The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas

A report to DEST and the Rural Education Program of FRRR

Margaret Alston and Jenny Kent
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Charles Sturt University
Wagga Wagga
Acknowledgements

There are many people who assisted with this project not least of whom are the principals of the Rural Education Program (REP) of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR), all of whom deserve special thanks for their vision in developing this project. The management of the project was overseen by a Steering Committee which included the principal researchers and representatives of the various stakeholder groups - DEST, FRRR’s REP, ICPA and VISE. These people showed determination and dedication to the task of examining rural and remote education issues and gave invaluable advice and direction to the researchers. We thank them most sincerely. Julaine Allan worked on the literature review and Kate Roberts provided the early organisational work. We thank them both for their work. Research assistants who worked on the project and were involved in site visits included Robyn Kelly, Bruce Valentine, Andrea Mascini and Kerri Whittenbury. We would like to thank them for their time, energy, research expertise and insight. Andrea deserves special mention for her work in organising and timetabling the site visits – a huge effort! Without their involvement the project leaders would not have achieved so much in such a short time. We also want to thank Nicky Loane in the Centre for Rural Social Research for assisting with the project, managing the budget and generally ensuring that the administrative tasks were attended to in a timely fashion. Finally, and most sincerely, we would like to thank the many people who took part in this project – the key informants and the young people in rural and remote areas, their parents, teachers and other community members who gave their time to the project. On many occasions, people travelled huge distances to reach us to tell their stories. On many occasions we were privileged to hear very personal stories about drought and education experiences in rural and remote areas. Without a doubt we can say that this project has touched us deeply and we hope that we have represented the views of participants in a way that will make a difference.
Foreword

Australia is just emerging from one of the most prolonged and devastating droughts in recorded history. The economic cost is enormous and the social and personal costs inestimable. We know of the serious situation of men women and children struggling to make a living from agriculture and related industries. We know about the communities that are being devastated by the structural changes taking place in rural and remote Australia, which, when overlaid by drought, they feel helpless to fight. However, there is one group of people who tend to be silent victims of the drought. These are the children living in rural and remote Australia and due to isolation, families’ financial and emotional distress, and the pressure on schools, many are finding access to a good education is compromised.

In January 2003, Rural Education Program was established to assist young people whose education may be affected by drought and other forms of rural crisis. This is a small philanthropic fund managed by Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal on behalf of the Founding Donors. The donors were inspired by the then Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon John Anderson who gave a speech in 2002 in which he highlighted the problems facing families and children in drought areas. In the three years since inception the Program has distributed over $1 million to around 140 projects across Australia,

In order to ensure that its funds were distributed to where they were most needed, Rural Education Program deemed it important to understand something about the circumstances of children living and being educated in rural and remote Australia. We found little in the way of national statistics about the population of young people in education and there was a dearth of information about how crises like the drought were affecting their access to education. With the assistance of The Hon Dr. Brendon Nelson, Minister for Education, Science and Training, we were pleased receive funds for the appointment of Charles Sturt University to undertake the study that is reported in this document.

We are pleased to present this Report, so ably prepared by the research team of Charles Sturt University, comprising Professor Margaret Alston and Ms Jenny Kent. They went out into the heart of drought country and talked to communities and returned with stories of severe suffering, but they also witnessed much resilience and inventiveness in the face of drought related hardship. Their report is the voice of young people their families and their communities and compiled in a way that enables us to act strategically to provide help where it is most needed. We thank the research team and Charles Sturt University for their excellent insight into this aspect of the drought.

We are grateful to Minister Nelson and his Department for their generosity and support for the research from the outset. We know that the Report will be a valuable source of understanding for the Commonwealth in its delivery of rural and remote educational programs in future. This partnership between private philanthropy, government and a university can be a strong force in promoting resilient communities now and in the future when we will certainly face more drought.

Baillieu Myer Chairman
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### Acronyms

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<th>Description</th>
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<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>AGSRC</td>
<td>Australian Government Schools Recurrent Costs index</td>
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<td>AIC</td>
<td>Assistance for Isolated Children</td>
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<td>ANTA</td>
<td>Australian National Training Authority</td>
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<td>CAP</td>
<td>Country Areas Program</td>
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<td>Community Disaster Relief Fund</td>
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<td>FTE</td>
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<td>Griffith Service Access Frame</td>
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<td>IDS</td>
<td>Interim Drought Support</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth</td>
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REFA  Rural Education Forum Australia
REP  Rural Education Program
SCRGSP  Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SLA  Statistical Local Area
TER  Tertiary Entrance Rank
TVET  Vocational Education and Training through the TAFE system
USO  Universal Service Obligation
VET  Vocational Education and Training
VISE  Volunteers for Isolated Student Education
1. Executive Summary

1.1 About the study

The longevity of the worst drought in Australia’s history coupled with widespread concern about its impacts, led to a limited number of studies of drought impacts between 2003 and 2005 (DoTARS 2005; Alston and Kent 2004; DAFF 2003). However the impact of drought on the educational access of young people from rural and remote areas remains an under-investigated area. As a result this research was commissioned by Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) through the Rural Education Program (REP) of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR).

The research was conducted to:

- inform current understanding of the impacts of drought on young people’s educational access in rural and remote areas;
- guide the development and allocation of assistance provided by the Rural Education Fund;
- identify ways in which government programs and policies could be adjusted to better address the specific impacts of drought on educational access in rural and remote Australia.

Three key questions guided the research. These included:

- What are the impacts of drought on young people’s educational access in rural and remote areas of Australia?
- What are the impacts of drought on secondary educational establishments servicing rural and remote students?
- What are the strategies that will enhance educational access for students in rural and remote areas?

1.2 Methodology

The research approach chosen for this study in consultation with DEST and FRRR is predominantly qualitative methodology. This allowed the researchers to go to selected case study sites and conduct an in-depth investigation with students, their families, their teachers and significant members of the communities in order to come to grips with the drought’s impact on the education experiences of young people. There is no attempt to quantify the extent of the issues raised, rather the research seeks to understand the lived experience of rural people in drought areas and to understand this experience from the view of those most affected.

Following consultation with key informants in DEST and in national
community organisations such as
the Isolated Children’s Parents’
Association (ICPA), Volunteers for
Isolated Students Education (VISE),
National Association for Rural
Student Accommodation (NARSA),
School of the Air personnel, and Area
Consultative Councils (ACCs), seven
rural and remote case study sites
were selected for in-depth study and
visited during April to August 2005.
Communities were chosen to represent
differential levels of remoteness and
a range of agricultural industry bases.
Those selected are Hay, Balranald,
Cootamundra in NSW; Longreach and
Blackall in Queensland; and Cohuna
and Kerang in Victoria. In these
communities researchers conducted
in-depth interviews with key informants
including local government officials,
welfare personnel and education
providers and ran focus groups with
students, their parents, teachers,
business proprietors, Indigenous
people and other community
members. The research visits were
widely publicised in local print media
and on radio giving community
members the opportunity to attend
focus groups and consultations. As
a result several hundred people took
part in this research, many making
extraordinary efforts to meet with the
research team. Interviews and focus
groups were taped and transcribed
and analysed to determine dominant
themes.
In addition to the case study interviews
and focus groups, a quantitative survey
was conducted with boarding schools
serving rural and remote young people.
Fifty-six schools in NSW, Queensland,
Victoria and the ACT were contacted
and sent survey forms. Twenty-one
surveys were returned (a response rate
of 37.5%) and these give an insight
into the drought experiences of young
people at boarding schools and the
impacts on the schools themselves.

1.3 Findings

1.3.1 Separating the impacts
of drought from on-going rural
restructuring

All communities visited were
experiencing the on-going effects
of rural restructuring. In Blackall,
Longreach, Hay and Balranald,
the impact of the changes in the
wool industry were evident in farm
amalgamations, farm families selling
and leaving the area, shearers and
contractors moving elsewhere for
employment, and a general drift of
population away from these areas.
In the Victorian communities the
researchers were made aware of the
impacts of dairy deregulation which
had led to a major shake-up in the
dairy industry and the communities
serving this industry. Again there
have been farm amalgamations and
a drift of families away from these
communities. In all communities
there has been a reduction of public
services, evident for example in
Cohuna’s loss of its local government
offices as part of local government
amalgamations and in Cootamundra’s
loss of several government department offices.
Yet several of the communities studied record a static population suggesting some movement of people back to these areas, many in search of a quieter lifestyle and cheaper housing. These areas also attract tourists. Nonetheless because of the out-migration of young people, populations are aging.
Separating the impacts of drought from ongoing rural restructuring has been one of the challenges of this study. However the visits to the case study sites reveal that drought has accelerated rural restructuring – for example, farms in remote areas are being amalgamated at a faster rate than expected, and these larger farms are moving into less labour intensive industries such as cattle production, leading to a significant loss of families, workers and young people from remote area properties. Drought has also led to an increase in debt, workloads and stress for rural families, has resulted in reduced employment opportunities in small communities, and has led to increased levels of poverty. In all communities we were made aware of the difficulties associated with accessing Exceptional Circumstances payments leaving many families under significant financial stress. In all communities the mood is revealed as ‘flat’, or in one case ‘desperate’.
For young people the drought has been a pervasive element of their young lives, revealed in their comments when reflecting on drought that they do not know what a ‘normal’ year is like. Recent rain led students to comment to the researchers on the wonder of raindrops. Their experience of drought is revealed also in their comments on the personal impacts of drought: the need for short showers, playing sport on rock-hard sporting ovals and being acutely aware of the need to preserve water. It was evident to the research team that young people are also working long hours on farms, assisting with farm labour tasks (sometimes missing school as a result), and they are exposed from a young age to the ravages of drought on livestock. Young people in towns are also working in part-time jobs, earning money that they report they need for their own needs and for their education. This is illustrated in Longreach, for example, where all but one of the young people at the hostel hold down a part-time job. Most rural and remote young people encountered in this study are working long hours outside school either in paid work or farm work.
The drought has had an impact on the need for rural and remote young people to work – to assist their families, and to earn their own income. The increased work responsibilities of young people have also had an impact on their ability to participate in activities such as sport and cultural events.
Teachers reveal that the drought has had a noticeable effect on poverty levels evident in the need for young people to wear their uniforms longer, to seek assistance with uniform at school and, for some,
an inability to attend excursions or take part in representative events for financial reasons. Some community representatives also worried about the impacts of the family and community ‘mood’ on young people’s mental health.

This then is the drought context in which young people seek educational opportunities. The research reveals that the drought has had significant impacts on educational access for all levels of schooling.

1.3.2 Impacts on educational access

Primary
Remote young people have been particularly affected by drought and ongoing restructuring. For example, the drift of people away from these areas has resulted in the closure of small schools and the loss of school buses. Remote children of primary school age have the choice of attending a small school if it is accessible, of boarding in their nearest town at a hostel or being home schooled.

Home tutors (who are overwhelmingly mothers) report being under significant stress during drought because of their need to work on their properties in the absence of hired labour, and the increased workloads associated with drought feeding. Home tutors report being torn between their responsibility to the farm and their responsibility for distance education lessons. Whereas up to 50% of remote students had governesses less than fifteen years ago, now only 7% do. Mothers report they have multiple expectations on their time, and some commented on their own lack of ability to teach their young people. They also report that their children are often needed to work on properties. The education of remote young people in primary school is heavily dependent on the ability and time of mothers to deliver the lessons, the financial capacity of the enterprise to do without the family labour and their ability to access the resources of distance education.

