7 Education and training

| Strategic areas for action |
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Education is a life‑long activity, beginning with learning and development in the home and in communities and continuing through to the more formal settings of school education, vocational education and training and higher education. Education and training aims to develop the capacities and talents of children so that they have the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values they need to participate in the economy and in society — contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing (Education Council 2019). There are strong links between higher levels of education and improved physical and mental health. Actions in this strategic area can help to strengthen communities and regions both economically and socially.

The indicators in this chapter cover some of the key factors that contribute to positive education and training outcomes.

* Teacher quality (section 7.1) — while there is no nationally agreed measure of teacher quality, research suggests that teachers can positively influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. Teacher quality includes recognising and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and maintaining positive expectations of individual students’ capability and success.
* School engagement (section 7.2) — student engagement with school and learning is important to achieve positive learning outcomes. While there is currently no nationally agreed definition of school engagement, three measures of school engagement have been identified: behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement.
* Transition from school to work (section 7.3) — young people’s successful transitions from school to further education, training and employment are important for establishing and maintaining social connections, and for their economic prospects and physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Several COAG targets and headline indicators reflect the importance of education and training:

* early childhood education (section 4.3)
* reading, writing and numeracy (section 4.4)
* Year 1 to 10 attendance (section 4.5)
* Year 12 attainment (section 4.6)
* post‑secondary education — participation and attainment (section 4.8).

Other COAG targets and headline indicators can be directly influenced by education and training outcomes:

* employment (section 4.7)
* household and individual income (section 4.10).

Outcomes in the education and training area can be affected by outcomes in several other strategic areas, or can influence outcomes in other areas:

* governance, leadership and culture — governance capacity and skills (chapter 5)
* early child development — basic skills for life and learning, ear health (chapter 6)
* healthy lives — access to primary health care and fewer potentially preventable hospitalisations will affect education outcomes, while education outcomes can influence both tobacco consumption and harm and obesity and nutrition (chapter 8)
* economic participation — employment and occupation, and home ownership (chapter 9).

Attachment tables for this chapter are identified in references throughout this chapter by an ‘A’ suffix (for example, ‘table 7A.1.1’). These tables can be found on the web page (www.pc.gov.au/oid2020).

### References

Education Council 2019, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, December, Council of Australian Governments.

## 7.1 Teacher quality[[1]](#footnote-1)

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| Box 7.1.1 Key messages |
| * Teacher quality is considered the most important ‘in‑school’ influence on student educational outcomes. While there is no nationally agreed measure of teacher quality, research suggests that teachers can positively influence the outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through a range of broad qualities. These qualities include recognising and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and maintaining positive expectations of individual students’ capability and success. * Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is one potential mechanism to improve teacher quality. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers can provide cultural knowledge to non‑Indigenous teachers and facilitate understanding between all teachers, students and the students’ families. For non‑Indigenous teachers, more experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students during their teacher education may increase their confidence in teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in future. |
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Student school achievement is influenced by a range of factors. These include ‘in‑school’ factors such as teacher quality and school resourcing (Sullivan, Perry and McConney 2013). These also include other factors such as family life, student motivation and ability (Biddle and Cameron 2012), and health outcomes (like hearing loss) (PC 2016).

Teacher quality is the single most important ‘in‑school’ influence on student achievement (Hattie 2009); it is a product of the school context, professional practices, and the attributes and capabilities of teachers and school leaders (Bahr and Mellor 2016). Teacher quality can influence student educational outcomes, both directly and indirectly, by fostering a positive, inclusive and safe learning environment (Boon 2011; Riley 2015). Improving teacher quality is therefore an important precondition for improving achievement (PC 2012).

Improving and maintaining teacher quality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students requires:

* understanding what quality means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their parents
* implementing effective strategies to build teacher quality
* evaluating these measures and monitoring of quality on an ongoing basis.

### Quality teaching entails a broad set of qualities that apply for all children and contexts…

Quality teaching entails a broad set of qualities that apply for all children and contexts. Quality teachers work closely with their peers and other school workers, recognise the diverse ways in which students learn, challenge them by setting high expectations, provide them with continuous feedback and bring to the classroom a deep knowledge of the subject matter (PC 2012). The key elements of quality teaching are described in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL 2011) which articulate that teachers should:

* know students and how they learn
* know the content and how to teach it
* plan for and implement effective teaching and learning
* create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments
* assess, provide feedback and report on student learning
* engage in professional learning
* engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community.

