

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



**Submission
to the**

Working Holiday Maker Visa Review

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), is a voluntary parent body, dedicated to ensuring all rural and remote 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 access to an appropriate education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this.

Many families living in rural and remote Australia, caring for and educating their children at home via distance education, rely on the employment of foreign workforce to either fulfil the roles of child carer, distance education tutor or worker in their core business. Backpackers are also a vital resource on rural properties where they 'free up' the mother so she can teach the children by distance education herself instead of working out in the paddock. ICPA (Aust) has concerns that the 32.5 percent 'Backpacker' tax on every dollar earned will be a disincentive for foreign workers coming to Australia on a working holiday visa and in turn disadvantage our member families trying to raise and educate their children in rural and remote areas.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the opportunity to highlight issues that concern our rural and remote members in relation to the impact of the proposed change to the 'Backpacker' tax on the Australian labour market and on rural and remote families.

In relation to the Terms of Reference for this submission, ICPA (Aust) responds to:

- **Australia's competitive position in attracting seasonal and temporary foreign labour, including comparative wages, entitlements and conditions**

Due to geographical isolation, there is a distinct lack of Australian workers, including qualified child care and educational workers, who are willing to undertake work where remoteness is an issue. It is extremely difficult to attract and retain Australian child carers and teachers to rural and remote areas. Frequently, the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are backpackers and our rural and remote members rely on the employment of overseas workers to fill these positions. While they are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas, they can only stay a maximum of 6 months with one employer and are not eligible for a second year visa. Plant and animal cultivation, fishing and pearling, tree farming and felling, mining and construction are currently the specific fields of work that qualifies an applicant for a second year visa. Measures including extending the eligibility for a second year visa to include child care and education provision under rural work are incentives for backpackers to holiday and work in rural and remote Australia.

- **Capacity to match employers with available workers, including regulatory arrangements in relation to the role of labour hire companies**

For many years, ICPA members residing in rural and remote Australia, have raised concerns about the difficulty of finding suitable people to employ in their homes, to provide child care or to teach their children who must be educated by distance education. It is hard enough to attract any workers, let alone those with qualifications. Basic prerequisites for child care and education positions in rural and remote Australia are simple: a resilience to outback conditions, loyalty to the family and competent child care/education skills.

The provision of early childhood education and the issue of accessing affordable early childhood learning and care for families living in rural and remote regions is proving beyond the reach of many due to either no or limited access to face-to-face services, no staff available to fill positions and/or the high out of pocket costs. Evidence from Australian and overseas studies indicates that the first five years are critical for a child's development. For many rural and remote families, the only way an appropriate and effective early childhood education can be implemented is via distance education,

which is delivered at home, usually by the mother who is often taken out of the farm workforce to perform this role. By engaging a foreign worker to fill this position, it would enable a family member to be freed up from the task of providing educational supervision and allow them to re-engage in the agricultural workforce.

Similarly, the only access to education is to study by distance education. This distance education provision is founded on the assumption that all children have ready access to a person able to teach the program in the geographically isolated classroom. This person, the distance education tutor must be capable and confident to deliver the practical, day-to-day supervision, support and educational outcomes requiring dedication and commitment. For continuity of education and retention of workers, the current maximum period of six months work with any one employer needs to be extended beyond au pairs to include distant education tutors.

- **Changes to the use of volunteer and unpaid labour (for instance Willing Workers on Organic farms)**

Recent years of drought and industry downturn have exacerbated demands on rural families by combining an increased workload with decreased incomes. For many farm businesses, low margins limit the capacity to offer higher wages as an incentive to agricultural work. Rural and remote families require the option to utilise volunteers and offer meals and accommodation in exchange for work. These volunteers allow the mother, who is often the distance education tutor, to focus on the children's education. Families often have no other choice but to educate their children via distance education. The removal of volunteer work activities counting towards a second Working Holiday visa from December 1, 2015 has been another disincentive for these workers to work in rural and remote Australia.

- **Short-term and long-term agricultural and tourism labour needs**

ICPA (Aust) believes there is no long term solution to labour shortages in remote and rural areas. Families who have played a vital role in the agricultural economy of Australia, have had difficulty accessing options to assist with child care and the supervision of their children in the classroom. These families are in need of real assistance and are disadvantaged by the limitations of the Working Holiday visa. Adjusting the terms of Working Holiday visas and extending the qualifying categories of rural work by adding child care and education to enable them to be eligible for a second year visa will assist in attracting and recruiting workforce and a larger employment pool for rural and remote Australia.

In 2015, ICPA (Aust) lodged a submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment, into the impact of Australia's temporary work visa programs on the Australian labour market and on the temporary work visa holders which highlights other related issues for our rural and remote families.

<http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/951/federal-submissions/federal-submissions-2015/submission-australian-temporary-working-visa-program.pdf>

- **Opportunities to expand supply of seasonal and temporary foreign workers for the agricultural sector.**

One solution to alleviate the current rural and remote labour shortage is to extend the current approved list of occupations to include a designated education and/or care category qualifying as rural work for people on a Working Holiday visa. Foreign travellers are extremely keen to work in remote areas in order to qualify for their second year Working Holiday Visa. Many foreign teachers are willing to come and teach in these areas and if this could qualify them for their second year visa under the 'Specific Work' list, it would open up the opportunities for more families to have their children taught by qualified teachers. The restrictions of the second year visa requirements impact the available labour market. Allowing foreign backpackers to be employed under these extensions would prove beneficial to both workers and families residing in rural and remote areas.

Benefits include:

- widening the available employment opportunities for these travellers
- increasing the employee pool for rural families
- enabling families the choice of teaching their children in the distance education classroom or allowing them to re-engage in the agricultural workforce while employing a distance education tutor
- assisting in overcoming acute labour shortages in the agricultural industry

Working holiday makers provide a valuable service to primary industry and are an important part of the fabric of many rural communities. For rural and remote families to continue to have available workforce to assist in child care, education and within their business, ICPA (Aust) recommends for workers on visa 417 and 462:

- there should not be any change to the tax applied to wages of backpackers
- Extension of working for 6 months with one employer to working for 12 months with one employer be extended to include distance education tutors (governesses)
- Eligibility criteria for a second year visa be extended to include child care and distance education tutors (governesses) in rural and remote Australia.

These measures will benefit rural and remote families caring for and educating their children and businesses as well as ensuring a sustainable workforce. The Working Holiday visas in their current form, do not readily benefit rural and remote families and businesses in need of real assistance due to the restrictions. The value of this program to those living in remote locations is dependent on the ability to access staff; a broader list of job categories would subsequently provide a larger employment pool. Without the labour provided by backpackers, agriculture and small rural communities face acute shortages resulting in a negative impact on the education of rural and remote children.