Several families in the case study areas have taken up the opportunity provided by the second home allowance. This allowance has been welcomed by many families - it enables (usually) mothers to move to their closest centre with their children. The children attend the local schools and women have the opportunity to work, providing an often much needed second income to the family.

Young remote people can also attend hostels such as those located in the case study sites of Hay and Longreach. The cost of hostel accommodation is as much as $2000 over the AIC allowances causing significant hardship for families and for the hostels which are not funded to provide additional education services.

High school
In all seven communities, we visited the local high schools and spoke with students, teachers and their parents. All but one of the schools has experienced a downturn in numbers
resultant on restructuring and drought. In Blackall for example numbers dropped by one third in a one year period. This has impacted on teacher numbers, subject offerings, the need for teachers to teach outside their discipline, difficulties with teachers accessing professional development, students taking more subjects by distance, problems associated with families funding extra-curricular activities, and some increases in difficult behaviours. We were also informed that some children are coming to school hungry.

Indigenous students and parents also report problems associated with access to literacy and numeracy classes, problems with absenteeism, an identified need for a greater celebration of Indigenous culture in the classroom, the need for Indigenous support people in the classroom and the need to provide a breakfast program.

Special needs children suffer particular disadvantage especially when they live in a remote area away from services and supports, and their needs for support programs, respite care and special supports for home tutors are urgent.

**Boarding school**

Many, particularly remote, young people attend boarding school for their high school years. Parents report difficulties with paying fees, reduced ability to visit their young people, and a trend towards sending them away at a later age. Boarding schools report that their rural and remote families are under particular stress and that they have tried to support them through delayed payment schemes, increasing bursaries and scholarships and making staff aware of the rural situation. Many parents have opted to pay their fees over a longer time period, resulting in their greatly reduced ability to support their young people going on to tertiary levels. Boarding school respondents report that some parents are urging their young people not to go on to tertiary level study for financial reasons. Young people at boarding school are reported to be anxious about their parents and about the circumstances at home as a result of drought and worry that their parents cannot afford for them to be away. There are also reports of families being unable to send younger children to boarding school.

*High school retention*

There is extensive evidence from this research to support the contention that high school retention rates are dropping for rural and remote young people for the following reasons:

- young people report that they might leave school to save their parents from the additional financial stress associated with tertiary education;
- if work is available some will take it in preference to staying on because they are determined to become financially independent and thus relieve the family of a financial burden;
• boys are more likely to leave early because of available work opportunities.

Post-school
Young people who leave school early may find an apprenticeship or traineeship but these are less evident with the drought. Young people who leave school early and remain in their communities, report significant unemployment and under-employment. For young people in rural and remote areas, the need to travel long distances for TAFE training is a significant issue, and one that requires parental support because of cost and a lack of public transport.

There are few jobs in rural and remote communities for young people and they are often in part-time, insecure work. Many who are unemployed are not eligible for Youth Allowance because of the means-testing associated with this award causing significant hardship and placing them at risk.

Tertiary access
During this research we heard most about the disadvantage associated with tertiary education access. Drought has particularly affected rural and remote young people’s access to tertiary level education primarily because of the financial costs associated with access, and because of the need to move for tertiary education.

At TAFE level young people in our study report:

• a lack of access to TAFE campuses;
• the need to travel some distance for training;
• a lack of public transport to facilitate their access;
• the need for high levels of parental support to access courses;
• lack of access to living away from home allowance;
• for remote young people, the need to live at a distance from home.

At university level young people in our study report:

• a lack of access to Youth Allowance because of means-testing on parental assets;
• financial difficulties associated with parents being asset rich and income poor;
• many families being unable to support their young people away from home;
• an increased need for them to delay their entry to university in an attempt to earn the required amount to be classified as independent for the purposes of Youth Allowance;
• the lack of unskilled full-time employment in their towns as a result of drought making the earning of this money difficult or impossible;
• anecdotal evidence that some give up their university places because of financial pressures;
• for those who do go away, the need to work to try and support themselves while at university;
• anecdotal evidence that some drop out from university because of financial and emotional pressures;
• anecdotal evidence that rural and remote young people choose a regional university over a capital city because of cheaper costs of living;
• the need to choose shorter courses to relieve the family’s financial burden and/or allow younger siblings access;
• for those where there is more than one child hoping to go to university, offering not to go, or being unable to go because of family financial pressures;
• a huge sense of frustration that university education is no longer available on a merit basis.

1.4 Key Actions Required

This research project suggests a number of actions are required to address rural and remote education access issues to ensure that young people in these areas have the same access to education as their urban counterparts. In particular, access to financial support to overcome the tyranny of distance is required at all levels of education – primary, secondary and tertiary. The researchers note that access to allowances is critical for educational access, and that these allowances need to be substantial enough to overcome the financial burden of education. Currently we would argue that none of the allowances are satisfactory and that all should be raised. We would suggest that all the allowances available for students at primary and tertiary levels be raised to approximately $8000 to allow increased choice for students and their families. We would also argue that students who must leave home for tertiary education should automatically be eligible for Youth Allowance. We also note our concern at the pressures being placed on mothers in remote areas to deliver quality education to their children. We therefore suggest the following actions are required.

1. Review of interactions and interrelationships between all allowances for rural and remote young people’s education to ensure equity of treatment.

2. Review the level of funding for educational allowances to ensure that all families can choose effective quality educational options for their children at similar costs to urban families. In doing this particular attention must be paid to special groups such as Indigenous children and children with special needs.

3. Address the pressures being placed on mothers in remote areas to deliver education to their children at the same time as they are working on and off properties.

4. Provide additional funding and infrastructure to rural and remote schools or schooling alternatives to ensure that learning options and
motivational activity are similar to metropolitan schools. Where this is impractical, ensure that the necessary infrastructure for distance education, home learning and other options such as boarding and hostels is provided to a high standard.

5. Provide additional supports for Indigenous students and children with special needs
2. Background

2.1 Rural educational disadvantage

Globalisation and economic and social changes have had significant impacts on rural and remote areas of Australia at least since the 1980s. Many inland rural areas have experienced declining or static population growth and a significant loss of services and job opportunities (Gray & Lawrence 2001; Alston 2002; Cheers 1998; Salt 1999, 2001; Birrell 2000). More recently the drought which has been experienced over much of rural Australia through the early twenty first century has exacerbated these changes.

Drought, social changes and economic decline in rural and remote areas has impacted significantly on education access for children in these areas. School retention and completion rates for rural and remote students compare unfavourably with urban students (HREOC 2000). Retention and completion rates for Indigenous students, many of whom live in rural and remote areas, are even worse. Education access for Indigenous students is affected by a lack of role models and indirectly affected by the artificial segregation in some western towns.

Table 1 shows high school completion rates for the years 1994 - 2004. These figures indicate the lower levels of completion for rural and remote students and, within these groups, the lower levels of aspiration of boys compared with girls.

Indicating declining numbers of remote students, Table 2 shows the numbers of students accessing various allowances to assist them with their education and the amount of government funds expended on this group. This table indicates that the numbers of remote students going to boarding school and studying by distance education at home are declining at the same time as numbers sourcing second home allowance are rising. This allowance assists (usually) mothers and their children to move to their regional centre for education and work.

Meanwhile the participation of Australians from rural and remote backgrounds in higher education is declining as a proportion of the overall percentage of people going on to higher education. Although nearly a third of high school students reside in rural and remote locations, only 17%

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1 The apparent retention rate is an estimate of the percentage of students of a given cohort who continued to a particular year of education e.g retention rate of full time secondary students from Year 7/8 to Year 12 (ABS Year Book Australia 2005, [http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/796199F30F695A2CA256F7200832F4F](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/796199F30F695A2CA256F7200832F4F)) accessed 8/03/05.
The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas

Further, between 1989 and 1996, the proportion of rural people going on to higher education declined from 25% to 17% during a period when the number of young people entering tertiary education increased by 25% (HREOC 1999). As James (2001, p.470) notes, ‘the present rural-urban imbalance in Australian higher education participation is unacceptable’. Despite rural and remote disadvantage being identified in the report, *A Fair Chance for All* (DEST 1990), little has changed since to address rural

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<th>Major Cities Total</th>
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Table 1 – Year 12 completion rates by location and gender for the years 1994-2004 (%)


b) Figures express the number of Yr 12 completions as a proportion of the estimated population that could attend Yr 12 in that year.

c) For 1997-2002, definitions of Major Cities, Regional and Remote are based on the ASGC Remoteness Structure.

d) For 1997-2002, Hobart, Darwin, Townsville-Thuringowa and Cairns are included in Regional Australia.

e) For 1994-1996 estimates based on the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification developed by DPIE.

Source DEST, derived from data supplied by State secondary accreditation authorities and the ABS.
disadvantage. The 1995 Senate Committee Inquiry into the Impact of assets tests on farming families access to social security and AUSTUDY (Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee 1995) indicated the financial burden of the assets test on assets rich, income poor rural and remote families. A number of additional studies since 1995 have shown that rural people experience significant problems accessing higher education. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission reported in 1999:

The future of regional Australia is dependent upon an educated and skilled population. However, recent reports suggest that barriers exist which not only restrict access to education and training in rural areas but which also deprive rural people of their basic human rights (HREOC 1999)

In fact, if anything the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) in the 1990s appears to have accelerated the decline in the proportion of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds including many from rural and remote backgrounds. Extensive work by Birrell and others (Birrell et al. 2000; Birrell, Dobson & Smith 1999; Birrell & Dobson 1997; Dobson & Birrell 1996) suggests that higher education charges in Australia have resulted in fewer people from lower socio-economic groups (and rural people are over-represented in this category) participating in higher education.

Ongoing rural restructuring and drought have added further pressure to rural Australians seeking education access. Australia’s rural areas have been in drought for up to five years as one of the driest periods on record has extended its grip on rural communities (Botterill & Fisher 2003). The erosion of incomes for farm families and those in communities dependent on agriculture has accelerated the financial disadvantage suffered by those in rural and remote areas (Alston & Kent 2004). Research on the social impacts of the drought undertaken in 2003 reveals that maintaining educational access is a significant stressor for drought affected families (Alston & Kent 2004). The extent to which young people’s access to education has been impacted by drought is the subject of this research.

2.2 Goal of the research

This research investigates the impact of the drought on young people’s ability to continue with or complete their education and how this might be ameliorated. The research focuses on students and families in rural and remote areas of eastern Australia.

The research was conducted to:

• inform current understanding of the impacts of drought on educational access in rural and remote areas;
• guide the development and allocation of assistance provided by the Rural Education Fund and other funding schemes; and
• identify ways in which Government programs and policies could be adjusted to better address the specific impacts of the drought on educational access in rural and remote Australia.

2.3 Key research questions

Three key questions were posed for this research project:

What are the impacts of drought on educational access in rural and remote areas of Australia?