### …and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, teachers must embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities and provide safe learning environments

There is also evidence of the elements of teacher quality that positively influence outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students specifically, particularly from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and students (Krakouer 2015; Lewthwaite et al. 2017; Riley 2015). Quality teachers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are culturally competent, and:

* recognise and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and perspectives. Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s cultural perspectives can improve the relationships between the school, teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It can also improve school attendance and student engagement, which have been linked to improved academic outcomes (Baxter and Meyers 2016; Gillan, Mellor and Krakouer 2017; Mooney et al. 2016)
* understand the adjustments required by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children entering the school environment. Quality teaching adapts to children’s identities and languages, and implements culturally relevant curricula (Miller et al. 2019)
* build positive relationships with students as a foundation for learning and maintain positive expectations of students’ capability and success (Lewthwaite et al. 2017; Lloyd et al. 2015; PC 2012). Teachers’ expectations of students’ capability and success are critical to whether students progress well or not (OECD 2017). However, teachers can implicitly or explicitly attribute low ability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, thereby influencing their academic achievement (Riley 2019).

Australian governments have agreed that ‘Australia’s education system must embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with safe learning environments’ (Education Council 2019, p. 16). According to the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, proficient teachers:

* design and implement effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
* provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages (AITSL 2011).

### Ensuring that teachers are well qualified and undertake ongoing professional development is a key strategy governments have adopted to improve teacher quality…

The OECD (2018) has found that high‑performing education systems:

… emphasise clinical education as part of initial teacher education; they provide bespoke opportunities for in‑service teachers’ professional development; and they put teacher‑appraisal mechanisms in place that have a strong focus on teachers’ continuous improvement. (p. 4)

Ensuring that teachers are well qualified initially (through university and pre‑service training) and that current teachers undertake ongoing professional development and assessment against the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* is a key strategy Australian governments have adopted to improve teacher quality. In particular, training and development includes teachers building their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and languages as outlined in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*.

For individual schools, retaining experienced staff and reducing turnover may also be a strategy to improve the quality of teaching. Schools in remote and/or disadvantaged areas (where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented) often report persistent difficulties in attracting and retaining well‑qualified teachers who can confidently engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and understand and respect their cultures; these difficulties can impede student learning (Halsey 2018; Hudson et al. 2016; Jorgensen 2017; PC 2012; Thomson and Hillman 2019).

### …however, teacher qualifications and experience are only part of the picture…

Teacher qualifications and experience are only part of the picture, as these data do not show what actually happens in the work of teaching (ACER 2017). Guenther, Disbray and Osborne (2016, p. 77) found that what matters ‘is not as much about the qualifications or experience of the teacher, as it is about the qualities the teacher brings to the context’ — that is, the in‑class qualities of teachers. In a review of literature relating to teachers’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural competency, Krakouer (2015) noted the importance of teachers’ abilities to teach to the strengths of their students and adapt their teaching style to suit individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

Assessment of in‑class teacher qualities (either as self‑assessed, or as assessed by principals and/or students) can provide important information to teachers, schools and school systems (ACER 2017; Thomson and Hillman 2019). Aspects of teacher quality will be similar for all students, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families also require that teachers recognise and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and incorporate them into their teaching (Baxter and Meyers 2016; Guenther, Disbray and Osborne 2016; Mooney et al. 2016).

### …and there is little information available for monitoring teacher quality

No nationally agreed measure or data set that monitors teacher quality currently exists, either in general or specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Data on teacher qualifications, experience, recent training, and accreditation against the professional standards are not currently available, although data being collected by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) may in future include measures related to initial teacher registration and progression through career stages (AITSL 2020).

Similarly, there are no nationally comparable data on the perceptions of teachers themselves about their preparedness and ability to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Available research provides some indication of the extent to which recent teacher graduates felt prepared for teaching in a culturally competent manner:

* A sample of pre‑service teachers across two states found that most prospective teachers believed they had an understanding of how students learn (98 per cent) and understood the intellectual development of students (90 per cent). However, only 60 per cent felt that they could engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and only 70 per cent felt they could demonstrate understanding for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Hudson et al. 2016). Supporting qualitative analysis indicated that a lack of experience with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students impacted prospective teachers’ confidence in practice (Hudson et al. 2016).
* Evidence from the Longitudinal Teacher Education and Workforce Study indicated that about half the sample of 2011 teacher graduates believed that their teacher education program prepared them to teach ‘culturally, linguistically and socio‑economically diverse learners’ (Mayer et al. 2014, p. 215).

### Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is one potential way to improve teacher quality

Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is one potential way to improve teacher quality, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers can provide cultural knowledge to non‑Indigenous teachers and facilitate understanding between teachers, students and families (Baxter and Meyers 2016; Buckskin 2016; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2017). In particular, local staff are considered important for remote and very remote schools (Guenther, Disbray and Osborne 2016). However, expecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to know and teach all aspects of culture in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and be responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education issues from curriculum to pastoral care, can substantially increase their workload. This can in turn lead to ‘burnout’ and stress; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, particularly at the early stage of their careers, should be provided with professional development and support (Santoro et al. 2011; Santoro and Reid 2006).

