

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Inquiry into

Education in Remote and Complex Environments

from the

Federal Council

of the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.
ICPA (Aust)**

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to comment on the inquiry into education in remote and complex environments. ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The member families of the association reside and work in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Many of our families live on isolated stations, great distances from their nearest community with their only access to education, including early childhood education, being via distance education programs.

As a stakeholder group focused on gaining equity for families accessing education while living and working in rural and remote Australia, ICPA (Aust) welcomes and supports any initiatives which may improve educational access and outcomes for rural and remote students. ICPA (Aust) advocates on behalf of geographically isolated families for adequate assistance to be available for their students to have equitable access to education opportunities commensurate to their urban counterparts. ICPA (Aust) believes that geographically isolated students need to be considered as a distinct disadvantage group in any discussions and consideration of education programs. Remote students should be afforded the same choices as their city counterparts of studying how and where it best suits their need.

ICPA (Aust) advocates for all geographically isolated students from early childhood to vocational and tertiary, any students whose educational opportunities and outcomes are impeded due to their geographical location. The key barriers and challenges that impact on the educational outcomes for students living beyond regional centres, include aspiration and access issues for those accessing small rural schools or taking part in distance education programs on isolated stations for their primary school years. The barriers for educating children in rural and remote locations result in remote students' educational outcomes and aspirations being less than that of their urban counterparts and can be attributed to many leaving remote areas to be able to provide their children with an appropriate education. Rural education is interlinked with other aspects of rural communities, such as fluctuating populations, economic influences, seasonal conditions and climate. It must be recognised that attempts to address inequities in the provision of quality education in remote environments would not be effective unless broader economic and social issues are also considered. In order to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of these students, inequity issues must be understood. Some of these children are not considered vulnerable because they are not impacted by extreme levels of poverty. Rather, due to geographic isolation from services, many rural and remote families are expected to cover out-of-pocket costs for the education of their children from early childhood through to tertiary education, which is not experienced by urban families. In order to improve provision of education outcomes, options and pathways for remote students a national approach that ensures educational delivery of a consistently high standard, no matter where the education is provided is needed.

Early Childhood

Equitable educational opportunities must commence with the early years, with a focus on the year prior to starting formal schooling. The availability, delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting formal schooling has been enhanced by the Federal Government's commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Despite this, the affordability and accessibility of such programs for those living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many due to unavailability of services and/or staff available to fill positions, limited flexibility to allow for individual family's needs, high out-of-pocket costs exceeding the family budget and funding concerns. It is imperative that any inquiry into improving education in these areas considers how early childhood education can be made more accessible and workable in these areas.

ICPA (Aust) believes the impact of not being able to access affordable early learning for children living beyond the metropolitan boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in large centres. Much of this is due to the inequitable availability and accessibility of early childhood learning opportunities and resources meaning learning difficulties are undiagnosed in the early years and limited opportunities for socialisation and interaction are available to remote students.

Flexibility is a key component to students accessing early child-hood services in small rural towns. This may include the need to consider how current infrastructure at small rural schools may be utilised to include preschoolers. Where this is not possible, funding needs to be made available to ensure appropriate infrastructure and resources can be provided. Ensuring access to Early Childhood Education may also need to include increasing availability and eligibility for students to access distance education preschool programs. More educators are also required to ensure that all students have access to the required 15 hours per week preschool education. In rural and remote areas, consideration should be given to include qualified teachers and diploma qualified educators where Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access. Students commencing formal schooling need to be school-ready, especially as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects have also been introduced to the preschool curriculum. Rural and remote students will lag behind their urban peers from the very beginning if preschool has not been experienced in their early years.

Distance Education Early Childhood Programs

While all States and Territories offer early learning programs delivered by distance education, this is the only avenue available for many families living in rural and remote areas. Families wanting to access these programs are bearing the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons. Across Australia, less than 200 children access recognised 4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education, which today includes a mixture of hands on play-based learning and teacher-led structured lessons involving the use of technology for these programs to be accessed. As with every other early childhood program for 3-4-year-olds, these distance education lessons are designed to help children transition from home to school. The children need a designated learning space in which to learn school behaviours, such as the ability to sit at a desk for enough time to complete a task and to use the technology required for distance education. It is also vital that these students can appropriately interact with their peers and teacher, to understand the formal concept of school and socialise face-to-face with other children of their age. This contact is also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities. However, providing these opportunities often requires remote families to travel great distances to attend school functions.

