

# Away from Base Review

## Response – University of Sydney

Thank you for reading through the discussion paper and for agreeing to share your views on how we can improve AFB assistance. Please enter your comments below in each of the discussion questions on this template.

We are not planning on posting these comments publicly, but please let us know if you want your submission kept confidential. This way we can take extra care with your comments in case we are asked to share them. Don't share private or personal information in this template.

It is best to respond to us by e-mail, attaching the completed template as a Word document. We would be happy to receive hard copies if e-mail is not convenient for you. Comments should be provided by **Friday 02 November 2018** to:

- [ITPT@pmc.gov.au](mailto:ITPT@pmc.gov.au)

Or by hardcopy to:

- AFB Review  
Education, Community Safety and Health Division  
Indigenous Affairs Group  
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet  
GPO Box 6500  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

We will read every submission and are grateful for the time and effort you have given to helping us ensure AFB support assists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participate in further education.

Respondent:	University of Sydney
Is this response on behalf of an organisation?	Yes
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Is your submission confidential?	No

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

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

The AFB program is an excellent model for the provision of higher education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, envied by colleagues for the pragmatic and efficient way in which it enables Indigenous people to overcome isolation and disadvantage. Not only does it facilitate students' participation in existing courses with a broad focus, its provision is a key element in the design of targeted block-release courses for Indigenous-specific needs that could not be offered by any university if they were reliant on a local student cohort.

Our AFB programs offer pathways into higher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who, without AFB assistance, would not be able to engage in this opportunity. AFB support helps fund travel, accommodation and meals whilst students attend block intensives, allowing them to focus on their academic engagement and not worry about the practical arrangements of being away from home.

While online delivery increasingly forms part of course delivery for those from remote areas, access is still problematic, and ultimately may only serve to entrench isolation. By comparison, the gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from across Australia into a physical class affords them an opportunity to make connections, exchange ideas and forge professional support networks that often serve them for life, just like mainstream students. This development of a community of learners and practitioners is considered by most educators to be an essential element of student development in higher education contexts.

The observation on the AFB teleconferences that non-Indigenous participation in block release courses has outgrown the rate of Indigenous participation nationally is not accepted as indicative of a preference by Indigenous students for wholly externally delivered courses. Rather it is believed to be indicative of the rising popularity for mixed mode delivery across the sector outside Indigenous-specific offerings, and the consequence of a frequently heard rumour across the sector that AFB funding was being phased out by the Commonwealth. This misapprehension is known to have been a reason for several decisions to close mixed-mode courses at universities over recent years.

While AFB provides essential support, the University of Sydney also invests in this program and in the students. It does so in several ways, including employing dedicated program administration staff, establishing additional support systems and mechanisms, providing practical support (laptops, textbooks), and absorbing travel and accommodation costs that are in excess of AFB funding.

The University of Sydney sees this investment as central to providing a range of ongoing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, especially those from regional and remote communities, who are not in a position to study via traditional methods.

However, without AFB funding support the programs offered would not be able to continue.

### **Identified gaps in current AFB support**

#### **Graduation costs**

Currently students can apply directly to Abstudy for travel support to attend their graduation ceremony. The University has provided many letters of support for students to use during their application process, but our experience is that more students are denied financial support for this travel each year.

This process is for travel only (not accommodation and meals) and needs to be driven by the student, direct to Abstudy. Students advise that this is stressful, with many students opting out of

attending their graduation because of the barrier to accessing travel support. It would be beneficial for the PM&C model to consider the inclusion of a graduation support package/amount that would provide for travel and one night's accommodation, so all students can attend their graduation.

### **Tiered travel costs**

As discussed on our teleconferences, it would be useful to consider re-instating a tiered PM&C funding model to recognise the substantial additional travel costs for remote students. The current flat rate funding model does not address these additional costs even though we appreciate the flexibility inherent in this funding model.

### **Students withdrawing prior to census**

A significant cost is incurred by providers when students withdraw before the HECS census but after attending their first block, and some remedy for this would be greatly appreciated. As it stands, students can enrol and incur travel and accommodation costs for the first block of a course, and then elect to discontinue without paying fees or incurring a HECS-Help liability. They are therefore not reported to the Commonwealth as enrolled and universities cannot access AFB funding in respect of them. The costs incurred by providers for these non-commencing candidates can be substantial if the student is from a remote area.

## **B. Administration of AFB**

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

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

At Sydney we access the PM&C model of AFB funding and find this works very well. The University and Schools teaching through the AFB model, have set up systems that allow the funding to be used effectively; have established systems to support students and meet reporting requirements. While the University often absorbs some additional costs for AFB students (especially for students from rural and remote locations who require very expensive travel), the University is firmly committed to this teaching model.

The most important element of the administration of the PM&C model is that Sydney as the educational institution, takes on the responsibility for arranging all logistics for this student cohort. We book travel, accommodation, arrange meal allowance and administer all paperwork. Importantly this frees students to focus on what they come to University to do, engage in their educational journeys.

Many of our AFB students approach university applications with an existing lived experience of departmental/institutions paperwork challenges, and we aim to reduce these barriers. We take on the planning and administration so that students can focus on their learning. Managing the practical logistics also ensures that all students arrive to block intensives less stressed and have appropriate Sydney-based accommodation and food for their study period.

### C. Individual students

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

The PM&C model allows for the institution to take care of arrangements related to travel, accommodation and meals, and to do so in a fair and equitable manner. If our student cohort were required to undertake all of the planning and negotiating personally, they would potentially become absorbed in this process, distracting from their learning. We believe this could be a barrier to participation in AFB and would very likely result in no shows by students.