Data on the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and their roles may provide some ‘proxy’ information on the overall quality of the teaching profession. Available data indicate that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is increasing. The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative found that there were 3100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school teachers nationally in 2015, a net increase of 439 teachers from 2012 (MATSITI 2017). Of these teachers, 83 per cent were classroom teachers, 7 per cent were deputy principals and 3 per cent were principals (Buckskin 2016).

Section 5.6 *Indigenous cultural studies* contains further information on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce.

### Future directions in data

The AITSL is currently developing the Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD); however, these data are not yet publically available. The ATWD will provide nationally consistent data on the number of teachers, their characteristics (including qualifications, registration and employment status), and teacher training and career paths (AITSL 2020). Collecting good quality data on the Indigenous status of teachers as part of the ATWD could provide valuable insights into the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

In addition, data on the extent to which teachers are meeting the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*, their prior teaching experience, where they are teaching now and their length of service at a school (particularly for schools in remote and very remote areas) may help to show whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to quality teachers. This may include whether they have access to teachers with effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and who have an understanding of their students’ local community and cultural setting, linguistic background and histories.

While teacher qualifications, experience and/or recent training are often used as proxies, these only make up part of the picture and do not focus attention on what actually happens in the work of teaching (Bahr and Mellor 2016). Research studies consistently show that school students are responsible and reliable sources of information about the quality of teaching, and are more reliable than other teachers or school principals (ACER 2017). The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE 2016) notes that data from student surveys and questionnaires are highly reliable for broad populations, for instance at the school level. However, there is not currently a national data source for student surveys.

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## 7.2 School engagement[[2]](#footnote-2)

| Box 7.2.1 Key messages |
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| * Student engagement with school and learning (‘school engagement’) is important for achieving positive learning outcomes. * School engagement means more than student attendance. While there is currently no nationally agreed definition or measure of school engagement, three elements of school engagement have been identified: behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. * There are currently no national data available on cognitive engagement, but some data are available on behavioural and emotional engagement with school: * Aspects of *behavioural engagement* are measured in section 4.5 *Year 1 to 10 attendance* and section 4.6 *Year 12 attainment*. Data show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ retention to Years 10 and 12, and Year 12 attainment, are both increasing — although these and school attendance rates at all year levels remain below those of their non‑Indigenous peers * One aspect of *emotional engagement* is the sense of belonging. Data reported in this section show that for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non‑Indigenous students ‘Sense of belonging at school’ has been decreasing since 2003. * Students’ sense of belonging at school is affected by a range of factors including: the relationship a student has with their teacher; the relationship between the school, parents and the community; and individual positive characteristics (such as optimism, self‑efficacy, healthy self‑esteem, coping skills, adaptability, pro‑social goals and the ability to make and keep friends). * Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s cultural perspectives can improve relationships between schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the students’ families. |
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High levels of school engagement are important for improved learning outcomes. Students who have emotional and cognitive engagement with school — which includes a sense of belonging, perseverance, motivation and self‑esteem — can make the most of available opportunities, irrespective of their ‘level of aptitude’ (OECD 2017).

Conversely, children who become disengaged are more likely to miss school, be disruptive in class, become depressed or anxious at school, or feel low connection to the school — which are all associated with poor school outcomes (Hancock and Zubrick 2015). Rather than characterising these children as problematic, these behaviours provide the school with a signal that these children need assistance, with school communities key in supporting them and building their engagement with school (Allen 2020).

Addressing school engagement is important. Australian and international research has demonstrated that students’ level of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement with school is connected with a range of positive outcomes, including:

* higher academic achievement
* improved rates of attendance and year 12 attainment
* better mental health and job status later in life (Allen and McKenzie 2015; CESE 2017, 2019; Gemici and Lu 2014; Goss, Sonnermann and Griffiths 2017; OECD 2019; Riley 2015).

However, the relationship between school engagement and student outcomes is complex. School engagement can positively affect performance but, conversely, improvements in performance also positively affect engagement (CESE 2017). In a study of NSW students, Turner and Pale (2019) found that some elements of school engagement (for example, resilience, effort, and attitudes to attendance) positively affected student academic outcomes, while there was no significant relationship for other factors (such as, motivation and interest, learning confidence, sense of connectedness and inclusion).

Several factors can make school engagement particularly challenging for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These factors include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children becoming discouraged by a history of low expectations, children and their communities being conditioned to see themselves as the cause of their educational failure, and racism — all of which can lead children to believe that school is not relevant for them, which in turn can reduce school engagement (Sarra et al. 2018; Stronger Smarter Institute Limited 2014). A study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary school students, using data from wave 6 of the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC), found that negative feelings about Indigenous identity were negatively associated with feeling engaged with schooling (Dunstan, Hewitt and Tomaszewski 2017).

