source 3: Autoethnographic reflections

Throughout the research project, I have been methodically reflecting on my own past professional experiences through a layered account as an autoethnographic technique. A layered account shows connections among personal experience, theory and research practices (Goodall, 2008) and may juxtapose multiple points of view of an event or phenomenon (Spry, 2011). These reflections assisted me to gain a cultural understanding of myself and my own professional experiences in relation to participants and findings of the study. Autoethnography allows researchers to produce meaningful and accessible research that is grounded in personal experience and provides a wider research lens to study our lived experience, enabling the researcher's influence to be acknowledged as part of the research process (Pitard, 2016). Autoethnographic journaling took the form of short non-fiction vignettes.

Vignettes are used in qualitative research often as hypothetical scenarios to elicit responses from participants about sensitive real-life issues (Murphy et al., 2021). In these cases, the vignettes were created and used as stimulus material to encourage 'interviewees to speak about the research topic' (Törrönen, 2002, p. 343).

However, a vignette is not necessarily a fictional work. A vignette is a short passage that is used to describe a moment in time and is complete in itself but can be part of a larger work (Bloom-Christen & Grunow, 2022). The term vignette comes from a Middle French word for 'vine' and denotes the vines that adorned books in the nineteenth century (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Likewise, a vignette 'adorns' the rest of the story by enhancing it with a brief description, account, or episode (Bloom-Christen & Grunow, 2022). As such, I have not constructed hypothetical scenarios, but rather factual vignettes that enhance the findings that emerged from other data sources and analysis. These vignettes provide a brief account of my professional experiences and observations while working directly with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities at a boarding school. The focus of individual vignettes ranges from myself, students, families, curriculum, processes, events, and interactions with staff. The vignettes were written throughout the duration of the research process based on memories while engaging with the literature and participant interviews. The vignettes were collated in preparation for analysis.

3.3.5 Data source 4: QCAA syllabus documents

A list of subjects offered at all boarding schools in Queensland was collated and their syllabus documents were assembled. The subjects being offered were elicited from a dataset available on the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) website (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2023f) which reports on the subjects that have student enrolments as per each individual school. This dataset is updated based on school reporting three times per year and contains data about subjects that are General, Applied, and Short Courses; Certificate Courses are not included in this data. Each school's senior subject

guides (publicly available from their websites) were then accessed to cross reference the General, Applied and Short Course data from the QCAA data, and to determine the Vocational Certificate Courses being offered. School offerings of Certificate Courses were collated from the My School website (ACARA, n.d.c). After collating the list of subjects being offered across all relevant schools in Queensland, subject syllabi were downloaded in preparation for analysis.

3.3.6 Data source 5: Publicly available data

This data was not collected by me, but rather sourced from publicly available sites such as My School (ACARA, n.d.c) and QCAA (QCAA, 2023f) to determine information about schools such as total student numbers enrolled, percentages of First Nations students enrolled, geographical location, percentages of Language background other than English (LBOTE) status of students, Index of community socio-educational advantage (ICSEA) values, the number of students enrolled in specific subjects, and subjects offered at individual schools. After collecting this data, it was inserted into excel sheets in preparation for analysis.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1 Simultaneous analysis

In accordance with a bricolage approach, the analysis of data from all data sets was conducted concurrently throughout the project (Kincheloe, 2011) in order to synthesise findings and to guide the ongoing direction of the study. Conducting the analysis of multiple data sets simultaneously allowed an iterative treatment of different sources of qualitative data (Snowden & Martin, 2011) and maximised the data's explanatory power (Kluge & Wolf, 1993). An additional benefit of simultaneous analysis is that it can allow secondary signals to emerge as it supports distinctive results (Nixon & Carpenter, 1996).

Throughout the research process, techniques were revised as insights were gained through the collection and analysis of the data. The process of data analysis was ongoing, material was catalogued and I read and reflected on the data as it became available and it began to "winnow" down (Guest et al., 2012). This inductive process of analysis allowed me to generate data into units of meaning categories and themes (Cohen et al., 2011).

After beginning the analysis by utilising NVivo, I moved to a primarily manual analysis. I found navigating the NVivo Software restrictive (this may have been avoided if I had have sought further NVivo training). Additionally, due to my personal preference and acknowledgement of how I usually engage in critical and in-depth work, I determined that for me to gain a more authentic and in-depth understanding of the research data I needed to move to a majority manual analysis. This manual analysis was initially conducted using highlighters, pen and paper, and then as major and minor themes were identified, they were transposed to an Excel spreadsheet for categorising and further sorting.

3.4.2 Overview of analysis techniques

Two analysis techniques were used for this study.

1. Thematic Content Analysis was used to analyse data from the staff focus group, past student interviews, autoethnographic reflections, and QCAA curriculum documents.
2. Descriptive Statistics was used to summarise, organise and represent publicly available data and QCAA curriculum documents.

3.4.3 Analysis techniques

3.4.3.1 Thematic content analysis

A thematic content analysis was applied to the data collated from the transcripts of the staff focus group and interviews with past students. In addition to the transcripts, the vignettes from autoethnographic reflections and curriculum documents from QCAA were analysed using thematic coding to triangulate the data and to complete a picture of emerging themes.

The thematic content analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

Step 1: Become familiar with the data – in which I read, and re-read the data collected.

Step 2: Generate initial codes – in which I used open coding (no pre-set codes but developed as I worked through the coding process) to organise the data into small chunks of meaning.

Step 3: Search for themes – in which I examined the codes to seek what was significant and if they could be collated into themes. This is where my theoretical framework of critical consideration was incorporated (and continued through the next three steps) to direct my attention to notions of Othering and relationships of power.

Step 4: Review themes – in which I modified and developed the themes. I read the data within each theme and considered whether it really supported that developed theme.

Step 5: Define themes - in which I refined the themes to identify the essence of each of them and to consider how each theme related to each other and how each of the subthemes interacted.

Step 6: Write-up – in which I constructed the analysis of findings.

The six steps were then repeated, and findings tweaked as necessary in an iterative process which improved the analysis with each cycle. Every time a new piece of data was collected, the process would begin again with the previously analysed data being revisited (Byrne, 2022).

3.4.3.2 Descriptive statistics

To augment the key findings that emerged through the thematic content analysis of the interviews and autoethnographic reflections, I also applied a process of descriptive statistics to summarise publicly available data that was sourced from the governmental sites My School (ACARA, n.d.c) and QCAA (QCAA, 2023f). Descriptive statistics enabled me to describe and summarise the relationship between two or more variables (Kaur et al., 2018) in a logical and meaningful way (Vetter, 2017). This procedure to depict how data is behaving was chosen for its ability to identify and display specific patterns or trends to interpret and tell the story (Cooksey, 2020). In order to complete the descriptive statistics process, the data was extracted from publicly accessible sites and input into excel spreadsheets. The data was then combined in various ways and represented graphically to provide a visual understanding of the central tendency being discussed in the data narrative while developing broader conclusions about the data.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Writing is not neutral or apolitical, and all writing has an invested interest with consequences and implications (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Research which is designed to capture the hidden structures and connections that affect particular populations, and that challenges commonly accepted ‘truths’, is to be judged by ‘goodness standards’ (Marshall, 1985). A way to achieve this ‘goodness standard’ is through trustworthiness, which relates to the degree of trust

readers have in results (Schmidt & Brown, 2015). Trustworthiness in this research project has been enhanced through the processes of confirmability, dependability and reflexivity:

3.5.1 Confirmability process

To ensure confirmability I utilised multiple data sets in order to triangulate the data and to confirm the information gathered. Upon completion of data analysis, I completed an audit to examine the collection and analysis procedures to make judgements about the potential for bias or distortion. In addition, in order to addresses how the participants' views and the researcher's representation match (Tobin & Begley, 2004), I created opportunities for participant checking where participants were sent copies of their transcripts to review and were encouraged to make amendments or further expansions on their responses in the interviews.

3.5.2 Dependability process

Rather than a goal of replicability, I have aimed to make it possible for the findings of this research to be able to be understood from one context to another (Stahl & King, 2020) by providing a thick description, including contextual information, to portray the circumstances surrounding the research. I also accounted for the changes to context within the research parameters and how these changes affected my approach to the study. For example, due to the issues with school participation at the time of natural disasters and pandemics, I needed to change from a survey due to limited school uptake. The reasons for doing so have been clearly outlined, thus emphasising the project's dependability. Further to this the design of the study was ensured dependability as my supervisors were in regular contact both via Zoom meetings and email. They have checked the process along the way ensuring the research had a rigorous design and was appropriate for the topic.

Additionally, the confirmation panel consisted of two First Nations academics who were able to provide cultural guidance about the research design. Suggestions made, taken into consideration and actioned included being mindful of my English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teaching expertise and the impact this might have on my researcher lens, further focus on students living and learning away from community and kin, and the incorporation of past student interviews.

3.5.3 Reflexivity process

While conducting a qualitative study, researchers are expected to adopt a reflexive approach (Pasgaard et al., 2017) in which they provide context about the intersecting relationships between participants and themselves (Dodgson, 2019). In particular, as previously discussed, my non-Indigeneity means that consciously considering my position in relation to the production of knowledge (Roulston, 2010) about a topic affecting First Nations peoples is paramount to this research process as positionality contributes to the construction of both the research process and its findings (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2018).

Throughout the research project, memos and research journal entries have been maintained. These reflexive entries have noted, and they discussed contextual information, reflections and ideas. The diary documented the development of perceptions and insights across various stages of research (Holly & Altrichter, 2011). Memos were used during online and phone interviews to make note of details that may not be evident through the transcription process.

To evaluate the effectiveness and rigour of the methods being used, throughout the analysis, I have reflected on the preconditions of my own self-understanding (Kincheloe et al., 2011) by undergoing a continuous reflexive process in which I have analysed my own biases and checked them against my findings.

3.6 Ethical considerations

I am committed to searching for knowledge and understanding by following recognised principles of research conduct. Human research requires ethical reflection through every stage of the research project. In the initial planning and throughout the duration of the research project I have referred to relevant ethical guidelines and deliberated on their values and principles in relation to the specific context of this research study. This research has been conducted in accordance with the principles in the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012) and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2007). Specifically adhered to are the values of merit and integrity by way of its potential contribution to knowledge and understanding while ensuring respect for participants is not compromised, justice by way of ensuring recruitment of participants is accurately accounted for with no unfair burden being faced, and beneficence by way of ensuring there is a likely benefit to the participants and the wider community.

In order to minimise the risks of harm or discomfort to participants, all effort was made to ensure there was no unfair burden of participation and no exploitation of participants in the conduct of the research. The university's Human Research Ethics Committee approved all stages of research involving human participants (see Appendices 1 – 4) and formal approval was gained by relevant educational bodies prior to contacting schools. All participants were advised that participation was entirely voluntary and that there would be no consequence for declining or withdrawing participation. This was conveyed via initial contact, Participant Information Sheets, and again verbally at the beginning of the interview.

Written invitations were sent to selected potential participants introducing the study and inviting them to participate. This communication contained details about the research and included a Participant Information Sheet. All potential participants were advised that they could contact either myself or my supervisors with any questions or concerns. The Participant Information Sheet contained information about any foreseen potential risks and included assurances that there was no obligation to participate. Participants were also provided with and guided through a Participant Consent form. Interviews were only conducted after consent was provided. Then at the beginning of the interview participants were also verbally walked through the key information in the Information Sheet and all the agreements on the consent form. They were then asked to provide consent verbally before we began. Data collection only took place after the participant had given their informed consent. Steps were taken throughout the process to ensure participants did not feel coerced to participate, Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research project and the outcomes of the research has been made accessible to research participants in a timely and clear manner, including sending them their transcripts for member checking.

To ensure the anonymity of participating schools and individuals, pseudonyms have been used, and all data collected has been deidentified. I followed the University's Research Data Management Policy and completed a data management plan. Throughout the research process, research data has been stored according to the data management policy including across multiple password protected devices.

As the past students I interviewed came from remote First Nations communities, all of them spoke a First Nations language/dialect or a First Nations English dialect at home. Language barriers meant that I had to be extra careful to

ensure they understood what the project entailed and what their rights were, for example they could say no if they did not want to participate. I also needed to ensure they fully understood what I was asking throughout the interview and were able to say what they wanted to convey. My background as an EAL/D teacher assisted with this. Also, being their teacher previously meant they were accustomed to my speech patterns. In addition to this, I utilised my EAL/D teaching skills such as repetition, paraphrasing, intentional pausing, emphasising tone and slowing down pace as necessary. Wait times for responses was also important both linguistically and culturally.

Insider research has been one of the key components that I have needed to consider throughout this process. Insider research is that which is undertaken within a community where the researcher is a member (Trowler, 2011). Both insider and outsider researchers need to contend with issues of identity and situated knowledge they possess (Chavez, 2008). I have considered myself to be involved in insider research from two perspectives. The first is my experience as a professional in the field. While it was my professional experiences within this field that led me to conduct this research, as part of my critical approach I recognise that my professional biases have resulted in a hope for action that has influenced this investigation. However, throughout the process I have regularly taken steps to recognise and critique the extent and ways in which these biases may have impacted on the analysis of results. I have needed to be open to data that does not match my thoughts on the topic to assess the extent and ways in which my values and experiences have influenced the research process (Chavez, 2008). Another way that I have needed to consider my role in insider research is when speaking with my past students. I hold intimate knowledge of these participants' backstories. This

relationship was of benefit because the relationships already existed and this then meant that trust was already established. However, it also meant that I knew information about the students, and I needed to be very careful in my conversation not to push them to say what I wanted them to so as their responses to questions were genuine. For example, it was not a problem to remind a participant about what subjects they studied, but it would have been a problem for me to provide a memory cue about an incident during the process of subject selection that I thought was influential. To counteract this possible bias of having insider knowledge about the topic, I engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the research process. This journaling was used as a way to counter bias during the data collection and analysis process. An example of this journalling process can be seen in Figure 1:

Figure 1

Journal Excerpt 6th April 2022

6/4/22

The interview with [redacted] went really well. The conversation started a little stilted, but I found that making sure I made the time for a general catch up at the start was beneficial as it refreshed the previous relationship and made him more relaxed and easier to converse with. To be honest, it also helped to settle my nerves a little for the interview too. We ended up having a rather in-depth conversation with memories from [redacted]'s time at school being explored.

One thing that I am conscious of though, is that because I was at the school at the same time as [redacted] and can recall the people and issues/events that we spoke about, that while it was beneficial to have that shared background and knowledge, that I did not want to sway or determine what he had to say. There was one time in particular where [redacted] spoke about the most supportive staff that worked with him. I had to bite my tongue and not say, hey, what about this person, and this person, etc.

I also found that there were times when I was aware of processes in place at the school that the student was not remembering. I stopped myself from trying to remind [redacted] of a particular process. The fact that he had not recalled, was not necessarily because of a lack of memory. He may not have actually experienced that process the way that I remembered it, or it may have had very little impact on him, which is a valid point in and of itself.

I then used this journal excerpt when interpreting the data from the interviews throughout the analysis process (as evident in Figure 2). It was a timely reminder

that even though I had insider knowledge of that participant's time at the boarding facility, my understanding and recollections differed based on our own personal experiences of the school.

Figure 2

Journal Excerpt 2nd September 2022

2/9/22

There were a number of times today when looking at the findings that I went back through some of my journal entries and noted that I was disappointed that one of the students had not recalled the processes and procedures of the school in the same way that I had. This was a timely reminder that just because our recollections differed, it didn't invalidate their experiences. In fact, it may show that that particular process was not necessarily one that was impactful or relevant to that past student at that time.

Further to this, I worked closely with my supervisors with regular meetings in which I discussed any consideration or concerns I had about my interpretation of data and whether I was overstepping from my position and experience within the field of education.

These discussions and the reflexive journaling also assisted me with considering my positioning as a non-Indigenous researcher. I needed to be careful about putting my own spin on data and ensuring I did not dismiss what my First Nations past students had to say. I had to ensure that I was not reinforcing hegemonic positions through my research, and the reflexive journaling proved very useful for this. Also, research with Indigenous peoples should be respectful, ethical, sympathetic and useful (Smith, 2012). As a non-Indigenous researcher, I was very conscious of the importance of beneficence in research. Beneficence means that the research needed to be beneficial not only to myself as the researcher but also to the First Nations peoples I was working with and their communities. I needed to ensure the time that I took from participants was worthwhile and that their voices were truly listened to and considered and that my reporting of their voices was not

simply my interpretation as a non-Indigenous educator, but that I enacted truth-telling. In the discussions I had with participants, I was assured numerous times that this was a very important topic that meant a lot to them, so I was encouraged that this research topic and the data collection I participated in met the requirements of being reciprocal.

Finally, to ensure the work is relevant and useful, the final results will be disseminated and communicated in ways that contribute to public knowledge and understanding that should not only benefit those directly linked to the case-study schools, but more generally those affected by and involved in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education across Australia.

3.7 Limitations

Throughout this research process there have been numerous setbacks and limitations to the study, especially throughout the phases of data collection. Most notably has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the natural disaster of ongoing flooding in Southeast Queensland. Both the floods and the pandemic impacted on my ability to recruit schools to participate in the research. With a significant amount of missed teaching time, many school leaders were hesitant to commit their staff to any additional work. This process meant numerous delays as ethics approval needed to be sought from governing bodies prior to contacting schools, in which there were delays and requests to hold off contact until a more suitable time, and then declinations by school leaders due to their warranted concern for their staff well-being. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to impact on schools, including shutdowns at various times throughout the entire research project. There were also schools committed to participate at the beginning of the data collection phase of research, but this also fell through when, on

top of school closures for lockdown purposes mandated by the State Government, additional teaching time was lost with implications on teacher stress due to the floods at the beginning of 2022. This meant that my initial plan for a significant focus to be on staff perceptions and observations about how policies impacted on student pathway choices needed to take less of a focus due to the lack of data available to analyse.

Another limitation I faced with recruitment was with my past students. First, the impact of COVID19 also contributed to taking away the option to travel to conduct interviews. This was especially important as being Indigenous, my past students belonged to a vulnerable community according to Queensland Health guidelines and therefore I needed to be extra careful about possible spread of infection, therefore meeting in person was not an appropriate course of action. Additionally, with past students I found a particular difficulty in overcoming the administrative requirements. I had a number of potential participants who agreed to speak with me after I contacted them but once there was a need to sign consent their willingness to have the interview disappeared and contact ceased. In particular, there was an issue with printing the consent form to sign to give permission; this was not something that I had considered beforehand but was proving to become a problem that needed addressing. After discussions with the ethics committee at the university it was decided that as long as the information was provided (I often screen shot the documents and sent them via text), the students were able to give permission by replying, “I agree” or “I consent” on their phones via a text message. Then, this consent was checked again verbally (which was recorded) at the beginning of the interview. This process made things easier, but I had already lost participation from a number of potential participants beforehand.

A further complication in the research process was in defining remoteness. What constitutes living in a remote community? Would a past student who grew up in a small town between two major cities be classified as remote? What about a family who spoke another language at home, practiced their traditional cultural practices and had strong connections to a remote community but lived in an urban setting? There were many considerations about what was remote and what was not. In order to identify which locations in Queensland were remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities I combined lists from two sources: Queensland Government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community histories (Queensland Government, n.d.) and a list of communities on the Australian Government's Indigenous webpage (Australian Government Indigenous, n.d.). From these lists, only those communities with a resident population consisting predominantly of First Nations peoples and those classified as level 4 (remote) or 5 (very remote) according to the remoteness scale as applied through the Australian Government's Health Workforce Locator (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2022) were determined to be considered remote communities for the purposes of this research.

Finally, another limitation of the study is the single gender of my past students. As I worked at a boys school, all of my past students are male. Gender diversity in research is important to enhance the scientific quality and social relevance of research (The Research Council of Norway, 2014). If the perceptions of past students who were female had also been included in this study, the results may have differed. This may be a possible study to be conducted in the future.

3.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has endeavoured to explain the methodology of this research. It began with a view of the foundation of the research by establishing the paradigmatic

influences of the project. A rationale for qualitative research was presented. Following this an explanation of the research design, including a description of the setting. I then provided a detailed description of the data collection and analysis through different phases of the research. Finally, there was a discussion of the ethical considerations and validity as well as the limitations of the methodology.

CHAPTER 4: DATA NARRATIVE

4.1 Introduction

By using the bricolage approach, as data was analysed the following major themes consistently emerged: the influence of relationships, the influence of subject accessibility, and the influence of wider education systems. This data will be conveyed by way of narrative through the findings from interviews with participating staff and past students, as well as through my own reflections of professional experiences and observations. Integrated in the exploration of themes are supporting findings from publicly available data and Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) curriculum documents.

4.2 Overview of past-student participants

The overriding themes and key concepts that make up this data narrative emerged predominantly from the interviews with the past-student participants. The four participants who shared their experiences provided distinctive perspectives about the factors that influenced their senior schooling pathway choices. While all four men attended the same all-boys boarding school, they each made unique decisions about their senior schooling studies. One participant did not complete an academic pathway and had no intention of doing so; the second participant undertook a vocational pathway despite wanting to pursue an academic one instead; the third past student had begun his senior studies in an academic pathway but changed mid-way with a focus on job preparedness; and the final participant undertook and completed an academic pathway. Each of these students offered observations about their unique experiences as part of this research.

4.2.1 Sam

I began working with Sam when he entered the boarding school at the start of Year 10; he had attended a school in his home community until the end of Year 9. Sam remained at the school until graduation, completing Years 10, 11 and 12. He had completed his Senior Education and Training (SET) plan interview at the school toward the end of Year 10 in which he chose subjects that would support a vocational pathway. Sam had no intention of undertaking an academic pathway and continues to be content with the decision that he made. Sam currently lives in his home community and is working as a lifeguard.

4.2.2 Keith

I met Keith in my first year of teaching when he was in Year 9; he was in my foundation English and foundation humanities classes. Keith began studying at that school in Year 8, which was the first year of high school at that time. Keith departed the school during Year 10 because of a combination of family and ABSTUDY funding reasons and attended a different school for a short period. I recall both students and staff being excited to see Keith reappear at the school approximately half-way through Year 11. Because of the timing of Keith's movements between schools he has been able to bring a comparative view of his experiences of selecting and completing pathway options at school. Through the interview Keith discussed how he had wanted to undertake an academic pathway but did not feel this was a viable option for him. Keith is currently living in his home community and has been employed across multiple industries since graduation. At the time of our interview, he was about to start a position in a newly established gym in his home community. Keith's recollections of his time at school were informative because he focussed on why he chose a vocational pathway despite wanting to study an academic one.

Keith delved into numerous issues about why he did not think he was capable of pursuing future academic studies ranging from a lack of opportunities to systemic constructs that affected his belief in his own capabilities.

4.2.3 Ronald

Ronald enrolled at the boarding school where I met him during Year 10. Prior to that he had attended two other secondary schools: one near a remote community and one in a regional town. Ronald had discussed struggling socially at both of those schools. However, by the time Ronald reached Year 11, with maturation, he had overcome his reservedness and applied, and was successful in being elected for, a student leadership position. Currently Ronald resides in a regional city and is employed in a factory. Prior to this current job, he had worked in various positions, enjoying a wide range of experiences. Initially, Ronald had chosen an academic pathway, but he later decided to switch to vocational studies.

4.2.4 Aaron

Despite attending the same school as the other former students, Aaron was the only participant who I had not met while at school as he had graduated before I had started. Aaron completed his entire secondary education at the school, from Year 8 to Year 12. In his junior years Aaron had no intention of studying an academic pathway, but after attending a university experience camp he decided he wanted to become an engineer and subsequently elected to study an academic pathway in his senior years of school; he is the only participant who completed an academic pathway at school. Upon graduation, Aaron completed tertiary studies and began working as an engineer, gaining experience both domestically and internationally in his field. He currently holds a management position in his field of expertise. Aaron currently resides in a remote location that is a central hub for other

communities in the surrounding area. Of note, Aaron's motivation to be a part of this study stemmed from his passion for promoting academic endeavours among First Nations students.

4.3 Overview of staff participants

The themes and key concepts that emerged from this data narrative were triangulated with data gathered from a focus group with staff from a co-educational boarding school in an inner-city location. The following staff (pseudonyms and roles) participated in the focus group:

- Dakota – Deputy Principal
- Jessie – Head of Vocational Education and Training
- Charlie – Head of Careers and Pathways
- Madison – Head of Diverse Learning
- Avery – Indigenous Education Co-ordinator

4.4 Presentation of results

4.4.1 The influence of relationships

Relationships are key to establishing an environment that fosters the capacity of students to learn. Hammond (2014) posits that there are six rules that are necessary to engage the brain in learning and the first two of these relate to relationships: the brain seeks to minimise social threats and maximise opportunities to connect with others in the community and positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check. Furthermore, people learn that others' opinions provide a reliable view about reality (Emami-Naeini et al., 2018) and individuals may make decisions based on other peoples' perceptions (Camazine, 2003; Moussaid et al., 2009). This influence has a strong impact on decision making across many domains (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004) such as social, cognitive and teaching

presences (Garrison et al., 2001) and can be either direct, through explicit persuasion, or indirect with a subtler psychological process (Mavrodiev, et al., 2013). Teenagers in particular, when making decisions in social situations, are often influenced by their peers (Steinberg, 2005). Consequently, the pathway choices students make in their senior years of school are not just impacted by internal decisions and motivations but can be influenced by their connections with others within both their learning and social environments. The connections students have that may influence their decision-making process about senior schooling pathway choices were identified as being with peers, families and communities, and staff.

4.4.1.1 Peers

Peers and friendship groups are a key component of all students' school lives; they are important socially but also are academically impactful. If a student has at least one friend, it has been found that they will receive higher grades and be more academically engaged than those with no friends (Juvonen et al., 2019). For students from remote communities, peers play a role throughout their educational journey from the beginning when deciding which boarding school they will attend, right through until after school completion when contact is maintained with those who they met at school into their adult years. For Aaron, one of the past students, it was upon family's and friend's recommendations about possible sporting opportunities that he attended his chosen secondary school, which eventually resulted in him attaining a university education: *"A few friends and family were already going to (that school), and I went there for sporting reasons. Then I took an interest in higher education. And, here I am."*

The friendships students make at boarding school are often continued after they graduate. These connections were noted with all participating past students as

they shared stories about their friends' personal and professional lives before we started the interviews. Even after a number of years since graduating from secondary school, Aaron inferred the importance of these friendships: *"I keep in contact with a lot of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students … with an inseparable bond that is still as strong as it was back in high school."*

Through all educational processes, friends both encourage and discourage academic achievement (Flashman, 2012) and can sway a decision about undertaking higher education studies (Franklin, 1995). Reflecting on these peer relationships provided an interesting conundrum for some of the past students as they recalled both how friendship groups assisted them in their studies, and how some peer connections could negatively influence decisions made about pathways in senior school or impact on the possibility of success if undertaking an academic pathway.

For teenagers the opinions of their friends and peers are increasingly important. It has been found that a teen's internal view of their relationship with others and how they think others will treat them are critical in shaping behaviour (Dodge & Price, 1994; Sroufe, 2005). This focus increasingly moves to the opinions of their friends and peers as they spend less time with family and more time with friends, and their peer relationships become more intimate (Larson & Richards, 1991; McElhaney et al., 2008).

This study found that the opinions of peers impacted across facets of school-life. Ronald reflected on the impact of peer opinions on his time while briefly attending a school near his home community in between starting his secondary education at a state school in a regional centre and his final enrolment in the boarding school that he graduated from:

"And then in grade nine, I went to (the school near my home community). And that for me, it was just like, I'm with my people right. I'm going to school with Aboriginal people. I still didn't feel that, and also my family because they're all from (that community). I thought, man, I still feel different. You know, I still don't feel like I belong here. But I mainly kept to myself, but then I was like, oh, you know, I want to be loud and just see how these guys would react. And like, you know, I'm with the (community) kids, they're gonna run you down. And so they was running me down. And I'm like, you know, technically getting bullied, right? I thought these were my family and that, and I thought we was all black fellas and we were all talking shit."

The impact of the opinions of the students in his previous school continued to plague Ronald initially after he transitioned to his boarding school. However, with a growing maturity came the determination to overlook his peers' opinions:

"And then when I went to (my boarding school) in grade 10, like I did keep to myself for like a whole year in grade 10, sort of. And then around grade 11. I'm like, I'm not gonna let that traumatize me. I'm not gonna let that experience back in (my old school) keep me down. Yes, it was also in grade 10. I would kinda get out now and then but still get treated like shit. But in grade 11. That's when I was just like, you know what, fuck it, I'm just gonna be myself and if they got a problem with that. You know, just let them."

Peer opinions are not only formed and felt around general behaviours or actions, but they can also impact on a student's comfort within an education setting. First Nations peoples will often portray behaviour that is connected to an avoidance of shame (Hughes et al., 2004) and behaviour within an educational context is aligned to who is observing them (Harrison, 2011; Louth, 2012). Ronald started his

senior schooling pathway in an academic one but by halfway through Year 11, he changed some classes to have less of an academic focus. One of those changes was from OP English (OP denotes Overall Position, the code used for a university pathway subject in the previous senior schooling system in Queensland) to English Communication (not a university pathway subject). Ronald reflected on his time in OP English and how the only other student from a remote community who was in his class would voice concern over what other students might think, especially when Ronald would laugh loudly in class while no-one else had the same reaction:

> *"It was just me and him. I mean, we would always sit next to each other. And also, me laughing, (my friend) would like sort of laugh with me. But then he was like, 'Ronald, that's embarrassing'. And I'm like, I don't care, that's funny."*

Peer opinions about academic matters was specifically raised as a hindrance to choosing an academic pathway. Aaron reflected on his observations of a typical pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as not being an academic one: *"Actually, going down that pathway of going to higher education and taking an interest in it, as opposed to the typical pathway of trying to play sport, doing non OP subjects."*

Aaron identified a gap between reasons for going to school and not taking up the academic opportunities available: *"Like, you have other Indigenous students that go to school because they feel like they have to go to school."*

He then reasoned that this was due to a lack of interest from community and described how when he put academic studies or achievement first, there were social consequences for that from his friends:

> *"I seen that there is lack of interest from community when it comes to education. It's because it's not normal. Even wearing glasses in communities*

is not normal. It's doing homeworks and doing science subjects. You get teased for it, oh you're trying to be deadly or something, you know. And it's very upsetting. At times when I wouldn't go out with the boys or playing footy or whatnot, because I had to study or work through uni. I was put in the category as, you know, are you trying to be different?"

This reaction was then equated to being based on fear of not only going against the tide, but also of the possibility of failure: *"And I think the biggest problem with Indigenous students is the fear of failure. You know, because education is not common."*

As a teacher this fear of failure became apparent to me in the very first days of my career. My teaching style involves most of my classes being conducted with a strong discussion basis. There was one student who I recall in my first few weeks of teaching who was a First Nations person from a remote community. I had asked the class for the key characteristics of a tundra biome and he volunteered an answer that listed some of the characteristics of a rainforest biome. I immediately said that his answer was incorrect. Unfortunately, from that point on he did not raise his hand to answer any questions for the remainder of the lesson and for a number of weeks into the term. After the lesson, I reflected on what I could have done differently, as I had seen the enthusiasm literally drain from his face seconds after being told that he was wrong and he actively looked at his peers to observe their reactions. From that point on, I made a conscious effort to always find a positive with a response before correcting it. For example, for this student's response where he said that a tundra biome had lots of rain, was usually hot and had tall trees, instead of simply informing him it was wrong, I now would say, 'What an awesome response! You have just described the characteristics of the rainforest biome – it is hot with lots of rain and it

does have tall trees. Now let's look at how the rainforest biome is different to the tundra biome.' I had discovered as a teacher early on that my students from remote communities were often afraid of failure, especially if that failure could be noticed by their peers. This experience showed me that when a student lost face like that, it was difficult to re-engage them with the classroom activities.

Friendships formed and fostered in schools are often closely predicted by a similarity in academic achievement and that a change in academic achievement may result in a change of friendship ties (Flashman, 2012). In addition to this possibility of friendship groups being based on academic achievement, it was found through this research that the actions of peers or friends can determine a student's engagement with their own studies.

Past students who were interviewed indicated that friendship groups were strong and often determined by interests or cultural backgrounds. Ronald entered the school in later years, not in Year 8 with the rest of his cohort, and he found that it was difficult to find a group to belong to if you weren't overly invested, or strongly identified with, an interest or characteristic:

> *"It was just me trying to find my group actually, you know how you have those groups where you get the cowboys, you've got the footy guys over here, you got the nerds over here, you've got the Torres Strait Islanders over here, (Community) boys over there, musicians. And I'm here trying to find out where the hell do I fit in this school and I felt like I couldn't even fit anywhere. And I was yeah, I just couldn't even just fit because it was just like I loved footy, but I never took it serious and I never talked about it all freaking day like, damn. And I love video games and anime, but I don't know, they were too boring."*

It was also found that the group that you associated with could determine your lack of engagement with education. Ronald reminisced that at his first high school in a regional area, the focus of his friends was on matters not related to schoolwork and this was not conducive to him wanting to focus on education:

> *"I would have obstacles now and then… Before I came to (my boarding school) in grade 10. I was in (the state school). Like in grade 8, everyone was just, you know, I was kind of like a bit of a loner and I didn't want to talk to anyone because everybody would just talk about smoking, and, you know, being unhealthy. And I'm like, man, that's not me. Like, I don't want to be around these people. And talk about going out with chicks. And me, I was like, more focused on my schoolwork. Like, yeah, I did have a crush on a girl but it was like, man. I don't know how to explain it, but I was like I wish I could go on a date, but I need to work and everything."*

Sam was also a student who transferred to the boarding school in the middle years of his secondary education. He also reflected on the impact of his friends' actions on his studies before coming to a boarding school: *"I get side-tracked too much up here, always like side-tracked into go out in the boat. Then going out with friends and don't worry about study."*

Friends can also have a positive impact though, particularly around supporting each other with assessment and other school tasks. After Sam transferred to his boarding school, he appreciated the ability to study and complete tasks with his friends during set study times at night. For his manual arts trade subjects, Sam recalled how fellow boarders would often work together to ensure the theory work was accurately completed:

"I started the book off by myself, finish it, then I just go over it with my friends to check if it's alright or if some answers are wrong, I can change it and put what answer you got on there."

One of the final programs I established before leaving my role at the boarding school was a reading club in boarding. I initially started it as a way to target literacy development of students in Year 7 by having Year 12 students sit with the Year 7s during study and read with them. An interesting outcome of this was that the senior students would come down to that reading area and after working with the younger boarders, they would then ask each other questions about their assessments or homework. In particular, I noticed one of my students who was studying an academic pathway speak to peers about his work and to seek support quite frequently. These conversations may have been already occurring in private, but they also may have been an outcome of providing a communal space which had the sole purpose of peer-assisted learning, albeit initially for the junior students; and that environment may have supported that exchange and willingness to seek support from peers by the seniors.

In addition to the importance placed on friends' opinions and the impact that their actions may have on students, another contributing factor to the pathways taken by students is the choices that their friends make. When Aaron was reflecting on his thought process during the senior school subject selection period, he admitted that his friends' choices were a key factor in his considerations: *"I think at the time I absolutely did. I had a few mates at school that were doing the subjects and I just wanted to follow the right crowd where some of my mates were."*

Staff from the Queensland boarding school participating in this research posited that choices can be made not only based on what students' friends want to do, but which teachers their friends liked:

> *"We also know that students will often choose by the teachers that are teaching those subjects too. They might have a preference for a subject, but often it's because they really liked the teacher who's looking after that program. And I'm sure that there are conversations around that as to who their favourite teacher is, and why they want to do PE, because he's got Mr. Such and Such, or whatever."*

It was understood by staff though, that making the same choices as their friends could be a safety-net for students, which can be a valid reason provided it was a suitable choice for that student:

> *"We do get kids who will have those conversations in boarding, and then come in the next day, do their subjects, and oh surprise, surprise, they're all in the same classes. That's a safety net for them. And that's fine, to a certain extent, as long as it is clear where they're going."*

Through my reflections during this study, I could recall one particular cohort in which two students had chosen to study an academic pathway. These two students were in many of the same classes and actually ended up becoming closer friends over their two senior years through their encouragement and support for each other. Whereas other students I taught who chose an academic pathway but did not have that same peer support eventually switched to a vocational focus. One of the students who made the switch discussed his decision to change to a non-academic pathway because he found it too isolating being the only Indigenous person, and the only person from his friendship group to be in those particular subjects.

For Aaron, when he decided that he wanted to study an academic pathway he recognised that it was a major shift for him and he had to make tough decisions about pursuing his choice and not worrying about what his friends were studying:

> *"So I started turning up to classes, I started wanting to learn. So I moved from the back of the class, to the front of the class. Perfect example is I walked into physics for the first time, because it was an elective subject, and the teacher at the time, rightly or wrongly asked me, am I in the right class? All your mates, or all your group of kids are down at HPE or manual arts. Can I blame the teacher? No, because I created that reputation, I was hanging around the group of students that weren't interested in education, that were there for specific reasons. So I had an opportunity to either walk back outside or shut up, and you know, prove to the teacher that I'm there to learn. And, like, at that time, I was, you know, trying to accept the fact that hey, I want to be more, like I want to learn and I started dropping out of classes where I was, I was only in classes because my mates were in it. … And I think at that time, I started enjoying learning."*

Yet, at the same time Aaron realised that shared experiences can be used or seen as a means of support, so having at least one person to talk to can make a significant difference. This is something that boarding schools with small percentages of Indigenous students need to consider:

> *"I think circumstances really mould people. Like (my friend) for example, he was very academic and is now a graduate and he's doing really well. And he had similar issues as well growing up and he had me to bounce ideas off."*

School processes can enhance the influence of peer opinions in the subject selection process. When discussing the difference in processes between schools,

Keith, who underwent the subject selection process at a state boarding school with a large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population at the end of Year 10 before transferring to the school that he graduated from early in Year 11, described the process:

> *"They got kids, got everyone to go into their house groups, so they split us up into our year levels and gave us sheets, and they did have people to talk to us about what options were available to consider and do through the school. … So there would have been about twenty of us. … A lot of it was done in groups, but come to think of it, I actually wish I'd been able to do one-on-one."*

This process in groups is also how I recall subject selections being organised at the boarding school that I worked at. I repetitively saw that students would choose a subject based on what their friends suggested because subject selections were conducted in the classroom with a teacher supervising. As students input their selections electronically peers would compare what they were choosing and deliberately select subjects that matched their friends' choices.

It is important for schools to recognise that friends' choices may impact on an individual's decision-making. This is not necessarily a negative impact as long as the school processes support students appropriately to determine if the choices are the right fit. Avery, the Indigenous Liaison Officer (ILO) from the focus group school reflected on this process with their current cohort:

> *"I know that there's a particular group at the moment, and they have basically chosen the same subjects all the way through. But they're very different in what they want to do. So that can work, but can be also a hindrance to number one, how they perform in class, but number two, if it's going to be the right pathway for them, so yeah, sometimes it's a bit sticky how to handle*

those things. But ultimately, we still try and make sure that they're choosing for themselves and not choosing for their mates, or just choosing it because it's, you know, they want to be with their friends. So yeah, with that sort of issue, it comes across a bit. But, you know, ultimately we're fairly confident that once we've given them that pathway, that that's what they're going to be able to achieve and be successful at."

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test conducted in 2018 in Australian schools found that the relationships between students' and their classmates' characteristics can impact on educational outcomes. While schools do not usually control the characteristics of the students they enrol, there is sometimes control over which students are placed in which classes (ACER, 2020). The report found that in Australian schools there was a strong peer effect with students achieving a mark that was consistent with being in classes with either higher or lower achieving students.

