



Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc

Submission

Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

BACKGROUND

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Queensland represents 1200 member families with forty-seven Branches who live and educate their children in rural and remote areas of one of the most expansive States of Australia.

Isolated students and their families incur greater education and related educational access costs than their metropolitan counterparts; these costs are cumulative over a longer period of time and multiplied by the number of siblings. There is a widening disparity between the costs and the financial assistance which is available.

There are limited educational choices for isolated students. Families and students are faced with the emotional, social, cultural and financial (daunting but eventual) prospect of having to live away from home or establish a second home to access appropriate schooling.

Due to the problems of attraction and retention of fully qualified staff in rural and remote areas, such as secondary teachers and skilled trade persons, isolated students do not have access to equitable educational opportunities or standards. Accessing courses through virtual schooling methods has its limitations. This affects their ability to achieve to their full potential and diminishes their long term educational and career prospects, ie., their capacity to participate in higher education.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION

ICPA Qld Inc supports the introduction of a tertiary access allowance which is non means tested for rural and remote students once enrolled who must live away from home to access their chosen course.

The following comments were notated during discussions with members.

a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;

- Boarding school fee data, when compared to the state and federal allowances, show a widening disparity between fees and allowances. Since 2006 boarding school fees have increased between 6-7% per year, while the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance has changed between 2-4%; tuition fees have increased by 6.5-7.5% as the Living Away From Home Allowance Remote Area Tuition Allowance (DET) has increased by 2.2-4.9%. One family's example was cited – it has cost the family \$100,000 (gross) for five years of boarding school per student (3) with less than 50% reimbursement through federal and state allowances.
- There is the cumulative financial impact, due to isolation ie., commence schooling at a SDE where travel and accommodation costs are incurred from the early years, through primary schooling, followed by boarding school and then tertiary education. Isolated students experience the longest impact, whereas other rural and remote students may be able to defer the higher costs later in the students' schooling, eg., after primary or secondary.
- Families incur costs to travel home for holidays from boarding school to tertiary education. Financial assistance during compulsory schooling years through the LAFHA Remote Area Travel Allowance does not fully cover costs. Expensive regional air travel is weighed up against cheaper lengthy, uncomfortable bus travel. The age of the student is also considered and the availability of responsible traveling companions.
- For rural and remote families it is quite common to use trips away from for business or school purposes rather than family holidays and students often come home to work in school holidays. This is a health concern.
- There is limited family attendance at school events due to the high cost of travel and the inability for both parents to be absent from the family business at any one time. This has a huge social and educational impact on students. It affect the family and school relations. Attendance at parent organization meetings, information evenings and parent-teacher interviews is most difficult.
- It is helpful financially if it is possible to rely on other family members for accommodation when attending school functions.
- Families in rural and remote areas incur higher travel and accommodation costs for trainees and apprenticeships to access block training
- There is inequitable access to the Qld Academies for gifted and talented students living in rural towns. Geographically isolated students have access to the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance through the Homestay Program.

- The wages for apprentices, particularly first years, are low, particularly when taking into account that they may need to live away from home, thus incurring the cost of establishing a separate home.
- There were consistent calls for increased access to financial assistance for university students from rural and remote areas.
- Parents claim that financial support by families is needed to fill in the gaps between allowances and costs.
- There are significant time delays in students attending universities because they need to earn money before commencing their course. This can mean some students never take up their positions.
- Families need to provide a vehicle for use of a student living in the city to get a job which is necessary in order to survive without the financial assistance of parents. This incurs additional costs such as registration, maintenance, insurance, fuel etc
- Youth Allowance is difficult for students to live on without additional income or family financial support or in-kind support. Families stock up student's 'pantries' when they are in town. Otherwise parents are concerned that eating healthily may not be a financial priority for students.
- Rural and remote students face costs which include accommodation and associated setting up home costs if it is not a residential college, tuition, books, laptops, printers, internet, mobile, telephone, travel, etc. Many of these costs are absorbed or diminished if the student is living at home and studying locally.
- There are associated problems of working while studying, namely the effect on study, health, transport, timetabling university attendance requirements, personal safety, etc.
- Students from remote areas incur the cost of rent to retain accommodation during holidays when they may be required to return home to participate in unpaid work in the family business.
- There are problems with loss of employment if students return home during holidays .
- Regional universities look at the OP scores of students who have completed their secondary schooling in a rural and remote school more favourably than a student whose residential address is rural and remote but have completed their secondary schooling in a metropolitan school, ie., boarding school, due to the need to living away from home to access schooling. This discriminates against isolated students.
- There is a significant shortfall between the accommodation scholarships (\$4000) with Youth Allowance (even including rent assistance) and the accommodation fees (\$12000) at a metropolitan university.
- Parents are trying to pay the full fees with discounts to avoid incurring a HECS debt when students graduate and will be establishing their homes and careers.

