

SUBMISSION

to the

**Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
References Committee**

on the

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

from

**Yaraka / Isisford Branch
of the
Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc**

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Terms of Reference

On 16 June 2009, the Senate referred the following matter to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee for inquiry and report by 29 October 2009:

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, with particular reference to:

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

The provision of The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance lessens the financial impact on rural and remote students (who are eligible to receive it) attending metropolitan secondary schools. The LAFAH allowance provided by the Queensland Government is also most helpful.

Notwithstanding the provision of some financial assistance through AIC, there are still significant expenses for which money needs to be found.

The AIC Basic Boarding Allowance (2009) is \$6,824 per year. Owing to the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance being means tested through the Parental Income Test many families are not eligible for the additional support. The 2009 Parental Income Test is set at \$32,800.00 which is not a realistic figure in today's economic circumstances.

Given that the average combined cost of boarding and tuition fees for a secondary student is between \$25,000.00 and \$30,000.00 per year, many rural and regional families are struggling to keep their children at an educational institution which can and does provide an appropriate education for that particular child.

There are still a number of deficits which need to be addressed, particularly in relation to those students who cannot access allowances.

Students who are ineligible for AIC and/or LAFAH (or perhaps equivalent allowances in other states if provided) are placed at considerable financial disadvantage if the local secondary schools does not provide an education appropriate for that particular student's needs. Boarding costs are enormous and many students who are not eligible for any financial assistance simply have to "make do" with whatever standard of education is on offer at their nearest secondary school.

This financial impact can then lead on to effect the wider community, local businesses etc when families pack up and move so their children can access an appropriate education. When the family leaves younger siblings are removed from the local

primary school which has a domino effect on services provided, both at the school and in the wider community.

The cost of travel for boarders to and from metropolitan secondary schools is significant, especially if there are several children in the family. The meagre travel allowance provided by the Queensland Government does little to assist with these costs. Distances in rural and regional areas are vast and fuel costs significantly higher than in metropolitan areas.

A situation which comes immediately to mind is the financial disadvantage which besets identified gifted students in Queensland. In Queensland there are several Smart State Academies, purpose built to provide appropriate curriculum for gifted learners. However ALL of these academies are located in metropolitan Brisbane.

If a student resides in a small country town (or even a larger regional centre) the student is not eligible for AIC or LAFAH. Therefore they are effectively denied a position at any of the Smart State Academies as such enrolment becomes cost-prohibitive for the family of the student. Education Queensland has extended the Homestay Programme to include the Smart State Academies but there is still no financial assistance of any kind available.

In reality this means that (with VERY FEW exceptions) only students in the Brisbane metropolitan area utilise the specialist services provided by the academies. Education Queensland states that units of the curriculum can be provided to students in “ordinary” high schools via distance learning mediums but anecdotal evidence suggests that this simply does not happen.

Apart from which, if it is considered acceptable to provide such curriculum via distance learning to some students, why not to ALL identified gifted learners. Why have a day school for some and distance learning for others? Surely there could be enormous cost savings if this (supposedly acceptable for some) method of delivery was used for all identified gifted learners?

While rural and regional students miss out on that which is provided by the Smart State Academies, the state and federal governments play hand ball with the interpretation of the guidelines for AIC. Each case should be considered on an individual basis so that no child’s educational potential is compromised owing to his or her geographic location.

Gifted students are not the only cohort who miss out. An appropriate education for one child may well not meet the educational requirements of another.

Statistical evidence shows strongly that there are significantly higher costs associated with post compulsory education for rural and regional students.

The Bradley Report supports this view point: “the additional living and study costs associated with higher education enrolment, particularly for those students who need to move away from home to study, are considerable”. (1)

Unless these students are eligible for Youth Allowance (and many are not and even less will be under the Government's proposed changes to the Eligibility for Youth Allowance criteria), there is no form of financial assistance for them at all.

They have to find and pay for accommodation as they do not have the opportunity to live at home while they study. Added to this are relocation and travel costs. Accommodation needs to be paid for during the semester holidays when the children may wish to travel home and spend time with their families. There are also the costs of food, rental bond, telephone, internet access etc.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many regional and rural simply do not apply for tertiary positions as they are well aware of the financial strain under which it will place their family on whom they must rely for financial support. Some students defer courses for twelve months in order to meet the requirement for Independent Youth Allowance. Under the proposed changes to Youth Allowance, this will not be long enough. Most universities will not allow deferments of more than twelve months so this will mean that the student will have to reapply for a position in their course of choice.

“In Australia in 2008, students who live in rural and remote areas are being denied the right of access to a tertiary education. Of the rural and remote students who are offered a higher education place, 43% defer. Of these 43%, 55% will never go on to do any form of higher education at all.” (2)

Their metropolitan “cousins” do not have any of these considerations to worry about. Is it any wonder that there is such a decline in the number of rural and remote students undertaking any form of tertiary study? These figures have been declining at an alarming rate for many years now and will decline even faster if something is not done and done soon to assist this cohort of Australia's youth.

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

Other than access to the local high school for secondary education, there does not appear to be any alternative other than distance education which isn't an option in many cases. The availability of options like school based apprenticeships and VET subjects is often also severely limited or non-existent.

In some towns, Non-Government School Term Hostels provide a boarding alternative for students who wish to attend their local high school. However this alternative is now under threat. The quadrennial funding programme (provided by the Federal Government) ended in 2008. In 2009 the funding became state administered with no iron-clad guarantee of future funding. Should any or all of these facilities close due to on-going financial difficulties, rural and remote students will be left stranded without this education alternative.

