

Submission to
The Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper

To:

**The Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
CANBERRA ACT 2600**

Submission made on behalf of:

Yaraka Isisford Branch of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring that all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. ICPA members Work together for equity of access to education for all students who live in rural and remote Australia

This submission contains no material supplied in confidence and can be placed on the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper website

Given that our organisation (ICPA) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring that all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education the focus of this submission will be on the provision of such an education for those students who are geographically isolated. It should be noted that the majority of these very students should be well on their way to becoming the primary producers and agricultural leaders of tomorrow. Sadly, however, this does not appear to be the case.

Therefore in accordance with the considerations and scope as outlined on the website <http://agriculturalcompetitiveness.dpmc.gov.au/terms-of-reference>, this submission will primarily focus on:

- the contribution of agriculture to regional centres and communities, including ways to boost investment and jobs growth in the sector and associated regional areas;
- the efficiency and competitiveness of inputs to the agriculture value chain — such as skills, training, education and human capital; research and development; and critical infrastructure;

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The reality is that if the cost of the provision of an education is preclusive to the participation of the students, then people will leave rural and remote areas and seek a residential location where they can access a cost effective education for their children. In addition to having an immediate detrimental effect on the local community from which they have departed, the flow on effect of this departure is that yet another family is lost to the agricultural industry as a whole. With rare exceptions, children from these families NEVER return to rural and remote locations.

These students are heavily impacted on by issues such as socioeconomic impediments, an aging and declining rural population and internal migration away from outback towards coastal areas, just to name a few. The influence of such factors on the education of these students is both profound and far reaching.

Rural students in many areas are poorly serviced with infrastructure (specific example of internet). This links to rural students in some areas being required to cope with new environments (e.g. boarding schools). This also results in resource transfer out of rural areas

Since the settlement of Australia commenced some 200 years ago, people living in rural and remote areas have been struggling with lack of services and in many cases inferior quality infrastructure. It is a Catch 22 situation – lack of population = lack of infrastructure and services which in turn mean that people will not chose to live and work in rural and remote locations. This was remediated to some degree during the 1950's which was a time of affluence for the wool producing industry in particular.

At present internal migration from the outback towards coastal areas is happening in endemic proportions. Rural schools have been closed due to lack of enrolments, provision of government services has declined and in general the population of rural and remote areas has aged, without the demographic of the “up and coming young people” to “take over the reigns.”

There are large flows of young people between Capital Cities, Large Population Centres and Country Areas. In the five years to August 2001, almost three times as many young people left Country Areas than arrived in these areas (226 net departures per 1,000 young people). Nearly two-thirds of the net outflow of these young people was to Capital Cities (1).

There are a number of causal factors involved in this coastward migration. Primary producers are not receiving realistic returns for products sold.

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“Margins are getting less and less because fixed costs like freight, fuel, workers’ compensation and compliance to work place health and safety continue to increase.....Rates particularly on our Queensland properties are another factor. For Example on a place such as Isis Downs, where rents and rates are more than \$400,000.00 a year, it makes it tough.” (2)

Another MAJOR contributing factor is the purchase of large tracts of land by investment companies, who have little or no regard for the impact of such purchases on the local community, its infrastructure or service providers. If the company maintained the properties as individual holdings and employed staff on this basis, the impact would be lessened greatly.

However this is certainly not the case in catchment area of our local ICPA branch. Large tracts of land have been purchased by a company (so much so that there is only one privately owned grazing enterprise between one small outback town and the next small settlement) and the aggregation is operated by a team of workers who move like locusts from one place to the next with military precision. The homesteads on the majority of these places have been sold for removal, bull dozed or simply allowed to fall down from neglect. For many years there was a school bus run which serviced this particular area but now there is not only no children but no permanent adult population either.

The age structure of rural and regional Australia has changed significantly in recent decades. A feature of this change has been the diminishing proportion of young people (i.e. those aged 15-24 years) in many of these areas. This reflects the continuing trend for young people to leave rural areas, and relocate to larger population centres. A key factor in this movement of young people is the greater availability of employment, education and training opportunities in urban areas.

In rural areas, opportunities in the labour force have declined as a result of technological change, economic restructuring and the relocation of businesses to regional centres. Further, young people in rural areas often have to choose between limited educational opportunities available locally, and moving away from family support networks to a large town or city, where the majority of post-compulsory education and training institutions are located.

