

AFL Cape York House Cairns provides residential care to secondary school aged boys from remote Indigenous communities in Cape York, the Torres Strait and Gulf of Carpentaria. The boys attend seven secondary schools in Cairns and are engaged in a range of pastoral, sporting, cultural and cultural activities and programs.

AFL Cape York House is funded in large part through the payment of the Abstudy Living Away From Home Allowance. This allowance is made up of a number of elements: boarding and tuition fees, Living Allowance, Rent Assistance and Remote Area Allowance and there are different rates of payments for students aged over and under 16. The difference in allowance for over and under 16 students is around \$4,500 per annum and most boarding providers are paid this difference in the form of the Under 16 Boarding Subsidy.

Stand-alone residential providers such as AFL Cape York House are not paid the Under 16 Boarding Supplement and as a consequence receive significantly less funding for any student under the age of 16. There is no logical or defensible reason behind the fact that the supplement is paid to boarding schools and residential facilities which are 'tied' to a single school while facilities which operate independently of a single school are not entitled to the supplement. Abstudy policy states that "in order to qualify for the Under 16 Boarding Supplement, student boarding facilities must be integrated into a boarding school's facilities and the staff and house parents must be employees of the school. The Under 16 Boarding Supplement is not available to hostels, it can only be paid to boarding schools."

In the case of AFL Cape York House, students attend one of seven partner schools, and the House supports the work of students through the provision of tutorial support programs which are staffed almost exclusively by volunteer tutors. All of the students who reside at AFL Cape York House and who attend our partner schools are very much at the centre of government initiatives aimed at 'closing the gap.' Many of our boys enter the House with significant deficits in literacy and numeracy which place them at high risk of academic failure and disengagement from school. A significant number of our students who are now successfully engaged in their secondary education have either been excluded from or disengaged from traditional boarding schools.

It is both illogical and indefensible that they should be denied access to funding which would be used to provide the required levels of learning and tutorial support. Despite the best efforts of our partner schools it is clear that professional learning support is required outside of normal school hours. Were the Under 16 Boarding Supplement to be paid to AFL Cape York House, it would be used to provide human and material resources to address significant gaps in literacy and numeracy and provide a range of other support programs. A change in the eligibility criteria explicit in Abstudy policy would be of minimal cost to the Commonwealth given the small number of residential facilities which deliver the same level of service to Indigenous students from remote communities.

Recommendation

That the Abstudy Under 16 Boarding Supplement be paid to stand-alone residential providers who are engaged in the support of education for Indigenous secondary school-aged students. Structured support allows vulnerable students to engage successfully with mainstream secondary education and complete Year 12 with a recognised level of certification which permits access to a range of post-school options outside of the default to welfare.