- Students are drawing heavily on savings accumulated during holiday work and gap year wages particularly at the beginning of the course and each term/semester.
- Conversely students who have saved prudently are penalized when applying for Independent Youth Allowance.
- Accommodation scholarship moneys are not deposited until after the accommodation fees are due at the beginning of the term.
- Students are affected financially by having to report going home on holidays and the subsequent effect on the value of rent assistance but incurring the cost of maintaining their rental accommodation over this period.
- Parents cite that the concept and workings of the 'income bank' are difficult to understand. Students are required to report earnings at short regular intervals which they do for fear of breaching conditions but seldom understand fully how it affects their Youth Allowance payments. Isolated families are often forced to leave their children to negotiate the Centrelink maze by themselves as parents find resolving issues online or over the telephone, only to find that information changes substantially, is unproductive and highly frustrating.
- Parents have been concerned that they have ill-advised their children when accepting scholarships and bursaries as these monies have then been included as assessable income for the purpose of student income support and so students have had their Centrelink payments reduced.

b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;

- External studies through distance education/online learning courses for younger students can be disenfranchising due to lack of engagement with teachers/tutors and other students
- There are limited work experience, school-based apprenticeships, TAFE and apprenticeship opportunities in rural and regional centres.
- Regional universities are perceived by metropolitan universities as having lower entry requirements and are therefore inferior courses and do not produce equivalent qualifications for graduates.
- Students and families were concerned about the discontinuation of courses at regional universities once their studies had commenced; this then required a reassessment of the situation which would then entail moving to the metropolitan centre and incurring costs which had not been in the budget.

c. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;

- It is seen as grossly unfair that students, currently working to meet the requirements of the previous system, are not eligible for Independent Youth Allowance.
- The Youth Allowance changes to the assets test have not gone far enough to address the problem for asset-rich, cash-poor rural business owners.
- The two year gap is too great; parents are concerned that students will not wish to enroll after such an extended time in the workforce.
- It is difficult to obtain jobs in rural and remote communities, particularly in meeting the 30 hours per week requirement.
- The seasonal nature of work must also be taken into account.
- Most universities only allow a one year deferral.
- There is a need for additional places at universities.
- Parents and students report consistently that they receive conflicting information from Centrelink. Isolated families find the information difficult to access over the internet or phone and are often not able to attend in person. This means that it is often left up to the student to negotiate the system. There is also a lack of followup of individual cases by Centrelink staff. Callers report being unable to access the same staff as calls are taken by a number of call centres. The cost of calls to 1300 numbers from mobile telephones is prohibitive for students who do not have access to a fixed telephone line.
- There was some disagreement about the bonded scholarships which have a buy-out option. It is perceived that rural and remote students miss out on these scholarships which are then taken by borderline 'rural' students who, upon completion of the course are offered a rural and remote placement, then choose to buy-out the bond rather than fill the position. It is felt that rural and remote students would be more likely to return to the bush and are more likely to adapt successfully for longer periods of time.

d. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;

- The range of courses being offered at each institution is limited.
- There is significant disruption to students already enrolled in a course when it is discontinued.
- The added financial costs for those students to relocate to a different institution to complete their qualifications eg., Agricultural Colleges, makes it difficult for students to complete their studies.

e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;

- There is limited availability of rental accommodation in metropolitan areas for university students due to the high demand; agencies look upon student applicants less favourably.
- University residential college places are in high demand and there is a lack of places.
- The emphasis on high Overall Performance scores for eligibility for accommodation scholarships may mean that rural and remote students with their history of educational disadvantage are precluded. It is felt that access to the residential colleges should be on the basis of need and rural and remote students are needy as their choices are limited. It was acknowledged that it was reasonable to expect students to meet the requirement for continuing academic achievement to retain their place in the residential college.
- Parents of students who must live away from home to access compulsory schooling call upon boarding institutions to continue to provide affordable boarding places for these students.
- The real value of State and Federal Government allowances to geographically isolated students must be maintained.
- Access to school term hostels in rural towns is a more affordable option for parents. They are closer to their families in a community which is familiar to them.

f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;

- Rural and remote students must have equitable access to quality education ie., teachers, pedagogy, curriculum, remediation, infrastructure and resources, including Schools of Distance Education.
- These students should have every opportunity to gain a high Overall Performance score if that is their aspiration.
- Education systems must continue to strive to attract and retain highly qualified, experienced staff in rural and remote areas.
- Universities and education systems should encourage and support preservice teachers to complete rural and remote practicum.
- Preservice university courses should prepare teachers to live and teach in rural communities.

g. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and

- Families move due to the prohibitive cost and lack of choice of education, particularly in secondary or tertiary years.
- Alternatively it creates the separation of families, thus destabilizing families.
- Urban drift leaves rural and remote communities to cope with labour shortages.

- The economical viability of small communities is threatened.
- There is a contraction of services.
- There is disproportionate lower representation of rural and regional students in higher education which feeds into the skills shortages in rural and remote areas.
- Returning rural and remote students who become tertiary qualified to the bush is more cost effective than offering very expensive lures to attract other professional staff – greater participation in community; long term benefits; better retention.

Compiled by ICPA Qld Inc

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