

# CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

## SUBMISSION TO SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

### Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

#### Context in Western Australia

Compared with other States and Territories, Western Australia has a number of factors which impact on the seven focus topics outlined in the Terms of Reference:

- There is a high degree of centralisation of educational and training opportunities in Perth which accounts for 86% of the State's population
- Regional centres of Albany, Bunbury, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, Port Hedland and Karratha are relatively small compared with other states, except for Bunbury.
- Non-metropolitan non-regional schools tend to be located in small centres and many schools are sole provider schools in remote locations; Indigenous populations are usually higher in such centres
- Most of the smaller centres have less than 2,000 people and little education and training infrastructure
- Large distances, isolation, climatic disruptions and very high transport costs are serious issues in education and training delivery.

#### Responses to specific Topics

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

The cost of boarding in metropolitan schools is significant, ranging from around \$35,000 per year in the non-government non Catholic boarding schools (day fees and boarding costs) to around \$18,000 in Catholic schools (day fees and boarding costs).

There are no government boarding schools in Perth but there is limited hostel availability.

The above fees are a significant burden on rural families, particularly when there may be two or more children involved and when additional costs of transport, excursions, uniforms, books and course fees are factored in. Given the high costs of air travel in Western Australia (eg return air fare from Kununurra to Perth = approx \$1,200) there is an additional burden in connecting Perth boarders with their families. This is a state-specific issue and possibly shared only by Queensland.

In terms of universities and TAFE, fees are generally less than for secondary schools, especially if students use the HECS arrangements. Accommodation is relatively modest at university accommodation colleges and sometimes marginally less in shared private rental accommodation. The relative lack of university training outside Perth (see next section) further exacerbates issues for rural students, who rely increasingly on coming to Perth for tertiary training. Notwithstanding this, university education for non-metropolitan students is nevertheless expensive.

TAFE training in regional centres is reasonably well catered for, particularly in Bunbury, Broome, Kalgoorlie and Geraldton. Not all courses are offered however, particularly at higher AQF levels.

***b. The education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas.***

For students in **larger regional centres** such as Kalgoorlie, Bunbury and surrounds, Albany and Geraldton, there is a reasonable range of education services. All of these centres offer a choice of government and non-government primary and secondary schools. All centres have larger TAFE centres. There are limited university education facilities however. The University of Western Australia has a small centre in Albany. Edith Cowan University has centres in Bunbury and a small centre in Margaret River. Curtin University of Technology has smaller centres in Kalgoorlie (mainly mining related); Northam (agriculture and agri-business); Margaret River (horticulture); Albany; Esperance; Geraldton; Karratha; Port Hedland. Courses are either specific to the economic base of the centre and/or quite limited and do not generally cover more popular courses in Perth nor the more specialist tertiary courses. Higher degrees are generally not available.

For students in **smaller centres**, facilities are very limited. Education facilities generally consist of a government District High School typically for years K to 10 only. Students wishing to engage in senior secondary studies (years 11 and 12) either have the choice of remaining at the District High School and undertaking studies typically through correspondence with the School of Isolated and Distance Education or moving to a larger centre. Vocational training opportunities rarely exist in these centres. A small TAFE annex may exist but they are mainly confined to adult education opportunities. Only in some centres is there a choice between government and non-government schools. This is usually confined only to primary schools.

For **remote centres**, the level of education and training choice is very limited and an ongoing challenge for all systems/sectors. Most centres are remote Aboriginal communities with a school catering from K to 7. Some schools have a 'secondary top' from years 7 to 10 but with very limited courses and opportunities available. Vocational training rarely exists due to lack of facilities and industry placements for on-the-job competencies. Any TAFE training is accessed only by occasional visits from regional TAFE lecturers or by transporting students to larger regional centres. Facilities and teacher quality are highly variable and costs of running these schools very high. Professional development and support by systems/sectors and other agencies is hindered by climatic factors, road quality and huge distances. A recently established hostel in Broome allows a small number of students to engage in secondary education in that centre.

- c. The implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in regional and rural areas***
- d. The short and long term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE College enrolments***
- e. The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study***

No reference to specified government policies will be made here except to indicate possible future support and policy directions. Some issues and recommendations which could be addressed in current and future government policy include:

- The financial subsidies and travel support for students needs to continue; the particular geographic imperatives in Western Australia need to be considered and a loading is appropriate for states like WA, Queensland and northern Territory where isolation and high travel costs are a particular problem.
- There is a general lack of boarding infrastructure and facilities in regional centres out of Perth; Australian government funding should be directed to providing such facilities, particularly to service Indigenous students and students from remote areas. Recent developments in the hostel in Broome are an example. More funding would assist in providing education and training opportunities for students boarding in Broome.
- TAFE facilities in most regional centres are fairly limited although they are improving. Continue expansion needs to continue. A particular issue for students in non-government schools is their inability to access TAFE training at a reasonable rate while still at school. Non-government schools cannot access profile funding from TAFE colleges whereas students from government schools can access training for free. Fee for service arrangements for non-government schools are around \$180 per hour for a group of 12 or so students. This means that 200 hours of TAFE training delivered by a TAFE college would cost about \$3,000 per student which is prohibitive.

It is strongly recommended that some arrangement be made to allow students in regional, and especially the remote areas, some access to TAFE training at a much lower rate. For certain groups of students, such as Indigenous students and those in remote and more isolated areas, this access should be free. This may be covered in training entitlement arrangements in the Youth Transitions and Attainment National Partnership.

The introduction of Australian Technical Colleges has not solved this problem. There is only one located outside Perth (in Karratha) and costs remain prohibitive for students and training offerings limited.

- Students in rural areas have much more limited curriculum offerings, other than in larger regional centres. This applies to both the general curriculum as well as VET. In smaller centre for government schools,

access is provided to the State government correspondence school (School of Isolated and Distance Education – SIDE) for free. For students in non-government schools (other than for sole provider schools) fees are charged. For a student in year 12 to study a subject – such as Chemistry – through SIDE, the cost is about \$2,200. For 4 students in a school the cost is therefore \$8,800. Most Catholic schools charge less than \$2,200 for an entire year's fees and the costs for SIDE are therefore not affordable. It is recommended that there be some cross subsidy from the Australian government to allow students greater access to correspondence education.

***f. The educational needs of rural and regional students***

The educational needs of students vary considerably and depend to a large extent, on the location of the school. Students in any locations outside Perth, Geraldton, Albany, Kalgoorlie and Bunbury need;

- An expanded range of TAFE and other training facilities
- Subsidisation for training – this could be confined to skills shortage areas and training which is demanded within the region
- Access to correspondence education where applicable at subsidised rates, particularly for non-government schools
- Access to quality teachers both within their schools and also some form of visitation program from more experienced metropolitan-based teachers; this may require some Australian government support for teacher training and to encourage quality teachers to seek appointments and remain in regional schools
- More partnerships with city schools which allows for some exchange of teachers, students (short term) and resources; systems/sectors provide this on a limited basis. Australian government support, particularly in remote regions would be required
- Greater access to hostel and boarding facilities in regional centres – many students are unwilling to board in Perth due to costs and isolation an cultural factors
- An expanded range of career counselling services, especially in isolated regions
- Continued and expanded support from mentors and support officers especially for the increasing numbers of students who are disengaged or in acute danger of being disengaged from education and training.

For further information please contact:

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