### School engagement means more than student attendance

School engagement is difficult to define and measure (Appleton, Christenson and Furlong 2008; Axelson and Flick 2011; Fredricks and McCloskey 2012). Even though Australian governments have agreed on the importance of school engagement for all students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (Education Council 2019; MCEECDYA 2010), there is no nationally agreed definition or measure of school engagement. An evaluation of the *Sporting Chance Program* by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) in 2011 proposed measures against the four dimensions it identified as important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ school engagement (Lonsdale et al. 2011 and table 7A.2.1); however, data sources for reporting against this framework have not been identified.

Outlined below are three components commonly referred to as comprising school engagement and are also contained within the proposed ACER (Lonsdale et al. 2011) framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school engagement. These are based on the model developed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), with additional material from Dunstan, Hewitt and Tomaszewski (2017) and Appleton, Christenson and Furlong (2008).

* *Behavioural engagement*. This may be measured by identifiable or observable behaviours at school (such as participation in school activities or classroom behaviours) and by attendance, attainment and retention. Aspects of behavioural engagement are measured in sections 4.5 *Year 1 to 10 attendance* and 4.6 *Year 12 attainment*. Data in these sections show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s rates of school enrolment and retention to Year 12 have been increasing, although school attendance and Year 12 attainment rates remain below those of their non‑Indigenous peers.
* *Emotional engagement* — also referred to as affective engagement. This describes the emotional response to school or affective connections at school. It may be analysed by seeking students’ attitudes to learning and school, one element of which is sense of belonging (included in this section), and their feelings about involvement with school including whether school is a worthwhile pursuit.
* *Cognitive engagement*. This has been less frequently measured in a classroom setting, but research studies have used measures such as students’ perceptions of intellectual challenge, effort or interest and motivation. No measures of cognitive engagement are presented in this Report.

The relationship between these components is complex, and they are likely to be interrelated. For example, students may skip school or arrive late for school because they are academically disengaged or do not feel they belong at school (OECD 2019). However, the factors that influence whether a child attends school (their behavioural engagement) may differ from the factors that influence how a child feels about school (their emotional engagement). For example, Dunstan, Hewitt and Tomaszewski’s (2017) analysis of LSIC data found that poorer socioeconomic circumstances were not associated with a child’s emotional engagement with school, but noted other research suggesting they were associated with behavioural engagement. By contrast, Dunstan, Hewitt and Tomaszewski (2017) found evidence that the environment within the school (such as positive peer and teacher relationships) may be more important than the environment outside the school for emotional engagement.

### Most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel attached to, and socially connected within, their school…

Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) — a triennial survey of 15-year-old students conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) — indicate that in 2018 most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students felt attached to, and socially connected within, their school (figure 7.2.1).[[3]](#footnote-3) However, in some ways their sense of belonging at school is below that reported by non‑Indigenous students (figure 7.2.1). As part of the PISA, students are asked for their responses to six statements that are considered to reflect their sense of belonging at school. Compared with non‑Indigenous students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reported a lower sense of belonging at school across three of the six statements. The largest gap with non‑Indigenous students related to ‘I feel like I belong at school’, with less than two‑thirds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students agreeing with the statement (figure 7.2.1).

| Figure 7.2.1 Sense of Belonging at School, 2018**a,b** |
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| | Figure 7.2.1 Sense of Belonging at School, 2018  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| ■ = The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who agree with the statement is not statistically different from the proportion for non‑Indigenous students.  arrow symbol = The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who agree with the statement is lower, and is statistically different from the proportion for non‑Indigenous students.  a Error bars represent the 95 per cent confidence interval associated with each point estimate. b See table 7A.2.2 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (unpublished); table 7A.2.2. |
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### …but this has decreased over time, particularly when it comes to feeling they belong at school

Students’ level of agreement to the six statements are combined to construct a Sense of Belonging at School Index. Higher scores on the Index indicate that students feel a greater sense of belonging at school, while a negative score on the Index indicates the result is below the 2003 PISA OECD average.[[4]](#footnote-4) In 2018, the Sense of Belonging at School Index score for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was ‑0.32 (table 7.2.1) — below the score for non‑Indigenous students, which was also negative (-0.18) (table 7.2.1).