Impacts assessed include changes in retention rates of secondary students in rural and remote areas; changes in the numbers of rural and remote students attending a sample of boarding schools in regional and capital cities; financial difficulties facing families and communities that act as a barrier to educational access; availability and resourcing of secondary education establishments to rural and remote students; implications for School of the Air pupils and service providers; strategies adopted by families and education providers to improve access.

What are the impacts of drought on secondary educational establishments servicing rural and remote students?

Impacts assessed include changes in teacher and student numbers, resourcing of services, and welfare strategies adopted by schools to improve access.

What are the strategies that will enhance secondary educational access for students in rural and remote areas?

The impacts of policy were assessed in order to develop strategies to enhance access for students from remote areas.

2.4 Research approach

In order to assess the impact of drought on educational access for young people in rural and remote areas, a predominantly qualitative methodology has been chosen. Qualitative methodology allows an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of people affected by drought. The researchers and the steering committee felt it was important to go to rural and remote areas and talk to those most affected – rural and remote young people, their parents, teachers, welfare personnel and other community key informants. With this in mind seven sites across three states, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria were selected. These sites vary in their level of remoteness and cover a range of industries including dairying, cropping, irrigation, wool, beef and sheep. Each site was visited during the period April to August 2005 by a team of three or four researchers, always including the principal researchers, Margaret Alston and
Jenny Kent. In each site interviews and focus groups were conducted. The qualitative methodology allowed the researchers to come to grips with the lived experience of rural and remote young people, their families, school personnel and community members in their quest for education during a time of significant hardship. We also conducted a largely quantitative survey with a representative sample of boarding schools in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and ACT to determine the impacts of drought on schools that serve rural and remote young people and the boarders from these areas.

The research incorporated the following:

- engagement with the funding body in order to ensure that aims for the project were mutually determined;
- an overall rationale that linked the research components to the three key questions posed above;
- the selection of sites in consultation with the funding body;
- a set of methods such as focus groups, interviews and surveys adopted in order that the overall aims of the project could be achieved;
- standardised sets of research questions for focus groups, interviews and surveys; and
- determination of reporting requirements.

The research proceeded in several stages including the following:

**Stage 1 – desk audit**

This phase involved collecting and analysing literature and archived statistical information including government and non-government reports on drought and educational access in Australia’s remote areas.

**Stage 2 – national key informant interviews**

During this phase national key informants were interviewed at length about the impacts of drought on secondary education access in remote areas. These informants included government employees in DEST and AFFA, and representatives of the National Farmers’ Association, the Isolated Childrens’ Parents’ Association, the National Association for Rural Student Accommodation, Rural Education Forum Australia, VISE, School of the Air personnel, other schools of distance education, the Department of Transport and Regional Services (particularly the Area Consultative Committees), the national body representing P&Cs and other bodies identified by DEST and AFFA. These interviews were used to gauge issues relating to the implications of drought on educational access at the national level.

Stages 3, 4 and 5 were included to allow the collection of qualitative data. These stages allowed the researchers to determine the issues impacting on education access as identified by those at the local level – the people in rural and remote communities.
Stage 3 - selection of case study sites
Seven sites were selected for in-depth study in consultation with the funding body. The sites were: three sites in New South Wales (Cootamundra, Balranald and Hay), two areas in Queensland (Blackall and Longreach), and two areas in Victoria (Cohuna and Kerang).

Stage 4 – case study site key informant interviews
In each of the areas studied in-depth, key informant interviews were conducted with school personnel and with financial counsellors, local government officials, accountants and welfare support staff. These interviews were used to gauge issues relating to the implications of drought on educational access at local levels.

Stage 5 – focus groups
In each selected site focus groups were held with -
- teachers and school principals
- secondary school students
- parents
- Indigenous community members
- other significant community representatives eg local government representatives
- where accessible, students who have exited schools in the case study sites either through withdrawal from education or through geographic mobility.

Stage 6 – Boarding Schools survey
A survey was distributed to 56 boarding schools in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and ACT in May 2005. Twenty-one completed surveys were returned, nine from Queensland, nine from NSW, two from Victoria and one from Canberra – a response rate of 37.5%. Seven of the responding schools are co-educational, six are boys only and eight girls only. This survey allowed an understanding of the impact of drought on rural and remote young people who board away from home and on the schools themselves.

Stage 7 – analysis
Interview and focus group data were analysed using conventional qualitative data analysis techniques (see Alston and Bowles, Research for Social Workers, second edition 2003). These techniques included data reduction, collation and determination of emerging themes. Quantitative data collected in surveys was analysed using SPSS in order to produce frequency tables, cross tabulations and to test
2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the background to the project, the key research questions, and the approach taken by the researchers in addressing the identified questions. The following chapters provide a review of the recent key literature relevant to the project; summaries of interviews with key informants, and focus groups and individuals from case study sites as well as discussion of findings and recommendations for enhancing access to secondary access in rural and remote areas.
3. Review of the Relevant Literature

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter we set the scene for our research by reviewing existing literature on pre-existing rural and regional disparity in educational access and attainment. More recent studies on the impact of drought on the community have also been included although this is limited as very little research has been conducted on the impacts of drought on rural and remote young people’s access to education.

Drought has impacted across vast areas of the Australian continent for much of the new century. The drought has been widespread and characterised by longevity and severity (Drought Review Panel 2004). By comparison with previous droughts, not only has there been reduced rainfall across the continent, but also temperatures have been up to 1.6° hotter (Lindesay 2003, p. 42) suggesting climate change is a factor in the drought’s severity. In economic terms the drought has reduced Australia’s economic growth by $7 billion (Botterill & Fisher 2003), eroded real farm incomes by 46% and resulted in a decline of 0.9% in GDP in 2002-3. This has caused significant hardship for those dependent on agricultural production and the communities that support them.

While much emphasis has been placed on the environmental and economic effects of the drought, relatively little attention has been paid to the social experiences of people most affected by drought. Alston and Kent (2004) studied the social impacts of drought noting that health, welfare, loss of employment, overwork and stress were features of the drought. Also noted was the impact on educational access for those in rural and remote communities. This study arises from our concern at this development. It focuses squarely on the impact of the drought on rural and remote young people’s access to education. This literature review includes an examination of material on educational access for rural and remote young people more generally. Readers will note that much of this material describes factors occurring prior to the onset of the drought. We also draw on the limited material produced during the recent drought to highlight additional drought pressures.

One of the difficulties shaping this research is the challenge of separating the impacts of ongoing rural restructuring from that of drought. The material presented here paints a picture of long-term decline in access to education for rural and remote young people consequent on changing demographics and significant social forces. The additional financial,
emotional and social pressures created by the recent catastrophic drought are therefore likely to make the access of young people to education even more tenuous. Yet education is viewed as a priority in a rapidly changing world as recognised by the Australian Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (PM Youth Pathways 2001). Nonetheless young people remain vulnerable in their transition through the various stages of education from primary to tertiary levels. The taskforce notes that while adolescence and early adulthood is an exciting stage of life, transitions from child to adolescent to adult are not easy. Specifically the taskforce notes that education, and transition from education, has a central role in young people’s transition through these stages (PM Youth Pathways 2001). Yet the transition to adulthood is fraught with hurdles that sometimes make these unachievable and, as Alston and Kent (2003) note, a lack of access to education results in social exclusion from global opportunities, not just local ones. Literacy, numeracy and the ability to understand and use information technology underpin current and future participation in a globalised marketplace (PM Youth Pathways 2001; Marks, McMillan & Ainley 2004). Without adequate education young people are restricted to localised and limited job markets. Yet, for rural young people, local job markets are becoming increasingly narrow, and therefore the need to acquire skills and knowledge is more urgent. However a new transitional barrier in the form of drought, together with existing educational disadvantage, is impeding their ability to achieve their potential.

Australian students in rural and remote areas have experienced long-standing educational disadvantage (e.g. Alloway et al. 2004; Alston & Kent 2003). Young people from rural communities have been under-represented in tertiary education and over-represented among the unemployed prior to drought (James et al. 1999; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2002; Alston & Kent 2003). For example James et al. 1999 note that for every ten people attending university from an urban area, there will be approximately six rural students. Unemployment rates for rural young people are as much as two or three times higher than the general rates, and this is due to the collapse of the rural youth job market rather than drought.

Rural educational disadvantage is a long standing feature of rural life. Alston (1999) outlines the key issues of Australian rural and remote educational disadvantage prior to 1999. Specifically, by comparison with urban students, rural students have poor school retention rates and limited tertiary access, and rural areas are characterised by poor participation by Indigenous students, teaching issues, technological problems, transport

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problems, limited financial support and variable quality of curricula and resources.

This review examines the literature on rural educational access from 2000 onwards, using the Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (HREOC 2000a, 2000b, 2000c) as a starting point to the current status of secondary school education in rural and remote areas of Australia. However, before reviewing the Inquiry and other research literature on rural education disadvantage, an analysis of ongoing restructuring and drought circumstances is presented to allow an understanding of the critical pressures facing drought affected families.

3.2 Drought

Drought has been described by Botterill and Fisher (2003, p. 3) as a ‘mismatch between the water available and the demands of human activities’. Thus it is difficult to accurately define when an area has entered drought (DoTARS 2005). However one of the triggers for widespread and lower than average rainfall is the El Nino effect, a measure of variations in the surface temperature of the Pacific Ocean. Traditionally an El Nino occurs every four to seven years and lasts for up to eighteen months (Bureau of Meteorology, www.bom.gov.au). The longevity of the recent drought (in some areas up to five years) suggests this drought is longer, more severe and different to normal patterns potentially signalling climate change. If this is indeed the case, droughts may become escalating features of the Australian landscape.

There is some suggestion that global warming will intensify, and that temperatures may rise by between 1° and 6° by the year 2070 (Ash & Holtum 2003). The link between the current drought and climate change has been made in a report entitled Global Warming Contributes to Australia’s Worst Drought (Karoly, Risbey & Reynolds 2002). The writers argue that the current drought is associated with an El Nino but also with higher than average temperatures.

While scientists keep a watching brief on the current drought and its idiosyncrasies, it is useful to note that we cannot be sure that this is any more than a particularly severe drought like previous long dry spells (for example in the 1940s). Anecdotally and from a previous study (Alston & Kent 2004), the researchers have found that the drought is creating significant hardship in rural Australia and that there are impacts on educational access for rural and remote young people. In order to tease out drought impacts from existing conditions, the following section outlines information on rural restructuring.
### 3.3 Rural restructuring

Rural and remote areas of Australia have been in a state of flux at least since the 1980s. Factors contributing to rural restructuring have included globalisation, fluctuating commodity prices and changes from a labour intensive to a capital intensive agriculture resulting in the loss of a significant number of jobs. Additional factors include detraditionalisation (Stehlik, Gray & Lawrence 1999) or the loss of certainty around rural life and traditions, population shifts and the decline in rural towns. At the same time the rise of neoliberalism (or the ideology that acts to foster global competition) (Gray & Lawrence 2001), and the incorporation within policy formulation of neoliberal principles of market prioritisation, self-reliance and individualism have had a significant effect on rural Australia (Gray & Lawrence 2001).

The impact on rural inland areas dependent on agriculture has been devastating particularly for small communities of 5000 or less (Hugo 2005). These communities have experienced a loss of service infrastructure and consequent loss of jobs, declining population, particularly in the younger age groups, aging populations and health and welfare impacts (Cheers & Taylor 2005). Those left behind are more likely than their urban counterparts to have poorer health, less education and higher and more prolonged unemployment.

