
Final Report

Rural and Remote School Education

**A Survey for the Human Rights and Equal
Opportunity Commission**

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1. Background

“Children who live outside the major population centres in Australia should not have to settle for a second rate education” (Commissioner Chris Sidoti)

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has been conducting *Bush Talks* since March 1998. This has involved consulting with people in regional, rural and remote Australia about human rights issues. In the talks education has consistently emerged as a major concern for people living in these areas.

In response to this concern, the Federal Human Rights Commissioner, Chris Sidoti, is conducting *A National Inquiry into Rural and Remote School Education*. The Inquiry is examining education from national and human rights perspectives.

International human rights agreements have been considered as part of the Inquiry, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention declares the right of every child to education regardless of race, sex, disability or other status. To achieve this right, State Parties shall ensure that:

- primary education must be compulsory and available free to all;
- secondary education must be available, with financial assistance to be offered in cases of need. There should be encouragement of the development of different forms of secondary education, including vocational and general; and
- measures to be taken to encourage regular attendance at school and the reduction of drop out rates.

(see http://www.hreoc.gov.au/school_page/undhr/sp10_3_1.html)

The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry require that the Commission inquire into the provision of education for children in rural and remote areas with reference to:

- the availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling;
- the quality of educational services, including technological support services;
- whether the education available to children with disabilities, Indigenous children and children from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds complies with their human rights.

(see http://www.hreoc.gov.au/news_info/rural/index.html)

The Inquiry involves a number of initiatives, including public hearings and meetings as well as a survey.

The Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne was commissioned by the Commission to conduct the survey. The survey sought input from individuals (parents, students and teachers) not otherwise reached by the Inquiry. It was not intended that

this survey should provide a statistically valid sample of these groups in rural and remote Australia; rather it was one of the methods of encouraging and supporting input of information and opinions to the Inquiry.

Acknowledgments

In carrying out this survey, the Youth Research Centre wishes to acknowledge the interest, support and advice provided by parents, students and teachers throughout Australia.

A number of people took responsibility for the collection of data within some specific areas:

Dr Murray Lake (Western Australia), Professor Carolyn Matthews (University of South Australia), Don Squires (Charles Sturt University, NSW), and Maureen Chiswell (Country Education Project, Victoria).

Many organisations assisted with the distribution of surveys through their networks, copied and circulated forms at their own initiative, provided time at conferences for workshops and consultations, enabled us to take part in conversations on the School of the Air and made students available for focus groups in schools in the Northern Territory.

Particular thanks is due to the support provided by the Youth Research Centre staff - Deborah Thomson, Jasmina Radulovic, Iva Siasosi, Meredith Gawler and Kate Eyles - who provided assistance with the phone surveys during two long and intensive days. Kate Eyles and John Wright entered basic survey data into the database.

Chris Kay from the Computer Facility of the Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, developed and maintained the web-based survey.

2. Methodology and Responses

2.1 The Survey

This survey of education in rural and remote Australia was carried out by the Youth Research Centre in the second half of 1999, principally during July - September.

2.1.1 The Questions

The survey addressed particular questions raised by the terms of reference of the Inquiry. Separate survey forms were developed for each of students, parents and teachers; while these had similar intentions, there were slightly different questions on each survey to focus on issues of greater relevance to each of these groups.

These questions included:

for students:

- time taken to get to school;
- access to technology;
- subject choice;
- advantages and limitations of their location in regard to education;
- strategies for educational change;

for parents:

- costs and means of getting children to school;
- other costs of education;
- income support;
- cultural appropriateness of schooling;
- advantages and limitations of their location in regard to education;
- strategies for educational change;

for teachers:

- costs involved in teaching in rural and remote areas;
- advantages and limitations of their location in regard to education;
- measures to overcome limitations and their effectiveness;
- other strategies for educational change.

2.1.2 Distribution of Surveys

The surveys were distributed in a wide variety of ways, using networks of educationists, parents, teachers and other related organisations and individuals throughout Australia. The existence of the survey was publicised in print journals, on radio, through other electronic communications, and through word of mouth.

Strategies included distribution through:

- attendance at conferences (student, parent, teacher and community conferences);
- newsletters (parent, school, associations);
- teacher unions;
- parent groups;
- regional service workers;
- regional education workers;
- state based representatives who distributed through local networks to schools;
- e-mail list servers;
- the establishment of a website;
- focus groups/school visits including lessons conducted over school of the air;
- responses to individual requests;
- HREOC workers and their networks.

An effort was made to enhance participation by particular groups. For example:

- an Indigenous student was employed in a rural area to distribute and assist Indigenous community to complete surveys;
- a linguist in a remote area was able to assist non-English speaking Indigenous people to complete surveys;
- disability support groups assisted in the distribution and completion of surveys.

2.2 Responses

The surveys were available and completed in a number of ways. These included:

- written surveys completed and returned individually or in groups (hard copy);
- verbal survey completion via a phone in;
- electronic survey completion and transmission through a website.

2.2.1 Written responses

Approximately five thousand surveys were distributed nationally. Reply paid envelopes were included to encourage greater response. Four consultants with specific local knowledge and networks within particular areas (across Australia) were identified and commissioned to distribute surveys widely, collect data and return groups of completed forms.

By the end of October approximately 3,100 surveys had been returned.

Responses came from: (these numbers also include those surveys completed on the phone or the web - see below for details)

Total responses by category and state/territory:

State/Territory	Parents	Students	Teachers & other education workers	TOTALS
New South Wales	329 (36%)	298 (17%)	140 (28%)	767 (25%)
Northern Territory	12 (1%)	51 (3%)	33 (7%)	96 (3%)
Queensland	133 (15%)	184 (11%)	104 (21%)	421 (14%)
South Australia	125 (14%)	146 (9%)	39 (8%)	310 (10%)
Tasmania	83 (9%)	525* (31%)	72 (14%)	680 (22%)
Victoria	90 (10%)	298* (17%)	47 (9%)	435 (14%)
Western Australia	133 (15%)	205 (12%)	69 (14%)	407 (13%)
(No information on state/territory)	6 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	4 (<1%)	12 (<1%)
TOTALS	911 (29%)	1709 (55%)	508 (16%)	3128

Some other figures describing the overall response rates are:

- a) 140 (4.5%) of the respondents described themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander:

parents: 15 (2% of all parents)
students: 117 (7% of all students)
teachers: 8 (2% of all teachers)

- b) the overwhelming majority of respondents were at, or associated with, Government schools:

Government: 2715 (87%)
Non-Government: 304 (10%)
Boarding: 67 (2%)
No response/other: 42 (1%)

Of the 'Boarding' group, there were 52 parents, 8 students and 7 teachers.

2.2.2 The Phone In

A free call number was provided for callers anywhere in Australia to contribute to the survey. This Phone In was specifically provided for people who may not have wanted to or have been unable to complete a written survey (eg those with low literacy) or for people who had not had access to the written survey through other means.

The Phone In was advertised extensively on national and regional radio throughout Australia. Over 30 interviews were conducted on behalf of the Commission in a short period of time leading up to the Phone In, in order to advertise the Inquiry and the survey. Follow-up interviews on national and regional radio were subsequently conducted providing some information about the results of the Phone In. In turn, this instigated a further round of survey responses.

The radio promotion of the Phone In meant that calls and comments continued to arrive for several weeks. A farmer heard an interview while in the paddocks, scratched the number into a barrel of sheep dip with a bit of baling wire and rubbed grease over the number so he wouldn't lose it. He phoned days later when he came in from work. Others heard the number while driving their children to school, or in the local store, or when they were about to leave the house; they wrote the number down, sometimes on the leg of their jeans, and phoned up later, or when they got to the single teacher school, they urged the teacher to phone in.

During the Phone In, five telephone lines were staffed for two days (10 am to 10 pm). In addition, callers were able to leave a message for ten days after the Phone In to receive a written copy of the survey.

265 surveys were completed over the phone, with many of the callers taking up to an hour to complete the survey, as they also took the opportunity to talk about significant concerns for them about education in their area.

Phone In responses came from:

- parents 210 (79%)
- students 5 (2%)
- teachers 50 (20%)

These responses are included in the overall figures reported in section 2.2.1.

2.2.3 The Website

The surveys were also available for answering on a specially constructed website for three months (August-October 1999). Responses could be entered onto the form and sent electronically. A further 20 people (12 parents, 4 students, 4 teachers; 10 from NSW, 2 from SA, 3 from Victoria, 2 from Tasmania and 2 from Queensland - one specified no state) completed the survey in this way.

As one of the factors limiting education in rural and remote areas was the cost (STD rates) and quality (very slow) of internet services (see pages 28 and 53), this may have influenced and limited the response rate. In addition to surveys completed in this way, several other people e-mailed the Centre for a hard copy of the survey; they were able to access the internet but were not prepared or able to use it to fill in a survey.

These responses are also included in the overall figures reported in section 2.2.1.

2.3 Response Validity

It was never intended that this survey provide a statistically valid sample of the views of people in rural and remote Australia. Rather the survey was intended to provide opportunities for people to contribute to the issues before the Commission's Inquiry. As will be noted in the next section, more remote areas of Australia and smaller communities are represented in this survey disproportionately to their overall population within Australia. Further, specific interest and single issue groups within some schools provided multiple copies of surveys stating similar concerns (eg the removal of portable classrooms). This resulted in large numbers of similar surveys, and these particularly affect the figures marked with a * on the chart. This means that such issues may emerge as 'statistically significant' overall, while actually representing a single case.

In reporting survey results, an attempt has been made on many major items to indicate an approximate strength of response, taking such factors into account. However, it must be noted that many survey items were 'open ended' and relied upon respondents to initiate comment on these issues. Their responses have then been post-coded into categories. Where very few or no responses around a particular issue were received (in a state/territory or within a particular population group for example), this is indicated on the charts by a dash (-). This does not necessarily mean these topics were not an issue here: had we specifically asked a 'closed' question, there may have been different results.

Some column percentages also add to less than or greater than 100%. This recognises both that some respondents did not answer particular questions (the percentages have been calculated with reference to the whole survey population within categories) or that they may have indicated more than one response in some cases.

3. Overall Issues

Some issues emerge consistently across all groups contributing to this survey. These issues reflect fundamental concerns associated both with living in rural and remote Australia, and also with attending school there. The survey responses also show substantial variations in the experience of schooling **within and between** various states and territories. We expect this: education is constitutionally the responsibility of these state and territory governments. However issues of educational provision, access and quality are also framed and influenced by Federal responsibilities, both in terms of resource provision and national intervention strategies, and in terms of provision of national infrastructures.

Though the discussion in this report is grounded in a broader experience and understanding of educational issues in rural and remote communities, its particular strength is that it reports and summarises the voices of many parents, students and teachers across the country. As such, it reflects their everyday experiences, joys and frustrations.

To understand the differences in views and ideas, we need to start by understanding what we mean by the terms ‘rural’ and ‘remote’, and by understanding the diversity of the day to day circumstances of families and individuals.

3.1 Rural and Remote: What is Meant?

Australia is a very sparsely populated country with a population heavily concentrated in a small number of coastal cities and capital cities:

- over 80% of Australia’s population live within 80 kilometres of the coast;
- more than 85% live in urban areas (Budge *et al*, 1992; Walmsley and Sorensen, 1993);
- between 70% (Western Australia) and 40% (Tasmania and Queensland) of each state’s population is concentrated in the capital city (Walmsley and Sorensen, 1993);
- there are only 31 places in Australia that have a population in excess of 25,000 people (Budge *et al*, 1992).

There are many different and potentially conflicting definitions of ‘rural’, using criteria of population density, economic factors, socio-cultural characteristics and location or remoteness from larger cities. While the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines rural as all residences and settlements of less than 1000 people, the Commonwealth Government recently defined rural as all non-metropolitan places with fewer than 100,000 people. These differences have profound effects on the size of the population being considered: using the ABS definition there are approximately 2.3 million rural Australians (less than 15% of the total population) while using the Commonwealth definition, this number rises to more than 5.7 million non-metropolitan Australians (approximately 34% of the total population). (Sher and Sher, 1994)

'Remote' is similarly subject to different interpretations. Its link in the **Remote, Rural and Metropolitan Classification** (DPIE and DSHS, 1994) to 'Aboriginal communities and very low population densities', also locates it within economic activity: mining and broadacre farming. It is noted there that it also implies:

distance from neighbours and distance from large towns and cities and the goods, services, facilities and opportunities offered by large towns and cities (DPIE and DSHS, 1994: 6)

The classification then uses distance from large towns and cities, and distance from other people (ie population density) to develop an 'index of remoteness'. It draws on both distance to urban centres and 'personal distance': the average distance between residents.

The terms 'rural' and 'remote' therefore have very different meanings in different contexts. Decisions about location are neither solely economic nor work related; nor are they seen definitionally in terms of disadvantage. "Remoteness can bring advantage," says the DPIE and DSHS classification report (1994: 6); many people strive to maintain a 'rural' lifestyle and will argue strongly about the advantages of such a lifestyle in terms of closer community links, increased safety, a more friendly, sharing and supportive community and so on. Access to rural schooling is part of this intention, and is often linked positively to the closer relationships between students and teachers that are attributed to smaller rural schools. Many respondents to this study identified strong positive aspects of rural schooling, particularly pointing to the commitment and efforts of teachers, parents and communities to ensuring access to quality education.