All of these issues associated with distance education early childhood programs and activities come at a significant cost to rural and remote families. However, geographically isolated families undertaking preschool distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education allowance which other distance education students receive. This is because 4-year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Federal Government and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as these children are still in their parents' care. ICPA (Aust) believes that given the vital need for Early Childhood Education to be universally accessible, financial support needs to be made available to these families in order to improve accessibility and affordability.

Mobile Early Childhood Services in Rural and Remote Areas

For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, playgroups and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and parents in small rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face-to-face interaction for children of similar ages in rural and remote areas. Flexibility and surety of funding for these services is vital in providing the much-needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities. ICPA (Aust) has concerns with the changes from the Budget Based Funding model to the new package, where, Mobile Playgroups in particular, have only been provided with temporary funding and have had to reapply for continued funding through the Department of Social Services or the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS). There is also no funding available for existing Mobile Playgroups such as the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) in the NT to expand and provide a much-needed similar service to surrounding pastoral properties and communities around Alice Springs.

Rural and Remote Schools

Rural and remote schools need to be adequately funded and resourced to ensure that the students attending these schools are given equitable educational opportunities to those attending schools in metropolitan areas. Geographically isolated students also need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their needs, allowing them to realise their educational potential and presenting a pathway which provides educational parity with their urban peers where this is not available locally to them. Viability of rural and remote schools is essential, and it is imperative for

rural and remote families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions. Rural and remote families and their students are valued and continued to be supported. Rural schools are often the centre of their communities and ensuring that these schools are well supported, resourced and staffed is vital to the children's learning in these towns. Good schools can retain and even attract families to the regions, but families will quickly move away if they have concerns regarding their children's education.

Distance Education (DE)

The success of distance education students reaching their aspirations and potential is reliant on the home tutor implementing DE materials on a daily basis in an effective, positive and competent manner. The value of the distance education tutor needs to be recognised and acknowledged.

For many young people living in remote regions, their only access to education is to study by distance education. While distance education services are well structured and distance education centres ably staffed, distance education provision is founded on the assumption that all children have ready access to a person able to teach the program in the geographically isolated classroom. That is in order to ensure the education in remote schoolrooms is appropriate and successfully, a suitably able person is needed in the schoolroom on a daily full-time basis to make this happen. This person is the distance education tutor who must be available and able to provide the practical, day-to-day supervision and support required for the effective delivery of a distance education program. This is an extensive role which requires a high level of commitment and is the only way that geographically isolated distance education can be successful. The vital role of the distance education tutor, often the mother who has had to come out of the workforce in order to supervise schooling, should be recognised through the payment of an allowance, which acknowledges the essential work they perform to deliver a high standard of education to these children.

Families who educate their children via distance education are required to establish and maintain a schoolroom setting, provide extra learning materials and resources, print necessary learning materials all of which are readily supplied to students at mainstream schools. In addition, distance education families often travel significant distances to participate in school activities that offer interaction and socialisation for their children. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance assists distance education families with some of these necessary expenses in order to educate their children when living in geographic isolation, however this does not include covering the cost of someone to teach the children in the home schoolroom. Due consideration must be given to the encumbrance on approximately 1500 families in geographically isolated areas for whom distance education is the only means to educate children.

Boarding

Many children living in remote regions of Australia must move away from home to attend secondary school as there is no school which offers the age appropriate schooling needed within a reasonable distance. There are very few government run boarding facilities that offer 24 hour care 7 days a week for students to access a government school and the few that are available cannot accommodate the number of students who board away from home due to distance (approximately 4500 students receive the AIC Boarding Allowance). In Queensland for example, there are eight local government shires that do not have a Secondary School and a further two that only offer up to Year 10. Several other shires may contain a high school, but it may be hundreds of kilometres from where some of the students live; these students need to board away from home for reasonable access to school. These students and their families need to be supported to be able to access appropriate and equitable educational opportunities as they move through their educational journey.

In regard to geographically isolated students from the 'tri-border' areas of Central Australia the distance to the nearest secondary school, let alone a boarding secondary school, may be thousands of kilometres away and the only available public transport such as passenger flights may require these students to board interstate. Consideration should be given for these students to be able to access state allowances in the jurisdiction they attend boarding school thus helping to make their schooling more affordable.