The PISA results recognised that there was a high level of streaming in Australian schools where students are placed in classes based on apparent ability levels. Yet, the results brought into question the practice of streaming, pointing out that despite the homogeneity of a streamed classroom which gives teachers the capacity to 'target' their instruction (Gamoran, 2009) to all students, both higher and lower achieving, gain benefit from being in a classroom with students of all abilities (ACER, 2020).

Despite the literature that argues against streaming (Johnston & Wildy, 2016; Rubie-Davies, 2010), it is a practice ingrained within many secondary schools. I recall a conversation that I had with the principal of the school where I was working where I expressed my concern about streaming as I had noticed students lose

engagement as they were ‘stuck’ in a foundation class. I presented academic literature as to why we should reconsider the streaming of students at the school. The principal indicated agreement with me but said that he had raised the same concerns when he started at the school but came up against fierce opposition from curriculum leaders. Academic streaming will remain in the school system for the time being.

Throughout my time at the school, I saw the impact of students and how they worked in classes based on who else was in that class. I recall working closely with another teacher where we actively separated and paired students in our two classes by considering who encouraged or challenged each other. This collaboration resulted in seeing improvements in engagement with learning content in both our classes. These decisions were not based on student abilities, but rather on their peer relationships and the impact they had on each other’s learning. Structurally we were able to make those changes as our classes were timetabled on the same line and we had both previously taught the majority of the students in different year levels and subjects so were able to consider the influence each individual student had on others within the two classes. Drawing on teacher knowledge of peer relationships resulted in a more supportive academic environment for students.

The makeup of the class can also impact on a student’s sense of belonging. In the 2018 PISA test, Indigenous students reported less sense of belonging than their non-Indigenous peers, with a higher percentage of non-Indigenous students agreeing with the statement *I feel like I belong at school* and *other students seem to like me,* and a higher percentage of First Nations students agreeing that they *feel like an outsider* at school (Thomson et al., 2020).

If a student feels they do not belong, it may enforce a belief that they are not the right fit for an academic pathway. Keith, who I previously taught in streamed foundation classes, admitted during his interview that he had initially wanted to undertake an academic pathway, but that when he looked at who else would be in that class, he did not feel that he belonged:

"Actually, I really did want to do OP in school. … But it was sort of, at the time I sorta felt that I'm not smart enough to sit in them classes and to do the work. … I sorta felt like them fellas could join the class that I would be the lowest sort of marking there. But I did really want to do OP in school. … Yea, I think, I seen all the other fellas and they were all sort of switched on and stuff. … and they could understand all the, for example the quantum math stuff or the OP English I think it was, and I felt that the workload could have been too much. … (I thought they were) like sorta smarter, and I sorta felt like I couldn't really do the work, and I was also in some of the classes in other subjects with them and I could see the difference between my work and theirs."

Unlike Keith, Ronald had initially chosen to study an academic pathway, but he found that his disposition made him feel as though he did not belong in that class before changing to a non-OP pathway.

"I felt like English, well, (my teacher), he was a good English teacher, but I reckon it was just the vibes of everybody which also made me want to get out of that English OP. Because while I was having fun, I was the only person laughing in class, mind you. Like (the teacher) would put up a joke up on the board. No one laughed at it. And then it's just me all by myself laughing at the joke because, like I understood it. And then (the teacher) would just smile and look at me and wait for me to stop laughing while everybody's just looking at

me, like why is this guy laughing? And I'll be like it's funny, you know, come on man. And that too, I felt like it was kind of stressful, but it was also, I felt like I don't belong here, like these people are boring."

For Aaron, who had chosen to remain in subjects that were part of an academic pathway, he determined that to be successful following his choice, he needed to consider who made up his friendship group:

"I need to do these subjects to get into engineering. I wanted to be an engineer. But it was like, you know, shit, I'm gonna get into these classes, I don't really know anyone. I knew the students in it, but we don't know, I know the names, I know where they (were from), you know, you don't have a relationship. And it certainly makes it easier when you've got friends. You're in an environment where you're comfortable. … I had to make friends with people that were not necessarily people that I hanged out with, but I needed that support system and I'm now in an environment where I will need to make new friends because none of my mates were there."

For Aaron, this movement of friends meant that, for the first time, he became friends with peers who did not identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander:

"I think I never really had that group of friends that think outside of the box until I, rightly or wrongly, I started hanging out with the non-Indigenous kids, because at (my school) for example, we had our own little groups. It was all about me and the mates from (my home), so we'd hang out."

Peers and friends are one of the key influences in a teenager's life and for First Nations students from remote communities, these relationships can have both a positive and a negative impact on the decisions they make and their success in whichever pathway they choose. The influence of these relationships is a

consideration schools should be making about their processes for senior schooling pathways and subject selections and to consider if there are processes that can be established to capitalise on the role that peers play and how to continue drawing on that in terms of peer mentoring.

4.4.1.2 Teaching staff

Another relationship that students have that can impact on their educational outcomes is with school staff. According to Fink (2016), the highest pedagogical possibilities occur when an educator is part of the students' community. Teacher behaviour and attitudes can impact on scholarly engagement positively as supportive relationships maintained by the teacher and student encourage students to participate in classroom activities (Hughes & Chen, 2011) and influence academic outcomes and behaviour (Liberante, 2012).

As part of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, an international study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that aims to help school leaders to understand their 15 year old students' academic abilities (OECD, 2019), Australian principals of First Nations students reported to a greater extent than principals of non-Indigenous students that teacher behaviour hindered student learning.

Positive relationships with teachers are vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Kearney et al., 2014) as they provide a consistent sense of community and belonging (Zubrick & Silburn, 2006). The way that teachers work to improve educational outcomes is complex (Nakata, 2007) and ultimately their attitudes and actions can impact on students (Lai, 2011) and their engagement and motivation. Through the interviews with past students and the information garnered from the PISA test, it was found that students were impacted by the support staff

provided, the interest teachers had in their subjects, staff opinions of students, the maintenance of an ongoing relationship, and the accessibility of individual conversations. It was also found that other staff beyond teachers could impact on student choices about pathways. Additionally, there were factors of relationships that emerged that were unique to a boarding setting.

According to the 2018 PISA test, a similar percentage of First Nations students (85.6%) to non-Indigenous students (87.3%) agreed that their teachers motivated them to learn (Underwood, 2018). This shows that the impact teachers have on students' motivation is consistent, irrelevant of cultural background. Of note however, this reported motivation decreased as they progressed over the years, with 93.9% of students reporting having motivational teachers in Year 5 with a significant drop to 75.1% in Year 11.

Motivation can be intrinsic where it is provided by an interest or enjoyment, or it can be extrinsic when it is elicited from the attainment of rewards such as grades or praise (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits can result in a student being motivated to achieve (Diseth et al., 2020; Lai, 2011). Motivation can be provided by teachers through the interest they show in the subject they are teaching (Fink, 2013), the support they provide their students and the opinion they have of their students.

Teacher support contributes to academic achievement (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Košir & Tement, 2013). In order for students to feel they have the capacity to succeed in their chosen subjects they need to be sufficiently supported to realise their full learning potential (Bonnor et al., 2021). They need to know their teachers care and are concerned about them (Lei et al., 2018).

Comparatively in the international rankings sourced from the 2018 PISA test, Australia was the third most likely country (out of 19) for students to report that their teacher supports them with their learning. Similar levels of teacher support were reported by Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, with no discernible difference. For all students, out of all of the states and territories in Australia, Queensland was identified as demonstrating the most frequent teacher support with an average across the four relevant questions in the survey being 81.25%. Whereas the average of all states across the four questions was 77.28% (Thomson et al., 2020).

The participating school recognised the need for this support and ensured a specific staff member was in classes that were identified as having significant numbers of students from remote communities who may benefit from this support.

"A lot of the students that are doing VET subjects in-house get some fantastic support. We have a staff member that goes into classes and support the students one on one often, or even two of the students and support them and try and get them through the different units."

This was then expanded on by another staff member:

"We have a really fantastic support worker that goes into every class. We identify the classes where we do have these, I guess bunches of students that like to work cohesively, and she will work with them one on one or as a team. So, we'll kind of identify where the support's needed and we'll get that one on one for them."

One issue to consider with this though is that the support is being targeted within Vocational Education and Training (VET) classes. It is unclear if a similar level of support is being offered to those who are studying, or who are wanting to study, an

academic pathway. The likelihood of students in an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) class was not acknowledged by the participating staff.

In my role as an educator working with the academic side of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' studies, I struggled with this support. My priority was to address the needs of the students who were requiring support to pass subjects. It was difficult to effectively support and enhance the scholarly capability of academically higher achieving students. I had a few students who would seek assistance, or their teachers would ask for additional support, but it definitely was not my priority as time would not permit. However, this support can be vital for those undertaking an academic pathway. Aaron spoke of how the support arranged by the Head of Department of Mathematics, assisted him in succeeding in a subject that he was not yet confident in:

> *"Yeah, so I used to be given an opportunity to do my chapter tests with the learning support teacher, not in the classroom. I used to do them in the Learning Development Centre. And I still got marked the same as everyone else. But he gave me an opportunity to create an environment where I was comfortable."*

When I asked Aaron if this additional support made him feel like he was different, he admitted that there were multiple ways of looking at it:

> *"I think (the teacher) knew that if I had failed, or whatnot, because the other students in that class were already capable of doing the test in that environment, and because I was a , you know, non-performing student, it wouldn't have done my confidence a lot if I had, you know, didn't pass, because I was barely passing their classes. Then it was only for the first few*

months, maybe the first two terms … just while I got comfortable in it. Then everything else just fell into place, I guess."

In addition to supporting students, it is key for a teacher to demonstrate interest in the subject they are teaching. A student may become and stay interested in a particular subject if their teacher relays the pleasure they take in teaching that subject (Thomson et al., 2020) and when a student cares about something to a greater degree than they did before, they then have the energy needed for significant learning (Fink, 2003). A teacher's enthusiasm is identified by: how they feel about teaching a subject (experienced enthusiasm) and how their feelings of enjoyment, passion and experience are expressed to their students (displayed enthusiasm) (Bardach et al., 2022; Frenzel et al., 2019; Keller et al., 2016).

The 2018 PISA survey showed a correlation between student performance and perceived teacher enthusiasm with a 14 percentage point difference between low performers (77%) who agreed with the statement *the teacher showed enjoyment in teaching* compared to 91% of high performing students. In Australia, teacher enthusiasm is above the OECD average, as the 7th highest out of the 19 OECD countries surveyed Queensland students, alongside those in the Australian Capital Territory, perceived higher levels of teacher enthusiasm in their classes than students in the other states and territories of Australia. Of note, non-Indigenous students perceived higher levels of teacher enthusiasm in their classes than Indigenous students (Thomson et al., 2020).

Students will sometimes make a choice about their subject based on what they think about their teacher. Scott from the participating boarding school pointed out that that:

“We also know that students will often choose by the teachers that are teaching those subjects too. They might have a preference for a subject, but often it's because they really liked the teacher who's looking after that program.”

But just as students’ opinions of their teacher can be a deciding factor, the opinion of the staff member can also impact on student engagement and subject and pathway choices. According to a survey conducted by the Queensland Department of Education (2022b), 96.4% of non-Indigenous students agreed that their teachers expect them to do their best, whereas this number was slightly lower (93.7%) for First Nations students.

Students who opted for an academic pathway were often motivated by the encouragement of a staff member who believed in their academic capabilities. In my time at the school, I recall two students who undertook an academic pathway. Throughout their junior years, these students frequently had staff encouraging them and spending extra time supporting them because they: *“knew the students could succeed*”.

In the interviews, Aaron also reported it wasn’t until he had a staff member start to build his confidence that he even considered that an academic pathway was an option:

“In grade 10, I was doing okay in some of my subjects because at that time I had a teacher …, he was like really cool, because he was a young maths teacher. And he … really helped build my confidence.”

Likewise, Ronald, who had changed from an academic pathway to a predominantly non-OP one, had a teacher re-build his confidence after the switch. At the time that Ronald changed from OP English to English Communication (a

subject not aligned with an academic pathway), he felt like he was no longer successful at school: *"When I went down to English Communication, Ms Grace, she was like Ronald … you need to start passing. And I'm like oh my gosh, like I fucked up."*

But then his new teacher in English Communication, Ms Grace, encouraged Ronald and made him feel like he had a particular talent and could be successful in this subject:

> *"But then it was all short stories pretty much and I was just getting A's. … We were doing short stories and stuff. And I'm like, man, I'm the pro at short stories. I was getting A's. Miss Grace, she'd like talk me up, like Ronald, that was amazing. You did a good short story. I'm like, yeah. Well, that's, you know, that's what I'm good at. What! … I'm like, I belong here because this is what I'm good at."*

The opinion of his teacher then made Ronald consider what he wanted and could do in his future:

> *"Her talking me up, you know, her talking me up, and you too, you know, saying oh yeah, like that's a good story Ronald, like, it made me want to become a writer in a way. Like, I would make like Fan Fiction writing."*

Being provided with encouragement opened up the possibility of different pathways for both of these students while they were at school and upon graduation. Aaron had an extra push from a different staff member, the Head of Department of Mathematics, who he had not had much to do with previously. This teacher expressed a belief in Aaron's capabilities. It was then that he started to consider an academic pathway to be a viable option:

"I had one of my best teachers at school, … he's the old maths teacher. … And look, (he) took an interest in me signing up for Math B. You know, I wasn't even a Math B student. I wasn't even in Math A. So I think that was a bit of a turning point in the teachers taking an interest in my development. So I have that opportunity with (the Head of Department of Mathematics), and rightly or wrongly, I didn't really…. Look, I didn't really have time for (him) because he was an academic person, as it were. I had a lot of time for the HPE teachers and the dorm parents because they could let me get away with what I wanted, like I wanted to play footy, I wanted to hang out with the boys. And so I think just getting the acknowledgement from (that teacher) really gave me some confidence. Like he took an interest. So he gave me a lot of confidence. And I started reading, I started taking an interest in it, I then understood that school in general is there to support me. … So I started turning up to classes, I started wanting to learn. And, like, at that time, I was, you know, trying to accept the fact that hey, I want to be more, like I want to learn and I started dropping out of classes where I was, I was only in classes because my mates were in it. And then I started realizing that wait, the teachers are here to help me develop, to help me learn. And I think at that time, I started enjoying learning."

One single encouragement by a teacher is not enough to support a student in choosing an academic pathway, however. The ongoing relationship between staff and students is another key contributing factor and can influence the subject and pathway choices a student may make.

I recall students opting to study a language other than English (LOTE) subject, which I taught in the junior years, because I had built a positive relationship

with them since they enrolled in the school. I also had numerous conversations with students about their electives and heard many times of choices based on how well they got along with the teacher.

This establishment and maintenance of these relationships comes from both the student as well as the teacher. Aaron recognised the role he played in his relationship with the Head of Department of Mathematics who had encouraged him to undertake an academic pathway with his study of mathematics:

> *"To gain respect, you gotta give respect and establishing relationships. Because see if I didn't establish a relationship with (the Head of Department of Mathematics), I don't think he would have taken an interest in teaching me or giving me opportunities after school to sit down with me to teach me about maths, to open the book with me, or let me sit exams in learning support."*

The maintenance of ongoing relationships with staff has the additional benefit of more upfront and direct conversations, which may not necessarily be framed in an obvious positive manner. Looking back on the choices he made for senior schooling subjects, Ronald wished that someone had have been more direct about his future. Ronald did not have an ongoing relationship with the staff member who chatted with him during his SET plan interview and he has regrets about that:

> *"I wish someone could just tell me straight away, look Ronald, this is the real world man. Like, instead of talking to me, like, oh yeah, so when you get out, you're gonna do this. Oh, great. Just say is it gonna make you money? … Just give it to me straight like that. Because I never really had that tough love actually growing up. I never had like a father there for me who would say like Ronald this aint gonna, this isn't gonna do well, or something like that. … My mother was like, really supportive and everything but it's just like, I wish I had*

that. I wish that (the person doing my SET Plan) coulda just gave it to me straight, you know. Like, when you get out of school, the real world's gonna fucking shit on you. Like in school you may be a somebody but once you get out of school, you just everybody else? You're not Michael Jordan when you get out. Like you may be Michael Jordan in here, but when you get out you're a freaking, you're a nobody. … Like there's better competition than you. For real, how are you going to be better than these guys? Like, how are you going to, you got to put in the work now. How are you going to train in order to become the best? Like a lot of boys back at (school), I don't know, like most of them you know, you could just see potential in them. Oh, man most of them are gonna make it, they're gonna be footy players. And then you know, you hear about them not making tryouts and stuff and it's like, wooo, what? And it's just like, once you think about it, you have to give 110% of your time and I think that, okay, you know, once I think about it now, me giving up OP subjects and everything. You know, yea, like, oh fuck. I don't know how to explain it actually. … Yeah, I made the choice to change because it was too much and I just wanted to chill … because I wasn't really told about sort of like pushing myself, I never had that motivation really. I'd have to say that it just comes down to motivation really."

One way for schools to facilitate these ongoing conversations is for there to be a formal system established. Keith pondered this very idea when asked what advice he would give to schools:

"I guess, for me looking back on school now, I think, the little things I guess, you know, communication with individuals in school and having one-on-one conversations, having good conversations, you know having sorta someone

who you know, not like a motivational speaker, but someone that is there to, yea, that you could go to see. I wish they had that in schools and yea, but sorta like someone there who could help them. … Someone in the school, because you are sorta building that relationship with people, with the kids you're working with at the schools, so you're sort of building that relationship with the trust. I think students are able to open up more about what they want and what they find difficult."

There was one occasion I saw an attempt at this while in my Head of Department role. One year, the Deputy Principal started an official mentoring program with the Heads of Departments. Each Head of Department was assigned a list of students to case mange, and were to meet with them throughout Years 11 and 12 to discuss how things were travelling academically and to offer up any needed advice and guidance. This program was targeted at students on an academic pathway only and did not start until they had already entered their senior years of study. However, the notion of the program could be applied to students from remote communities in order to build up this relationship over time so students can feel comfortable talking and the teachers can really understand their students to offer substantive and personalised guidance when it comes time to elect a senior schooling pathway. It is worth noting though that this program was not without issue. It only lasted one year due to procedural issues from staff capacity to undertake such an endeavour.

Having a strong relationship enables trusted conversations to occur to a greater extent to facilitate the most appropriate choice of pathways and subjects. Keith identified that he would have benefited from a conversation with an individual

staff member over a group conversation. When detailing the process of senior schooling subject selection at a school that he previously attended:

> *"A lot of it was done in groups. But come to think of it, I actually wish I'd been able to do one-on-one. … If I had the chance to talk to someone individually it would have changed, because I was doing graphics and all that which yea, I did do that up in (my last school), and I wasn't sure how to do all that stuff on the computer. … When it comes to that decision making to choose your subject, I reckon best not to do it in groups. … I think just having that person or persons to talk to about it and being away from your peers so you can sorta make that decision yourself."*

The participating school identified the ability to facilitate individual discussions with students as being one of their strengths. The careers counsellor noted the process she follows for all students: *"I meet with all of our seniors, every single senior student has one on one career counselling."*

The power staff hold means caution needs to be exercised with these conversations with individual staff members. If a relationship is not established where the staff member genuinely knows the individual, a student may be directed inappropriately. A student who I had worked with from the beginning of Year 10 when he first entered the school and who I had established a positive relationship with had expressed to me during one of our OP English for ESL Learners classes that he had been thinking about enrolling in a teacher education course. He was keen about this idea and we had been looking at a number of possible options for university, including entry pathways, the support systems established and the possibility of scholarships to assist financially. The school engaged an external person, whose job it was to meet with the Year 12s and assist with application for

further study or work. This student attended the meeting, and immediately, despite weeks of conversations about possible tertiary education, had changed his mind and wanted to return back to his home community following graduation. I will never know what conversation occurred in that meeting, and I do not begrudge any person, especially First Nations peoples, from retuning to their home community, but the timing was circumspect, and there was no longer any consideration of tertiary study, either on-campus or externally.

Charlie, the Head of Careers and Pathways at the participating school also recognised the impact these individual relationships across teaching staff can have in ensuring accurate guidance was provided and worked as a team to ensure personalised information was considered during the subject selection phase:

> *"I just think what we do well is all our intervention support of students is personalised. We're trying to find out through the teachers, (the Deputy Principal) often gives lots of insight to student's areas of interest. And (the four of us), we work on, we have a bit of a brainstorm. We know this student is interested in law enforcement, or they're interested in early education. So we will often get together and think about, okay, we can offer them this course or this opportunity. And then we'll come up with a range of opportunities, whether it be you know, doing the university subject, at school in Indigenous art, which is, you know, one of our students now, we're going to try and help pathway her with that. But once you come back to that team idea, we'll look at the student's interests and strengths, and we'll then brainstorm between all of us what we know is out there and then present them to the student and then see what you know, if they're interested in doing that."*

4.4.1.3 Other staff

It is not only teachers who can be influential to students when they are trying to decide on an academic or vocational pathway. There are a variety of staff within a school community who may impact to varying extents, such as careers counsellors, ILOs, Heads of Year, boarding staff and external advisors and organisations.

Similarly to the student who changed his mind after speaking with the external advisor about studying to become a teacher post-school, I recall another student who wanted to undertake tertiary studies to gain qualifications to become a national parks ranger. This student had expressed this desire through our conversations in the second semester of Year 10. I was unsure of appropriate university studies for this career path, so I organised for him to talk with a career's counsellor. When I spoke to this student after that meeting, his plans had changed. He said that he was advised that he did not require tertiary studies for this career path, which I am assuming was accurate information. However, he seemed disappointed. When I pressed him on this, the student revealed he was keen to be the first person in his family to attend university. This is a consideration that was not taken into account, and I regret to admit that I did not then push this student to move beyond, or to re-discuss with the careers counsellor. Even though this was most likely pragmatic advice, what eventuated was the student lost motivation in all his subjects in his final two years of secondary education. I often wonder how his Year 11 and 12 journey would have differed if he had been guided towards his aspirational pathway.

Sam indicated the only person he spoke to about his subject choices for Years 11 and 12 was not a member of the teaching staff, but rather, was the school's Indigenous Liaison Officer (ILO): *"I had a chat with Miss Phillips. We just talked about it, (did it) suit you to do."*

Keith identified the inclusion of middle leader pastoral staff in the process for subject choices and changes: *"On top of my head, I think I had to let my teacher know, my year level coordinator know, I'm pretty sure."*

Whereas Ronald had a meeting with one of the school's leadership team members to discuss his choices. This person did not know Ronald and automatically questioned his selection of an academic pathway. Similar to the student who wanted to become a ranger, Ronald's plan to study at university was queried because of his career aspirations:

> *"We had to like sit down and talk about our future and what we want to do when we get out of school. What subjects, I think yeah, I told him I said I wanted to get into acting and shit. … He was sitting down and talking about it. And then he said, why are you doing so many OP subjects? And I say, yeah, I want to go to university and I want to study you know, study this whole acting thing. And fucking beyond Home and Away. They had this casting call for Home and Away but I was just like I'm not doing that."*

Schools should strive to ensure the entire staff genuinely understand the students' aspirations and can guide them appropriately. While it is the purview and responsibility of all staff, Aaron recognised the impact that ILOs have on student wellbeing and support, suggesting that it comes down to an investment in culturally aware and designated staff: *"I think that there needs to be a lot of investment into Indigenous Liaison Officers that really act as the gap filler between Indigenous student wellbeing and support system as well."*

The participating school also identified the important role that an ILO plays due to the relationship they have built with both the students and their families. One

of the staff recalled the unique connection that Thomas, the ILO, brought to the process:

> *"His expertise and knowledge with those families does come in very handy then. So, I guess … academic teachers then do have that network through (him) to then have that help to make those connections. And then (our ILO) can then share the information that the teachers wanted if they're not getting an email response back from the parents. But then we have that trust."*

In a survey conducted by Education Queensland in 2022 it was indicated that students' ability to get help from home with their school work decreased over the years from 85.8% in Year 5 to 72.8% in Year 11. Additionally, overall Indigenous students were 4% less likely to have academic support at home than their non-Indigenous peers (Department of Education, 2022b). Boarding schools have a unique ability for staff to support students with their schoolwork above that provided by regular day schools. As Sam reflected: *"I can ask house parents for some help. Yes, some help and how you can do it, is there a better way to do the studying?"*

Keith also honed in on how the situation in boarding supported him with the overall act of academic studies:

> *"Boarding, I think for me it really helped me. It gave me that routine of I have to do that hour of work or study it sorta got that routine going which really helped me to get my assignments done, and I did have that support. Well you probably remember, you helped me out in grade 11 and 12."*

The unique ability of boarding schools to capitalise on the relationship between staff and students was discussed by the participant school. It was reported that the tutors in particular can have an impact on subject choices because students

may recognise that there is one particular person who the students know can support them if they choose to study a particular subject:

> *"They have academic prep time each night, obviously, and we have academic tutors come in and assist the students. And something could even come down to the fact that they know they're going to get excellent academic tuition and support after hours in those prep times. That can have an influence on their choices, if they know that there's a really good maths teacher or person who can support them with their science interests and so on, they're more confident to take that subject on or that course on. … The tutors, we try to provide a range of tutors who've got skill sets across a number of fields. So we don't necessarily aim, particularly, you know, we certainly might be looking for somebody. In fact, we've got a former, one of our former maths teachers comes back and does tutoring at night, and is really well regarded. And obviously, she's very, very good supporting the students in their maths, but we often will have university students who've got skill sets that they can offer. I mean, most of them are specialising very often they're studying education anyway, but very often they have a specialist in maths or English or whatever. But given that they're a couple of years out of school, they're probably quite familiar with being able to support the kids … We like to get a range of people available."*

Boarding school establishes a unique opportunity that day schools cannot emulate, that is the opportunity to build relationships between students and staff in a less formalised setting. As previously discussed, if a student and staff member have created an ongoing trusting relationship, it is more likely that staff will understand

each individual student's situation and aspirations and the students will be more likely to take on board guidance offered by those staff members.

I acknowledge that my work on school side changed, and in my opinion improved, in the classroom when I began working as a supervisor on boarding side. My relationship with my students deepened as I had opportunities to chat with them in a much more relaxed setting. The power imbalance was diminished, and I was able to have chats while eating dinner at the same table. One of my favourite activities on a Saturday night was to set up a jigsaw puzzle and work on it between laps of the dorm. Throughout the night I would have so many different students sit at the table and work on the puzzle for 10 to 20 minutes. This was an opportune time for casual chats. Even simple tasks like transporting to shops on the weekend and Friday night take-aways created opportunities to build a more intimate understanding of my students and to establish trust. These relationships then meant that I was able to guide students with a full picture of their aspirations and they had the trust needed to seek that guidance and for some to be confident enough to study an OP subject with me.

Ronald also recognised the benefit of this overlap of staff in terms of that assistance with his studies once he entered senior school, especially his OP (more academic) subjects. In particular, Ronald spoke about Mrs Christopher:

> *"Well, at boarding we barely had any help anyways. Like we had dorm parents, but I don't know like, it wasn't really help. They wasn't really helping. But Mrs Christopher, she was actually pretty cool, because she was my PC teacher. Not just PC teacher, she also helped out when you was late on assignments and you'd go into her classroom for that thing. Yeah, she was like really, really helpful honestly."*

Ronald saw Mrs Christopher in three roles and contexts: in boarding, in the classroom and in a support role. This crossover of roles enabled different contexts for interaction that would assist in building a more humanised understanding of each other.

In summary, the relationship that students have with all staff members is paramount to their capacity to have the ability to complete the coursework in whatever subjects and pathways they have chosen as they will feel confident in seeking support from staff when needed. Relationships may also influence the choices students make in the first place whether that may be because they like and are motivated by a particular staff member, or a teacher is so enthusiastic about a subject that, like a contagion, the student is now interested in it too, or a staff member has shown a genuine interest and belief in a student that has sparked a belief that just maybe they can do this despite academic pathways not being in their considerations prior. It is also important to remember that conversations around subjects and pathways can be not beneficial if there is not an ongoing relationship, especially if the staff member does not 'know' the student.

4.4.1.4 Families / communities

The relationship that students have with their parents/families have a real impact on academic outcomes. Family expectations impact on educational achievement and relationships with parents can act as a buffer for negative influences of peers (Murray-Harvey, 2010; Wong et al., 2002). The influence of parents is a predictor of student motivation and engagement (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012; Mansour & Martin, 2009). And the impact of this influence is not dependent on the parents' socio-economic background, education or ethnic

background (Liu & White, 2017; Sianturi et al., 2022). Parental engagement for all students generally declines as students' progress through their years of schooling. The extent of familial engagement may be influenced by a misalignment of cultural background between the family and the school, previous historical experiences with the education system and a diversity of interpretations of what it means to be 'helpful' educationally (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Mansour & Martin, 2009).
For First Nations peoples there is a special bond with family (Dudgeon et al., 2021). In addition to the Western concept of family, community is also incredibly influential with overlaps between family, kinship and community (Dudgeon et al., 2021). Consequently, both family and community may influence a student's decision making process about which pathway they undertake for the senior years of their secondary education.

For the participants, there was a mixed bag of experiences with the influence that families and communities had on their education and choices to focus on for senior schooling subjects. The participating school also recognised the role families and community played on the education of their students.

Family opinions on subjects can be representative and determined by an indifference to education in general. This should not be mistaken as not caring about their children's education; families may not want to interfere with the education process, believing that teachers and schools are best equipped to guide their children through academic endeavours.

In my role focussing on the academia of First Nations students I frequently contacted families about all different aspects of their children's education including to have discussions about the choices they were making for their senior schooling pathways. During these conversations, parents would often indicate that they did not

really have an opinion and that I was the teacher so I would know best what their child should do. At the time I did not push this further but in hindsight I should have found a way to bring parents into the conversations with their children. If schools built that relationship with families more thoroughly, it may establish an environment in which they are comfortable contributing to this discussion.

Ronald's family support was his mother and nanna. At the time of selecting his subjects and pathway for senior school he briefly interacted with his mum, who was working out at the mines at the time, and his nanna, who he lived with when he was not in the residences for boarding while his mum was away:

> *"I think mum, she just didn't care? Like she was just like, you know, whatever you want to do, do it sort of thing. And I'm like, oh, I want to be an actor. And she's like, Oh, okay, cool."*

When asked about his nanna's input: *"She was just, doing her thing working."*

Keith also did not speak with his family about his choices, identifying his peers as being the only source of input in his decision-making process as well as his experiences in junior classes. After I asked did you talk to anyone at school or home? Keith responded: *"Nah, not really. Well with my peers I did, and I think um in grade 8 to grade ten doing all the manual arts stuff, I thought yea, I'll just give it a go."*

As suggested here, and as will be expanded on further in a later chapter, there are historical reasons and social reasons why parents and families and communities may not be involved in the decision-making process. But when does this turn from indifference to a possible negative or detrimental contribution?

None of the participants spoke negatively about the impact/influence their own families may have had, but rather about the impact they saw in relationships in

community. Sam spoke of the actions his mother took to remove him from the community he was in, she wanted him to leave because he was: *“failing the subjects and following the wrong people.”*

Contrastingly I remember Sam arriving at school in Year 10 and seeing him thrive despite being away from his family and community. Sam also recognised in hindsight that: *“It was a really good choice.”*

Aaron more explicitly identified the negative impact communities can have on the drive to pursue an academic pathway, especially stemming from the lack of interest in education:

> *“I seen that there is lack of interest from community when it comes to education. It's because it's not normal. Even wearing glasses in communities is not normal. It's doing homeworks and doing science subjects. You get teased for it, oh you're trying to be deadly or something, you know. And it's very upsetting. At times when I wouldn't go out with the boys or playing footy or whatnot, because I had to study or work through uni. I was put in the category as, you know, are you trying to be different. You get paid out. And it was a bit upsetting. But that's the, that mentality does need to be broken, and I think I broke that barrier of … being at a school where it’s dominated by sporting achievements, especially for the Indigenous students. Nine times out of 10 all the Indigenous students go there because sports, or you've got family member that's already going to that school. It's not because, hey, you know, this is a great school with great, you know, schooling opportunities to excel into doing further education … And I know at that time, when I was at (the school), it wasn't renowned for its academic achievements, especially in the Indigenous communities anyway.”*

Aaron continued with his reflection comparing the focus on education compared to that placed in sporting endeavours by families and members of the community that he comes from:

"I guess it's that there seems to be, there needs to be more realistic approach when it comes to education. We Indigenous communities really need to understand the importance of education. I come from a background where, you know, school is often a place where you go to between nine o'clock and three o'clock. There is no interest in the grades I get. There's no consequences for me missing school. But there's consequences for me missing training, consequences for me, not turning up to training on time, not, you know, not making the football team or the sporting, you know what I mean, like. And that's just openly speaking."

Interestingly, Aaron identified that part of his motivation to pursue an academic pathway in his senior years of schooling was to prove his community wrong.

"Then it also goes back to my early schooling where I got, what do you call it? Some of the community members were like, oh, you're gonna go and fail, going to high School. So I kind of knew that, you know, I'm gonna go to high school because that's what you do. After primary school you go to high school and after high school you come back to the community. That kind of mentality is already instilled in some Indigenous students. And it's the opportunities that they grasp on, leading up. So I was like, no, I'm not gonna go back to the community and prove to them that they were right, that I would go back to community. So it's like a bit of a mental challenge."

Aaron is now using his experience to create a change in his community by mentoring current students with the intention to impact on their academic endeavours:

"Now I've returned (home), and I get involved in offering mentoring and all that kind of stuff. There is a big gap in Indigenous leadership, where the people like myself and one of my mates … can talk to community students, because we can relate to them, we've been in the same position as them, we did have to leave home at the age of 11 and 12 to go to a boarding school in an environment where English is not, where English is the first language and English in (our home community) is the third language."

Having a family or community member as a role model may influence a student's choice about the senior schooling pathway they wish to pursue. I recall having a discussion with a student in Year 10 who I had noticed had a particular academic capability. He was a quiet achiever who seemed quite happy to coast under the radar. Around the time of subject selections, I discussed the possibility of an academic pathway with this student. He however had no desire to study an academic pathway. Rather, he spoke of his admiration for his brother who had completed non-academic studies at school and upon graduation enlisted in the defence force. This student expressed his desire to travel the world with defence, just as his brother had done. Even when I told him that studying OP (academic) subjects would not rule him out of enlisting, he was adamant that he wanted to follow his brother's path. I heard recently that this student was in fact successful in his endeavour and was at the time deployed internationally.

Ronald on the other hand, originally thought that he would like to be the first in his family to attend university, but eventually found the stress of this pathway to be too much:

> *"I was just thinking I might think of being, you know, because no one in my family has ever been to university before, or studied. So I was like, oh well, I might try this and see what there is for my future, or whatever. I wasn't really thinking about like, I don't know, I wanted to do sort of like performing arts. That's what I wanted to get into. But I don't know, like it was just freaking too much. That's all like too stressful."*

With these connections that students have with their families and other members of the community, it is important that schools work to develop, foster and maintain relationships with their students' families. I now recognise that this was an area that I needed to work more effectively on in my previous role. As a boarding school, the necessity to communicate with parents on a regular occurrence is removed. The students' house/boarding parents have become their de-facto parents. This became the simple solution that allowed you to ignore possible barriers to communication with families such as phone and internet access, and possible language differences. This is an area that if I were in the same role I would actively seek to improve.

In the interview with staff from the participating school it was clear that they recognised the importance of their relationship with their students' families, actively seeking ways to foster it:

> *"We've got a priority to try and get to some of the communities whenever we can. COVID has obviously limited that in the last little while. Generally we work through from our youngest students through but we've made an effort to*

try and get to several of the communities to meet families to see what the community is like."

The Deputy Principal, Dakota, gave an example of how this active engagement with community and family has previously supported the academic outcomes for a specific student:

"We had one situation with a young lady who's now graduated, where at end of Year 11 we were really dubious as to what she was coming back to in Year 12, if she was even going to come back. So we got online with them, had a video call with Mum, from the community there simply to get Mum on board, so that we all understood what we would expect from her. And I know the people around the screen, worked very, very hard to get our young friend over the line. And it was a wonderful achievement that we got her through Year 12 achieving what she did. So yeah, it's about those connections. And that means having the parental support as well."

One way that schools can make these connections more effectively and culturally relevantly is through the engagement of an Indigenous Liaison Officer (ILO) or an Indigenous Education Worker (IEW):

"Just going back to liaison with parents and things. I guess, putting my teacher hat on, a lot of teachers will probably go through (our ILO), because (he's) got that, I guess connection with parents. So if a teacher does email and doesn't get a response, you know, they might be having a difficulty in a particular subject. They wanted the parents to know, but they don't hear back. Then (our ILO), his expertise and knowledge with those families does come in very handy then. So I guess, like you mentioned, sometimes there is that that difficulty, but I guess teachers, academic teachers then do have that network

through (our ILO) to then have that help to make those connections. And then he can then share the information that the teachers wanted if they're not getting an email response back from the parents. But then we have that trust that it has sort of, you know, at least they've been made aware through a different channel as well."

The participating school also was actively working to include parents more explicitly in the subject selection process in Year 10:

"We're trying to formalise that process through the first half of year 10 before they do their set planning. And I'm actually in the process of designing the booklet and the activities now, and we would like to see some more input from families. Because families have a lot greater insight into students and what they're great at. So with these activities we would like some input from the family. So I just have to work out how that's going to work, whether it be the students sitting down and going through like a list of questions with their family about subjects. Where the family sees their student's strengths or interests or potential career paths. So we do that now. We're just going to formalise it now and bring in parents and families into that process and to use that when we're helping the students with their selection. So whilst … it might be hard for us to communicate with parents sometimes, we're hoping that this process that you know, we'll have a booklet, whether it be a hardcopy or online, the parents will then engage in that process and we'll gain further insight from looking at the activities that students have done and the discussions they've had with their families."

The relationships that students have with their parents / families and other members of the community can impact on their education from a general

perspective, as well as their decision-making about senior schooling pathway choices. Participants in the study spoke positively about their own families but highlighted the negative influence of communities reporting a prioritisation of sporting achievements and a lack of support for academic pursuits. Despite these challenges, some participants were motivated to pursue academic pathways in spite of community expectations. These relationships have the capacity to impact both positively and negatively and relationships with both families and communities should be facilitated by schools to more effectively support the pathway choices being made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities.

4.4.1.5 Summary

First Nations students from remote communities have influential relationships with peers, school staff, and families and communities. These connections impact on student engagement in learning and decisions about senior schooling pathways in a multitude of ways. All varieties of relationships students are involved in can have both positive and negative impacts on decision-making processes. The ways in which these relationships influence students should be a consideration schools make when evaluating their processes surrounding senior schooling decision-making. Schools should consider how to capitalise on these relationships such as through structures that support peer mentoring, how to establish trusting and reciprocal relationships with staff, and how to engage with both families and communities to enhance opportunities for students to pursue a senior schooling pathway of their genuine preference.

4.4.2 The influence of subject accessibility

One of the key influences on the decisions Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities may make at boarding school is the accessibility of subjects. Subjects' accessibility can be determined by what is actually offered in each individual school. Additionally, a subject may not be accessible due to its content being geographically or culturally irrelevant. From a systemic perspective, the way subject requirements for those wishing to be eligible to obtain an ATAR upon completion of Year 12 may also impact on the choices students make when selecting subjects. This section will discuss whether the subjects that are available enable students to undertake a pathway that is their authentic preference, or if it compels students into a particular pathway choice.

4.4.2.1 ATAR requirements

A major contributing factor to the pathway choices that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make is the availability and accessibility of subjects. While certain subjects are required for successful completion to become eligible for an academic ranking by Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC), schools determine what subjects are taught based on their individual needs. The past students who were interviewed for this project had the choice of a slightly different academic program to students today in 2023.