Rural areas that young people are moving away from usually experience associated declines in population and increasingly older age profiles. In some areas, these population changes also coincide with a decline in key industries and the withdrawal of services, both public (e.g. schools and hospitals) and private (e.g. banking and retail). In turn, such changes may make living in rural areas less attractive to young

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people, and further impact upon on the wellbeing and sustainability of the remaining community. (3)

The rapid encroachment of the mining sector is adding another layer of seemingly insurmountable problems. For many years, no employer in any sector of the pastoral industry has been able to match the wages and working conditions offered by the mining industry. Our young people are leaving in droves, to live, work and play where the big dollars are to be earned. Who can blame them when the starting salary for many mining positions is in excess of \$80,000.00 per year? Couple that with paid annual leave, set hours of employment, great working conditions and is it any small wonder that “the next generation” have little or no interest in or intention of returning to the family grazing enterprise.

All of these issues have an enormous impact on the education of rural and remote students: this education is provided (in the main) in one of three ways: a local one or two teacher multi-level primary school, a school in a larger regional centre or a school of distance education.

In 2001, secondary school attendance among 16 year olds ranged from 84% in Major Cities to 41% in Very Remote areas. Students in regional and remote areas are more likely than those in cities to face problems of access and limited choice as they strive to complete their education. (4)

The one-teacher multi-level primary school in our local community closed at the end of 2008 due to lack of enrolments. Education Queensland kept the school open for as long as they possibly could but in the end, it was impossible to justify its existence. This closure gives rise to another issue – how to attract and retain families into the area when their only choice to provide education for their children is via distance education.

This flow on effect causes a further decline in the population base which means less and less families to participate in and maintain the community and its infrastructure. The cohesive social fabric of the community begins to unravel and community and volunteer organisations suffer. This in turn impacts on the social fabric of rural and remote communities where most of the entertainment and functions which draw people together are created by the communities themselves. Unlike those who reside in the city, there is no choice of entertainment or venues for social engagement – unless the community creates its own social events and gatherings, there simply are not any unless people chose to travel vast distances to access events held in some neighbouring town or community.

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Distance Education is a well utilised option for many rural and remote children for the provision of their primary education. However for untrained home tutor in the home class room the “teaching” of distance education is a daunting task which causes high levels of stress and has an enormous impact on the day to day life of the family. Often “Mum” is not only the jillaroo, book keeper, house keeper, wife and mother – she is also the “teacher.” There is often conflicting demands placed on her time – she is needed to muster or assist with some on property task and must juggle these demands with the need to be in the “class room” with one or more children, all in different year levels and requiring different levels of assistance etc.

Many people can no longer afford to employ a governess – yet another financial impost on an already struggling rural sector. Despite much lobbying by the Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association and other groups no government has seen fit to establish a home tutor’s allowance. There are some allowances available for distance education such as the Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education Allowance. However families are still considerably out of pocket as the cost of establishing, stocking and maintaining a home class room is considerable. There are also the added costs of fuel and accommodation when travelling to attend face-to-face school functions such as Mini Schools, Sports Carnivals, Home Tutor Work Shops etc.

The level of support provided to home tutors varies depending on the particular school of distance education with which the family is enrolled. Some schools have a particularly strong and effective support programme – others appear not to be so committed in this vital area. Be that as it may, at the end of the day, unless the home tutor happens to have teacher training from some previous life, the curriculum is being delivered face-to-face by an untrained individual, who is doing the best she can to provide her children with an appropriate and fulfilling education. Add to the mix children with learning and/or behavioural difficulties or gifted students whose requirements include extension and differentiated curriculum and the task becomes almost impossible.

“Students living outside the major cities, especially those in rural and remote areas, may be disadvantaged in their education. The range of subjects and levels of study available to these students is often more limited, as can be their access to technology. They may also have limited or no access to non-compulsory education such as early childhood education and tertiary education. Many rural students have to move to urban areas to attend post-compulsory education. Problems caused by distance and isolation are often compounded by the costs associated with setting up home education facilities, or with living and studying away from home. In rural and remote areas there may also be limited employment opportunities, which can be a further disincentive to study beyond compulsory schooling.” (5)

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It would be easy to make the very false assumption that with the advent of the home computer and the arrival of the internet and email, that the delivery of distance education would be revolutionised. The use of video streaming, embedded web links in the curriculum, use of email to return completed work instantaneously, the virtual classroom, interactive white boards, - the list is virtually endless.