Tertiary/Vocational

In remote areas of Australia there is limited access to tertiary institutions and fewer apprentice and training opportunities thus students from these areas must move away from their local communities to access a tertiary institution or find traineeships and placements, which comes at great financial and emotional cost. Rural families have difficulties meeting the relocation and accommodation costs associated with higher education and training and

therefore support and assistance needs to be considered to assist with these costs to ensure equitable education opportunities for these students.

Online Learning

There are numerous benefits for students studying online from home, such as affordability, choice, ease of access, the potential to speed up learning and the ability to enter the workforce more rapidly and better balance work and family demands due to flexibility in course delivery options. For certain students, some or all of these elements may be beneficial as they undertake their tertiary study, however online tertiary education is not appropriate for everyone or every course. The benefits, however, may apply more readily to online learning for the ongoing professional development of qualified professionals who live in rural and remote areas such as teachers and nurses.

It is vital that online learning is available as an option for students but not be seen as the only learning mode providing equity to rural students or meeting all students' educational needs. The opportunity to partake in face-to-face campus, social, sporting, cultural and academic life is seen by many students as a vital component of tertiary study and a critical element of relationship building and gaining communication skills and personal development. These factors are even more important when considering rural and remote students who may have spent their entire formal education in a small school or distance education classroom with associated educational and social disadvantages.

Curriculum

Access and support to deliver the Australian Curriculum (including STEM) in a flexible way to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students is essential in remote locations. The National Curriculum needs to present an accurate account of primary production in the Australian Curriculum. ICPA members have called for the inclusion of unbiased units which specifically teach how Australian food and fibre is produced, so that all students will have a better understanding of this essential industry and how the food they eat is grown. In remote communities where there are high schools, the curriculum is often modified to meet the educational and lifestyle needs of indigenous students, in order to address poor outcomes and this needs to be considered for all students in the remote context. Teachers capable and qualified of teaching the curriculum are also essential to maintaining quality educational outcomes for students in these locations.

Provision of the curriculum in remote areas is largely dependent on access to the internet and telecommunications to access the curriculum provided by the educational centre, especially in distance education settings; connectivity is key. With this in mind, it is imperative that in order for students to receive a commensurate education in these areas that a key focus on maintaining adequate communications and technology available to these students. Without this, students will not receive equitable education outcomes. An example of the challenges include families who work in stock camps or in other non-permanent remote situations who are unable to access their curriculum because of the lack of availability of an internet service which will meet their needs. As the curriculum and education system becomes more reliant on internet, this is even more essential.

Teachers

The importance of preparing teachers for the rural and remote context and supporting them when they are teaching in these contexts cannot be underestimated. The quality of teaching staff in any educational setting are key to the quality of the education provided and to achieve optimum learning outcomes for remote students. It is vitally important that teachers are prepared for the rural and remote context to be able to meet the learning needs and interests of remote students. Value needs to be put upon different and multiple characteristics for effective and successful teachers in these areas. In remote areas, it is essential that staff are well supported and given every and equal opportunity for professional development to enhance their skills as for those in urban schooling environments. Often young inexperienced teachers take on hard to fill positions in isolated locations, unprepared for rural living, isolation from family, friends and colleagues, and the impact lack of educational services has on student outcomes. Training of graduate teachers for the rural and remote experience and engagement in these communities is vital to ensure improved and ongoing relevant support needs to be provided for teachers in these areas. Training in the identification and management of specific learning needs and disabilities should also be a key element in any teacher preparation to build the teacher's capacity to identify and assist children with special needs or learning difficulties. Assistance and incentives need to be readily available to teachers in remote locations to ensure they are offered adequate facilities and services. Appropriate training and high-quality induction for those entering the teaching

profession in a rural and remote context is essential to overcoming barriers and challenges associated with teaching in these contexts. These provisions will assist in attracting and retaining quality teaching staff to remote locations and will in turn ensure better educational outcomes for students in these areas.

Rural Hardship

The impact of drought and other rural hardships cannot be discounted when considering education in remote and geographically isolated areas. Drought and rural hardships impact all types of schooling in rural and remote communities, both for students in the towns as well as out on properties as the communities struggle to provide an education for their children amidst these hardships. The wellbeing and resilience of a community is truly tested when they are unable to provide basic compulsory education for their children.