Queensland's standard pathway to tertiary entry for Year 12 school leavers changed from the Overall Position (OP) system to the current ATAR system in 2020. Prior to the change there was a clear delineation between students undertaking an academic pathway and those who were not. One of the limitations of the clear split distinction in pathways within the OP system was identified by Ronald who, despite

having a wish to go to university, was also concerned about having relevant skills to enter the workforce upon graduation:

> *"What do you want to be when you get out of school? Like does it involve university? Or does it just involve just rocking up with a resume, job experience sort of thing? … It's either, you know, you can get job experience while you're in school, or just, you know, focus on them OP subjects and go to university. Because me, I was stuck in the middle. Because I was just, yeah, I wanted to go to university, but also wanted to get work experience. Because I was just thinking about, man, I just want to get out of school and get a job. I was just thinking about this and that, so much."*

One of the staff at the participating school asserted that parents often are not aware of impacts of recent changes made to the academic rigour of both pathways in the senior years:

> *"I think ATAR has definitely changed that way of thought. I guess the OP system was definitely, you're either academic or you're not, and I guess that is where a lot of parents have come up with the idea that vocational maybe isn't as academic, but that's not true."*

With the introduction of ATAR, the need to make a distinct choice has been minimised. The transition has resulted in a shift where a mixed stream is now more feasible with students who would traditionally be exclusively academic being encouraged to take up one vocational course during their senior years at school. This change is predicated by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority's (QCAA's) requirements for meeting ATAR eligibility. There are several combinations of types of subjects that students can undertake to be eligible for an ATAR, all combinations require successful completion of an English subject, and

unlike in the previous OP system which did not take any VET certificate qualifications into account, students can have an Applied or a higher level (at least certificate III) VET qualification as part of their eligibility:

An ATAR is calculated based on three possible scenarios:

- Best five General subject results, or
- Best results in four General subjects, plus one Applied subject, or
- Best results in four General subjects, plus one VET qualification at Certificate III or above (Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre, 2021).

One of the positives of the new system is that it has provided ways for students to undertake subjects across a range of academic and vocational pathways more readily. With the inclusion of Certificates III and above counting towards an ATAR and the value that is placed on them when contributing towards Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) points, this means that a student undertaking a vocational subject can remain eligible for an ATAR result and has opened the possibility for more academic pathways with the inclusion of certificate courses as well. In the words of one of the staff members at the participating school, ATAR and VET support each other because *"they're more cohesive now that ATAR has brought that in."* The staff member additionally identified how, the option for those on an academic pathway to incorporate vocational studies in their selection is encouraged by the way QCE points are allocated.

> *"I guess that now is allowing students to have backup opportunities as well. So even our academic students, we would love for them to have a vocational subject on their set plans, a Cert III level obviously opens more doors with pathways to university and obviously those QCE points are fantastic at a Cert III level as well."*

While this means that there is now the possibility for the coaction of ATAR and VET subjects to effectively enable students to have more choices about continuing with further education or directly entering the full-time workforce upon graduation, a concern remains that students may still be encouraged to take on a higher proportion of certificate courses and non-ATAR subjects as the certificates will contribute more to attain the necessary points for their QCE and Applied subjects accrue the same points and are more attainable to pass than General subjects.

4.4.2.2 Availability at school

A patent reason for a student being influenced into a particular pathway is because the subjects actually available at individual schools may limit options available for students to study subjects aligned with either academic or vocational studies, thus possibly channelling them into a non-preferred pathway.

The subjects and pathways that are available for First Nations students to select at boarding schools in Queensland, in actuality differ vastly based on numerous factors as will be seen throughout this section. When selecting subjects that will be undertaken as part of their senior studies, students' choices are to be made principally across three categories: Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificates, General subjects, and Applied subjects. Also available are senior external examinations which are programs for those who are unable to access a particular subject at school with results based solely on examination performance (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.b), and short courses which are one-unit courses with a teaching, learning and assessment time of just 55 hours (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2022a). However, these have not been considered in this analysis as there is limited information about school participation in the external examination program and only four short courses are

listed by the QCAA with only five out of the 51 boarding schools in Queensland running one (three schools) or two (two schools) short courses.

The QCAA provides syllabus and assessment requirements and oversees the administration of both General and Applied subjects and acts as a delegate for the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) in registering and auditing Queensland school registered training organisations (RTOs) to deliver and assess VET certificates (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.d). Alternatively, VET courses can be administered by external RTOs. As a prevalent rule, General subjects are suited to students who are interested in pathways that lead to tertiary studies, vocational education and training, or work (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2019b). Applied subjects are mostly suited to students who are interested in vocational education and training, or work (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2023a). Vocational certificate courses are suited mostly for those interested in a vocational training or work pathway and those seeking employment-specific skills (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.d). Available certificates offered at schools in Queensland range from a Certificate I progressing through levels II, III, and IV, up to Diploma qualifications with an increase of depth and breadth, time and utility (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.c).

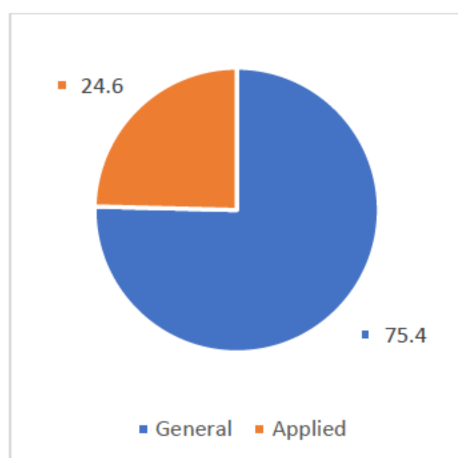
First Nations students are limited by only being able to choose subjects that are offered at their schools and this can be seen by dissecting how subjects are offered based on different ways of categorising the schools. Data was sourced about individual school's uptake of General and Applied subjects (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2023f) and schools' offerings of the different certificate levels (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority

[ACARA], 2022b). Schools were categorised specifically according to proportion of students identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value, school size, geographic location of schools, and the gender that the schools catered for. Funding per student of individual schools was not considered as the variation in sources of funding meant no clear assumptions could be made about how funding might impact subject availability. The analysis of the data demonstrated that a possible contributing factor for First Nations students choosing a particular senior schooling pathway is impacted by the subject availability at their school.

Before discussing how the different ways of categorising schools demonstrate the extent of subject availability for First Nations students, it is necessary to note the proportion of each of the types of subjects as seen in Figure 3. With approximately three quarters of the total General and Applied subjects offered across all boarding schools in Queensland being General, this indicates the predominant focus of boarding schools in Queensland to be to facilitate an academic pathway.

Figure 3

Overall Percentage of Subjects Offered: General vs. Applied



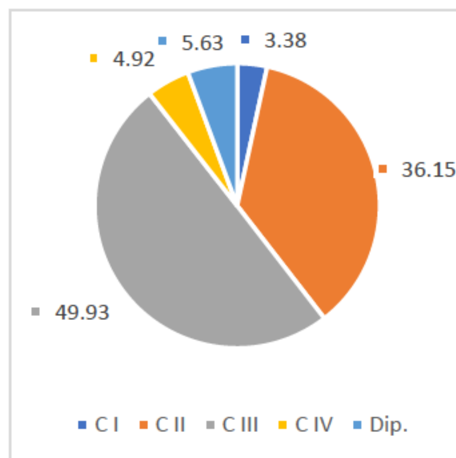
Regardless of whether a school focuses on an academic, vocational, or mixed stream pathway, VET certificates play a key role in senior school programs for both

post-school employment opportunities, and for meeting QCE point requirements. One of the requirements to obtain a QCE is to gain 20 credits from accepted learning options. Of these, the most common are General and Applied subjects which, with successful completion, are awarded four points per subject. Due to the way points are allocated for QCEs many students will undertake a Certificate III subject as a safety net for obtaining required points. QCAA have determined the credit value of the learning options to be based on the criteria of depth and breadth, time and utility (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2023d). When looking at the following data, it is worth noting that a Certificate III contributes 8 points toward a QCE, while even though the breadth/depth, time and utility increases as you progress through to a Certificate IV and a Diploma, they also contribute a maximum of eight credits toward a student's accumulated QCE points. Thus, if the focus for the school and the student is on attaining points for their QCE, there is no benefit in studying a certificate above a level three.

As is evident in Figure 4, approximately half of all of the overall offerings of VET courses across the 51 boarding schools in Queensland are at a Certificate III level, followed by approximately 35% of Certificate II offerings. The administration of Certificates I, IV and Diploma are all reasonably equivalent with slightly more Diploma and Certificate IV courses offered than Certificate I.

Figure 4

Overall Percentage of Certificates Offered: By Level



For each of the following ways of categorising schools to analyse the distribution of General, Applied and the five certificate levels, data about the school's First Nations population, ICSEA value, overall school size, school's geographic location and the gender of students was gathered from ACARA's MySchool website (ACARA, 2022). The first step in each category's analysis was to split the schools according to the appropriate categorisation and then to determine the percentage of First Nations students in each component of that category. For example, a percentage of First Nations students was calculated for schools with a below average ICSEA value and then compared to the percentage of First Nations students for schools with an above average ICSEA value.

Because of a discrepancy of total number of schools in each category, comparing the percentages of types of subjects within each category would not convey results with validity, thus steps were taken to compare to what extent each category provided opportunities to study each of the subject types. This was done by first analysing each category for the percentage of General subjects offered and the percentage of Applied subjects offered. Using the category of school size as an example, I first worked out how many subjects were offered in all smaller schools

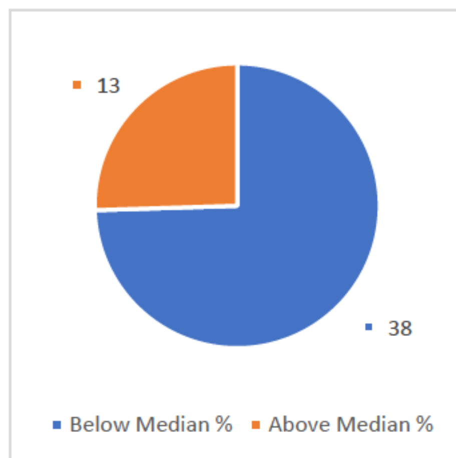
and what percentage were Applied as opposed to General. I followed this with the same calculation for larger schools. I then used those percentages to compare opportunities for students to study a General subject according to school size, followed by a comparison of opportunities to study an Applied subject according to school size. The final step in this analysis was a similar calculation about certificate levels. At first, I looked at each category individually, for example small schools, and calculated the percentage of each of the certificate levels offered. I then calculated the percentage of each of the certificate levels offered in large schools. These percentages were then used to compare opportunities for each of the certificate levels to be studied dependent on the category, in this case school size.

4.4.2.2.1 Indigeneity

To examine the subjects offered according to percentage of students at schools identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, the median percentage of students at the schools was calculated by adding the percentage of First Nations students at each school and dividing that number by 51 (the total number of boarding schools in Queensland). As depicted in Figure 5. this resulted in a median population of First Nations students at each school as 14.29%. 38 of the 51 schools (75%) have below the median percentage of First Nations students.

Figure 5

Schools According to Percentage of First Nations Students



Figures 6 and 7 show that if a student attends a school with an enrolment of a higher proportion of First Nations students, their opportunities to study a General subject is more limited than those students attending a school with a lower proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. Conversely, at schools with an above median percentage of First Nations students, a student has an increased possibility of studying an Applied subject as opposed to those at a below median school.

Figure 6

Applied Subjects: Percentage Offered Per School Indigeneity

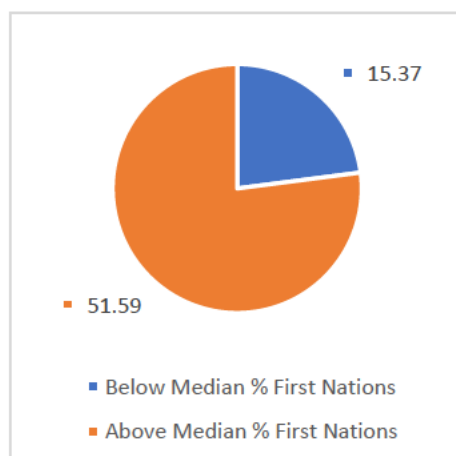
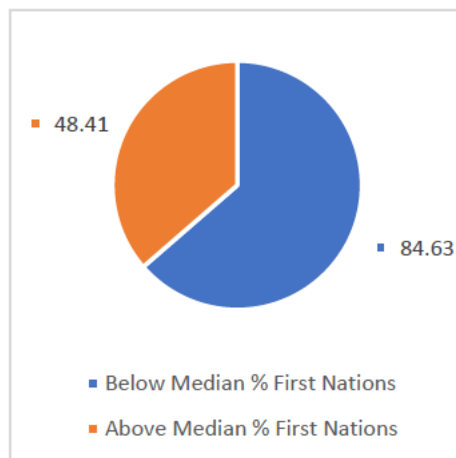


Figure 7

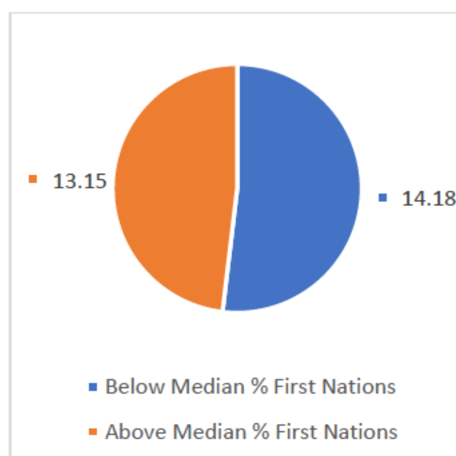
General Subjects: Percentage Offered Per School Indigeneity



According to the average number of vocational courses available to select at each school, as seen in Figure 8, there is not a discernible difference between schools dependent on percentage of First Nations students enrolled.

Figure 8

Average Number of Certificate Courses Offered Per School According to School Indigeneity

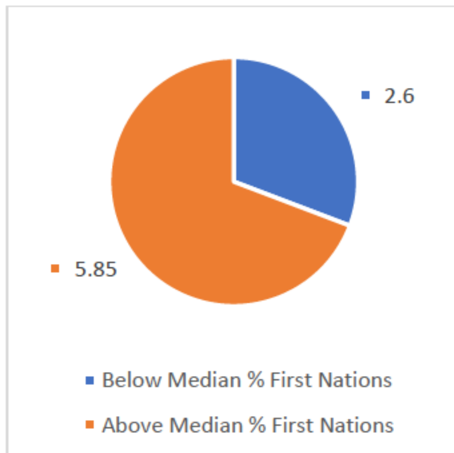


The distinction between schools with an above and below median percentage of First Nations students becomes apparent upon inspection of the percentage of the courses according to certification level. As is evident in Figure 9, if a student attends a school with a higher proportion of First Nations students, nearly 6% of their

available certificate courses are at a Certificate I level, whereas schools with a lower proportion of First Nations students offer less than 3% of their courses at this lowest certification standard.

Figure 9

Certificate I: Percentage Offered Per School Indigeneity



By the time the certificates reach a level three, increasing in breadth/depth and utility, the trend reverses (as seen in Figures 10 and 11) to a higher proportion of certificates being offered at schools with a lower percentage of First Nations students.

Figure 10

Certificate II: Percentage Offered Per School Indigeneity

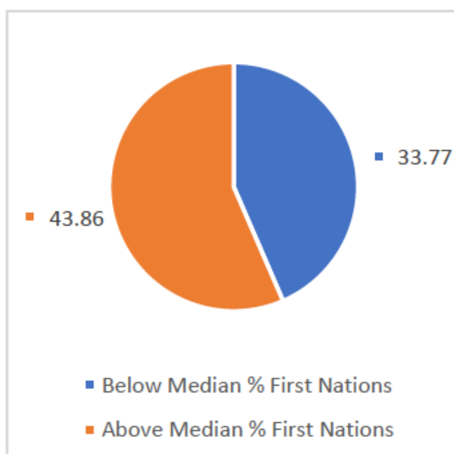
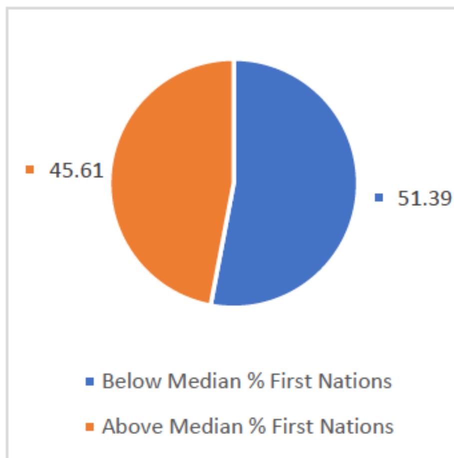


Figure 11

Certificate III: Percentage Offered Per School Indigeneity



This trend continues to progress (see Figures 12 and 13) until the converse of Certificate I can be seen at a Diploma level with over 6% of courses offered at a below median First Nations population school at this highest certification, and just nearly 3% being available for study at schools with a higher Indigeneity status.

Figure 12

Certificate IV: Percentage Offered Per School Indigeneity

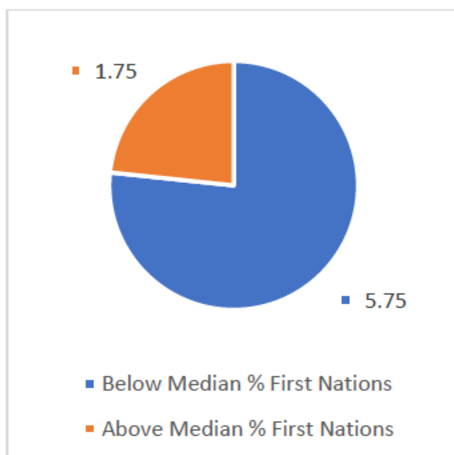
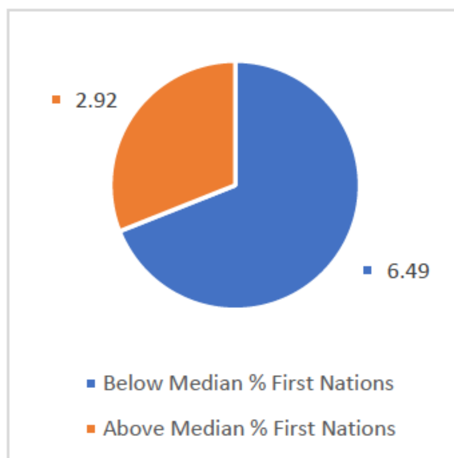


Figure 13

Diploma Certificate: Percentage Offered Per School Indigeneity



Overall, it is evident that the higher the percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students at a school, the less opportunity there is to study a higher level certificate course or a general subject to enable the undertaking of an ATAR / academic pathway.

4.4.2.2.2 ICSEA

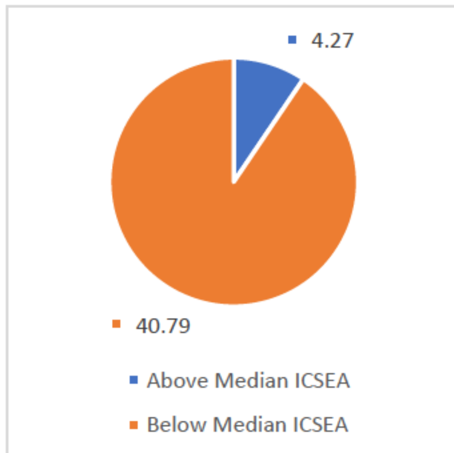
An analysis was also conducted by examining the subjects that are offered based on the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) values of the schools. ICSEA is calculated with a formula that considers the occupation and education levels of parents, remoteness of the school and the percent of Indigenous student enrolment. The median ICSEA score is 1000, with a range from 500 (representing educational disadvantage) to about 1300 (representing educational advantage) (ACARA, 2020). 37 of the 51 boarding schools have an above median ICSEA score, and 14 below.

Figure 14 shows how schools with a below median ICSEA had a much higher percentage of First Nations students enrolled than those with an ICSEA value that was above the median. The average percentage of First Nations students in below

median ICSEA schools is 40.79%, and the average percentage of First Nations students in above median ICSEA schools is 4.27%

Figure 14

Percentage of First Nations Students According to ICSEA Value



Figures 15 and 16 show that if a student attends a school with an above median ICSEA value, they have an approximately 85% chance to enrol in a General subject, enabling an academic pathway, whereas a student at a school with an ICSEA value below the median only has approximately 50% opportunity of undertaking General subjects.

Figure 15

Applied Subjects: Percentage Offered Per ICSEA Value

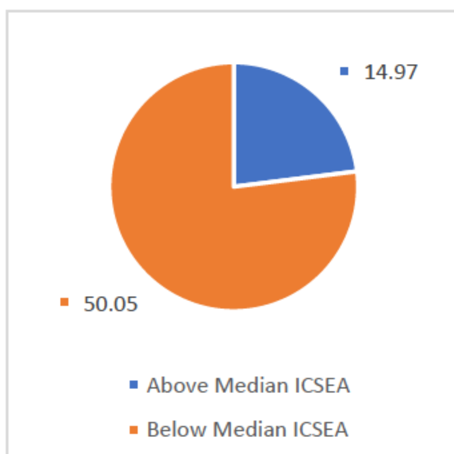
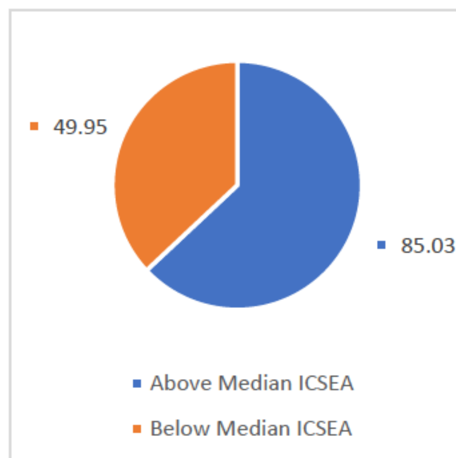


Figure 16

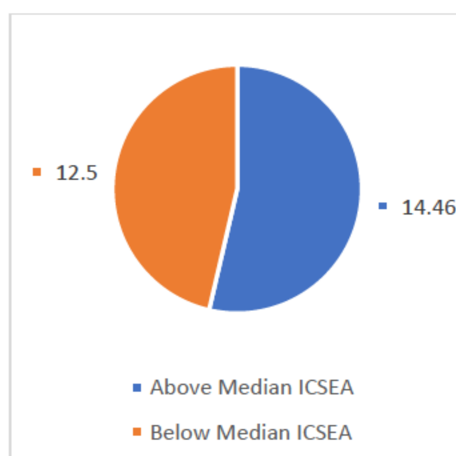
General Subjects: Percentage Offered Per ICSEA Value



The average number of certificates offered at each school is relatively even regardless of a school's ICSEA level, as seen in Figure 17.

Figure 17

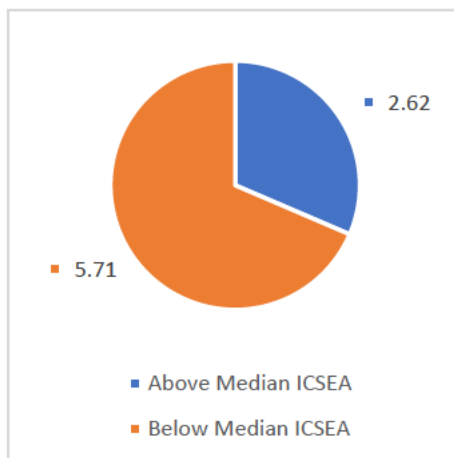
Average Number of Certificate Courses Offered Per School According to ICSEA Value



Like the Indigeneity status of schools, a trend can be seen in Figure 18 where schools with a lower ICSEA value provide more of an opportunity to study a Certificate I course (approximately 5%) than students who are attending a higher ICSEA value school (approximately 2%).

Figure 18

Certificate I: Percentage Offered Per ICSEA Value



Moving to a Certificate 2 (Figure 19), this trend then reverses from the more intensive Certificate III (Figure 20) onward (Figure 21), until a Diploma supports students at above median ICSEA schools to study a more academically rigorous course with more than 6% of their offerings, as opposed to schools with a lower ICSEA value who offer only approximately 3% of their courses at this highest level, as seen in Figure 22.

Figure 19

Certificate II: Percentage Offered Per ICSEA Value

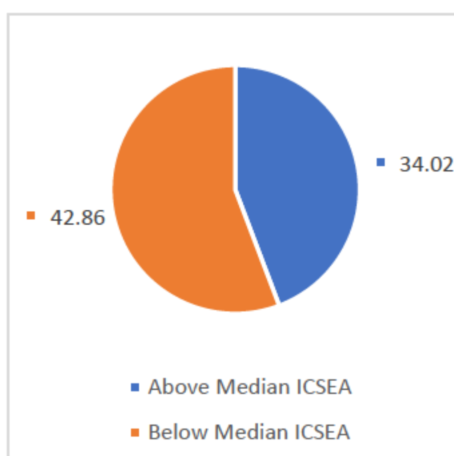


Figure 20

Certificate III: Percentage Offered Per ICSEA Value

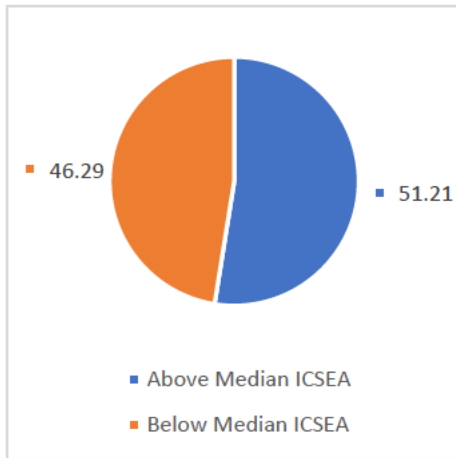


Figure 21

Certificate IV: Percentage Offered Per ICSEA Value

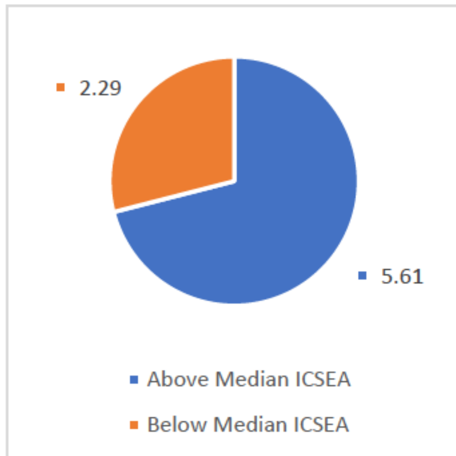
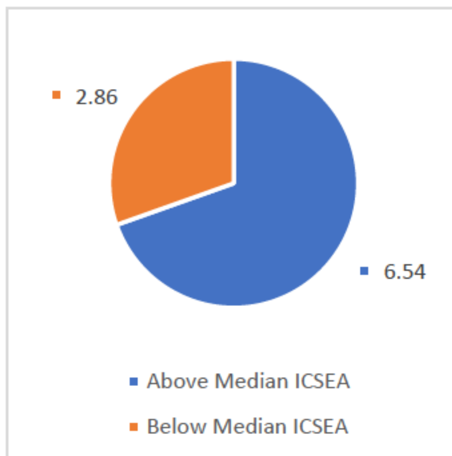


Figure 22

Diploma Certificate: Percentage Offered Per ICSEA Value



First Nations students are more likely to attend a school with a below median ICSEA value, and in doing so, the likelihood of studying an Applied course or a lower level certificate course is higher than if they were attending a school with an above median ICSEA value. By attending the lower than median ICSEA schools, the options for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to study an academic pathway are more limited than if they were attending a school with a higher level ICSEA value. As there is a higher percentage of First Nations students at lower ICSEA level schools, this equates to an impact on the options available for pathways of First Nations students.

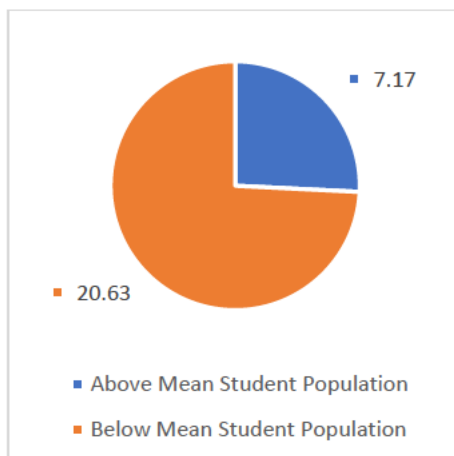
4.4.2.2.3 School size

An analysis has also been conducted into the availability of subjects according to the size of the school. The mean size of the 51 boarding schools is 915.15 students, so the schools were categorised into two groups, those with more than 915 students (24) and those with less than 915 students (27). The smaller sized schools had a higher average percentage of First Nations students (20.65%) than the larger ones (7.17%), as depicted in Figure 23. That does not necessarily equate to more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as there may be some

larger schools with a higher actual number of First Nations students. However, due to the larger number of non-Indigenous students, the percentage may be lower. Nonetheless, it does mean that smaller schools are focused more predominantly on the education of First Nations students than larger schools.

Figure 23

Percentage of First Nations Students According to School Size



The distinction is not as pronounced when observing in Figures 24 and 25 the percentage of General subjects studied according to school size with over 80% of subjects at larger schools and nearly 70% of those at smaller schools being General subjects. However, there remains a trend of a higher portion of subjects at schools with a larger percentage of First Nations students being non-complicit with an academic pathway.

Figure 24

Applied Subjects: Percentage Offered Per School Size

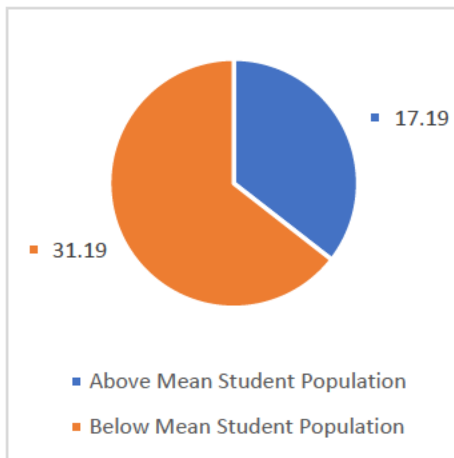
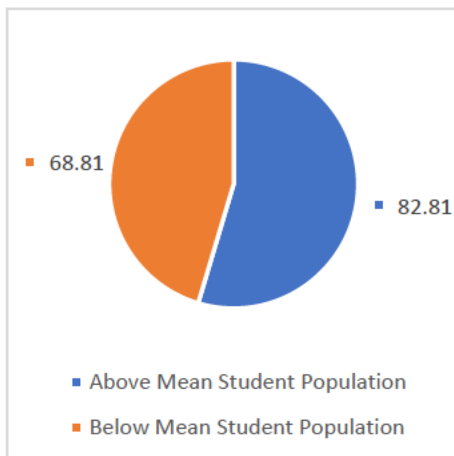


Figure 25

General Subjects: Percentage Offered Per School Size



Certificates at a level II, III and IV (Figures 27, 28 and 29) represent an inconsequential distinction between offerings of small and larger schools. However, at a Diploma level (Figure 30), it is evident that students at a smaller school have a more limited opportunity to undertake a more rigorous vocational course than students at a larger school, yet have a higher opportunity to enrol in an entry level Certificate I course (Figure 26).

Figure 26

Certificate I: Percentage Offered Per School Size

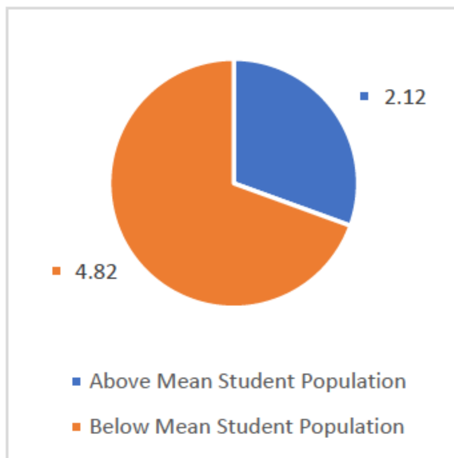


Figure 27

Certificate II: Percentage Offered Per School

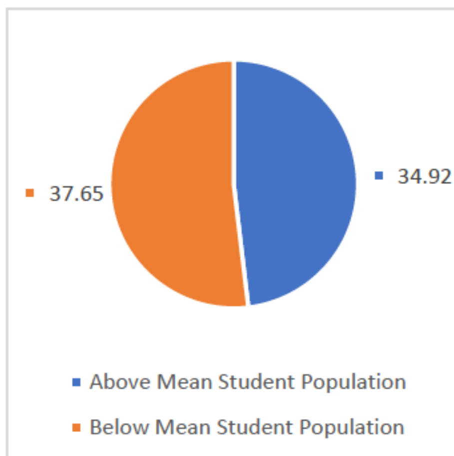


Figure 28

Certificate III: Percentage Offered Per School Size

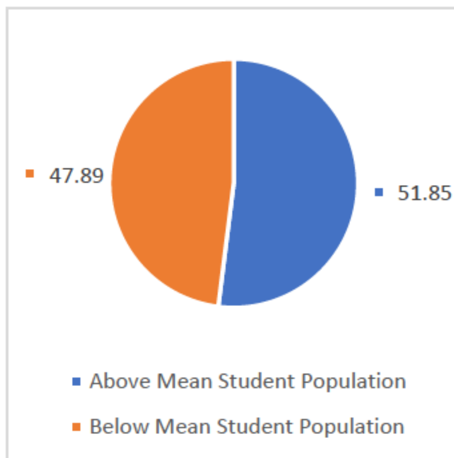


Figure 29

Certificate IV: Percentage Offered Per School Size

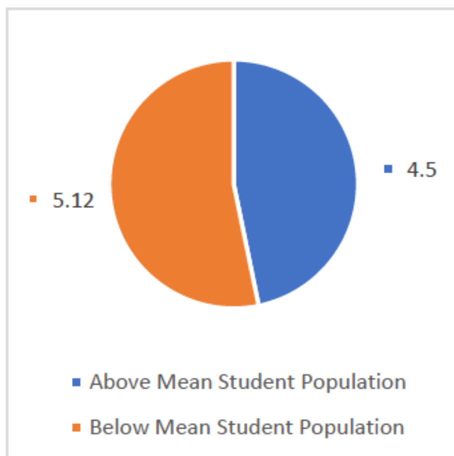
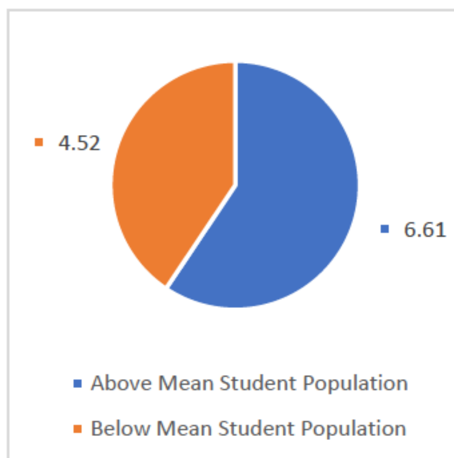


Figure 30

Diploma Certificate: Percentage Offered Per School Size



While the distinction according to school size between more academic subjects and less academic ones is decidedly less observable than the distinctions according to ICSEA values of schools, the trend continues to persist that there is more likelihood of studying General and more academically rigorous certificate courses at schools with a lower percentage of First Nations students in attendance.

4.4.2.2.4 Geographic location

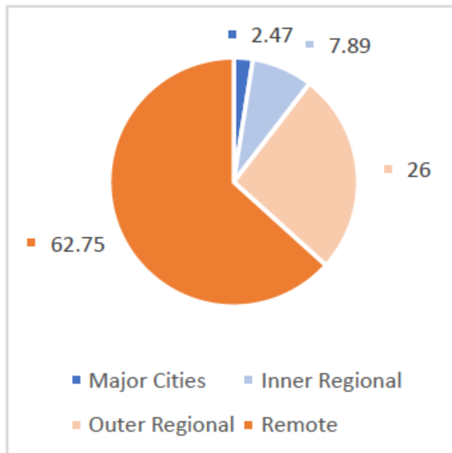
Another way to categorise schools is according to their geographic location. In order to consider the distribution of schools in more accessible locations compared to those that are further from city centres and the accompanying services, the four geographic categorisations have been grouped into two by coding with similar shades. Boarding schools in major cities and inner regional areas which have more readily available access to key services are both represented with shades of blue. Schools located in outer regional and remote locations, that have more limited access to key services, are represented with shades of orange.

As seen in Figure 31, the distribution of First Nations students is significant in remote locations which have the most limited access to additional key services, having over 60% of their school population as First Nations students. In comparison,

schools in major cities only have a little over 2% of their student numbers who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Figure 31

Percentage of First Nations Students According to Geographic Location



The distinction between the percentage of subjects that are Applied offered by schools in a major city or an inner regional location is significantly less than the percentage that are offered by schools in outer regional or remote locations (Figure 32). Similarly, in Figure 33 it can be seen that schools that are in a major city or inner regional location have a higher percentage of subjects that are aligned with an academic pathway (General) as opposed to the percentage in outer regional and remote schools. If a student is attending a school that is in an outer regional or remote location, their opportunities to study a General or academic subject are more limited than if they were in attendance at a school in a major city or inner regional location.

Figure 32

Applied Subjects: Percentage Offered Per Geographic Location

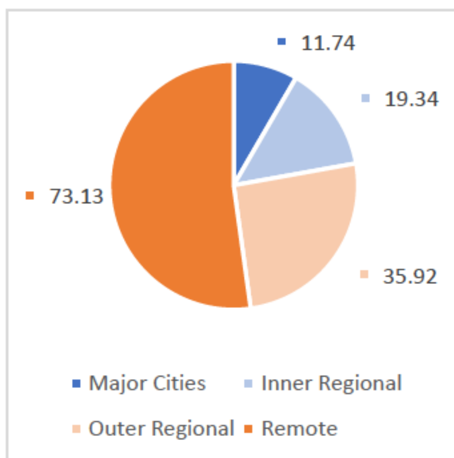


Figure 33

General Subjects: Percentage Offered Per Geographic Location

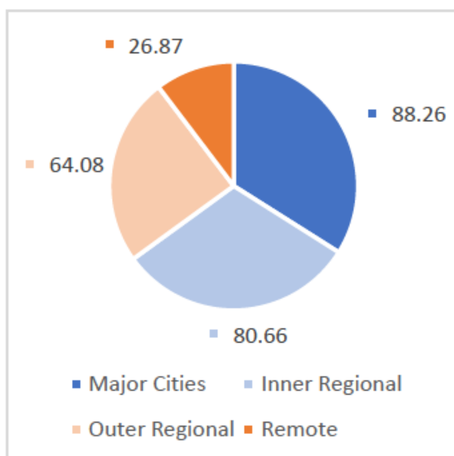


Figure 34 shows that the average number of certificates offered at schools in each of the geographic regions is relatively similar with a minimum average of 10.75 in remote schools, and a maximum average of 15 in inner regional schools. There are slightly more certificate courses available in major cities and inner regional areas, and less in remote and outer regional locations, but overall the variation is insignificant.

