

Additional Comments by Labor Members

The educational achievements of regional, rural and remote students have been lower than that of their metropolitan peers for many years. This is a fact that is well known and well researched and has been investigated and inquired into by Governments for decades. Promises to fix the education divide between city and country has been repeatedly made. Yet, there has been little progress when it comes to reversing this trend.

For the most part, the *Education in Remote and Complex Environments Report* is balanced and reflects the evidence the committee received. The Committee's findings, included in the Report, call on the Government to implement the findings of its own reviews including the Halsey Review and the Napthine Review. Labor members of the committee support this call to action.

However, the Labor members believe that the recommendations in the *Education in Remote and Complex Environments Report* do not go far enough and lack urgency. Real action by the Government to address inequalities in the educational outcomes of regional, rural and remote students is urgently required. Nor does this Report's recommendations acknowledge that decisions made by the current Government directly impact on the educational outcomes of students from regional, rural and remote communities.

In our view, the evidence presented to the Committee clearly indicates that the current Government's 2014 budget decision to cut school funding associated with the former Labor Government's Better Schools funding model was the wrong decision due to the disproportionate impact it had on regional, rural and remote schools.

As stated in the Report, the AEU highlights how the current Government's changes to school resourcing by the *Australia Education Amendment Act 2017* reduced funding these schools would have received. An example they cited was that schools in the Northern Territory will be funded at 21 percent less than the Schooling Resource Standard by 2023. Various other organisations stated similar concerns regarding school funding with some highlighting that 'these schools are more expensive to run.'

Noting that the most recent Census reported that the percentage of Northern Territory school aged children (5-18 years of age) who are indigenous was 44.21%, these measures will have a disproportionate impact on the Northern Territory's Indigenous school-age population.

Many of the challenges highlighted in the evidence presented to the committee may have been alleviated if the funding guaranteed by *Australian Education Act 2013* had continued. The compounding impact of this funding not being received by these schools limits their ability to address many of the barriers outlined in this Report.

At the very least, the Labor members of the Committee would have like the Report to highlight the urgent need for a fairer needs-based funding model. As the Report outlines in the School Resourcing section, there is a need for a fairer needs-based funding model that aims to address regional, rural and remote student disadvantage. Simply stating that a funding model is needs-based doesn't adequately reflect real experiences in schools. Although the Government argues that its current funding model for schools is needs-based, submissions the Committee received suggest the exact opposite (4.25).

Further, the new National School Reform Agreement, commencing in 2023 (Recommendation 10) is an opportunity for the Education Minister to agree to a long-term fairer needs-based funding model.

Without a doubt, stakeholders engaged in the education of students in remote and complex environments believe the Government's current school funding model is unfair and disproportionately favours inner metropolitan schools. Labor agrees and believes this should be a core focus of the next National School Reform Agreement.

Although the impact of the pandemic on schools is noted in the report (4.2), the recommendations fail to address with any urgency this new and emerging crisis in regional, rural and remote education. In short, the pandemic has exacerbated existing fault lines in Australia's education system and will impact students from regional, rural and remote communities more than their counterparts from inner metropolitan areas.

The Committee's Report mentions that one stakeholder commented (4.240) that 'a shift to online education has disadvantaged many students ... facing long-term impacts on their education'. The Report also highlights that schools also reported a range of difficulties as a consequence of the pandemic, including potential funding shortfalls and access to online resources.

The pandemic has also placed 'significant financial stress on some remote schools like community schools in remote communities as a consequence of families moving away during the pandemic' (4.227).

This is further evidence that the Government must immediately review and increase its share of funding to schools who are struggling with the fallout of the pandemic.

Early Childhood Education

The Labor members of this Committee argue that access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) should be universal like primary and secondary school education. The educational and developmental benefits of ECEC are indisputable and yet many families, including those located in regional, rural and remote Australia, face significant barriers in accessing affordable quality ECEC.

It is the view of the Labor members of this Committee that although a few key areas of Early Childhood Education were raised in the Report, they were not addressed in the Report's recommendations. Evidence presented to the Committee during this inquiry highlighted that the cost of attending early childhood education was a key barrier for regional families.

In the recommendations section of Chapter 3, there is no mention of cost of ECEC as a barrier despite it being recognised in the summary and discussion section (3.50) as being a key barrier to access for regional, rural and remote families. Addressing the barriers to access, including the cost of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), is vital if we as a nation want to increase participation rates for regional, rural and remote children.

This point is also illustrated in by the Child Care Subsidy (3.25) 'there is evidence that financial support can significantly improve participation in early childhood education.' The Government should strongly consider introducing Labor's proposal of universal access to ECEC by moving the Child Care Subsidy to 90% of the cost to families.

Another key area lacking force in the Committee's Report recommendations is that of addressing the low wages of workers in the sector. Low pay is a barrier to the recruitment and retention of highly skilled, predominately female workers, therefore, addressing this barrier must be part of any genuine workforce strategy. Labor members of the Committee believe the Government should play a proactive role in encouraging and supporting the sector's ability to increase wages as a workforce development strategy to help combat recruitment and retention challenges. To date, this Government has dismissed this as not their issue and attacked the previous Labor Government for working with the sector to try to find a solution to this complex problem.

Further Education and Employment

The University sector representatives were unanimously critical of the Government's support or lack thereof for the Higher Education sector during the COVID19 crisis. Whilst the report acknowledges that 'universities are experiencing a significant period of disruption as a consequence of the COVID19 pandemic' (5.112), the recommendations to address these issues are inadequate and lack the urgency required to be effective. The approach suggested in the recommendations that "the committee will continue to monitor these developments" (5.115) is quite frankly not good enough.

The financial impact of the COVID19 pandemic on Universities cannot be underestimated. The universities argued at every opportunity during the Higher Education Roundtable that funding shortfalls will have a significant financial impact on universities and their ability to deliver higher education in regional universities where the cost of delivering courses is extremely high.

The sector was also highly sceptical of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Jobs Ready Graduates Package) 2020*, arguing that these additional university places will not be rolled out fast enough to meet demand nor to address the dire financial situation that universities are in.

Uncapping universities places for regional universities would ensure that regional students with the required pre-COVID19 entrance scores do not miss out on a place next year. As a result of the COVID19 pandemic, it is widely accepted that demand for university places in 2021 will be much higher than previous years and the higher the demand, the higher the entrance scores required. This will disproportionately impact students from regional communities whose entrance scores are on average lower than those of students from metropolitan areas. There is the potential for there to be fewer students from regional, rural and remote communities attending university next year as increased competition drives up entrance marks.

If the Minister for Education is genuine about implementing the recommendations of the Napthine Review, the Government would immediately implement one of its key recommendations and provide demand-driven funding for university places in regional areas.

Another way to urgently address the shortfall in funding associated with the higher cost of delivering higher education in regional universities, suggested by Latrobe University, was for the Government to increase the regional loading. It is the view of Labor members that the Minister for Education should not only consider this recommendation but also to reverse the billions of dollars cut from the sector since this Government came into office in 2013.

The Committee's report encourages the current Government to get on with addressing the educational inequality of regional, remote and rural students. However, Labor members' additional comments – which reflect evidence presented to the Committee particularly through the roundtable process – stress that urgent action is required to ensure that young Australians from all over the country should be supported to meet their potential with high quality education and meaningful pathways to further education.

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