Early Years Learning

Educating younger rural and remote children can be financially draining and this cost is difficult to meet when a family is faced with hardship, such as drought. Children miss out on learning opportunities because families cannot afford added costs associated with travelling many kilometres to access learning and social programs. Finding funds for out-of-pocket costs to educate preschoolers can be problematic. Families also have difficulty funding escalating increased In Home Care (IHC) fees for child care. With a focus on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and a recognition that access to an early childhood program is essential, children in drought-affected areas not being able to participate in these services may suffer long term impacts. The viability of Long Day Care Centres, early learning centres and kindergartens is also vulnerable when communities are struggling with drought, and consideration for support of these early learning programs should also be a part of an education focus in creating resilience in rural communities.

Rural Schools

In times of rural hardship, students at schools in rural communities often must forego normal supplementary educational activities like school camps, excursions or other events due to added expenses. Children are acutely aware of the difficult circumstances the drought brings and will make choices that they feel may help their families but may inhibit their education opportunities at the same time. Examples include choosing not to participate in a science competition or local sport representatives or not attending competitions away from their community. Bringing outside specialist educators such as artists or sports coaches into the communities becomes more challenging as communities struggle to raise funds locally. The mental wellbeing of both parents and students is adversely impacted due to the bleak environment. This in turn affects the wellbeing of whole communities as they struggle to provide for their children. Limited educational opportunity and experiences can also mean families choose to move away from these areas due to the lack of equitable educational opportunities, thus further damaging the social fabric of the communities.

Distance Education

Distance education for geographically isolated students who have no access to daily face-to-face schooling is founded on the assumption that a 'home or distance education tutor' is available to supervise the students in their home schoolroom. This is a significant barrier for remote families who must provide this tutor themselves. The role often falls on the mother, which means she is then unable to participate in other day to day work, either on the property on which the family resides or elsewhere. Families find it difficult to fund a tutor, and finding a governess/tutor often proves difficult, as fewer people are interested in taking jobs in isolated areas even when families can pay a wage. Some families have relied on the In Home Care (IHC) scheme to subsidise tutor wages however, this scheme does not entirely meet the needs of rural and remote families as tutors are only allowed to supervise homework and not distance education, even when there is no face-to-face school nearby. One of the intents of the IHC scheme and the New Child Care Package is to get as many parents into work or study as possible, however, with educators not being able to supervise the home learning centre for Distance Education students other than for homework times, geographically isolated mothers are hindered in their ability to work and this small cohort of rural and remote families are excluded from the benefits of the program. In times of drought and other rural hardship, this can be exacerbated as the need for the family member, acting as the home tutor, cannot be assisting with the day-to-day running of the business as well as supervising their children's schoolwork.

Boarding Schools

Rural and remote students often have limited secondary schooling options available to them as many have no reasonable daily access to age appropriate schooling where they live. While living in a remote location where no school exists other than a form of 'School of Distance Education', there are also many cases in rural areas where the

closest school does not offer schooling above Middle School, or does not offer High School at all. For example, in Queensland there are eight Shires with no high school and another two Shires where high school only provides to Year 10. It is not just “property/station” children who go away to boarding school. Many rural towns only have P-6 primary schools, so the town children also often go away to a school that offers boarding to receive an education. These children live too far away to travel back and forth from home and school regularly and there are no schools near them. There is sometimes a misunderstanding that these students are going past the local school to try to have an “elite” education, however for many of these rural children, no local school exists. While Distance Education for Secondary students is available, it can be very difficult to commit to and be successful at, especially if a student has attended a local school for their primary years and does not have a previous distance education background. High School age students undertaking distance education require a dedicated supervisor and families often do not have the resources or financial support to provide one.

Across all states there are relatively few government-run boarding school options available to families, which leaves most having to pay the ever-increasing high costs of independent or private boarding schools to educate their children. State run hostels in many states have dwindled to very low numbers and many only offer Monday-Friday boarding which is problematic for the majority of boarders who must travel long distances. In 2015, ICPA (Aust) surveyed its members with relation to boarding fees, the link to the paper can be found here:

<https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/94/final-boarding-school-survey-icpa-aust-with-comments-2016>

It was found that average out-of-pocket costs for families (AFTER commonwealth and any state allowances available were deducted) were between \$17,000 - \$35,000 per student per year, which is unsustainable for most rural families. Many families often have multiple students boarding away at once and costs can reach \$100,000 per year out-of-pocket for all the students in some of these families. Some families are splitting the family and moving to town to access affordable schooling, or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all their children in boarding school. This negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

