

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT...?

# Aboriginal secondary school scholarships

Close the Gap Research









# Proposition

Scholarships for Aboriginal secondary students are meant to assist students succeed in life. Presumably, Aboriginal students carry a particular disadvantage that needs to be addressed. Are scholarships for Aboriginal students awarded to the right students?

**If not, is money better spent on other Aboriginal students?**

# Background

The more years an individual spends in education, the better their prospects. Completing Year 12 or an equivalent qualification provides an essential pathway to further education and employment, reducing the risk of adverse outcomes such as poverty.

**Aboriginal Australians are less likely to complete Year 12 than non-Aboriginal Australians.**

Despite improvements, this inequality persists. In 2021, just under seven out of ten Aboriginal Australians aged 20 to 24 had attained Year 12 relative to around nine non-Aboriginal Australians.





# Closing the education gap

This publication explores scholarships for Aboriginal students, examining disparities in educational attainment and factors influencing access. Through analysis, our aim is to uncover challenges and opportunities in supporting Aboriginal students.

## The gap in education is not the same everywhere

The proportion of Aboriginal Australians aged 20 to 24 who have attained Year 12 varies nationwide.

Attainment is highest in the Australian Capital Territory (82 per cent in 2021) and lowest in the Northern Territory, where the attainment gap is also most pronounced (40 per cent Aboriginal vs 88 per cent non-Aboriginal in 2021).

Attainment is highest in major cities (76 per cent in 2021). This declines to 42 per cent in very remote areas.

Attainment is highest in the least disadvantaged socioeconomic areas (87 per cent in 2021) and lowest in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic areas (58 per cent in 2021).

## Socioeconomic and geographic disadvantage: disproportionate impacts on Aboriginal families

Relative to non-Aboriginal Australians, Aboriginal Australians experience greater levels of socioeconomic and geographic disadvantage, which impact educational opportunities and outcomes.

Socioeconomic disadvantage correlates with a complex range of circumstances that can affect education, such as family and community dysfunction, frequent relocation and unstable living conditions, poor physical health, and behavioural issues.

Aside from these challenges, the cost of schooling - particularly at more senior levels - can be a significant barrier to education for children from disadvantaged families.

Access to secondary schooling may be limited or lacking for families living in remote and very remote areas. Substantial travel may be required to get to secondary school; for some students, boarding school may be the only viable option.



For socioeconomically disadvantaged families in geographically disadvantaged communities, this may represent a severe or prohibitive financial burden (even considering assistance through government study support payments).

## The scholarship landscape

In response to the overrepresentation of socioeconomic and geographic disadvantage among Aboriginal Australians, federal, state and territory governments have increased financial support for secondary students, including scholarships.

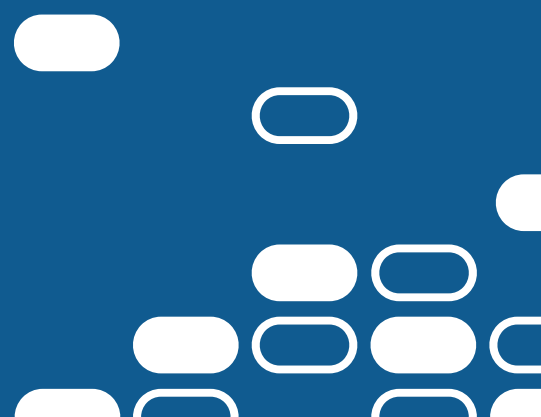
Scholarships are intended to help improve access to education and address the geographic and economic barriers preventing Aboriginal students from attaining Year 12.

Various organisations provide scholarship programs, including not-for-profits, schools, and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. Providers range from small to large scale and may solely deliver scholarships or provide scholarships as one aspect of various activities.

Scholarships cover various schooling options, from day students in public schools to boarding students at private schools.

