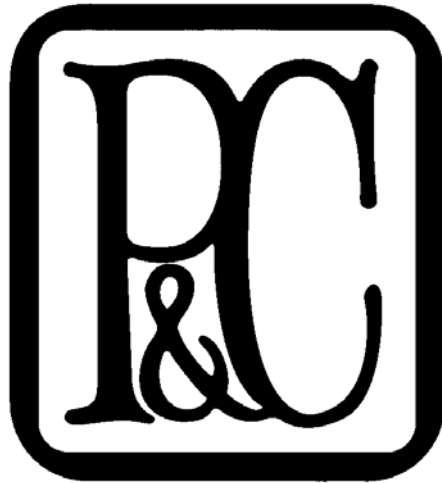


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**Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education
Opportunities.**

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PREAMBLE¹

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- All students have the capacity to learn;
- The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular;
- Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students.

Introduction

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is thankful for this opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities. The P&C Federation strongly believes that an assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges is essential.

The core belief of the Federation is that the education of our youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource. The need, challenges and opportunities available to ensure equitable access is provided to all students across New South Wales.

A: The financial impact of rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE

Most secondary students who leave rural and regional centres to attend secondary institutions do so to attend Boarding schools. For some families this is due to the lack of suitable facilities in the immediate area or, if a secondary school is available, there may be the absence of suitable boarding options to cover their needs. In this case, there is some coverage under the Assistance

¹ Preamble of Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of NSW. *2008 P&C Handbook* (6)

for Isolated Children Scheme which 'assists mainly geographically isolated families with the additional costs incurred in educating their school age children'²). The majority of these children have completed their Primary school years on Distance Education, often linked to the School of the Air facilities across the state.

The difficulty arises for families when the movement is beyond the secondary years and into a tertiary option of study. The Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme will only cover students who are undertaking study at a Tertiary level if they are under 16 years of age (or 'the minimum age that their state or territory requires them to participate in education')³. As most students who are attending a University or TAFE are over this age, the financial burden for accommodation and associated costs falls back on the family.

In addition to accommodation, the costs of travel to and from the various educational facilities can be expensive both in monetary terms and in time. For rural and regional areas, the availability of public transport options is often minimal and if it is available, is restrictive in the flexibility offered to travelers. Travel from one side of the state to the other can take one to two days as, for some families, the issue of dirt roads (which can be impassable if it rains) and the dangers of wildlife such as kangaroos, pigs, goats and emus are a real consideration when planning a journey. There is also the growing understanding of the need for drivers to manage fatigue by taking breaks every two hours for the sake of safety of all road users.

Travel is further complicated by the increasing costs of fuels. Air travel, while a preference for some, is often preclusive in the cost and may involve a journey of several hours to reach a centre that has a functioning facility to offer this option. Train travel is not always available as the route is distinct and again requires families to travel to specific centres to ensure a link with the timetabled service. Similarly, bus services are timetabled and have a distinct route between major centres across the state. However, it must be remembered that, for some families, these forms of transport are their only option.

Depending upon the size of the rural and regional centre in which a student resides as to the opportunities available for them to undertake work options to supplement any costs associated with furthering their education. In some instances, the family bears the burden of all costs as there are limited work opportunities until the student moves to a larger centre.

B: The educational alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas

Students in rural and regional centres are able to access a number of options when exploring the educational opportunities but these will depend upon the person's interest.

In terms of secondary study, most major regional centres offer secondary schools of some type including public, Catholic and non-government dependent upon the particular centre. The more rural areas have reduced numbers of schools in towns or may have a Central School option

² Centrelink NSW; http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/isolated_children.htm

³ Centrelink NSW; http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/isolated_children.htm

incorporating both Primary and Secondary classes on the one campus. This option is often due to small student numbers and in the current climate, is often highly dependent on technology including video conferencing lessons linked to larger centres in the region or to Distance Education facilities. This type of option has a restrictive curriculum choice and schools in some areas have set up innovative programs in an attempt to address these issues (e2 schools in the Orange area, RASP in the Broken Hill area of NSW)⁴.

In smaller towns, the restriction to the school options may be that a local Primary school is available but once the student reaches secondary age, they are required to attend a larger town or Boarding school option. In some cases, Distance Education is considered as well. On rural properties, the option tends to be Distance Education/ School of the Air and a governess to support the needs of the students during the early years and then, again, a movement to a larger regional town. Again a cost involved although there is some support with the Assistance for Isolated Children's scheme.

In terms of tertiary options, rural and regional students are restricted in their choices by the size of their centres and the various tertiary institutions which are willing to extend their campuses into regional areas. TAFE options are available in major centres although again, the size of the town will determine the level of courses available in any one study area. There are instances of students undertaking apprenticeships in their local town but where they are required to travel to a major regional centre to complete the theoretical component of their studies. This is usually done in a block of a number of weeks followed by periods of study at home while completing the practical components in the workplace.

In some towns, the local TAFE will offer a restricted number of courses or the option to undertake a course of study at another TAFE facility as an external student. In some cases, there is teaching support available at the local institute although not necessarily by someone who is well versed in the particular subject being undertaken.

Universities also offer campuses at many regional centres across NSW in a variety of subject areas and students are able to choose the particular course of study which allows them to remain in the rural and regional areas (Charles Sturt University for example has campuses at Bathurst, Albury, Wagga Wagga and Dubbo). There has been an increase in the external studies options involving residential schools at specific times to bring these students together for face to face contact. This has been in recognition of the changing work dynamics of society whereby many adults now study while holding down full-time or part-time employment and, sometimes, juggling family responsibilities.