Figure 34

Average Number of Certificate Courses Offered Per School According to Geographic Location

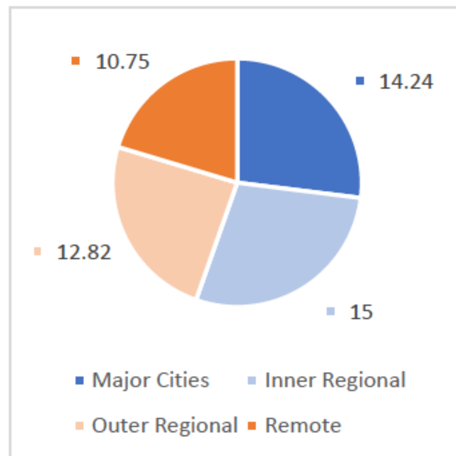
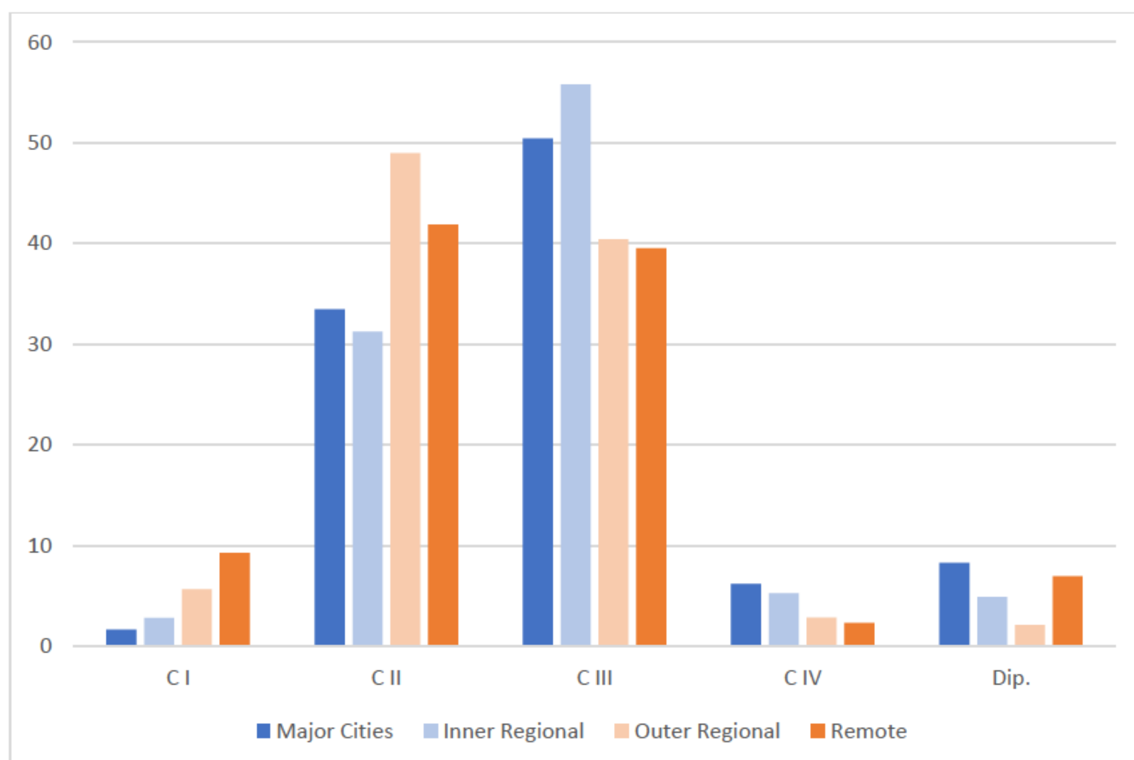


Figure 35 provides an overall picture of how the distribution of certificate levels offered by schools depending on geographic location tells a similar narrative to what has been seen according to Indigeneity status, ICSEA value and school size.

Figure 35

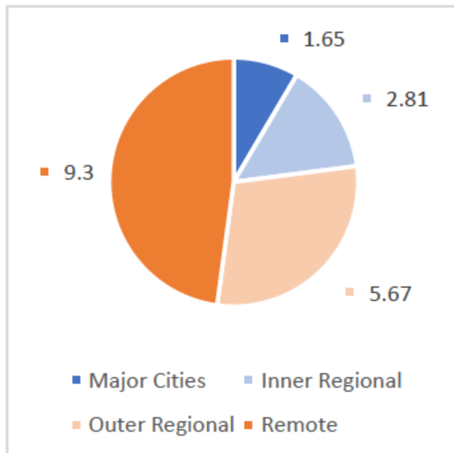
Percentage of Certificates Offered: By Level According to Geographic Location



Certificate I (Figure 36) trends up to a higher percentage being offered in remote schools.

Figure 36

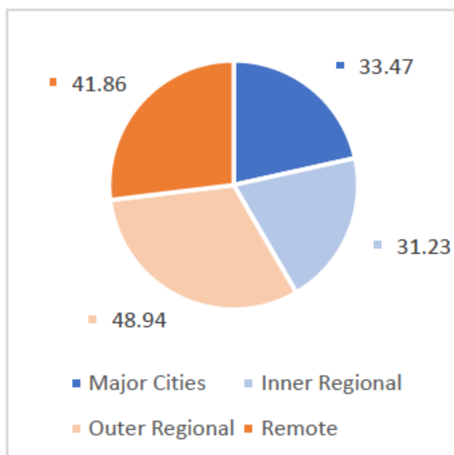
Certificate I: Percentage Offered Per Geographic Location



While there is not a steady increase in Certificate II courses (Figure 37), major cities and inner regional locations have a significantly lower percentage of offerings than outer regional and remote schools.

Figure 37

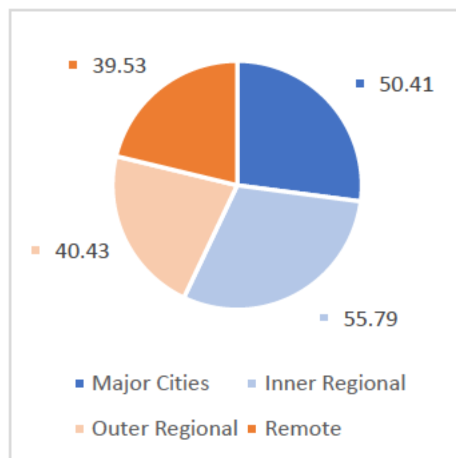
Certificate II: Percentage Offered Per Geographic Location



In Figure 38 Certificate III sees a reverse outcome with the highest percentage of offerings in major cities and inner regional schools.

Figure 38

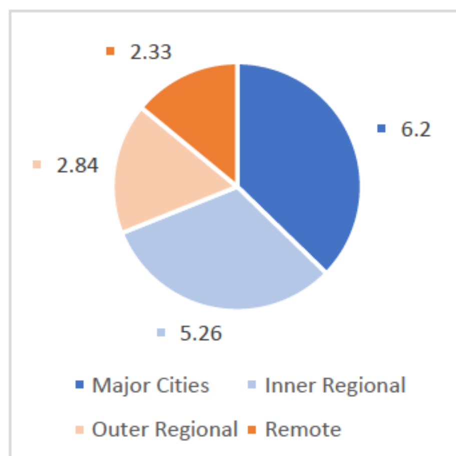
Certificate III: Percentage Offered Per Geographic Location



Certificate IV (Figure 39) reveals a trend down from major cities to remote locations.

Figure 39

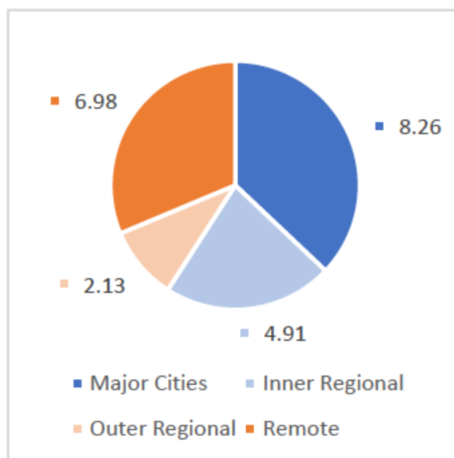
Certificate IV: Percentage Offered Per Geographic Location



And finally, for Diploma level courses as seen in Figure 40, interestingly (possibly attributable to the smaller numbers of students enrolled in remote boarding schools) there is a trend down in percentage of offerings from major cities to outer regional areas, but the percentage of availability in schools in remote locations exceeds those in regional schools.

Figure 40

Diploma Certificate: Percentage Offered Per Geographic Location



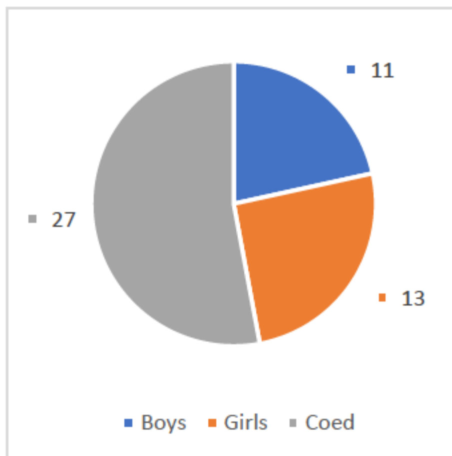
Systemic racism is structural and embedded in systems throughout all sectors of society (Braveman et al., 2022). This is evident through the recurrence in the above analysis that makes clear that schools with a higher percentage of First Nations students, in this case outer regional and remote schools, have a higher likelihood of being restricted in their options to study an academic pathway with a higher percentage of their available programs being Applied subjects and lower level certificate courses. Schools with a lower percentage of First Nations students (in inner regional and major cities) have a higher percentage of subjects that are more rigorous certificate levels and General subjects, leading to more choices to enable studying an academic pathway.

4.4.2.2.5 Gender of students

Boarding schools can also be categorised according to the gender of their students (Figure41). Out of the 51 boarding schools, 11 are boys only, 13 girls only, and 27 are coeducational.

Figure 41

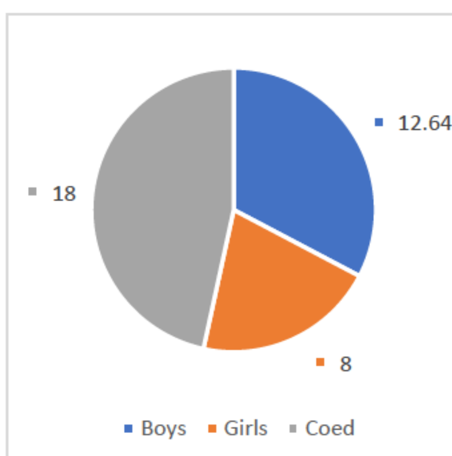
Number of Boarding Schools According to Gender



Considering the proportion of First Nations students attending each gender category of school (Figure 42), sees the largest percentage in coeducational schools with 18 percent of students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This is followed by boys-only schools with an average First Nations population of 12.64%. Lastly is girls schools with the smallest proportion (8%) of First Nations students.

Figure 42

Percentage of First Nations Students According to Gender of Schools



When considering the average percentage of Applied subjects at each category of school in Figure 43 compared to the average percentage of General

subjects in Figure 44, it can be observed that if a student is studying at an all girls school there is a higher opportunity to undertake an academic General subject than for those students at a coeducational school or all boys school. Applied subjects are the most readily accessible at co-educational schools which contemporaneously have the higher percentage of First Nations students enrolled.

Figure 43

Applied Subjects: Percentage Offered Per Gender of Schools

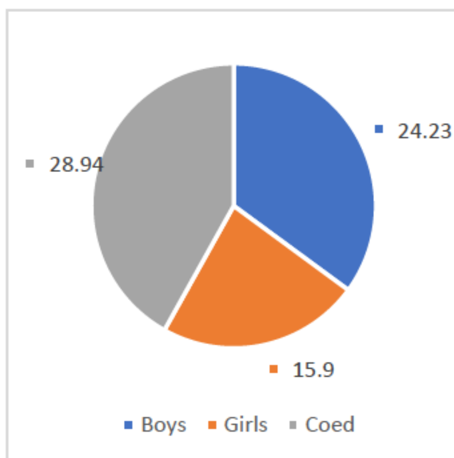
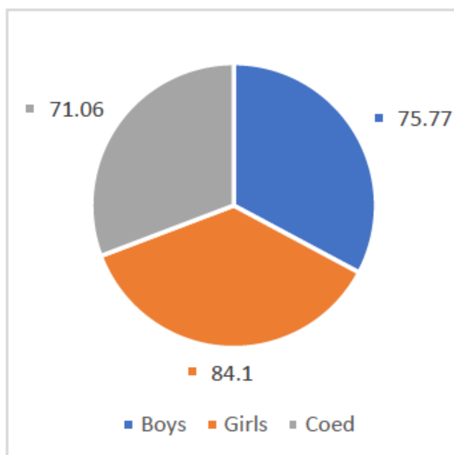


Figure 44

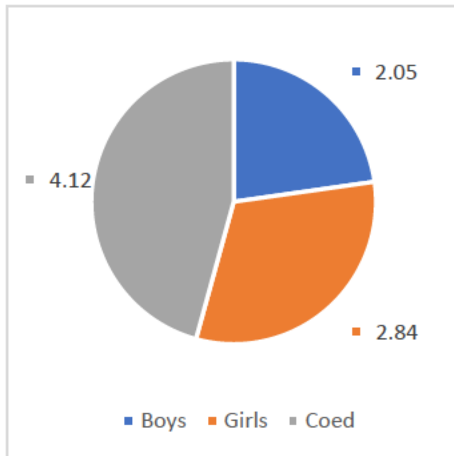
General Subjects: Percentage Offered Per Gender of Schools



Examining the certificates offered at schools as categorised by gender, coeducational schools have a higher percentage of Certificate I courses (Figure 45) than either girls or boys schools.

Figure 45

Certificate I: Percentage Offered Per Gender of School



In Figures 46 and 47, it is evident that this percentage of offering evens out at a Certificate II and III level.

Figure 46

Certificate II: Percentage Offered Per Gender of School

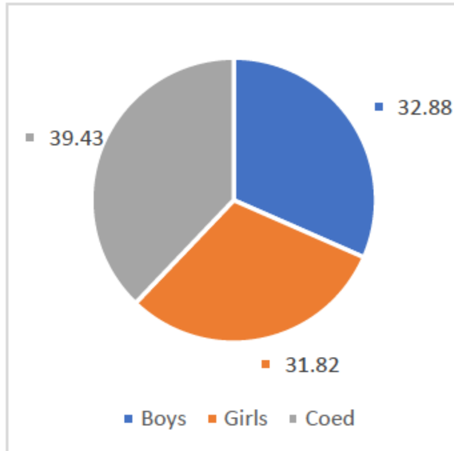
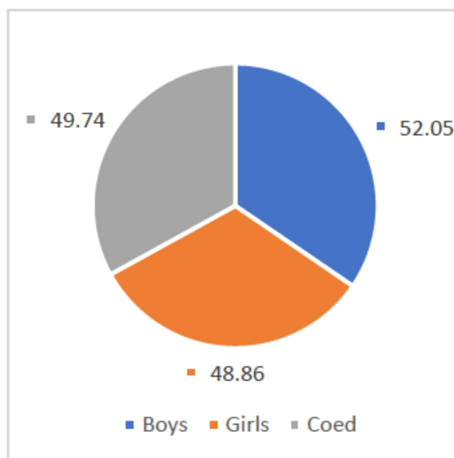


Figure 47

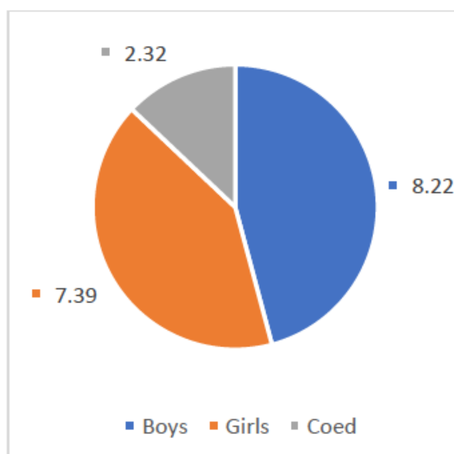
Certificate III: Percentage Offered Per Gender of School



At a Certificate IV (Figure 48), it is clear that both boys and girls have a higher opportunity to undertake a more academic course than students at a coeducational facility.

Figure 48

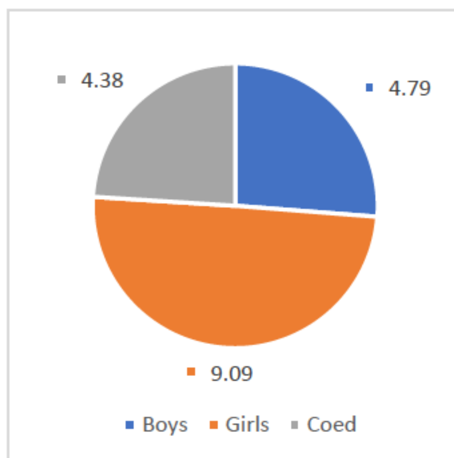
Certificate IV: Percentage Offered Per Gender of School



Most consequentially as seen in Figure 49, a Diploma level course is significantly more readily available for students attending an all girls school than those at a coeducational or boys school.

Figure 49

Diploma Certificate: Percentage Offered Per Gender of School



Although not as pronounced, once again, the category of school with the least percentage of First Nations students (all girls) offers more opportunities to study an academic pathway than schools with a higher percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. Coeducational schools which have the highest percentage of First Nations students, have the most limited options of undertaking more academically rigorous subjects.

Overall, I have identified that when examining where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students attend school, whether that be based on school size, ICSEA value, geographic location or gender, students have more options to choose non-academic subjects. The higher the First Nations population, the more likely it is to have lower level certificate courses offered. The lower the First Nations population, the more likely a school is to have access to General and higher level certificate subjects. No matter which way the schools are categorised, there are more opportunities by way of subjects that cater for students at schools with lower First Nations percentages.

4.4.2.2.6 Flexible delivery

If subjects are simply unavailable at school, then that may influence the pathway choices that students make for their Year 11 and 12 studies. Throughout my teaching career I have had multiple conversations with students who wanted to study particular subjects but were not able to because schools simply did not offer them. There are numerous factors that may impact on a school's ability to offer a range of subjects for senior studies.

Subject availability may be impacted by student uptake. I recall the difficulty I had when trying to establish a senior Chinese language class because I was unable to gain the requisite number of students to nominate it as a first preference in order for the subject to be viable, as stipulated by the Deputy Principal. The course would have run as an AB program (a combination of Years 11 and 12 in the same class) so the initial year would have limited numbers but would increase with the introduction of the new cohort in the following year. The number of students who opted to take the course was further limited because the line it was placed on coincided with both business and tourism study options, which were the most likely combinations for students to choose alongside a language course. Most secondary schools operate a structure for timetables where classes are spread across a set of lines. Due to availability and conflicts of resources such as staffing, classrooms and equipment, the organisation of these lines can be rigid and cause limitations for students to enrol in their preferred subject selections (South Australian Secondary Principals' Association, 2022). Even if a subject is officially offered by a school, it may still be inaccessible because of cancellations due to low student numbers or because the line that the subject is on may conflict with another preferred study option.

Whatever the reason for not availing certain subjects, there are a number of readily available solutions that schools could employ. Apart from a total restructure of timetables to enable variability for individual students in study structures (Queensland Studies Authority, 2007), flexibility to facilitate a wider availability of subjects in senior school could be considered. One solution is for students to study the subject externally. However, this option often has a cost associated that must be met by the student (Department of Education, 2022a). Also, with no dedicated staff on site specifically assigned to each subject, consideration would need to be made about how to sufficiently support students who are undertaking this independent study. This could be addressed with a set staff member who is responsible for overseeing external study options providing necessary support to access the course material and to monitor progress.

Another solution that some schools have employed to overcome the limitations of subject offerings is the possibility of combining difficult to cover senior schooling classes across schools. There is a strong history of school partnering in Queensland schools with schools able to broaden their subject accessibility by partnering with geographically nearby schools (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2017). Despite the potential benefits, these arrangements can be difficult to navigate due to school system/administration incompatibilities.

When I first started working at the boarding school students in Years 11 and 12 had the option of undertaking subjects that were offered at the nearby girls school. This provided a wider variety of options for students to choose from. However, this arrangement between the two schools ceased due to administrative changes in both schools that made aligning timetable requirements untenable. If schools do manage to maintain partnership arrangements with a nearby school, to

enhance accessibility, an additional consideration needs to be made about the potential for First Nations student to feel 'shame' when joining with a different cohort of learners. As Ronald recounted of his experiences studying drama at the all-girls school in the same town:

> *"You know, going to an all-boys school, and then you see girls for like, the first time in ages. It was like kind of like an embarrassment, sort of embarrassing. … I'm like, I was more comfortable with dudes, and I've been around them, and then it's just like oh my gosh, it's a girl sort of thing, I thought that was funny."*

Even if options like school partnerships are implemented, perceiving the possibility of shame when selecting senior schooling subjects that require interaction with different cohorts of peers, First Nations students from remote communities may continue to limit their choices of pathway options.

The more subjects a school can offer for students to select, the more opportunity those students have of being able to opt for the pathway that matches their aspirations. If schools are restricted as to the range of subjects they can offer, they should be looking to alternative means to implement flexible curriculum offerings to facilitate greater accessibility. However, flexible learning should be considered a means to quality learning, not an end to quality learning (Chen, 2003; te Riele, 2014). Schools also must consider if additional hurdles directly related to factors impacting pathway choices will be amplified through these flexible arrangements.

4.4.2.3 Future life applicability

Even if sufficient subjects across both academic and vocational domains are available, First Nations students from remote communities may still be compelled to

select a particular pathway because of other compounding factors that impact the accessibility of the subjects. As indicated by staff at the participating school, who do offer a significant portion of their courses as academic pathways, their First Nations students still predominantly opt to study a vocational pathway:

> *"We offer six internal (VET) courses that are taught through our teachers. And then (we also offer) traineeships and apprenticeships and TAFE at school. … A very, very high portion of our Indigenous … students take a VET pathway. They will, and I shouldn't say all, but most are doing at least one VET, if not two VET programs. … Almost all of our Indigenous students take a VET pathway, or close to."*

The choices students make may be impacted by the relevance of the subjects available. Not only do subjects studied have a major influence on the post-school educational and career options available, but the relevance of subjects to their post school life can determine whether a student discerns the subject as being a useful option (Fullarton & Ainley, 2000). This can involve considerations about what subjects are required for particular jobs, and what jobs are available where a student intends to live. One possible way this can be further considered is by thinking about whether subjects and pathways can prepare you for both university and work. In order for students' choices to not be determined by perceived usefulness of subjects, all subjects should be clear about their applicability to both work and further study.

In discourse about education in Australia, there is a strong focus on preparation for job readiness (2020; Keele et al., 2020; Noble & McGrath, 2016; Thomson et al.) with government initiatives such as the Federal Government's endorsement of the Future Ready Strategy, a practical framework to prepare students for the future of work (Department of Employment and Workplace

Relations, 2022). Despite this increasing focus on preparation to enter the workforce, students' knowledge about requirements and pathways to transition into future careers or study opportunities is variable. Aaron's understanding of the requisite skills and knowledge needed to embark on a career in engineering was acquired not through services at his school, but rather via an immersive on-campus experience at a university during his school holidays. This then provided Aaron with a clear track so he could make appropriate choices regarding his senior school studies to begin his journey to become an engineer.

> *"In grade 10, I got drafted into Australian Indigenous summer school, engineering summer school. So that really gave me an idea of what exposure to engineering, and I kind of knew that, okay, I need to pick this subject. But then I was like, oh, I know those subjects are going to be really difficult. I don't really want to do them, but I'll give it a crack anyway. Because if I want to be an engineer, I need to do those subjects. And it was bit of an unknown territory for me, to be honest, to be completely honest with you."*

Ronald on the other hand, had a different experience where he came to believe that it was more important to gain the qualifications to enter the workforce while at school because if he wanted to he could gain entrance to university through an alternative pathway. As part of his decision to switch to a vocational pathway, Ronald had concluded that by enrolling in certificate courses he would have more opportunities to gain employment upon graduation. However, Ronald reflected that this was not in fact the case and that he actually succeeded in job applications easily despite not using the numerous certificates he had completed at school. Notwithstanding the transferable skills from his studies, ultimately Ronald found the certificates to have been of little benefit to his employability:

"And so I just did all these OP subjects. And then, I don't know me being different from everybody and plus it being too stressful, me giving up on what I love just for, and I'm like damn I've gotta do this for two years. I'm not doing this for two years, stuff that. If I'm gonna go to uni and then I'm like oh how about I can get some job experience in school and then when I get out I could just pay for uni or whatever. You know, instead of just getting freakin, what's it called? Getting a scholarship. … But then when I got out of school I didn't just freaking know that you could just, you know, you could just tell people I have no job experience and that they can hire you. Like, I didn't even know that was a thing like, because I always thought, oh, yeah, you need a job experience."

The information and guidance that is provided to First Nations students from remote communities about requirements for different post-school options influences the choices they believe are most appropriate for senior school pathway options.

With the focus by Australian governments on developing skills that respond to future labour market needs (Thomson et al., 2020), schools have increasingly created opportunities for students to cultivate employment proficiencies; this has created a contradiction in which the liberatory implications of education are being hindered by the ideological effects of schooling (Noonan & Coral, 2015). Even though the three types of senior school subjects offered through the QCAA indicate that they cater to both the development of work and study aspirations, the covert implication of the targeted purpose of each type of subject is evident through the emphasis of suitability of each type. Applied subjects and VET courses are positioned as being suitable foremost for students interested in a vocational pathway (QCAA, 2023; QCAA, n.d.c). General subjects on the other hand list their suitability

as being for students interested in a tertiary pathway before including a reference to work (QCAA, 2019b) with an emphasis on the development of academic skills. If a student is prioritising capacity to enter the workforce, VET and Applied subjects will be recognised as the most suitable choice. Lacking in these discussions however is the skills that can be acquired in General subjects and transferred to the workplace. In the interviews, it became clear that it isn't just about what specific subjects you need for particular jobs, but also of importance is the transferable skills gained from the subjects and whether those skills would prepare students for life after graduation, whether that be further studies or entering the workforce.

While undertaking his senior schooling studies, Ronald changed his plans to pursue further education in the field of performing arts because of his experiences in associated subjects:

> *"I wasn't really thinking about like, I don't know, I wanted to do sort of like performing arts. That's what I wanted to get into. But I don't know, like it was just freaking too much. That's all like too stressful."*

Ronald found the skills he learned through his hospitality course guided him to planning a career in the service industry:

> *"I didn't even know what I was going to do when I got out of school to be honest. I wanted to, I just wanted to do a hospitality job because I did, what's the course thing? Man, when you did coffee orders? … Yea, I did those actually, when I was at (school). … Yeah, it was actually fun. I was like, man, I see myself doing this in the future."*

If Ronald had have been able to see the tangible skills from his drama course he may have then seen a future in both possibilities.

Keith on the other hand, recognised the transferable skills across all his courses that could be drawn on in his post-school working life. Keith recognised the importance of communication skills for his future work and wanted to study OP English to facilitate developing these skills:

> *"I sorta wanted to do like an OP English so I could get my communication skills up. And sort of yea, my ultimate goal back in school, and sorta still is, is sorta having a job working with kids and providing support and stuff. Something along (those) lines."*

These communication proficiencies are targeted in all QCAA English courses, but what Keith found post-school was that the skills he gained in all of his courses were able to be drawn on in his professional life. Of note, Keith's trade qualifications that he attained through his senior years of school are not what he has drawn on in his professional experiences, it has actually been the cross-curricula 21st century skills that he has found to be of benefit:

> *"So, with the HPE and ICT I thought that is something that would be good knowledge doing computer work. … I chose ICT just for the basic work on the computers and the different tools that I could use. … And typing reports and all that stuff, being able to use Microsoft word, and Excel more effectively for my future job. Also, with the HPE I thought I might do something with HPE because it's interesting, you know like personal training or something. … I also did engineering and woodwork and construction in grade 12 so I just thought I'll, … how do I say it? … Sort of, get to do everything, you know. … So, a hundred percent, (my subjects helped me in) a lot of the jobs that I've been in where I've worked in the office and stuff. … Yea, the construction sort of helped. How do I say it? Sort of the due dates and deadlines. … And*

also planning and organising with my subjects really helped me with prioritising my time, yea it really helped me."

If students can be aware of how all subjects can prepare for both future study and future employment, they may be more inclined to consider undertaking a wider variety of subjects. It is critical to acknowledge that skills do more than simply preparing for a specific professional role, of equal importance is the transferable skills that can be drawn on in any line of work or study. Students should be made aware that all subjects, irrespective if they are General, Applied or VET, can develop skills for work.

One consideration that has consistently emerged through this research has been the relevance of a student's study to their life in community. While I have on numerous occasions lived for extended periods away from my home on Yagera, Jagera and Ugarapul lands, and have experienced a sense of longing for home, as a non-Indigenous Australian my understanding of the subtleties of the extent to which community is important for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be fully comprehensive. However, in my interactions with students, I have gained an appreciation for the importance of connections with people, Country, language and spirituality for many First Nations peoples. The past students I spoke to for this research raised the role that community had on them throughout their educational journey and expressed having the capacity to return home as being a key consideration. Schools need to actively provide educational opportunities that students can draw on in the event of returning to their home community yet should be cautious that those skills do not solely focus on vocational pathways while excluding academic ones.

Prior to beginning this research, I had a conversation with Daniel, an uncle of some of my previous students. This person had been a trusted contact while teaching his nephews, that I had been working with throughout their time at school with multiple phone conversations about both academic progress and social emotional considerations. During this particular conversation Daniel raised a concern he had about the relevance of what his nephews had learnt at school. After returning to their home community, Daniel had become concerned that after 5 years of education in a boarding school, they had returned without the necessary skills to succeed within community. This conversation really jarred me as my focus had been on building academic skills. Initially I thought this was a limiting perspective that Daniel had expressed because surely you would want students to have skills to succeed outside of community. Then I spent some time reflecting on my positionality and realised that while I believed I was simply exhibiting high expectations for my students, I was still viewing, and to some extent judging, through my non-Indigenous lens and not considering the differences in worldviews of my students as I was unable to fully understand that connection to community that they had. So that then left me questioning how to provide an education that enables students to have the skills required to succeed whether they return to build a life in their home community or another location. Additionally, a student's intentions for where they will be based after graduation cannot be considered to be their indefinite choice, thus it is necessary to prepare students for life both in community and out.

Charlie, the Head of Careers and Pathways, discussed how the school participating in this research actively ensured that students were prepared for their next step beyond graduation, including acknowledging that they needed to prepare students for futures in a variety of locations:

"At the end of the year, we're all working, all of us once again in a team, to make sure we've set them up and we've got them sort of ready for their next step, whether that be university, whether it be traineeships, whether it be you know, getting the right blue cards, white cards, licenses to go back and apply in community, or whatever it is, we're working to set them up and get them, I guess, ready for that next step of their career."

Despite acknowledging the importance of having options for a variety of after-school possibilities, it was recognised by the Avery, the Indigenous Liaison Officer (ILO) at the participating school that they still targeted skill development to individual students according to their intentions for living arrangements in the future:

"I think it's important too that we're aware of where the kids have come from. So for example, if they're from remote areas say in the Northern Territory, you know, once they finish school, what options do they have for employment or further studies once they go back? If they've chosen to go back, it's no use them doing certain subjects that are not going to potentially provide them with employment within their community. If they're staying in town, what supports do they have here? What options can we look at for alternative accommodation, transport, where they might be studying, where they might be working, where those sort of potential, even apprenticeships might lead. So if we don't have that information, the kids basically leave and that's it."

An example was then given by Avery of a specific student and how developing appropriate skills was vital for preparing him for when he departed the school:

"So, I could give probably one example of one of our students that we got through by the skin of his teeth. I was able to set him up with a traineeship. He

had accommodation nearby, he was able to commute to and from work, he was then offered further work, unfortunately, didn't have a driver's license which cut that short, things like that. So, it's looking for those sorts of, looking to provide them with the skills that's actually going to give them an opportunity to progress that they wouldn't normally, that kids in the city generally have. So yeah, it's all about knowing where they're from, whether they're going back, whether they're staying here, all that sort of thing. So, it's really important as part of our process to make sure that where they're headed is going to be somewhere that they'll be able to get some traction with.

And that particular student …, he was given lots of opportunities, you know, over the years prior from year 10 up just to figure out what he likes doing, you know. Some of them worked for him, and that was great, because you don't know what you don't know. So it's not just we're gonna get you into one thing. A lot of the time it's the students taste testing, for lack of a better word, different courses sometimes or different opportunities. I know that particular student had some experience on campus in some different areas. I think he was working with our grounds team wasn't he for a while there. So it was trying to expose him to different areas, and I guess seeing what fits and what he liked as well.

He's not in Queensland anymore. But yeah, he did work at school with the grounds staff. He also worked with an organisation …, when they did the, was it a display home? So, he got some work there. He also went to TAFE…. And then he did a number of certificates through the school as well. So basically, he left quite well tooled. But it was just finding his niche like most people anyway, so. Biggest issue for him in the end was not having a driver's

license. Things like that. But that's something we're actually working on for this year. So that's another pathway that we're looking to probably empower our students a little bit more."

Having multiple options and skill sets to draw on after graduation is important for students. The recognition that it is vital to develop a variety of transferable skills was relayed by Sam as his post-school trade employment did not eventuate as anticipated. When Sam had chosen his subjects and throughout his time in Years 11 and 12, he had hoped to gain a carpentry apprenticeship upon graduation, drawing on the skills he was developing in his construction class: *"I loved it. We built tables, we built like metal frame one for houses, sometimes we laid bricks."*

Unfortunately, despite applying for multiple vacancies, Sam was unsuccessful with his applications for positions both at home and outside of his home community: *"I applied to be a carpenter in Cairns, here with the council, two in Brissie. Yeah, that was the place. They didn't give me call back for the apprenticeship."*

Sam has returned to his community in a remote location and skills that he gained in other subjects in his senior years have been beneficial for life in general. Sam's study of automotive engineering has provided him with a general skill that has been practical and beneficial for him and his family: *"Automotive, … working on cars, … It was pretty good classes to get to know them stuff. Any troubles with our vehicle I can just look at it."*

Additionally, Sam identified several skills from his senior studies that have been assisting him since graduation. Sam's home is in a central location with a number of government and private facilities that act as a hub for surrounding communities. While Sam indicated that none of the subjects that he studied in school helped him specifically with his current job as a lifeguard, he did recognise

the general benefits of the skills he developed in some of his subjects that have assisted him with this position. While Sam did not enjoy maths because of *"all the numbers they have to do"* he still found what he learned to be beneficial post-school: *"It helped me maybe subtract stuff. Yeah, maybe the stuff I was helped with was dividing and multiplication. … I use it these days."*

Sam also found the skills he learned in his English class to be beneficial back in community because: *"We use English mainly when the tourist season, we have to use the English here."*

Despite this evidence of the transferability of skills from all types of subjects that students can draw on post-school, educational institutions continue to make assumptions about the usefulness of particular subjects for First Nations students from remote communities, resulting in possible limitations on pathway choices being made. Staff at the participating school described how knowing students and where they came from enabled them to prepare students with skills that were specifically relevant to life in community:

> *"It's actually knowing about that community and knowing what actual options that they have. So, there's no children doing certain pathways. So, say, even something like an RSA if they're going home, where there isn't a licensed premise. Okay, so something like that. Something simple like that. Yeah, it's great if they stay here, because they might be able to pick up part time work and things like that. But is that really going to be of any benefit to them down the track, I think it's really important that they all get it, especially if they do have that drive to stay in town or work in areas where there's things like that, but ultimately, it's trying to match up the community to the kid, and giving them the skills to be able to work in maybe the area of education, health. And*

they're generally in some of these really remote areas, is the only options for kids, aged care, and things like that. And that's generally work in the store, that sort of thing. So, skilling them in, you know, having the general maths and things like that, general maths skills, and all that sort of thing. It's really important that they are matched up to what's available in their community."

There is no denying that it is important to have skills that will assist upon return to community, however the way schools and the education system place such emphasis on this has the effect of limiting choices students may make about their senior studies and pathways in the senior years. As Aaron posited:

"Everyone knows that after school, they'll go back to community. You know, there's no interest in pursuing higher education. And is it because they are restricted? Or the system that has been developed is failing them? You know, is it then school's responsibility to make sure that those opportunities are there?"

Keith also discussed the push in the school that he had attended prior to his return to where I worked with him. This was a school located in a remote location with a predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population.

"When I moved to (that other school), I found it was a bit challenging because in (that community) I was sort of limited to what subjects, oh not really the subjects, but the opportunity in a way because up there, they're more of a mining, oh I forgot, Rio Tinto, the company. And a lot of them do go into Rio. That's just from my experience. … And I find a lot of them do go into trades and all that up (there). That's one thing I noticed when I went to school up there. … It's like trade is the only choice to get in school kind of way. Look,

living up (there), it sorta encouraged you to get a trade straight away. That was the vibe I got from going to school there."

There is a misconception about the only way to thrive or succeed if returning to community being based on a trade or established jobs, often in the areas of education, health or general service industries. However, more recognition needs to be made about how other areas of skill development and study that don't necessarily align directly with needs in community can also produce professional success if a person chooses to return home due to the transferability of both academic and practical skills. Academic pathways should be able to support students to return to community just as a vocational pathway is viewed to do. Aaron experienced this exact process:

"I think there's certainly opportunities there. And it depends on how hard you work for it. Like, when I first was over in Western Australia, I was wanting to go back to (my home community). … I always knew I was going to go … after graduating, but I needed to get that experience and develop my skills and knowledge and expand on it, you know. I knew I wasn't going to be any benefit just going from uni back to community. So, I did some time over in Western Australia, in the mines with Rio Tinto who I got scholarships with. So, I spent like three years over there. Then I was like yep, I think I'm ready to get back (home). But there wasn't any opportunities available. … So, a position came up, funnily enough, it was at the local council as a receptionist, as an admin. The title was divisional manager, like an admin boss. So basically I was an admin. I was like, man, if I go back (home) in this role, I just have to work my butt off and hopefully I'll do enough to get a promotion. And I did that. So that was back in 2016. I started in the divisional manager's role in April.

So, by the time in June, I was promoted, recruited into engineering operations, then worked my butt off. By the end of the year, I was acting in managing engineering operations. And then became full time, then offered a full time manager engineering operations gig shortly after, I think it was in like mid 2017 or something like that. Then in 2019 I was acting executive manager engineering services, then in my current role as capital works manager. Then I think back in 2020 I was even acting head of engineering, then acting executive director of engineering services all last year. So basically, if you work hard in the profession that you desire, opportunities will come. Like no one's going to call you and say hey, look, we think you're best fit for this position, like I had to prove my worth. I wanted it to be on merit and I just knew that if I go and have a crack as an admin, that's my foot through the door."

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have a special connection with home communities that I, as a non-Indigenous researcher, will never completely understand. Both staff and past students who have participated in this research recognised the importance of the connections to home and the need to gain skills that could support a return to community if that is what a student so chooses. However, while it is valuable to gain important skills, this outlook can become limiting for students if the push is on preparation for jobs that are obviously accessible immediately following graduation, such as in health care or general service industries. Skills across subjects can be drawn on for work and further recognition should be given to the skills that are transferable from more academically targeted studies. It needs to be acknowledged that no matter what a student's pathway was, it can be possible to establish themselves in a position through a gradual process.

Skills gained from academic subjects are just as applicable as those from vocational pathways. Skills developed for jobs outside of community can be as valid and applicable within.