The study recognises the range of different circumstances in which rural people live and has attempted to provide some discriminators to organise the responses. Respondents were asked to identify their own location type according to the following criteria. These were based on a hierarchy of urban centre population sizes similar to that used by Faulkner and French (1983) and outlined in the **Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification** (DPIE and DSHS, 1994):

Response rates by category and location type:

Location Type	Students	Parents	Teachers	Overall Number	Overall %
Isolated farm or station more than 100 km from a town	72 (4%)	95 (10%)	19 (4%)	186	6%
Farm or station within 100 km of a town	271 (16%)	256 (28%)	56 (11%)	583	19%
Within a small community under 1000 people	317 (19%)	225 (25%)	125 (25%)	667	21%
Within a rural community of between 1000 – 10,000 people	752 (44 %)	237 (26%)	207 (41%)	1196	38%
Within a small rural centre of between 10,000 – 25,000 people	44 (3%)	55 (6%)	60 (12%)	159	5%
Within a larger rural centre of between 25,000 – 100,000 people	85 (5%)	37 (4%)	35 (7%)	157	5%
No answer	168 (10%)	6 (<1%)	6 (1%)	180	6%

It can be noted that 25% of all respondents described themselves as being from a 'farm or station'. Given the low total numbers of people actually living in these locations, it is clear that the survey provided positive access for people in this category. The response was also strong from small communities (21%) and from rural communities of less than 10,000 people (38%). Almost 85% of respondents were from communities of less than 10,000 people. These figures are further strengthened by a recognition that some survey responses from the larger population centres came from organisations associated with rural education, and from teachers who lived in these centres and commuted to nearby smaller rural locations to teach.

These figures can also be analysed by the state or territory of response (below). Not surprisingly, there were proportionately fewer responses from isolated farms and stations in Tasmania and Victoria than there were from these areas in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. Similarly, relatively few responses were received from rural centres above 10,000 population in Tasmania, South Australia or Queensland, particularly in comparison to Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Response rates by state/territory and location type:

Location Type	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
Isolated farm or station more than 100 km from a town	36 5%	5 5%	50 12%	39 13%	4 <1%	13 3%	37 9%
Farm or station within 100 km of a town	149 19%	21 22%	94 22%	111 36%	61 9%	57 13%	86 21%
Within a small community under 1000 people	151 20%	16 17%	79 19%	124 40%	89 13%	132 30%	74 18%
Within a rural community of between 1000 – 10,000 people	330 43%	29 30%	171 41%	29 9%	374 55%	149 34%	113 28%
Within a small rural centre of between 10,000 – 25,000 people	64 8%	13 14%	16 4%	6 2%	0	26 6%	33 8%
Within a larger rural centre of between 25,000 – 100,000 people	32 4%	12 13%	2 <1%	0	10 2%	41 9%	59 15%

3.2 Living in Rural and Remote Australia

Survey respondents were enthusiastic about contributing to the research. Parents and teachers were particularly keen to assist and to tell their stories. What stands out from these contacts with people from rural and remote areas is that it is difficult (if not impossible) to define a ‘typical’ circumstance for people living in rural and remote Australia, and thus a ‘typical’ educational situation. Here is just a quick snapshot of some of the many descriptions of rural lifestyle experienced during this study:

Families

- A family living on a station, with the nearest neighbours over 2 or 3 hours’ drive over dirt roads. There are three children, two of whom are of school age. The school age children study through distance education at home. The mother is the key educator, balancing the demands of mothering, teaching and working on the farm.
- The family is living in a rural town of 300 people. Two children attend the local rural primary school and one travels by bus, a trip of 45 minutes each way, to the nearest secondary school.
- During the week, a mother and her two children live in the family’s second home which is located in a major city; they travel back to the family owned station most weekends. The children attend a primary school in the community close to the second family home.

-
- A family living in a rural area have three children: the youngest child is completing the final year of primary schooling via distance education; the other two children are at boarding school undertaking their secondary education. Next year the family will be supporting three children at boarding school, then after that, they will have two at boarding school and one undertaking tertiary study. They say that decreased financial support for tertiary study will really test their family finances.

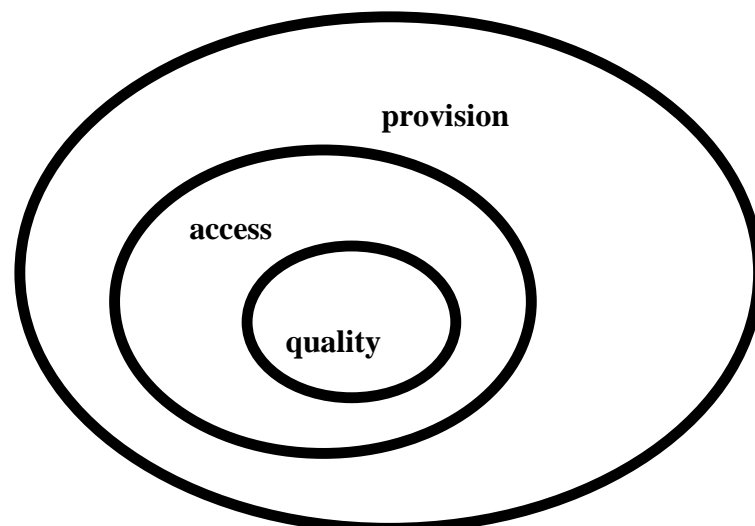
Schools

- A rural school is comprised of all Aboriginal children. In this community, English is not the first language and yet all the teaching resources are based on an assumption of English as the first language.
- A small school located in a mining community has a relatively high teacher turnover. The school is very well resourced through support from the mining company. Teachers are paid comparatively low salaries when compared to other workers in the community, particularly those paid by the mining company.

3.3 Education in Rural and Remote Australia

The responses to this survey clearly reflect on the three levels of concern to the Commission: **provision**, **access** and **quality** of education in rural and remote Australia. These issues are mutually related and can be perceived as shown on the following diagram.

The quality of education provided has an intrinsic reality, but is also embedded within and constrained by issues of access - and both access and quality can only be talked about within the context of the actual supply or provision of education and schooling.



It must be clearly stated at the outset that rural education does not necessarily equate with a second rate education in terms of quality. Good schools and bad schools can be found in communities right across Australia - in metropolitan as well as rural areas. However, much of the social, education and economic policy development in Australia has been based on the equation of 'rural' and 'disadvantaged' and the need to initiate measures to 'compensate' for those disadvantages.

People and businesses in locations which are a distance from goods and services tend to be socially and economically disadvantaged in terms of their access to goods and services. The larger a town or city, the greater the range, quality and variety of goods and services tends to be. (DPIE and DSHS, 1994: 6)

Rural education has historically been viewed as not being of equal standard to that provided in urban areas: “Several committees which investigated education in rural areas in the mid-1970s were critical of its quality.” (Connell, 1993: 493) For example, in a report that still sounds ominously familiar, the Commonwealth Schools Commission in 1975 found that there was educational disadvantage at a secondary level in rural areas from factors such as “isolation, non-access to cultural facilities, the range and level of local employment and the educational levels and incomes of families. More specifically, rural schools may suffer from high teacher turnover, a lack of specialist services, a restricted range of curriculum options and a high proportion of young inexperienced teachers.” (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1975: 75 -79)

Significant effort has gone into improving education in rural areas since this time, with intervention and resourcing at both state/territory and federal levels. The importance of local initiatives is also acknowledged: “teachers in rural areas develop innovative and alternative forms of education in order to respond to the particular needs of the community” (Wyn and Stokes, 1998), as is community-based action. In many communities, the school **is** the basis of that community - economically and socially. Without a school, young families may not move to or stay in the area. The support for educational improvement by the whole community - through local school committees, fundraising, lobbying, direct resource provision and so on - is an important element of educational reform and development.

3.3.1 Provision

Over many years, state and federal governments and rural communities have committed resources to the **provision** and **development** of local schools and other education facilities in rural areas. Such policies have initially concentrated on the provision of primary schools within each community. Where direct provision of schools for face-to-face education has not been deemed viable (because of population density and travelling distances), other forms of Distance Education have been instituted. These exist as ‘local’ alternatives to ‘relocational’ approaches, such as students boarding away from home to attend centralised schools. Innovative approaches, such as the School of the Air and programs developed through the Country Areas Program, have been initiated. More recently, the delivery of education to isolated children has been assisted through the further development of new technologies.

However, many of these initiatives have required disproportionate budget commitments to maintain the provision of educational facilities. Rural education is therefore constantly vulnerable to reductions in educational budgets and, with population shifts, to falling enrolments and the threat of closure of schools. There remain many challenges in this area.

3.3.2 Access

Though the provision of education may be widespread and diverse throughout Australia, **equitable access** to this education is constrained and limited by factors associated with distance and with population density. These make access to education provisions both more difficult and more expensive. However, location itself is just one of the factors that impact on rural schooling; its interaction with other important and often related factors such as:

- school size;
- socio-economic status;
- curriculum breadth;
- range of community support services;
- availability of communication systems,

influences students' access to technology, support services, range and choice of subjects, a rich, relevant and culturally appropriate curriculum, high quality teachers, high quality curriculum delivery, continuity in teaching and curriculum, and extra-curricular resources.

Equitable access to this range of quality education provisions is tied directly to the cost of both provision and access. Survey respondents pointed to their (theoretical) access to a range of educational possibilities:

- local schools;
- neighbouring schools (students travel substantial distances and/or temporarily board closer to the school);
- boarding schools (students leave home for substantial periods);
- distance education (both School of the Air and by correspondence, with parents as home tutors).

However, which of these could be and was accessed depended on both the living situation of the families (location, socio-economic status and so on) as well as their perceptions of (and decisions about) the appropriateness of the education that was available, to the students' needs.

The vast majority of rural young people actually attend schools. In comparison with metropolitan schools, these rural schools are also constrained by circumstances of location and population: they are usually smaller in size, have fewer resources (budgets are linked to student numbers) and are more limited in the range of studies that they can offer.

Generally the respondents to the research accepted that their location and lifestyle circumstances would necessarily have direct implications for their access to available education. For example families living on stations or in remote communities accepted that their children would have to study through some form of Distance Education, and then leave home to attend boarding school in order to complete their secondary education.

This acceptance did not mean that they were willing to tolerate restricted access to a quality education. Some parents were particularly critical of the schooling to which

they could gain access - in particular secondary education - and drew attention to the lack of subject choice, the cost, the inadequate transport systems and the time involved in travel.

The **key access issues** arising from the study concern **cost, transport, and income support**. The following comments provide an overall summary of issues raised by parents, students and teachers (which are developed in part 4 of this Report).

The greatest education ‘disadvantage’ faced by people in rural and remote locations is that to gain access to an education - any education - they have to pay more. This can include the **cost** of travel, of board, loss of income, excursions and so on. There is provision of financial assistance (see below) but parents report that this fails to meet costs - in the end, parents have to pay. While some families can afford these costs, for others access to any form of education is a financial burden - and one that many school students assist in meeting through extensive part-time work. Other families find the burden too great, and students drop out of school early: retention rates in rural and remote areas are significantly lower than those in urban areas. Access to education is thus inequitable within the Australian community.

The principles of access to school buses and other **transport** systems that are provided, are not clearly understood within rural and remote communities. There are systemic barriers; for example in remote areas, with a sparse population, there is a requirement for minimum numbers of students in order to ‘justify’ or ‘qualify’ for provision of a bus service. In the absence of such provision, school children are then dependent on parents to drive them to a bus route, to the boarding school, to a town-based school, to a Distance Education group day or to an extra-curricular activity. Again, such family-provided transport costs time and money.

The **income support** presently provided to families in rural and remote Australia is of considerable assistance. However, this support only applies if the children attend the nearest school; even then, the amounts do not cover educational outlays and parents have to pay substantial amounts themselves. Though outside the scope of this survey, many respondents drew strong attention to the inadequacy of income support for tertiary students from rural and remote areas.

3.3.3 Quality

The factors that determine the quality of schooling are influenced by, but also go well beyond location and size.

The **key quality issues** arising from the study concern **subject choice, education delivery (both teacher and technology issues), and resource provision**. The following comments provide an overall summary of issues raised by parents, students and teachers.

The very factors that create a small, caring and supportive school environment, also can serve to restrict student **subject choices**. With a smaller student and teacher population, the range of subjects that can be economically offered is restricted. While it has been possible in some cases to negotiate and develop local curriculum that is

flexible enough to meet the diversity of individual needs, increased inflexibility in centralised curriculum requirements has required an ‘individual choice’ model of diversity that insists on schools providing a large range of subjects; small school’s inabilities to do this, limit students’ options.

Similar regulatory frameworks impact on the supply, quality and turn-over of **teacher provision**. A frequent theme of comments from all respondents was that of the difficulties in persuading teachers to take up rural and remote appointments, and then the difficulty in holding teachers. Educational resourcing issues impact on the provision of quality staff, on the availability of on-going professional development for these staff and on the turnover of teachers. Incentive schemes have worked in attracting teachers to some rural and remote areas but not necessarily in keeping them there.

New technologies promise much in improving education provision in rural and remote areas, both through the enhancement of curricula of schools and in developments in Distance Education. However, the current quality of the technological infrastructure in many rural and remote areas of Australia is not adequate to these needs. The potential of the internet and many other technological developments are severely limited. Where families have access to this technology, this access costs much more than in other areas. Where we would have expected greater use of new technologies (particularly internet) in the more remote areas, the survey results indicate an *inverse relationship between remoteness and the up-take of new communication technologies* - the costs increase so dramatically that the promised benefits cannot be realised.