However for many students, access to any or all of the above technologies is limited at best and non-existent at worst. Students who use a satellite based internet service simply do not have the data transmission speeds to successfully log on and work with these types of service delivery. In addition internet plans of sufficient size to enable the up load and down load of large quantities of data are exceedingly expensive for those families whose only internet access is via satellite. These geographically isolated students are the very ones with most to gain from equitable and efficient internet access. This lack of equal access to the virtual classroom is yet another inequity faced by these isolated learners. They are arguably the most in need of a “shared circle” by utilising such spaces as Google+ or eFoliospaces.

This is not only an issue for distance education students – there is still the desperate situation of the six state schools in Queensland battling with internet speeds of 128kb/s. These schools have not been able to offer full curriculum choices to their students because they simply do not have the internet capability to do so. Opportunities for staff to engage in professional development are also curtailed.

Date: 25 March 2014 16:33:28 AEST

To: Subject: Turnbull satellite announcement

This afternoon the Minister for Communications announced funding to improve the interim NBN satellite service

[http://www.zdnet.com/au/government-stumps-up-18-4m-to-fix-nbn-satellite-service-7000027666/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+zdnetaustralia-news+\(ZDNET+Australia+-+News\)](http://www.zdnet.com/au/government-stumps-up-18-4m-to-fix-nbn-satellite-service-7000027666/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+zdnetaustralia-news+(ZDNET+Australia+-+News))

Despite the impending rectification of the lack of available satellite internet connections, delivery platforms which can cope effectively with issues such as latency will still need to be an absolute priority if geographically isolated students, be they learning via distance education or in small schools, are to receive an appropriate and on-going education to take them forward into the 21st Century.

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“After 2022, there will only be three delivery methods of voice and data services in Australia i.e., optic fibre, wireless and satellite. The interplay of these three delivery methods plays a crucial role in the development and delivery of educational programs to rural and remote students, particularly geographically isolated students.”(6)

The provision of appropriate secondary education for rural and remote and geographically isolated students is not an issue to be undertaken with considerable thought and consideration of all options available.

“Distance education is another option for secondary students who do not have daily access to a school. At this level it is usually a successful alternative for highly motivated, self-directed learners. Many students find it is difficult to stay ‘on track’ at home without the support of face-to-face teaching and easy access to the school’s educational resources. Young people require social contact, peer support and interaction to mature and develop into responsible adults. Access to efficient internet services is paramount to the success of distance education.”(7)

Residential hostels which offer boarding facilities and access to school are located in a small number of towns and larger regional centres. However, as for the SDE option, these facilities are not the preferred choice of many parents when choosing a boarding school for their children.

“Not all secondary schools located within rural and regional centres offer an education that is appropriate to all students’ individual educational needs. The spectrum of ‘appropriate education’ can span from the academically talented (gifted), through English as a Second Language school to a student with learning difficulties and disabilities. In smaller centres the education facilities frequently do not have the resources to meet the needs to all their students. Subject choice is often limited to a range which potentially narrows the student’s career choices. Lack of competition, interaction and learning with class members are all things which leave these teenagers at a disadvantage when class sizes are small. Some schools do not have core subjects taught face-to-face with a teacher presenting in the classroom, and many schools are adversely impacted upon by community social problems. This creates a very difficult learning environment. In these circumstances, students either receive an education locally that is not appropriate, or their families elect to move them away to access a more appropriate educational facility in another centre.” (8)

This means that for many R & R and GI students, they “leave home” at between the ages of eleven and thirteen years to commence what will be, from 2015, a six year journey through high school. These children return home for the school holidays but family life as it was will never be the same. The decision to send a child to boarding school is often one of the most difficult and emotionally sensitive ones that parents

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will ever make. Obviously we all want what is ultimately best for our children and access to an appropriate and continuing education is usually number one on most parents' wish lists for their children.

Not only does the making of this decision come at great emotional cost: there is also considerable financial outlay to be made.

“Educating rural and remote students at metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE requires a significant financial commitment by the family and the students themselves. Students, who need to relocate, often face the prospect of having to move hundreds of kilometres away from home. Their family has to generate enough ‘after tax’ income to pay for the following expenses:

- 1) Relocation expenses
- 2) Boarding/accommodation expenses, which often includes a bond with rental accommodation.
- 3) Tuition/university expenses
- 4) Travel expenses (including family visits)
- 5) Communication expenses (telephones etc.)