4.4.2.4 Cultural Relevance

Culturally relevant teaching is a pedagogical approach that addresses student achievement and uses cultural referents to develop skills and knowledge by filtering content and strategies to be more personally meaningful (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students may be impacted by the cultural relevance of the subjects that are (or are not) available to elect for study. At both the state and national level, education departments have implemented frameworks and guidelines for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. At a state level, QCAA have numerous strategies, resources, projects and initiatives that focus on increasing awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.a). At the national level, ACARA has provided guidance for teachers to incorporate First Nations histories and cultures through cross-curriculum priorities (ACARA, 2023) and educators are directed by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers to have a broad understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages and teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning strengths and needs of students from diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds. It also requires teachers to demonstrate broad knowledge and understanding of the impact of culture, cultural identity and linguistic background on the education of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). In spite of the plethora of policy to guide educators to incorporate First Nations perspectives in their

classrooms, teachers report that they do not feel comfortable or capable in their actual implementation (Bishop, 2020; Blair & Weatherby-Fell, 2015; Buxton, 2017). Providing opportunities for learning that is relevant to students culturally across both academic and vocational subjects would broaden the students' options to choose the most relevant pathway.

Ronald raised the issue of learning about Shakespeare in both his English and drama classes and whether that has not only any relevance for First Nations students, but for all students in a modern day setting:

> *"Actually doing Shakespeare and everything in school, like Shakespeare you know, he's cool and whatnot, but it's like man, like most of us, once you think about it, like his stuff has a meaning to it, but his stuff is also shit. Like, in a way, I'll be real with ya. Shakespeare has some classics. But it's like nowadays we think of it as tragedy. But what if back then that shit was comedy, like people killing themselves, you know drinking poison. You know, what if back then it was funny, like people laugh, like that was the modern day humour back then. And we're here like deeply studying that stuff."*

Shakespeare continues to be endorsed for study in Queensland schools both through the Australian Curriculum with numerous Shakespearean plays listed in the sample texts list for English (ACARA, n.d.e) and via the Queensland General English/EAL prescribed texts (QCAA, 2023c) and suggested texts in the General Drama syllabus (QCAA, 2019c). This research is not evaluating the validity of exploring Shakespearean texts through the curriculum, rather Ronald's recollection of studying Shakespeare jogged a memory of my experience drawing on one of the Bard's classics as a side study within a major unit with a class of First Nations students from remote communities. Beforehand, I had a discussion with a staff

member at my school about my intentions to conduct a brief study of a scene from Macbeth in my English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) class. The staff member expressed concern about the students' capacity to interpret the prose as well as their likelihood of disengagement. I was pleased that the week-long study was successful with numerous discussions focussing on the parallels in Shakespeare's plays with First Nations cultural practices such as familial relationships. In particular, we analysed how Macbeth killing Duncan was akin to killing his own father and considered the role of Elders in both cultures. If teachers are supported to incorporate First Nations perspectives in their classes in a similar way, this may result in students' ability to relate to content in all areas of study and thus open up their options when choosing senior schooling pathways.

In terms of specific subjects, ones that are directly culturally aligned for First Nations students are often in a non-academic format. This results in further limitations for pathway choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities. Some examples of culturally aligned subjects will be discussed below.

For many First Nations peoples, religion is of significant importance. A Christian affiliation has been reported at 54% of the nation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). A subject that was offered in the senior years at the school where I taught was an amalgamation of the non-OP subjects, Religion and Ethics and art. A notable number of First Nations students took this class because there were opportunities to draw on both their Christian faith that as contended by Aaron, was very strong within certain communities: *"in my community, we're all religious",* and art, another culturally aligned practice. As all students at the school were obliged to undertake at

least one religion subject for senior, RE Art was a popular option. Raymond explained why he changed from the OP subject Study of Religion to the non-OP variety Religion and Ethics Art:

> *"I did … R.E. I think I did an OP one for that. But then I got out of that into R.E. Art because I found out I was like, oh, you can do R.E. Art, so I can do religious art sort of thing. Yeah, I'm doing this. … Well, it was a fun subject. … I loved it … with like that Christian background sort of thing of familiarity. And also art, I was like, I'm gonna love this subject. … It suited me."*

While the subject officially offered was Religion and Ethics, by combining it with the culturally aligned practice of art, it became a highly popular option for students and is an example of how schools can provide curriculum that will explicitly engage its First Nations students. This subject was developed for students on a non-academic pathway. If schools found ways to align their General/academic subjects in a similar way with cultural knowledges and skills, it may increase the possibilities for students who wish to undertake either a vocational or an academic pathway to select an appropriate and accessible subject.

Another subject that is culturally relevant for First Nations peoples is the General subject Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. This is a course that specifically covers topics that are about, and relevant to, First Nations students' lives. Students undertaking this course will learn about topics affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples such as culture and identity, social and political change, land rights and freedoms, and reconciliation and recognition. Keith had indicated during the interview that when he returned to the school where I worked during Year 11 that a subject he wished he had have been able to undertake, which

he had started at his previous school because of its relevance for First Nations students, was the previous OP iteration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies:

> *"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander class. … So just like your Eddie Mabo and all that kinda stuff. I think, for me, and I'm not sure about other people, but sorta, it's useful to have an understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture. Because me, I'm Indigenous yea, and sorta, it would give others the opportunity to learn it too. You know, other kids at boarding school and stuff. Yea, and I think we would feel sorta more, umm confident. Because it was one of the subjects up at (my other school). … And sorta you know, when I did that subject at the school I interacted with the students together. … And every time I did have that subject, I would go in there confident, like I do know a bit about this and a bit about that, whereas if I'm going into another class it's just like I don't know what we're doing today."*

Keith had wanted to continue with this course, but it was not available when he came to our school. I recall a conversation with another staff member at the school who had wanted to offer this particular subject. She felt it would be a good fit and appropriate addition to the humanities curriculum. Unfortunately, she had been unable to gain the approval from the school to establish the course. In 2023, in all of Queensland, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is only being offered by six schools and not one of them is a boarding facility (QCAA, 2023f). This is a course that could offer an opportunity to undertake an academic and culturally relevant study for First Nations students from remote communities as they may find it relatable and thus engage with the content more explicitly, but it is simply not available as an option.

Another course that QCAA endorse that may be appropriate and accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language course. Learning a language spoken by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples can promote a sense of pride and direction and be a strong motivator for students (Australian Parliament House, 2011). I recall one of the Indigenous Liaison Officers at the boarding school where I worked had organised with local Elders a weekly cultural night. Part of the programming was to learn the basics of a First Nations language. This activity was attended and enjoyed by many of the students from different communities, showing how motivated they were to learn a First Nations language.

QCAA's inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (QCAA, 2019a) as part of their course offerings is positive. However, in 2023 the course has only been taken up by four schools and just one of these schools is a boarding facility (QCAA, 2023f). Another shortcoming with this course is that unlike all of the other language courses offered by QCAA, it is not a General subject, thus it cannot contribute toward a student's ATAR result if a student was wanting to undertake an academic pathway in their senior years. It also is not an applied or a VET certificate course, being one of the four short courses available to study, only offering one point toward a QCE. This lack of status speaks to how the system values it. According to systemic incentives for schools to opt to offer this, there is little motivation for them to do so. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages course has promise. While there are barriers with how to moderate a subject that could teach any number of First Nations languages, with consideration of how to make the course as academically rigorous as other language programs, it could be offered as a General

subject, thus providing incentives for schools to offer another subject that facilitates an academic pathway for their students.

If subjects are not available in schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities simply cannot select them. A consideration needs to first be made about how to make all subjects culturally relevant for First Nations students through the inclusion of First Nations perspectives throughout the curriculum. It has been seen that when provided with effective professional learning about the cross-curriculum priorities educators experienced more confident classroom practice (Guenther et al., 2020), however while state and national frameworks require teachers to implement First Nations perspectives, relying on teacher capacity and willingness without providing sufficient time and resources will result in minimal and tokenistic attempts that will do little to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (Baynes, 2016; Hogarth, 2022). Further to this, the specific subjects that QCAA offer that could provide culturally relevant and accessible subjects for students to undertake either do not exist, are not on an academic track, or are simply not being offered by schools. If a subject is not available, a student quite simply cannot choose it. With the omission of these subjects to be chosen in an academic pathway, students may be deterred from opting for that track. The offering of these subjects would also be beneficial for students undertaking a vocational pathway as they may still engage with these courses as part of their programs.

4.4.2.5 Epistemological applicability

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities may also have their choices about senior schooling pathways impacted by the way subjects conflict or align with their epistemology. An epistemology refers to who can

be a knower and what can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1982); it became evident through interviews with staff and the four past students that schools in Queensland continue to reinforce who and what can be known by way of approaches to teaching and learning. Some participants indicated an unwillingness to undertake more rigorous studies in their educational journey, but what became clear through both interviews with students and desktop analysis of publicly available data was that these subjects that some of the past student participants had identified as being too intensive often did not enable First Nations students to learn through culturally relevant means such as practicality and repetition.

A common theme that has emerged from the past students who were interviewed has been the perception that the intensity required over a significant period of time to undertake an ATAR pathway was a deterrent. Sam posited that one of the reasons he did not opt to undertake an academic pathway was that he did not believe he had the requisite skills and thus would have needed to work with greater effort than if undertaking a vocational pathway:

> *"I guess for the OP subjects they've got more study into it, … hard work and you have to study 24/7. … I couldn't do it, I guess. … The certificate and applied subjects, … certificate one was like much easy, and it's basic, and you don't have to study much for that. You do study, like, once you do the test online, to get the certificate. … (They have) different skills."*

Likewise, Keith's decision to not undertake an academic pathway was founded on his perception of the workload required to match the expectations and pace of his peers in the OP classes:

> *"I sorta thought that all the other classmates or peers who were in those classes, that I knew they were sorta switched on and they could understand*

all the … for example the quantum math stuff or the OP English I think it was, and I felt that the workload could have been too much."

Ronald, who started on an academic pathway but later moved to a non-academic one, identified the stress and the degree of effort required for what he perceived as minimal outcomes as being a motivator for switching to a non-academic pathway:

> *"At first I was in the really smart English, I wasn't smart. I was like in all the smart classes pretty much when I started grade eleven. And I was like, this is too stressful. I'm going down, like get me out of here! I wanna have fun you know, in school. … It was just like, I had to give up my social life, and my hobbies and stuff. Because I love drawing now and then in my free time, I love going to the gym, and I love watching anime now and then. It's like, I had to give up all this stuff so that I could study and I'm like, man, this is too much for me. … And then, I don't know, me being different from everybody and plus it being too stressful, me giving up on what I love just for, and I'm like damn I've gotta do this for two years. I'm not doing this for two years, stuff that. If I'm gonna go to uni, and then I'm like oh how about I can get some job experience in school and then when I get out I could just pay for uni or whatever. You know, instead of just getting freakin, what's it called? Getting a scholarship. You know in the first term I got a C. I was like damn, all that hard work just for fucking C. I was a C average. I just averaged a C. Yea, I passed, but it wasn't enough for me, you know, I'm stressing out for a C."*

Aaron on the other hand posited that it is not about having an aversion to working hard; many of his peers trained intensely for physical endeavours yet did not choose to put that same emphasis on their academic studies: *"No one likes to stress*

themselves out, except, you know, going to the gym, do weights. If they put in the same energy into studying, it's achievable."

While on the surface some may assume the students' reasoning for opting for a non-academic pathway is a lack of motivation, or even laziness, the more the past students divulged throughout these conversations, the clearer it became that an aspect of choices to not pursue academic pathways was a result of the extent of appropriateness of the subjects on offer.

To dispel the notion that First Nations students are 'unmotivated' or 'lazy', the reasoning that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities may not recognise the value in persisting with academic endeavours, requires further exploration. In his interview, Ronald emphasised that he had lost interest in mathematics when he reached senior school:

> *"I reckon that everyone hates doing math. Honestly, math used to be my favourite subject, until I got to grade 11 and I hated math. Even when I got out of OP, I still hated math. Wow, man, this is freaking hard."*

While working with students from remote communities who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, I frequently heard students discuss how subjects that they previously enjoyed no longer interested them. Through this research, it became evident that an important factor to maintain students' engagement with studies was to consider ways of learning. Three learning preferences that support students' cultural ways of learning came to the fore inductively through staff and past student participants' identification: subjects that have practical opportunities, the possibility for repetition, and the ability to be supported throughout the learning process.

Internationally, Indigenous pedagogies are reported as being experiential, emphasizing learning by doing as young people traditionally practiced the skills needed to participate in their community as adults, equating to the need in today's curriculum through observation, action, reflection and further action (Antoine et al., 2018). This correlates with Australian research that posits that First Nations learners test knowledge through experience, introspection and practice (Wheaton & Roger, 2000). For many students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, the incorporation of elements of kinaesthetic learning is a key characteristic (Robinson & Nichol, 1998; Yunkaporta, 2010) that is more evident in VET studies than academic subjects (Wibrow, 2022).

While speaking to the choices he had made about his senior schooling pathways, Sam had discussed how even if he had not considered capacity to undertake an academic pathway, he still would have opted for a vocational one. Sam's classes were predominantly certificate courses undertaken in the Manual Arts department and he discussed why he enjoyed these classes in particular: *"When it was theory it was hard work … (but) I love it when it comes to like prac time."*

The participant school explained why, just like Sam, the majority of their First Nations students choose vocational subjects for their senior schooling choices:

> *"You know, vocational is a lot more hands on experience, you're getting real life skills and things you can actually go out and have a qualification in. … So it provides them with the hands on skills rather than an academic record that perhaps may not have any bearing on where they're going."*

In fact, even when students do not initially consider the extent of kinaesthetic attributes in their subject selections, this lack of practicality can be a reason why they change to an alternative subject. For Ronald, it was this lack of practical elements in

his OP classes that was part of the reason that he changed from an academic pathway to a vocational one. Ronald identified how he was disappointed when he was in the OP subject Visual Art, and he realised how little practical elements were involved before he transferred to a non-OP subject in its place:

> *"I did Visual Art. But that was an OP subject, so we didn't really do any art work, and I'm like, holy fuck, I want to do some art already. I don't want to study these, you know, Picasso and all those other artists. Like I don't really care about them. Like yeah, they were cool. They were impactful, and the whole thing, I want us to do art. … There wasn't enough practical in it."*

Ronald did persist with his drama class though, but he did identify that he was not entirely satisfied with it because it did not contain a sufficient practical element either:

> *"Year 10 was more fun doing drama. While in year 11 and 12 it was more like, I don't know, it was just, it was boring. The only bit I liked about drama was reading a script. And you know, … there was a lot more theory in it. … Everything was just like, why this, why that, why is this happening? Why is this like that? Like we had to freakin explain it sort of thing and it was sort of pissing me off. … It was an OP subject. And I was like, no, I'm gonna stick to this, even though it's OP. We barely did any prac, but I just did it."*

It is possible however for General/academic subjects to effectively incorporate practical elements into their content. In fact, when these practical components also engage cultural considerations, it encourages success and engagement with the subject. Keith discussed one of his assessments in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies that he did at a previous school and how the practical elements of it included movement, which according to Hammond (2014) for cultures steeped in

oral traditions, makes the most of the brain's memory systems to encode knowledge. Keith found this way of learning especially effective:

> *"So up (at my other school), one of the assignments was a bit like drama where you kinda create a performance sort of so you're creating a story so it could be anything too, you could do a dance or anything and I found that a lot of the kids did strive and that they sort of just freely, … just do a certain subject, what do you call it, like a song or something. … Something that sorta um, that sort of helped me a lot, yea, with my sort of writing and stuff. … I did a dance, I did it with um… we could do it with individual or we could do it with pairs. So I did a dance, I did it to um Archie Roach, do you know 'took the children away'? … So yea, we did the what do you call it, we did a dance to that, talking about the stolen generation. The song played and we made up our dance and that was for an assignment, so we had to write about it and stuff. I found that a lot of the Indigenous kids and other kids involved really did sorta excel. … I think they were sorta, well for me it would help me to feel confident. When I did mine, I found it was very helpful."*

Not only was this option for the assessment beneficial for students with achievement outcomes, but Keith had observed that it engaged the students in the entire learning process. Similarly, when Ronald was asked what advice, he would give to schools for changes they could make to enable students to open all pathways as a possibility to pursue, he indicated that students would be more able to engage with subjects if schools considered just how much theory was included:

> *"I want to say the theory. I don't really care about English and math; I reckon they could just stay the same. I reckon it was just theory and like classes that I wanted to do sort of thing and some of it really didn't make sense."*

In addition to a preference for subjects that facilitate practical learning, another mode of knowledge acquisition that suits the way First Nations students learn is through repetition and trial and error (Yunkaporta, 2009). Non-linear pedagogy is a complex cycle of learning centred around continuously occurring processes (Wheaton & Roger, 2000). Staff at the participating school explained that VET supports this way of learning with the ability to repeat modules until you can display competency and that this is why so many of their students find this pathway to be the most suitable choice:

"I think the VET style of learning as well, works really well because it's competency based. So, for a lot of our Indigenous students who might not be as successful in an academic subject, the fact that they get to have a go at it multiple times and continue to fix and learn. You learn through knowing what's wrong. So when you're getting feedback about things, you're more likely to learn what's wrong, as opposed to, you know, handing something in and getting a fail. So, I find a lot of our Indigenous students love VET pathways, because they're getting feedback, they're actually learning a skill. I think last year, we had 99% of Indigenous students in a VET pathway, besides maybe one."

It was this ability to have the opportunity to improve and fix mistakes rather than just fail that Sam recognised as to why he was successful and enjoyed his vocational courses that he had predominantly enrolled in:

"The first time I had a crack (at the exams), it didn't went too well. Then I asked (my teacher) can I do this test tomorrow if I can go back and study, study for it and do it again. Once I did the second time, I got everything right."

Steele and Aronson (1995) postulate that persistence in an endeavour is impacted by stereotypes, including concern about confirming a negative stereotype. Aaron also recognised that it was this fear of failure that likely deters First Nations students from undertaking an academic pathway and that this is an issue that he was able to overcome because he was aware it was required as part of his journey to become an engineer:

> *"And it's the failure of failing, setting ourselves up for failure. Like Maths B, oh nah, it's really hard, physics is really hard. It's that lack of understanding and … it's easier to stay in your comfort zone. … But then I was like, oh, I know those subjects are going to be really difficult. I don't really want to do them, but I'll give it a crack anyway. Because if I want to be an engineer, I need to do those subjects. And it was bit of an unknown territory for me, to be honest, to be completely honest with you."*

While there have been some improvements with the transition to the new Queensland Certificate of Education system in Queensland schools, one of the main issues that has been compounded is if a student fails one assessment piece there is a more limited ability to regain marks for an overall passing grade. While preparing for the transition to the new system, I recall discussions among staff about less assessments being positive as it would enable more in-depth learning to occur. However, a side effect has been that students now have less opportunities to successfully demonstrate competency in these subjects. Ultimately though, as long as students are faced with a pass/fail option as the only way to complete ATAR courses, this will discourage some students from even attempting to undertake an academic pathway, as there are not as many opportunities to learn from their mistakes and to rectify their learning.

Many minoritised cultures, including those in Australia, tend toward collectivism (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). This way of knowing relies on collective wisdom with learning happening through group interactions (Hammond, 2014). According to Yunkaporta's framework, the kinship mind is an important component of learning as part of Aboriginal worldviews, nothing exists outside of a relationship to something else and knowledge transmission is dependent on the relationship between the learner, other learners and 'knowledge keepers' (Bilton et al., 2020). For First Nations students this means that according to traditional ways of learning, it is beneficial to be supported by a trusted individual through their studies.

It must be acknowledged that there are often multiple streams of support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to access as per Aaron's assertion:

> *"Some of our challenges are not that challenging given the support we've got available to Indigenous students. I went to school … and at uni where tutoring was free. Where I had support, financial support whilst at uni, because I had Indigenous scholarships which my non-Indigenous mates didn't have. So, you can see the balance there. But me opening up to taking on those opportunities…"*

One such support system that I was tasked with establishing and was happy to see students take up the opportunity, was dedicated study sessions held on school side for boarding students. A number of teaching staff members attended on particular nights to offer their support to students. I found it especially interesting that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities frequently made use of the teachers in attendance getting guidance and assistance with both assessments and general content that they had not grasped in class.

More opportunities for support like this could help students to believe that an academic pathway is a possibility if that is something they would like to pursue. When contemplating the reason for not taking on an academic pathway even though he really wanted to, Keith noted that with support he would have made the leap:

> *"Actually, I really did want to do OP in school. Actually, I really did, but it was sort of, at the time I sorta felt that I'm not smart enough to sit in them classes and to do the work. … A hundred percent … if there was a bit more sorta support and sorta encouragement that I could, and just a talk with someone that I could, then I definitely would have gave it a shot."*

The support students receive with assessments was noticed by Keith who compared the difference between the two schools he had attended for his secondary education. Keith said that one of the reasons for the difference may have been because the school he was at had more predominant First Nations student population which impacted on the way his assessments were made accessible:

> *"I did find it easier up in (the other school) doing the assignments than it was (at the one you were at). … I remember clearly, I've never seen that before. Yeah. Okay. It was like they've sort of never seen that structure of handing it in before. How can I say it? The kids there, they had just the assignment, they didn't have the cover page with the context and when the draft was due. … I remember looking at my first assignment, … like the assignment I had, I think it was for English, I ended up getting an A-. I don't know how. I think I had a presentation there to do, and a script for it I had to do. They were sort of different in a way, like the curriculum and all of that, I'm pretty sure."*

First Nations ways of knowledge acquisition involves learning in a supportive environment. This support can take many forms, but the more options available and ways to make students feel like, or know, that support is available, the more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities will be able to choose a pathway option that they prefer.

4.4.2.6 Summary

The accessibility of subjects has a major impact on the pathway choices Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities make at boarding school. Accessibility is impacted by the availability of subjects at schools and considering that schools that have a high percentage of First Nations students in attendance have a more limited number of options for academic subjects, this means the choices available limit student ability to choose this pathway. Further to this, academically aligned subjects are mostly irrelevant to many First Nations students because of their lack of cultural applicability and consideration or incorporation of First Nations ways of learning. In order to open the options for students to not be pigeonholed in a particular pathway, the availability of subjects needs to be more extensive, more applicable to meeting both an academic or work directed post-school outcome, and to suit culturally and epistemologically.

4.4.3 The influence of wider education systems

In addition to subject specific influences, other elements of the education system can impact on the senior schooling pathway choices of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities. Systemic structures such as class placements through streaming and support practices can influence a student's perception of their academic abilities. Particularly relevant to a boarding setting, students' ability to engage in academic activities can be impacted by the

quandary of distance of home communities and essential cultural practices. An additional impact can arise from the administrative component of institutions from school leadership and an ongoing push for outcomes. This section will examine in what ways these wider education system factors might impact on the senior schooling pathway choices of First Nations students from remote communities.

4.4.3.1 Streaming

Streaming, also referred to as journey grouping or homogeneous grouping, is employed in numerous schools across Queensland and Australia. The practice of streaming is where students are placed into ability-based classes (Johnston & Wildy, 2016; Trautwein et al., 2006) to manage individual differences between students, particularly during the junior years of secondary school (Plunkett, 2009). With no policies at a state or national level, Queensland principals are accorded the autonomy to make decisions about how to place differentiated students into streams (Johnston & Wildy, 2016). Streaming is commonplace in schools across Australia with the OECD estimating that 98 percent of Australia's schools use some form of homogeneous grouping (OECD, 2013), particularly in the subjects of mathematics, English and science (Perry, 2016).

For this research there was no access to a definitive list of Queensland boarding schools that partake in streaming, therefore, a search was conducted of each of the schools' websites, including subject handbooks for Years 11 and 12, to seek evidence of streaming. This process means that the reported number of boarding schools is not exhaustive, but at the minimum over half (27) of the 51 schools were identified as implementing streaming in Years 7-10 to varying extents. For some schools the process was across all junior year levels and core subjects

(mathematics, English, science and humanities), while for others the practice was designated to a specific subject and year level (for example, Year 10 mathematics).

The justification behind the longstanding practice of streaming is that it facilitates targeted differentiation to support students more efficiently with their learning (Ansalone, 2010; Johnston & Wildy, 2016). Some evidence has been found for how high ability students can benefit from gifted and talented grouping (Forgasz, 2010; Plunkett, 2009), specifically being slightly beneficial for the wellbeing of students who are academically strong (Belfi, et al., 2012).

In the interviews while considering the impact that streaming had on his education, Keith identified the skills he developed while in foundation classes at his school as being particularly beneficial when he journeyed to a core class (the school journeyed students through foundation, core and extension classes):

> *"(It) sorta prepped you for the basics, as in … assignments, sort of like prepped you as in like, building you up to sorta go into core. … It sorta did prep me in a way because it helped me get the basic format for the word documents and all that. And I was able to use those sorta skills in foundation to do up in core."*

These skills that Keith identified as being developed during his time in foundation classes are assumed knowledge when students enter secondary school. Despite increasing access to devices, teachers are not observing a comparable increase or sophistication in skills, with students often unable to perform basic computing functions (Graham & Sahlberg, 2020).

In my professional experience, not just working with students from remote communities, but also with students in a metropolitan context, I have also noted a lack of basic digital literacy. The following reflection is about one of these

experiences. I had a student who I was becoming increasingly aggravated with because he seemed to be at the same place every time I checked on his progress with an assignment, so I assumed he had been playing games or watching movies on his laptop. It wasn't until a couple of weeks later that I finally realised he was writing a paragraph in that lesson that I had already read two days previously. This was when I realised the student did not possess the required technical skills. When I sat with him to sort out his filing issues, I discovered that every time he could not find his file, he assumed it had been deleted so would start again. I found multiple copies of his work in the documents folder of his computer; he did not know where the files were going when he hit the save button. I then explicitly taught this student, and the rest of the class, to create folders in specific locations to save files. ACARA have identified Information and Communication Technology as a general capability to be addressed through the learning areas (ACARA, n.d.b). Yet by the time students reach secondary school they have not always been explicitly taught how to execute basic computational functions such as saving a file, thus resulting in the student ending up with consistently lost work or multiple files across locations, causing avoidable confusion.

The skills Keith had identified are necessary for successful participation in modern day education settings, however they should not be grounds for being streamed into ability levels. Administrative skills such as touch-typing, saving documents and basic operational skills for programs such as Microsoft Word should be taught within curriculum areas or as a targeted weekly class for all students.

Despite the differential benefits to one cohort, gifted and talented, placing students in homogenous groups is at the cost of disadvantaging others (Bonnor et al., 2021) and is a socially unjust practice that is often accompanied by threats and

sanctions for ‘not making the grade’ for those who have been marginalised by schooling (Mills et al., 2017). Literature canvasses the negative impacts streaming has on students such as academic self-concepts (Craven et al., 2000), the impact it has on teaching practices (Macqueen, 2010), and limiting future subject access (Jaremus et al., 2022; LeTendre et al., 2003). The practice has been especially criticised for its impact on students from geographically rural or remote locations, low socio-economic backgrounds (SES) backgrounds, non-English speaking backgrounds, First Nations students and other racial minority students (Dickson et al., 2020; Hornby & Witte, 2014; Macqueen, 2012).

Inequities arise from the outset of the process of streaming students (Johnston et al., 2022). Measures of prior performance are used to form groups, meaning that ‘achievement’ rather than ‘ability’ is often used to determine student placement (Muijs & Dunne, 2010). Standardised testing such as NAPLAN or PAT assessment results are increasingly used as an educational measurement and are subsequently drawn on to determine journey group placement (Oakes, 2008). Standardised tests have been criticised for their unreliability and cultural bias (Hallam & Parsons, 2013), yet they continue to influence notions of student ability (Forgasz, 2010).

As part of my role at the boarding school, I was involved in discussions about journey group placements, and its negotiations always revolved around how best to fit students into the allocated classes available according to timetabling constraints. There was a maximum number of students who could be enrolled in each class, which meant that you would sometimes have students placed in either extension or foundation classes simply because the numbers in core had already been exceeded and they were on the right (or wrong) side of the list.

For Year 7 students, these decisions were made drawing on available data such as ACER PAT assessments, previous NAPLAN results, and results on Year 6 report cards. Students who we were aware were coming but had not yet arrived (often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities awaiting finalisation of scheduling ABSTUDY flights), a decision was made about placements based off minimally available data. Frequently, knowing a student was coming from a remote community, it was assumed that he would be entering the foundation program, and a space was left open. While this was not necessarily the student's final placement, the assumption had already been made and unless they were substantially more suited to being in a higher stream, foundation is where they would start their secondary schooling journey.

Class size realities can dictate that some students are allocated the wrong journey group (Forgasz, 2010). And as teacher expectations decline over the course of First Nations students schooling years (Stone et al., 2017) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may be placed in the lower group based on their Indigeneity.

Journeying between the streamed classes becomes a numbers game, relying on a peer to 'drop down' or leave the school in order to open a position for the move (Hallam & Parsons, 2013). As Fatheree, a teacher who participated in an email interview about streaming, stated, "Students that were assigned to the lowest track were condemned to live there for perpetuity" (Kamil, 2019).

One of the significant impacts of streaming is that stereotypes about the students within each journey group can be maintained with teachers assuming capabilities based on the stream a student has been assigned. I recall one particular student who I had worked closely with in the junior years who faced assumptions about his abilities to perform in a leadership position based on his foundation level

classes in his junior studies. It was the end of Year 11 and it was time for students to nominate for Year 12 leadership positions for the following year. This student had nominated himself for the position of School Captain. The process was that after the closing date of nominations, students were vetted to determine their suitability to fulfil the duties of the role. Only selected students would then move forward in the process to be interviewed by the principal, and finally to be given the opportunity to present a speech to both their peers and staff prior to ballots opening for voting. I recall participating in diverging discussions with some staff about this student's capacity to fulfil this role. It was assumed that he would be unable to perform the required duties of School Captain because he was a 'foundation student'. However, being the student's English teacher in previous years and seeing his public speaking skills firsthand through everyday interactions, learning tasks and assessments, I was certain that he had the confidence and capacity to perform the School Captain duties effectively. Unfortunately, the student ultimately did not make it past the initial stage of pre-selections so did not have the opportunity to address his peers and voice in what ways he would be an ideal School Captain.

Some of the teachers who thought that this student would not be able to effectively fulfil the role of School Captain had not made that assumption based on their personal experience with him, but rather because his academic journey had been through foundation classes. Previous research has shown that teachers' expectations of whole class groups can have greater effects on student learning than teachers' expectations of individual students (Rubie-Davies, 2007). In a study where Australian teachers were interviewed, Macqueen (2010) found that the attitudes of teachers towards homogenous groupings impacted negatively on their teaching

practices, and in turn student learning, resulting in stereotypes being reinforced, including students' beliefs in their own capabilities.

Equivalently, some interviewed students in Western Australia who were streamed in core classes experienced teachers who held a homogenous view of the journeyed groupings, resulting in teacher expectations that were limiting and unfair, thus leading to feelings of being constrained, pressured, or pigeonholed (Johnston et al., 2022). In this research, Keith reflected on how journey groups shaped his opinions about student ability when, at school, he was moved from core to foundation classes following NAPLAN assessments: *"I think for me at school, I sorta thought foundation were the lowest of the students. and I thought that core and extension were for the higher up."*

When Keith had the rare opportunity to journey back into core classes for some of his subjects, he already had the perception of his academic abilities after initially being moved down: *"In a way, I thought if I do step up into these classes, I will be the lowest mark there."*

The impact of streaming students in the junior years of secondary school can be seen through the accessibility of particular subjects in senior, thus being an influencing factor on the pathway choices First Nations students from remote communities make.

Some schools enact pre-requisites for their subjects in Years 11 and 12. Figure 50 depicts a list of pre-requisites outlined in the senior school subject handbook of one of the boarding schools in Queensland.

Figure 50

Sample Senior Subject Pre-requisites

Prerequisites for General Subjects

Mathematics
• General Mathematics – C+ in General mathematics (Yr10) • Mathematical Methods – C in Mathematical Methods (Yr 10) • Specialist Mathematics – B in Mathematical Methods (Yr 10)
English
• English – B- in Core English, or a C in Extension English
Science
• Agricultural Science – B in Core Science • Biology – B in Core Science • Chemistry – C in Extension Science • Marine Science – B in Core Science • Physics – C in Extension Science • Psychology – C in Extension Science
Health and Physical Education
• Physical Education – B in Core English
The Arts
• Music – B in Core English or application/performance Interview • Visual Art - B in Core English
Humanities
• Ancient or Modern History – B in Core English or a B in Junior History • Business - B in Core English or a B in Junior Business • Geography - B in Core English or a B in Core Junior Geography • Legal Studies - B in Core English or a B in Junior Business
Religion
• Study of Religion – B in Year 10 SOR and a B in Core English
Technology
• Design – B in Core Mathematics or a C in Junior Digital Technology
Vocational Education
• Certificate II in Electrotechnology – B in Core English and a B in Core Mathematics

In order to enrol in the general subjects being offered, there is not only a pre-requisite about grades, but also about journey group allocations from Year 10. If a student has not been given the opportunity to complete core or above level studies, then they will not have the opportunity to enrol in many of the general subjects this school has on offer.

One of the challenges faced by students who are streamed is the variance in classwork between the journeyed groupings. There is often a gap between work that has been undertaken and what is required for the higher group (Hallam & Parsons, 2013). When asked about his move from a foundation class to a core one, and whether he would perform as well as his new classmates and cope in the new environment, Keith recalled being cautious: *"Yeah. I was just waiting to see what the work was and if I could do it."*

In a study of students who had been placed in streamed classes at their schools, Johnston et al. (2022) reported the difficulties faced by students when they 'moved up' as they felt they needed to catch up with their peers. Students reported it felt like they had skipped significant learning, reflecting a gap between the classwork in each journey group. This gap in learning can further limit student choices when it comes to selecting senior schooling subjects (Jaremus et al., 2022). One of my reflections while conducting this study focused on my professional observations of how streaming disadvantaged students by creating a substantial barrier to accessing an academic subject in Years 11 and 12. After I began teaching students in Years 11 and 12 in the OP English for ESL Learners program, I began to notice significant gaps between the skills students had learnt in Years 7-10 to what they were expected to know at the start of Year 11. It was not that students did not have the capacity to learn these skills, but that they hadn't had the opportunity to learn them yet. As I also had taught across various year levels for the streamed junior programs, I was aware of the difference in content and skills being taught in Years 7 to 10. The work programs for the extension and core classes were developed from year-level appropriate curriculum, whereas the foundation program for English was developed using curriculum guides from two years below. So, if a student was in a

Year 10 foundation English class, their skill development was based on the Year 8 curriculum guides. Thus, when a student entered Year 11 and were being taught and assessed based on year-level appropriate criteria, students content understanding and skill acquisition had to jump 3 year levels (from Year 8 to 11) as opposed to the one year level that core and extension students faced. It became evident over the years of running the program, that it was necessary in the first term of Year 11 to develop the student's required knowledge and skills to the standard necessary to successfully complete their work in this senior subject.

The move from Year 10 to Year 11 is difficult for all students, but if someone is expected to jump from Year 8 to Year 11, it is even more significant. Table 1 below is based on the national Years 8 and 10 English curriculum (Version 8.4) (ACARA, n.d.a), drawing on extracts from the year level descriptions and achievement standards. The highlighted elements of these extracts demonstrate a selection of the variance in knowledge and skill expectations between the two year levels.

Table 1

Selected Extracts from ACARA English Curriculum (Version 8.4)

Year 8	Year 10	Notes
They listen to, read, view, interpret, evaluate and perform a range of spoken, written and multimodal texts in which the primary purpose is aesthetic, as well as texts designed to inform and persuade.	They interpret, create, evaluate, discuss and perform a wide range of literary texts in which the primary purpose is aesthetic, as well as texts designed to inform and persuade.	Evaluate to Discuss Range to Wide range
These include various types of media texts including newspapers, magazines and digital texts, early adolescent novels, non-fiction, poetry and dramatic performances.	These include various types of media texts, including newspapers, film and digital texts, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, dramatic performances and	Addition to abstraction, higher order reasoning, intertextual references

	multimodal texts, with themes and issues involving levels of abstraction, higher order reasoning and intertextual references.	
Students develop their understanding of how texts, including media texts, are influenced by context, purpose and audience	Students develop critical understanding of the contemporary media and the differences between media texts.	Develop understanding to develop critical understanding
Informative texts present technical and content information from various sources about specialised topics.	Informative texts represent a synthesis of technical and abstract information (from credible/verifiable sources) about a wide range of specialised topics.	Present to represent a synthesis of
By the end of Year 8, students understand how the selection of text structures is influenced by the selection of language mode and how this varies for different purposes and audiences.	By the end of Year 10, students evaluate how text structures can be used in innovative ways by different authors.	Understand to evaluate
Students interpret texts, questioning the reliability of sources of ideas and information.	They develop and justify their own interpretations of texts.	Interpret texts to develop and justify own interpretations
Through combining ideas, images and language features from other texts, students show how ideas can be expressed in new ways.	They develop their own style by experimenting with language features, stylistic devices, text structures and images.	Express ideas in new ways to develop own style
Students create texts for different purposes, selecting language to influence audience response.	Students create a wide range of texts to articulate complex ideas.	Influence audience response to articulate complex ideas
They make presentations and contribute actively to class and group discussions, using language patterns for effect.	They make presentations and contribute actively to class and group discussions, building on others' ideas, solving problems, justifying opinions and developing and expanding arguments.	Addition – build on others' ideas, justifying, developing and expanding

Consider the difference in accessibility for a student who is transitioning to Year 11 from a Year 8 work program as opposed to a Year 10 one.

- For example, the capacity to “make use of and analyse the ways cultural assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs underpin texts and invite audiences to take up positions” (QCAA, 2018, p. 6) will be more accessible to a student who has developed a ‘*critical understanding’* as opposed to ‘*an understanding* of how texts are influenced by context, purpose and audience’.
- A second example is when students are expected to “use patterns and conventions of genres to achieve particular purposes in cultural contexts and social situations” (QCAA, 2018, p. 6). This will be more attainable for a student who has already ‘developed their own style to express ideas’, than one who has only been asked to ‘show how ideas can be expressed in new ways’.

Claims exist of the benefits of streaming students into ability groups being felt by those in the extension programs with a minimal positive impact to their well-being. However, as per the OECD mantra “you can’t have excellence without equity”. The issues with the widely utilised practice have significant impacts on students’ capacity to access subjects in an academic pathway in senior school. The process of assigning journey groups can be inequitable with student placements being based on achievement instead of ability, the use of standardised tests, low expectations, and available room in groupings. Then students are faced with limitations on journeying between groups due to factors such as the maintenance of stereotypes, the lack of room for movement, and the knowledge gap between levels. As students enter their senior years of secondary schooling, being placed in a lower journey group can impact on the choices they can make about pathways and appropriate

subject selections as they either have not had the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to successfully meet pre-requisites, or they have not been provided with appropriate learning to develop knowledge and skills necessary for a smooth transition into the senior curriculum.

4.4.3.2 EAL/D support

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities may not speak Standard Australian English (SAE) as a first language in their homes. This can feed students into a particular pathway because of the systemic structure of schools prioritising SAE as a lingua franca while simultaneously invalidating many of the home languages, including Aboriginal English dialects, spoken by First Nations peoples in remote communities (Malcolm et al., 2020). Additionally, by offering limited opportunities for support in the development of SAE skills, students' linguistic backgrounds may impact on their senior schooling pathway choices while attending boarding school.