The **resourcing** of schools in rural and remote areas appears to vary considerably between and within states and territories. Respondents argued that, overall, rural and remote schools need better levels of resources and greater certainty in on-going funding.

The challenges faced by people living in rural and remote areas to provide a quality education are significant, as the discussion of the factors listed above indicate. These factors are compounded for students with disabilities and other special needs, and for many Aboriginal students and communities, some of who do not speak English as their first language.

Understanding the needs of rural and remote Australians with respect to the provision, access and quality of education is complex. These issues are discussed in more detail in the following section.

4. Key Issues from the Surveys

This section of the report attempts to summarise both the commonalities and variations within the survey responses from parents, students, teachers and other education workers. The tables present some comparisons of responses from the survey, though the comments about sampling and response validity (page 10) should be kept in mind. Comparisons are made within specific sub-populations of the survey (eg parents of students involved in Distance Education; schools within centres of less than 10,000 people and so on). Where no figure is presented (-), numbers mentioning the issue are too small to quote any significant value.

It should also be kept in mind that many of these figures represent numbers of parents, students and teachers taking the initiative to raise an issue. (As such, responses have then been post-coded into categories.) Many others respondents may have agreed that a particular issue was important, had they been specifically polled on it.

4.1 Provision

The provision of schooling and educational resources in rural and remote Australia is a 'given' that attracted little specific response. Particular instances were highlighted - the need for a new room, the need for provision of particular curriculum approaches, the need for greater diversity in provision - but it was accepted that a range of measures are in place to 'offer' education at both primary and secondary level. As noted below, however, access to the provided education is a more complicated matter.

Respondents were drawn from and had experience in:

- local schools (to which students travelled daily);
- neighbouring schools (where students travel substantial distances and/or are temporarily boarding closer to the school);
- boarding schools (where students leave home for substantial periods);
- distance education (where education is offered through both the School of the Air and by correspondence, with parents acting as home tutors).

In practice, some of these provisions co-exist. For example, a student might be attending a local school but also undertaking Distance Education for some subjects. For others, Distance Education is frequently a mix of limited hours through the School of the Air supplemented by written correspondence lessons.

Each sub-section or topic within this part of the report adopts a similar structure: it deals firstly with issues related to Distance Education (School of the Air or correspondence), then with issues related to face-to-face schooling (boarding or local school), then finally to issues related to specific population groups (Indigenous students, students with disabilities and so on).

This structure highlights the nature of the provision of education: appropriate education exist for students within all these geographic and population groups; however the inherent costs and time involved in gaining access to these resources constrain access, and impact on the quality of the education ultimately delivered.

The interplay of the issues of provision and access is simply illustrated by looking at whether students live at home or away from home to attend school, and also whether they use the School of the Air or other forms of Distance Education. The final two rows discriminate between students who said they completed all their education by some form of Distance Education, and those who do some Distance Education with other forms of education (ie are at schools). (Some students indicated several options; total percentages therefore exceed 100%.)

Student educational location by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
Live at home	290 (98%)	46 (90%)	162 (91%)	134 (93%)	492 (97%)	290 (99%)	156 (92%)
Live away from home	5 (2%)	3 (6%)	7 (4%)	7 (5%)	5 (1%)	2 (<1%)	20 (12%)

School of the Air	12 (4%)	12* (24%)	16 (9%)	29 (20%)	4 (<1%)	3 (1%)	12 (7%)
All Distance Education	19 (6%)	6 (12%)	1 (<1%)	15 (10%)	8 (2%)	0	3 (2%)
Part Distance Education	6 (2%)	6 (12%)	5 (3%)	11 (8%)	3 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	9 (5%)

* *the relatively large number here is due to completion of a group of students surveys when a consultant took part in a discussion in Katherine through the School of the Air*

4.2 Access

Two dominant and inter-related factors - costs and transport - were identified by respondents as limiting their access to the education facilities that are provided.

4.2.1 Costs

Costs of Distance Education/School of the Air

There were several costs incurred within Distance Education that parents were required to cover. Almost all the parents in these cases received support through Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) but often this did not cover their costs.

Parents of School of the Air Students - education costs for participation not covered - broken down by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
School of the Air costs not covered	71%	-	76%	79%	-	-	57%
Receive AIC	96%	-	88%	100%	-	-	100%

These costs include:

- *Home Tutors/Supervisors*

A significant number of parents (18% of parents in this group in NSW; 21% in Queensland; 37% in SA; 13% in WA) wrote of the difficulties associated with having to be in the school room supervising the children for the school day. Because schooling is compulsory, primary school children have to be supervised and assisted with their Distance Education curriculum - by a Home Tutor (usually a parent). Allocation of this role comes at a considerable expense to families involved. While the parent (usually the mother) is supervising the children, she is unable to work on the property. In the present rural climate where many properties are run without outside help, this arrangement removes one worker from the property's labour force.

*Air lessons are half an hour, five times per week. The rest is up to the mother or governess for those who can afford it.
(parent, Queensland)*

On the other hand, if a supervisor/governess is employed to be this Home Tutor, it costs the family around \$17,000 per year. There is no subsidy, allowance or rebate available either for the parent to be the Home Tutor or for employing a supervisor. Some of these parents may also have children in boarding school and this compounds these costs.

- *Mini-schools/cluster days/sports camps/school visits*

Students involved in School of the Air and other Distance Education attend mini-schools, cluster days, sports camps and school visits throughout the year. Costs associated with travel, accommodation and food for these trips, makes it difficult for some children to attend. In NSW, 37% of parents involved in distance education identified this as an issue, as did 37% of parents in Queensland and 27% in South

Australia. While there is some reimbursement for travel and many parents receive Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC), the amount provided does not normally fully cover accommodation and food costs.

We pay \$1650 for ten days' accommodation and food to attend activities at the School of the Air in north-western Queensland. This did not take account of the travel or the wear and tear on the car, taken to drive up to eight hours each way trip to attend these activities. (parent, Queensland)

Travel, accommodation for the mini-schools quickly absorbs the money. (parent, Queensland)

- *Resources/School Room*

Parents supporting Distance Education are required to set up a school room and provide educational resources that would exist within a school. These provisions entail an extra cost that parents indicated was not fully provided for through any subsidies.

Some measures are being taken to meet these needs, but they are uneven between various systems. In the Northern Territory, one School of the Air was providing computers to children who had completed at least one term of work with the school. In western New South Wales, parents had to lease a computer from the School of the Air. In South Australia, parents commented on the cost of providing other teaching materials such as encyclopedias, CD-ROMs and other teaching aids.

Costs of Boarding

Where local schools are not available, some students (2.1% of the responding students) leave home to attend Boarding School. However, access to such an option is severely constrained by parental ability to pay. The costs of boarding were reported as significant financial outlays for all the relevant respondents. These could involve costs of up to \$22,000 per student per year.

In some cases, respondents received financial assistance through Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC), while others were not eligible for any such assistance. In the majority of cases, the assistance available did **not** cover the costs of providing an education. The differences reported by parents between the cost and the available subsidy ranged from \$2,200 per child to \$15,000 per child.

Parent (with students boarding) - boarding costs not supported - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
Boarding costs not covered	100%	-	100%	100%	91%	-	94%
Receive AIC	86%	-	61%	50%	50%	78%	72%

In Western Australia, Years 11 and 12 are provided at senior high schools in larger regional centres. In these cases, students from rural and remote areas board in residential hostels. Some respondents reported sending their children to boarding school at Year 8. Boarding costs vary between schools. Some students indicated that they were attending a particular senior high school because it was the only one that offered cheap and affordable boarding costs, even though it did not offer the subjects they wanted - and thus the quality of their education was compromised in order to achieve access to education.

Some parents and students commented on their concern over the pressures that the cost of boarding would place on the already stretched finances of the family. Other parents on low income, whose children had to board for Years 11 and 12, commented that their children had to survive away from home solely on their Austudy payments.

We have to find the money for boarding school of around \$15,000 per annum with a taxable income of \$33,000. That doesn't leave much for the rest of us to live on. (parent, Queensland)

Costs of Setting Up Two Houses

Where Boarding Schools were not a financial option, and where schools were inaccessible (for Year 11 and 12 students in particular), some families (in all states and territories) reported that they had established a second house within a larger centre and closer to the school to provide access to education. Students then live there part-time. In all of these situations, the respondents had incurred considerable costs in maintaining two households.

For example, one Year 12 student from Northern Queensland found it was too far to travel every day to school over rough roads; thus a second house was set up in the town. To help finance this, the student had to work several nights a week after school, including one night to 11.30 pm.

Particular reasons for second house establishment sometimes focused on access to a broader and face-to-face senior secondary curriculum, that is to a school which had the subject range and support that the student needed for tertiary entrance. In these situations, because these subjects were also available through Distance Education at the local school, there was no financial assistance provided to set up the second house. In other examples, difficulties associated with home supervision of the Distance Education of a primary level student, had led mothers to move into town with the children and leave the fathers to run the property.

My parents had to build another house in town so that my sister and I could go to school. (student, Victoria)

The maintaining of two houses was a cost that teachers also reported; they had been relocated to another area and had left their spouse and family at the original home.

Costs of Transport

Access to schools for many respondents required some period of travel, which was either provided by the parents or by a school bus. As well as the constraints placed on various aspects of education by such travel (see the next section), there were often significant costs associated with this travel.

If you are not very financial, you can send your child on the bus to the school 50 kms away. Otherwise you have to pay for boarding. (parent, WA)

There were comments from parents about the funding arrangements for school bus transport, and there was some confusion over different regulations applying even in different regions within one state. The bus costs are often only paid for if the parents send the child to the closest school. (This was more of an issue in, for example, rural Victoria, where more than one school existed within a reasonable travel distance.) However, parents responded that this meant that there was, economically, no real choice in the school that their children could attend. Some parents then responded by paying for the transport to ensure a greater subject choice for their children or where they considered that the closest school was not suitable.

I send my child to the next town because of the school's reputation, but I have to pay for the bus. (parent, Victoria)

In other circumstances, parents reported that when students were boarding, there were extra costs incurred in transporting their children to the Boarding School as well as costs for parents to visit the school or bring children home on weekends. In some cases, transport costs were subsidised on the basis of taking the child to boarding school once a term. Subsidies did not cover the parents' return trip nor the collection of the child at the end of term. As each was a trip of up to eight hours, these costs were substantial. These costs also had the impact of restricting the amount of time that parents could be with their children.

Our children have to leave home at 12 years old; there are huge travel costs to get to see our children. (parent, WA)

For families with students in schools, teachers and parents commented on the cost of excursions; the distances to be travelled restricted the number of excursions involving bus travel. For parents and teachers in communities of under 10,000 people, school excursion costs were identified as a major issue by the following percentages of the respondents:

Parent and teacher identification of excursion costs as issue - by state/territory

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
school in a community of under 10,000 people	25%	27%	27%	29%	31%	32%	25%

In South Australia, in a small community of under 1000 people, 80 kilometres from a rural centre, the primary school was not able to gain access to the local school bus for excursions because the cost was calculated by the kilometre. The Country Areas Program (CAP) bus was available only half of the year as it was shared between schools.

We live on an island. The school subsidises part of the cost but we pay \$60 for every excursion off the island. (parent, Tasmania)

There is difficulty and expense in arranging excursions; most excursions involve a lot of travelling. (teacher, NSW)

Costs of Curriculum Enrichment

In addition to excursions, teachers commented on the cost of activities with other schools and of having visiting performances at the school. Parents commented on the cost of taking their children to the city to visit museums and cultural events.

We can't go on excursions very far because it costs too much money. (student, WA)

Cultural performances come here at student cost. (teacher, WA)

Costs of Technology

Respondents, particularly parents, found the cost of providing internet access for their children at home extremely expensive. Many were being charged at STD phone rates as there was no local provider. One respondent in remote Queensland estimated costs of \$20 per two hours to use and download information from the internet. In addition, it is still very slow to download from the internet in these areas due to the types of telephone systems available there.

There is a big cost to provide our children with internet (access). Slow speed lines make it even more costly. The recent Murder Under the Microscope competition cost us \$360 and that was only one unit! (parent, station, NSW)

Costs of Access to Higher Education

The cost of higher education affected all students in rural and remote areas. While students in larger centres (with 25,000 to 100,000 people) were able to live and attend school in their own town and many even had a range of educational institutions available, problems arose when these students wished to undertake higher education.

The problems arise when students finish high school and need to attend University in Perth. The costs are prohibitive for many families. (teacher, WA)

Other respondents commented that although they were eligible for AIC (which is not means tested) while their children attended secondary school, they were not eligible for any assistance at a tertiary level because all relevant allowances were means tested. In many of these cases, the asset test (which included the family farm) denied them receipt of assistance even though there was little income from the farm.

Our children need to travel and board for Years 11 and 12. They receive a non means tested AIC. When they go to Uni, this allowance is means tested. Hardly fair or encouragement for rural kids to continue their education. (parent, Tasmania)

Costs for Students with Disabilities

Some parents of children with disabilities advised through the survey that their children were unable to access appropriate state government provided schooling. These parents then said that they needed to provide private schooling for their children at additional cost.