### 3.4 Drought and its impact on education

How then do we isolate the impacts of drought from what is a long period of rural restructuring? A handful of studies undertaken in recent times are crucial (DoTARS 2005; Alston & Kent 2004; DAFF 2003). Two case studies conducted in drought affected communities (DoTARS 2005) reveal that the impacts are dependent on the stage of the drought, or how many years a community has been in drought. Further, a community’s capacity to respond is weakened when that community is most in need.

Impacts revealed by this study include greater demand on churches and other charities for pastoral care and welfare assistance, loss of hired labour, a greater need for family labour and the greater likelihood that women will be working on the farm and/or engaging in employment off the farm. This study also reveals the significance of community resilience in terms of long term recovery strategies.

The impacts of education are only briefly touched on in the DoTARS report but include the observation that a school principal had decided to pay extra water costs to allow the students to experience green grass at school at a time when the landscape elsewhere is bare and barren. This strategy has also been adopted in other small schools in drought areas (Alston & Kent 2004). The DoTARS report also reveals incidents where children...
Margaret Alston and Jenny Kent are pulled out of school to assist with farm work, where parents are seeking delayed payment of fees and where families are unable to afford excursions costs.

The Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) has undertaken a comprehensive review of the impact of drought and the use of drought relief measures (DAFF 2003). The report notes that income support measures such as Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment (ECRP) from Centrelink were vital in enabling families to survive. However, also noted in the review are the difficulties families have accessing these payments because of complicated eligibility criteria and application processes. In addition, means testing was believed by families to be harsh and resulted in limited payments to many families who were fortunate to have some off-farm income. These issues have significant impacts on parents’ ability to keep their young people in school.

Alston and Kent (2004) note that efforts to gain extra income to keep children in school frequently resulted in families becoming ineligible for ECRP thus increasing their hardship. Alston and Kent’s (2004) report notes decreasing high school enrolments at all research sites. Schools and parents blamed this on the impact of the drought and cited examples of families leaving town for work.

The DAFF Report (2003) focuses on agricultural producers rather than rural communities overall. However social impacts were specifically noted because they arose repeatedly in DAFF consultations. Impacts of the drought on education included withdrawing children from schools, inability of families to cover costs associated with schooling such as excursions, and loss of education resources such as teachers and school buses as the workforce relocated to other areas. Younger farmers with higher debt and younger children were found to experience the greatest impact of the drought compared to older established farming families (DAFF 2003). These findings are supported by Alston and Kent (2004) who note the significant social impacts of drought on rural communities including the drain on the rural workforce.

3.5 International issues in rural education

Although much has been written about drought and desertification in the international literature, finding material specifically on the impacts of education is difficult. However, Eldridge (2002), reporting on the 1992 drought in South Africa notes that many young people dropped out of education. They either assisted their parents through looking after livestock, thus allowing their parents to undertake more income generating activities, or they earned money themselves. Families also reduced their household expenditure on education and there were more school drop outs in poor households and amongst girls.
The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas (Eldridge 2002). The following section addresses more general material on rural education in the international sphere.

Internationally, education is viewed as the way out of poverty (e.g. Valdes & Mistiaen 2003). While standards of education are high in most Western industrialised nations, they vary markedly in developing and undeveloped nations (Marks, McMillan & Ainley 2004). Repeatedly, low adult income levels are linked to early exit, or lack of, education (White 2003; Rural School and Community Trust 2003). Strategies to improve the overall status of a population include attention to educational access (Valdes & Mistiaen 2003) but these strategies vary according to the level of development or industrialisation of the country. In Africa and India, for example, minimal levels of schooling for a growing portion of the population are a goal (Marks, McMillan & Ainley 2004), whereas in the USA equalising differences between groups in the community is the aim of educational policy (Ward 2003). Across the globe, differences between rural and urban educational outcomes are noted and nations around the world adopt educational policy in an attempt to ameliorate these differences.

Engaging communities and Indigenous populations in an effort to develop social capital and increase employment opportunities is one approach to addressing rural educational disadvantage. Rural School and Community Trust (2003) notes several projects where partnerships are developed between educational institutions (high school and universities) and local communities. Promoting and preserving Indigenous culture, teacher retention, and community development are among the many projects discussed. Community engagement with educational institutions is reported to have benefits for all sectors of the community, including increasing school participation rates of children, and promoting social capital (Rural School and Community Trust 2003; Kline 2000).

The tendency of educational systems to support higher achievement of the dominant social groups is consistently reported in terms of its negative impact on marginalised groups (e.g. White 2003). For example the inadequacy of educational institutions and curricula to meet the needs of Indigenous populations results in that population’s lack of participation and lower achievement in schooling (White 2003; Rural School and Community Trust 2003).

In areas where colonisation has decimated Indigenous populations, projects designed specifically to provide full participation in school decision making and culturally appropriate content and delivery for Indigenous people have been found to substantially improve their educational outcomes (e.g. Kline 2000). Wright (2003) notes a project in New Zealand that successfully redressed educational marginalisation of Indigenous young people by
integrating culture and community into the curriculum. This was viewed as a way of imparting community values, customs and history and using the community as a resource. Approaches such as these work on a local level to identify and meet local needs and one of the key factors reported in successful community schooling projects is local relevance. At the same time schools and teachers have responsibilities to meet literacy and numeracy standards and other curricula demands. Howley (2003) suggests place-based pedagogy is a way of recognising local issues while addressing the need to be accountable in delivering literacy and numeracy aspects of the curriculum.

For rural people the problems associated with local relevance are compounded by the higher cost of providing education relative to urban areas. For example Ward (2003) suggests rural areas have a particular rural character that can be generalised and that implies certain costs of education such as distance, isolation, and ability to attract and retain professionals, that are different to urban areas. Mathis (2003) also notes that US funding formulas applied to rural schools are inadequate given the cost factors involved and that this makes rural education inequitable. Teacher retention is a problem in rural areas around the world. The causes are most frequently linked to rural economies, income levels and rural facilities (e.g. Ayalon 2003; Lazarus 2003). Ayalon (2003) suggests that teachers are unprepared for rural life and that ‘rural’ should be identified as a specific culture in multicultural teacher education. Wright (2000) notes that rural areas have identifiable values which communities want teachers to promote and be reflected in the curriculum. Lack of support for those values creates conflict between teachers and community. Wright (2000) is referring to a specific New Zealand community and the attribution of identified rural values to all rural communities is not suggested. Lazarus (2003) reports that rural teachers in USA schools have not been accredited and that most states are in the process of licensing teachers. Comparing the quality of teaching between rural and urban schools, Lazarus found that teaching experience had the most significant impact on student achievement and that rural areas had to pay teachers more to retain those with most experience. Level of teaching qualification was not found to have an impact on student achievement but, in rural areas, teachers often had to teach outside their area of expertise which did negatively affect student results (Lazarus 2003).

The differences between rural and urban education access and outcomes are routinely noted in the international context. Strategies to address rural educational disadvantage use either localised community development approaches or governance/policy approaches.

Yet on a cautionary note it is worth recognising that rurality is frequently referred to, despite there being
ongoing challenges in defining what is meant by the term. It is not clear whether rurality as conceived of in the US or Guatemala is the same as rurality in Australia. Strategies used overseas to redress rural educational disadvantage could be applied in Australia if culturally appropriate. However it could be argued that Australia’s vast distances and sparse populations make it unique. Nonetheless, no other country appears to have completely overcome rural educational disadvantage.

The terms rural and remote are not defined in this review. The literature reviewed frequently sought to define rural, regional and remote noting repeatedly the problems with lack of consistent definitions and measures of rurality (e.g. Alloway et al. 2004). This literature review only covers literature that addresses some aspect of school education that incorporates rural and remote issues specifically or identifies them as part of the work.

3.6 Rurality and remoteness

Welch (2000) notes that rural Australia is as diverse geographically, economically and socially as urban Australia. However, the term ‘the bush’ encompasses many non-metropolitan areas. The bush represents a mythological Australia where people are tough, endure hardship, yet care about each other (Elliot-Schmidt & Strong 1997). Stereotypical views of rural and remote Australia pervade fictional and non-fictional, historical and recent accounts of life outside metropolitan areas (Sher & Sher 1994). The extent to which these stereotypes are upheld by bush dwellers will vary from place to place and person to person. While definitions of rural, remote and regional vary considerably, most Australians could identify if they lived in ‘the bush’.

3.7 Context of Australian schooling

Responsibility for government schools including policies and funding, falls to the relevant state or territory minister. Responsibility for non-government schools falls to their individual governing body, frequently a religious group (MCEETYA 2002). Non-government schools receive most of their government funding from the Australian Government via the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) (MCEETYA 2002). The role of DEST in relation to schooling has been described as ‘to co-ordinate policy and to fill gaps [left by state education departments] in provision and quality’ (HREOC 2000b:8). This role specifically includes improving access to education for disadvantaged groups including Indigenous and isolated students (HREOC 2000b, p. 9).
All sectors of education consumed 5.3% of Gross Domestic Product in 2001-02 (ABS 2002). Primary and secondary education expenses were $21,283 million for this period, comprising 56.7% of total education expenditure (ABS 2002). DEST provides funding to all schools for particular education strategies to implement programs such as the National Goals for Schooling in the twenty-first century and to specific schools under programs such as the Country Areas Program (CAP) (Department of Education, Science and Training, accessed 10/3/05, www.dest.gov.au/schools/adelaide.htm; Crosier & Noblett 2003). CAP will provide funding of $117 million to rural and remote schools via this program over the period from 2005 to 2008. Approximately 5% of students in rural and remote areas attend schools which qualify for CAP funding (HREOC 2000b).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) provides an annual snapshot of Australian schools. In 2004 there were 9,615 schools in Australia and 72.2% of these were government schools (ABS 2005). In 2004 there were 3,331,964 full-time school students, 67.5% attending government schools (ABS 2005). The number of students attending government schools has fallen over the past ten years from 72% in 1993 (ABS 2004a). Schools in NSW and Queensland have the highest number of Indigenous students with 58% of 130,447 full-time Indigenous students in Australia attending schools in these states (ABS 2005).

### 3.8 Data collection issues

Rural and remote primary and secondary students are one-quarter to one-third of all Australian school students (HREOC 2000b). The number of students cannot be more closely estimated because of the range of diverse government agencies collecting statistics on school attendance and because of different ways of classifying rural and remote. The agencies collecting data on schools and students include the ABS, DEST, and the State Education Departments. The ABS National Schools Statistical Collection and DEST have data on schools at statistical local area (SLA) level, but not on students. The ABS collects a range of data but it is not disaggregated below state level and it collects attendance data, not non-attendance or reasons for non-attendance (L Stinson [National Centre for Education and Training Statistics] 2005, pers. comm.). Despite this the reasons students do not attend school would seem to be data essential to addressing low participation and completion rates. Data collection and data sharing between the state education departments and DEST is a continuing problem (L Stinson [National Centre for Education and Training Statistics] 2005, pers. comm.). The lack of uniformity of data collection has been noted as a problem in identifying students at risk of leaving school early and identifying risk characteristics (PM Youth Pathways 2001).
risk characteristics suggested as implicated in early school leaving are low income, and being rural, Indigenous, a truant and/or homeless (PM Youth Pathways 2001). Investigating the way these factors are interrelated and strategies for addressing them are proposed but at this stage unreported (PM Youth Pathways 2001).