The latter include low-fee schools with a substantial number of Aboriginal students (which may be located in remote or very remote communities) and higher-fee 'mainstream' (non-Aboriginal) schools in regional or metropolitan locations.

There are two main approaches to scholarship administration: a school-led model where the school selects and enrolls applicants and a community/broker-led model where the scholarship provider handles the process.



## How much do governments spend on scholarships?

The federal government is a significant source of scholarship funding, with more than \$150 million granted to providers since 2018.

Comprehensive, up-to-date figures for total federal, state and territory government expenditure on scholarships are not published. Scholarships are sometimes part of a broader funding package; the scholarship component is not specified.

## How are scholarships awarded?

Scholarships appear to be awarded based on some combination of need (e.g., family socioeconomic circumstances, geographic location, availability of secondary education within the home community) and merit (e.g., past academic performance, school attendance, commitment to educational attainment/enthusiasm for school).

It is helpful to conceptualise need and merit as two intersecting dimensions, forming four quadrants.

How need and merit are assessed, and the 'weighting' given to different aspects of need and merit, appears to vary across different schools/providers. There is relatively little information available about the characteristics of scholarship recipients.

This means there is no way of assessing which 'quadrant' scholarships are most geared towards.

## Are scholarships reaching the students who most need or merit them?

Published data about scholarship selection processes and recipients suggests that scholarships are only sometimes awarded based on need or merit.

For example, some providers fund high fee-paying, mainstream boarding schools that award scholarships based on criteria such as an applicant's likelihood of completing Year 12 and whether the applicant has a supportive family who initiated the enrolment process and is willing to contribute financially to their child's education.

Although schools assess family income, this is to adjust the scholarship amount and family financial contributions rather than determine who receives a scholarship.

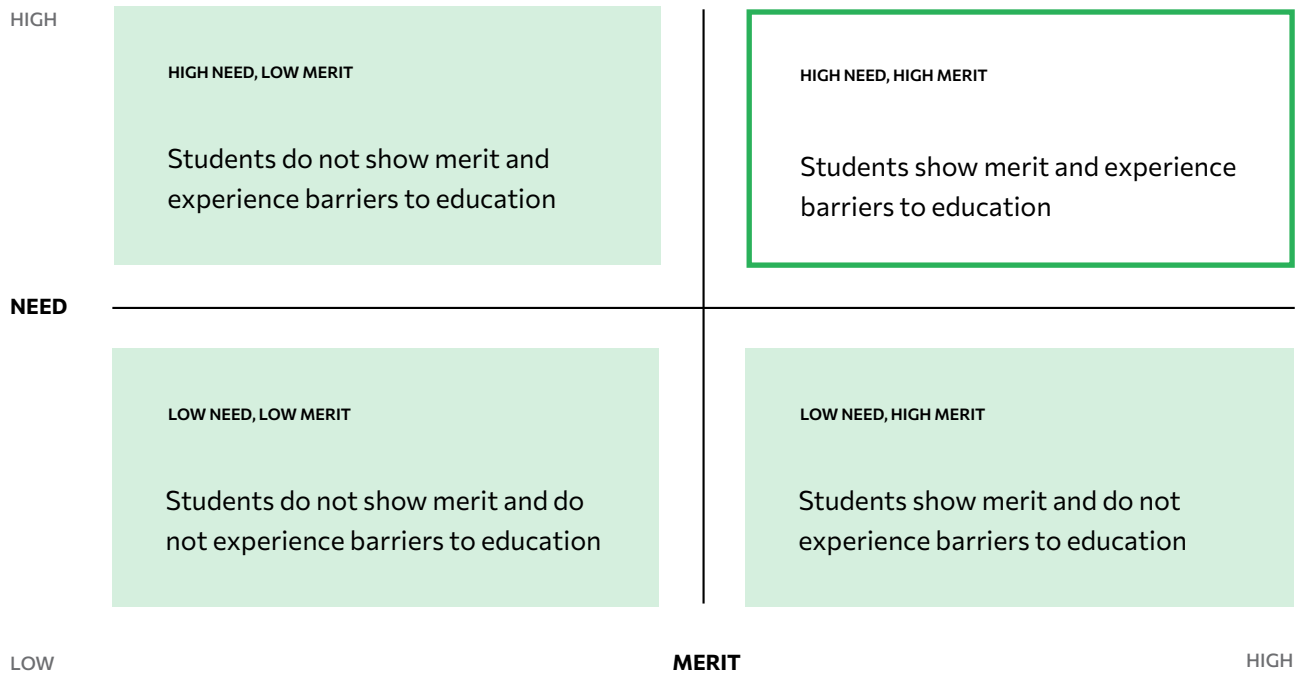
One program indicates that some scholarship families have a yearly income of more than \$150,000. In 2022, only one third of that program's Year 12 graduates were from remote or very remote communities.

