

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports 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 consultation on the *Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports Discussion Paper* providing feedback related specifically to the needs of rural and remote students in relation to the non-financial supports within the apprenticeship system and how they can be adjusted to drive up completions and improve diversity.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation, which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to an appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary and training. 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, often live great distances from their nearest employer and post-school training providers.

ICPA (Aust) believes engaging in Australia’s workforce through Apprenticeships, Traineeships and School Based Traineeships (SBATs) should be an option for all young Australians who have the ability, ambition and motivation to succeed in these vocations, 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 apprenticeship and training opportunities. This can be due to remoteness, availability and delivery, flexibility of training places, access to courses and businesses for workplace learning, the impact of time lost in travel and their inability to meet relocation and living expenses associated with these opportunities.

Access to further education, qualifications and credentials is life-changing for an individual, and their families. There is also potential for young people to return to a rural setting post training, bringing skills back to small communities, thereby enhancing economic and social sustainability in rural and remote Australia. In reference to the *Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports Discussion Paper*, Regional and Remote Apprentices in Training equated to 36.7% as of 31 March 2022. This is a significant representation which needs to be harnessed by appropriate support services with a view to increasing the completion rates for this cohort.

Rural and remote Australian Apprentices¹ experience significant disadvantage in their efforts to pursue their chosen courses. Recognition that ‘rural and remote’ is a separate disadvantaged group is required to ensure appropriate assistance is provided to those most in need ensuring equity of access to post school qualifications.

ICPA (Aust)’s submission responds to the following questions based on the *Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports Discussion Paper*:

- What changes are needed to drive up the completion rate?
- How can services delivered better encourage and support apprentices from diverse backgrounds?
- How can the support services be optimised to meet the current and future needs of apprentices and employers?

¹ Australian Apprentices is used in this document as a reference to those undertaking any of the three levels in the Australian Apprenticeship system – Apprentice, Trainee or School Based Apprentice and Trainee.

Recommendations:

Accessing Australia Apprenticeships in rural and remote locations

- Careers Education including knowledge, growth and development, should be embedded in all high school curriculum and delivered during and after the student's primary and secondary education as outlined in the Australian Blueprint for Career Development ² by a qualified practitioner and presented utilising face-to-face meetings/content in conjunction with high quality online resources.
- A national website similar to *Courseseeker* would provide a one-stop comparison website with information including providers, job availability, costs, government financial and non-financial support and tools to assist with career pathway decision-making and identification of individual career options tailored to interests and abilities. Information including how to apply for a Vocational Education and Training (VET) course/apprenticeship, entry options, pre-requisites, application processes, what the components of an apprenticeship involve i.e., work vs training blocks and course delivery options would all be valuable.
- The facilitation of work experience, industry visits and industry-based assessments of trade occupations to ensure students are undertaking the best-suited Australian Apprenticeship, are matched with an appropriate employer and have access to off-the-job training within their capabilities needs to be more adequately enabled by support services.
- The availability of more transparent, accurate and up-to-date information as provided by the Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) which reflects the actual training to be delivered.
- A Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process that is not onerous and accurately acknowledges the student's skills and knowledge.
- At Sign Up to an Australian Apprenticeship:
 - Clear information on the responsibilities of all the parties involved in a State Training Contract and Training Plan and all additional information is available to all parties prior to the meeting.
 - The sign-up process is face-to-face where possible.
 - All parties are present, including student and their parents/guardians, in order for all aspects of the contract to be explained and understood, i.e., rules and regulations, the support services and financial assistance available and the expectations of an Australian Apprenticeship. Parents or Guardians must be present. This is particularly important for the students who are under the age of eighteen or if an over 18-year-old student appoints their parent/guardian to be an advocate or to receive information on their behalf.
 - Clearer information about the role of the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN), key contacts (the who and how of the contact process) and essential human resource and course information. At the time of sign-up, there is an abundance of forms required to be completed from the place of employment (e.g., Superannuation, Tax File Number declaration), the RTO and financial assistance applications. Initiatives such as an 'Australian Apprentice Welcome Pack' could be implemented. This pack could be provided to the apprentice (and parent/guardian) with information pertaining to wages, pay rates, holidays, how and when to submit a leave request, allowances available, who to call if you need assistance etc and a calendar of off-the-job training blocks/days and information on roles,

² Australian Blueprint for Career Development

responsibilities and contact process and details of the apprentice, RTO and the AASN provider. It needs to be made clear that the AASN support person is the first point of call in most instances.