Meeting these costs are exacerbated in times of drought or other rural hardship. In the drought situation across much of Australia currently, ICPA has been hearing of heartbreaking cases where families cannot pay boarding and tuition fees and the students are no longer able to continue at their school. In some instances, families are delaying their children going away to school or bringing them home early and in some cases choosing which of their children they can educate. Some are not going away to school at all while others are being brought home which can mean that education then stops for the most part, especially for boys as they may be needed to work on the property. One NSW family, for example, is rotating bringing their boys home from school during term to help keep their stock alive while Dad goes out and earns off-farm income to help pay the mounting bills.

Some families can no longer afford to pay staff or have reduced staff numbers, so the increasing workload falls directly on family members. Schools for the most part are being extremely supportive to rural boarding students, with some offering discounts, bursaries, time payments and help where they can. Ultimately, these schools are businesses and cannot give all rural students a free education if they are to remain viable. ICPA (Aust) is very concerned about the future of these young children, as their education cannot be put ‘on hold’ for a couple of years while the drought is on, in the hope that the children can go back to schooling at a later date when a family’s finances have improved.

Tertiary and Training

Students from drought-affected communities should not be disadvantaged from accessing tertiary and training opportunities. The extra costs associated with accessing tertiary and training opportunities can be even more difficult to cover in times of drought.

Community, Culture and Country

Students in remote areas are in a unique situation where they often have an intimate knowledge of their families work and a close connection to their communities. This is especially clear in times of rural hardship when children and their education are impacted by these hardships. For example, the effects of drought on children were highlighted in the report released by UNICEF Australia in February 2019: “In Their Own Words: The Hidden Impact of Prolonged Drought on Children and Young People” which highlighted the unique challenges for children experiencing drought and concerns for the wellbeing of these children. Students feel the pressure as they know the high cost incurred by their families for them to be at school. These students know their families struggle to find the funds to keep them in school and they can feel an extra need to do well because of this. Rural children also feel guilty for being at school rather than at home helping when they know their family needs them. Many families do not talk about the real situation openly

as they do not want the children worrying, which builds up pressure and creates anxiety. In a less than ideal situation, some rural families due to the high cost of accessing education are splitting, with mum and the children going to live in town to access school, leaving dad to deal with the drought at home alone. To alleviate this, specific educational assistance for remote students to assist them to provide education for their children, which will in turn enhance their resilience and wellbeing is required and even more so in times of rural hardship such as droughts.

Attracting and retaining graduates from all backgrounds to rural and remote areas by offering certainty of sustainable, vibrant communities, gainful employment and an opportunity to be valued for the skills they can provide is imperative. Potentially, many rural and remote tertiary and VET students will return post-course to rural communities, bringing back skills which in turn will help to strengthen their communities and assist in further attracting and retaining residents, thereby boosting the economic and social sustainability of these communities. It is essential to ensure these students have access to equitable educational opportunities, as well as providing incentives and support to attract and retain the workforce in remote locations.

Initiatives to support remote educational outcomes

ICPA (Aust) acknowledges and appreciates past and present government initiatives that have been effective in supporting and achieving greater educational outcomes in remote communities. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance was introduced in 1973 to provide financial support to families with children who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate government school. Since it was first introduced, it has provided geographical isolated students improved access to educational opportunities. While ICPA (Aust) believes changes need to be considered for the allowance to meet the needs of geographically isolated families in the twenty-first century, we are tremendously grateful to successive Australian governments for continuing the scheme to assist geographically isolated students to access an appropriate education.

Other initiatives which promote improved educational outcomes in remote communities include flexible approaches to providing specialist subjects to students in remote communities and incentives to attract, support and retain teachers in remote areas.

Secondary Schooling: The Aurora College (The Virtual Selective High School) is a new and unique secondary option for gifted and talented students in government schools in NSW. Classes commenced in January 2015 with over 160 students from across NSW. Aurora College allows students in rural and remote areas to remain in their local school and community while studying specialist subjects which their home school cannot currently offer.

Students connect with their teachers and classmates through a virtual learning environment, which includes web conferencing software and the Department's virtual classrooms. Aurora College offers students expanded career options through innovative programs and strengthened partnerships between schools, TAFE, universities, business and employers. Mentoring opportunities and master classes are key features of both the online and residential school programs.