Although the provision of travel and accommodation services directly by the Commonwealth might appeal to some university administrators keen to implement internal efficiencies and be similarly attractive to the Commonwealth, it is highly unlikely to produce good outcomes for students and course delivery.

University staff establish close relationships with AFB/block students from the beginning of the application process, through enrolment, and on to ultimate course completion. That fosters a depth understanding of their personal circumstances and the particulars of travel to and from their home communities. University staff can be accessible to students on a 24/7 basis around block travel dates and are able to resolve issues quickly, whether that means authorising an urgent flight change because of missed ground transport connections, or instructing casual accommodation receptionists regarding errors and misunderstanding as students check-in. In some cases, it can mean attendance by staff at providers to sort out accommodation for students unable to be checked in. Such relatively common crises invariably arise out of normal business hours and almost always on the weekend. It is difficult to see that the Commonwealth would be able to provide such a localised and responsive service.

Regarding the provision of meal allowances, university staff are easily able to verify student attendance, authorise the release of funds, and make adjustments to subsequent payments based on any student absences. This would require real-time reporting if managed centrally, and potentially result in frequent over and under-payments.

In both cases removing these functions from providers, or putting them at arm's length through an intermediary, would carry a high risk of student discontinuations that would only result in unnecessary costs to students, course providers and the Commonwealth.

The example of applications for graduation travel support (see comments under section A above) shows how student-initiated systems can lead to frustration for students. Many of our students have significant work, family and community responsibilities. On top of this they engage in an intensive period of study. Our students need to be spending their time on their study and learning and not on applying for or claiming their own AFB support.

Our students advise that having their travel, meals and accommodation organised by us is a very large attraction for this program.

## D. Targeting and Prioritising AFB

*What is the fairest way of targeting and prioritising existing AFB resources? Please comment on one or more of the following issues:*

- *Courses*
- *Student home locations*
- *Providers*
- *Per student allocations*
- *Number of trips and days of accommodation*
- *Co-contributions*
- *Employer-sponsored education and training*
- *Types of costs covered*

*Please offer advice on how your preferred approach might be implemented.*

*What is the fairest way of targeting and prioritising existing AFB resources? Please comment on one or more of the following issues:*

### **Courses**

We would not like to see AFB funding prioritised based on specific course offerings. It would be inequitable to make judgements about what courses are needed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. They should be able to choose whatever course they see as being the best developmental opportunity.

Currently students receive AFB support as a cohort studying in an approved AFB program. We would welcome consideration of funding of the individual student for AFB, particularly for post graduate studies.

Over the past three years Sydney University has lost a number of Masters level applicants in the Health stream because they could not access AFB funding to support travelling to their compulsory workshops. Instead, they enrolled in a block intensive Masters program elsewhere that was an AFB approved program.

### **Student home locations**

We would not like to see students prioritised by home location. We need to be doing more to engage with students from around the country. Sydney University absorbs some of the additional costs of enrolling students from remote communities, but we would welcome consideration a new version of the old tiered model of AFB funding, which provided the institution with additional money for students with higher travel costs who were remote or rural.

Students who live close to their institution can access support services, while remote area students often have little prospect of doing so, and institutions cannot easily provide these for them at home. While on campus, it is often the case that block students are only afforded time for classes, so they still cannot easily access extra-curricular services.

Reverse AFB works well for regional delivery but relies on having educators who are able to travel. Reverse AFB also requires some support for students needing to travel in to a particular location. For example, a Sydney based University might deliver a program in the community in Cairns. While the costs for Cairns-located students would be minimal, there would still be travel required for students studying in Cairns but living in other parts of the state.

### **Providers**

We would not like to see AFB funding prioritised based on the provider.

### **Per student allocations**

As noted above, we would welcome additional AFB support for rural and remote students with high travel costs. If this was embedded into the PM&C model it would be ideal.

### **Number of trips and days of accommodation**

AFB could recognise that some courses will need to change the amount of face to face/blocks/days to meet industry/student/community needs.

Student accommodation in Sydney is very difficult to access for block mode students. As such we need to use local shared unit-based accommodation that is reliable and close to campus. This comes at a high cost to the AFB program.

### **Co-contributions**

We believe that students already contribute by their investment in AFB study. We would not like to see any co-contribution requirement placed on them.

As a University we currently contribute to the costs of running this program.

Many students have to take leave without pay to attend block intensives or use their annual leave. We would welcome initiatives that encourage workplaces to provide students with some fee support; study leave; and or paid study time, if they enrol in an AFB program of study.

### **Employer-sponsored education and training**

We previously had four students from Queensland sponsored by their employer to attend our program. They each had a fee sponsored place and if they won a CSP, then the balance of their fees were paid by the employer. This changed with a change of Government and since then we have not seen any similar support.

### **Types of costs covered**

In our view covering the following costs should be essential:

- Travel
- Accommodation
- Meals
- Graduation support package

In our view the following costs would be ideal:

- Internet access support
- Technology package (e.g. laptop)
- Childcare support for peak study periods

## **E. Anything else you'd like us to consider?**

*Please outline any issues you think we've missed and your proposed solutions to these issues.*

The PM&C model allows us to maintain the people in the process and we see this as vital. Students want to have people to go to, people to talk to, and continuity of support people during their study. They need to know that a person (institution) has their travel and other logistics covered, and that they can talk to that person if needed. We would not like to see the people removed from the AFB model.

The provision of AFB for eligibility testing is considered of questionable value, and the University of Sydney does not use it. Students can normally be remotely assessed relatively easily by the establishment of an ad hoc relationship with a local educational professional.

Staff here are aware of other institutions that persistently utilise this element of AFB funding as a pre-enrolment recruitment activity, where prospective students are entertained over an extended period in a manner that creates a false impression of university study in order to secure their application to that specific institution.

We would like to see this practice reviewed.