



## **Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments**

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a second submission to the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments. We thank the Committee for acknowledging that the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic on education provides valuable insight into how teaching and learning can be improved for students in remote and complex environments, and indeed, across Australia.

APTA notes that the impact of COVID-19 on students and classroom teachers is well-understood in the community, including by the federal and state/territory governments. The impacts of school closures and the move to online or mix-mode teaching in most Australian jurisdictions received broad media coverage and political and administrative attention. Thus, APTA's second submission to the Inquiry will focus on the role of professional teaching associations (PTAs) in supporting and connecting teachers across Australia and the lessons that can be applied from the COVID-19 response for longer term support to teachers working in remote and complex environments. This is our area of expertise and is an aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic which may not be familiar to decision-makers.

APTA's primary role of supporting and connecting joint councils for PTAs across Australia means we have strong reach into schools. We will include in this submission feedback from our members on the impacts of COVID-19 more broadly.

To prepare this submission, APTA received input from our member associations and also conducted an online forum on Thursday June 4 2020 where teachers and educators discussed how the experiences of COVID-19 can be used to impact on the work of teachers and PTAs into the future.

Our submission occurs in two parts. Part One looks specifically on what can be learned from the impact of on professional teaching associations and how this can input into discussions on supporting education in remote and complex environments. Part Two considers the impact of COVID-19 in other relevant areas.

In our submission, APTA makes the following recommendations to the committee, on which we will elaborate in this submission:

1. That federal and state/territory governments provide adequate funding for professional teaching associations to effectively support teachers working in remote and complex environments
2. That jurisdictions recognise the benefit of online professional learning events for teachers working in remote and complex environments, while noting that face-to-face events are also necessary and that support for remote and regional teachers to attend is vital
3. That federal and state/territory governments actively engage with professional teaching associations on ongoing issues relating to teaching in remote and complex environments.

## **PART 1: The role of professional teaching associations during the COVID-19 pandemic**

APTA notes that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on professional teaching associations in positive and negative ways. The core business of a PTA is to actively support their members by directly or indirectly facilitating professional learning and advice relevant to their field, whether it be a subject specialisation (such as English or mathematics teaching) or cross-curriculum field (such as literacy or special education). Traditionally, associations provide face-to-face professional learning events at regional, state/territory and national levels, which have been impacted by travel restrictions and limits on gatherings due to physical distancing.

PTAs have had to shift their focus from face-to-face events to providing support in other ways, such as through:

- Online conferences via web-based platforms such as Zoom or Teams
- Webinars
- Increasing communication via websites or social media networks
- Developing and/or sharing resources

These changes have been challenging for associations, particularly for those that rely on school-based volunteers or on ticket sales of face-to-face events for revenue. However, many positive outcomes were observed and these are summarised below. Each of these points is evidence that professional teaching associations are very well placed – and often better placed than other support services – in providing relevant and appropriate support for teachers in regional and remote locations.

### **1. How COVID-19 enhanced support for teachers in regional and remote locations**

The benefit of a shift to online professional learning meant that geographic location is not a factor in access. While some teachers are challenged by unreliable internet, feedback to APTA suggests that many more teachers were able to access professional learning than they would have otherwise. Cost and logistics prevents many regional teachers from accessing face-to-face events which are usually hosted in major urban areas, and a shift online meant more teachers can access professional learning.

### **2. The value of professional teaching associations in reviewing resources and services**

The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic meant institutions and service providers around the world rapidly developed and shared resources aimed at supporting teachers and parents operating in online teaching environments. Online tools were provided for free or at reduced cost to teachers, and universities, museums, publishers and others produced an avalanche of resources. Much of this content was very high quality and relevant to the Australian teaching context, but some was not. Professional teaching associations played a valuable role in filtering content and advising their members on high-quality and useful content and services. Teachers struggling to cope under

dramatic changes to pedagogical practice who were unable to effectively review and evaluate the huge range of resources provided to them could rely on the expert advice of their association.

APTA would also like to highlight that many resources shared by PTAs were not from external providers, but were generated by their own members. This highlights the incredible benefit of experienced teachers helping their peers and the value of PTAs in facilitating communication between teachers.

Our member associations noted that many teachers provided feedback that they appreciated the role of the PTA in identifying and sharing quality resources.

### **3. The impact of COVID-19 on improving web presence and social networks**

COVID-19 provided impetus to PTAs on improving the quality of their websites and social networks for hosting and sharing resources. These resources – developed by subject specialists and experienced classroom practitioners are now more widely available to teachers across Australia, including those working in remote and complex environments.

### **4. The value of professional teaching associations in advocacy for teachers**

The COVID-19 pandemic created a number of challenges for teachers and students regarding assessment for senior secondary teachers and students. PTAs noted that they have had to advocate on behalf of their members on matters associated with the impact of COVID-19 on equitable student assessment. As PTAs are run by educators, for educators, they are well-placed to advocate on behalf of teachers. As an example, the NSW Society and Culture Association advocated to the NSW Educator Standards Authority (NESA) on the impacts of COVID-19 on the Personal Interest Project component of the HSC Society and Culture course.

#### Issues for professional teaching associations from COVID-19

##### **1. Financial and human resources impacts on professional teaching associations**

Our members noted that many online professional learning conferences or webinars were provided free of charge. This meant an increase in the number of participants for many events, but it also meant a negative financial impact on many associations.

Depending on the size and location of a professional teaching association, PTAs may be well-funded or may struggle for revenue. Associations in populous states in common subject areas (such as English or science) can generate revenue from membership fees and the sale of resources. These larger associations may also employ full-time or part-time staff to support the work of the association. Some jurisdictions, such as the Northern Territory, provide government funding to support smaller associations to conduct their work. These associations were often able to continue to support their members, albeit in different forms.