- Rural and remote Australian Apprentices should be allocated an AASN provider staff member who they can develop a rapport with and who is their first point of contact. Contact from the AASN personnel should be regular and frequent to monitor wellbeing, progress, identification of anomalies in work environment and answer any questions from the apprentice to ensure this all occurs in a timely manner.
- Connectivity - Lack of affordable and reliable internet connections and services in some rural and remote areas can result in decreased access to information and support to make informed decisions. The provision of information on a variety of platforms; phone, internet (virtual tours and web-conferencing) and face-to-face is required.

Flexibility in Training and Assessing

- An option be available for trainers to travel to the workplaces of the apprentice and trainee to monitor the workplace and assess the skills in order to share the travelling load of the apprentice particularly if there are several requiring assessing in a rural and remote location.
- The option of virtual real time assessing of the apprentice.
- Off-the-job training needs to be face-to-face or combination of face-to-face and virtual for rural and remote Australian Apprentices. While the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that a combination of face to face and virtual delivery can be cost-effective, full virtual course delivery has proven challenging for rural and remote cohorts.
- The option of access to off-the-job training in blocks and online if appropriate or possible, in lieu of weekly days off the job training. **(See Appendix 'A' - Case Study 1 and 2).**

Encouraging and Supporting Rural and Remote Apprentices

- The high upfront and ongoing costs for rural and remote students who must relocate to access their apprenticeship contributes to low completion rates for this cohort. ICPA (Aust) appreciates that the financial aspects are being reviewed in late 2023 and looks forward to expanding on these issues, which include the need for increases to the Commonwealth Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA), inclusion of apprentices and trainees in the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) along with Youth Allowance adjunct payments including the Relocation Scholarship.
- Increased supports for Australian Apprentices through training and upskilling of AASN provider staff on the unique needs of rural and remote apprentices who have relocated from home to access their apprenticeship including the knowledge and experience of the non-financial support these apprentices need to succeed.
- For an Australian Apprentice from a rural and remote area, moving to access an apprenticeship can mean relocating over one thousand kilometres away from the family home. The process of relocating away from family and community support, often for the first time can lead to well-being and mental health challenges. These young people need to set up a place of residence, live independently including undertaking activities such as shopping and housework for the first time while commencing a new occupation, all without the physical support of their families. Coupled

with this, the huge relocation and on-going living costs and that apprentices are on very low wages, often with minimal financial assistance often means that sport and recreation are sacrificed. It is crucial that support services are aware of these underlying tribulations.

- The AASN providers should also engage employers in specific training and resources to increase their understanding of the needs and barriers of rural and remote apprentices, which may not be experienced as keenly as their metro-based peers. This information could be incorporated into the follow-up plan of the apprentice throughout the course by the employer to ensure the wellbeing of the student is being monitored. For example, when holiday leave requests for time off around popular holidays like Christmas or Easter are submitted, apprentices can be overlooked and the leave can instead be given to the qualified personnel as they often have families. It is also more economical for apprentices to be rostered on over holiday periods. For rural and remote apprentices, this can mean they are not able to return to their homes for Christmas with their families as the public holidays do not provide enough time for travel. This increases the sense of isolation. These challenges are all contributing factors to the low completion rates of rural and remote apprentices **(see Appendix 'A' - Case Study 3)**.
- Supports and incentives currently focus heavily on the employer and the RTO rather than the individual apprentice. More direct financial and non-financial support for rural and remote apprentices is essential to ensure their unique needs are met. The AASN Code of Conduct and the Australian Apprentice Incentive System Program Guidelines outline a myriad of support which will be provided to the apprentice, however, anecdotal feedback from member families indicates that this support is not consistently provided. Improved delivery of pastoral care, support and advice to the apprentice must be instigated from the AASN providers with more regular check-ins to ensure rural and remote students successfully progress through their apprenticeship with the unique support they often require.
- AASN providers need to support apprentices to know their rights within the workplace regarding conditions, pay, leave and entitlements to ensure rural and remote Australian Apprentices are valued and work conditions are fair. Often, when contractual or pay issues are raised with the provider by the apprentice, the advice is for the young person to contact Fair Work or take it up with the employer. Both courses of action could leave the apprentice very vulnerable without third party representation due to a lack of experience and knowledge of these types of issues. Some of these apprentices are still under the age of eighteen.
- Furthermore, there is a need for AASN providers to offer increased assistance to address conflicts at work. ICPA (Aust) has received feedback from members/apprentices that the common advice from support services is to deal directly with the employer/superior in relation to issues including conflicts at work and safety concerns. Young apprentices are often not comfortable or confident enough to have this conversation with a superior and need guidance, support and often third-party representation. **(See Appendix 'A' - Case Study 4)**.
- Contact with apprentices could be undertaken during the off-the-job training in the form of group sessions, and/or one-on-one interviews. This would facilitate support structures including their peers for the students outside the workplace. This may also be required in the workplace if an apprentice/trainee is experiencing difficulties with their off-the-job environment.

