

## Early Findings on the Effects of *Boarding School*

### AUTHOR

Andrew Martin (University of Sydney),  
Brad Papworth (ABSA), and  
Paul Ginns (University of Sydney)

---

What impact does attendance at boarding school have on students' motivation and engagement? How does it affect outcomes such as peer relations, relationship with parents, and quality of life? In this article we present some early findings from the ABSA research project aimed at examining the extent to which attendance at boarding school affects students' academic and non-academic outcomes.

### Objectives

The study (funded by the Australian Research Council and conducted by the University of Sydney in partnership with ABSA) seeks to identify the role of boarding school in academic (eg. motivation, engagement) and non-academic (eg. self-esteem, life satisfaction) outcomes. It does so through a large-scale study of boarding and day students in Australia.

### Introduction

In recent years there has been a small body of research investigating the role of boarding school in students' development. However, little large-scale and longitudinal research has been conducted to deeply and broadly understand the processes and phenomena under focus. Research to date tends to be limited to relatively few boarding schools or limited to relatively narrow outcome measures. Hence, findings and conclusions can be susceptible to variability between individual schools, with relatively limited applicability across the sector.

On refining our data, our research is conducted amongst 13 schools comprising boarding and day students and assesses many academic and non-academic factors

to more fully and reliably gain a sense of the role of boarding school in students' academic and non-academic development. Due to the complexity of the research, there are a number of critical stages to ensure the research and its findings are of the highest quality (see Fig. 1).

### Participants

The sample comprises 5,198 high school students in junior high 11-14 years (54%) and senior high 15-19 years (46%) from thirteen high schools, including 50 boarding houses/residences, in almost every State and Territory of Australia. 29% were boarding students and 71% were day students. Schools in the sample were comprehensive schools of mixed ability (but generally higher in achievement and SES than the national average). Seven schools were co-educational, three schools comprised boys only, and three schools comprised girls only. Although not intended to be representative of the Australian population of high schools, we suggest the sample comprises enough students to yield broadly generalizable results. Just over half (57%) of the respondents were male and 43% were female. The mean age of respondents was 14.35 (SD = 1.67) years and the mean grade was between Yr 9-10 (SD = 1.63). A total of 10% of the sample was from a non-English speaking background and 5% of students were indigenous. With few exceptions, all targeted students in attendance on the day of the testing participated in the survey. Teachers administered the instrument to students during class. The rating scale was first explained and a sample item presented. Students were then asked to complete the instrument on their own and to return the completed instrument to the teacher at the end of class.

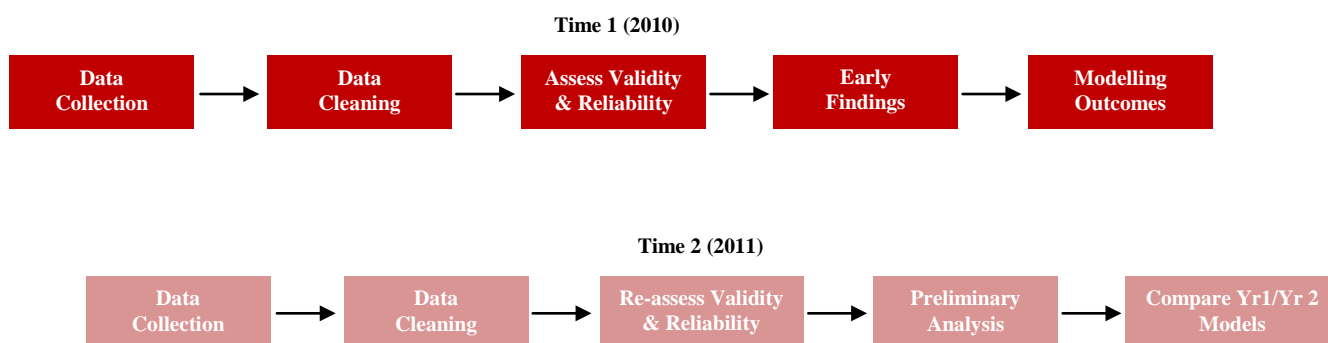


Figure 1: Stages of ABSA research project.

## Materials

- Self-report questionnaire
- Academic outcomes assessed included:
  - achievement (NAPLAN results)
  - achievement-related behaviour
  - approaches to learning
  - motivation and engagement
- Non-academic outcomes assessed included:
  - satisfaction with life
  - well-being
  - interpersonal relationships
- Perceived climate of the boarding house or school
- Big Five Personality Inventory to assess personality
- Students' general and family demographics

At this stage, preliminary analyses have been conducted. These analyses have investigated differences between boarding and day students after controlling for socio-demographics, ability, personality, and school characteristics. It is vital to control for these factors because we want to understand the unique effects of boarding school after accounting for these factors. For example, it may be that a particular personality or socio-demographic may be more likely to attend boarding school and thus it is important to know what effects are due to personality (for example) and what are due to boarding school.

## Analyses

Our preliminary assessments of the data are based on multiple regression analysis. In these regression analyses we included boarding school status (vs. day status) as a predictor – along with numerous socio-

demographic, ability, personality, and school factors as covariates. Of central interest is the effect of boarding school status after controlling for the covariates.

## Results

After controlling for factors such as socio-demographics, ability, personality and school characteristics we found (at  $p < .001$ ):

- On 23 of the 25 motivation and engagement factors (eg. self-efficacy, valuing school, persistence, homework completion, enjoyment of school, class participation), boarding and day students are not significantly different.
- On 2 problematic motivation and engagement factors (fear of failure, uncertain control), boarding school students score higher than day students.
- On 4 of the 5 non-academic measures (eg. self-esteem, life satisfaction), boarding and day students are not significantly different.
- On 1 non-academic measure (relationship with parents), boarding school students are significantly more positive than day students.
- On 20 of the 25 climate/organisational factors (eg. peer support, competitive focus), boarding and day students are not significantly different.
- On 5 climate/organisational measures, boarding school students are significantly more positive than day students.

## Discussion

The overarching finding is general parity in academic and non-academic outcomes between boarding and day students, after controlling for potentially confounding



factors. Hence, attending boarding school generally appears to provide boarders the same level of access and opportunities to academic and non-academic success as their day school counterparts. The data also identifies some areas for further development amongst boarding students – and some areas for celebration in the boarding sector.

Importantly, however, these are preliminary findings. From here we will be conducting more sophisticated analysis to further validate these findings and to better understand the various factors relevant to them. We will also begin collecting a second wave of data to understand these findings and processes from a longitudinal perspective.

For further information about this study, contact Brad Papworth: b.papworth@edfac.usyd.edu.au or (02) 9683 8490.