Additionally, the terms rural and remote are contestable, and measurements of rurality and remoteness vary according to the classification system used. While 78% of Australia can be classified as remote because it is geographically isolated from large service centres and infrastructure, Smith (2004) notes that geographic classifications do not always grasp the nature of the population’s experience of isolation. For example a service centre may be geographically nearby but not easily accessed because of road conditions. Measurement instruments such as the Griffith Service Access Frame (GSAF) attempt to take these issues, and others such as economic resources, into account (HREOC 2000b, p.30). The GSAF and other measures are not uniformly applied by state or commonwealth agencies to a population such as students or schools so data varies widely across and between states and populations.

Alloway et al. (2004) note that aggregated data and large scale studies, while providing measures of isolation and/or rurality, do not allow explorations of community cultures and community differences. Qualitative investigations of attitudinal factors and lived experiences of rural and remote school students are rare.

3.9 Income support and financial assistance

Income support for secondary school students comes from the Commonwealth government in several ways depending on the individual student’s circumstances. Family assistance is paid to parents of dependent full time students up to the age of 21 years. This payment is administered through the Family Assistance Office and is means-tested (ABS 2004b). Youth allowance is the main income support payment for full-time students aged 16-24 years and is subject to both personal and family means testing to determine eligibility (ABS 2004b). Youth allowance is paid to young people living independently or whose parents receive a benefit. Youth allowance is designed to help low income families support children during education and training (ABS 2004b).

The Australian Government via the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme provides financial assistance for families where children do not have ‘reasonable daily access’ to an appropriate government school and therefore must board away from home, live in a second family home or study via distance education (Centrelink 2005, p. 3). Under this
scheme, most benefits are not means or asset tested including for example, a boarding allowance of $6,000 per child (Centrelink 2005). Where a means test applies for assistance, facilities are available to waive the test if an applicant (or their partner) is in receipt of certain Australian Government assistance, such as the Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment.

In 2005, the Australian Government introduced the Non-Government School Term Hostels (NGSTH) Programme (see Department of Education, Science and Training website, www.dest.gov.au). The Programme assists eligible non-government school term hostels to provide a high standard of care to primary and secondary students from rural and remote areas of Australia. Under the Programme, an annual grant of $2,500 per student per year is available to eligible hostels. This four year initiative also indirectly supports rural families and communities by providing an affordable alternative to boarding school or distance education for rural and remote families. Up to 1,000 rural and remote students are expected to benefit from the Programme in 2005.

The following sections of this chapter report the findings of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education, the findings of the NSW Inquiry into Public Education, and other research literature on rural school education. Following the discussion of the two Inquiries, issues relating to rural schools, teachers and students are reported.

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Source DEST 2005
3.10 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into rural and remote education

Noting the significance of education as a measure of an individual's ability to participate in many facets of society, The UN Convention on the rights of the child specifically recognises the right to education without discrimination in Article 28.1 (HREOC 2000b). The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) consulted with rural and remote Australian communities during 1998. These consultations revealed widespread concern with education access, standards and quality (HREOC 2000a, p.3). Education had also been identified as an issue affecting employment and income levels by other areas of government (e.g. Productivity Commission 1999). HREOC began an Inquiry into rural and remote education in 1999 with 73 recommendations resulting and a number of reports published in 2000 (e.g. HREOC 2000a, 2000b & 2000c).

The key question for the HREOC Inquiry was:

What is necessary to ensure that, by the age of 18, each child in Australia has received the education he or she requires to participate to his or her full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community? (HREOC 2000a, p. 5)

The Inquiry determined that the five necessary features of school education were availability, accessibility, affordability, adaptability and acceptability to the different groups in the community (HREOC 2000b).

(i) Availability

Availability of education means that government has a responsibility to provide education as a part of basic infrastructure. This includes school buildings, staff, curriculum and students (HREOC 2000b). The HREOC Inquiry found that many rural and remote schools have poor educational facilities and offer limited curricula to their students (HREOC 2000b, p. 36). Staff are difficult to attract and specialist teachers rare (HREOC 2000b, p. 42). While boarding school is noted as an option for remote students, the Inquiry specified that it is frequently an unaffordable option and that it was more desirable for students to be schooled near to their homes (HREOC 2000b, p. 39).

(ii) Accessibility

Accessibility of education includes practical issues of access such as transport and more complex issues of access for students with disabilities, health problems, those speaking languages other than English and access to information technologies (HREOC 2000b). The HREOC Inquiry repeatedly found issues of access serious impediments to rural and remote students’ education. The responses to the Inquiry continually highlighted this basic issue and a
separate report was devoted to it (HREOC 2000c). Transport availability and costs were noted as critical in preventing students getting to school or continuing beyond basic education (HREOC 2000c). Access is frequently temporarily denied to many students because of road closures due to rain. The temporary access problems may last days or weeks and also affect planned events such as sporting and cultural festivals (HREOC 2000c). Australia has many problems with access to information technology. The Universal Service Obligation (USO) was intended to address these problems including the provision of high quality telecommunications services to all areas of Australia (HREOC 2000b). For those school students dependent on distance education and its increasing use of electronic delivery, access to adequate levels of affordable telecommunications technology is important (HREOC 2000b).

(iii) Affordability
The HREOC Inquiry into rural and remote education found that the greatest disadvantage faced by people in rural and remote areas is cost (HREOC 2000b, p. 67). The aspect of affordability permeated the other areas investigated during the Inquiry. Costs of education in rural and remote areas are higher for schools and families. For schools additional costs results in limiting the range of experiences and activities in which students can participate. For families, the Inquiry noted that financial assistance does not meet the additional costs and the result for many children is the need to work part-time or leave school (HREOC 2000b).

(iv) Acceptability
Acceptability of school education was identified by the HREOC Inquiry as an issue primarily for Indigenous students and their families (HREOC 2000b). HREOC argues that Australia’s Indigenous people experience serious disadvantage in their access to participation in the social, political and economic life of the country. As a consequence children still face barriers to participation in education, receive minimal culturally appropriate content or delivery and Indigenous communities find few opportunities to be involved in school decision making or planning (HREOC 2000b, p. 75). Several of the Inquiry’s recommendations dealt with these issues including developing curricula that included relevant local content (HREOC 2000b).

(v) Adaptability
The Inquiry found that schools need to be adaptable and responsive to the needs of students and the community. The recommendations arising from this addressed timetabling, curriculum and Vocational Education and Training (VET). In particular networking with the community was seen to be enhanced by allowing access to the school outside traditional school time including holiday periods (HREOC 2000b). This was believed to promote the school as a community resource.
The curriculum was found to have an urban focus and to recommend activities and excursions that are unavailable to many rural and remote students. Local adaptations and specific rural curriculum items were recommended. As part of this VET was viewed as a way of schools expanding their scope and offering more to students who did not wish to pursue tertiary education. It was suggested that VET would achieve higher retention rates for rural/remote boys and promote long term employment opportunities (HREOC 2000b).

In summary, the Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education found that Australians living in rural and remote areas are seriously disadvantaged in accessibility, affordability, adaptability, acceptability, and availability of education. Submissions received by the Inquiry noted examples of the ways these factors operated and also innovative ways of dealing with them.

3.11 NSW Inquiry into Public Education

An Inquiry into public education conducted by the New South Wales Government found similar concerns to the HREOC Inquiry. While the NSW Inquiry did not investigate rural and remote education specifically, it devoted a chapter of its final reports to the difficulties experienced by rural teachers, schools, students and communities (NSW DET 2002).

3.12 School and community

The NSW Inquiry noted a number of education issues that rural areas face and urban areas do not. These include, additional expenses in fulfilling basic educational requirements, a lack of opportunity to provide a range of educational experiences, limited opportunities for professional development, limited numbers of casual teachers resulting in ‘time-killing’ activities for students whose teachers are absent, problems recruiting and retaining teachers and poor access to up-to-date information technology (NSW DET 2002, pp. 104-107). Of particular note is the impact of the teacher allocation on a per-capita basis. The ratio of teachers to students is 1:25 and in small schools the twenty plus students may cover several grades (NSW DET 2002, p. 106). A submission to the Inquiry noted that regardless of the teacher’s dedication, in such a situation some programs have to be sacrificed (NSW DET 2002, p. 106).
‘loss of collective confidence’ in rural communities that impacts on educational delivery (NSW DET 2002, p. 110).

Two separate reports (Squires 2001; Kilpatrick et al. 2002) note that schools are seriously affected by diminishing social capital and community dislocation, but are also well placed to generate new or strengthen existing, community networks, and redevelop collective confidence. Boylan (2004) suggests there are frequently close ties between school and community in rural/remote areas and that schools are viewed as an integral and important part of community life.

Suggestions for further developing the school’s role in the community rely on action from both school and community. Squires (2001) suggests schools being directly involved in local decision making processes such as civic leadership and opening the doors to adult community members for skill development programs. Similarly, Kilpatrick et al. (2002) propose rural school – community partnerships which expand the concept of public education and use the available school resources in a variety of ways. The ease of such partnerships developing will depend largely on the nature and resources of individual communities. Communities that are dislocated or have minimal social capital will struggle to use the school as a resource. As Alston and Kent (2004) note, drought affected communities are also depleted in social capital and as such may not be well placed to further develop their educational options.

Blackmore et al. (2004) suggest that schools have too many competing demands of educational governance, funding and welfare issues without an increase in resources to enable closer school – community partnerships. Global discourses of individual choice have stressed the student’s right to education that fits their needs and creates competition between schools (Blackmore et al 2004). Crosier and Noblett (2003) note in their report into CAP that the funding arrangements could result in students not going to their nearest school but to one in a larger centre, removing the funding from the smaller school and so the school as a community resource. McKinnon, Kearns and Crockett (2004) suggest that rural school students have a need for support services such as social workers to redress their disadvantage. They note that, while educational discourse promotes both choice and social justice, few resources are allocated to government schools to implement social justice strategies to alleviate disadvantage.

In summary, schools are useful to rural communities for more than providing teaching to students. They are an integral part of a community’s infrastructure. However, maximising the school as a resource for the community depends on increased resources from the Commonwealth Government and the State Governments, and commitments to projects at a community level. The community’s ability to commit will
be dependent on issues such as cohesiveness and social capital, and, in times of crisis such as drought, this requires additional support from all levels of government. The ability of all levels of government to commit will be dependent on recognition of the need to uphold social justice and maintain rural infrastructure.

3.13 Teachers

In 2002 there were 295,746 staff employed in Australian schools. Teachers comprised 225,353 of these employees (MCEETYA 2002). In 2004 there were 233,065 teaching staff in Australian schools (ABS 2005). The numbers of teachers in non-government schools has increased by 17.9% since 1999 while the number of teachers in government schools has increased by 3.8% in the same period (ABS 2005) demonstrating the growth in private schooling. Staff are allocated on a per capita basis resulting in rural and remote schools being disadvantaged in a range of programs such as special education, language and literacy and having a limited curriculum because of their small student numbers (HREOC 2000b, p. 32).