As connectivity continues to improve it is anticipated that programs such as the Aurora College will expand. Caution should be taken when considering this platform as meeting the learning needs and learning styles of all students in rural and remote locations. Learning via distance education at the secondary level is not conducive to all learning styles. Students need to be independent, self-motivated learners if they are to achieve good results. While one or two subjects being taught through virtual classrooms can be beneficial, to go beyond that can be detrimental for many students, particularly when other life experiences are very limited in their community. The teenage years provide a critical window of opportunity for learning and growth, as children are becoming more independent of their parents and moving into adulthood. They are easily influenced by those around them and the opportunities available to them. Parents place a high priority on accessing education to ensure their children can reach their potential and grow into confident, capable adults, able to give back to society.

Most states offer some form of incentives to encourage teachers to rural and remote locations, such as the transfer points system, whereby points are gained in order to transfer to chosen locations. The most effective initiatives in attracting and retaining top teachers seem to be those which prepare teachers for living and working in rural areas and/or offer mentoring support Initiatives which include:

Pre-service teacher incentive programs - for example the Kelvin Grove Teacher Education of Excellence⁴, which works closely with the QLD University of Technology (QUT) to improve teacher preparation into Prep to Year 12 with exposure to rural and remote placements.

Take the Lead (Qld) –a leadership and development program to develop the skills and capabilities of selected participants as high performing school leaders. The program attracts and recruits high-performing teachers, associate leaders and principals who aspire to higher level school leadership roles in rural or remote locations in Queensland.

NSW- teach.Rural Scholarships, “HSC students and university students currently enrolled in teacher education studies - get paid while you study to become a primary or secondary teacher in a rural or remote NSW public school!”

Remote Areas Incentive Scheme (RAIS) in Qld for rural and remote teachers provides increased funding dependent on the remoteness of the school as well as the cost of several flights in and out of town.

Incentives to attract and retain other professionals e.g. psychologists, behavioural therapists and speech therapists in rural and remote areas will enable continuity of specific learning programs and take the pressure off teachers to develop management programs for students with specific education needs.

Career Pathways

Access to information on and support for senior secondary career pathways is critical for all young Australians’ future planning regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location. For many students living in rural and remote areas, difficulty in accessing information and support is proving restrictive to them achieving their future aspirations. Support is often not readily available and difficult to access due to the remoteness of where these students live. Availability and flexibility of modes of delivery of information/courses and difficulty accessing work placement opportunities can present real barriers to engagement in pathways into jobs and careers. Rural and remote students deserve access to options for post-school that are commensurate with their ability, skills, ambition, aspirations, passion, interests and motivation, and must be given the opportunity to succeed and reach their potential.

Issues for Rural and Remote Students

To ensure equity of access to senior secondary pathways and to improve the successful transition to their post-school career pathway for rural and remote students, ICPA (Aust) believes the following challenges need to be considered for these students:

Affordability - A major deterrent to rural and remote students participating in and accessing their chosen work experience, VETis and career pathway curriculum on a daily basis is the cost of accessing chosen courses/work places. Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate to attend work placement, university or training institutions away from home, incurring high accommodation and travel expenses.

The cost of delivery of courses to rural and remote areas can be prohibitive for service providers in both the private and government RTO sectors, reducing access to courses for students outside metropolitan areas.

Accessibility and availability - Training providers, courses and practicum places in rural and remote locations to facilitate the completion of the course including practical course components may not be readily available. Students in rural and remote locations are constrained in their ability to complete courses due to a lack of easy, regular access to appropriate businesses to conduct the practical component of their chosen course.

Communication issues - In rural areas, students often live great distances from training centres and the quality and capability of internet and communication services may make accessing and completing online components of a program challenging.

Data restrictions for Sky Muster satellite internet customers is particularly problematic, as while an Educational Service is available to students enrolled in Schools of Distance Education for primary and secondary education, tertiary and vocational education students do not qualify for the additional data offered by the Sky Muster Education Service. A large percentage of rural students live in areas where only Sky Muster satellite internet is available or possibly mobile broadband where data can be cost-prohibitive. Expanding the Sky Muster Education service to include tertiary and training students and adding unmetered educational content to the new Sky Muster Plus satellite internet plans would also prove very helpful to these students. Rural and remote students need a variety of means of delivery.