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| Table 7.2.1 Sense of Belonging at School Index, by Indigenous status, 2018**a,b** |
| |  | NSW | Vic | Qld | WA | SA | Tas | ACT | NT | Aust |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander | -0.39 ±0.12 | -0.39 ±0.32 | -0.22 ±0.16 | -0.18 ±0.22 | -0.26 ±0.19 | -0.44 ±0.23 | -0.40 ±0.42 | -0.35 ±0.21 | -0.32 ±0.07 |  | | Non‑Indigenous | -0.17 ±0.04 | -0.12 ±0.05 | -0.23 ±0.05 | -0.25 ±0.04 | -0.23 ±0.07 | -0.36 ±0.09 | -0.26 ±0.08 | -0.25 ±0.16 | -0.18 ±0.02 |  | |
| a The table includes the 95 per cent confidence interval associated with each point estimate (for example,  -0.32 ±0.07). b See table 7A.2.3 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (unpublished); table 7A.2.3. |
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Students’ sense of belonging at school declined significantly, for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non‑Indigenous students, between PISA 2003 and 2018 (table 7A.2.3). Over the 15‑year period, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who reported positive views declined significantly across all six statements relating to a sense of belonging. In particular, between PISA 2003 and 2018, there was a 25 percentage point decrease in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reporting ‘I feel like I belong at school’ (table 7A.2.2).

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ sense of belonging at school is affected by a range of factors

A number of factors may influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ affective engagement with school.

* *The relationship a student has with their teacher* — Students report a greater sense of belonging when they feel that teachers respect and value them (Allen et al. 2018; Dunstan, Hewitt and Tomaszewski 2017; Turner and Pale 2019).

A school that values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s cultural perspectives can improve the relationships between its teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Fogarty, Schwab and Lovell 2015; Gillan, Mellor and Krakouer 2017; Mooney et al. 2016). Conversely, if an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child does not feel that the school and their teacher values their cultural perspective, or feels that they exhibit racist attitudes or behaviours, their level of school engagement may decline (Mooney et al. 2016).

* *The relationship between the school, parents and the community* — A parent’s relationship with the school and the value and level of support they are able to provide are important to student outcomes. Local schools that engage parents in their children’s education improve the children’s educational attainment and engagement (Barker and Harris 2020; Higgins and Morley 2014).

Researchers have highlighted that for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, the history of school education has not been positive and has been associated with a racist and systematic disruption of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s ways of life (Benveniste et al. 2014; Ockenden 2014; Sarra et al. 2018). To address their concerns regarding student safety and cultural wellbeing, schools need to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and caregivers as partners in education; this should help improve levels of home‑based support and school engagement (PM&C 2018; Purdie and Buckley 2010; Zubrick et al. 2006).

* *Familiarity and comfort at school* — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who feel accepted or have strong peer relations and ties within the school environment are more likely to want to engage and achieve well at school (Dunstan, Hewitt and Tomaszewski 2017; Riley 2015).

Unlike for behavioural engagement, Dunstan, Hewitt and Tomaszewski’s (2017) analysis suggests that socioeconomic factors (such as parental employment, household income or area‑level socioeconomic circumstances) are not significantly associated with affective engagement.

With regards to the first two factors above, research has found that (in both urban and remote areas) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and support staff — and the involvement and engagement of community elders — can play an important role by providing cultural knowledge to non‑Indigenous teachers and facilitating understanding between all teachers, students and their families (Baxter and Meyers 2016; Guenther and Disbray 2015; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2017). However, it has also been noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are expected to know and teach all aspects of culture in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and are often also responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education issues from curriculum to pastoral care. These high expectations and this increased workload often lead to ‘burnout’ and stress — and so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, particularly in the early stage of their careers, should be provided with professional development and support (Santoro et al. 2011; Santoro and Reid 2006).

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the language spoken at home is a traditional language, a regional Kriol, or Aboriginal English (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2017) (see sections 5.5 *Indigenous language revitalisation and maintenance* and 6.8 *Basic skills for life and learning*). This can present barriers for students who are expected to learn in standard Australian English. Studies suggest that when quality bilingual or culturally appropriate instructional approaches (which support students speaking English as a second language) are adopted, family and community support for schooling and student engagement may increase (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2017; Silburn et al. 2011).

### While academy-style programs do not replace the need for schools to work with students and their communities, they can be an effective way of engaging and supporting students at school

Australian governments fund a number of ‘academy‑style’ engagement programs that have the specific goal of increasing participants’ school engagement (Gillan, Mellor and Krakouer 2017; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2017). Often using sport as a ‘hook’, these programs partner with schools and aim to strengthen engagement at school by: providing culturally safe spaces; providing health and nutrition education; building resilience and self‑esteem; providing opportunities for community engagement and leadership; and encouraging and supporting academic and post‑school goals. While these programs do not replace the need for schools to engage with students and their communities, there is evidence that some have ‘proven to be an effective way of engaging and supporting students at school’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2017, p. 76). However, there have been concerns raised that programs for girls and non‑sports based programs do not receive the same recognition or funding (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs 2017).