Teachers are a significant part of the education system and, as Hattie (2004) suggests, they are responsible for significant variability in student achievement. Students themselves, home and peers are noted as other factors impacting on student achievement and Hattie notes that all these factors are interrelated (Hattie 2004, p. 24). However, the ability of teachers to deliver the required curriculum and stimulate their students to learn is a vital part of the education system. Green and Reid (2003) suggest teachers in rural areas are perceived to be at worst poor, and at best variable compared to their metropolitan counterparts although there is no evidence for this claim. Rather, rural areas have difficulty staffing schools and retaining experienced staff (Illingworth 2004). Rural decline affects all public and private agencies ability to attract an experienced workforce.

Several studies have investigated teachers' experiences of rural and remote communities and teaching (e.g. Sharplin 2002; Baills et al. 2002; Williams 2002). Significantly all noted that new teachers were unprepared for life in the new location although they do not discuss if those teachers came from rural/remote areas or if teachers in general are unprepared for teaching. Williams (2002) notes that internationally, up to 40% of teacher graduates leave their profession within 3 years of graduating with geographical isolation frequently cited as a cause. Sharplin (2002) described the way new teachers simultaneously hold idyllic and horrific expectations, maintaining stereotypical views of rural and remote locations.

Boylan (2004), in a synthesis of the national and state inquiries and research papers notes specific issues for rural and remote teachers. In
reviewing the research papers Boylan (2004) states firstly, teachers in rural areas need to be prepared for multi-age classrooms and have developed appropriate teaching strategies. Secondly, teachers coming from urban areas need to understand and be sensitive to cultural differences, values and norms of country towns. Thirdly, Boylan notes that several studies acknowledge that the community is involved in school life and that teachers need to appreciate and utilise this as a resource. Finally, Boylan (2004) emphasises the need for teacher education to prepare teachers for rural and remote employment by offering specialised subjects and rural practice placements. This strategy is believed to go some way towards meeting the shortage of rural teachers and is more useful in retaining teachers than allowances and cheap rent (Illingworth 2004).

A number of inquiries into rural education consistently report the same issues of disadvantage and inequality in relation to teachers and teaching issues. Boylan (2004) lists reports ranging from the 1983 Education Commission of NSW Listening and responding: A review of education in rural NSW and the 1988 Commonwealth Schools Commission Schooling in rural Australia report and the most recent HREOC Inquiry noted earlier. All emphasise employment, retention and professional development of teachers as significant problems in the provision of equitable delivery of education in rural and remote areas.

3.14 Students

Rural educational disadvantage impacts on students more than any other group. It is children and young people who have their future aspirations limited by basic curricula, few specialist teachers and lack of school and community resources. The following section of reviewed literature overviews factors relating to rural/remote students.

3.14.1 Participation and completion rates for students

Schooling is compulsory in Australia between the ages of approximately five and fifteen years (there are some interstate variations in these ages). In recent years secondary school students have been encouraged to remain at school after compulsory schooling age, considerably increasing school retention rates for post-compulsory schooling. However, participation in education and completion rates for Year 12 students have been consistently noted as lower in rural and remote areas than urban areas (Crosier & Noblett 2003).

Crosier and Noblett’s (2003) data is reported from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). Retention rates in LSAY are calculated by recording a cohort of students in Year 9 who subsequently participated in Year 12. LSAY calculations take into account grade
repetition, interstate migration and between system transfers (Crosier & Noblett 2003).

Overall completion rates at Year 12 level were 75% in 2001, up from 43% in 1976. However, in 1998 83% of metropolitan students were still enrolled in Year 12 compared with only 74% of rural and remote students (Crosier & Noblett 2003, p. 16). When the rural and remote classification of students is further broken down, remote students’ participation rate is 69%, regional students’ participation rate is 73% and metropolitan students is 82% (Crosier & Noblett 2003). Additionally noted is the significantly lower participation rates (17% lower) of rural and remote boys compared to rural and remote girls (Crosier & Noblett 2003).

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain the disparity in Year 12 participation rates between rural/remote and urban areas. These reasons include lack of opportunity, costs, lack of teachers and negative attitudes to formal education (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman 2004; Crosier & Noblett 2003; James et al 1999). However several studies (e.g. Marks et al. 2000) report that school participation rates are less influenced by geographical isolation and more influenced by socio-economic status and gender. Jones (2002) and James (2001) concur that geographical isolation alone does not predict schooling participation rates. Given rural/remote economic decline, lower household income and withdrawal of services and industry, socio-economic status is generally lower in rural areas. James (2001) found that participation in secondary school is mostly affected by socio-economic status. However when combined with distance these two factors produce the greatest educational disadvantage. James (2001, p. 469) particularly notes the social and cultural contexts of rural areas calling these ‘discouraging’ barriers such as separation from friends when required to live away from home. Looker and Dwyer (in Alloway et al 2004) stated that long standing family ties to the community and strong identification with place was a significant defining factor of rurality and influenced a young person’s choices of future education or employment. Young people faced with the choice of leaving home for secondary education or leaving school may choose to leave school because of community and family ties not because of negative attitudes to education.

Both James (2001) and Kenyon et al (2001) suggest that parents’ attitudes to post compulsory education will influence their children’s choices about participating in Years 11 and 12. Financial costs, employment options and schooling availability will affect this decision. Alloway et al (2004) found that student’s aspirations were not always shared by their parents. In general Alloway et al (2004) found students well aware of, and wanting to participate in the global marketplace, whereas parents were more concerned about students’ abilities to participate
given the education they were receiving. The financial constraints on parents’ ability to provide additional opportunities is also noted.

Socio-economic background and educational outcomes are consistently linked in studies world-wide. Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) report that the strong influence of socio-economic background on early school leaving, participation in Year 12 and university entrance. Students with low socioeconomic status are more likely to leave school early. Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) point out there is no link between socioeconomic status and achievement. Students from low socioeconomic groups do not leave school because they cannot perform adequately but because they cannot afford to stay there. Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) suggest a policy focus on improving poor performance of students will reduce future socioeconomic inequality across the community as more students achieve permanent employment. Alternatively addressing socioeconomic inequality in the community may enable students to meet the costs of staying at school.

Distance education is increasingly delivered by electronic means. For example, electronic distance education accounts for more than half of all government schools in Queensland and one third of students are in rural and remote areas (QLD DET 2003). To meet the needs of these students Queensland has made a decision to promote and increase distance education and information technology delivery of education to meet the needs of rural/remote students (QLD DET 2003). In addition such technology can enable teachers to access professional development by, for example, videoconferencing (HREOC 2000b). The success of this delivery strategy is reliant on vast improvements in access to information technology and the ability of students to pay for the required technology. The success of secondary school programs delivered by distance education is not reported and those delivered by electronic communication are not yet evaluated.

Rural student’s choices of staying at school for post compulsory education are strongly influenced by the location of the school and the costs of remaining at school. Young people who do not want to leave their homes are likely to leave school. Educational delivery strategies such as on-line classes are impaired because of technology limitations such as lack of broadband access and their success at secondary school level has yet to be evaluated. The ability to pay for post-compulsory education will depend on a student’s family situation and the availability of limited government assistance.

### 3.14.2 Academic achievement

Participation and completion rates of non-compulsory education are a factor in future socio-economic status. However there are minimal differences between rural/remote and urban students’ academic achievements.
Those rural/remote students who stay at school are not disadvantaged in basic education by their location. A number of studies found academic achievement measured by literacy and numeracy rates and Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) scores for example, were similar in rural and urban areas (Crosier & Noblett 2003, p. 20). Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) note that literacy and numeracy have the greatest influence on labour market outcomes and are the strongest risk factors for failed school to work transitions.

Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) suggest that overall Australian students’ performance is high by international standards. These authors also state there is no evidence to suggest that this high standard is due to policy initiatives made during the past 30 years, rather the standard has remained constant for this period (Marks, McMillan & Ainley 2004, p. 3). However, overall performance does not take into account regional variations and the differences between metropolitan and rural/remote areas. Overall performance does not take into account differences in school sectors. Students in non-government schools receive higher tertiary entrance scores than those in government schools (Marks, McMillan and Ainley 2004). Choice of school is limited in rural/remote areas. Additionally academic achievement figures do not reflect the outcomes for young people who have left school early, a situation more likely in rural/remote areas.

In summary, school participation and subsequently achievement, is strongly affected by socioeconomic status. While overall, Australian students’ participation and performance in post-compulsory education is high, rural/remote students’ achievements do not meet urban standards. Students’ (and parents’) education choices are limited by the cost and availability of education in rural/remote areas.

3.14.3 VET

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is offered in schools (school VET) and through the TAFE system (TVET). VET aims to provide students with the skills to enter the labour market and courses are offered according to local labour market needs (Johns et al. 2004). Crosier & Noblett (2003, p. 18), reviewing a number of reports on VET suggest that lower rural participation rates in year 12 are offset by increasing participation rates in VET and traineeships.

A review by Johns et al (2004) of school VET in rural areas found VET programs successful in retaining students who may have otherwise left school early. This review also found that students undertook VET courses specifically to enable them to stay in rural areas. An outcome made more likely by VET fields of study being linked to local labour markets (Johns et al 2004). Frost (2001) suggests rural VET programs have rejuvenated communities, addressed chronic youth unemployment and reinstated the
school as a significant community resource. Conversely Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) found that there is little evidence to suggest school VET benefits the participants although across Australia 15% of school students undertake some VET subjects. Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) note that schools have generally weak links to employers, and limited industry standard resources to provide VET courses. Alloway et al. (2004, p. 250) are concerned that division of students into academic and vocational streams could ‘fall-out along socio-economic lines’ and highlight and maintain differential opportunities within communities. The authors suggest that the labour–market outcomes of School VET participants be monitored to determine the program’s effectiveness.

It appears desirable for rural/remote students to have the choice of VET during their schooling, particularly if links to local labour markets are strong and continuing to be developed. However the benefits and limitations of VET need to be monitored.

### 3.14.4 Gender

Gender differences in education are generally decreasing overall. Marks, McMillan and Ainley (2004) report that overall, girls achieve higher results for literacy than boys, and similar results for numeracy. Earlier studies into gender differences in school performance noted significantly better results in all areas for boys. Marks et al (2004) suggest that policy initiatives aimed at improving the school performance of girls have been successful. However, gender has a more complex influence on education than literacy and numeracy scores. More rural boys than rural girls become early school leavers and boys are more likely to find work in their local communities (Alloway et al 2004).

Alloway et al. (2004) noted both boys and girls view rural communities as male spaces and this influences girls’ tendency to choose tertiary education outside the community. This choice does not necessarily translate into permanent local employment.

The gender differences in education participation and completion rates are frequently noted but not explored in the research literature. The future impact of boys’ early school leaving and girls’ choice of education outside the community requires further study.

### 3.15 Participation and performance of Indigenous students

Australia’s Indigenous young people are educationally disadvantaged by comparison with other young non-Indigenous (see for example HREOC 2000). Several reports in recent years have reported on Indigenous educational disadvantage and these
include The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW DET 2004), The 2001 National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (DEST 2002), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Education Policy (1991), and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. These reports note that Indigenous students’ social and economic disadvantage are key factors in their educational disadvantage. Relative to non-Indigenous young people, it would appear that Indigenous students are significantly disadvantaged in educational access regardless of drought circumstances. Jones (2002) found that Indigenous students have lower performance levels than non-Indigenous students and that Indigenous students in remote areas have the poorest academic achievements of any students.