Many associations, however, rely on teacher volunteers to operate and on revenue from face-to-face conferences and workshops for necessary revenue. The drastic increase in teacher workload and restrictions on travel and physical distancing meant these associations struggled to maintain normal operations. This is not to say that volunteer-driven associations in remote or regional areas did not benefit from the additional support provided by education departments, curriculum authorities and others, but that in some cases professional associations temporarily or permanently ceased functioning, removing a valuable service for supplementary support.

**APTA recommends that federal and state/territory governments provide adequate funding for professional teaching associations in order to better support teachers working in remote and complex environments.** It is clear that financial and human resources are imperative for professional teaching associations to function, and considering the great value of PTAs in supporting regional and remote teachers, direct funding for associations will benefit teachers across Australia.

## **PART 2: Broader impacts of COVID-19 on education**

In addition to considering the impact of COVID-19 on associations, APTA has a strong interest in education more broadly, and we have been actively considering the impacts of COVID-19 on teaching and learning, and on the lessons we can take forward into the future.

The following issues were raised by our members and have impact on the education of students in remote and complex environments.

### **1. Support for special education students in regional and remote locations**

The impacts of COVID-19 on students with special education needs were significant regardless of location. Special education and learning support teachers provided feedback to their PTAs that shifting to an online teaching model was incredibly difficult. Parents also noted tremendous challenges in effectively supporting their children's learning.

Special education teachers know that external support providers play a valuable role in supporting the education of children with additional needs, and this has been impacted by COVID-19. This helps to reinforce the additional challenges for special needs students in regional and remote locations who do not have ready access external support providers regardless of the pandemic. We note that supporting special education teachers and students in remote and complex environments is a high need.

APTA notes that professional associations which directly support special education teachers are well-placed to provide ongoing support to teachers working in remote and complex locations as a result of COVID-19 learning – more webinars and online events are being planned into the future. We do note, however, that human and financial resources are needed for this to be sustainable for some associations.

### **2. The continuing need for centralised face-to-face professional learning**

Most of our members noted the impact of travel restrictions and physical distancing on face-to-face events. While a shift to online professional learning has had benefits in terms of access, it has had negative impacts, including:

- **Some professional learning cannot be conducted online**

For example, NSW-based teachers noted that valuable face-to-face professional learning on HSC assessment had to be cancelled and that the professional learning of these events could not be shifted online for security and privacy reasons. The ability for teachers across a jurisdiction to come together to discuss crucial issues such as senior secondary assessment remains a vital need.

- **Face-to-face events are highly valued for professional networking**

Listening to a subject expert or keynote speaker can occur equally successfully online as in a lecture theatre, but the ability for educators to converse in formal and informal ways during a professional learning event remains essential. The relationships educators form at face-to-face events have long-term positive impacts on teaching and learning.

- **National conferences support cross-jurisdictional dialogue**

The primary operation of most PTAs is within an educational jurisdiction. National conferences provide a means for teachers across Australia to meet and discuss initiatives and resources with their peers. APTA notes that in 2020 most national conferences have been cancelled or postponed.

- **Face-to-face events create revenue**

Feedback to APTA suggests that many PTAs have offered online professional learning for free. Normally, these events would be conducted centrally at cost to attendees. While free events are preferable for participants, many PTAs rely on ticket sales to generate revenue. For associations without revenue from membership fees or without financial support from state/territory governments, their ability to support their members is much reduced.

- **Professional learning events cancelled and not replaced**

Many face-to-face professional learning events organised by PTAs were cancelled due to COVID-19 and these were not replaced by online alternatives. This has impacted on the ability for many teachers to access relevant professional learning.

- **Disengagement from online professional learning**

Some associations noted a decline in the participation in online professional learning events in comparison to face-to-face events. While this may indicate teachers were too overwhelmed by changes to their teaching to engage in any profession learning, or that they

were disengaged from online professional learning based on having to teach online, it is likely that face-to-face professional learning remains preferable for many teachers.

- **Declining membership levels**

Some professional teaching associations noted a decline in their membership in 2020 in comparison to previous years. This suggests that the decision to join a teaching association is due to the ability to access face-to-face events.

**APTA recommends that jurisdictions recognise the benefit of online professional learning events for teachers working in remote and complex environments, while noting that face-to-face events are also necessary, and that support for remote and regional teachers to attend is vital.** We recognise the tremendous value that online events have had for regional and remote teachers, but we strongly recommend that this occurs alongside centralised, face-to-face events and that funding to support attendance at these is required. We know that providing both online and face-to-face events will be challenging to associations, which is why APTA also recommends that adequate funding be provided to allow this.

During the COVID-19 pandemic professional teaching associations have actively supported teachers across Australia as they adapted to the changes in their work. We know from our work that COVID-19 has impacted on teachers differently across the country. In some jurisdictions teaching has occurred effectively “as usual” while for most teachers COVID-19 drastically changed the way that teachers worked. APTA has worked hard to record the experiences of teachers to consider ways in which professional teaching associations can better support their members. This submission relates specifically to the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments and is only a small summary of what we have learned about the hard work and resilience of teachers across Australia.

Our ability to quickly and effectively engage with educators on issues impacting on teaching and learning results in our third recommendation to the committee. **We recommend that federal and state/territory governments actively engage with professional teaching associations on ongoing issues relating to teaching in remote and complex environments.** We believe we have a strong ongoing role to play in working with governments on improving teaching and learning for students across Australia.

We thank you for considering our submission.

Cheryl Brennan

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