One parent reported that the health status of her child was affected by having to travel a long distance on a bus. While the child was in primary school, she was able to attend the local primary school where disability support was provided. However, the nearest government secondary school was much further away, and because the health of the child was being adversely affected, the parent had to enrol the child in a closer private secondary school. There was no financial assistance available for this and the teacher aide time that was provided was greatly reduced in the transfer from the state to the private sector.

4.2.2 Transport

To Distance Education/Mini Schools

Transport for the class lessons was not directly an issue for families of children being educated at home through Distance Education: the school room was a short walk on the property. However (as noted above), it became an issue for parents when they needed to transport children long distances to attend mini-schools, cluster days and sport camps. The parents were responsible for the transport to these events. In one

case, a parent reported a trip over 244 kilometres of dirt road before reaching the bitumen - this was a trip of seven hours to reach one school event.

To School

While most respondents (particularly parents) reported that school buses were available (for example, only 8% of the surveyed NSW parents who were living on farms said that **no** buses were available), there was a problem with access to suitable bus routes and with the length of time students spent on buses (times of up to almost four hours per day were reported). Significant numbers of parents identified the time spent on buses as a major issue.

In some cases this time was simply due to the distances to travel and the number of pick ups on the route, but in other cases the time taken was related to the condition of the roads: dirt and gravel roads greatly increased the travel time.

Teachers and parents commented on the impact of the wet season in Northern Australia which restricts access to schools when the roads become impassable; students can miss many days of school. (This was also a problem for some respondents in New South Wales.) For some remote communities, the only way in and out in the wet season is by air which is very costly and restricts access to the community for outside resources.

Parent identification of buses as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
living on farm or station	24%	-	20%	14%	50%	20%*	19%
living in a community of under 10,000 people	10%§	-	5%§	6%§	1%	-	-

* *only mentioned in respect of disabled students*

§ *all secondary students*

Students were able to be more specific about the amount of time they spent on buses:

Student reportage of daily time spent travelling - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
less than 30 mins	67%	61%	69%	67%	65%	71%	53%
30 - 39 mins	9%	14%	7%	12%	19%	9%	11%
40 - 49 mins	4%	2%	7%	8%	5%	8%	5%
50 - 59 mins	4%	2%	0%	0%	5%	1%	4%
1 - 1.19 hours	5%	0%	7%	6%	6%	5%	8%
1.20 - 1.29 hours	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%
1.30 - 1.39 hours	2%	2%	1%	1%	0%	0%	2%
Greater than 1.40 hours	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%

When students had to travel any distance on buses, however, it restricted the provision of and their participation in after school activities, such as sport and music. Travel of substantial distances was reported to have a serious effect on the time available for homework.

Some parents commented on the distances that they themselves had to travel to access the school bus. They were concerned that busing formulas disadvantaged children from larger properties. For example, parents from Queensland reported that the distance that a bus would travel from a school in Queensland is in part determined by the number of children to collect. Respondents in areas with large properties found it more difficult to achieve the numbers required to have the bus drive close enough to their properties. As a result, someone - usually a parent - was required to spend several hours a day taking the children to and from the bus pick-up point.

In one area in western NSW, school bus routes had been discontinued and students were now doing Distance Education as they were unable to gain suitable access to the local school. This in turn created difficulties for the school: the drop in student numbers meant that it was threatened with closure.

Respondents also talked of the difficulty in having to deal with different departments to try to resolve an issue. For example, in one area, while there was a bus available (supplied by the Ministry of Transport), there was no allocation for a driver to staff the school run (to be supplied by the Ministry of Education).

For those families located in small towns, the easy and safe access to school was mentioned as one of the advantages of the community (eg mentioned by 7% of parents in NSW from rural centres under 10,000 people). This was particularly so for primary schools where there is a much greater availability of small schools in rural and remote areas. On the other hand, the concentration of secondary schools into larger rural centres provided families living in small towns and on properties with more access problems.

For example, in one small town in NSW, while a primary school is available locally, once the students need to attend secondary education, the local high school (85 kilometres away) becomes a two hour journey each way because of the condition of the road. As a result the majority of the students have to attend boarding school or study through Distance Education.

These pressures increase in the senior years of secondary school, as more specialist studies are seen to require consolidation into larger senior high schools. In Western Australia, schools providing Year 11 and 12 studies are only located in the larger regional centres. Some students are travelling long distances on buses to attend these. While boarding is provided at these regional centres, some parents cannot afford the boarding costs and their children are required to travel even longer distances each day.

At secondary school level, differences also develop in school orientations through specialisations in the subject ranges offered - either by intent, or in response to student interests. Where there are several schools accessible, this may not place restrictions on students whose interests and choices are not catered for locally. But in rural and remote areas, some families found that their choice of school was constrained by transport and distance issues. To allow children to live at home, or even to return home on the weekends, meant that the closest school **had** to be attended - and this did not always provide the subjects required.

To TAFE

Departmental workers from DETYA reported that being able to travel on the school bus was an issue for students under 18 who were attending TAFE to fulfil the requirements of being in full time education and training in order to receive the Youth Allowance. These students had to pay to use the bus whereas, if they were attending the closest school, they would not have had to do so. In some cases in the south west of Western Australia, these students were put off the bus if it was too full. There were again problems with having to deal with two departments when trying to address these issues.

For Students with Disabilities

Transport difficulties were magnified for students with disabilities. There are far fewer appropriate schools available, those that were available required significant travel times, and these students often had difficulties in travelling long distances.

In north western Victoria, some parents (20% of those living on farms, with students with disabilities, responded in this way) and teachers commented that because of these distances and the difficulty in travelling, some students with disabilities are required to board in town during the week to attend the available school. There were then difficulties with finding appropriate accommodation for these students.

My child attends a special development school 100 km away. She boards during the week. There was no aide time or specialised teachers in our small town. (parent, Victoria)

4.3 Quality

All of the above factors of access clearly impact on the quality of education that is, in the end, received. For example, constraints on after-school activities or on homework time because of transport requirements, may limit the nature of the educational experience for students. As schools increasingly require parental provision of resources, texts and fees (fixed or 'voluntary'), the pressure of costs associated with accessing education in rural and remote Australia is transmitted into the learning environment.

While it must be reiterated that there is nothing inferior *per se* in the quality of teaching or the nature of the curriculum, there are also a number of other factors operating in rural and remote areas that have a significant impact on the quality of education.

In responding to this survey, the majority of parents and students identified both advantages and disadvantages associated with the quality of education in their location. It would seem from these responses that the disadvantages become greater in secondary school; there were concerns expressed about subject choice, about teacher availability and experience, about curriculum enrichment and diversity, and even about access to Years 11 and 12 in a number of States.

Bigger is not better. (parent, Victoria)

4.3.1 The Learning Environment

Some parents, particularly those with primary school age children, felt that there were **no educational disadvantage** associated with their location. They talked about a secure and supportive school environment where the children were known individually and where there was substantial one-to-one attention in small classes. This was a more common response from parents who also had reasonably close access to larger rural centres or to capital cities when they needed specialist services, specific cultural activities and further extra curricula activities.

Small school and community, where they are well known by all and are safe and have a lot of freedom. (Parent, WA)

Other parents responded that there was **no educational advantage** of their location. This response was more common from those engaged in Distance Education where parents felt ill equipped to be in the home tutor or supervisor role.

The only advantage I can see is that I can control/help/guide my child's education to the best of my ability. (parent, Distance Education, SA)

In Distance Education

One of the main advantages of Distance Education that was reported by parents (56% of parents involved in Distance Education in NSW; 46% in Queensland; 68% in South Australia; 66% in Western Australia) was the close relationship between the parent and the student. Such an advantage included both the amount of one-to-one contact between the child and the home tutor and the amount of parental involvement (and hence understanding of curriculum and the student's progress). This allowed for an early recognition of problems or of areas requiring revision, and the ability to change teaching styles to accommodate learning needs.

Distance Education is wonderful for primary schooling. The bond between parents, students and teachers is wonderful. It is one to one teaching and the ability to solve problems when they arise. (parent, NSW)

Parents responded positively that their children had to learn to be self motivated and to learn valuable skills associated with self paced learning.

One of the main disadvantages from the parents' perspective of Distance Education, was the amount of time needed to deliver the curriculum to the students.

Who does the mother's other work while she is preparing and teaching school? Is it the fairy godmother? (parent, Queensland)

Home tutor as well as mother, wife, cook, cleaner, gardener, receptionist (average 30 calls daily) and book-keeper - juggling the many roles expected of us is draining and stressful - school sometimes suffers as do relationships with children in the school-room. (parent, Queensland)

(We are) unable to provide enough time for child due to commitments on property. Bush women are too busy to teach children properly. (parent, Queensland)

Students studying with the School of the Air responded in a focus group that there was limited time for classes on air and that there was restricted communication because "you can't see your teachers very often."

Poor radio reception (as a result of outdated equipment and weather factors) frustrated teachers and made establishment of a productive learning environment difficult. At one School of the Air in the Northern Territory, there is a large amount of radio interference experienced on air from Indonesian fishermen, who use the same radio frequency as does the school.

(I) don't want to criticise the School of the Air, as the teachers do the best they can, but really in some ways it is an archaic system with huge expectations on the mother. (parent, Queensland)

In Schools

Where students attended school within smaller communities, parents, teachers and students all identified the often smaller size of the schools with increased capacity for teachers to respond to the individual needs of the students. For example, in one small school of 25 students in New South Wales, a student reported that because the school was small, the teachers could spend a lot of time working with students individually. Perhaps because of this close individual knowledge and contact, there was a perception by both teachers and parents that students were well adjusted and better behaved than were their urban counterparts.

A small school means that the teacher can give more individual attention to each child. Parents feel a greater ownership of the school. (parent, NSW)

Country, smaller schools, don't get lost in the system so much more parental involvement. (parent, Queensland)

There aren't a lot of students in the class, so there is more teacher interaction with students. (student, WA)

Parent identification of response to individual needs in small schools as an advantage - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
school in a community of under 10,000 people	25%	-	25%	22%	25%	42%	22%

It is interesting to note that capacity of teachers to respond to individual needs was **not** mentioned as an advantage by parents from rural communities of over 10,000 people.

We have a lot of very caring, dedicated teachers who live locally and have pride in the school. (parent, SA)

However, within these small schools, many of the classes were composite classes (with students from several grade/age levels) and some parents felt that was not a beneficial learning environment.

Some teachers, parents and students commented on other disadvantages of being located in a small town. These included a lack of competition between students within the schools.

There is a lack of competition for high achievers and highly motivated workers. It is hard for students who are not taken on holidays to get an understanding of the bigger picture. (teacher, NSW)

Parent and teacher identification of lack of competition as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	8%	4%	11%	10%	2%	3%	9%

The students were typified by one respondents as the ‘big fish in the small pond’, and this lack of challenge was perceived as being a disadvantage in a competitive environment, such as in the attainment of Year 12 scores for accessing tertiary education (in situations where the students continued to Year 12). Some respondents commented that the academic students went to boarding school at the beginning of secondary school, which left a number of less academically inclined students at the schools.

There is peer pressure so it is only ‘cool’ to succeed in sport but not academically. (parent, NSW)

This perception of low educational expectations of and from some of the students was noted by both parents and teachers. They cited some of the reasons as the lack of appropriate role models in the community, the narrower world view of the children, the low educational level of some parents (having left school, for example, at Year 8), and some parents’ negative experiences of school themselves.

There is a lack of information and role models for a wide range of careers in our small town. (parent, SA)

We would expect these expectations to be reflected in students’ reports of their levels of aspiration for further study:

Student reportage of aspirations - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
complete Year 10	4%	0%	3%	0%	9%	0%	0%
complete Year 12	42%	35%	24%	32%	39%	48%	35%
attend University	48%	41%	44%	42%	35%	38%	34%
undertake traineeship	10%	4%	7%	7%	11%	6%	10%
attend TAFE	14%	4%	13%	21%	22%	13%	27%
other	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Note: students responding frequently marked more than one category; other students did not include information; percentages may add to more or less than 100%

It is interesting to note that there were small though significant numbers of students in NSW, Queensland and Tasmania who indicated that they would only wish to attend school until Year 10. The low rate of aspiration to attend TAFE or to take up traineeships, by the (small) sample of students from the Northern Territory is also notable.

Not that many subjects after Year 10 that will get you to Uni. Actually you can't get into Uni if you do Year 12 here. (student, Tasmania)

In many of the remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, it was felt that the learning environment did not provide enough flexibility to cater fully for the needs of the children. The school year and school day operates as it does in other schools in Western Australia, and this does not allow for cultural obligations that the children have. Traditional business, including law business and initiations, normally occurs between July and November. Everyone is required to attend these and camp in the bush which means the children miss much of this school term.

Building Maintenance/Resources

With provisions of buildings and educational resources closely linked to specific state and territory factors, it was not surprising that responses varied widely. Some respondents commented that their schools were well resourced with good school buildings and technology resources. In part this was due to the existence of a close community that raised funds to help provide these resources and was, in part, also a reflection of specific government funding programs for rural or remote locations.

There are lots of computers and big sports grounds. (student, Tasmania)

Parent identification of lack of facilities and resources (including IT, libraries, school buildings) as an issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	34%	-	37%*	25%¶	16%	20%	18%

* 30% of this relates to telephone access

¶ 60% of this figure relates to IT and telephone access

Some teachers from schools with significant Indigenous populations pointed out that, because of the number of Indigenous students in their school and the existence of special purpose funding, the school was well resourced. On the other hand, other respondents were critical of the lack of maintenance of buildings and of the difficulties in getting repairs done. This was particularly an issue with parents in the Torres Strait Islands.