In the interviews while reflecting on his ability to empathise with current students, Aaron identified the difference in language use between households in his home community and his school community:

> *"(We) can talk to community students, because we can relate to them, we've been in the same position as them, we did have to leave home at the age of 11 and 12 to go to a boarding school in an environment where English is not, where English is the first language and English in (our home community) is the third language."*

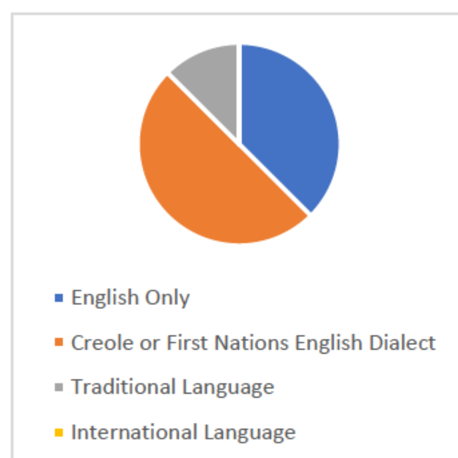
Analysis of linguistic background of residents in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been conducted, drawn from linguistic data from the 2021 census (ABS, 2022b).

Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were identified from combining lists from two sources: Queensland Government Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community histories (Queensland Government, n.d.) and a communities list on the Australian Government's Indigenous webpage (Australian Government Indigenous, n.d.). From these, 11 were eliminated from the data analysis as the predominant population was non-Indigenous residents or they were not located in a zone classified as level 4 (remote) or 5 (very remote) according to the remoteness scale as applied through the Australian Government's Health Workforce Locator (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2022). A further 3 locations were also eliminated (Dauan, Kubin and Ugar) as the data was limited due to insufficient collection for census analysis.

For census collection residents can indicate more than one language of use. Figure 51 shows that out of the 32 communities, 12 were identified as having a higher percentage of residents who spoke English only, 16 were identified as having a higher percentage of residents who speak a creole or First Nation English dialect, and four were identified as having more traditional language speakers.

Figure 51

Predominant Language Used in Remote First Nations Communities

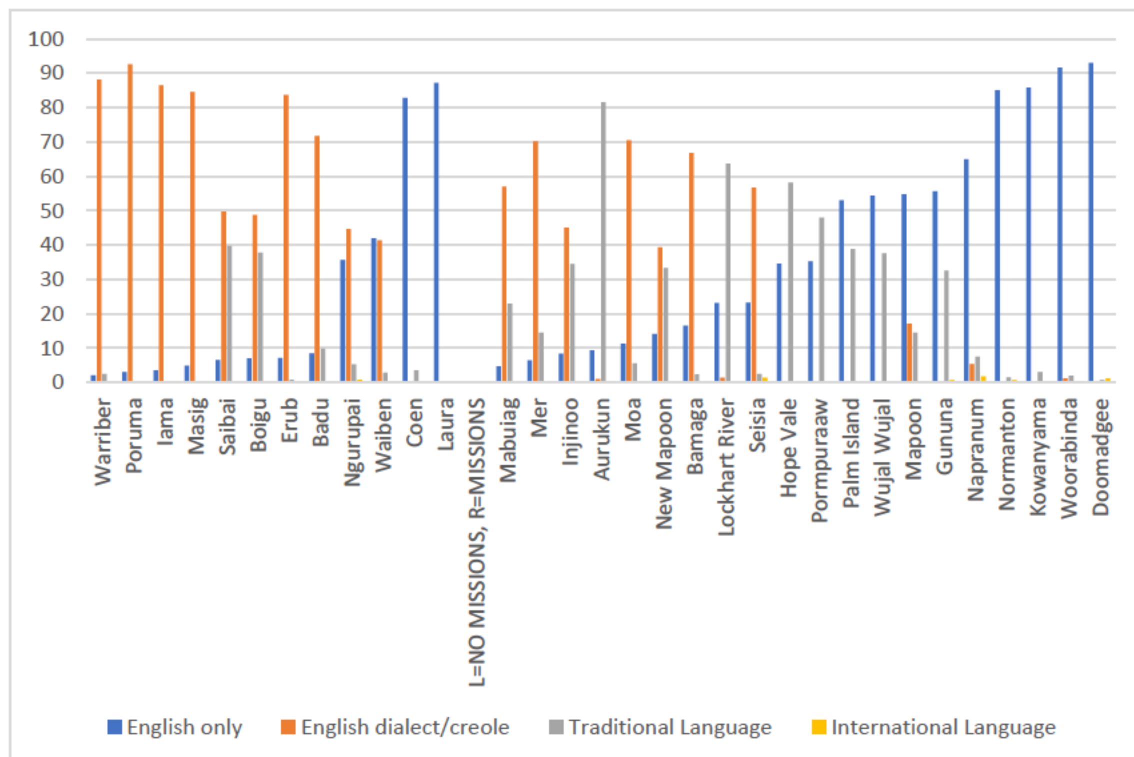


First Nations dialects have been developed through a widespread process of language contact, shift and spread; they are place-based (with varying degrees of mutuality) and are English-lexified (Angelo, 2013). Creoles, on the other hand, are mostly unintelligible with SAE (Angelo, 2013). Even though Yumplatok, Torres Strait Islanders' lingua franca (Thomassin, 2019) is a complete language in its own right, with systems of meanings, and the way the language is used resembling traditional Torres Strait languages more than English (Shnukal, 1988), I have included it in the domain of dialects in Figures 50 and 51 as it was developed out of a necessity for communication due to the Torres Strait's history of trade and colonial encounters by combining many languages including an introduced English-lexified pidgin and Torres Strait traditional languages such as Kala Laga Ya and Meriam Mir (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013).

In Figure 52, it can be noted that a significant number of locations where English has been identified as being the predominant language of residents have a colonial context of having missions established there (Queensland Government, 2023). Of the 12 mostly English-speaking communities, only three were not historically mission locations and each of those have a historical or social context that can explain their identification of being predominantly English only speakers.

Figure 52

Language Backgrounds of Residents in Remote First Nations Communities



Waiben (Thursday Island), Coen and Laura are locations that have not been the site of a mission in the past yet are outliers in the data with more English only speakers identified than speakers of First Nation dialects or traditional languages. Each of their histories and contexts demonstrate the complexities involved with residents' identification of linguistic backgrounds. Waiben is the main administrative centre for the Torres Strait (Gab Titui Cultural Centre, n.d.) with 37 Australian and state government agencies and services to the region being primarily based on Thursday Island (Burt, 2021; Queensland Government, 2018) and 25.2% of residents being non-Indigenous (ABS, n.d.). Coen saw the introduction of a police station in 1888 (Richards, 2008) and along with the establishment of mines and cattle stations, First Nations peoples of Coen often worked for the police, in the mines, or on stations as stockmen and domestic labourers (Queensland Government, 2017). These two communities have varying contexts where the

influence of the English Language has resulted in a higher proportion of residents who identify as English only speakers: Waiben as a modern region hub with an influx of government officials, and Coen as a historical site of invasion through industry establishment.

The significance of whether a site was historically a mission is the impact this context has on language background identification. Many missions prohibited people from speaking any language other than English (Rademaker & Rowse, 2020), and the after-effects of this prohibitive practice is still evident today. First, some traditional languages have become extinct or endangered with minimal first language speakers remaining (Senft, 2010; Sivak et al., 2019). Second, the consistency of being told either directly or through inference that your language is inferior may have lasting intergenerational impacts on a speaker's own perception of the language's inferiority/superiority positionality (Sharifian, 2008). Third, speakers (and others) may not recognise that an alternate way of speaking English is in fact a valid English dialect and not simply 'bad English' (Angelo, 2013; Sharifian, 2008). Finally, today dialects are used to converse across different language groups (Angelo, 2013). I observed this interdialectal exchange in action at boarding school. A common language used was Yumplatok as many First Nations students across the Torres Straits and Cape York used different varieties of it. Interestingly I also observed non-Indigenous students integrating Yumplatok in their speech by using terms like 'bala' (brother) and 'kaikai' (food) as well as greetings and salutations in their conversational speech.

Ultimately the reliability of linguistic background data is difficult to assure because of the enduring impacts of historical and social contexts resulting in a preponderance to identify as a SAE only speaker. However, despite this unreliability

of knowing if a resident in a community genuinely speaks only SAE, the enduring impacts of this remains with a significant number of First Nations peoples in communities who identify as speaking a First Nation English dialect or a traditional language. Thus, it is important to consider the role that speaking a language other than SAE as a home language may have on the choices Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities may make about senior schooling pathways.

When students depart for boarding school, they may be leaving a community that predominantly speaks a language other than English or a dialect of English that differs from the SAE that is used in the classroom of their new school. Systemically Australian schools expect the use of SAE (Wigglesworth & Lasagabaster, 2011) rather than recognising linguistic difference. Students who do not have the proficiency in the four macroskills are often assumed to not have the capacity to participate in education effectively (Lewthwaite et al., 2015). In particular, there is often a misnomer within or by education staff that Aboriginal Englishes are not a legitimate language, so students are not offered the same language support as a classmate who speaks a foreign language such as French. For First Nations students, when a teacher hears language that is similar, but not quite the same as SAE they may take a deficit viewpoint and make a negative assumption about cognitive capacity. This may result in not being aware of how to appropriately support a student's language proficiency, thus the more complex concepts become as students progress through schooling, the more inaccessible the content becomes.

There are some instances of two-way learning and bilingual education. However, along with the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008, a uniform test in SAE, a focus of English instruction resulted in the effective abolishment of many bilingual

instruction programs (Wigglesworth & Lasagabaster, 2011). Despite the benefits of bilingual education (Bianco & Slaughter, 2017; Disbray, 2017; Simpson et al., 2009), the systemic expectation of English as the lingua franca in Queensland schools means that once a student reaches senior secondary school there is an expectation of academic performance in and through SAE.

Even if teaching through home language were a possibility, both course content and assessment within the senior syllabus is an unavoidable aspect of the Queensland curriculum. Furthermore, in a boarding setting which often caters to multiple cultural and linguistic groups, teaching and learning in and through a first language would have many obstacles.

Once students reach their senior schooling years (11 and 12) and even from Year 10 as it gears up to prepare students for their senior studies, the language requirements also increase. The ILO at the participating school considered how the assumed linguistic knowledge of senior subjects may have resulted in almost all of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking a VET pathway:

> *"A high percentage (undertake a VET pathway), purely because of the gap academically. Once they hit Year 10 and a half, 11 and 12, the academic side of it, especially in sciences, and the language just changes. Now most of these kids probably speak, can speak two or three different languages. But then there's the language of maths, then there's the language of science, then there's the language of English, and so forth and so on. So, that is definitely more attuned to their general pathway. But also is more in tune with where they see themselves."*

In fact, each syllabus specifically outlines the role that literacy plays within the course as part of the underpinning factors. Combined with numeracy and 21st

century skills, literacy has shaped the development of senior subjects with students both learning about and through these skills. Many of the syllabus documents specify familiarity with syntax (arrangement of words and phrases) and specialised language. Modern History for example requires selecting and employing text structure and language knowledge to express their thoughts and ideas logically and fluently.

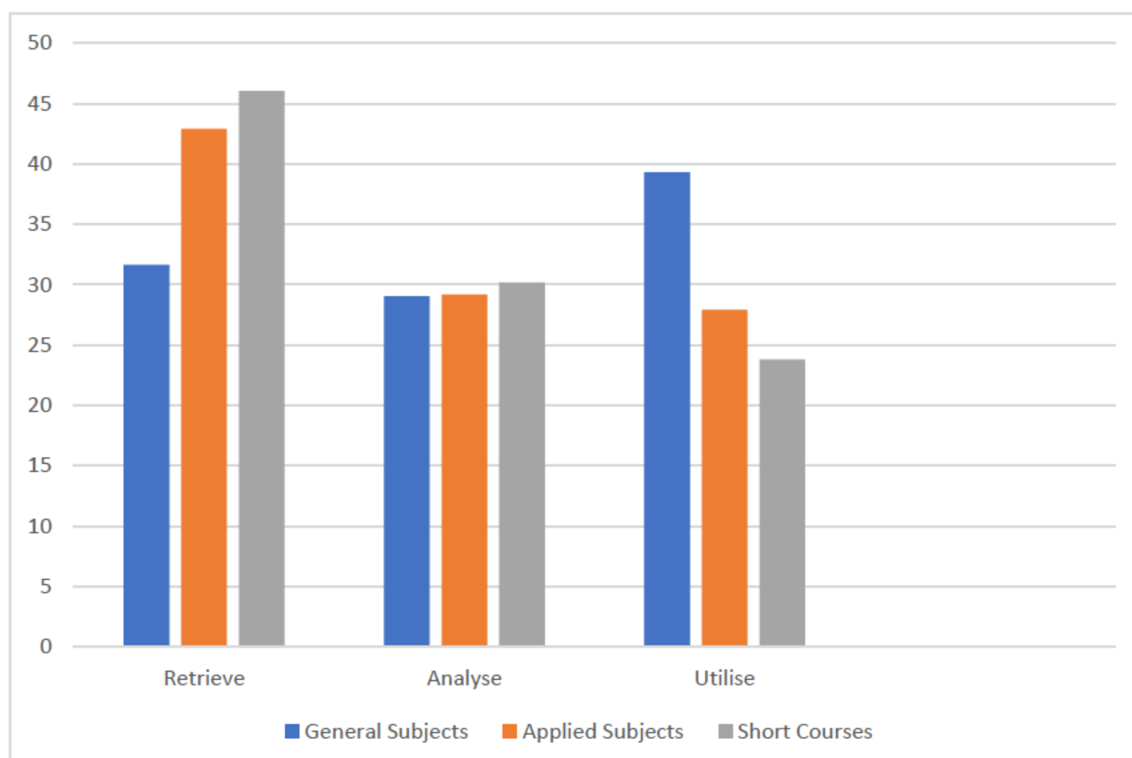
Within the curriculum documents of the senior subjects (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.c), each syllabus has a Teaching and Learning section, and within this, syllabus objectives highlight the applicable cognitive verbs. These cognitive verbs have been categorised into three domains: retrieval & comprehension, analytical processes, and knowledge utilisation (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018b). The knowledge utilisation verbs require the most literacy skills to achieve as it is the productive strand (Ingram & Wylie, 1992).

An analysis was conducted to observe what percentage of cognitive verbs in each type of subject fell into the three different domains. The three subject types offered by the QCAA are General, (academic pathway), Applied (non-academic pathway) and Short Courses (1 unit courses geared specifically toward vocational training). It is worth noting that only four Short Courses are offered compared to 25 Applied subjects and 48 General subjects. In Figure 53 below it can be observed that while the middle analysis domain was fairly evenly spread, the retrieval and utilisation domains have a contrasting outcome. The percentage of retrieval cognitive verbs was significantly higher for Applied subjects (42.92%) and Short Courses (46.02%) than General subjects (31.65%). Conversely the percentage of utilisation verbs evident in the syllabi of General subjects (39.31%) was

comparatively higher than in the Applied subjects (27.92%) and Short Courses (23.81%). This converse spread demonstrates that there is a higher level of cognition, especially around communication required in a General subject as opposed to an Applied one.

Figure 53

Percentage of Cognitive Verbs According to Subject Type



One cognitive verb that can further demonstrate the distinction in literacy requirements is 'synthesise'. According to QCAA's definition of 'synthesis', it means to "combine different parts or elements (e.g. information, ideas, components) into a whole, in order to create new understanding" (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018b). I recall marking assignments for the now obsolete OP English for ESL Learners subject and the synthesising criterion was often a roadblock that prohibited students from attaining a higher grade. The language required to synthesise is a difficult task for students (Zhang, 2013) because of factors such as topic familiarity, reading ability, and complexity of relationship

between texts (Spivey, 1997; Wiley & Voss, 1999). According to the data from QCAA's cognitive verbs, it can be seen in Figures 54, 55 and 56 below that a greater proportion of general subjects specifically note an outcome of synthesise compared to either Applied or Short Courses. This does not equate to students not being capable of synthesising, thus being restricted from enrolling in General subjects, rather that this is a skill that can be established with targeted support. In a project examining the effect of instruction on English as a Second Language (ESL) students' synthesis writing, Zhang (2013) found a positive effect of synthesis writing instruction incorporated through language classes.

Figure 54

Proportion of General Subjects Listing 'Synthesis'

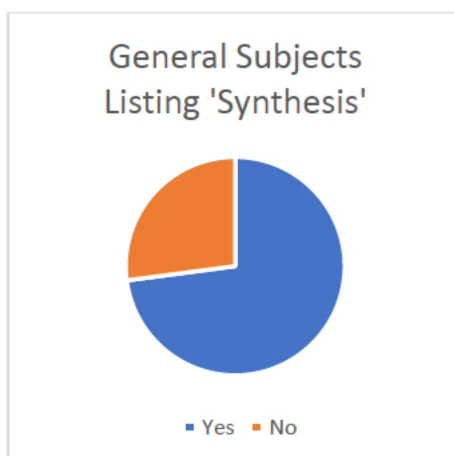


Figure 55

Proportion of Applied Subjects Listing 'Synthesis'

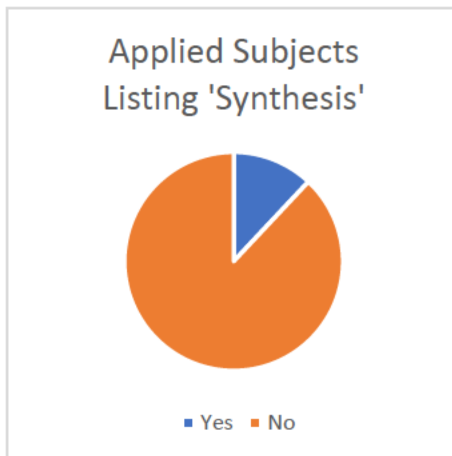
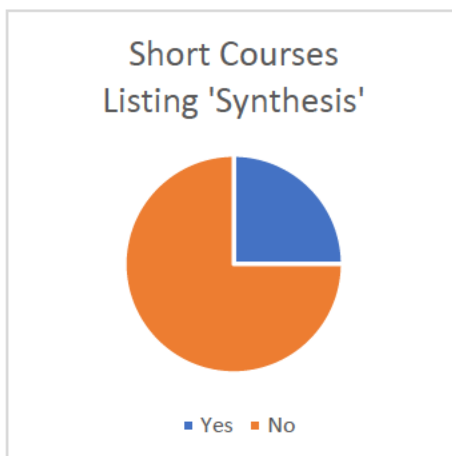


Figure 56

Proportion of Short Courses Listing 'Synthesis'



Many subject's Instrument Specific Marking Guides (ISMGs) also have a standard focused on literacy. Not only is literacy required to address other knowledge-based criteria (using Modern History, you will be assessed on "discerning use of historical questions by creating a nuanced key inquiry question and relevant sub-questions", which requires a significant grasp of SAE), but the ISMGs also have a specific focus on creating and communicating (drawing on Social and Community Studies, it requires literacy skills to achieve standards such as "recognition and comprehensive description of concepts and ideas related to the development of

personal interpersonal and citizenship skills" while also explicitly targeting literacy with a specific standard which assesses "use of language conventions and features to communicate ideas and information according to purpose").

Ultimately, all subjects require literacy knowledge and proficiency. However, the complexity of this literacy is elevated further in the utilisation domain of the cognitive verbs than in the retrieval domain and if a student is studying General subjects, they will more likely be required to implement the cognitive verbs in the more rigorous utilisation domain. This is not a reason for EALD students from remote communities to not be given the opportunity to undertake General subjects, but schools should consider how to support SAE language acquisition in both junior and senior years so students feel it is possible to study an academic pathway if they choose. This support should begin in the junior years to minimise obstacles like knowledge of technical terminology required in senior subjects. Schools should offer programs while the students are in the junior years of school that specifically target the language of subjects.

I established a junior ESL program at the boarding school where I worked with a primary focus on individual and small group sessions to build communicative skills. The other component was a timetabled year level class. When developing the work program for these classes, I collaborated with Curriculum Heads of Department to establish what units of work were occurring and what were the subject specific terminology and concepts that were likely to warrant support. The crossover between subjects meant we were able to develop units that focused on a theme that covered elements across curriculum areas. For example, in Year 8 geography there is a focus on landforms and landscapes including geomorphic processes, while in science there is a descriptor for earth and space sciences which explores the

geological knowledge about different rock types and formations. By combining these into one unit we were able to focus on language occurring across curriculum areas to prepare and assist students with upcoming study.

Likewise, the participating school also recognised the need for this support from the early years:

> *"There are a number of different things where we, just our Academic Skills Program, which most of our kids, especially our remote kids will do through years seven, eight and nine before hitting Year 10, and that focuses heavily on language."*

An important and ongoing process to support students within their classes effectively is the establishment of staff awareness about students' linguistic backgrounds and the development of teaching features such as processing times, making instructions accessible and knowing how to target and develop language capabilities. In addition to learning how to support students with language acquisition, teachers should also recognise students' particular interest in literacy when it appears and encourage this. This point became clear to me in the interviews with Keith. As we were speaking, I recalled that he used to own a notebook that I saw him writing in while in boarding. When I asked Keith about it at the time, he showed me, and I was both surprised and moved by the poetry that it contained. Keith recalled what he used the book for: *"I used to write about, what do you call it, life's challenges and all that, I used to just write to music."*

I remember not wanting to make a big deal about the book and Keith's skills because I thought it might have been something personal that he wanted to keep to himself. However, in hindsight during the interviews, I realised it was in fact

something he was happy to share with people: *"I did show a lot of my mates and that. I did show a couple of people and …, yea, I think sorta teachers."*

It then has made me consider if us teachers, who he trusted to show his writing to, had have recognised the enjoyment he took in writing and encouraged him further, Keith may have had more belief in his own capabilities with language and therefore believed that he was capable of completing an academic pathway. Keith recalled how this encouragement may have changed what he chose to study in his senior years, in particular he may have chosen the OP pathway that he had actually wanted to do: *"If there was a bit more sorta support and sorta encouragement that I could, and just a talk with someone that I could, then I definitely would have gave it a shot."*

Once students who do not speak SAE at home reach their senior years in secondary school, one way schools can support them with their language development is through offering the general subject English as an Additional Language. This course can be beneficial for students who choose either an academic or non-academic pathway. I recall running the previous OP iteration of this course for students and had some enrolled who were on an OP pathway and others who were studying a vocational pathway. Those studying an OP pathway were able to complete their English requirements with a course that specifically targeted language, and those who were studying a vocational pathway were able to gain further skills with language conventions that would be useful across curriculum areas and outside of school.

While discussing whether that senior OP ESL class was useful to him after school, Sam reflected on how English plays a key role in his job now that he is back

in his home community: *"We use English mainly when the tourist season, we have to use the English here."*

As depicted in Table 2 below, out of the 51 boarding schools identified in Queensland, only six had students enrolled in English as an Additional Language (QCAA, 2023f).

Table 2

Queensland Boarding Schools that Offered English as an Additional Language as a General (ATAR) subject in 2022

School Name	% First Nations Students	LBOTE%	Cricos Registration	Website includes details about international program
John Paul College	2%	39%	Yes	Yes
St Margaret's Anglican Girls School	3%	16%	Yes	Yes
Ipswich Girls Grammar School	4%	23%	Yes	Yes
The Rockhampton Grammar School	5%	17%	Yes	Yes
Clayfield College	7%	29%	Yes	Yes
Mount St Bernard College	68%	36%	Yes	No

Of significance, there are 16 boarding schools in Queensland with a population of First Nations students over 10%. Out of these 16 schools, only one offers English as an Additional Language as a possible study option. When you compare the percentage of Language Background other than English (LBOTE) students (ACARA, 2023), if the percentage of LBOTE students is significantly higher than that of First Nations students, it would be reasonable to assume that the cohort

studying English as an Additional Language is likely to consist of not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Additionally, all six schools have a current Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS) registration which is necessary if enrolling any student who is not an Australian resident. This does not on its own necessarily indicate that the school is actively enrolling immigrant or international students on its own though. Delving further, out of these schools, all but one actively advertises an international student program. When you consider all of these factors, the likely assumption is that Mount St Bernard is the only boarding school that has an English as an Additional Language senior subject offering specifically for their First Nations students.

2019 was the last year of the OP system before Queensland schools transitioned to ATAR. As part of that transition, all subjects were redrafted. At a time of universal intensification of educators' work impacting on their core job of teaching (Gavin et al., 2021) I recall there being a general concern amongst staff at the school where I worked that all subjects were intensifying in academic expectations and rigour and that there would not be the same level of ability to target the content of the work program to students. This was when a decision was made to not offer the new version of the subject at the school where I worked.

However, when comparing the standards of assessment between the two, there are many correlations. For example, when comparing a sample assessment's ISMG from the current General English course and a rubric from one of the assignments that my students used to do in the OP English for ESL students course, across a particular domain the similarities are evident as can be seen in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Rubric Comparison Between Previous and Current Iterations of EAL Subjects

OP ESL Communication Skills	ATAR English as an Additional Language Knowledge Application
Exploitation of genre patterns and conventions that clarify or enhance meaning	Discerning use of aesthetic features and stylistic devices to achieve purposes
Insightful and perceptive integration of language features that effectively respond to the particular audience, purpose and context enhancing meaning	Discerning use of the ways cultural assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs underpin texts and invite audiences to take up positions
Logical selection, cohesive organization, insightful presentation and expression of complex ideas that suit the particular audience, purpose and context	Subtle and complex creation of perspectives and representations of concepts, identities, times and places

The first domain refers to the utilisation of language conventions to convey a message. The second domain refers to using language features to persuade a particular audience. The third domain is about how the information is presented to suit a particular purpose.

While there was concern within my workplace about the increase in requirements, in hindsight, the syllabus still had a similar focus on language capacity. However, my school was one example of opting to cease running the subject. A key point of difference between the two offerings, is the ability (or not) to adapt the course content for optimum relevance for a particular cohort of students. When I developed the OP English for ESL Learners work program, while I needed to cover all elements of the syllabus, the order and design was adaptable. So, for my cohort that consisted solely of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities, I could tailor the topics and assessments to be of interest to them. For example, we studied units such as Indigenous representation in the

media, a unit with a focus on current political issues where they responded to a letter to the editor about closures of communities in Western Australia; and international dreaming in which students explored the links between socio-cultural context and text with an assessment task where they constructed and performed a persuasive speech recommending that schools in Australia include creation stories from around the world in their curriculum. Another unit drew on Chris Sarra's (2012) autobiography in which students were not reading about a First Nations sports player, but rather about a man who became the first Aboriginal principal in Queensland.

The new syllabus on the other hand is much more specific about the focus of each unit, teachers still have the ability to choose the text to suit students, however it must be drawn from a set list. In the prescribed text list there are numerous First Nations authors and texts that can be drawn on such as Kirli Saunders' poetry, Tom Wright's play, and Anita Heiss' anthology, to name just a few (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2023c).

There may be other schools like mine that ceased to offer the academic pathway course when the new English as an Additional Language syllabus was released because of the initially noted differences. Now, after four years, the program is established and only one of the boarding schools who currently offer it have a significant First Nations cohort and do not have a dedicated international program, thus within boarding schools studying the General subject English as an Additional Language is not readily available for those wanting to undertake an academic pathway.

In summary, it is likely that students from remote communities who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander have a language background where

Standard Australian English is not their first language. The identification of students can be difficult though because of societal and historical contexts of First Nations peoples and remote communities where a First Nation dialect may not be viewed as a valid language. The hidden curriculum is evident in the education system in Queensland where learning rules reflect the dominant Western culture (Rahman, 2013) through elements such as language, impacting on students' sense of belonging. While not explicitly stating that curriculum must be delivered in SAE, in senior there is no way of assessing SAE outcomes. If a student does not have the skills, or support to gain the proficiency in SAE to complete subject requirements, they will likely struggle, not because of cognitive deficiencies or incapabilities, but rather because the lingua franca of schools does not match their home language. The difference in language requirements between General and Applied subjects (inclusive of Short Courses) is significant in complexity. This means that it is more difficult for students who speak a language other than SAE to succeed in the General subjects. This however should not be a deterrent in the senior years with students not being given the opportunity due to language differences. Rather, schools can implement targeted language support in the junior years. Also, they can offer EALD as a senior subject which will support with language across the curriculum, while simultaneously providing a linguistically accessible subject that will meet ATAR subject requirements.

4.4.3.3 Geographic and cultural travel impacts

Another issue that specifically impacts First Nations peoples from remote communities is related to cultural practices and travel implications when living in remote locations. Travel and extended stays in community that may impact on the amount of time to engage in the curriculum, thus possibly impacting on capacity to

undertake an academic pathway in the senior years, can be due to the organisation of travelling to and from school each academic term, returning home for cultural practices such as Sorry Business and major unexpected events.

One of the governmental support systems that many students and families from remote communities deal with for their travel is ABSTUDY. ABSTUDY is a selection of payments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that can be used to assist with school fees, boarding fees, living costs, travel costs and school materials (Services Australia, 2022). Specific to students from remote communities there is ABSTUDY support to be able to access education for their secondary school years at a boarding school when no appropriate facility exists in their home community.

The process of applying for ABSTUDY funds is one families undertake themselves. A student's family can make a claim by an online form, by post, or in person (Services Australia, 2023). However, the process can be difficult and, as posited by Keith, can impact on whether a student even has the possibility of enrolling in a boarding school:

> *"I know a lot of kids (in my community) here that they did apply for wanting to go to (a boarding school) and I actually have asked that question. How come they didn't end up going? And they have said it's just too much to do, too much paperwork, so they ended up going to the high school … which is about 30 minutes away, and that only goes to grade 10. And they end up back in (community), going to … the high school here, which is not really the school I would prefer."*

Keith described what he could remember about the process for his own application:

“From memory, I’m pretty sure Mum and Dad did all of mine. … I remember what they did was they sent an Abstudy pack for the parents to fill in and I had to sign some document as well. So I think the whole process is where they want to know your parents’ wage and all that. … We got (the pack) off Centrelink. So we made a claim through Centrelink in (the nearest major centre). Again, I’m not too sure if they got it from the school or not, I can’t sort of remember, but we had to fill out a lot of papers because I do remember seeing what they had to do.”

After the significant effort that his parents went through to gain eligibility to receive the ABSTUDY funds, at the end of Year 9 Keith’s father’s employment placed the family above the income threshold. Keith was no longer able to access the ABSTUDY support and when his family moved for work, this necessitated a change of schools in Year 10:

“I think if your parents, or my dad he was a police officer so I think he was earning more money to actually apply for it though I’m pretty sure. I’m not really sure about that, yea, so to go on ABSTUDY you had to get somewhere to stay and show them the amount of money.”

In order for Keith’s brothers to be able to navigate the system to attend a boarding school, they involved a family member with the application process:

“They went to (boarding) as well, so we had to get Mum’s brother to claim for them. So Mum and Dad couldn't, so that was sort of the same thing, so it was sort of too much, so we ended up getting my Uncle to claim for (my brother) to go. So it is all a bit tricky.”

While this could have been an option for Keith as well, he initially opted not to and to simply attend a different school because of the difficulties of navigating the

ABSTUDY system: *"I think, for me, it was sort of more of a personal choice because I didn't really want to have to go through all the paperwork again."*

Because of the change in ABSTUDY funding, Keith's educational continuity was disrupted:

> *"So I left, I went to (the other school). So I did 11 months up there and I was able to come back to my boarding school. … ABSTUDY cut me off. Yea, I just went and did a bit of schooling up there and then came back. … I came back in Year …. ooh. Year 11, about half way through Year 11, and then went into Year 12."*

In studies conducted in the United States, it was found that young children who change schools frequently have poorer educational outcomes (Hutchings et al., 2013) and older students are at more risk of dropping out of high school (Gasper et al., 2012). Closer to home, in a West Australian study it was found that moving school will impact on school engagement and with highly mobile students, that is those who have attended five or more schools, only 20 percent regularly attend high school, often struggling with a sense of belonging (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015). The impact of interrupted schooling was supported by Keith who discussed his experiences with numerous school movements throughout his educational journey:

> *"I think in a way it sort of does, like from my experience, like I lived up in (another community) as well with Mum and Dad. Being up there, there was a big change in my primary school years. And with secondary movement, when I moved (in Year 10), I found it was a bit challenging because … I was sort of limited to what subjects, oh not really the subjects, but the opportunity in a way."*

A further issue with ABSTUDY that can impact on attendance rates is organising flights at the beginning and end of each school term. In my professional experience when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at a boarding school, my classes with students from remote communities were impacted at the beginning and end of every school term, sometimes by an entire week. This was due to the delayed arrival and early departure of students to fit in with available flights. This absence could be further extended if students missed a flight either in their home community of in the connecting major city. If these delays occurred at either end of every term, students from remote communities could be missing up to eight weeks of schooling every year. This is a significant amount of missed opportunities for learning.

The time missed is not always due to ABSTUDY flights, but as noted by staff at the participant school, unexpected major health and environmental events can be an unavoidable situation for students from remote communities that may impact on the time available to engage in education:

> *"Especially, obviously, COVID makes everything difficult, but COVID has played havoc with it. And then just general things in the communities, down to natural weather events where we've had kids stranded and things like that. So it is what it is."*

In addition to these unexpected events, a significant and persistent interruption to student educational attendance that also has implications for flights through ABSTUDY is Sorry Business. Sorry Business is a profound period of mourning that transcends the Western perception of grieving for the deceased. While customary practices will differ between First Nations communities and groups (Queensland Health, 2015) Sorry Business generally involves responsibilities to

attend and participate in funerals, cultural activities and ceremonies with the community (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2021).

For Keith, returning home for cultural reasons was an easy process and did not have a significant impact on his studies during his senior years because he lived close enough to be able to organise without the need to go through ABSTUDY processes. However he recognised the process was different than for those from further afield:

> *"For me, because I didn't really deal with ABSTUDY, so I'd put my leave in with my dorm and I'd let my teachers know that I won't be there for a certain time. But I do know that there are a lot of boys there … who haven't been there, or they've had to go back up for Sorry Business and have had to go through ABSTUDY to pay for flights and stuff, but I don't know the whole process for them."*

The quagmire of distance was recognised as a challenge for Aaron as there were some cultural activities that he was unable to participate in due to the distance between school and his home community: *"Yeah, there was times where there was things happening in my community that I couldn't go back to, because, you know, I was at school."*

When students are able to make their way home for Sorry Business, considerations need to be made by schools. Staff at the participating school discussed Sorry Business and the considerations they have to engage in regarding timing of travel arrangements:

> *"The bane of my existence. Sorry Business can be very disruptive, it impacts heavily on the students. The issue we have is Sorry Business can be as long as a piece of string. So it is very difficult to know, until generally what I do,*

unless I can get a set date for them to return. If I can get a set date I book it. If I don't, it's just left open ended. And then the community or the parents will get in touch with me and say, you know, so and so is right to come back to school can you book it for this day? Generally, I've started getting very good about it. But it can be difficult."

From a student's perspective, Aaron discussed the importance of Sorry Business and his own personal experiences with how the demands of school were superseded by important cultural practices:

"And look, reflecting back on it, Sorry Business happens all the time. And we need to uphold why we, sorry we need to develop a system where Sorry Business gets recognition from the school in terms of, like we don't think, I think Indigenous students don't think the way others do because it's like the end of the world, they need to go home, everything will need to be stopped. Things become irrelevant. That's certainly how I felt when I was even going through uni, like nah nah nah nah, I need to go back (home)."

Aaron also explained why school staff may have difficulty comprehending the significance of these events.

"I think unless you've lived in a tight knit community, you will never get an appreciation of why community members struggle. It's like a small town, small town thing, you know, … where everyone knows everyone, someone that could not be direct relationship, whether it's a friend or a family member, will have a significant impact when they pass on. As opposed to someone that you've met occasionally in a big city, you don't really have that relationship or the connection."

The participating school also recognised that while students' return to community for these events can result in missed opportunities for study, it is important to remember that this is an important cultural practice that must be respected and supported. It will not be of any benefit to the student to add academic pressure to their lives at such a deeply poignant time:

> *"My view, and I've expressed this …, is that we shouldn't be piling these kids up with work to go home to Sorry Business, we wouldn't do it to non-Indigenous kids that were going to a funeral or going away, you know, in a state for a family member's funeral or something like that. Why should we do it to our kids? And the onus is not on us. I mean, we rank fairly low compared to the family in regards to these children. So we shouldn't be imposing our beliefs, so to speak, or our, what we think is best for them when they're going away."*

However, even with the recognition that Sorry Business is a non-negotiable and that schools have no place to prohibit students from participating in important cultural practices, it cannot be denied that extended absences can impact on student engagement and opportunities for learning. Aaron discussed the impact it had on his own education:

> *"It had a big impact because, Sorry Business, especially close family or friend, I don't take too well. And community is very tight knit. So there was times even at uni, where I had to defer for exams. … Like even at uni I struggled. Even living down in Sydney when I was living and working over in Western Australia. You can't just go back in a heartbeat back (home). Yeah. It's definitely had a lot of impact, to be honest."*

Aaron then continued by explaining why Sorry Business had such a significant impact on some of his peers specifically in relation to their educational endeavours:

"Sorry Business, I think had a lot of impact not only on me, to the other students as well, and where some of the students just never recovered from it. Because boarding school is so isolated and so far from communities, they tend to then go back to communities and just don't get motivated to pursue education."

Cultural events and practices such as Sorry Business must be supported by schools for students to attend, however the impact that they can have on students' educational engagement and missed learning opportunities is something that schools must consider. While Aaron was at school, he recognised himself that even though returning home was important, so was the work he was leaving behind at school:

"But I think I needed to accept the fact that, yes you need to get back (home), but you need to make sure that you get assignments done, that don't get an extension of time or defer your exams."

It is crucial for schools to consider how they can provide support to students who need to be absent for extended periods as this is an inherent part of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities. In the case of significant weather events, such as flooding which may impede students' return from school holidays, technology may serve to keep some connected to their learning. However, as the participating school emphasised, this solution cannot always be relied upon:

"There was discussion last year about you know, do we keep the kids in touch, most of the kids will go home with their laptops, whether their internet

access is adequate enough. Generally, in most communities these days it is. But that's not to say it will work a hundred percent of the time."

It is necessary for schools to understand and accept that students will miss work during these events. Avery, the Indigenous Liaison Officer at the participating school discussed what processes they implement to deal with this and the way the school community work together to support students upon their return:

"So yes, they will miss work. Yes, they will have to catch up. But, that's outlined to them initially that when you get back you're gonna have to work extra hard because you're gonna have a lot of stuff to catch up on. … Yeah, generally what will happen is with me, class, teachers will contact me and I will then pass that on to boarding. And, basically, that prep time at night, we try and focus on them getting their assignments finished and things like that. So, it is a bit of a slog, because there isn't easing back into it really, because they still have obligations that they need to meet, regardless. And I know that might sound a little bit harsh, but ultimately, it's going to affect them if they don't, so we have to just give them that extra support. And the teachers at the school are fantastic because they will give them extra time. They will provide tutorials for them. They will catch them up. They will give them all the information. So realistically, it's just down to the student to make sure that they're following those processes and they're trying to catch back up."

Aaron underscored the importance for schools to support their students when they return from extended periods of leave, aligning with the viewpoints of the participating school. Specifically, he emphasised the time to transition back to school and the need for services such as counselling:

“I think it's different individuals will experience it a little bit differently. I think the Cultural Liaison Officers or Indigenous Student Liaison Officers have a big part to play in how they accommodate that. Like, especially with me, it was just trying to find that medium. … I think that there needs to be a lot of investment into Indigenous Liaison Officers that really act as the gap filler between Indigenous student wellbeing and support system as well. … Yeah, I think, the counsellors and transition, transitioning from community to school. … And, you know, and the counselling needs to come into play as well because we're not emotionally up there.”

The additional challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities related to cultural practices and travel implications creates a situation where additional time away from school can be unavoidable, with students potentially not having optimal opportunities to engage with learning opportunities. This diminished opportunity to engage and interruptions to continuity of education means that students’ ability to choose and pursue an academic pathway at school is impacted because students may have missed key understandings from course content. While these circumstances are beyond control, schools need to consider how they implement support systems that address the unique circumstances faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities.