These costs are essential expenditure, because the local community does not have the resources to provide an appropriate education. Such expenses place an enormous strain on the student and their family's financial resources.”(9)

Once again, there are some state and federal government allowances available to assist with these costs. However, even more so than with Distance Education, these allowances, some of which are means tested, offer only limited assistance. “The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme assists some families, but many families fail to meet the strict eligibility criteria. By denying financial assistance to these families, their children are denied an education appropriate to their individual needs.”(10)

“An immediate and substantial increase in allowances is needed to address this inequity. While it is not practical to provide schools within reasonable proximity to all students in Australia, all students should have access to a school which can deliver an education commensurate with their needs. While distance education is a solution for some, this is not a practical mode of delivery for many students, particularly most secondary students. Many families must utilise boarding schools.

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In addition to an immediate and substantial increase, these allowances should be indexed in line with the CPI's education sub-index, as this is a true reflection of education cost increases". (11)

The effects of the financial impact of sending children to boarding school are considerable, not only for the family concerned but the flow on effect impacts on the local community in a variety of ways.

Broadly, this can be categorised into three areas:

1. whole families leaving communities
2. dollars leaving rural grazing enterprises and rural communities
3. Children who leave and do not return once their education is completed.

When people simply cannot afford to meet boarding schools costs, many of them 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. This is particularly evident in small rural towns that rely on the business generated by workers such as shearers, contact harvesters, contract mustering providers and the like. Once their children reach high school, they leave the small communities and move to where their children do have reasonable daily access to a high school.

Remote families say the cost of boarding school education is becoming so difficult more families are choosing to leave country areas and relocate.

Andrew Pegler from the Isolated Children's Parents' Association says the costs are getting harder to bear for many families." We are seeing it take, and it always has for a number of years, taken people out of the smallest rural towns that don't have a secondary school and don't have access to a secondary school," he said." Once their children need a secondary school because of the cost of the option of boarding, the whole family tends to relocate." It is a major problem as far as taking people out of some of these towns." Mr Pegler says there are some allowances for isolated families who cannot access a high school close to home but they are not keeping pace with the increasing costs." Without exaggeration, the average family is probably finding in the vicinity of \$20,000 per child to educate them per year if they don't have access to a secondary school and they have to have a boarding school," he said." After 2015, we're looking at six years of secondary school, so we are looking at one more year there." (12)

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The impact of paying boarding school fees is also keenly felt by the families who are making such payments. This is money which is leaving the agricultural enterprise which was responsible for generating it in the first place.

“A major source of funding for the 34% of Australian Students who attend non-government schools across Australia is their parents. Parents contribute 58% of the funding for independent school students and 28% for Catholic school students” (13)

Obviously included in these percentages are all the boarding students from R & R and GI locations who have no realistic choice but to attend one of the non-government schools as they have no reasonable daily access to an appropriate education. These families are, in effect, paying twice for their children’s education as the public education system is funded from income tax revenue and so anyone’s business enterprise which pays tax makes a contribution to the public education system.

It leaves little or no capital for reinvestment in the grazing property, be that reinvestment in the form of repairs and maintenance, capital improvements or employment of labour. Which ever way it is viewed, those vital dollars have left the community in which they were generated. This also impacts on people shopping locally and supporting local business houses: if they have to journey to a major (usually capital) city to participate in ANY of their children’s’ educational activities, they will make purchases of good and services while they are in that city. Hundreds of thousands of dollars leave rural and remote locations annually, never to return and never to be included in the income generating circle of that community.

Obviously, school fees need to be very carefully considered within your financial planning if you are committed to the private school system - in many situations the cost of sending two children through an Australian private school will cost more than AUD200K.

Accessing tertiary education is also fraught with difficulties for this cohort of students. 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”. (14)

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.

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Anecdotal evidence suggests that many regional and rural students 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. Depending on each student's individual location and personal circumstances, some financial support may be available to attend tertiary institutions.

“It is the case that between 1991 and 2005, the proportion of regional (encompassing rural and remote) university students, *decreased* from 20% to 17.7%.” (15)

“Overall in 2001, 18% of Australians aged 25-64 years had a Bachelor degree or higher as their highest non-school qualification. Among people in this age group, 21% of those counted in Major Cities held a degree or a post-graduate qualification, the highest proportion of all Remoteness Areas. Across the other Remoteness Areas, the proportion was about half this, ranging from 13% in Inner Regional areas to 10% in Very Remote areas. This difference between Major Cities and the other Remoteness Areas is probably augmented by the movement of young people to cities to undertake higher education or to obtain employment. In addition, the majority of jobs requiring higher education qualifications are likely to be found in Major Cities.” (16)

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the population in R &R and GI areas is aging rapidly and for a variety of reasons, the majority of the “next generation” is simply not interested in or prepared to become involved in the agricultural industry. The world is an oyster belonging to the next generation and most of them plan to grow “pearls” not wool, beef and crops.