Other concerns over resources were expressed in the area of support for information technology.

Technology can help overcome some problems associated with distance ... as long as the technology works: direct technical help is a long way away. (teacher, Tasmania)

4.3.2 The Social Environment

Students particularly mentioned the isolation inherent in Distance Education.

You can't see your friends very often and ... you don't have many very close friends. (student, NT)

There are no other children to play with and my child can't play team sports. (parent, Queensland)

You don't see much of our peers or do group activities with them. I think that school is more fun with other people; it makes it less of a task. (student, Distance Education, NT)

Not all the comments were negative, however: students mentioned that there were no school bullies, while parents pointed to the lack of peer pressure.

Some parents commented that Distance Education allowed the parents to control the social environment and provide moral protection, but many more commented on the lack of social interaction their children had and the lack of experience of learning to be in group situations.

Parent identification of lack of social interaction (with Distance Education) as an issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
parents of Distance Education participants	78%	-	59%	72%	-	-	66%

Some parents commented on the “relationship difficulties when having to teach your own child.” Learning difficulties or special needs placed added strain on the parent-child relationship.

Many parents, students and teachers commented on the positive aspects of a school located in a small community where people knew each other. There was wide community support for the school and children had a sense of community belonging. There was also a perception that this was a safer environment for children and that there were less drugs and other undesirable influences within and outside the schools.

My children learn the importance of community, team work and contributing to the community. (parent, SA)

There is an appreciation of the rural environment and nature. (parent, Queensland)

My son has Aspergers Syndrome, so because we are in a country town, he is very familiar to other people who are then supportive. (parent, WA)

Parent identification of positive aspects of living in a small community as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	18%	50%	36%	31%	12%	17%	31%
schools in a community of over 10,000 people	-*	-	-	-	-	-	-

* not mentioned by any respondents in communities of over 10,000 people

In the remote Aboriginal schools, the location of the schools within the communities allows the children to stay in the community and learn the traditional ways and participate in bush trips.

My children live with family, go on bush trips and learn traditional ways. (Indigenous parent, remote WA)

The kids are educated within their culture and family group. (teacher, remote WA)

4.3.3 Curriculum

Surprisingly, the majority of the students studying through the School of the Air and other Distance Education are at a primary level. These schools found it more difficult to provide the subject range and support at a secondary level. A teacher from a western Queensland School of Distance Education reported that the primary curriculum was very thorough, “but the success of the program was dependent upon the efforts of the home tutor and his/her partnership with the school”. The secondary curriculum (Years 8 - 10) provided a limited number of subjects as a result of the smaller number of students enrolled.

For Distance Education to be effective, a supervisor must be available. They are unpaid, but in effect deliver all lessons to the students. (teacher, NSW)

Parents from different states commented on the primary curriculum for Distance Education. This curriculum is based within a structure of separate year levels. This caused difficulties for some home tutors who then had to develop, teach or support different curriculum content for each of the children in the school room. It was suggested that the development of a multi-age curriculum would help the home tutor deliver the curriculum more effectively.

There were substantial differences in the degree of satisfaction or dis-satisfaction with Distance Education curriculum expressed by parents in different states and territories. Parents in Western Australia were generally positive about the curriculum and found the Distance Education lessons well set out and thorough, although some parents and students said that there was a large amount of written work expected.

Queensland parents similarly reported that the Queensland curriculum had an excellent base. It was said that this curriculum is particularly designed with the lifestyle and schooling demands of Distance Education children and their supervisors clearly in mind. Many student comments reflected the inherent nature of a Distance Education curriculum: they would like clearer instructions as to what was expected of them; they were disappointed that they couldn't participate in some subjects (eg drama); they would have liked to learn to participate in groups.

There was substantially more dissatisfaction with the curriculum expressed by parents from South Australia who were involved in Distance Education (31% of these parents

expressed dissatisfaction, in comparison with 3% in NSW, 13% in Western Australia and insignificant responses elsewhere). They claimed that there is a lack of understanding by the developers of the curriculum materials, of what learning in an isolated rural location entails. In particular, they alleged that the curriculum is written with face-to-face schooling in mind: the approaches include group discussion, team-oriented physical education, and drama - which are difficult to do with one child in the school room. The curriculum also is said to require a whole school day of supervision, which is difficult for the working farm parent to provide. Some South Australian parents had tried to buy curriculum materials from Queensland but then encountered difficulties with this curriculum not being recognised for assessment and support by the School of the Air.

As my children's teacher I have an experience of their learning development all the time. When they are still battling with certain areas, it is time to change the learning procedure and find a new one that suits your child's learning style.
(parent, Queensland)

Some parents found they were able to teach good reading skills, while other parents found delivering the curriculum a daunting task. Both teachers and parents emphasized the role of the parent or home tutor in the delivery of the curriculum. Some parents liked to be able to control the content of school papers.

I am able to pick out the best basics of the papers, cross out the garbage and use my own extension material. (parent, Queensland)

Subject choice

Many respondents commented on the lack of subject choice in secondary schools.

Parent and teacher identification of lack of subject choice as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000	17%	-	18%	45%	19%	9%	19%
schools in a community of over 10,000	9%	-	-	-	-	-	9%

Students also reported that they were not receiving their subject choices within their schools:

Student identification of lack of subject choice as an issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
not getting choice	26%	33%	30%	38%	28%	20%	34%
comparison with parent and teacher responses	+9%	-	+12%	-7%	+9%	+11%	+15%

There is reasonable consistency between states and territories in this matter. It is also interesting to note that generally students were more critical than were their parents and teachers about the lack of subject choice - except in South Australia, where higher than average levels of student dis-satisfaction are mirrored by even higher levels of parental dis-satisfaction.

The lack of subject choice was partly related to the size of some of the secondary schools, but it was also related to the availability of teachers. One student from New South Wales commented that there is less variety of languages and other subjects as it is harder to find and retain specialised teachers and tutors in rural and remote areas.

The main limitation in our area is not being able to do various specialist subjects ie languages face to face. (parent, SA)

There are not enough people to fill up the subjects. (student, NSW)

In South Australia, the lack of subject choice - seen as a result of small school size in many of the Area Schools - was also seen as contributing to the decision by some parents to send their children to boarding schools in Adelaide. Subjects through Open Access (Distance Education) were not seen as a viable option here, especially at Years 11 and 12. Although students could perhaps undertake a range of subjects through Distance Education, if there was no teacher at the school with any expertise in that subject area, there was no support for students choosing to do this. Some students commented that they had started subjects by Distance Education when the school did not offer them, but then had dropped them when they became too hard and when local support, explanation and advice was not forthcoming.

Inadequate staffing formulas means less choice in curriculum offerings in secondary school. (teacher, SA)

Vocational Education

Many rural schools are now implementing vocational education subjects or courses. For example, in Tasmania, schools are developing courses that are linked into the National Training Modules. Vocational education developments were seen by some teachers as an important curriculum strategy to overcome some of the limitations caused by distance and location. With the connections being developed within the local

business community for work placement, students are able to gain training qualifications without having to leave the community.

The commitment of industry (aquaculture) which is focused on its community has meant we have been able to establish innovative enterprise and vocational programs which have been recognised nationally... At our school, 75% leave for Hobart and 25% stay to do VET courses in hospitality and aquaculture. (teacher, Tasmania)

However, there are also particular problems for students undertaking vocational education courses as the number and variety of work placement available to students in rural and remote areas are limited, and access to Registered Training Providers may mean travel to or boarding in distant regional centres.

New programs eg Vocational Education require a lot of extra travel and funding. (teacher, NSW)

Students from Western Australia and South Australia commented on the advantages of being able to do agriculture courses at their rural schools.

Teachers and parents also mentioned students' lack of understanding of wider-world employment issues due to a small town location, and vocational education curriculum developments were seen as a response to this.

Students do not appreciate the competitiveness for work or further education places. Their vision and goals tend to be limited by their experience and understanding. (teacher, WA)

Parent and teacher identification of lack of understanding of employment as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	13%	5%	8%	20%	7%	6%	11%

Curriculum Enrichment

Parents, teachers and students drew attention to the difficulties in offering depth in the curriculum through the use of outside resources such as excursions to museums, cultural experiences, art galleries, business links and interschool sport (see comments on cost of excursions, page 27).

Because we are so far in the Bush, we don't really get the chance to participate in things that city kids do. (student, NSW)

We don't have big libraries or museums to visit for research. (student, SA)

Many schools tried to have art/cultural performance come to the schools (rather than move students to them), but even here the cost and time involved was high and some schools felt they missed out.

The 'artie bus' is generously sponsored by the Art Gallery in the rural centre to, once a year, take the whole school to the Art Gallery. Perhaps other programs like this might be helpful from other community organisations. (teacher, Victoria)

The parents contribute funds through fundraising and the School Council provides funds for excursions. (teacher, Victoria)

The nearest town is 560 km, so excursions out of town are difficult. (teacher, NT)

Students doing Distance Education commented that they missed being able to participate in regular sports, particularly team sports. These are only available when they go on yearly camps.

The lack of access to a bus during school time was frequently reported by teachers as contributing to the isolation experienced by children in rural and remote areas. In Queensland, rural schools have access to a bus for **part** of the year - this is provided by Priority Country Area Project (PCAP). In one school, this allowed the school to provide swimming lessons at the nearest pool: 100 kilometres away. But not having this bus available for six months of the year restricted the outside experiences that the school could provide for the children at these times.

The bus has to be shared between all the schools. (teacher, Queensland)

On one of the outer islands of the Torres Strait, it was access to a boat rather than a bus, that was necessary to provide other experiences for the children.

Curriculum Relevance

A few respondents from Western Australia and Queensland commented on the perceived lack of relevance of the curriculum for Indigenous students.

There is a state-wide syllabus which is largely irrelevant or difficult to teach. (teacher, Queensland)

In remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, literacy is still being delivered as though English is the first language. The children speak their own language until they attend school. In one remote school, where language and culture is taught - with the Aboriginal Education Workers (AEW) being integral to this teaching - there is reported to be an increased attendance rate among the children.

In another remote community, a respondent noted that the students generally stay in the community, so that although they have some awareness of the 'western world', English is not overly relevant for them. Even so, there was a perception among some parents that their children needed more experience of the 'western world'.

One Western Australian respondent commented that education and curriculum content were not sufficiently related to post-school outcomes (particularly employment for Indigenous students), which made it difficult to maintain student motivation and attendance in school.

There is 95% unemployment in our community, so it is difficult (to see) the purpose in school and the value of education. (teacher, NT)

Responses from teachers in the Torres Strait Islands indicate that they did not find the prescribed curriculum content and work materials relevant for their students. Because of the isolation of the island, the students have little understanding of "things that kids down south take for granted."

Cultural Appropriateness

Not all parents responded as to whether their school promoted respect for diverse cultures, languages and experiences. Of those parents that did, the majority responded that this was done through the teaching of a language other than English (LOTE), through visiting exchange students, multi cultural days and in some cases by the celebration of NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration) week.

Parent identification of cultural appropriateness as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
location on farm or station	41%	-	71%	75%	-	15%	66%
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	42%	60%	61%	55%	53%	78%	67%
schools in a community of over 10,000 people	42%	-	-	-	-	64%	58%

In Distance Education in Queensland, a parent responded that respect was promoted through project work in the curriculum. Other parents (particularly in catholic schools) linked the encouragement of diversity and respect to the overall philosophy of the school.

Some students from a few culturally diverse towns in New South Wales commented that this community diversity was a positive influence in encouraging respect for diversity within the school curriculum.

Living in a culturally diverse community promotes cross cultural learning. (student, NSW)

Other parents responded that, although they lived in a culturally diverse community, it was not being recognised by the teaching in all schools.

We value the small community based school which encourages family based relationships, respect of others and all groups making up Australia's modern multicultural society. (parent, South Australia)

Through its curriculum, this school promoted Aboriginal and German languages as well as celebrations of many cultures.

On the other hand, some parents commented that the strongly Anglo Saxon background of their community limited students' experience of a diversity of cultures. One parent noted that while children are given access to multicultural perspectives through the school's curriculum, it was difficult for them to really appreciate it without first hand experience.

Some other parents had difficulty with ideas of cultural diversity, particularly with regard to Aboriginal culture. A few (non-Indigenous parents) said that the curriculum contained too much emphasis on Aboriginal culture and made them feel like second class citizens.

Drawing the two parts of the community together is very difficult and cannot be hurried. (parent, NSW)

These difficulties were reflected within some classroom approaches, with some teachers reporting that a few other teachers would only use the curriculum materials that supported stereotypical views of Aboriginal culture.

Responses from teachers in remote community schools (both government and catholic - in Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland) pointed to the strong family and cultural ties that surround children, as one of the greatest advantages for education in these areas. Teachers and parents similarly reported that bilingual education in the Northern Territory, using local teachers, promoted respect for diverse cultures and languages.

Aboriginal kids get to learn how their ancestors used to talk, where they lived and how they hunted for food. (student, NSW)

4.3.4 Extra Curricula Activities

Extra-curricular activities - sport, music, debating, governance, community involvement and so on - provide important contributions to the overall quality of students' education. Parents, students and teachers from rural and remote locations commented on the difficulties experienced in providing and accessing such extra curricula activities.