### Future directions in data

Further work is required to determine the definitions, appropriateness and method of collating and reporting data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ engagement with school, and on the interaction of the various engagement components.

A number of jurisdictions collect their own data on school engagement and/or wellbeing (SCRGSP 2020, section 4). Their surveys collect information from students across the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive domains of engagement; however, they are not conducted on a consistent basis and only limited data are available publicly (particularly with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students). The suitability of the measures proposed in the ACER framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school engagement (Lonsdale et al. 2011 and table 7A.2.1) should be assessed and, if they are found suitable, appropriate data sources should be identified for national reporting.

Further work is also required to investigate the factors affecting the link between school engagement and learning outcomes.

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## 7.3 Transition from school to work[[5]](#footnote-5)

| Box 7.3.1 Key messages |
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| * The successful transition of young people from school to further education, training and employment is important for establishing and maintaining social connections, and for their economic prospects and physical and mental health and wellbeing. * While there are increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people completing Year 12, this does not appear to be translating into higher levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people being fully engaged in employment, education and training when they leave school. Nationally in 2018‑19, 36 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 17–24 year olds were fully engaged — similar to the rate in 2002. And while the rate for non‑Indigenous young people has declined since 2002, it is still double the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. * For those with higher level post‑school qualifications, this is associated with improved employment outcomes. Nationally in 2017–19, among people aged 18–64 years with a Bachelor degree or above, labour force participation and employment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (87 per cent and 80 per cent respectively) were similar to those for non‑Indigenous people. But for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with lower qualification levels, the labour force and employment outcomes were below that of non‑Indigenous people with similar qualification levels. * However, not being fully engaged may not mean disengagement or being unproductive. Many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may be engaged with employment, education and training on a part time basis, or be involved in other activities (such as volunteering or caring for others). In 2016, more than 40 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women who were not fully engaged in employment, education and training had a child, compared to 20 per cent of young non‑Indigenous women. * For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people able and wanting to transition to full time employment, education and training, there are additional barriers when compared to non‑Indigenous young people. Barriers include poorer educational outcomes from schooling, lower levels of English literacy, poorer health, greater family responsibilities, and less access to resources to find employment, education and training opportunities. Residents in remote areas face additional challenges with more limited employment, education and training opportunities in their local areas, which disproportionally affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. |
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| Box 7.3.2 Measures of transition from school to work |
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| There are two main measures for this indicator:   * *Successful transition from school* is defined as the proportion of young people aged  17–24 years no longer enrolled at school who are fully engaged in post‑school education or training or are employed. * *Labour force status and employment‑to‑population ratio of people aged 18–64 years who have achieved a qualification of Certificate level III or above* is defined as the proportion of people aged 18–64 years with a qualification of Certificate level III or above who are (a) in the labour force and (b) employed.   Data for both measures are sourced from the ABS National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey/National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, with the most recent available data for 2018‑19 (engagement by remoteness: employment status by sex; remoteness; jurisdiction). Comparable data for the non‑Indigenous population are available from the ABS National Health Survey/General Social Survey, with the most recent available data for 2017‑18.   * Supplementary data are also reported from the ABS Census of Population and Housing (Census), with the most recent available data for 2016 (remoteness; all jurisdictions). Survey and Census data are not directly comparable. |
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The successful engagement of young people in employment and further education and training is crucial for personal economic prospects and wellbeing (such as mental and physical health). Young people that are engaged in employment, education and training are more trusting of others and engaged with society and their communities (OECD 2016).

Australian and international research shows that a person that experiences periods of educational or economic inactivity can suffer damaging long‑term consequences for future employment (Anlezark 2011; Dorsett and Lucchino 2018)*.* For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, accumulated labour market disadvantage during their youth can lead to significant differences in work experience once they are in their thirties, relative to non‑Indigenous people (Venn 2018). As well as the economic impact, there is evidence that inactivity among young people is associated with a greater dissatisfaction about their personal situation and more pessimism about the future (OECD 2016).

Like most young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people want to be able to contribute positively to their communities and society. While there are a range of motivating factors for individuals, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people their education and employment aspirations are influenced by their culture, and desire to be with and care for their family and kin. Parkes, McRae‑Williams and Tedmanson (2015) found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in remote locations were ‘motivated by the dream of being with family, caring for others and being cared for’, and therefore value pathways and options that maintain and strengthen relationships with family rather than remove them from family.

