

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to

Senator the Hon Scott Ryan

Minister for Vocational Education and Skills

on the

Redesigning of the VET FEE-HELP Discussion Paper

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Redesigning VET FEE-HELP* Discussion Paper with recommendations for consideration to ensure equity of access to the Vocational and Educational system for rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, live great distances from their nearest training institution and frequently must live away from home to access further education.

Access to further education is life-changing for an individual, their families and rural communities as many return post training to the rural setting bringing back skills to the community. Students returning to rural areas help strengthen their communities with the knowledge they have gained in their chosen competency.

ICPA (Aust) believes every Australian who has the ability and desire to succeed in apprenticeship or training vocation, should be able to pursue their goal regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location.

Engaging in Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector should be an option for all young Australians. However, for many students living in rural and remote areas it is proving difficult to undertake training opportunities due to their inability to meet relocation, tuition and living expenses. ICPA (Aust) believes the added costs borne by rural students in their quest for further education are depriving Australia of a wealth of independent and innovative young Australians.

To ensure equity of access to the Vocational Education and Training System (VET) and to improve the participation rates of rural and remote students, ICPA (Aust) recommends the following for consideration:

Disadvantage

Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students are a separate disadvantaged group within the VET FEE-HELP scheme so that assistance is provided to those most in need to give equity of access to the VET sector.

Given the high costs that come hand in hand with relocation, it would seem obvious that this group who need to relocate, should then be automatically considered as a separate disadvantaged group requiring assistance to access VET courses VET FEE-HELP assistance.

Access to information

ICPA (Aust) supports an agent or an intermediary to improve transparency and flow of information to rural and remote students and their parents/carers. The majority of our members have students schooled through distance education or attending boarding school for their secondary education due to geographical isolation. It is imperative in order for an informed decision to be made, that access to information is available via appropriate and effective communication means. For boarding students

this information needs to be accessible to both parents and students to enable parents to assist their children with both understanding the information and decision making. An agent or intermediary would ensure consistency of information.

Travel distance

Consideration must be given to the distance rural and remote students live from their closest training institution. They may find work in a local environment, however would need to travel to access the theory component of their course. Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate to short term accommodation while attending training institutions and/or compulsory practicums away from home. There is the added uncertainty of fitting work around study.

Additional expenses

While VET FEE-HELP is useful paying the upfront course costs, it does not assist with living expenses or with the costs of accessing the courses. Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate and source accommodation while attending training institutions away from home. Access costs are typically a major deterrent to rural and remote students participating in the VET system at the same rate as their metropolitan peers who can often live at home while attending training colleges/centres, at much lower living costs than for rural students who need to move away from home in order to participate in a training course.

For many rural and remote students who are attracted to VET qualifications, the high upfront fees coupled with relocation costs act as a deterrent.

ICPA (Aust) believes the current government measure for student income support – Youth Allowance – does not adequately recognise the extra costs incurred by many rural and remote students, who may need to support themselves often at great distances from their family when compared to the costs incurred by their urban counterparts who attend training institutions while living at home.

VET students are unable to access the Relocation Scholarship. Youth Allowance (YA) is accessible as long as it is a full time course and they meet the independent or dependent criteria.

Rural and remote families often have little financial means to support a student who needs to relocate to take up an apprenticeship or training course.

Skills in rural and remote areas

Provision of competency based skills courses for jobs which are in short supply in rural and remote areas, while encouraging and supporting students from rural and remote areas to take up these courses, can lead to freshly skilled students returning to these areas.

Often students return to rural areas to help strengthen their communities with the knowledge they have gained in their chosen competency.

For ambitious and motivated young people from rural and remote areas unable to access their chosen course on a daily basis, the unpredictability, complexity and fragmented nature of the income support system including VET FEE-HELP Scheme means far too many young rural people are simply not even contemplating the VET system.

In effect, their aspirations are being driven and dictated by their ability to access financial assistance while they train.

One group that is often forgotten are women in rural and remote centres who have taken time out of the workforce to raise their families and teach their children via distance education. These women need to have incentives to further increase their skills in competency based courses while remaining on the family station. Relocation incentives for compulsory practical components will assist these women to more easily participate in courses involving practicums where they must be away from home for a short time.

Gathering accurate data to examine the key factors that limit the ability of rural and remote students to access the VET system, is seen as critical in ICPA (Aust)'s continuing quest for equity of access for these students.

Providers

ICPA (Aust) welcomes upfront guidelines and regular quality control checks on providers as once rural and remote students have relocated, it is often very difficult in the smaller communities to find another provider or the student has to relocate again. This can prove difficult leading to potential dis-engaging and non-completion of the chosen course.

Recent reduction in face to face training and an increase in online training does not necessarily support and encourage rural and remote students who may have difficulty accessing online communication due to poor internet services. Rural and remote students who often live great distances from training centres and have poor internet and communication services, need alternate means of delivery from various mediums. A variety of communication means needs to be employed to support our rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) is grateful for the opportunity to submit considerations in the Redesigning VET FEE-HELP Discussion Paper and urges the committee to consider the necessity of ensuring rural and remote students, wherever their home, equal opportunity to access the VET sector.