The cost and time to travel to be involved in representative sport can be anywhere from 200 km - 1300 km a round trip. (parent, NSW)

Parent identification of access to extra-curricula activities as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
location on farm or station	36%	-	30%	21%	-	-	30%
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	21%	23%	35%	22%	31%	22%	27%
schools in a community of over 10,000 people	3%	-	-	-	-	5%	-

The distance between schools in rural and remote areas made it difficult for some schools to offer or engage in interschool activities and sport. Time for after school

activities was limited or non-existent for those students having to catch the school bus home.

Boarding in a larger school means that I have time after school for music and sport. (student, WA)

For other students, the lack of or restrictions on local extra curricula activities such as sport and music, meant that they were faced with hours of travel on the weekends by both students and their parents to take part in these activities in larger centres.

4.3.5 Delivery of Education: Teachers

Availability

Schools in rural and remote areas frequently reported that they found it was difficult to attract teachers to their areas.

It is difficult to get teachers away from the coast. (teacher, Queensland)

Similarly, Distance Education schools reported some difficulties in attracting suitable staff.

Measures to 'compensate' for the lack of face-to-face teachers in these circumstances were variable. Some Schools of the Air employed 'itinerant teachers' who visited families on their properties, and this was very well regarded and seen as highly beneficial to the quality of schooling provided. On the other hand, where some parents employed a governess or supervisor to deliver or oversee the Distance Education curriculum, they reported that an appropriate person was hard to find; they generally had to employ someone with no teacher training.

Two of the most frequent parent and teacher responses in the survey were about:

- shortages of teachers in schools in rural and remote areas; and
- the difficulty in getting teachers to stay in rural and remote areas.

This was widely mentioned as a problem for both primary and secondary schools, but was particularly the case in rural and remote Western Australia. It was both a long term and a short term (relief teachers) problem. One teacher in NSW commented that there was, at present, a severe shortage of teachers: it was very difficult for schools to adequately staff schools when staff were sick or on leave. Other teachers (from remote community schools in Western Australia to rural schools in New South Wales and Queensland) responded that they were short of teachers and unable to deliver the full curriculum.

Our school always has trouble getting an agriculture teacher, even though we are in the country. (student, SA)

If we could get a teacher to stay for twelve months at our single teacher school, we would be happy. (parent, western Queensland)

While a number of incentive schemes were in place, these often had the impact that teachers only stayed for the time that the financial incentive was available - eg for two or three years in Queensland and New South Wales.

A few teachers who come for the two year incentive transfer talk all the time about going back to where they came from - it gets a bit tiring! (teacher, NSW)

Turnover and Expertise

As noted above, simply attracting teachers is not sufficient: there need to be measures to ensure they stay for reasonable lengths of time to develop and provide a stable quality education. Many parents and teachers - including some teachers in Distance Education - commented on the high turnover rate of teachers in schools in rural and remote areas. Many of the teachers responding to the survey indicated that, while they had been teaching for a number of years, they had only been at their current rural or remote school for a short time: around two years was a frequent statement. When teachers did stay for longer periods of time, they commented that the relationships that were built with the families through the schools - including the Schools of Distance Education - were extremely rewarding. The parents and students were positive about the support they received from teachers at the schools in what was a difficult learning environment.

Parent and teacher identification of teacher availability - high turn-over, lack of teachers, experience of teachers - as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000	18%	34%	21%	23%	23%	11%*	49%
schools in a community of over 10,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	25%

* 50% of these comments related to disability issues

Particular mention was made by some parents of the lack of appropriately qualified teachers which made it difficult for schools to offer extension programs particularly for gifted students. This, in turn, led to boredom and frustration for these students in school.

States and territories have specific regulations and incentives which influence the lengths of time that teachers stay in rural and remote areas, and hence it was not surprising to see large variations in responses.

High turnover of teaching staff makes it difficult for schools to maintain continuity in the teaching - or even the offering - of some subjects in secondary schools. The teaching of language and sport was often mentioned in this context. It also adds considerable costs to the skilling of teachers in the school. A Principal in western Queensland commented on the constant difficulty in retaining staff who had been trained, at the school's expense, in areas of vocational education. Once the teachers had the qualifications they were then able to obtain teaching positions in more desirable locations on the coast.

Teachers tend to move more quickly than in Perth because there is not a lot of incentive to stay here in regard to career - ie no permanency. (teacher, WA)

Quality and Experience

There were many and varied responses relating to the experience and quality of teachers in schools. Parents commented that the available teachers were lacking in experience, often first year out and that they were not familiar with rural or remote living and so found it difficult to cope with the dust and isolation. A number of parents and teachers said: "Do not send first year out teachers to isolated or remote locations." While many of the teachers responding to the survey and involved in Distance Education were experienced teachers, they also commented that this was a difficult job for first year out or inexperienced teachers.

Lots of inexperienced teachers come to this town as their first year out from College. (Principal, WA)

In other areas, issues of teacher turnover were reversed, and were alleged to have an impact on teacher quality. In Victoria, for example, some parents commented that the teachers had been in the school for 'too long' and were not up to date with the latest developments in teaching. One parent (a farmer) complained that he found that teachers did not understand the need for students who were going to return to the farm, to have a tertiary education.

On the other hand, many parents and students responded that teachers were readily available to help students and that this helped create a caring and supportive learning environment.

Teachers go to extreme efforts to provide the best opportunities for the students. (parent, Victoria)

In turn, teachers commented that the advantage of teaching in a small community was the support that this community provided for their work.

There are many more caring relationships with students and families. (teacher, Tasmania)

Teacher identification of community support as an advantage - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
school in a community under 10,000	29%	14%	28%	38%	31%	54%	34%

Some teachers reported the existence of other staff who did not want to be located in isolated schools.

Some staff do not want to be there, so their whole perception/delivery of education and living is coloured by their negative feelings and thoughts about the place. (teacher, Queensland)

I am a surfer stuck out west. (teacher, western NSW)

Awareness of Indigenous Cultures

One respondent from Western Australia drew particular attention to the need for teachers and Principals to be aware of issues concerning Indigenous education. She felt that because her town was not regarded as being in 'the outback', teachers and Principals arrived there without being sufficiently aware of basic issues in Indigenous education: the different learning styles, language, and child rearing approaches; the effects of cultural breakdown and social dislocation. Nor were they aware of associated issues such as the poor health status of many of the children and behavioural problems in the schools. A few (non-Indigenous) parents responded that they felt their children were then disadvantaged in the schools by this lack of understanding.

Another respondent in Western Australia commented on the lack of professional development in Aboriginal culture for teachers going into these communities. This is exacerbated by the 'fly in-fly out' nature of teaching in some of these communities which means that the teachers do not integrate with the communities.

4.3.6 Delivery of Education: Technology

The provision of learning through new technologies was cited by many respondents as one way of helping to overcome educational difficulties associated with distance. However, substantial difficulties were also identified, including both access to the hardware and software (provision of computers and internet connections) and to effective and efficient use (cost and technological support).

While we are well resourced in terms of hardware and software, the major resource is still the teacher. (teacher, Victoria)

Parent, teacher and student responses to the survey identified that:

- almost all students had access to computers at school;
- the majority had access to the internet;
- many had access to a computer at home; but
- far fewer students had access to the internet at home.

Student reportage of access to computer and internet at school and at home - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
computer access at school	94%	88%	87%	87%	100%	94%	100%
no computer access at school	2%	4%	6%	7%	0%	1%	0%

computer access at home	66%	59%	59%	73%	55%	73%	65%
no computer access at home	32%	35%	34%	19%	33%	26%	37%

internet access at school	90%	86%	72%	75%	100%	97%	94%
no internet access at school	6%	9%	20%	13%	0%	1%	5%

internet access at home	30%	31%	24%	29%	23%	30%	23%
no internet access at home	67%	59%	69%	67%	64%	70%	79%

It is interesting to note that, while all Tasmanian students responding to the survey had computer and internet access at school, they also reported the lowest access to computers and the internet at home of all states and territories.

Our kids probably have better computer skills than many kids in Perth. (teacher, WA)

Our small school is well resourced with computers. (parent, NSW)

There were problems associated with the reliability of and realistic access to technology, particularly for the internet in rural and remote areas. Parents identified problems with phone systems in remote and isolated areas. The Digital Radio Concentrate System system does not allow reliable access to the internet or even e-

mail. In South Australia, parents reported that, at times, there were not enough phone lines to access either the telephone or the internet. As noted earlier (page 28), the cost of access to the internet is governed by STD telephone rates.

Distance Education students reported varying experiences of access to computers and the internet. Some of these students in Western Australia did not have access to the internet, while in the Northern Territory, the majority of students had access through computers supplied by the School of the Air. In Queensland, access to computers and the internet was again variable, and frequently depended on whether the parents had internet and computer access at home.

There were many other reports of specific uses of new technologies. A teacher in Tasmania mentioned the wide use of computer technology to provide access for students to many alternative learning sites. Elsewhere in Tasmania, teachers pointed to the benefits for small school libraries from computer technology: students were now able to access **other** school libraries in Tasmania and thus decrease the sense of isolation. Some schools had developed the use of online facilities for and within the local community: for example, a school in south western Victoria is a flexible learning centre for adult education.

Video conferencing in some schools provided access for students to subjects that were being taught through clusters of schools. For example, in north eastern Victoria, one or two students in a small rural school are able to learn a language that is being taught at another school. The student is part of the class and can interact directly with the teacher. Some teachers elsewhere reported problems with access to technologies such as video conferencing; some talked of still having poor quality phone lines.

They say Open Access provides equitable options for our kids. What a joke - a real Emperor With No Clothes On story - There are so many problems, stuff-ups, faulty infrastructure doesn't allow video conferencing to happen very easily - and poor quality phone lines make it difficult. (teacher, SA)

4.4 Access and Quality for Students with Disabilities

Respondents with children with disabilities who were involved in Distance Education reported that their children received additional time over the radio to help with their special needs. This assistance was provided by the teachers at the schools of Distance Education, though these teachers were not specifically trained in disability issues. These parents identified the lack of assistance from a specially trained teacher as an issue.

Where a parent needed to board children, one parent in Queensland reported that she experienced difficulty in finding a secondary boarding school that could cater for her child's disability.

There was similarly a wide range in the responses about the degree of support provided for students with disabilities within schools. While for some parents, the

needs of their child were fully met, others had difficulty obtaining the level of support required.

My son has a teacher's aide, but there is a lack of expertise in a little understood disability. It is not a really appropriate school placement. (parent, WA)

Parent identification of whether disabilities were catered for - by state/territory (numbers):

		NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
Disability catered for - fully or to some extent	under 10,000	14	-	6	10	4	11	3
	over 10,000	5	-	-	-	-	5	5
Disability not catered for	under 10,000	13	-	3	2	3	9	1
	over 10,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	1

While it was possible to attend a local primary school that provided specialist help, secondary education was of more concern to these parents. In New South Wales, an example was given of one student who could not attend her local secondary school as it did not meet her particular needs, but to attend the nearest special school required lengthy travel for the student. Another parent from Victoria reported that, after being unable to gain enrolment at the local secondary school for her son, she tried to enrol him in a special school only 80 kilometres away. However he was not eligible for this because he had a physical rather than an intellectual disability. Finally he had to attend a special setting in Melbourne, which was emotionally distressing and a financial drain on the family. He has now returned home and is doing Distance Education to complete his senior schooling.

Some parents reported that there was an integration aide available for their child, but that the aide had no experience or training in their child's specific disability.

4.5 Support Services

Support services are available within some education systems to address the various specific and special needs of students. These services include speech therapists, guidance officers, occupational therapists and so on. More generally, specific rural and remote education support services are provided by systems to address issues in these schools and communities.

4.5.1 Specialist Services In/Out of School

In Queensland, parents of children with disabilities who were involved in Distance Education commented on the lack of visiting specialist services to towns within a

reasonable distance from their isolated farms and stations. This has then involved long drive (up to six hours were reported) to gain access to specialist help.

Some teachers commented on the lack of specialist programs in small schools to cater for the needs of marginalised students; teachers commented that more of these programs were available at schools in urban areas.

Teacher identification of lack of counselling and other support services as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	15%	-	12%	22%	13%	35%	13%

The strong response from Victorian teachers is particularly influenced by their experiences and memories of past services, many of which were cut back in the early 90s.

In some areas, respondents mentioned that specialist services (such as speech therapy) are available in schools but that there is long wait for speech therapists to visit a particular school.

It takes up to eighteen months for children with learning difficulties to receive help in this area. (teacher, NSW)

Similar concerns are expressed about non-school, community services. Parents in all areas said that it was difficult to obtain specialist help outside schools in their locations. For most it was then a long drive to a regional centre to gain access to these services.

It is 100 km to obtain specialist help for my child. (parent, NSW)

The absence of these community resources also affects the quality of support available to schools. School counsellors responding to the survey pointed to the lack of health and counselling facilities in small towns to which they could refer students.

The biggest problem is the economic rationalist 'user pays' mentality which is still used by government departments and corporations. Under this policy, country towns will never be able to provide the same services as major cities (take telecommunication costs for example). (teacher, WA)

4.5.2 Other Programs

The various state and territory based Country Area Programs (CAP), a Commonwealth Government funded initiative, were cited by teachers in small rural schools as providing measures that helped overcome the limitations caused by location.

