

**SUBMISSION TO
THE INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REGIONAL ACCESS TO
SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES**

**From the
ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF WA**

Compiled by:

ICPA(WA) State Council

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INTRODUCTION

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of WA represents rural and remote families in seeking equality of access to educational opportunities.

These families reside in all parts of the State of Western Australia, from Kununurra and Port Hedland in the north to Esperance and Ravensthorpe in the south. The majority of our members live on farming or pastoral properties and access education via a school bus or through School of the Air.

ICPA WA is commenting from a Western Australian perspective.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

a) The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE

For most rural and remote families in WA, moving their children to a larger centre for secondary and tertiary education is unavoidable.

Secondary Education

For those geographically isolated families whose children have completed their primary education via Distance Education there is little choice but to send their children away to boarding schools for their secondary education. Whilst there are some regional residential colleges the majority of families have to send their children to predominately non government boarding schools in Perth.

The only other alternative for secondary schooling is to continue via the Distance Education system, however there are very few families who are willing or able to continue in this mode and most feel that this option would not provide their children with sufficient social/sporting/artistic experiences to equip them for their post-secondary lives.

Families living in rural and regional areas may have access to secondary education up to Year 10 through District High Schools and then have no alternative but to send their children away to boarding school for years 11 and 12.

Others may have access to these District High schools but they may feel that the conditions at the school are not conducive to their child achieving their potential. For

example, subjects may not be offered for a chosen career path; low class numbers may limit subject choice; English may not be the first language. Therefore, to provide them with the best opportunity to realise their potential, they choose to send their child to a more appropriate school.

One of many examples highlighting this last point was apparent in Naomi Godden's report (Regional Young People and Youth Allowance; Access to Tertiary Education) from a community in the North West of WA. Participants in the research Ms Godden conducted stated that their isolation causes secondary educational disadvantages, as young people have limited access to face to face learning, career guidance and preparation, and Tertiary Entrance Examination (TEE) Revision Seminars. The schools offer four TEE courses each year, and while small classes may be advantageous, students lack academic competition. Many students must study TEE courses through Schools of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), with minimal face to face contact with SIDE teachers. Students' attitudes towards SIDE were generally negative, sharing difficulties with self-directed learning, motivation, and some report failing SIDE courses. A year 12 student attended a TEE revision seminar in Perth, costing her family \$3000 in flights and accommodation. Indigenous young people in many areas in WA experience particular difficulties, with generally low literacy and numeracy, and subsequently low retention.

Middle schooling. Currently in WA secondary schooling commences at Year 8 however there is a move towards the middle schooling model and this will require families to send their students to boarding facilities in year 7 which means another year of fees. Many independent schools are already accepting and strongly urging parents to send their students in year 7. The public education system is yet to follow suit however the idea is being reviewed despite a report released in 2007 finding against the concept.

The average family consisting of 2 or 3 children faces what equates to up to 15 years of fees (18 should middle schooling eventuate) to access a secondary boarding facility. This is an enormous financial commitment and one that many families in rural and remote WA just can not undertake.

The costs incurred are much more than the tuition and boarding fees. There is the travel component along with the many ongoing incidentals such as setting up the 'home away from home' in the boarding house, taxi fares to doctors and dentists,

phone calls to keep in touch with home, travel costs for parents to attend sports events, speech nights and other milestones in their children's school lives, etc.

In Ms Godden's research one WA parent acknowledges difficulties with visiting children in Perth, as return flights can cost up to \$1300. Further, many young people do not have any extended family in Perth, further adding to the cost of the trip.

ICPA WA acknowledges that some boarding and travel costs are partly offset by the Federal Allowance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme and the relevant State travel assistance schemes. However, these forms of assistance are not available to all. Government run facilities do provide a lower fee option however they are limited in availability and location.

Tertiary Education

Most, if not all, country students must move away from home to access tertiary education in WA. For those families who have already supported their children through boarding school, finding the funds for a tertiary education is a most daunting task and one that many simply cannot undertake. The relocation costs of setting up a home in the city, paying a bond, buying text books etc are significant. The only option for financial assistance for students is to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance. This in itself produces a host of barriers and hurdles that must be cleared to meet the criteria.

Participants in Ms Godden's research stated that because eligibility to YA is so difficult, participants believe the current system does not assist regional young people to access tertiary education. As one student says, 'It's designed to exclude people. Not include people'.

Focus group participants in the Kimberley WA share negative attitudes and experiences. They feel the processes to receive YA are difficult and complex, and describe them as 'rigmarole'. One parent, after hearing stories from other parents, decided that she would rather not apply for YA. 'It's not worth it, not worth the hassle for the small amount of money'.