Access to Quality Staff - It is essential that suitably qualified staff in regional and remote locations are engaged, with a high level of knowledge and skills relevant to the curriculum being taught and this must extend to the career pathway curriculum. These teachers must have access to regular, affordable upskilling opportunities and professional development to ensure their skills and knowledge remain of high standard and relevant to emerging trends and demands of business/industry.

Onerous teacher registration requirements in various jurisdictions further limits the availability of skilled teachers in these rural and remote areas. ICPA (Aust) believes that an alternative, flexible pathway could be made for these

teachers to retain their teacher registration to ensure utilisation of these skilled teachers within rural and remote contexts to enhance and increase careers pathway programs offered in these areas.

Rural and remote students must be afforded suitably qualified career advisors to support them through their career pathway decisions.

Transparency - Adequate information needs to be available to provide career pathways advice via appropriate and effective communication means on a national platform to support consumers' choices with regard to course availability, entry requirements, pre-requisites, costs and financial support in order for an informed decision to be made. There is a plethora of information available which is difficult to navigate and locate.

ICPA (Aust) supports an agent or an intermediary to improve transparency and flow of information and ensure informed decisions about learning pathways to rural and remote students and their parents/carers. The newly formed www.courseseeker.edu.au website devised for tertiary information could be a basis for a single online careers pathway information platform and provides a comparison website with information including providers, job availability, prerequisites, costs, government support, and has tools to assist with career pathway decision-making and identification of individual career options tailored to interests and abilities. It is important that all career pathways are encouraged as acceptable and valued career paths.

Skills - Rural and remote students must have access to the same career pathway opportunities as offered to metropolitan students. Students need to be supported in the development of skills including teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills, problem solving, creativity and entrepreneurship and job skills including curriculum vitae writing and interview skills, to be an effective contributor to the workforce.

ICPA (Aust) recommends the following to address the challenges for the rural and remote students we represent so they can better understand the decisions that they need to make to build the working lives to which they aspire.

- Rural and remote students need to be given equitable access to support and resources when in secondary school to assist them to develop the essential skills and knowledge associated with making decisions on their future pathways. The mode of delivery of this support and resources may need to be adapted to suit the location of the students.
- Assistance needs to be expanded and improved for rural and remote students to ensure courses, training providers and workplaces are accessible. Rural and remote students often have to relocate to access their courses and this comes at an immense cost. ICPA (Aust) recommends expanding and simplifying allowances for the expenses incurred to access courses and costs associated relocation, travel and accommodation expenses. Support needs to also be available for these students who may experience social and emotional challenges due to the need to leave their local, known communities.
- Expansion of online or virtual learning and training opportunities and resources would improve accessibility for students in rural and remote areas. Programs similar to the 12-month pilot *Virtual Work Experience Program (VWEP)* which tested a virtual work experience environment and provided an opportunity for students to undertake collaborative, group STEM projects in virtual environments, would enable remote students to experience work environments virtually if unable to participate work experience in person. A 12-month pilot of the Program is being delivered by CSIRO for the Department of Education and Training under a service agreement.
- Continued improvement in availability, accessibility and affordability in internet and communication services is required for regional, rural and remote schools, teachers, students, parents and communities is necessary for this to occur. It is imperative for the Sky Muster Education Service to be extended to VET and tertiary students.
- The attraction and retention of teachers and VET educators in these locations requires attention to ensure the sustainability of high-quality learning environments for rural and remote students.

Quality access to career information and pathways is pivotal for rural and remote students, their families and rural communities as potentially trainees/students will return to the rural setting bringing back skills to their local area. This in turn will benefit rural and remote communities by enhancing their economic and social sustainability and improve viability and progress. Rural and remote students face unique, multiple challenges in making decisions about their future whether that pathway is into the workforce, higher education or training. Young people need to follow their skills, career aspirations, interests and needs and be given the access to options so they can make well-informed choices.

Conclusion

ICPA (Aust) is pleased to be able to provide comment to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments. As an organisation focused

on equitable educational access for geographically isolated students, we feel it is imperative that they be recognised as a distinct disadvantage group and welcome the opportunity to highlight the barriers associated with being educated in a remote area. ICPA (Aust) is encouraged that this inquiry has been established and welcomes any initiatives focused on delivering better outcomes for remote students.