CAP funds are a godsend. They have dropped back recently but should be increased for small country schools. (teacher, NSW)

Teacher identification of the importance of CAP funding - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
all teachers	12%	-	17%	45%	2%	10%	2%

Some of the specific CAP initiatives identified by survey respondents (often teachers) were:

- CAP funded excursions (Queensland) where teachers identify students’ needs and arrange excursions to major centres;
- provision of buses for excursions: these buses are shared between a number of schools, so each school only had a bus for a part of the year;
- cultural events in schools: these tend to be one-off events that travel to the isolated and small rural schools.

4.6 Professional Issues

Teachers (and sometimes parents and students) raised particular issues that relate to the professional lives of teachers in rural and remote Australia: the advantages and disadvantages in terms of career, re-location, professional development and so on. These are important both on a personal level (for the teachers), and in the impact they have on the provision of quality education for students and their families.

4.6.1 Career Development and Experience

Some teachers had moved to schools in isolated areas to start or to further their careers. A few then felt that this had placed restrictions on career prospects - that it would be difficult for them to return to the city at some future time. They felt that they were ‘out of touch’ with the latest educational directions and issues in urban schools.

There are less opportunities to further career pathways in terms of promotable positions. The perception of peers is that one is no longer ‘up to pace’ with the latest. (teacher, Tasmania)

Others felt that the move to a rural or remote school had disadvantaged them because the small school size failed to offer adequate promotional opportunities.

Teacher identification of lack of promotional opportunities as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	17%	5%	6%	7%	7%	16%	16%

4.6.2 Costs: Relocation and Personal

In the majority of cases, when teachers took up positions in isolated areas, the basic costs of relocation were reported to be subsidised by the Education Department, although there were extra unsubsidised costs incurred. Some teachers commented that while they had relocated to further their career, their partner had had to leave other work to relocate **with** them. This, combined with having to relocate the children to new schools, had placed considerable personal strain on family relationships.

Some teachers were also parents of children who were tertiary students; living now in a rural or remote location placed considerable financial costs on these families.

Teachers commented that they were living a long way from their extended families; travel to visit close relatives was both expensive and time consuming. The areas they moved to sometimes had higher costs of living; for example housing, if not provided by the Education Departments, was expensive and difficult to find.

Many teachers responded about these personal costs of relocating to schools in isolated areas.

No family or friends. No hobbies or social life. No partner, no internet (yet!). (teacher, remote WA)

Teacher identification of personal costs of relocation as issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	32%	38%	26%	30%	28%	16%	37%
schools in a community of over 10,000 people	9%	-	-	-	-	-	5%

In shifting to new areas, they had left their previous (personal and educational) support networks, but over time, built new contacts and support. One teacher in the Northern Territory acknowledged that generally people were very supportive because they had

been through similar situations: they knew what it was like to be the ‘new face’ and they were keen for people to have good experiences in their area.

4.6.3 Incentives

The value of incentive schemes for teachers was acknowledged by teachers and parents from Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales. However, they were not always seen as being adequate, either in amount or in type. In Western Australia, for example, some teachers said that there needed to be more financial incentives to make it worth giving up living in the city.

The school's teaching population is very transient, usually only staying a year or two. Many incentives need to be considered to attract teachers on a more permanent basis. (teacher, NT)

While these incentive schemes were generally seen to be useful in encouraging the appointment of teachers to rural and remote locations, different circumstances of teachers meant that they had different needs. For example, for some teachers, permanency of appointment was a priority, while others with permanency needed direct financial incentives. Others wanted guarantees of teaching appointments in urban locations after a time in rural areas. Some simply wanted better conditions, including decent housing.

There needs to be more financial assistance to teachers - especially permanent teachers. Gaining permanency is no incentive. (teacher, WA)

Rather than having teacher transfer policies focus on the right of teachers to leave an isolated area after 3 years, such policies should provide incentives for quality teachers to move and remain in isolated areas. (teacher, Tasmania)

The country incentive scheme is starting to make things a little better, but is still a long way short of the mark. Permanency and better conditions need to be offered, especially housing. (teacher, WA)

4.6.4 Professional Development

Many teachers in all areas of education reported that they experienced increased difficulties in gaining access to appropriate professional development because of their location.

Teacher identification of lack of access to professional development as an issue - by state/territory:

	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	Tas	Vic	WA
schools in a community of under 10,000 people	63%	23%	42%	38%	41%	61%	41%
schools in a community of over 10,000 people	12%	-	10%	-	-	-	40%

There is a lack of access to professional development, conferences and other experienced teachers. (teacher, Queensland)

Much professional development is provided centrally: in the capital cities of each state. Teachers are required to travel for lengthy periods to get access to professional development, incurring replacement teacher costs (beyond that actually involved in the professional development event, eg for the extra travel time incurred), as well as travel costs. These are not always met by central budgets, or exceed the allowance within school-based budgets. The non-availability of relief teachers in rural and remote areas added further complications (see below).

There were other impacts on the personal professional development of teachers. Some (but not all) reported that they had been unable or found it difficult to continue with further tertiary study due to their remote location. Others felt out of touch with the latest teaching issues because of decreased opportunities for outside examination marking at senior levels, or because of decreased contact and networking with teachers in the same subject area from other schools.

It is very difficult to attend post-graduate studies but it's no longer a problem because I can't afford the HECS. (teacher, WA)

I am able to complete further study externally at no cost. (teacher, NT)

Measures such as decentralising and localising in-services were mentioned positively. At a catholic school in the north-east of the Northern Territory, professional development was provided for the local school staff at a neighbouring Indigenous school. One teacher commented that in-services held at school were more effective because local staff members felt more comfortable in their own environment than in a distant town.

4.6.5 Relief Teachers

Some teachers reported that there were difficulties in many rural and remote areas in obtaining relief teachers: 4% of teachers in Queensland and 9% in Western Australia raised this as an issue. This had direct implications for teachers, as their attendance at professional development activities (most of which required time out of school) could only occur or be approved if their classes were covered. Even with in-service funding available for relief teachers, if such staff did not exist locally, schools could not afford to allow teachers to attend the activities. These shortages also reduced the planning time that teachers had, as existing staff were required to cover classes of absent teachers.

5. Strategies

Respondents identified many strategies that were currently operating within their school or area. Based on their experiences, they also put forward ideas for improving educational provision, access and quality.

Most of these strategies involved additional funding to rural and remote schools and communities and to students and their families. However, underpinning many of the responses was also a desire for rural education to be taken more seriously by policy makers and decision-makers. Many respondents believe that current levels of resourcing and some policy settings do not reflect a comprehensive understanding of the educational challenges that exist in rural Australia. Underlying many comments - particularly from those who lived large distances from capital cities - was a sense of 'being forgotten' and being 'far from decision-making'.

Pollies think the Harbour at one end of Macquarie Street and Central Park which they can see from the steps of Parliament House are the geographical limits of NSW. (parent, NSW)

The strategies proposed by respondents to the surveys follow the structure of the issues discussed in part 4 of this report.

5.1 Costs

Principle:

Parents should be provided with levels of support that meet the additional costs involved in providing an education to rural and remote students.

Federal, state and territory governments need to provide a realistic level of financial assistance that meets the needs of parents of distance education students, of students in rural and remote schools and of students from rural areas who are undertaking tertiary studies.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- A home tutor allowance or rebate for families when one parent is required to teach the children or to employ a governess or supervisor to deliver the Distance Education curriculum;
- Reimbursement to parents for all costs associated with Distance Education including travel and accommodation to attend cluster days, mini-schools and sporting camps;
- Special payments or concessions for rural students to participate in activities involving extra travel to larger cities;

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- A change to the Austudy farm asset test that would allow greater access to income support. This was especially appropriate for tertiary education when families had been eligible for non-means tested AIC for secondary education but are not eligible for means tested Austudy at a tertiary level;
 - Greater levels of support for public education particularly in rural areas by all levels of government.

5.2 Transport

Principles

Increased co-operation is needed between government departments on issues of transport.

Resources should be provided to increase access to transport both to and from school, and within school hours.

Decision-making capacity on transport should be devolved to school communities wherever possible.

Provision of transport is a key to many other existing and proposed educational access strategies. Considerable burdens of time, money and effort are shared by parents and schools. Communities have the greatest understanding of the complexities of local issues.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- Bus route allocation needs to reflect local needs and circumstances more closely, and be less ‘formula’ driven. Decision-making should take into account the size of properties, more direct routes to reduce travel time for students, free access to school buses for school age students attending other educational locations and procedures for extending bus routes when required;
- Improved communication between government departments (particularly education and transport) to improve access to school buses;
- Governments should ensure that school buses have air-conditioning where appropriate;
- More vehicles - cars and or buses - be provided to remote schools for use during school hours;
- School age students studying at TAFE Colleges should have access to school buses at no cost.

5.3 The Learning Environment

Principles:

There should be a focus on the development of a more positive orientation to rural and remote education, building on the commitment of rural teachers and communities.

The provision of improved facilities, resources and opportunities should be a priority.

Rural communities must be adequately resourced and supported to enable them to create school communities where education is valued.

There is a general perception that the quality of education provided in rural and remote Australia is poorer than that provided in urban areas. This has an impact on the overall learning environment of schools and on student achievement. Development of a positive environment is the shared responsibility of the government, the school and the community.

Rural communities - including local industries and businesses - play an important role in the provision of rural and remote schooling. These partnerships are very important in establishing a productive learning environment. They need to be provided with greater levels of support, with training, and with more locally-controlled resources in order to enable them to carry out these responsibilities.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- The need for more one-teacher schools in remote areas;
- Facilities and grounds should be maintained in good condition at all times;
- Air conditioners provided in classrooms where there are high temperatures for significant periods of the year;
- The promotion of the importance of education and motivation of students;
- Development of facilities that are shared between the school and the community (such as community libraries, skill centres and on line facilities);
- Development of community support groups to provide new teachers with information and support as they settle into the community.

5.4 The Social Environment

Principle:

Students from rural and remote areas need to experience a variety of social settings that can assist them to develop personal skills and the ability to work with others.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- Provision of residential programs that involve classroom situations for Distance Education students during the year to enable students to learn in groups;
- Development of cultural programs that can be provided within the school environment, that promote greater tolerance and understanding of different cultures;
- Provision of students with a range of opportunities that broaden their social understandings and experiences.

5.5 Curriculum

Principle:

Rural and remote students are entitled to a comprehensive general education that adequately prepares them for the work and lifestyle of their choice.

Providers of schooling to rural and remote students are constantly balancing the competing demands of curriculum breadth and smaller class sizes. Additional teaching staff need to be provided to enable schools to better meet the diverse needs of their students. This includes innovative ways of providing students with access to a greater range of subjects, particularly practical or 'hands-on' studies.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- Development of multi-age curriculum for Distance Education, to enable home tutors or supervisors to work with different age children in the schoolroom;
- Development of multi-age curriculum to address concerns with composite classes in small rural schools;
- Review staffing formulas in small rural schools (government and independent) to allow more face to face teaching of subjects and more curriculum choice;
- Expansion of curriculum breadth through co-operative efforts between all providers: schools (government and non-government), Distance Education centres, Universities and TAFE Colleges;
- Linkages of the curriculum to employment outcomes to encourage motivation and attendance at school. This could involve changes in teaching methods and curriculum, and should include budget provisions to support students undertaking work experience;
- Development of curriculum opportunities that provide 'hands on' or practical learning methodologies, which lead to concrete outcomes for the students;
- Delivery of vocational training that includes literacy and numeracy skills in remote Indigenous communities. It was reported that, after Indigenous boys are initiated at fourteen to fifteen years, they are unwilling to attend school. One comment (ATSIC worker, WA) was that "boys go to school, but men go to training";
- Work experience opportunities be made available to secondary age students within remote Indigenous communities;
- The enrichment of the curriculum through visits by cultural events to rural and remote schools;
- Sharing of specialist teachers between cluster schools. Local school clusters should determine the specialist area/s to be provided by the shared specialist;
- Greater co-ordination between Distance Education Centres and rural schools in curriculum development and delivery.

5.6 Extra Curricular Activities

Principle:

An education enriched by a range of social, cultural and sporting opportunities is the right of all students regardless of where they live and learn.

There is a strong demand from schools and their communities for more visiting performances and activities. A statewide or regionally based approach to the support and co-ordination of such educational programs should be implemented.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- Increased funding for the provision of buses or travel subsidies to small rural and remote schools to ensure access to the wider community on a regular basis;
- Clustering of schools for cultural, sporting and other special events, where possible and appropriate;
- Increased visits from special events to regional centres and individual schools;
- Increased funding to the Country Areas Program in each State;
- City Camps located in regional centres and capital cities to be available at low cost to students from rural and remote schools for excursions;
- Establishment of 'sister school' relationships between rural/remote and urban schools to support students visits.

5.7 Delivery of Education: Teachers

Principles:

High quality teachers are fundamental to good education.

Teachers working in rural and remote areas should be appropriately trained, prepared, supported and paid.

Good teachers are the core of quality education in rural and remote areas - as elsewhere. Issues of availability, experience, turnover, satisfaction and development are fundamental to on-going provision of quality education. The reality is that rural and remote schools need more teachers.