### Increasing rates of Year 12 attainment does not appear to be translating to increased rates of young people in employment, post-school education and training

While there are increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people completing Year 12 (see section 4.6 *Year 12 attainment*), this does not appear to be translating into higher levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people being fully engaged in employment, education and training when they leave school. Nationally in 2018‑19, 36 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 17–24 years, who were no longer attending school, were ‘fully engaged’ in employment or post‑school education and training — similar to the rate in 2002 (figure 7.3.1).[[6]](#footnote-6) The rate of non‑Indigenous young people who are fully engaged in employment, education and training has declined since 2002, but has remained approximately double the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (figure 7.3.1).

| Figure 7.3.1 Proportion of people aged 17–24 years not in school who are fully engaged in full time employment, education and training, by Indigenous status, 2002 to 2017–2019**a,b** |
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| | Figure 7.3.1 Proportion of people aged 17–24 years not in school who are fully engaged in full time employment, education and training, by Indigenous status, 2002 to 2017–2019  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| a Error bars represent the 95 per cent confidence interval associated with each point estimate. b See table 7A.3.1 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: ABS (unpublished) National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (various years); ABS (unpublished) National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (various years) ABS (unpublished) National Health Survey (various years); ABS (unpublished) General Social Survey (various years); table 7A.3.1. |
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The likelihood of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people being fully engaged in employment, education or training is influenced by remoteness. In 2018‑19, around half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 17–24 years in major cities were fully engaged in employment, education and training, which was higher than all other remoteness areas (tables 7A.3.1‑2). Census data for 2016 showed that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people fully engaged in employment, education and training declined with remoteness, with very remote areas having the lowest proportion (table 7A.3.6). In contrast, the proportion of non‑Indigenous young people who are fully engaged does not vary as much by remoteness. In very remote areas the proportion who are fully engaged is similar to major cities, and although the proportions are lower in regional and remote areas, they do not decline to the same extent as the rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (table 7A.3.6).

The outcomes for remote areas may be related in part to the fewer employment, education and training opportunities in remote areas (compared to non‑remote areas), which may disproportionally impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a larger proportion live in remote areas compared to non‑Indigenous people (see sections 4.7 *Employment* and 4.8 *Post‑secondary education*).

### Post-school education is associated with better employment outcomes, and this is particularly so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Adults with post‑school education and training have better employment outcomes, and this is particularly so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Nationally in 2018‑19, among people aged 18–64 years with a Bachelor degree or above, labour force participation and employment rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (87 per cent and 80 per cent respectively) were similar to those for non‑Indigenous people (in 2017‑18) (figure 7.3.2). However, if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had post‑school qualifications of Certificate level II or below or none at all, labour force participation and employment rates fell significantly (to 53 per cent and 41 per cent, respectively), and were also significantly below the rates of non‑Indigenous people at the same qualification level (figure 7.3.2). Further discussion on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s participation in post‑school education and training is provided in section 4.8 *Post‑secondary education*.

| Figure 7.3.2 Level of highest non-school qualification and employment status (aged 18–64 years), by Indigenous status, 2017–19**a,b** |
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| | Figure 7.3.2 Level of highest  non-school qualification and employment status (aged 18–64 years), by Indigenous status, 2017–19  Labour force participation rate  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. Figure 7.3.2 Level of highest  non-school qualification and employment status (aged 18–64 years), by Indigenous status, 2017–19  Employment to population ratio  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. Figure 7.3.2 Level of highest  non-school qualification and employment status (aged 18–64 years), by Indigenous status, 2017–19  Legend to figure  More details can be found within the text surrounding this image. | | --- | |
| a Error bars represent the 95 per cent confidence interval associated with each point estimate. b See table 7A.3.3 for detailed definitions, footnotes and caveats. |
| *Source*: ABS (unpublished) National Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2018‑19; ABS (unpublished) National Health Survey 2017‑18; table 7A.3.3. |
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### Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people not ‘fully’ participating in employment, education and training are engaged with other activities

There remains a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who are not fully engaged in employment, education and training. However, not being fully engaged may not mean disengagement or being unproductive.

* Nationally in 2016, about 25 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 17–24 years not fully engaged were employed or studying part time, indicating a level of engagement with the labour force and post‑school education and training. For young non‑Indigenous people it was about 50 per cent.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, like non‑Indigenous people, may be engaged in other productive and/or developmental activities, such as caring for family members, caring for Country , travelling, or volunteering (see sections 4.9 *Disability and chronic disease*, 5.7 *Participation in community activities*, and5.8 *Access to traditional lands and waters* and Venn 2018). Nationally in 2016, about 12 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 17–24 years not fully engaged provided unpaid assistance to people with disability, about 10 per cent volunteered for an organisation or group, and 30 per cent provided care to a child. For young non‑Indigenous people these proportions were about 7 per cent, 15 per cent and 20 per cent respectively.[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females (in particular) may be engaged with child care responsibilities. Nationally in 2016, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females aged 17–24 years who are fully engaged in employment, education and training was 6 percentage points lower than males (this contrasts with young non‑Indigenous people, where there is minimal difference between male and female rates). This may partially be attributed to child care responsibilities resulting from higher birth rates amongst young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females. Nationally in 2016, over 40 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females aged 17–24 years not fully engaged in employment, education and training had a child, compared to about 20 per cent for young non‑Indigenous females.[[9]](#footnote-9) (See also section 6.3 *Teenage birth rate*.)