Combined with the higher costs, students, of necessity, are also removed from their families and hence experience the loss of emotional support provided by their families. The impact of the removal from this support should not be underestimated.

One student in Ms Godden's report said: "...there is no option. You must go..and emotionally it's very difficult. It's not like you chose, 'I'm ready to go.' It's like, 'Well now it's time. Off you go.'"

It has been well documented in many studies that country students who move away from home find it difficult to cope with living independently in unfamiliar surroundings. The Youth Allowance is not enough to live on and they must seek part time employment to make ends meet. This interferes with their ability to do well in their studies, leading to a high dropout rate for country students.

'Study breaks were work breaks. So I didn't get a study break', says Sarah who works 20 hours a week while studying full-time. Sometimes it is not easy to find a job. Some students in Ms Godden's research share stories of young women involved in stripping and prostitution to financially support themselves. "I knew a girl...she was a topless waitress. She was so desperate for money. She was in a nudie calendar for like \$100. She was a very dignified girl. She just....there are no jobs...she just did it". And, "I have a friend, she is a second year Uni student and she is seriously considering prostitution to get her through uni."

b) the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas:

Access to educational alternatives in regional areas poses the same problem for those living in rural and remote areas: students must relocate.

It must continue to be highlighted that in WA distances are vast no matter which part of the state you reside.

ICPA WA believes there are sound educational institutions, (university and TAFE) outside the metropolitan area, in Broome, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Bunbury and Albany, for instance. While these can provide excellent alternatives to those residing in or near those centres they do not always offer the course a student wishes to study eg Medicine can only be accessed in Perth. However, to the many families scattered throughout central and northern WA, they are just as inaccessible as any university or TAFE campus in Perth.

If a student from a remote location decides to take up an apprenticeship in a nearby town, relocation of this student is also necessary. Even with the Living Away from Home Allowance it is not possible for the student to live on their first year's wages. In times of shortages of trades, where young people should be encouraged to learn a trade, it makes little sense for an apprentice to defer for two years to be able to receive Youth Allowance. They are likely to lose their apprenticeship if forced to defer for two years.

Another alternative to access tertiary study is through online delivery. However this is often not suitable, particularly for school leavers, many of whom have difficulties with motivation and self-directed learning and for whom the supportive environment of face to face learning is paramount.

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

Tertiary

ICPA WA wishes to focus on the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria for accessing the independent rate of the Youth Allowance. The Hon Julia Gillard acknowledged in a speech at the Higher Education Conference on March 9 2009 that "...the most seriously under-represented groups in higher education are those from remote parts of Australia, Indigenous students, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from regional locations."

The proposed changes to Independent Youth Allowance eligibility forcing a prospective student to work 30 hours a week for at least 18 months, will have a huge and detrimental impact on current and future applicants from those very groups.

In small rural/remote communities, employment is already very limited and the availability of 30hr/wk job opportunities almost non-existent, particularly for a school leaver with no job skills. In primary industry work is seasonal, such as on the wheat bins or stock mustering. Due to distance, a driver's license and car are a necessary part of gaining and keeping employment. These requirements will create the ridiculous situation of a student 'becoming independent' (moving away from home) in order to gain independent status. It's contradictory.

All participants from a country town in the Kimberley (WA) in Ms Godden's research acknowledge it can be difficult to find work in both regional communities and cities to meet the Independence criteria. In many regional communities there is limited employment for young people to earn enough during their gap year and holidays, particularly communities with seasonal employment. Thus many young people must leave home to find employment. "I know this girl...she was a stripper after school...think earned over 18 grand in a month. Busy month." (University Student)

And in a drought affected area,
'Six years of drought in our area has meant that there is no local employment.'
(Parent, ICPA).

Most universities currently defer enrolment for a maximum of 12 months. They will lose their place altogether, affording it will be irrelevant.

Many students who take a year's break after Year 12 often do not return to study. It is likely this will be exacerbated if there is a forced two year break.

In Western Australia for every 100 seventeen year old students in the city some 26 enrol in university and for every 100 rural and regional students 7 enrol.

Despite the same offer rate to those who apply the take up rate is much lower from rural and regional students. This imbalance is likely to become more pronounced if the proposed changes are introduced.

The retrospectivity of the proposed change is completely unfair to those students who have almost gained their eligibility for Independent status. They have been accepted and enrolled at a university, plan to begin studying in 2010, perhaps have accommodation organised, but if this proposal is passed, they then face another 12 months delay and will most likely lose their place at university.

If rural, regional and remote students defer their studies or apprenticeships for two years in order to qualify for Independent YA they will be another year behind their metropolitan peers in entering the workforce. Why should they be put further back from their city counterparts???