“Every year, young people move to find work or to study. Those in regional areas are particularly likely to move because of the greater employment and education opportunities available to them in Major Cities” (17)

There are a number of factors which influence their decisions not to return home:

- The family's agricultural operation may not be in a position where these children can return home and draw a wage, particularly if the enterprise is still meeting the costs of educating younger siblings.
- Lack of peer group with which to interact and socialise and lack of venues at which to undertake such social activities.
- Perceived lack of opportunities within the rural industry
- They are fully aware of the struggles with which their parents have had to cope and have no wish for such struggles to be imposed on them. i.e. poor

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commodity prices, seasonal conditionals, over-governance by the bureaucracy, lack of leisure time, much hard physical work for seemingly little return.

- The inability of the agricultural sector to compete with the mining industry in terms of real wages and working conditions
- Geographic isolation – something with which most of these children grew up and now they have an opportunity to live somewhere with more access to goods and services they have no desire to return to such isolation
- The lack of services such as twenty-four hour 240 volt power, mobile telephone coverage, fast broadband internet connectivity – this cohort of the population lives in the most technologically advanced era of civilization. They fully utilise social networking sites and other forms of interactive media and are simply not prepared to live without 24/7 connectivity.
- Generational issues and lack of proper succession planning within families.
- This list is far from comprehensive but it does present a brief overview of some of the reasons that young people are not returning to the agricultural industry into which they were born and raised.

In areas with smaller populations, young people are less likely to remain in the area as they pass from childhood to adulthood. In 2001, there were 230,100 persons aged 15-24 years in the Rural Balance of Australia - 36% less than the number of 5-14 year olds in these areas 10 years earlier. The movement of young people out of rural areas and into urban locations is a long-standing demographic phenomenon in Australia. Most of this movement, over the last half of the 20th century, was to Capital Cities, with net inflows of young people fluctuating from 49,800 in the five years to census night in 1976, down to a low of 25,100 in 1986, and up to a high of 82,500 in 2001. (18)

“Education is integral to remote, rural and regional human rights concerns and central to rural revitalisation, sustainability and productivity. Education is the key to Rural Australia and so Australia’s future. We must work together to ensure education is accessible, equitable, and of excellent quality for all rural Australians. Our nation depends on it.”(19)

“At the tertiary level, advocacy is directed towards effecting change at community, state or national levels. Associations, education systems, tertiary education institutions, political parties and the media each have the potential to shape attitude and influence decisions.Tertiary advocacy requires planned strategy and sustained effort. This form takes considerably longer but can have much broader impact with changes at systemic, political and societal levels.....Tertiary level advocacy can bring about attitudinal and educational change within society.” (20)

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Statistics, school closures, population drift, lack of services etc are all very real issues for residents of geographically isolated areas. The physical and emotional impacts of such actions are felt very deeply by community residents. As mentioned previously in this submission, the Yaraka State School closed at the end of 2008 due to lack of enrolments.

In conclusion of this submission I would like to add the poem written by my (then ten year old) daughter who was a student at the Yaraka State School during the time of “community consultation” prior to the actual closure of the school

Places of the Past

There's some old decrepit buildings,

In the outback where I roam

In sad and lonely ghost town

Once called home, sweet home.

There's no one in this little town

Its families have all moved away

So the houses stand there patiently,

Each dreaming of a long-gone day.

When the children laughed and played

While their mothers cooked and chatted.

And their fathers gathered at the bar.

But now those days are shattered

There's no one in the school house.

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No teacher to ring the bell.

There's no school work in the desks.

It's just a lonely shell.

Abandoned now, it sits forlorn

Cobwebs and mould upon the stairs

The stillness seeks to haunt me

A sad state of affairs!

The recollections of the laughter

And all the fun that once was had.

Of the frustrations and delights

Over the good work and the bad.

So the wind whistles through town

Spreading all the dust

While the kangaroos hop silently

With fur as red as rust.

No more memories will come to rest

In that long forgotten town

And I see now what will happen.

If MY school closes down.

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