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people face additional barriers in their transition from school to post‑school employment, education and training

The transition from school to employment or further education or training can be difficult for any young person, but there are additional barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (discussed in detail elsewhere in this Report, but summarised here) such as:

* lower educational outcomes achieved through the school education system (section 4.4 *Reading, writing and numeracy*), which place them at a disadvantage when attempting to transition to the workplace or to post‑school education and training (Gray, Hunter and Lahoar 2012)
* lower socioeconomic status (access to resources), poorer health status and family responsibilities can limit the range of opportunities to employment, education and training to which they can transition (Cuervo, Barakat and Turnbull 2015)
* for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people whose first language is not ‘standard Australian English’, a lack of recognition of Aboriginal languages can impact their educational outcomes and act as a barrier to accessing and engaging in employment opportunities and post‑school education and training (Rutherford, McCalman and Bainbridge 2019; Thomas et al. 2014; Watts, Gardner and Mushin 2019).

Transitions from school to employment and further education and training can be smoother for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if institutions are seen to value and support their cultures and accommodate their cultural obligations (Ackehurst, Polvere and Windley 2017).

In addition, exposure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models and accessibility to information on experiences with post‑secondary institutions and workplaces, have also been identified as important facilitators of educational and employment aspirations (Gore et al. 2017). See sections 4.7 *Employment* and 4.8 *Post‑secondary education.*

The barriers are greater for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people living in remote and very remote communities. In a systematic review of research Rutherford, McCalman and Bainbridge (2019) found several factors affected young people’s transition into employment and post‑school education in these areas. While these factors are relevant to all young people in remote and very remote areas, they disproportionally affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people overall as they are more likely to live in these areas.

* A shortage of suitable local jobs and the large geographic distance to service centres can negatively influence student aspirations and post‑school transitions to work and employment (Hunter and Gray 2001; Rutherford, McCalman and Bainbridge 2019; Savvas, Boulton and Jepsen 2011).
* Government policies often take a ‘one size fits all’ strategy for addressing education and employment opportunities for young people in remote communities, which limits communities’ abilities to drive local solutions (Rutherford, McCalman and Bainbridge 2019). In a review of Vocational Education and Training programs in remote areas Guenther et al. (2017) note that what defines ‘successful’ program for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities was ‘local community ownership’ of the program, that is, the extent to which the community felt they’d had input into its development and whether it reflected community culture. The context of the remote community also needs to be considered to enable the identification of local opportunities relevant to those communities (Jordan 2016; McRae-Williams et al. 2016).

### Future directions in data

Further work is required to understand the post‑school pathways of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Several jurisdictions collect data on student destinations within their own jurisdiction (SCRGSP 2020, section 4). These surveys collect information from students in the year following their departure from schooling. However, these data are not collected on a consistent basis, are often only for government schools, and limited data are publically available (particularly with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people).

The availability of longitudinal data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people could assist to understand their choices post school, including reasons for disengagement from education, training and employment, those wanting to engage and not being able to, alternative pathways being attempted, and transitions between vocational education, higher education, employment and other activities. As the cohorts in the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children get older, this data collection could assist to answer some of these questions.

In addition, further research would be useful on the impact of programs aimed at supporting young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their transition from school to work (such as school‑based traineeships, work readiness programs, career guidance/support, connecting with mentors/role models).

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1. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Dr Lynette Riley, University of Sydney, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Dr Lynette Riley, University of Sydney, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) collects information on one aspect of emotional engagement: students’ sense of belonging at school (OECD 2019). It should be noted that the construct for this measure has not been validated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and should so be used with caution when attributing ‘sense of belonging’ to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The index, when it was originally constructed in PISA 2003, was standardised to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 across OECD countries (De Bortoli 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Steering Committee notes its appreciation to Dr Lynette Riley, University of Sydney, who reviewed a draft of this section of the Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To be *fully* engaged a person is defined as being: ‘Engaged through full time study *and* full time employment’, ‘Primarily engaged through full time study’, ‘Primarily engaged through full time employment’, or ‘Engaged through part time study *and* part time employment’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Data derived from ABS TableBuilder data: ABS 2018, *Census of Population and Housing, 2016*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Data derived from ABS TableBuilder data: ABS 2018, *Census of Population and Housing, 2016*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Derived from ABS TableBuilder data: ABS 2018, *Census of Population and Housing, 2016*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)