



Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (Inc.)

FEDERAL COUNCIL  
"Access to Education"

SUBMISSION

to the

Coalition's Online Higher Education Working Group

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 national, apolitical, volunteer organisation that represents families who live in rural and remote Australia. Our goal is to ensure that members have access to a continuing and appropriate, quality education. Particular consideration is given to issues highly relevant to rural residents that often do not apply to metropolitan situations.

ICPA is pleased to provide comments to inform the investigation of the key issues and challenges related to the development of online higher education in Australia to complement existing traditional higher education models. ICPA appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important area of decision making and policy development.

It is clear that the potential benefits of online learning are enormous for all involved in higher education. There are opportunities at the national level for our economy to benefit through increased productivity and economic growth and for our educational institutions to capitalise on the potential of this major export earner in the global trend toward increased reliance on technology and online resourcing. Whilst ICPA appreciates the potential for economic benefits at the macro level, we feel there are a number of issues that need to be considered in the context of rural and remote students.

First, consideration must be given to the Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). The development of MOOCs over the past five years has opened up many new options for 'study for interest' modules and plays an important role in lifelong learning in the context of career, personal and educational development. However, these courses need to be seen as an entirely different genre of course to those which will enhance the formal educational and subsequent career opportunities for students studying online. Courses on offer need to be regulated through being formulated, approved and assessed at the university level and form part of a formal tertiary qualification.

Second, there appear to be numerous benefits for students studying online from home, such as affordability, choice, ease of access, the potential to speed up learning and allow students to enter the workforce more rapidly and the ability to better balance work and family demands due to flexibility in course delivery options. These benefits however, may apply more readily to online learning as a tool for the ongoing development of qualified professionals who live in rural and remote areas such as teachers and nurses - an entirely different category of learner to the school leaver. For certain students, some or all of these elements may be beneficial as they undertake their tertiary study. However, this will unquestionably not apply to all students. It is important that online learning is seen as an option for students and not a convenient replacement for face to face, on-campus attendance.

The opportunity to partake in campus social, sporting cultural and academic life is seen by many students as a vital component of tertiary study. The opportunities for face-to-face situations with both academics and peers are a critical element of both relationship building and personal development. These factors can be seen as even more important when considering rural and remote students who may have spent their entire formal education in a one teacher school or home classroom.

Studying by distance education, from a remote location, is itself already recognised as an issue and considered as a separate, distinct and valid form of educational disadvantage.

ICPA is currently lobbying for a tertiary access allowance and considers it vital for the Government to create an allowance that will enable all rural and remote students to have the equivalent right of access to tertiary education that is available to most students living in the urban areas of Australia.

Third, without efficient, effective and affordable internet services, studying online can be frustrating, costly and extremely time consuming as well as a deterrent to studying via this mode. While the NBN rollout may help to alleviate these problems it will be a number of years before remote students are able to access the long term satellite solution proposed.

ICPA believes that while the opportunity to develop online course options for tertiary students is a positive move forward, online learning is not appropriate for everyone. It is therefore, critically important that online learning not be seen as the learning mode providing equity to rural students.

ICPA values the opportunity to submit to the Coalition's Online Higher Education Working Group and looks forward to future opportunities for consultation. The Association urges the Working Group to consider the necessity of enabling rural students, wherever their family home, the ability to access an appropriate tertiary course via the delivery mode of their choice. Should the Working Group require any further information, ICPA would be happy to provide it.