Absenteeism and non-participation is a serious problem for Indigenous students affecting academic performance ratings. In 1997 the Year 8 to Year 12 retention rate for Indigenous students was 31% compared to 73% for non-Indigenous students (Marks, McMillan & Ainley 2004). Several reports note that Indigenous students are more likely to leave school before Year 12, have substantially more absences from school and subsequently enrol in lower level TAFE, tertiary or training courses than non-Indigenous students (ANTA 2000, p. 11; SCRGSP 2003, p. 3.13). These factors result in fewer post-school qualifications, fewer jobs and a lower income for the Indigenous population compared to the non-Indigenous population (ANTA 2000; SCRGSP 2003).

SCRGSP (2003) notes that Indigenous students generally have significantly lower achievement rates on benchmarks for literacy and numeracy compared to non-Indigenous students and this is attributed to systemic racism and high absenteeism (SCRGSP 2003). The HREOC Inquiry noted most school education is designed for non-Indigenous young people and inadvertently marginalises Indigenous young people (HREOC 2000b). The limited data from Indigenous controlled schools that have a culturally appropriate approach show that students achieved higher than average scores on the state tests of literacy and numeracy (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist 2003, p. 71). For Indigenous young people low levels of educational achievement translate into poor employment records, low income, reduced standards of health and higher levels of crime (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW DET 2004). These reports also note that investment in early intervention educational programs return up to $4-6 for every $1 invested (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW DET 2004).

The link between low socio-economic disadvantage and educational outcomes is demonstrated by ACOSS (2003) who note lower levels of literacy, lower school retention
rates and lower participation in higher education amongst the socio-economically disadvantaged. In relation to educational achievement, Indigenous students are roughly 19 months behind their non-Indigenous classmates on literacy levels in NSW Year 3 tests and absenteeism is twice as high amongst Indigenous students, and increasing in high school years (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW DET 2004).

Indigenous young people are more likely to live in poverty, to be of low birth weight, to have substantially worse health than other Australians, to experience hearing problem, to experience domestic violence and neglect and to have not accessed preschool services (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW DET 2004).

3.15.1 Indigenous funding programs

Commonwealth education funding for Indigenous students is allocated to schools for two separate programs. Each of these programs intends to redress the significant disadvantage of Indigenous students in access to and achievement in education. The two programs are the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) and the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance (IEDA) program. A Productivity Commission report notes that while funding under these programs has increased in recent years it remains small in its target to redress the disadvantage of Indigenous students, relative to mainstream educational funding (CGC 2001, p. 208). Additionally the funding does not increase the likelihood of Indigenous students enrolling or attending school more frequently and therefore does not meet unmet need. Reviews of the funding programs, while essentially positive, do not reflect the situation in all communities with local communities experiencing difficulties in obtaining and administering the funding (CGC 2001, pp. 208-10).

Rural/remote Indigenous students are among the most disadvantaged of all students in Australia (see for example HREOC 2000). As well as experiencing barriers to education such as cost and access, the education system itself appears a barrier. Students’ participation and achievement in education is further affected by their rural/remote location. Alloway et al. (2004) note that students in communities with a weak economy often view opportunities as existing outside rural communities and to be successful it is necessary to leave rural areas. Alloway et al (2004) also note the dangers of upholding stereotypical views of rurality and rural attitudes to education. These stereotypes include having lowered expectations of the academic capabilities and intelligence of young people and subsequently offering them limited opportunities in school and in access to future training, education and employment. Overall
students’ achievement in education is dependent upon their opportunity to participate.

3.16 Conclusion

This chapter has summarised what we know of educational access for rural and remote young people and has provided some background detail on drought. It appears that there is extensive rural educational disadvantage. What is not clear is which additional educational impacts result from the widespread drought. Repeatedly, research, policy position papers and Inquiries find the issues of rural/remote educational disadvantage to be high costs of, and limited access to, basic education, limited curricula, lack of experienced and specialised teachers, and the greater likelihood of early school leaving particularly for boys. Some impacts from these issues are fewer rural/remote young people entering tertiary education, higher youth unemployment and subsequently adult unemployment. It also results in young people leaving their homes to work or study in metropolitan areas and a denigration of the rights of rural/remote students to high quality accessible education.

It is more difficult to extract from the literature the complex interplay of factors that exacerbate rural/remote educational disadvantage. The addition of a long-term drought adds considerable complexity to this mix.

What is apparent, however, is that school funding programs do not meet the additional expenses associated with educating rural children because they are based on a metropolitan funding model. The financial implications of drought suggest additional disadvantage.

Personal and family income support via family allowance and youth allowance provides additional income to very low income earners. This does not make an impact on the socioeconomic disadvantage that results in children leaving school before Year 12. A substantially larger income is required to meet the additional expenses of schooling in rural and remote areas.

While some of the recommendations from the HREOC Inquiry, the NSW Public Education Inquiry and the Prime Minister’s Youth Task Force are being implemented and evaluated, these strategies are aimed at education specifically. The added effects of general rural economic downturn, restructuring and the additional factor of drought are not improving rural and remote educational outcomes.

Socioeconomic status and the cost of education are repeatedly identified as the reasons for early school leaving. Additional factors, such as drought, that increase costs of living or reduce family income and/or diminish a community’s social capital will have a significant impact on a student’s ability to remain at school and to transition effectively through to tertiary level.
The study, reported on in the following chapters, will fill a gap in the literature on rural educational disadvantage. Our visits to seven sites in rural and remote areas of Australia shed light on the impacts of drought and allow us to develop strategies to counteract the debilitating effects on our rural and remote young people.
4. Information from Key Informant Interviews

4.1 Key informant interviewees

Key informants were interviewed at length about the impacts of drought on secondary education access for students in rural and remote areas. These informants included government employees in DEST, State Government education departments and AFFA. They also included a representative/s of the National Farmers’ Federation, the Isolated Childrens’ Parents’ Association, the National Association for Rural Student Accommodation, Rural Education Forum Australia, School of the Air personnel, other schools of distance education, the Department of Transport and Regional Services (particularly the Area Consultative Committees), VISE, the national body representing P&Cs and other bodies identified by DEST and FRRR. These interviews were used to gauge issues relating to the implications of drought on educational access at the national level. A full list of key informants interviewed is provided in Appendix 2. The remainder of this chapter summarises the completed key informant interviews.

4.2 Introduction

Interviewees brought their own particular organisational and personal perspectives to the subject of drought impacts on educational access for rural and remote young people. However it is possible to draw a number of conclusions from the material presented.

The majority of interviewees agree it is difficult to separate the effects of drought from the ongoing processes of rural restructuring. However several draw out significant impacts of drought including:

- the financial impact for families – both property owners and workers which restricts education options;
- the movement of workers away from remote areas to access education for their children;
- different educational choices being taken up eg hostel accommodation closer to home rather than boarding school for some families;
- the high stress levels experienced by drought impacted families;
- the stress experienced by children impacts on their educational choices in relation to staying at school, continuing to higher education and/or course selection;
- the increased workloads undertaken by all family members including children;
where mothers and children are working on properties, this often impacts on time available for distance education lessons;

- the increasing difficulties faced by families in continuing their children’s education away from their communities;

- the adoption of strategies in remote areas such as off-farm work where one parent (usually the mother) moves to a regional centre to improve access to work and education;

- increased isolation of remote families as a result of high fuel costs, drought, low incomes and diminished access to community interaction resulting in children’s declining access to extra-curricular activities;

- the significant stresses on rural schools in relation to maintaining student numbers, teacher numbers and curriculum choices;

- the consolidation of properties into larger conglomerates has had an impact on educational access;

- educational access appears to have been reduced for rural and remote young people.

These impacts will be explored in more depth below and in the case study site visit reports. It is clear from the interviews however that education delivery, particularly to remote areas, rests on a number of underlying ‘taken for granted’ assumptions which several interviewees refer to and question including:

- that parents (overwhelmingly mothers) have the skills necessary to teach their children in remote areas with assistance from School of the Air / distance education;

- that education to rural and particularly remote areas is available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and adaptable (noted as problematic in the HREOC report of 2000);

- that parents have the asset base to provide education fees (an assumption that ignores the low incomes of many farming families and small businesses and the lack of asset base of families of agricultural workers in remote areas);

- that little accommodation is made for the education of special needs children in remote areas;

- that gaps in education delivery will be filled by parents and volunteer tutors;

- that secondary education access is assured.

Interviewees in direct contact with parents note that rural and remote parents value education for their children almost above all else and will do whatever they can to improve their children’s access to education. Nonetheless many felt their efforts are frustrated by a lack of funds, infrastructure and support particularly for remote families.

The remainder of this chapter outlines the detailed results from interviews.
4.3 Infrastructure

4.3.1 Australian Government programs funding Rural and Remote Education (refer to appendices in literature review for additional information)

4.3.1.1. Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme
The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme helps the families of primary, secondary and under 16 year old tertiary students who are unable to attend an appropriate government school on a daily basis because of geographic isolation. The Scheme has several allowances available. These are:

1. Basic Boarding Allowance of $6,000 per annum, which assists with the costs associated with children who board away from home to attend school;

2. Additional Boarding Allowance of $1,069 per annum, contributes to boarding costs. The allowance is means tested but families in receipt of Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment (ECRP) are exempted;

3. Second Home Allowance for parents who choose to set up a second home to allow their children to access education - $4,557;

4. Distance education allowance of $3,000 per annum for primary and secondary students studying via distance education; and

5. Pensioner Education Supplement of $62.40 per fortnight, for primary or ungraded level students, under 21, who are in receipt of certain pensions.

Guidelines apply in relation to access to the above allowances including that the distance between the principal family home and the nearest appropriate government school must be at least 56 kilometres and that the distance from the family home and the nearest available transport is at least 4.5 kilometres.

4.3.1.2 Non Government School Terms Hostel (NGSTH) Programme
The Non-Government School Terms Hostel (NGSTH) Programme is a new Programme introduced in 2005 to provide funding to non-government school term hostels that accommodate primary and secondary students from rural and remote areas. The NGSTH Programme will provide $2,500 per student per year directly to eligible non-government school term hostels. The objective of the Programme is to assist hostels to provide a high standard of care to rural primary and secondary students accommodated at the hostel, and to assist rural communities by providing affordable living away from home alternatives to boarding school and on-property distance education.

4.3.1.3 States – Country Area Program (CAP)
Additional funding to education authorities in all States and the Northern Territory also occurs under
the Country Areas Programme (CAP). These funds are provided in an endeavour to bridge the gap between metropolitan schools and more geographically isolated schools in their provision of education. Over the next four years $117 million will be distributed under this Programme. For 2005 and additional amount of $25,597,000 will be distributed. Funding is supplemented each year in line with movements in the Australian Government Schools Recurrent Costs (AGSRC) index. The way the Programme is managed is determined by the States and Territories.