C: The implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas

For many students, the roll out of the Digital Revolution as well as other funding made available to schools, has opened the opportunities to access the world at their fingertips. Gifted and Talented students can now access virtual Opportunity Classes (Western Region, New England Region)

⁴ Centrelink NSW; http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/isolated_children.htm

using video conferencing and other technology. Student leadership and other areas are similarly being linked using technology to ensure that these students are provided with opportunities available as their metropolitan counterparts.

Naturally, this means that schools are required to ensure that the technology remains up to date. The associated costs of improving infrastructure within school to cope with increased needs as well as the technology associated wiring has become a priority under many school maintenance plans and recent funding from the Federal Government has proven a boost to schools to allow this to progress. In addition, the increase in the number of laptops available to staff and students has enhanced the curriculum opportunities.

Of more concern are the recent changes in Youth Allowances and Austudy eligibility criteria and payment. For many students, the cost of attending a tertiary option and particularly University has been prohibitive due to the fees associated with enrolling and attending these facilities. As noted above, for students who must travel to another regional centre in order to attend tertiary courses, consideration must be given to the cost and availability of travel and accommodation as well as fees. Even students undertaking a block of study, such as described for apprenticeships, must ensure they have suitable secure accommodation available for the limited periods required and the finances to fund this.

Also to be considered is the removal of the 'Living away from home allowance' which supported student's accommodation needs. This has been replaced by a relocation allowance of some \$4 000 and then an additional allowance of about \$1 000 per year however this does not always allow for the needs of the student and their family. Many families within rural and regional areas do not have the option for their child to live at home to access a tertiary education or the support network with extended family/ friends if they must travel, and/or board, in order to continue their education. The financial cost of funding the living arrangements can be preclusive. There has been an indication by some families that they would prefer the ongoing support of the 'Living away from home allowance'

There are many cases of students opting for a period of work prior to entering tertiary studies, in order to fund their own education and achieve an independent status as prescribed by Centrelink. Recent changes have affected student, particularly in regional centres. While acknowledging the value in promoting 16 to 20 year olds to be 'earning or learning', there are ongoing concerns about the limited availability of work options in rural and some regional areas. The increase in required hours to 30 hours per week for 18 months in the last 2 years in order to achieve an independence status may preclude many rural and regional students from achieving this level. This may then affect their ability to access any form of tertiary education as financially, they are not in a position to afford the experience.

D: The short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments

Students who are required to earn specific amounts of money will not be as focused on their studies and will take longer to complete courses. In the era of poor trade numbers, the focus is on

increasing the number of apprentices but this is unlikely to happen if they are required to work and study just to provide a reasonable standard of living while undertaking their studies. Similarly, the need for other professionals such as nurses, teachers and doctors just to name a few, will be affected as they attempt to juggle work and study. In these type of situations, there may be a reduction in the number of full time students and an increase in the numbers of part-time students.

E: The adequacy of government measures to provide for students who require to leave home for secondary and post-secondary study

The Assistance for Isolated Children's Scheme offers a variety of support options for students who leave home for education at a secondary level but is less supportive as the age of the student increases. Once the student reaches 16 years of age the financial responsibility for the student falls back on the family except if they access the Youth Allowance which is then based on the family income as most students have limited opportunities to engage in employment to gain independence status under the Centrelink guidelines. They may be eligible for some support with accommodation based on their living away from home but this is again based on the income of families.

F: The educational needs of rural and regional students

The educational needs of students are the same regardless of where they are in the state however access to services and opportunities are affected by their postcode.

Options such as phone allowance this may be an option to assist rural students to keep in contact with family and reduce the feelings of homesickness.

Mental Health issues have become a big part of the movement from rural and regional areas to metropolitan addresses. It is an ongoing concern expressed by parents, for their children, once they leave the security of the family home to access further education, especially at a post secondary level. Anecdotal evidence from families describe situations of depression, isolation issues, homesickness and other forms of adjustment disorders. Students are required to move away from home and the security of family and social networks. They often have to find accommodation and use skills that they have not had to practice prior to this (washing, cooking) or have had limited exposure to. There is often a financial burden to the student and/ or the family which can create stress with all of its associated difficulties. This all assumes that families are in a position to fund the student to pursue their career study goals. Some students choose not to follow their goals as they are aware that the family is not in a financial position to support them.

In cases where students are required to work to ensure their adequately funded to continue with their education, the time required to work erodes the quality time necessary for effective study. There is often a high drop-out rate as work overtakes study, or, in some cases, it takes longer to complete the post secondary study when students attempt to juggle both work and study. There are associated health issues with students attempting to work 30 hours per week and complete a full time educational study load.

There has been a suggestion that more contact is needed between students who have been away and those contemplating it, to explain what they have been through. This allows students to be prepared for the situations in which they are likely to find themselves.

G: The impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities

Broadband improvements have had a positive impact in that it provides better access to technology and thus widens the community opportunities.

In increasing the school age, some communities will now have students remaining in the local community for longer periods and exploring job opportunities. Will this affect the culture of the town? Will it improve or create problems with binge drinking, suicide attempts and other teenage identified difficulties.

Will it increase the size of the school? How will schools engage these students? What type of courses will they have available? What will be the VET and TVET options? How will the transition between school and TAFE be organized? If there are more TVET options, how will the TAFE cope? Have these issues been explored?

Conclusion

The Federation of Parents and Citizen's Association of New South Wales wishes to emphasize that the educational needs of students are the same regardless of where they are in the state however access to services and opportunities are affected by their postcode. Government programs such as the broadbanding initiative which are currently being rolled out will provide more equitable opportunities for these students and are a great starting point.