

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**"Access to Education"**



**Submission**

to the

**Review**

of

**Vocational Education and Training**

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 ***Vocational Education and Training Review*** with issues relevant to rural and remote students and recommendations for consideration to ensure equity of access to the Vocational Education and Training 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.

ICPA (Aust) believes engaging in Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector should be an option to pursue for all young Australians who have the ability, ambition and motivation to succeed in an apprenticeship or training vocation, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location. However, for many students living in rural and remote areas, it is proving difficult to undertake training opportunities due to remoteness, availability and delivery flexibility of training places, access to courses and businesses for practicums, and their inability to meet relocation, tuition and living expenses associated with these opportunities.

Access to further education is life-changing for an individual, their families and rural communities as there is the potential that many will return post training to the rural setting bringing back skills to the community. This in turn will benefit communities by enhancing their economic and social sustainability.

Rural and remote apprentices and VET students experience significant disadvantage in their efforts to pursue their chosen courses. Recognition that rural and remote students are a separate disadvantaged group is required so that assistance is provided to those most in need to give equity of access to the VET sector. The successful achievement of rural and remote students in the VET sector will be enhanced by tackling the key challenges in the VET sector including continual quality control of the courses offered, ensuring courses offer relevant content, the availability of VET courses for rural and remote students and further promotion, encouragement and support for rural and remote students to pursue a VET pathway or apprenticeship.

#### **Issues for Rural and Remote Students:**

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

- **Affordability**
  - A major deterrent to rural and remote students participating in the VET system and their ability to access their chosen course on a daily basis is the cost of accessing chosen courses.
  - The unpredictability, complexity and fragmented nature of the current income support system 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.
  - Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate and source accommodation while attending training institutions away from home.

- Many rural and remote VET students and apprentices have further costs when attending compulsory course placements, as a consequence of the cost of travel and additional accommodation required to attend these placements either at training institutions or businesses. These are a significant impost and often impossible to fund without outside help from employers or family. Financial assistance with relocation is vital for short-term compulsory practicums of approved courses to assist these training students to more easily participate in courses involving practicums where they must be away from home for a short time.
- VET students are unable to access the Relocation Scholarship. It is imperative the eligibility criteria for the Relocation Scholarship be widened to include VET students who are receiving Youth Allowance (YA) and studying approved courses. Youth Allowance (YA) is accessible as long as it is a full-time course and they meet the independent or dependent criteria.
- **Accessibility and availability**
  - Training providers, courses and practicum places in rural and remote locations to facilitate the completion of the course including practical course components may not be readily available.
  - Students in rural and remote locations are constrained in their ability to complete courses through easy, regular access to appropriate businesses to conduct the practical component of their chosen course.
- **Registered Training Organisations (RTOs):**
  - It is essential that RTOs have clear and transparent guidelines, competency regulations, transparent renewal procedures, regular audits for accreditation, built-in safeguards for students and ongoing regulation to ensure accountability.
  - VET providers in regional areas require support to deliver programs that are flexible and relevant to the local demographic as well as responsive to local labour market. Programs need to be innovative and meet quality standards to ensure VET students in each area have educational opportunity commensurate with their urban counterparts.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes upfront guidelines and regular quality control checks on providers.

- **Communication issues:**  
In rural areas, students often live great distances from training centres and the quality and capability of internet and communication services may make accessing and completing online components of a program challenging. Data restrictions for Sky Muster satellite internet customers is particularly problematic, as while an Educational Service is available to students enrolled in Schools of Distance Education and Schools of the Air, tertiary and vocational education students do not qualify for the additional data offered by the Sky Muster Education Service. A large percentage of rural students live in areas where only Sky Muster satellite internet is available or possibly mobile broadband where data can be cost prohibitive. Rural and remote students need a variety of alternate means of delivery. Continued improvement in availability, accessibility and affordability in internet and communication services is required of ICT for regional, rural and remote schools, teachers, students, parents and communities. It is imperative for the Sky Muster Education Service to be extended to VET students.
- **Access to Quality Staff:**  
It is essential that suitably qualified staff in regional and remote locations are engaged, with a high level of knowledge and skill relevant to the curriculum being taught and must extend to the VET

sector. VET teachers require access to regular affordable upskilling opportunities and professional development to ensure their skills and knowledge remain of high standard and relevant to emerging trends and demands of business/industry. In rural and remote areas many teachers are teaching across learning areas without training, or teaching outside their area of specialisation.

Often teachers residing in rural and remote locations are forced to let their registration lapse due to the onerous teacher registration requirements in various jurisdictions, further limiting the availability of skilled VET teachers in these areas. ICPA (Aust) believes that an alternative, flexible pathway could be made for these teachers to retain their teacher registration. If this occurred, skilled teachers in rural and remote areas could then be utilised within rural and remote contexts to enhance and increase the VET programs offered in these areas.