For Distance Education students, the relationship between the home tutor or supervisor and the teachers in Distance Education centres is equally important. Both need to be supported to enable them to work in close co-operation.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- Distance Education teachers need to work in co-operation with home tutors or supervisors to develop work that meets the needs and interests of the student;
- Home tutors or supervisors should be provided with annual in-services;
- Teachers in rural and remote areas need training and support in the use of new technologies;

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- Development of staffing formulas that recognise the particular needs of rural and remote schools;
 - Greater administrative allowance for Head Teachers and Principals in small schools to enable adequate time for completion of administrative tasks;
 - Provision of laptop computers for teachers through a subsidy scheme.

5.8 Delivery of Education: Technology

Principles:

Technology provided to rural and remote schools and their communities must be high quality, reliable and affordable.

Governments - federal, state and territory - need to develop a long term, strategic approach to the improvement of infrastructure in rural and remote Australia with a particular view to resourcing extensive application of new technologies to educational utilisation.

Technology is universally proposed as the major potential contributor to improved service delivery, particularly for schools in rural and remote areas.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- The telecommunications network needs to be made more reliable, more affordable and of higher quality if it is to continue to be used extensively in education delivery;
- All Distance Education students should have e-mail and internet access to enable parent, teacher and student communication;
- Greater access to satellite programs through Distance Education (as trialed by NSW Distance Education);
- Improvements to the telecommunication system to enable more students to do part of the schooling through e-mail and the internet;
- The provision of a 1800 number to an Internet Service Provider for remote students when accessing the internet;
- Schools to be linked to fibre optic cable;
- Exploration of virtual campus developments for application in rural areas;
- Increased access to satellite programs for schools to broaden curriculum opportunities;
- Increased funding for telematics and video conferencing to allow access to a broader curriculum provided by these technologies;
- Ensure that every rural and remote school and distant education student has a computer(s) with internet access;
- Ensure that there is adequate technical back up and assistance for these technological initiatives.

5.9 Access and Quality for Students with Disabilities

Principle:

All students with disabilities must have access to quality services including appropriately trained and supported staff.

Families of students with disabilities and other special learning needs face significant dilemmas: should their children live at home and attend the local school with limited teacher resources, or should their children live away from home and attend a school where better levels of specialist support are available? Schools need improved levels of specialist support; students living away from home require appropriate accommodation options.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- Disability assistance from appropriately trained special needs teachers in Distance Education settings;
- The availability and funding of appropriate teacher aides within a mainstream setting so that students with disabilities are able to gain access to their local school;
- A range of appropriate accommodation options available to students with disabilities who are required to live away from home to continue their education: including hostel, small community houses and private board;
- Availability of hostel type accommodation for students who need some independence, with staff providing supervision and support;
- Greater communication between urban-based specialists with knowledge of particular disabilities and teachers in rural areas.

5.10 Support Services

Principle:

A range of specialist support services should be accessible to schools, teachers and families in rural and remote areas to assist them in the assessment of student needs and in the development of appropriate education programs.

Rural and remote schools and students need greater access to specialist support services. Programs such as the Country Areas Program provide resources to school communities that enable them to determine their own priorities and support appropriate local initiatives.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- CAP funding should be increased, to enable schools and school clusters to determine priorities and support local initiatives;
- Improved access to Specialist Support Teachers. It was suggested that this could be achieved through employment of regional or cluster based Specialist Support Teachers to visit schools and students in rural and remote areas;

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- Provision of funding for the creation of specialist support tutors for students undertaking Distance Education;
 - Establishment of a free call number for parents and supervisors of Distance Education students, to gain access to specialist support services.

5.11 Professional Issues

Principle:

Teachers working in rural and remote areas should be valued and provided with appropriate incentives, professional development, and support.

It is suggested that teachers need appropriate training for teaching in rural and remote areas, improved professional development opportunities within their school environment, and more comprehensive incentive schemes to encourage them to continue teaching in rural schools.

Home tutors and supervisors need support and recognition through accredited training.

Strategies suggested by respondents included:

- Provision of professional development opportunities in regional locations and in rural and remote schools;
- Provision of funding to schools to support access to local and centralised professional development activities, in school time and in vacations;
- Funding for professional development to include budgets for travel, accommodation costs and the provision of relief teachers;
- Increased access to teacher training in rural campuses of universities. Some respondents felt that teachers were more likely to stay in rural areas if they came from rural areas initially;
- Increase the availability of programs such as the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) which allow community members to complete teacher education by correspondence. One respondent indicated that this program is available for Indigenous people through the James Cook University (Queensland). She was not able to find a correspondence course for non-Indigenous people that would allow her to train as a teacher and stay in her community;
- Completion of professional development on Indigenous culture and heritage by all teachers before teaching in remote Indigenous communities;
- An accreditation and training system for parents, governesses, and supervisors involved in the delivery of Distance Education curriculum;
- Recognition and professional development for home tutors to deliver Distance Education;
- Existence of an appropriate range of incentives for teachers in rural and remote locations: eg permanency, financial remuneration, travel costs and housing;
- Tax free financial incentives to encourage more experienced teachers to rural and remote schools;
- Support for the establishment and maintenance of partnerships between rural schools and universities.

6. Case Studies

These brief case studies illustrate some of the complex stories of education in rural and remote Australia which have been uncovered by this survey.

6.1 Distance Education

This case study is taken from one of the callers to the Phone In. It highlights some of the difficulties faced by families on remote properties who have to provide education for their children through Distance Education.

Jan has five children aged from three to eleven years. She lives on a property that is 260 kilometres from the nearest town. Two of the children are studying through Distance Education at home and two further children are of pre school age. The fifth child, Kate (11 years), boards in town, six hours' drive away, while she finishes primary school.

Kate has a learning difficulty, as does Sam who is in grade 3. Sam had extra help with literacy via satellite with a VISE teacher for three lessons a week. He has now been taken off the program. Jan has to sit with him for all his work so the other children get left unsupervised.

All the three older children were originally studying from home through Distance Education. Jan was having difficulty with three children in the school room (on the property) as well as having the two younger children to look after. She is concerned that she does not have the skills to properly teach her children and finds it very stressful.

The family made the decision to send Kate to board so that she could attend a school. Kate was having terrible tantrums at home trying to learn through Distance Education and her relationship with Jan was suffering. She has found it much easier to learn since she has been at a school but misses being with her family.

Kate's boarding costs are covered by AIC and a bursary. There are also payments to take Kate to school at the beginning of term but not to collect her at the end of term. There are no payments to Jan or any other home tutor to be in the schoolroom full time with their children, providing them with the education that most other children are able to get at a school.

When Jan had the last baby, she moved to town for the year with her children so the older ones could attend school and left her husband on the property. Jan is very concerned about next year when she will again have three school age children in the school room. She is not sure what the family will have to do to ensure that all the children receive an education.

6.2 The Sober Women's Group: Traditional Aboriginal Education in Yirrkala, East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

This case study looks at how health education is developed in a remote Indigenous community using traditional ways of teaching based on the student's culture.

The education is based on Gurrutu, which is the kinship system for the extended family. When alcohol was discussed it was placed in reference to Gurrutu. All children at the Yirrkala school were placed in groups to describe and discuss Gurrutu and their skin groups and the importance of Gurrutu to Yolngu (Aboriginal people). It was then shown that alcohol "puts shyness to sleep" and that people then go off and live with the wrong related kinship group. This is wrong for Yolngu culture.

The health effects of alcohol were shown to the children by cooking a wallaby. When a wallaby is cooked, its liver becomes hard. This was related to alcohol to show the effect that alcohol has on people's livers.

The other education related to nutrition and teaching Gurrutu. Bush tucker trips were organised with the women showing the children how to hunt and to fish, catch crabs, find turtle eggs and mussels from the mangroves, and find stingrays, mud crabs, oysters and clams, while talking to them about the importance of Gurrutu. (from Mukherjee, Stokes and Holdsworth, 1997)

6.3 Virtual School for the Gifted (VSG)

One of the web respondents describes the school he has set up to cater for gifted students wherever the internet will reach.

The VSG offers subjects in mathematics, physics, computing and gifted education. The school has 100 students from Year 4 to 12. The students are from all over the world but mainly from Australia.

The school was started because the teacher believes that gifted students are one of the most neglected groups in rural and remote Australia. The students he has from rural and remote Australia express views of extreme loneliness. VSG has a social and community aspect to try to deal with the issue.

VSG works with schools to complement their programs and provide special education services for gifted students. VSG then provides the trained teachers and community clubs without the students having to physically leave their location.

Address: <http://www.vsg.edu.au>

6.4 Distance Education: A Teacher's Point of View

Kate is a teacher at the School of the Air which is located in a regional centre in rural Australia. She describes some joys and frustrations of working at the School of the Air.

The School of the Air provides a unique and specialised educational service for students living in our district. This district is huge: over 750,000 square kilometres. We go and visit students and their families and have an opportunity to build good working relationships with our students and families. This is great for both them and for us as educators. If the service did not exist, students and their families wouldn't have access to our home visits, to daily radio sessions or to camps for students and home tutors. They could just enrol in Distance Education but they wouldn't get these valuable education supports.

We have problems though with poor radio reception due to outdated equipment and weather factors. There are also uninformed bureaucrats and educators in the big cities who make decisions without having a real clue about the nature of the service we provide or the circumstances of our students and families.

6.5 Vocational Education in Small Rural Schools: A Teacher's Perspective

Ken has been involved in the setting up and delivery of a VET (Vocational Education and Training) aquaculture course in a small town on the coast. He describes some of the positive aspects of being in a small community and how these measures have helped young people to remain in their community.

Our location in a small community means that the school will only ever have a small student population. As resources are allocated on the basis of student numbers (with some compensation for distance), the school will never be able to provide the breadth of opportunity available in a larger centre.

As a result we have been forced to be innovative in the way we deliver programs and provide learning opportunities. But the positives are that the close knit community provides explicit support for the school and its educational programs. The commitment of an industry which is focused on its community, has supported the establishment of these programs.

We have developed Aquaculture and Hospitality which are delivered through an enterprise model. The school has been recognised as a best practice project by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), and the model is being adapted to deliver education throughout the senior school.

The best result for the community is that 25% of the students now stay at the school after Year 10 to do the VET courses rather than move to the regional centres to complete their Years 11 and 12.

6.6 Vocational Education - an Indigenous Student's Perspective

In one small town, there was a problem with non attendance at school among the Indigenous students. Many students did not make the transition from primary to secondary school. While 50% of the primary school population were Indigenous students, only 10% of the secondary school population were Indigenous students.

The local Indigenous art gallery wanted to try and help with this problem. Their own interest was that they had experienced the young people hanging around outside the gallery with nothing to do. They approached the school to set up an Arts Traineeship program where the Indigenous students could attend the gallery for two days a week as long as they attended the school for another two days of the week.

The gallery provided employment and a future for twelve Indigenous workers in the town. The workers wanted to be able to train the young people still at school so that they could share in that future.

One of the Indigenous students describes what the program has done for her:

We are working in all areas of the Tulklana Business such as retail, graphics, art, banking, computers, answering telephones, selling things, making of items and speaking to customers. And in doing these things, I have learnt to be more confident in myself and the things I do. Here I feel I can talk to the workers about my problems without feeling self conscious and they help me sort out my problems.

The things I do have made me think about the future and what I want to do with the rest of my life - which means going to school and studying hard so I can get to where I want to go in life. The gallery has opened up a whole new range of possibilities. I feel that since I have been involved in this program I have started to get more serious about my school work and handing it in on time and my homework too. Since I've been here, it's been so much fun but we are also made to work hard, which I don't mind because the work is fun.

6.7 REVISE: A Support Program for Home Tutors

A retired teacher from a large regional town in rural Victoria described how his visit to a family in outback South Australia helped provide relief to the home tutor supervisor and resulted in an on-going support role.

Bill is a recently retired teacher. Last year he volunteered to be part of the Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (REVISE) program. Bill had spent many years teaching in a regional town in Victoria and was an experienced classroom teacher. He was keen to continue to work with young people and to keep in contact with education.

Bill travelled to outback South Australia and stayed with his host family for six weeks. The family consisted of the mother and father and two children - a 12 year old daughter undertaking grade 6, and a 10 year old son undertaking grade 4. During Bill's

six-week visit, he supervised the children's home study and provided additional extension activities.

Since his return, both children have visited Bill in his home town. They travelled to Victoria, stayed with Bill and his wife and attended the local primary school. They enjoyed being at school with other children and joining in a broad range of group activities.

During his visit to outback SA, Bill made a number of observations about the children, their education and the REVISE program. The students had a very limited view of the wider world as they have few experiences of life beyond their station and their community. The children undertaking Distance Education have telephone contact with their teachers once per week. Often the curriculum materials and activities provided are not immediately relevant to the world of the students. Topics such as road safety and the use of money, whilst important, do not have relevance to the everyday life of the children and their family.

The role of home tutor supervisor is very important and very demanding. Bill recognised the importance of his visit in providing relief for the parents (particularly the mother) who supervises the children in doing their home study. It also provided opportunities for the parents to talk about their children's education, their progress and ways of supporting them in their school work.

REVISE is a program designed to assist home tutors in rural and remote areas of Australia. The program identifies volunteers, usually retired teachers, and supports them to visit students undertaking their education through home study or School of the Air in outback areas. The program is voluntary with the family providing accommodation and meals for the volunteers and the REVISE program covering expenses. The program is administered and organised by the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA) with some funding provided by the Federal Government.

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