- A request for apprentices/student to complete an 'Exit Survey' when withdrawing from or relocating an Australian Apprenticeship to track and collect data on the contributing factors and situations that lead to high withdrawal rates prior to completion of apprenticeships to determine if it is a result of welfare, workplace, educational, financial or other reasons.

Australian Apprenticeship Support Network and its Providers

There is a need to have appropriate systems in place to periodically and adequately review support services to ensure performance indicators are met along with the AASN Code of Conduct and Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System Guidelines.

Once again ICPA (Aust) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this discussion and would be happy to provide any further information that is required.

Appendix A

Case Studies from our Members

Case 1 - NSW

Bourke NSW to Dubbo NSW is 360km each way, and it hosts our closest delivery of Electrotechnology for Refrigeration Mechanics. In 2020 an Electrotechnology School Based Apprentice and Trainee student was offered Tamworth NSW (560km each way) or Broken Hill NSW (617km each way) for one day a week off-the-job training, by TAFE as the RTO.

Case Study 2 – Western Australia

Block training sessions for rural students in the city can cause accommodation and supervision issues. Pre-Apprenticeships that are conducted at TAFE's are often required before entry into a full-time apprenticeship. A Motor Mechanic Pre-Apprenticeship (six months) is offered at the Geraldton TAFE and is run on a Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Accommodation is provided on site but is paid at the rate for a full week board. Work Placement is a mandatory requirement of the course but is done in two blocks, one at the end of each term. As most of the students that attend this course are from areas outside of the Geraldton townsite, would it be more practical to organise the work experience to occur on a Thursday and Friday?

Case 3 – Western Australia

My son is in his first year of a Heavy Diesel apprenticeship in Perth 450 kilometres from his families rural farming property. He loves his job and is eager to complete it so that he can return to a rural environment where his skills will be in high demand. He started his apprenticeship in January 2022, worked all of Easter on double pay to try and get ahead with his mounting bills that an apprentice wage struggles to cover. A keen sportsman, he has forgone his hockey team due to the high club fees and the games being held at different times over a weekend.

My son has had two weeks off all year and often works Saturdays. His day commences at 5am, a half hour commute to his workplace to start work at 6am. He does 7.5 hours on ordinary pay and then tops this up with 3 more hours of extra time to finish at 4:30pm, home at 5pm.

He has asked for time off over Christmas; however, this has not been forthcoming as he was told by his employer that he did not get his leave request in early enough.

Is it that he is a cheaper and probably more capable and compliant employee to keep at the workshop over the Christmas break? A day off on Christmas day does not allow him to travel home for Christmas. This arrangement is not a fair outcome for a young first year apprentice from a geographically isolated part of Australia.

Case Study 4 – Western Australia

My son met with a representative from Apprenticeships Australia at his commencement meeting and enquired about any allowances that he may be able to access. He has met with this person once more this year and has not had any follow-up on his enquiries. This meeting happened at his workplace. He does have the email of this representative so he can contact her but will not as he says she is just there to make sure he is at work and tick that box off in her folder.

A phone call today to enquire about any allowances for apprentices put me in contact with a lady from an AASN. I was told this support service looks after all apprentices in WA but are based in Queensland. She would not talk to me as it was 5pm Qld time and I should call back tomorrow. So, this would be problematic for any students in WA, just simply because of time zone differences.

I have been on hold to Services Australia Apprentice hotline 133633 for 28minutes....Use this number if you need help with payments and services for Australian Apprenticeships... A more dedicated hotline for rural and remote apprentices would be good as she needed a lot of assistance to even get to the Living Away from Home Allowance understanding.