Once again it should be noted that not all local high schools offer an education appropriate to the needs of all children.

Access to post compulsory education is even more restricted. In some areas, there are limited TAFE options but access to university (other than as an external student via distance learning) is virtually nil. Many courses need face to face tuition, instruction and interaction and are not able to be offered externally.

Especially for post compulsory education, it is almost a given that students will need to relocate away from home. Formal post compulsory education is highly desirable in this the twenty-first century but children living in rural and regional areas are highly disadvantaged.

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

The current measures such as the provision of AIC need to be maintained and increased by realistic increments on a regular basis. Cost implications have always placed rural and regional students at a definite disadvantage.

Currently Youth Allowance does provide some assistance to a small number of rural and regional students who can qualify to receive it. It is “better than nothing” for those students. However the proposed changes will reduce significantly the number of rural and remote students who will be able to access this allowance.

As mentioned in (a) state and federal government “buck passing” creates confusion and inequities. Definitions of “appropriate schooling” vary and this does nothing to enhance equity of access to education, especially for rural and remote students.

The reality is that less and less people will continue to reside in rural and remote locations when they cannot access the standard of education they want for their children. Current government measures do little to enhance their options so they leave.

This of course has a flow-on effect. Those who do not have the option to relocate are further marginalised by an ever-decreasing standard of service provided. Thus marginalised, students begin to “fall through the cracks” in the system and consequently the cycle repeats itself.

Rural and remote primary and secondary students make up 33% of the school population, but these students make up less than 17% of the tertiary population. (3)

To date, no formal acknowledgement has been made by any political party of the need for some form of tertiary (post compulsory) education allowance. AIC goes some way towards meeting the needs of those students in the formal “education system” but once they wish to progress to university, there is virtually no assistance available and with the proposed changes to Youth Allowance, there will be even less.

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

In many instances, tertiary education is simply becoming too costly for students to access so they are just not undertaking **any** form of post compulsory education, regional, TAFE or anything else.

This will of course be to the detriment of the educational facility – the same old domino effect – lack of students – limited subject/course availability – greater lack of students – eventual closure of facility.

It is assumed that (in part) the “proposed government policies” is referring to proposed changes in funding to universities and also to amalgamation of campuses. The amalgamation of campuses may well lead to them losing their regional focus. This would be quite detrimental to the over-all functioning of the individual campuses.

Those undertaking apprenticeships in rural and remote locations are at a distinct disadvantage when compared to their city peers. They are eligible for the Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA) for apprentices. However this allowance falls far short of meeting the costs involved. Obviously the deficit has to be found from somewhere.

- Current LAFHA allowance is
- first year apprentices \$77.17 per week,
- second year apprentices \$38.59 per week
- third year apprentices \$25 per week.

The cumulative effect of this short-sighted, short term, ad hoc approach to funding for the post compulsory cohort of students will result long term in more and more people leaving rural and regional areas. As previously stated this will have a domino effect on these areas.

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

There is no appropriate guaranteed provision of assistance for rural and regional students. The adequacy of present financial assistance (See list below) is at best questionable and at worst, downright detrimental to the educational needs of our rural and regional student population.

- Commonwealth Scholarship Program / National Accommodation Scholarships
- Indigenous Access Scholarship
- The Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA) for apprentices
- Youth Allowance,
- Austudy,
- Abstudy),

If these students were being adequately provided for, then the alarming statistics in relation to rural and remote participation in post compulsory education would be very different.

WHY IS IT NOT POSSIBLE FOR THOSE IN GOVERNMENT TO SEE CLEARLY WHAT PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SAYING FOR YEARS? POST COMPULSORY EDUCATION HAS ALMOST BECOME A PLAYGROUND FOR THE NATION'S RICH CHILDREN AS IT IS COST PROHIBITIVE FOR THOSE FROM LESS AFFLUENT FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;

In most areas of rural and regional Australia, there is a reasonable standard of primary education available. However vigilance needs to be maintained to ensure the continued provision of an acceptable standard.

Areas which need continuing support include but are not limited to

- Distance Education
- Support for teachers to travel to students for home visits
- Provision of sporting and cultural opportunities for students
- The guaranteed continued provision of the Country Areas Programme (CAP as it is know) which becomes the Priority Country Area Programme in some states.

These students need access to secondary & tertiary education equal to their city counterparts. These children need formal recognition as a special needs group and following that recognition, provision need to be made by all levels of government to ensure equity of access to all forms of education for this group.

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

With the demise of educational opportunities and career choice pathways, comes the inevitable population drift away from rural and remote areas. As more and more of the “next generation” leave to gain an education of their choice, less and less return once that education has been completed.

Government needs to realise that if students can gain an appropriate education in their local areas, they are much more likely to remain in that area and become active members of the community. Community capacity building is powerful tool and continuity of population contributes greatly to this phenomenon.

There needs to be Tax incentives for living regional areas. The whole taxation system needs complete revision and tax incentives need to be provided so that businesses can invest strongly in infrastructure etc. and to build up the communities.

Communities are suffering at the hands of government policy (e.g. forced shire amalgamation in Queensland). Instead of growing and prospering, rural and remote communities are struggling with high fuel costs, lack of health services, lack of resources etc.

h. other related matters.

According to the National Report on Schooling 1997, a major priority of the Australian Government is "To support choice in schooling in the interests of freedom of expression, diversity, innovation and greater accountability and to assist educationally disadvantaged students to access and participate in education in order to maximise their educational outcomes."(4)

It is now 2009 – twelve years on – our children are still waiting.

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