4.4.3.4 Push for ‘outcomes’

In today’s neo-liberal climate where Australian schools have become sites that embrace top-down management with a primary role as job trainers (Giroux, 2010) there has been a shift to punitive measures of accountability with national agreements requiring each state or territory education department to meet set

performance targets (Rowe, 2022). This accountability is evident through two influencing forces that place significance on student 'outcomes': firstly, a push for outcomes specifically targeted towards First Nations students as the Australian Federal Government continues to aim to 'Close the Gap' between non-Indigenous and First Nations peoples by measuring specified outcomes (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, n.d.). Secondly, an overall push for academic outcomes for senior students by individual schools by way of the attainment of a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). Whilst striving for 'outcomes' gives the impression of being a positive motivator for schools in their work with First Nations students, there is a possibility that this push for outcomes could create complicacies that may influence the decision-making about senior schooling pathway choices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students from remote communities.

One of the forces that influences the education specifically of First Nations students is the Australian Government's aim to 'Close the Gap' between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those of non-Indigenous backgrounds across 19 outcomes, five of which fall in the education domain (Australian Government, 2023). By systematically comparing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the aggregate to non-Indigenous Australians in a way that consistently indicates First Nations status as 'falling short' of national norms, Closing the Gap is reproducing a deficit discourse (Fogarty et al., 2018). Deficit based narratives like Closing the Gap, problematise First Nations peoples, potentially producing further disadvantage (Dawson et al., 2021).

While in 2023 the government has moved away from explicitly targeting literacy and numeracy in the same way as previously, up until 2020 these Literacy

and Numeracy outcomes were measured using data from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (Australian Government, 2020a). NAPLAN was established in 2008 to provide consistency in monitoring literacy and numeracy levels nationally in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (Department of Education, 2018).

Despite being compulsory for all students NAPLAN is not culturally or linguistically inclusive, relying on Standard Australian English and Western cultural norms to successfully access (Freeman, 2013). Wigglesworth et al. (2011) assert that NAPLAN is not appropriate for students of any age if they are still developing age-for-grade proficiency as it is designed to test the mastery of academic and written language of students whose first language is English. The reading component of NAPLAN frequently tests analytical skills which are coated heavily in western cultural norms (Freeman, 2013) such as the 2009 Year 3 reading test that included a narrative about a paperboy and an advertisement for a movie which relies on assumed knowledge that may be unfamiliar to remote Indigenous students with questions directly testing unfamiliar cultural understandings (Wigglesworth et al., 2011). Whilst for data collection purposes a student's Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) status is recorded, students from remote communities, are often at a disadvantage due to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

All students are impacted by the push for outcomes through NAPLAN. Students are encouraged not to worry about NAPLAN with announcements such as that by Robert Randall, the head of the national testing body in 2014, who stated that it should be no more stressful than a sport carnival (Barry, 2014). However, students are frequently anxious, potentially impacting their test performance (Swain et al., 2018). NAPLAN can also be seen as high-stakes by schools with the publication of results on the My School website and the increasing focus of media

attention (Department of Education, 2018). Some schools use NAPLAN in their marketing and it has even been proposed to be used as a basis for performance pay (Masters, 2018). This added pressure can be transferred to both teachers and students (Swain et al., 2018) who may then focus on preparation for the test to the detriment of other content and curriculum. The inference of the importance of NAPLAN results and what they indicate about academic capacity may impact on a student's understanding about what senior schooling pathway is the most appropriate or possible for them.

As discussed earlier, journey groups, or streaming, can impact on the choices students make about pathways in senior school. At the school where I worked, NAPLAN results played a key role in the designation of students into their journey groups along with internal placement tests. As Keith reflected, he was concerned about the impact the Year 9 NAPLAN test would have on his school journey and how it might impact on his placement in the streaming system: *"I thought if I took the test, I would be put into foundation or extension. Yea, I wasn't too sure, but that was what I thought at the time."*

And as he recalled the test did in fact impact on where he was placed in the streaming system: *"After I did that NAPLAN test I do remember my classes being changed to foundation."*

As has been previously explored, journey groups or streaming can impact on how students see their position in the education system as well as their belief in their capacity to learn, thus influencing possible decisions about senior schooling pathways.

Coming from a remote community and basing your belief in academic capacity on a test that preferences Standard Australian English and Western cultural

norms can influence a students' belief in their academic capacity. Keith reflected on how his belief in his academic abilities was impacted after getting his results of the Year 9 NAPLAN test:

"When I got the results, I did think, sort of, I can't do that; so, what's the point of trying to do that."

Even not sitting the test can impact on a student's sense of belonging in the education system. Every year there are reports in the media of multiple schools requesting students not take the exam (Bagshaw, 2016; Cook, 2017; Levy, 2018). Whether this is because the school is trying to boost their position in published league tables or if it is a school being considerate of unique learning needs of their students, either way, this could impact on student belonging. Research suggests that students with a positive sense of belonging are more likely to stay in school longer and have higher academic outcomes, being more motivated in their learning (NSW Government Department of Education, 2020).

I recall numerous conversations about possible withdrawals around NAPLAN time. It was suggested that a number of First Nations students from remote communities not sit NAPLAN 'for their benefit'. However, I argued against this citing the need for parental consent. I was then instructed to talk to the students and their parents, if I could contact them. The majority of students spoken with indicated that they were in fact happy to sit the test. Keith expressed how he felt about taking the NAPLAN test:

"Yea, I think I sat all of them. The last one was the one in grade 9, that's the last one. … I can remember that NAPLAN test, I think we took that at the start of the year, I think I was sorta nervous in a way but I wasn't too sure about it. … I thought there were positives and negatives."

Furthermore, when I did contact parents as instructed, they all wanted their children to participate. As one parent expressed to me, their child had participated in NAPLAN every year and they did not understand why it would be different now that they were in secondary school. Despite student and parent willingness to participate, being advised not to could impact on student's academic confidence. If a student is being told by their school that they do not have the capacity to participate in NAPLAN then this could transfer to a belief in their capacity to undertake an academic pathway in their senior years of schooling.

Another key focus of Closing the Gap is the rate of completion of Year 12. Target 5 of the 2023 Closing the Gap Implementation Plan is, by 2031, to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2023). This target has been set because Year 12 completion is often seen as an indicator of aptitude in the job market (Biddle, 2010) and because First Nations peoples are more likely to work full time than early school leavers (Venn & Biddle, 2018).

The impact of this target of completion is seen across secondary institutes nationally. I recall numerous conversations with staff such as Heads of Years, Heads of Departments and Assistant Principals where the consensus was that we just need to 'get the students through'. Working at other schools, with Year 12 cohorts in a general teaching capacity, and not specifically with First Nations students, this urgency of ensuring completion was evident there too. The staff who were interviewed from the participant school also identified how their processes aimed to support students in attaining this completion:

“(We’ve) sort of worked fairly closely … in that space for our year 10s, 11s and 12s … making sure that we've tracked our kids properly and making sure that they're getting through, especially through year 12.”

This support and tracking is an ongoing process involving multiple staff at the participant school:

“It's not just we set them up and they go away on their path within the subjects. It's sort of, we follow them all the way along, and there's often redirecting or rejigging the timetable that subjects aren't working, they're not the right fit, they're not, I guess, they're not doing well in the subjects or not enjoying them. So we will often redirect them. And that's through liaising with their teachers, and (support staff). … So it's not just a once off. It's a continual all the way through.”

The measurement for the Closing the Gap target for Year 12 completion is based on data provided by each state’s education department. For Queensland, that means that students need to attain a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), Queensland Certificate of Independent Achievement (QCIA), a vocational certificate at least at a level 2 or a Senior Statement (Australian Government, 2020b). When a student completes Year 12, the aim of most is to have accumulated the required points for a QCE. However, if a student does not acquire sufficient points a Senior Statement is still awarded, irrelevant of achieving set academic outcomes.

In recent years, the accountability measures placed on schools continues to be mandated from policymakers, placing a primary emphasis on student achievement (Gadson, 2018). In particular, schools are concerned with public relations (Alvoid & Black, 2014) resulting in a push for favourable outcomes that can be drawn on in marketing campaigns. Apart from individual schools independently

marketing through the publication of academic outcomes, My School, a website designed to provide important information on each school (Cook, 2014), releases data on each school's Year 12 outcomes, including attainments of QCEs. While the information available on My School is designed to help parents understand the performance of schools over time, there is no doubt 'high performing' schools receive positive media coverage via the My School database (Riddle, 2023). As schools become cautious of 'their' outcomes, opportunities afforded to some students at school may be impacted with the possibility of students being guided into particular pathways for safety of data-based representation.

The Queensland Certificate of Education has become the benchmark of success at schools. While a QCE is not required to have met the standard for Year 12 completion in the Closing the Gap target, schools still push for their students to attain one by the end of their senior schooling studies. In order for students to be awarded a QCE they must attain at least 20 credits in a required pattern, including meeting literacy and numeracy requirements (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2022b).

Having 100 percent QCE attainment has become the epitome of success in schools in Queensland. I recall having a meeting with a new principal in which I presented data of where we were and progress that had been made over the years with the First Nations students at the school. He was not concerned about retention or the number of students studying and successfully completing OP (academic) subjects but that the year before there were two students who had not received their QCE, ignoring the fact this was an improvement to the average of the five previous years. When I began to explain the specific reasons for both students not being

eligible for a QCE, I was stopped mid-explanation and told that anything below 100% attainment was unacceptable.

With the introduction of the My School website where schools are publicly accountable for academic outcomes and with their use of academic outcome data in marketing campaigns, schools want to avoid any non-attainments of QCEs. This can mean that students are not given the opportunity to try certain subjects and pathways if there is a possibility that they may not be able to accrue the points required.

I recall instances where I had a student who aspired to enrol in an OP subject but were informed that they could not as there was a high risk of not 'passing' thus jeopardising their possibility of a QCE. However, if you can receive a Senior Statement without the QCE, does a non-obtainment necessarily impact a student, especially when you are able to continue working towards your QCE for up to seven years after finishing Year 12 (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2023b) The impact of not being afforded the opportunity to study a senior schooling pathway to ensure QCE attainment is not necessary.

The push for outcomes due to publishable data are resulting in limitations in choices students can make when schools are concerned about the implications on their data of not attaining a QCE. However, schools can put processes in place to ensure students are meeting these outcomes while not excluding them from their desired pathways. Charlie, the Head of Careers and Pathways, spoke extensively about the processes involved to ensure students were eligible for their QCE, with teamwork being key:

> *"We all sort of work together as a team with the students and their families and their teachers to I guess sometimes redirect pathways in bringing up*

other courses such as VET … and as well as obviously supporting the students with their QCE attainment. So making sure they're on track for their QCE. … It's really a team effort, none of us sort of working in isolation. We all work together, … so we're often all meeting and having conversations and emails going back and forth about you know, supporting students and pathwaying them the best we can."

Madison, the Head of Diverse Learning detailed how much time was also spent dedicated to ongoing audits:

"Each semester when the report card comes out, we do an audit that is sort of a joint audit between all the key stakeholders … . So we then know whether they've got their QCE points … . So this sort of situation, I guess we're specifically talking about Indigenous students today, but I guess this is sort of how we deal with any student who might be in that, you know, maybe not tracking as well or we need to make sure that we're supporting them through the process. … That's one thing that our school has done, that I think really helps us know whether the kids are able to cope with what they, what we think is going to work for them at the beginning. (We) also have a process where we do what we call a QCE stocktake. We do that every semester as well, to have a look at how the kids are tracking in terms of their QCE points and checking that they're on track to meet their literacy, numeracy and meet their pathway, their SET plan and things like that. So I guess there's a lot of different filters and safety nets for the kids. I mean there's us checking data in terms of success in separate subjects. And as we go through our QCE stocktake, we pick up patterns as well. And then looking at overlaying (different data), we very, it's really clear those students that need intervention

or further support. So, there's lots of processes that … catch our kids that maybe are at risk or need that extra support."

Sometimes students do decide to undertake a pathway that goes against the advice or guidance that schools have given them. Madison went on to describe how their auditing system enables sufficient tracking of these students:

"And of course, sometimes our suggestions aren't taken on board. And they want to go their own way anyway with the subjects that we might think may not be going to work best for them. So, I guess that gives us an opportunity that oversight again, at the end of the day to then have earlier conversations, to say, hey, you know, it's semester one, and you are struggling in these spaces. And so, it does give us a lot of time then to try and realign kids with appropriate subjects."

There is much focus by schools to give the 'best chance for success'. Within schools I have often heard staff talk about how it's best not to 'set students up for failure'. It is important to not let students fall between the cracks but the way 'success' is measured needs to be considered. We need to consider if we have placed a 'corrugated iron ceiling' (Helme, 2005) on our First Nations students because of this push for QCE attainment and whether it is truly success if students' aspirations are stymied. Even if schools believe a QCE to be the most important outcome, they need to consider how they eliminate that 'corrugated iron ceiling'. Madison, the Head of Diverse Learning explained the unique process they have put in to allow students to 'have a go' but still to be able to gain the necessary points for their QCE if an academic pathway eventuates to be unsuitable:

"One of the things that also helps us a little bit is that sometimes if students are aspirational and want to have a go at General Math, and they want to

have a go at General English, because we start early, they can have a go at that, if they haven't been successful our Essential English and Math programs, Unit One and Two, actually starts a little bit later. So anyone who's been unsuccessful in that first round of the end of grade 10, they can actually jump into the grade 11 Essential Maths or Essential English course where they're mostly successful. I think the kids have mostly been able to be really successful in that subject. But then they can get their four points there. So even though they lost that point, because they might have been aspirational, and we wanted to give them a go, and on the fact that they want to have a go at that, they can get a play in that water a little bit, see if it fits them. If they are unsuccessful, they still have four options, they still can get four points in that Essentials program. And that's sort of a beautiful safety net for the Indigenous kids and learning support kids, anyone who might have that diverse sort of learning need happening. … I think that has been very helpful for our school in that then, ok I might have failed that one at the end of grade 10, but I can still get four points for English, I can still get four points for math, as opposed to already losing one out. So starting early happens for all of those sort of general subjects. But we do have that Essential English and Math that start up that term, that semester later. And I think that's a really awesome situation that is sort of inbuilt at (our school), is that safety net for everyone who might be trying to get points at the last minute, that we still do have that opportunity."

This was further expanded by Dakota, the Deputy Principal, with a specific example of what this programming looks like by explaining the situation for one of their students:

"With our Essentials program, we have a student at the moment which we're still monitoring. She wasn't successful in General Math in Unit One. So, you know, semester two of Year 10 is when that is. She was thinking about going to Essential Math, but through discussions with our Dean of Academic Welfare, and myself, has decided to give it another go. So, we're going to try Unit Two, she's going to work really hard, and you know, she's going to, I guess put in, give it 100%, and give it another go for Unit Two. And then at the end of Unit Two, we'll have to make that call where if she's successful, she stays, if not, she will go to Essential Math. So, they're very aware. We've had meetings, there has been emails going back and forth. Mum and the student know where she's at, but they'd like to give it another go. So, monitoring constantly, her teachers will be aware that you know, she's really going to try hard at the General Maths. So, it's very individualised and personalised for every student in their pathway. … It works really, really well because … all of our students who would like to train in Math Methods or General Math or English, they want to give it a go, and we allow that, we facilitate that, we support them. But if it's not right, they can then start the Essentials program because it is behind, I guess, or delayed a semester. They can sort of pick up that QCE credit that they have dropped potentially."

In 2019, Queensland changed the way they measured QCEs with one of the implications being the rigidity of the acquisition of points making it difficult to change subjects after the second of four units of study. This could exacerbate the problem of students not being given an opportunity to be aspirational in case they may miss their QCE points. The Head of Careers and Pathways, Charlie, recognised this

dilemma and the need to avoid students being stuck in subjects or pathways that are not the right fit:

> *After Unit Two, they’re sort of locked into Unit Three and Four. So, we don't wait to that point. We’re supporting, we're checking, we're monitoring, we're re-pathwaying that whole way through for them to try and avoid that situation.”*

Charlie then discussed how in order to avoid that problem, the school put processes in place to address this with the early start of General subjects and an ongoing and consistent audit system:

> *“When monitoring them … through (the) audit system, … through our QCE system, we pick up children after Unit One. So that's the end of Year 10, after six months, and that's when we will be … looking to go okay, these are the students on our radar. They haven't been overly successful in this subject. Have they just missed out? What's the story? Is it that they haven't been trying and with a little bit more support they could get them across the line, or it's not the right fit for them? And so we'll then look to, we'll figure out what's going on basically. A lot of the students are like, I hate this subject, it's not for me. We'll get them out. We'll put them in something that is more appropriate and enjoyable. Or there can be some more support to try and get them across the line. So there's intervention the whole way, we're very aware that by the end of Unit Two, we need to have that pathway, have them on the right pathway.”*

Due to the Federal Government’s Closing the Gap strategy and the increasing need for schools to demonstrate academic success of their students, there is a push for ‘outcomes’ of First Nations students that may impact on their ability to select the right pathway in senior school. The new system introduced in 2019 has made it

more difficult to change subjects if a student finds their choice is not suitable, which then might impact on whether a school supports a particular pathway. The benefit to the changes though is it has enabled schools to have some control of the timing of when they run their units. This provides the opportunity for schools to establish strategies for students to be aspirational in their pathways with the safety net to return to a non-academic pathway without risking points for their QCE. However, this relies on schools being innovative with their scheduling of units of study and ongoing monitoring like that which the participating school detailed.

4.4.3.5 Consistency of leadership

Level of academic achievement is a strong predictor of senior schooling pathways (Becker & Hecken, 2009; Chesters, 2018) as students consider their perceived ability and the probability of success in their pathway choice (Chesters, 2018). The academic achievement of First Nations students is targeted by initiatives and programs at the individual school level which are mostly funded by either/or the state and federal governments (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023; Department of Education, 2023). Funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education programs often tasks each recipient organisation the autonomy to decide how to best target the intended purpose of the funding. While this enables schools to focus priorities to their specific contexts, with limited research-based direction being provided (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004) it can result in a lack of preparedness of schools to educate First Nations students to their full potential (Anderson et al., 2022) and thus position students to not choose a pathway that matches their aspirations.

The Queensland Department of Education policy Focus on Schools (1990) set schools on the trajectory to have increased decision-making responsibilities and

greater control over resources, budgets and education outcomes (Cranston et al., 2003; Lingard et al., 2002). Whilst schools are directed by overarching institutions, as leaders, principals are responsible for financial planning (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018) and are accountable for providing the strategic direction of their school (Cranston et al., 2003). As principals have taken on more responsibility for the strategic direction of their schools, this could potentially impact on the progress or direction of programs and processes that could influence the pathway choices that students make.

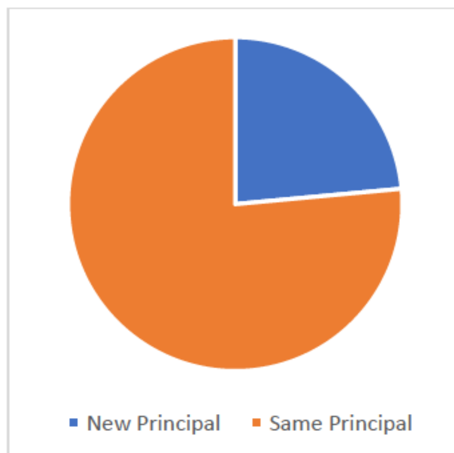
The diversity of principal priorities became apparent to me while delivering a presentation at a conference about the initiatives and programs supporting the school's EAL/D and/or First Nations students. I had not realised the uniqueness of the school's programs until a number of attendees expressed their hope that their school leaders would one day support similar initiatives. Despite the vast knowledge that invested staff brought to the table, it was stated that it was often difficult to gain the support from school leadership to initiate such projects, then, if and when such programs were supported, there was a risk of cessation if there was a change of principalship, thus limiting the potential to observe long-term impacts. If programs are not given sufficient time to become established, they will exhibit an 'implementation dip' as staff encounter innovation that requires new skills and understandings (Fullan, 2001) which may influence decision about the viability of projects if there is inconsistency in leadership.

In mid-2021, while reaching out to schools to participate in this research, I recorded the names of each of the principals at the boarding schools I had identified in Queensland. 18 months later, at the start of 2023, as seen in Figure 57, 12 out of 51 boarding schools were represented by a new principal. That is a 23.53% (or

nearly 1 in 4) chance of having a change of hand of the leadership of a school within 18 months, and with that, the potential for the school to change priorities under the direction of successive leadership.

Figure 57

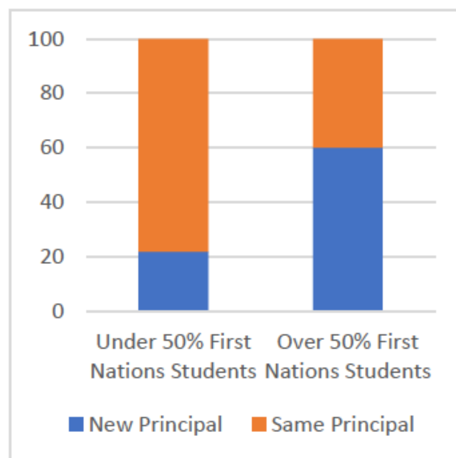
Percentage of Schools with a Change of Principalship (2021-2023)



Of note, the higher the percentage of First Nations students enrolled at the school, the higher the possibility of the school encountering a change of principalship (see Figure 58).

Figure 58

Percentage of Schools with a Change of Principal According to Percentage of First Nations Population



Reflecting on my own professional experience, I have encountered the impact on programs due to a change of leadership. When I initially started working at a boarding school in Queensland, the principal at the time recognised the significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of the school and drew on the background of staff, capitalising on their skills and interests, to enhance outcomes through programs and initiatives that worked towards an equitable education for all students. Under his directive, the Indigenous Education Department had a 2-pronged collaborative approach, with a cultural focus under the direction of a teacher who identified as Aboriginal, and an academic focus under my direction. I established a program that supported students who were First Nations and/or EAL/D background with designated classes and individual academic support provided by myself and a dedicated teacher aid. Data was collected to assess the program's success, showing improvements across numerous academic outcomes including the tracking of students who were undertaking an academic pathway. Ongoing targeted professional learning for staff was also developed and implemented to increase knowledge and understanding about the unique learning strengths and needs of the First Nations students in their classes.

After four years of developing this program of targeted support, the school had a change of leadership and within three terms I was advised that the First Nations academic programs would not be continuing the following year. I departed the school the next term, but I am aware that the Indigenous Education Department was discontinued, and an external organisation was entrusted with the cultural and academic lives of the school's First Nations students. I cannot comment on the work this organisation does with students; however, I was disappointed that after seeing five years of improved academic outcomes, a program supported by data-driven results could be terminated without acknowledging the positive impact consistent and targeted programs had had on student outcomes.

Educational leadership can enhance or diminish teachers' beliefs in a school-wide program (Kerr et al., 2006) with principals specifically being pivotal in shaping a culture of assent (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Yoon, 2016). Inconsistency through changes in school leadership can have an impact on teacher drive (Gadson, 2018; Govindarajan, 2012) because teacher buy-in is crucial for programs to result in long-term continued success (Lee & Min, 2017) through commitment to the implementation of proposals and a strong degree of comfort with that decision (Zimmerman, 2006). Conversely, studies have found that if teachers are not invested in a program and they fail to implement reform components completely, student achievement can, in fact, be negatively impacted (Grigg et al., 2013; Yoon, 2016).

I have encountered the lack of teacher buy-in due to inconsistency of programs professionally some years ago when I was involved in the initial roll out of an international aid project. My role involved conversing with teachers, many of whom explicitly expressed that they were not prepared to invest their time into the

implementation of the project because it was just the latest international initiative to be introduced to the country and that it would likely be succeeded by a new project after a few years, thus being a waste of their time and effort. Evidently, as the teachers had predicted, approximately five years later, another organisation had been awarded the contract for stage 2 and the actionable design of the project was significantly adjusted.

Interestingly, I encountered similar perspectives while establishing programs targeting First Nations students' academic journeys. It was often long-term staff who had seen numerous changes in leadership who were hesitant to support the programs. Once again, when there was a change of leadership, the programs I was seeking teacher buy-in for were abolished.

It usually takes more than two years for a program to lead to practical changes (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Glazerman et al., 2010) and at least five years to have a strong effect on academic achievement (Borman et al., 2003; Lee & Min, 2017). In combination with a growing trend for school principals to take on a role similar to a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and thus have individualised focusses to attain marketable outcomes, when a school lacks consistency in their leadership teams there will be a concurrent inconsistency in programming. This can result in the termination or significant alteration of existing initiatives due to the change of focus of a school, and any existing or potential impact on students' educational endeavours will be impermanent and thus may influence the pathway choices students perceive are available to them in the senior years of schooling.

4.4.3.6 Summary

Structures that do, or are perceived to, support student learning such as systems for students who speak a language other than Standard Australian English

and streaming practices that affect class compositions can impact on students' experiences at school, thus influencing their belief in their capacity to undertake an academic pathway. Additionally, the remoteness of students' home communities and the necessity to participate in exigent cultural practices combined with the difficulty in dealing with bureaucratic processes can result in extended periods of absence that may impact on students' ability to engage in learning. These factors are exacerbated by the administrative influences from regularly rotating leadership and an increasing need for schools to achieve 'outcomes'. For students to be able to increase their belief in their capacity to undertake senior schooling studies that align with their authentic preference, shifts in systemic structures need to be considered by both schools and overarching educational institutions.

4.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter the data that was collected through a bricolage approach has been analysed by way of the three major themes that emerged from past student and staff interviews. Through a narrative presentation it was revealed in what ways Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities were influenced when choosing a senior schooling pathway at boarding school. Key influences that emerged were relationships with peers, staff and families/communities, the accessibility and availability of subjects and wider education system structures of streaming, EAL/D supports, geographic and cultural impacts, a push for outcomes and (in)consistency of leadership.

First Nations students from remote communities' engagement in learning and their decisions about senior schooling pathways are influenced greatly by their relationships with peers, school staff, and families and communities. Educational institutions should take these connections into account when evaluating senior

schooling decision-making processes to consider ways in which they can capitalise on these relationships. Initiatives such as peer mentoring, processes to establish ongoing trusting relationships with staff, and ways to engage both families and communities, could enhance opportunities for students to pursue their preferred senior schooling pathway. Additionally, the accessibility and appropriateness of subjects also plays a significant role in the choices First Nations students from remote communities make about their senior schooling pathways. Limited subject options that align with an academic pathway persist in schools with higher percentages of First Nations enrolments, effectively limiting options to undertake academic studies. Educational institutions should consider ways to more extensively cater to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' cultural ways of learning to broaden students' choices. Schools and overarching institutions should also consider the wider systemic structures that may support or hinder student engagement and learning and how these can impact on a student's confidence in pursuing their preferred senior schooling pathway. Systemic changes by both schools and governing bodies are necessary; without reconsiderations about the extent to which students are guided into particular pathways in order to meet specified 'outcomes', true alignment with preferred senior schooling studies will not be achieved.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to bring the experiences and observational data together through a critical lens to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the findings about the factors that can influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities when selecting a senior schooling pathway in Queensland boarding schools. To do this I consider the ways in which historical and hegemonic societal structures continue to be evident within Australia's education system, and how these structures then impact on the senior schooling pathway choices made by First Nations students from remote communities at boarding schools. I suggest ways in which educational institutions and staff can support students to make choices that align with their genuine pathway preferences. Conducting a critical qualitative study, I drew on publicly available data, interviews with past students, a focus group with staff at a boarding school and my own professional reflections and found that the education system is steeped in historical and societal structures that reinforce hegemonic positions that result in First Nations students from remote communities being more likely to select a non-academic pathway. These findings indicate that efforts should be dedicated to ensuring equal accessibility between academic and non-academic senior schooling pathways at boarding schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities.

5.2 A critical perspective

As a non-Indigenous researcher studying a topic that affects First Nations students, I have been conscious of not slipping into a colonial research role that Smith (2012) describes as "they came, they saw, they named, they claimed" (p. 83)

in which ‘scientists’ had theories to prove, and evidence and data to gather, to classify and describe the indigenous world. It has been necessary to put a critical hat on so as not to comfortably slip into a part of the system that reinforces hegemonic societal positions that have so far continued to place First Nations students in a situation where there has been little change over the years (Brown, 2018).

My critical framework is based on the understanding that power is not a separate domain of study but stands at the heart of all social life (Swartz, 1997), thus I have co-considered Said and Foucault’s theoretical constructions of power as they complement each other to understand the connection between power and knowledge in a postcolonial setting. It has enabled the development of deeper understandings about power, knowledge and representation in a particular (educational) social and cultural construct.

Foucault examines how power shapes the production of knowledge. According to Foucault, power is everywhere and is attributed to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (Foucault, 1982). It exists in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustains it (Foucault, 1977). Those within the educational field must challenge how meanings and values are imposed and perpetuated in schools through social mechanisms of economic and political control found in society at large (Darder, 2012). Meanings and values can be viewed as what Foucault (1977) discussed as truth, which induces regular effects of power with each society having a discourse that it accepts as a regime of truth. It is this relationship between truth (or knowledge) and power that has been examined to see what constitutes knowledge in the education system. Foucault also views human knowledge and existence as being profoundly historical and suggests critical

engagement with the systems of the present through history (Foucault, 1977) which he views as being any period that is made up of a series of discourses. By engaging with a history of the present, it enables a diagnosis of the current situation (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 2014); if you don't understand the historical background and what has come before, you will not understand why we are where we are.

Said's Western discourse about the Other (1978) is concerned with how knowledge was collected and classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonised. Thus, peoples who have been colonised become partially a creation of the West (Smith, 2012). Key to Said's theory is the act of Othering in which he examines how Western discourse constructs and represents the Orient as a homogenous and inferior Other and highlights the power dynamics involved in the creation and dissemination of knowledge (Said, 1978)

To ensure consideration throughout the research process of how the production of knowledge and how it is tied to positions of power is dependent on a person's place in society as an Occident or Orient – West or Other, I have drawn on theories from both Foucault and Said who were influential in the fields of philosophy and postcolonial studies.

5.3 Interconnectedness of experiences

When I began this research project, my focus was on the policies and procedures surrounding First Nations education and how their implementation might impact on the choices students make about senior schooling pathways. However, as I worked through the collated data the experiences and opinions of the First Nations participants stood out as being the most purposeful and impactful in responding to the research aim.

During the course of drafting the analysis, I encountered a juncture where my formulation of pivotal points was not converging; it became evident that the impasse stemmed from the way in which I had compartmentalised key points. According to the bricolage approach I have employed, the data I have drawn on should not be treated as individual elements to be considered on their own, but rather where the concrete experiences of individuals are a part of a larger historically situated complex system (Wyatt & Zaidi, 2022). With this in mind, when I stepped back from the analysis and reflected on why I had undertaken this study in the first place, it was the observations of the experiences of my students that had sparked my interest in this topic. Also, considering Freire's (1970) assertion that any situation in which a group of people are alienated from their own decision making and are prevented from engaging in the process of inquiry is an act of violence, I needed to centre the experiences surrounding these issues of the First Nations participants. Student experiences became the heart of my research and in order to be privy to the initiatives they take, it is their point of view that must be considered in the midst of what is happening (Greene, 1995). Thus, it is the interconnectedness of issues that became apparent through the past-student recollections, aligned with professional staff observations that have driven the discussion of this research to consider the historical and societal structures that have impacted on the pathway choices of students.

The direction of the analysis and subsequent discussion of results has been built based on the experiences shared by the past student participants. Each of the past students have provided a unique perspective about the factors that influence senior schooling pathway choices because of the distinctions in their backgrounds and the decisions they made about the appropriate pathway to undertake while at

school. All four past students attended the same all-boys boarding school in an outer regional location; I had worked with three who graduated in the same year, and the fourth past student had finished school before I had arrived. Two of the participants identify as Aboriginal and the other two as Torres Strait Islander. At the time of the interviews, three were living in remote communities and the other in a regional city. Officially three were currently working, but the fourth participant was between jobs and about to begin their new position in the following week. The four past students offered unique perspectives due to their choices and journeys through Years 11 and 12: one participant had indicated no intention of completing an academic pathway; the second participant had wanted to undertake an academic pathway but opted for a vocational one instead; the third past student had begun his senior studies in an academic pathway but changed mid-way with a focus on job preparedness; and the final participant undertook and completed an academic pathway. Each of these students had different experiences that they were able to draw on and discuss as part of this research.

In addition to the experiences shared from the perspectives of past students, my own reflections, and observations of staff at the participating school were aligned with the incorporation of descriptive analysis of publicly available data to demonstrate how the experiences reported by the past students was influenced by different aspects of the education system.

5.4 Learnings from the analysis

The discussion of what we can learn from the analysis will consider the key points that have emerged from a critical perspective. The goal of this research is to consider how staff, boarding schools and governing bodies can support the genuine alignment of pathway preferences of First Nations students from remote

communities. I will explore in what ways preferred choices can be supported by considering what has been learned from the information in the analysis through a critical lens that deliberates the ways in which historical and hegemonic societal structures continue to be evident within Australia's education system and in what ways these structures within the system impact on the senior schooling pathway choices made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities at boarding schools in Queensland. Throughout the colonial era, the experiences of those who were colonised have been represented to the West through the discovery, extraction, appropriation and distribution of knowledges (Smith, 2012). These portrayals have in turn often been re-represented to the original owners of those knowledges (Said, 1977). On this basis, I have focused the findings from this analysis on key issues that were directly raised by the First Nations participants in this study.

5.4.1 Student positioning in the construct of the system of education

Queensland's system of education has insidiously impacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities throughout their entire educational journey, culminating in First Nations students' self-perceptions that influence their senior schooling pathway choices. The key points that emerged through the research project about how the institution of education positions students with a particular belief about capacity to engage in an academic pathway were streaming, availability of subjects, relevance of subjects, and the pedagogic applicability of subjects.

All four of the past students who participated in the research experienced a system of streaming in the junior years (Years 8 to 10) of their secondary education. The system of journey grouping, in which students are placed into classes based on

perceived academic abilities, on the surface aims to target learning, but in effect can create a belief by students that they do not have the capacity to engage in academically rigorous studies. Colonial education was a way to impose positional superiority (Smith, 2012) which has continued to be maintained through the use of streaming in schools. Marginalised students often may be assigned to the lower ability classes because of low expectations of staff and the ongoing dismissal of the validity of traditional languages and First Nations English dialects that are often spoken as a first language by students from remote communities. Once students have been placed in their designated streamed ability group, upward movement is difficult as classes are often allocated a set number of students and thus any movement is reliant on the departure of a peer in the target journey group. By continuing to implement streaming in schools, institutions are reinforcing a belief to students who are caught in this systemic practice, that they do not have the requisite skills to undertake an academic pathway. In addition, the skills that students develop may be limited due to the way in which key content is taught in certain streamed classes. If students miss key learnings it can impact on their capacity to complete an academic pathway in Years 11 and 12. A further implication of journey groups on pathway choices is the reinforcement of self-identification based on the peers within those groups. If students are considering undertaking an academic pathway, like Keith, they may view their peers who have also selected this option and determine that they do not belong because of a perception of differing abilities based on previous journey group placements. Furthermore, if a student does opt to follow their aspirations and undertake an academic pathway, as Aaron reported, due to the predominance of particular streaming allocations of First Nations students, they may now find themselves experiencing new social interactions with peers who are not

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, adding an additional layer of complexity to their senior schooling experience.

Another element that was raised about why students choose particular pathways was the availability of subjects. According to the Bringing Them Home report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), historically boarding schools were established as a way to deny a culturally relevant education and as a point from which Aboriginal children were removed. When First Nations children were placed in dormitories at a young age, it was for the purpose of instilling 'Western values' and 'work habits' (Smith, 2009) because of the purported 'superiority' of a non-Indigenous way of life (Fletcher, 1988, as cited in Reynolds, 2009). As part of a 'civilisation project' children were placed in dormitories, training institutes or non-Indigenous homes with a focus of training boys for basic labour and girls for domestic work (Smith, 2009). This historical preference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop skills for the workplace has persisted in today's educational context. Through the past-student narratives and the co-representation of publicly available data about school populations and subject enrolments, the issue of subject availability emerged as an ongoing impediment to the ability of First Nations students to undertake their preferred senior schooling pathway.

The ongoing hegemonic positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students being suited to manual and domestic oriented careers continues to be reinforced by the availability of subjects at schools with a high percentage of First Nations student enrolments. It was demonstrated through the representation of publicly available data that suitable subjects may simply be unavailable at schools where First Nations students are enrolled. The higher the First Nations population, the more likely a school is to have lower level certificate courses offered. The lower

the First Nations population, the more likely a school is to have access to General and higher level certificate subjects. There are more opportunities by way of subjects that cater for students at schools with lower First Nations percentages.

Accessibility is not just about simply offering subjects for an academic pathway, but it also is about whether the subjects offered are appropriate and support cultural ways of learning and being. Education will fail if it is not connected to the reality of a student's life (Fogarty, 2012). Said (1983) questioned the act of writing and its relationship to power. In particular, the consideration of who is responsible for writing, who are they writing for and what circumstances are they writing for can relate to the development of curriculum documents. Minimal subjects are offered by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) that are explicitly linked to First Nations knowledges and not all are suitable for those wishing to undertake an academic pathway. Furthermore, the number of schools offering subjects aligned with an academic pathway and that are relevant to First Nations experiences such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies are extremely limited. When students have the opportunity to undertake culturally relevant studies, the result is not just their engagement with that specific subject, but an improved belief in capabilities to undertake such studies. By not providing opportunities to study content that is explicitly relevant to students' lives, the education system is reinforcing societal positions of power by determining what is worthy of knowledge acquisition (Kincheloe, 2008). In addition to specific subjects, there has been some movement in recent years on the integration of First Nations perspectives across the curriculum. As bell hooks (1989) posits students are more than ready to break through ideological barriers to knowing and to relearn the world by exposing ideological filters. However, the implementation of this cross-curriculum

priority is not without issue. Staff report a lack of guidance and thus a fear of teaching it in the right way. Also, considering the implementation by governing bodies, First Nations perspectives are not prioritised through curriculum documents; often the key content descriptors are focussed on Eurocentric learning while the elaborations that come in under the key content, contain connections to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, showing a continuation of cross-purposes with Western education priorities (Nakata, 2023). If cross curriculum priorities were more fully ingrained and supported and not just something that staff felt they needed to do without sufficient guidance, teachers would be able to teach in a manner that works to transform consciousness and creates an atmosphere of open expression (hooks, 1994).

Another way that subjects in the senior years impede First Nations students from being able to choose to study an academic pathway is their ineffectuality at catering to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of learning. Culture involves power and helps to produce asymmetries in the abilities of individuals and social groups to define and realise their needs (Johnson, 1983). Indigenous knowledges are a multidimensional body of understandings that are predominantly viewed by Euroculture as inferior and primitive (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008) and thus students may be perceived to have learning deficits (Shields, 2009). This research found that subjects that are aligned with a vocational pathway, are more likely to involve ways of learning that match First Nations pedagogies such as the involvement of practical components and the ability to learn through repetition. One of the findings of this research was that First Nations students could have a fear of failure. Unlike in subjects within an academic pathway where a failing grade is final, vocational subjects offer the opportunity for repetitive learning, even through assessment.

Strong peer relationships and the convenience of boarding further facilitated the repetitive nature of vocational subjects, as past students reported being able to draw on the knowledge of their peers when repeating work that they had not yet grasped key concepts in. Unfortunately, beliefs and attitudes of those who hold power serve to structure what is perceived as acceptable and "normal" within a given field (Swartz, 1997) and rather than seeking ways to embed culturally relevant ways of learning into academically aligned subjects, First Nations students' culture continues to be perceived as deficient in that it impedes their school success (Shields, 2009) and we are positioning students to believe that their ways of knowledge acquisition are not as rigorous. This has resulted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students often opting for a vocational pathway because it is actually more applicable to preferred ways of learning.