This suggests scholarship award bias towards families with relatively high 'social capital', which is not representative of those students who are most likely to experience barriers to completing Year 12.





# Figure 1: Need and merit in awarding scholarships



## Are scholarships helping to close the gap?

While it may only be possible for a student to attend a particular school with a scholarship, this does not necessarily equate to a student experiencing a need of the kind that presents a barrier to completing Year 12.

A crucial indicator of whether scholarships are assisting in closing the education gap is whether they support students to complete Year 12, who would otherwise have been at risk of being unable to do so. Few scholarship programs have been evaluated against this measure, and there needs to be more data available to answer this question.

One survey of former scholarship recipients through one provider suggests that almost half considered that they would have been likely (22 per cent) or very likely (25 per cent) to complete Year 12 without a scholarship. Fewer than one in five considered that they would have been unlikely (7 per cent) or very unlikely (10 per cent) to complete Year 12 without a scholarship.

Given that schools funded through that provider appear to select students with a high likelihood of completing Year 12, this finding is unsurprising. However, it is difficult to see how awarding a scholarship to a student who would have been likely to complete Year 12, even without that scholarship, is helping to close the gap in Year 12 attainment.

## What do we need to know?

We need to know what scholarships are assigned to which quadrant, need and merit. We must also understand the counterfactual to attribute cause and effect between interventions and outcomes. The 'counterfactual' measures what would have happened to beneficiaries without the intervention. The impact is estimated by

comparing counterfactual outcomes to those observed under the intervention. For example, an Aboriginal student may have passed year 12 at a local school without a scholarship to a private school.

It should be possible to gather examples of scholarships proving the basis on which they are granted and assign these to the quadrants, need and merit.

Only a little information is published about students awarded scholarships or what happens to those recipients in the longer term (i.e., dropout rates, continuation to tertiary education, engagement in employment, etc).

There needs to be more information about the families and communities of scholarship recipients and what factors may more generally differentiate successful scholarship applicants from unsuccessful applicants or other students.

Although much of this information may be held by individual scholarship administrators, there has yet to be any systematic effort to support providers in sharing or organising that information in a consolidated, comprehensive format.

Without this, there is no way of assessing whether Aboriginal scholarships successfully target barriers that may otherwise prevent a student from completing Year 12 and helping scholarship providers enhance their practices to have maximum impact.

## What are we going to do?

Improving what we know about secondary school scholarships for Aboriginal students is the crucial first step in understanding what role scholarships play in helping to close the gap in Year 12 attainment. Close the Gap Research aims to make that step happen.







# Close the Gap Research

Close the Gap Research (CtGR) is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to making a positive impact on the lives of Aboriginal people facing adversity. Our mission is to alleviate poverty, suffering, and hardship among Aboriginal communities in need.

## Need. Not race.

CtGR will assess the efficacy of existing and proposed models for addressing the needs of Aboriginal people and work with partners to provide direct, impactful relief to those who really need it. We want to partner with program providers willing to publish proof of success in the following areas:

- School scholarships
- Employment in remote communities
- Prisoner rehabilitation







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