However, the biggest issue with education sustainability in rural and remote locations is retention of staff. High functioning communities can be turned on their heads when teachers leave. The attraction and retention of teachers and VET educators in these locations requires attention to ensure the sustainability of high-quality learning environments for rural and remote VET sector students.

- **Resource Investment:**

A quality VET system requires continuing levels of investment into resourcing of VET providers – infrastructure, staffing and personnel and the availability of flexible, industry-current and affordable VET programs will enable a high quality of learning, improved outcomes and delivery of an engaging curriculum regardless of the location.

The implementation of regular collaboration between government, industry, business, VET providers and community stakeholders to identify, evaluate and review growing trends will allow the delivery of a VET program relevant to rural and remote areas.

- **Transparency:**

Adequate information needs to be available to provide vocational pathways advice via appropriate and effective communication means on a national platform to support VET consumers' choices with regard to RTO facilities, course availability, entry requirements, pre-requisites, costs and financial support in order for an informed decision to be made.

ICPA (Aust) supports an agent or an intermediary to improve transparency and flow of information and ensure informed decisions to rural and remote students and their parents/carers. The newly formed [www.courseseeker.edu.au](http://www.courseseeker.edu.au) website devised for tertiary information could follow on to the VET sector and provide a one stop shop comparison website with information including providers, prerequisites, costs, government support, etc.

- **Support for Students with Disabilities:**

Innovative approaches are required for students with disabilities and engaging Allied Health and support services to minimise the impact of their disability, where practical, would also promote uptake of VET opportunities and encourage engagement, retention and completion of students' chosen field of study. These supports would also be beneficial during the transition to the workforce.

- **Accommodation Provision:**

Recognition needs to be made that rural and remote students may need to relocate away from their usual residence and source accommodation while attending training institutions for a full

course and/or compulsory practicums and theory components. The availability for these students to receive the Relocation Scholarship to assist with living away from home costs to attend study would increase enrolment and completion of courses by students for whom distance/location is a barrier to successful education outcomes.

- **Regional Study Hubs:**

Strategically placed regional hubs should be available for online learning/support to help overcome communication difficulties for VET students which is a considerable problem in many rural and remote areas. Utilising the announced government Regional Study Hubs (RSHs) to their best advantage and offering VET students the use of these hubs and their resources alongside those studying tertiary subjects would offer wider benefit to communities.

- **VETiS:**

Many rural and remote students are well suited to a vocational pathway and these skills and professions are vital to the viability and progress of rural and remote communities.

It is important that VET training pathways are encouraged as acceptable and valued career paths and VET options should have equal weighting to academic pathways both in subjects offered and achievement acknowledgement.

It is also vital that trades or qualifications gained through a VET provider are seen as equal to occupations or qualifications gained through attendance at a University.

ICPA members continually raise concerns regarding VET through motions brought to the ICPA (Aust) Federal Conference each year (Appendix A). The issues raised include ensuring appropriate quality standards and competencies of students, accountability of training organisations, relocation assistance for compulsory work placements including Relocation Scholarships and increasing the Commonwealth Living Away From Home Allowance (LAFHA).

ICPA (Aust) is appreciative of the Australian Government's commitment to students in rural and remote areas contemplating or undertaking VET pathways, the increased recognition and promotion that VET can offer a beneficial pathway to a career and that the VET sector can be an alternate pathway to university.

The budgetary measures aimed at VET sector students including the Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships, revised National Standards for Group Training Organisations and the *Review of the National Vocational Education & Training Regulator Act 2011* are welcomed. Despite these measures, more needs to be done to ensure rural and remote students are given every opportunity to participate in VET regardless of their location.

Keeping the issues affecting rural and remote students in the VET arena at the forefront and addressing the challenges and inequities will ensure equity of access for these students to the Vocational Education and Training system.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Motions presented and passed at recent ICPA (Aust) Federal Conferences**

#### **2016**

- “That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the national bodies to ensure that all training organisations which provide training for staff in Early Childhood diligently require students to meet the appropriate quality standards and competencies for their level of accreditation.”
- “That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the relevant ministers for rural and regional students studying a VET course, who need to relocate to complete compulsory work placement, be eligible for Youth Allowance for the period of their work placement.”

#### **2017**

- “That ICPA (Aust) requests the relevant Federal Minister ensures that all training organisations which provide training for staff obtaining Certificate III in Early Childhood meet the appropriate standard.”
- “That ICPA Australia lobbies the Minister for Education and Training and the Minister for Human Services to include apprentices and trainees in the Relocation Scholarship eligibility criteria.”

#### **2018**

- “That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the ministers to immediately provide a one-off increase to the Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA-Commonwealth) rate of payment for Australian Apprentices and index this payment against the CPI to protect these financially vulnerable students.”
- “That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the Minister for Education and Training and the Minister for Human Services to include apprentices in the Relocation Scholarship Scheme.”