There are several suggestions for improvements that can help make students feel like their knowledges and ways of learning have a place in academic studies. Eliminating streaming could minimise the reinforcement of students' belief in an incapacity to engage in an academic curriculum. Additionally, it is important to introduce more subjects that relate to topics about First Nations experiences and that sufficiently promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. If schools are unable to offer a wider range of subjects in both an academic and vocational pathway, then the consideration of flexible delivery methods such as blended learning models could enhance the possibility of students gaining access to a larger variety of subject types. All subjects, whether vocational or academic, should offer practical ways of learning that incorporate hands-on activities with real-life connections. The learning of subject content and the completion of assessment should engage a process of repetition in the learning sequence. The subjects that

are offered at schools and the ways in which they are taught is determined by school leadership teams. Schools have opportunities to create an environment in which students' belief in the validity of their knowledges and skills within an academic framework are both viable and advantageous. However, if systemic change within a school is adopted, for the continuation of change, stability in leadership teams needs to be improved.

5.4.2 Impact of support systems on senior schooling pathway choices

Another overarching theme that emerged from the interviews with past students was the impact of support systems on their senior schooling pathway choices. This assistance was experienced, or often-times left wanting, by way of support with language, support from staff, support that is culturally relevant, mentoring support, boarding specific support, and support from family and community.

The main language of instruction in the education system in Australia is Standard Australian English (SAE) (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.), yet it is likely for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities to speak a traditional language or First Nations dialect as a first language. In some countries, language can demonstrate how subordinate cultures have resisted forms of cultural invasion as a mechanism for survival (Freire & Macedo, 1987) such as the refusal to be literate as an act of resistance rather than an act of ignorance (Darder, 2012). However, in Australia the colonisers were successful in eradicating many traditional languages and coinciding with progressive settler movement, many varieties of First Nations English dialects developed. Unfortunately, the 'shifting langscape' of Indigenous English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) learners' language backgrounds created by the history of

colonial settler contact are often perceived as error-laden rather than valid in their own right (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013). This perception of the unworthiness of linguistic backgrounds may have been a contributing factor to some of the past student participants' self-perception that they were deficit in skills necessary to complete academic studies. Systemically, this issue could be addressed with a greater extent of schools offering bilingual education which draws on both SAE and home languages. However, within a boarding school setting with multiple languages spoken, a hidden normative curriculum which induces educators to accept structures as if they could be no other way (Kincheloe, 2004) makes bilingual programming unlikely. In which case, schools need to support the acquisition of SAE through English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) programming. In the senior years, an EAL/D subject is offered that aligns with an academic pathway while providing support with language development; unfortunately, minimal boarding schools in Queensland currently offer this as a possible subject enrolment. Of equal importance and possibly more impactful on the pathway choices of First Nations students is support with language development in the junior years. If students feel that, first their language skills are sufficient to undertake academically rigorous subjects in Years 11 and 12, and second that they will be able to access continued language support throughout their studies, this may open the possibility for students to undertake an academic pathway if it aligns with their aspirations.

One of the determinants of accessibility of academic pathways was the support past-students had received, or wished they had received, from their teachers and other staff. It was identified that if students felt they had support available from staff, that they would have been more likely to undertake an academic pathway. For students who received explicit support and encouragement by their teachers, they

were comfortable with their decision to complete academic studies. This knowledge of the influence that a positive relationship can have on students should be considered by educators. Teachers have authority to direct and influence what is taking place in their classrooms. Authority should not be viewed as an absolute and totalising force but as a terrain of legitimation and struggle (Giroux, 1986). With this authority, when working with First Nations students, teachers must have an understanding of power and how power is used to construct relationships and create social conditions that can, potentially, either subordinate or empower students (Darder, 2012). One of the findings from the interviews with past students was that the key to having a supportive relationship with staff was that it was a two-way-street in which the student also needed to establish trust and rapport. These supportive relationships should not be reliant on a specific connection with teachers. Staff should be supporting and encouraging all students to undertake the pathway option that matches their genuine desire so as not to promote just selected leaders, but the community as a whole (Freire, 1970).

A key point that emerged was that support systems need to be culturally relevant. Schools need to employ staff who ideally are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or who have appreciation and respect for issues that First Nations students will face in their educational journey. Having staff who understand that students complaining about the 'hard work' of studies does not necessarily mean that they are 'lazy' but that the intensity of the work for an extended period may seem impractical for students who are removed from their families and community support systems. One of the most significant reasons for the need for culturally aware support persons is in relation to the cultural practice of Sorry Business. Both past students and staff indicated that extended absences due to Sorry Business can

have a significant impact on learning opportunities, but that it is not acceptable to expect students to complete home learning and assessments while involved in such practices. Instead, support systems need to be developed that address the needs of students to reengage in learning while ensuring their emotional wellbeing is also a priority. These cultural practices should not be a predictor of a student's ability to undertake and complete an academic pathway, and as such schools need to invest in appropriate support systems that will help to minimise impact on learning upon student's return.

Having culturally relevant support systems extends to the utilisation of mentoring programs. A number of suggestions about mentoring were raised by the past student participants albeit with different requirements. Interestingly, a finding that emerged about mentors is that they do not need to be an adult staff member but can be an older or similar aged peer. What is important is that that 'mentor' has knowledge and experience that students can relate to. One important requirement was that mentors should understand the particular needs of students from remote communities. The act of mentoring can result in the reinforcement of dominant social values, so it is of utmost importance that if the mentor is a non-Indigenous staff member that they are culturally responsive and able to develop a reciprocal relationship with their mentee. Additionally, the mentor-mentee relationship should be a long-standing one that will enable the establishment of genuine rapport so desired direction of study can be discussed with trust that the mentor will provide guidance while not imposing beliefs that reinforce students' hegemonic societal positions.

An education in a boarding setting for First Nations students is steeped in a historical background. The historical purpose of boarding schools was to assimilate

First Nations peoples into the dominant society in which they lived (Smith, 2009). In settler-colonial history, boarding was an initiative which separated young people from their families, communities, languages and cultures (O'Bryan, 2022). Boarding has continued to be a means of dislocation for First Nations peoples in remote communities with a lack of education opportunities resulting in the necessity to send young people away to receive an education (Fogarty et al., 2015). Boarding facilities are often the only educational option for First Nations students from remote communities, yet unfortunately, if parents are unable to navigate the governmental systems of support such as ABSTUDY applications, some students will not be able to attend. While boarding schools must contend with their historic and societal role in colonial education, in terms of students' ability to select their senior schooling pathway preference, boarding offers unique support systems that schools can take advantage of. One element of boarding that the past students identified as being particularly beneficial was the structure provided with designated study times. This enables students to develop study routines that they may not have achieved while living at home and to make the most of peer and staff support that is effectively on-tap. Schools can further enhance these opportunities by implementing targeted sessions of support. If students are aware that additional systems of support are available, boarding schools have a unique opportunity to facilitate First Nations students making a pathway choice that matches their true aspirations.

The final means of support that was discussed by past students was that from family and community. What I personally found interesting, from the perspective of an educator who has put considerable effort into establishing connections and relationships with family, was that the past students indicated that family had little input into the senior schooling pathway choices that were made. It is necessary to

consider the contextual background for families and community as colonial experiences for First Nations peoples such as genocide, the removal of children, marginalisation and racism have contributed to the current context of Indigenous education (Mander, 2012). I, and others working within schools, must remember that the results of a Eurocentric discourse is that some parents, because of a combination of cultural difference and societal conditions, may not practice parenting in ways that are deemed to be in sync with the dominant discourse (Darder, 2012) so it is important to have staff who are culturally responsive and considerate in their interactions with families. Not indicating an opinion on the pathway choices of their children, does not necessarily mean that parents have no interest in their education. There are many contextual reasons that parents or carers may avoid educational decision making. It is also important to note that the connection between family and community, and how they are often one and the same, should be remembered. It became clear that influences on choices to undertake an academic pathway often had more to do with the community than what we in the Western ideology class as immediate family. This relationship with community was explained in the interviews with past students as being much closer and influential than those who are from larger cities and non-Indigenous backgrounds can fully comprehend. According to participants, the impact of this relationship within community is that oftentimes, academic endeavours are not encouraged which can impact on the sustainability of selecting an academic pathway at school. Schools need to consider ways in which they interact with families such as establishing an ongoing relationship where parents and carers feel welcome to be key stakeholders in their children's education while keeping in mind the historical and intergenerational reasons why families may distance themselves from communication with schools. Also, schools need to

actively establish solid connections with the general community as this is a major contributor of influence for First Nations students' senior schooling pathway decision making.

Taking on board the findings about how support can encourage First Nations students from remote communities to undertake a pathway that matches their desired aspirations, the following suggestions have emerged. If possible, schools should offer bilingual education programs that incorporate both SAE and home languages in order to validate the linguistic background of students. However, if this is not possible, schools can implement targeted language support in the junior years which will aid students in acquiring necessary SAE language skills and build their confidence to feel capable of completing an academic pathway if desired. Furthermore, schools can offer EAL/D as a senior subject that will support students with language knowledge across subjects while simultaneously providing a linguistically accessible subject that will meet Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) subject requirements. Relationships with staff continues to be important and schools need to consider how that can be fostered and sustained in an ongoing way to emphasise support and encouragement. Staff should be educated about hegemonic power dynamics specifically in relation to working with First Nations students. Ideally, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff who have a deep understanding of the constructs faced by First Nations student should be engaged by the school to provide support for students. Non-Indigenous staff need to undergo cultural awareness training so as to be able to recognise and accommodate impacts of cultural practices such as Sorry Business. Schools and staff need to enable students to prioritise their emotional wellbeing while continuing to support academic re-engagement following important cultural practices. Mentoring programs need to

be ongoing to establish an opportunity to build trust with mentees to provide appropriate guidance and support that aligns with student choices. Schools can also consider peer mentoring which enables support for students by those who understand from first hand experience the challenges students face in both their ongoing studies and pathway decision making. Schools can take advantage of the unique setup in boarding by tapping into structures such as set study schedules to target support through both peers and staff. This will encourage students to choose their desired pathway because of awareness of ongoing additional support systems. Connections with both family and community should be established and enhanced. Teachers need to be aware of the historical context that may influence parental engagement with the education system. There also needs to be recognition that in addition to family, community plays a crucial role in the educational journey of students and schools should actively engage in relationship building with students' communities. All of these suggestions are reliant on individual staff and school leadership, so major systemic shifts will provide further consistency to ensure continued support systems remain in place.

5.4.3 Redefine success

The final overarching theme to emerge from this research is the need for schools to redefine 'success'. With the annual Closing the Gap (CTG) report, the Federal Government increasingly pushes for educational outcomes such as Year 12 completion and improved literacy and numeracy scores on standardised tests such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). In order to pursue this drive for outcomes, the responsibility is placed on school leadership teams with data publicly published and scrutinised through the media. With leadership of schools increasingly turning from the role of an educator to one that

increasingly resembles a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), schools market themselves based on Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) attainment and ATAR scores. With this change there has been an increase in a push to prove 'success' which means that students can be actively discouraged from undertaking an academic pathway if the school determines there is a possibility of an impact on their publishable data. Shields (2009) frames this way of leading a school with an emphasis on meeting set targets such as those in the Federal Government's CTG initiative to be a reproductive approach which promotes an exclusionary culture of blame and fear. By being actively discouraged to 'take risks' by pursuing an academic pathway, students are being placed in a subordinate position of power. The legitimacy of school should be critiqued (Erickson, 1987) understanding that the meaning of 'achievement' is culturally variable (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011) and that publishable outcome-based notions of success are a Western construct. Schools need to consider their definition of 'success' and whether their systemic pursuits are encouraging or hampering student plans for the future.

For First Nations peoples, historically education was about preparing for placement in a vocational position (Smith, 2009). Today, this trend continues with a propensity for First Nations students to enrol in a vocational pathway in their senior years of schooling. 'Success' is claimed by both schools and governments by the number of First Nations students completing vocational certificates. In fact, the completion of a Certificate III is classified by the Federal Government as achieving the equivalence of Year 12 completion which helps to 'close the gap' on one of the CTG targets (Closing the Gap, n.d.). However, does the completion of vocational studies equate to 'success'? There are three issues at hand. First, the average levels of certificate courses continue to be undertaken at a lower qualification than by

non-Indigenous Australians. Second, participants indicated that the specific qualifications they completed through their vocational studies at school did not directly result in employment opportunities, thus are not a guarantee of job readiness. Third, that the continual persistence of success being measured by job readiness reinforces historical constructs of the suitability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for a role of servitude.

An interesting finding to emerge from the research was the transferability of skills from all subjects, regardless of pathway alignment. Despite vocational pathways being touted as preparing students for the workforce, none spoke about the skills gained from such courses as explicitly helping them to gain employment, and most notably, vocational qualifications did not aid in gaining employment either within or external to home communities. However, the general skills that were developed across a variety of subjects such as language development, computer literacy and time-management were recognised as being beneficial to completing tasks in a variety of work environments. Also evident from the interviews was the usefulness of skills gained from an academic program that can be drawn on across different fields within community. Both the education system and individual schools should consider how subjects are perceived by both students and the wider community. In recent years, vocational studies have been marketed in such a way that they are often considered the preferred route to develop practical work-related skills. A similar emphasis could be placed on academically aligned subjects by focussing on the development of transferable skills. Again, the way that ‘success’ is measured in terms of skill development continues to be focused on vocational skillsets that maintain positions of servitude through labour rather than the

acknowledgement of non-trade specific skills that can be drawn on regardless of future employment.

Combined with the inconsistency of school leadership terms, principals may be afraid to implement major changes and to take ‘risks’ by framing success in a way that is about students pursuing endeavours that align with their genuine desires regardless of meeting set targets for marketing purposes. A major systemic shift is needed to redefine the concept of success and to move away from the deficit discourse of CTG. One suggestion is to eliminate the need for schools to market themselves solely based on publishable outcomes such as NAPLAN results, QCE attainment and ATAR rankings to demonstrate ‘success’ by considering the notion of principal accountability and its impacts. Schools should also reconsider what it means to be ‘job ready’. Students should not be pigeonholed into specific career paths. Instead, the focus should be on preparing students for life in general, equipping them with transferable 21st century skills that can be attained across all subjects. This way, students can choose either academic or vocational pathways, depending on their genuine aspirations, and draw on these skills for future work, study or general living requirements.

5.4.4 Systemic shifts

Creating an environment in which senior schooling pathway choices become a viable possibility for First Nations students from remote communities in boarding schools in Queensland cannot be achieved by simply tacking on changes to the existing education system because it fails to address the perpetuation of the dominance of Western knowledge within the system which functions to marginalise and invalidate knowledge and lived experiences which fall outside the values and interests of the dominant group (Darder, 2012).

While changes within the system such as the ability to more readily combine academic and vocational studies into a mixed pathway and for schools to stagger the commencement of senior studies to enable students to trial an academic pathway without impacting on outcome driven requirements for 'successful' completion of Year 12 can have a positive impact, larger systemic issues remain. All elements of the education system are interconnected, and targeting select components will not result in change. By not wholeheartedly being an agent of transformation, change, and social mobility, schools are too often instruments of reproduction (Shields, 2009). Major systemic shifts are required to confront and dismantle the hegemonic and historically situated positions of power that persist and continue to marginalise and invalidate cultural values, knowledge and lived experience (Darder, 2012). This can situate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to not believe that an academic pathway is a viable study option in their senior years of secondary school.

Instead of considering the possibility that there may be another way to 'do' education, we continue to position the constructs within the education system that have resulted in the situation that we have today where First Nations students are less likely to pursue academic pathways. We in the education field, attempt to fill in the gaps with initiatives such as the inclusion of First Nations perspectives across the curriculum, with no concrete guidance for teachers to ensure schools are enacting such measures. By keeping this Western system intact, and simply tacking on amendments, we continue to reinforce the notion of the superiority of a system that does not value the cultural knowledges and ways of learning of First Nations students, thus continuing to position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be less likely than their non-Indigenous peers to undertake an academic pathway even if this is their desired aspiration.

5.5 Considerations of limitations

While valuable insights have been gained from the analysed data, including experiences and observations relayed by all staff and past student participants, it is essential to acknowledge that this research is subject to several limitations and to consider potential areas for future investigations. There have been three categories of limitations in this study: challenges with specificity of geographical data, boundaries related to my non-Indigeneity and constraints with participant recruitment.

A delimitation, a restriction that I purposefully implemented, of this study was to focus on boarding schools solely in the state of Queensland. This decision was based on the understanding that the structure of the education system in Australia is complex with a shared responsibility for schooling held between the Federal Government and individual state and territory governments (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.). Queensland schools plan, teach, assess and report using the overarching Australian Curriculum from Prep to Year 10 (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2022b). However, while the council of federal, state and territory education ministers have agreed on the senior secondary Australian Curriculum which contains content and achievement standards for 15 senior secondary subjects, it is up to the individual state authorities to determine how these standards are integrated into their courses (ACARA, n.d.d) resulting in distinct variations across the nation's states and territories. This added layer of complexity was not viable for the timeframe of this study; thus, it was determined to focus on Queensland boarding schools only. Future studies could be conducted across or within other individual states and territories to align these findings with common systemic constructs evident across Australia.

A further limitation related to geography when collecting and analysing publicly available data was the availability of specific information about First Nations students based on their geographical locations, particularly levels of remoteness and educational choices. Additionally, separating data of school cohorts based on Indigeneity and boarding status of their students was not possible. While access to this specific data would enhance the analysis in this research project, the findings remain valid as they have provided insight into First Nations education overall while also considering the unique challenges faced by students from remote communities. Furthermore, firsthand accounts were gathered from current staff and past boarding students who lived in remote communities which provided rich insight into relevant experiences and observations. For a more comprehensive understanding, future studies could be conducted within individual schools to enable access to specific data pertaining to these elements providing a more precise overview of the distribution of pathway choices within schools.

A potential limitation of this study is my status as a non-Indigenous person. Throughout the research process I have consistently reflected on my positionality. When analysing data as a non-Indigenous researcher, it has been crucial to acknowledge that my interpretation is influenced by my societal position as a member of the majoritised culture in Australia. By reflecting on this positionality while examining the data, I began to shift my focus toward the narrative responses from the interviews of the past-students I had spoken with as I realised that it was their recollections about their experiences that held the key to understanding the central influences on senior schooling pathway choices. Consequently, I placed greater emphasis on these experiences to guide the focus of the analysis. I believe that by reflecting on my position, and thus centering the voices of the First Nations

participants to determine the key concepts of the analysis, it has enabled a deeper understanding of what influences Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities when making senior schooling pathway choices at boarding schools.

Building and managing relationships is key in qualitative research (Paksi & Kivinen, 2021; Smith, 2012). Thus, the potential impact of my previous relationship with the past-student participants could be deliberated, particularly in terms of possible power dynamics impacting on the participants' willingness to convey opinions freely. It is worth noting however that all of us have not been associated with the connecting school for several years and the past-students are now adults thus eliminating any power imbalances. In practice, our past relationships actually facilitated open discussions as there had already been a level of trust and rapport established. Additionally, our mutual knowledge and understanding of the school and associated experiences enabled ideas to be shared seamlessly with this past connection being beneficial for eliciting and understanding the context behind key experiences.

Possible limitations with the interpretation of data from my interactions with the past-students also needs to be considered based on differences in language backgrounds. My first language is Standard Australian English (SAE), whereas the participants all speak, as their first language, a First Nations English or a traditional First Nations language. Interpretation of meaning is central in qualitative research (van Nes et al., 2010) and language differences have the potential to affect the elucidation of key messages. However, the ability of myself and the participants to effectively communicate intended points was enhanced by our previous educational connections, having worked closely in establishing an effective communicative

relationship. Furthermore, my background as an EAL/D teacher has equipped me with appropriate communicative skills for working with people who speak a first language other than English.

Since the past-student participants were selected exclusively from an all-boys boarding school, diverse gender representation in experiences was not explored. I acknowledge that there are gendered differences in educational outcomes of all students in Australia such as the retention of students being higher with females (88%) than males (79%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021) and 60% of female students expecting to complete a university degree compared with 49% of male students (AIWH, 2021). More specifically in relation to First Nations students, research has found that females are more likely to achieve higher test scores and to complete Year 12 than male students (Biddle & Meehl, 2018). In this study, gender disparities are briefly referenced regarding subject accessibility based on school type where it can be seen that academic pathways are the most accessible at all-girls schools. Future studies could incorporate voices of female/non-binary participants to provide a more gender-diverse representation of experiences of pathway choices.

The sample size of the past-student participants is relatively small; however, the sample composition is adequate with the range of experiences of the students being varied with different levels of participation, and views of participation, about pathways in senior school. Additionally, all bar one of the participants attended more than one school during their secondary education (including one who completed some of his Year 11 studies elsewhere) which enabled them to compare their experiences at different institutions. While a sample size of four may be viewed as minimal, the range of experiences conveyed and discussed through the interviews

led to a rich tapestry of collected data enabling a deep qualitative analysis (Sandelowski, 1995; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

It is recognised that the past-students who participated in this study completed their education in the previous QCE system which was transitioned out at the end of 2019 (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2021). While it is appropriate to acknowledge that the experiences conveyed through the interviews may not fully reflect those of current students, correlations between the old and new system have been made through the analysis, and systemic issues continue to exist today (Shay et al., 2023). There are also benefits of speaking with past students as opposed to current ones. As past students are older, their ability to reflect on their school-time experiences from a more matured perspective enables them to take into account how their choices have impacted on their lives post-school and the ability to discuss issues from the perspective of both a student and an older member of their community. To expand on the relevance and continuity of the research, current students could be recruited for future studies.

The initial plan for this research was to examine through a survey and staff interviews how policies and frameworks and the way they are interpreted and implemented within schools influences pathway choices of First Nations students from remote communities. Initial contact with governing bodies to seek permission to approach schools was successful. However, invitations to participate were mostly ignored or denied with just a few schools agreeing to participate to varying extents, and with only one school ultimately moving forward with the interviews. The reasoning for the declinations was cited by many schools to be to protect the already limited time that staff have available, especially as the study coincided with interruptions and new modes of learning due to school closures in Queensland from

COVID-19 outbreaks and major flooding events. Telling in and of itself, some school leadership teams also cited their belief that staff would not be able to speak to questions about how they work with policies and processes in relation to senior schooling pathway choices of First Nations students from remote communities. The impacts of how schools work with policies still warrants further consideration through future research endeavours, including directly through schools now that interruptions have subsided. Alternate ways of reaching out to staff could also be considered, such as recruiting current teachers directly via professional networks and social media platforms.

Despite the identified limitations, the findings of this research have tied key data about the senior schooling pathway choices of First Nations students from remote communities at boarding schools in Queensland. In future research endeavours findings from this study can be expanded on by completing case studies at several schools which will correlate student and staff experiences while aligning to school specific frameworks and individual student data.

5.6 Chapter summary

First Nations students from remote communities are more likely to undertake a non-academic pathway in their senior years at boarding schools in Queensland. However, this choice may not align with their genuine pathway preferences as there are historical and hegemonic constructs that continue to permeate the education system influencing the decision-making process. There is potential for individual educational institutions to reassess what is meant by ‘success’ and consider processes that can support students to choose their preferred pathway. However, change needs to occur at a systemic level in order to observe long-lasting transformation, as individual staff or school-based initiatives will not result in major

shifts in available opportunities for First Nations students to freely select from either an academic or a non-academic pathway.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore factors that contribute to the senior schooling pathway choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities at boarding schools in Queensland. First Nations students from remote communities attending boarding schools in Queensland have more opportunities to undertake a non-academic pathway during their senior years. However, this accessibility of pathway may not reflect their authentic preferences due to the enduring influence of historical and hegemonic constructs within the education system. While there is potential for individual educational institutions to redefine "success" and implement supportive processes for pathway selection, achieving lasting transformation requires systemic change. It is essential to recognise that substantial shifts in opportunities for First Nations students to freely choose between academic and non-academic pathways necessitate systemic-level adjustments, as initiatives at the individual staff or school-based levels may not suffice for comprehensive transformation.

As the key findings of the research were elicited primarily from interviews with past students who had graduated prior to the introduction in 2020 of the current senior schooling structure in Queensland, I have spent considerable time ruminating over the currency of their experiences.

By a stroke of serendipity, I recently received a call from a fellow teacher who spoke with me about two First Nations students from remote communities at the school in which she works. The first student is in the beginning stages of their secondary education (Year 7) and initially exhibited great enthusiasm for his educational journey. This student loves mathematics and possesses an aptitude for numerical operations. However, due to his first language being a traditional First

Nations one, and this being his first year of education outside of his home community, the student has not yet acquired sufficient proficiency in Standard Australian English to effectively demonstrate competence in the language intensive domain of the subject. This particular boarding school streams their core subjects into ability level classes. Consequently, despite the student's aptitude in mathematics, because of his linguistic background, he has been placed in the lower-level class. Now, even before reaching the mid-point of his first year of secondary education, this student has already begun to lose interest and engagement with mathematics, reporting feeling bored as he is not being challenged beyond the fundamental skills being taught in his streamed class. Unfortunately, rather than specifically targeting language support, or providing an opportunity to learn in his first language, this student has been automatically assumed to be at a deficit in all areas of mathematics. In his first year of secondary education, he has been denied the opportunity to pursue a subject of personal interest and thus has perpetuated a belief that his linguistic background means he is incapable of participating in academically rigorous courses. The account of this current Year 7 student reinforced to me that the adverse impacts of streaming that were raised throughout this research project persists with today's cohort of students.

The second student that the teacher spoke about is at the other end of his educational journey, in Year 12. A supporting agency involved with the school has been discussing the student's post-school plans with him and he has expressed a desire to study medicine at university to achieve his goal of becoming a general practitioner in his home community. However, concerns arose when the person working with this student examined his subjects and realised that he is unable to meet the requirements to pursue his aspirations after Year 12 graduation because

his subjects are not aligned with the prerequisites for admission through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC). When the support person asked the student why he was not studying the specific subjects required for his desired path, the student explained that he had chosen appropriate subjects in the academic stream but that when he received his timetable, he found he had been placed in Applied (non-academic) and vocational subjects. Because there has not been an ongoing mentoring process, this issue has only now, toward the end of Year 12, been discovered making it too late to make the necessary changes to subject choices. The supporting agency is looking into alternate entry opportunities for future studies in the field of health, however the student is now concerned that he may have missed key learning opportunities and may subsequently lack the necessary skills to succeed in a tertiary setting. This is another account, that unfortunately reinforced the currency of the past-student experiences shared through the interviews demonstrating the systemic issues faced by First Nations students when making their senior schooling pathway choices.

This recent conversation highlighted to me that despite my initial doubts about the currency of the data I had gathered due to the elapsed time since the past student participants had been in school, the issues that emerged through the interviews persist to this day. It is now 2023, and despite continuous efforts for change, the same outcomes for First Nations students endures. Various government initiatives have been implemented in recent years including the introduction of new curriculum, the inclusion of cross-curriculum priorities, and professional standards directly related to effectively and appropriately teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, these initiatives have simply been incremental additions to the existing system which have not brought

about meaningful change. In order to create an environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities can choose a senior schooling pathway that aligns with their genuine preference, there must be a systemic shift that reimagines and reconstructs the education system.

This superficial appearance of change while remaining issues persist reminds me of a tree that I once purchased. This tree grew beautiful red leaves and produced both flowers and edible fruit. I enjoyed caring for this plant for approximately three years, however due to my ‘brown thumb’ the tree stopped bearing fruit and producing flowers and began to wither and eventually died. I could not determine what was wrong with it; it did not matter how much I watered it, how much fertiliser I applied, or how many nutrients I sprayed, my attempts to revive the tree failed. Then one week, our bin for green waste still had some space so my husband broke off all the branches and discarded them, leaving only the main trunk protruding from the pot. Then, the following fortnight, as he went to dispose of the remainder of the tree, he noticed that the tree had begun to regenerate and new growth had emerged from the main trunk. Upon closer examination, we discovered that the tree was severely root-bound so we took it out of the pot and planted it in our garden bed. Being free from its enclosure, the tree’s roots were able to expand and establish a new stronger system and the leaves and flowers have now begun to reappear. Regardless of the initiatives I took such as watering and fertilising the plant, the branches, leaves and fruits were unable to flourish until the root system was addressed. Similarly, the roots of the education system are the underlying issue that impacts on the senior schooling pathway choices of First Nations students from remote communities. No matter how many ‘nutrients’ are added such as introducing new curricula or professional teaching standards, unless the root systemic factors

are addressed true ‘growth’ cannot occur. Just like my struggling tree, the ‘leaves’ and ‘fruit’ of the education system will not thrive and First Nations students from remote communities will not have the optimum environment to choose a senior schooling pathway that aligns with their preferences. Without a systemic shift, regardless of how much things ‘change’, the situation will remain the same.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Past Student Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

To:	Staff Participants
Project Title*:*	Senior schooling pathway choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities attending Queensland boarding schools
Principal Researcher:	Emma Sheppard
Supervisors:	Dr Jacinta Maxwell Dr Renee Desmarchelier

This research is being undertaken by Emma Sheppard, a Doctor of Philosophy Candidate at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.

Background

For students preparing to start senior secondary schooling in Australia, the choice to undertake a vocational or an academic pathway is an important decision. Existing research suggests it is even more complex for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities studying at boarding schools.

As a past student who has graduated from a Queensland boarding school who identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, you are invited to participate in this research project. Through a small online focus group of 2-4 past students, you will be asked a variety of questions about your experiences while at school when choosing pathways and subjects for your senior years (Years 11 and 12).

Please read this Participant Information Sheet carefully. Its purpose is to explain to you the procedures involved so that you can make an informed decision as to whether you are going to participate. Please feel free to ask questions about any information in the document. Contact details can be found on the final page of this information sheet.

Once you understand what the project is about and if you agree to take part in it, please complete and return the consent form you received in the invitation email. By returning the consent form, you indicate that you understand the information and that you give your consent to participate in the research project.

Procedures

Involvement in this project will entail participation in an online focus group that will take approximately one hour and will be video recorded for data collection purposes. This focus group will be arranged at a convenient time in consultation with yourself and other participants. You may be contacted after the focus group if any information is needed to be clarified or expanded on. You will be provided with a transcript of your interview to review. If you wish to offer any further thoughts after the initial focus group or following review of your transcript, a further meeting time can be arranged. If you would like to see a copy of the summary of results prior to publication, please contact the principal researcher or her supervisors (contact details are provided below).

The research process will be monitored at all stages by Dr Jacinta Maxwell and Dr Renee Desmarchelier.

The risks associated with this study are predicted to be low and are unlikely to extend beyond minor inconvenience in relation to the time required to participate in the focus group. In the unlikely event that participation results in psychological discomfort or harm, referral to external counselling services will be provided. The project will be conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research.

Confidentiality

Any data collected as part of this project will be stored securely as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management Policy. If any information is obtained through this project that can identify you, it will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission, subject to legal requirements or in response to potential activity that may result in a serious and imminent threat to a person's life or safety. Re-identifiable personal information may be used by the research team to contact you to seek clarification of data from the initial interview. The findings from this project may be made available for inclusion in a professional journal publication or conference presentation or may be used for future research projects. Any publication information or summaries of findings will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. Any data that may enable a reader to identify you will be separated from your responses.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. **If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to**. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage prior to data analysis. If you decide to withdraw from this project, please notify a member of the research team. Any information already obtained from you will be destroyed at your request.

Your decision whether to take part or not, or to take part and then withdraw, will not result in any negative repercussions.

Before you make your decision, a member of the research team will be available to answer any questions you have about the research project.

Referral Services

If participation in this focus group or any other aspect of this study results in feelings of distress, please contact one of the research team members listed below. Alternatively, you may wish to contact an independent counselling service such as:

- Lifeline
  lifeline.org.au
  13 11 14

- Beyond Blue
  beyondblue.org.au
  1300 224 636

- Mindspot
  mindspot.org.au
  1800 614 434

Queries or Concerns

If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact the Principal Researcher:

- Ms Emma Sheppard

Alternatively, you may contact Emma's Supervisors:

- Dr Jacinta Maxwell

or

- Dr Renee Desmarchelier

Should you have any concern about the conduct of this research project, please contact the USQ Ethics Committee Support Officer:

- Office of Research, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba, Qld 4350
  (07) 4631 1839
  ethics@usq.edu.au.

Appendix 2: Past Student Proposed Interview Questions

Draft Focus Group Questions: Stage 3

**This is a list of indicative questions meant as a guide only. Not all questions will be asked and the focus group will be directed according to information conveyed by participants.*

1. When did you finish school? / What have you been doing since you graduated?

2. What subjects did you choose to study in senior school and what were the options that were available to you?

3. When did you choose these subjects?

4. What was the process for making those selections and who was involved in this process?
    a. What were the key considerations when choosing your subjects / pathway?
    b. Did you seek guidance when selecting your subjects?

5. What contributed to the choices you made?
    a. Did you have a set outcome in mind?
    b. How did you decide which subjects you did and didn't want to study?

6. How do you feel about the senior school pathway you took?
    a. Did this pathway impact or contribute to what you are currently doing? How, provide some examples?
    b. Were there any processes during that decision-making that you can now see the benefit of?
    c. Do you have any regrets about the subjects that you undertook?

7. What advice would you give to current students regarding subject / pathway options?

8. What advice would you give to schools about how to support students while selecting senior schooling pathways / subjects?

9. Any additional thoughts?

Appendix 3: Staff Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

To:	Staff Participants
Project Title:	Senior schooling pathway choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities attending Queensland boarding schools
Principal Researcher:	Emma Sheppard
Supervisors:	Dr Jacinta Maxwell Dr Renee Desmarchelier

This research is being undertaken by Emma Sheppard, a Doctor of Philosophy Candidate at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba.

Background

For students preparing to start senior secondary schooling in Australia, the choice to undertake a vocational or an academic pathway is an important decision. Existing research suggests it is even more complex for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities studying at boarding schools.

As a staff member of a Queensland boarding school that enrols Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities, you are invited to participate in this research project. Through an online interview, you will be asked a variety of questions about how school policies and procedures impact on senior schooling pathway choices of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander boarding students from remote communities.

Please read this Participant Information Sheet carefully. Its purpose is to explain to you the procedures involved so that you can make an informed decision as to whether you are going to participate. Please feel free to ask questions about any information in the document. Contact details can be found on the final page of this information sheet.

Once you understand what the project is about and if you agree to take part in it, please complete and return the consent form you received in the invitation email. By returning the consent form, you indicate that you understand the information and that you give your consent to participate in the research project.

Procedures

Involvement in this project will entail participation in an online interview that will take approximately one hour. This interview will be arranged at a convenient time in consultation with you. You may be contacted post interview if any information is needed to be clarified or expanded on. You will be provided with a transcript of your interview to review. If you wish to offer any further thoughts after the initial interview or following review of your transcript, a further meeting time can be arranged. If you would like to see a copy of the summary of results prior to publication, please contact the principal researcher or her supervisors (contact details are provided below).

The research process will be monitored at all stages by Dr Jacinta Maxwell and Dr Renee Desmarchelier.

The risks associated with this study are predicted to be low and are unlikely to extend beyond minor inconvenience in relation to the time required to participate in the survey. In the unlikely event that participation results in psychological discomfort or harm, referral to external counselling services will be provided. The project will be conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research.

Confidentiality

Any data collected as part of this project will be stored securely as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management Policy. If any information is obtained through this project that can identify you, it will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission, subject to legal requirements or in response to potential activity that may result in a serious and imminent threat to a person's life or safety. Re-identifiable personal information may be used by the research team to contact you to seek clarification of data from the initial interview. The findings from this project may be made available for inclusion in a professional journal publication or conference presentation or may be used for future research projects. Any publication information or summaries of findings will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. Any data that may enable a reader to identify you will be separated from your responses.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. **If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to**. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage prior to data analysis. If you decide to withdraw from this project, please notify a member of the research team. Any information already obtained from you will be destroyed at your request.

Your decision whether to take part or not, or to take part and then withdraw, will not affect your relationship with the University of Southern Queensland or your employing authority.

Before you make your decision, a member of the research team will be available to answer any questions you have about the research project.

Referral Services

If participation in this survey or any other aspect of this study results in feelings of distress, please contact one of the research team members listed below. Alternatively, you may wish to contact an independent counselling service such as:

- Lifeline
  lifeline.org.au
  13 11 14

- Beyond Blue
  beyondblue.org.au
  1300 224 636

- Mindspot
  mindspot.org.au
  1800 614 434

Queries or Concerns

If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact the Principal Researcher:

- Ms Emma Sheppard

Alternatively, you may contact Emma's Supervisors:

- Dr Jacinta Maxwell

  or

- Dr Renee Desmarchelier

Should you have any concern about the conduct of this research project, please contact the USQ Ethics Committee Support Officer:

- Office of Research, University of Southern Queensland, West Street, Toowoomba, Qld 4350
  (07) 4631 2690
  ethics@usq.edu.au.

Appendix 4: Staff Proposed Interview Questions

Draft Interview Questions: Stage 2

**This is a list of indicative questions meant as a guide only. Not all questions will be asked and the interviews will be directed according to information conveyed by participants.*

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and how long you have been teaching?
    a. What role do you have at the school?
    b. In what ways do you work with the school's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities?

2. Who is directly involved in the process to help Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities choose their senior schooling pathway?
    a. How do these roles work together in this process?

3. How are parents of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities included in the decision-making process of senior schooling pathway options?
    a. Sub question: How are parents of other students at the school included in the decision-making process of senior schooling pathway options?

4. What is the school's process to help Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities choose their senior schooling pathway?
    a. How were these processes developed? *(Leadership team only)*
    b. What external policies and frameworks were drawn on when developing the school's processes? *(Leadership team only)*
    c. Are you aware of how these processes were developed? *(non-leadership staff)*
    d. Are you aware of the external policies and frameworks that were drawn on when developing the school's processes? *(non-leadership staff)*
    e. In what ways is this information disseminated to relevant staff?
    f. How effectively is this process enacted?
        I. Give some examples of the effectiveness of the implementation of this process, reflecting on what you have seen or had direct experience of?

5. To what extent do you draw on policies and procedures when speaking with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities about post-school pathway options?
    a. What policies and procedures do you explicitly engage with when speaking with students about post-school pathway options?
    b. Give some examples of instances where you have engaged with these policies.

6. Can you see evidence of the crux / essence of these policies and procedures evident in all staff practices?
    a. Give some examples reflecting on what you have seen or had direct experience of.

7. In what ways does the school provide opportunities to explore post-school pathways for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities?
    a. Is there a difference between these opportunities and those for all students including non-Indigenous students?

8. To what extent do these opportunities impact on senior schooling pathway choices of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students?
    a. Can you give an example of this by reflecting on what you have seen / had direct experience of / had students share with you?

9. Are there any factors external to the education setting, including within the boarding environment and within home communities, which may impact on pathway choices for the school's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students?
    a. Can you give an example of these external factors from something that you have seen / had direct experience of / had students share with you?
    b. How do school procedures and policies address these external factors?

10. Are the school processes effective at addressing the needs of students while making senior schooling pathway decisions?
    a. Can you give an example of how they are effective by reflecting on what you have seen / had direct experience of / had students share with you?

11. In what ways can the school improve its processes that may impact on senior schooling pathway choices for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities?
    a. Where have you seen gaps in the processes? Reflect on these gaps with something that you have seen / had direct experience of / had students share with you?