These proposed changes alone will only serve to make the access to tertiary education even more difficult for rural, regional and remote students than it

currently is. How can this measure possibly assist our rural and remote students overcome the barriers to accessing a tertiary education?

(d) Short and long term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments

The most immediate effect will be the declining number of enrolments in these centres. The flow-on from this will be a reduction of options, courses and eventual closure of such institutions.

These regional centres constantly face the usual and ongoing issues that so many services in non-metropolitan areas face including that of sustainability, profitability, accountability, issues of attracting and retaining staff, providing suitable accommodation for staff, provisions of and access to necessary services eg health. The list continues. A reduction in enrolments will just add more pressure to these institutions.

Curtin University's Northam Campus, which focuses on agriculture, is to be closed due to lack of financial support. This is a significant loss to agriculture and a blow to students who will now need to move to Perth if they wish to study agriculture. In these uncertain times of climate change and possible world food shortages the government should be doing all in its power to support agricultural research and development.

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

Secondary

As stated previously, for secondary education there is access to the AIC allowances and some travel subsidies. However only families that fall within a specific set of criteria can access this. One of the biggest hurdles to AIC is the issue of what is an appropriate school.

In WA an appropriate school is defined as one that offers English, Maths, Social Studies and Science, and in some district high schools that is all that is offered. If a

student is talented at language, music or art, which are not offered at the local school and he lives within 56km of the local school and has a bus run past his driveway, he is not eligible for the AIC. Many families, rather than pay the fees to send the student to boarding school, decide they must relocate or set up a second home in order for the student to reach his educational potential, both of which are detrimental to the local community.

It then adds to our concern as to how students will be provided for and catered for if they are forced to leave home to attend boarding school a year earlier.

Tertiary

Rural and remote students are grossly under-represented in post-secondary education and this is partly due to the difficulties in getting to the 'front gate' of their chosen tertiary institution/post secondary education.

The government currently recognises that there are increased costs for rural and remote families with students who must leave home to access secondary education and subsidises these costs with the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC). However this is not recognised when those same students must leave home to access post-secondary studies and apprenticeships.

Tertiary accommodation

For university and TAFE students WA is grossly lacking adequate residential accommodation with full pastoral care and academic support. For a student who has just finished school and left home to attend university or TAFE this type of accommodation is crucial for the academic and social success of the student and is an ideal first step to independence. In Perth there is only one university offering this type of accommodation and it is hugely oversubscribed.

There is a shortage of affordable rental accommodation for apprentices and students.

(f) the educational needs of rural and regional students

The educational needs of every single student must be met and provided for no matter where they reside in WA. However, how those needs are met will vary.

Students:

- Must have access to all eight learning areas
- Learning outcomes must be met no matter where the student resides.
- Must have access to appropriate educational opportunities
- Must have access to social interaction

One shoe does not fit all. We need flexible and innovative approaches and regardless of the delivery mode or location, the student must have the means to be able to access education.

(g) the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities

It is well known that the people most likely to live in the country are those that grew up in the country. If we are to have a vibrant, viable and sustainable future in rural Australia we need our country students to go on to tertiary education and undertake professions that they can then take back to the bush. Every effort must be made by governments to help rural students to access further educational opportunities. It is the most fundamental way to halt the exodus of people from rural Australia. If services are provided in towns people will follow.

Lack of or reducing education facilities, health services and the like just serve to drive families away from the rural and remote communities. As stated earlier, families with inadequate educational choices either relocate and take their skills with them or send their children away which, without assistance, is too much for most. Some families even get a second home as they are not able to meet the costs of boarding on top of school fees. Country towns lose families because of the lack of appropriate education.

For those families that can not access allowances to assist them with appropriate education many leave town or set up second home – community loses, local school loses and so on. It becomes a vicious circle.

(h) other related matters

ICPA WA believes that to assist rural and remote students in their quest to further their tertiary education - what is needed is a non-means tested, yearly allowance, specifically for this already disadvantaged group, to help offset the costs of relocating to study; costs not incurred by metropolitan students who can live at home whilst continuing to study. These costs include, but are not limited to, setting up house, (including bond), travelling to and from home, internet access, increased phone expenses etc.

Generally rural and remote people accept that they must relocate in order to study however the greatest challenge is often faced before the first page of a book can be turned and that is being able to afford the cost of access to get to the place of study followed by being able to sustain the living. No matter the delivery mode or the location the student should have the means to be able to access it.

There have been a number of studies done and reports written on the subject of access to higher education for rural, regional and remote students. ICPA WA believes that it is imperative that provisions are put in place **now** to allow the rural and remote student access to the tertiary path.

ICPA WA thanks you for the opportunity to submit some of our views on the terms of reference to this inquiry. Should you wish to discuss any of the points we have raised please do not hesitate to contact us.

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