States administer the CAP funding provided by the Australian Government to improve the educational access of rural and remote students. Interviews were conducted with an employee working under the New South Wales (NSW) CAP program to determine how states might spend their funding. NSW has 252 schools under the CAP program, two thirds of which are one or two teacher schools. It was noted that numbers of young people are declining in rural and remote areas but that young people are seeking greater subject choices. NSW Government Schools have adapted to this through the provision of subjects by distance education into isolated high schools. Another adaptation is the ‘clustering’ of groups of rural high schools to improve subject choices. The western access cluster which includes Condobolin High School is one example of this where schools combine expertise for greater subject choice and students from the cluster study via fax, video and distance education through the schools in the cluster. NSW is extending satellite delivery of education services into remote areas. An additional service provided under CAP funding is the running of camps for School of the Air children. The emphasis of this program is on educational delivery rather than the provision of welfare supports for isolated children.

In Queensland the program is referred to as Priority Country Area Program (PCAP). There are four PCAP regions in Queensland. One area coordinator whose region covered one-third of the state was interviewed about the program.

Queensland receives about $5 million under PCAP and just on $800,000 is allocated to the region based around Longreach. Despite its huge area, the region actually has the least number of students, covering just 38 schools, six of which are Catholic systemic schools. The region also caters for School of the Air students. Schools are eligible if they are 75 kms or more from a town with a population of more than 20 000. The majority of the schools covered by PCAP funding in this region are one teacher schools. Some of the schools are very small.

A lot of our schools have 5-18 students ... if it's feasible for students to go somewhere else ... if it's not viable they close it at around 5-8. Some of ours would hold longer because it's not feasible for them to travel – but eventually it will be uneconomical to keep
the whole school open with 2 or 3 students … they really have no alternative but to go onto distance education.

(Informant employed in the CAP)

The distribution of the PCAP funding in this region is done through a representative system. Sixteen local committees, comprising teachers and parents, represent the students in the area, and individual schools may make a submission to their local committee who allocate funds. There are also representative committees representing each of the four regions and a state level committee tasked with a more strategic planning focus.

The majority of funds are allocated to facilitate expanded educational opportunities for students. This may include excursions, specialist training, sports days, Arts camps etc. The funds may also be used to cover some of the additional costs associated with professional development opportunities for teachers in remote areas.

Of significance is that numbers of students served under this funding arrangement five years ago had been declining at the rate of 100 per year in the region covering Longreach. In the last year this figure has risen from 3000 to 3150 suggesting that there are now more young people studying in remote areas in the drought rather than being sent away to boarding school.

In the first part of the drought people could still afford to send their kids away and then as it become harder and harder they held their kids back.

(School of the Air Informant)

4.3.2 Distance Education

In Victoria the provision of education through the Distance Education Centre relies on accessing advanced technologies in pursuit of optimal education delivery. Currently the School serves 2500 students (1200 FTE or full time equivalent students) many of whom are students away travelling, elite athletes, postnatal young women, juvenile justice inmates or adults seeking qualifications. In Victoria, rural students are not the main cohort accessing this form of education.

Funding has been used to provide computers and web cams to host families on the proviso that students keep up with the school work program. Additionally a school based welfare person has been appointed to facilitate student management action plans. This program allows each student access to a support teacher who assesses the student’s progress. The Victorian Centre is also part of a Boys’ Education Lighthouse Programme. They also provide camps for isolated young people.

The Longreach School of the Air operates out of large premises on the outskirts of Longreach. It currently
serves 220 students across an area of 470,000 square kilometres, twice the size of Victoria and Tasmania combined. There are 28 teachers on staff (24 FTE). The school offers several programs including: a basic correspondence program; a digital program delivered via computer with teacher support and cluster days once a term in the local area and in-reach boarding at Longreach for a week at a time; and, home tutor support (usually the mothers) where workshops and training are provided on a regular basis. Teachers are allocated on a location and year group basis.

The School has two big days a year in Longreach – the swimming carnival and the athletics carnival days. The outreach days in the local areas allow the School to provide music, dance, drama, health, sport and PE. The mini schools at the Longreach facility also include an Art program and every second year there is a cultural camp. Years 1-5 have one mini-school per year, Years 6 and 7 have two camps and the secondary school students are also taken on an ‘away’ camp to a capital city. The school is allocated $20,000 CAP funding (called PCAP in Queensland) and most of this is used for transport costs to camps.

The school has a counsellor, as well as a strong representative Parents and Citizens’ Association (P&C). No school fees are charged. Meanwhile almost all of the students have access to satellite technology to facilitate their learning, a change from High Frequency (HF) radio. However they still have problems with video streaming. Student contact with their teacher includes half an hour a day on the telephone and a one on one session for 15 minutes per day. Years 6 and 7 are allocated an Internet chat room.

Most of the students studying through Longreach are in the prep to Year 7 classes with only 22 studying at secondary levels. It is acknowledged by most informants in this research project associated with children in remote areas that undertaking secondary education through some form of Distance Education is at best challenging and at worst impossible. Where students have no alternative, they are likely to drop out long before completing high school.

Numbers at Longreach have not changed significantly during this drought, unlike the 1994-5 drought when they dropped from 330 to 180. Since then numbers have stabilised to 220. The losses in the last drought are attributed to the complete devastation of the wool industry following the removal of the floor price and the rapid loss of people from the area.

Unlike the drought of 1994-5, when up to 50% of families had a paid home tutor (or governess), this time around only 7% have that service. There is more pressure on mothers to be a resident home tutor at the same time as she is juggling other responsibilities on the property. In response, Longreach has made a deliberate attempt to recruit women who are also mothers to their teaching staff in order to provide additional emotional support to mothers on
remote properties. The level of skills among the mothers varies from a very high level of skill to very limited. Where the school feels the task is beyond the home tutor they will make suggestions about other options including moving the children to a hostel or boarding facility or the mother moving to town with the children.

The worst case scenario is the mother tries to do an outside job as well as the teaching job. Some of them are just economically obliged to do that ... they will start early and do the school work in the morning and have the afternoon outside ... the bottom line is that these parents are prepared to do anything to give their kids a good education.

(School of the Air informant)

There is some concern that in their anxiety to keep everything going, mothers will sometimes complete the assignments for students.

The parent helps too much in their hurry to get the mustering done and they fill in the papers.

(School of the Air informant)

There is also some concern by informants working with remote children that students will ‘drop off the radar’ and that there are students in remote areas who are not undertaking education at all.

The experience of being a home tutor was commented on by another of our interviewees who had educated her four children at home for sixteen years.

There are days when you don't want to do anything ... but it is better than housework! ... I became aware that it was the best education you could get at the time. ... it gave you freedom in the sense that you went on holidays when we wanted to ... and when it suited the work practices of the place you could go because you weren't committed to school at home. We didn't have to get to school buses or anything ... and you had all that freedom to do things as a family ... we could go mustering and then school after.

Nonetheless there are significant negatives.

You weren't sure if you were doing the best for them ... I was lucky that my husband supported us 100%. I know some of the home tutors who had to be on demand to go out [on the property]. I was lucky, education came first and we worked around that.

A young person completing her university degree, who had studied all her primary education by distance at home before going away to boarding school notes:

I loved it – I’m very biased, I think it was the best education. But I’m glad we didn’t do secondary at home as well ... for friendship skills it was good going to boarding school ... it gives you a lot more
independence. ... but I don’t think I could do what Mum did for 16 years – I would find it frustrating.

4.3.3 Hostels

According to one of our informants, approximately 90 rural student hostels and residential colleges are available for rural and remote students across Australia, with some being run by governments and many smaller ones by shire councils, churches or parent groups. These hostels allow students who need to live away from home greater access to education, usually at a local high school. They are cheaper than boarding schools, providing accommodation, but also much needed social interaction with peers. Hostels are run by house parents. Most, if not all hostels are members of the National Association for Rural Students’ Accommodation (NARSA). NARSA provides training for house parents in legal procedures, health and safety and relevant policies and procedures. Essentially NARSA was established to provide support to hostels.

Up to ten hostels have closed over the last five years, in many cases because of falling numbers of students living at the hostels in close proximity to the school they are attending. For example in NSW it was noted that numbers are falling in Dubbo, Cobar, Hay and Wagga but are stable in Broken Hill. Other reasons for closure include a failure to meet legal requirements. Yet one informant reported that there are also waiting lists in Charleville and in several Western Australian hostels.

Informants note that numbers are falling in some hostels because of fewer children on properties or because parents are bypassing the local high schools in favour of regional or capital city schools. In Queensland many large corporate properties are run by single workers rather than as family concerns resulting in fewer children needing this service.

Most hostels charge the equivalent of the basic boarding allowance - $6000. One informant fears that hostels may be required to charge up to $2000 over the allowance for equity reasons as urban students must pay some educational costs. Some hostel personnel are concerned this will make it unaffordable for their families.

Twenty-five of NARSA’s hostels are Indigenous hostels. Traditionally hostels find it very difficult to retain Indigenous students in education and most drop out before they have completed senior high school. An identified anomaly exists whereby students at Indigenous colleges receive significant funding for clothing etc., however Indigenous students attending a mainstream hostel are not eligible for the same funding. It was noted that these students can be a drain on hostel resources because of the need to provide clothing etc out of existing resources. It was suggested that this anomaly needs to be addressed.

Many students move from the hostels to boarding school in later years.
Informants note that girls are more likely to complete their schooling than boys.

Traditionally hostels were established by a parent or group of parents anxious to provide accommodation for their children. The result is that many hostel staff are untrained, hence NARSA’s attempt to provide basic training and support. NARSA has no funding from any external body and is reliant on the goodwill of the people running the organisation.

The greatest need is for funding to provide additional facilities. The introduction of the Commonwealth Government Hostel Programme funding of $2500 per student will assist hostels to provide more than basic accommodation. For example this funding will allow provision of computers and other equipment. There is, however, concern by informants associated with hostels about the costs of legal requirements which have resulted in some closures.

4.3.4 Volunteers for Isolated Students’ Education (VISE)

VISE is a national program providing volunteer tutors for students studying by distance education in isolated areas of Australia. It is a national organisation with a dispersed organisational structure - the CEO lives in Canberra, the recruitment officer in Melbourne, the president in Ballarat, the vice president in Gympie, the publicity officer and national coordinator in Melbourne. The organisation recruits retired teachers and other non-teachers (called angels) for service in remote areas. There are ten coordinators and 146 volunteers currently on the books and between 200 and 250 placements each year. Tutors must provide a working with children criminal records police check to ensure they are suitable to work with children.

Coordinators match requests from parents with availability of volunteers. Tutors stay on properties as part of the family for periods of between six to ten weeks. Requests for a tutor must come from parents and the period of time is determined by parents. Often parents will seek tutors during a particularly busy time on the property such as mustering time, or because the child has a particular learning problem that the parent wants assistance with. Many families have the same tutor return each year, establishing a rich and enduring relationship. The volunteers are not paid but receive room and board from families. Parents are required to pay travel costs. However in recent times some families have struggled to find the funds for this. The Rural Education Fund of FRRR and the Airways Trust have provided additional support. Families highly value the VISE tutors support.

The vast majority worship the VISE tutors.

(Informant associated with VISE program)
Informants note that most remote distance students are primary students. Parents use AIC funds and work hard to send their young people away for their high school years not only for the education but also for the socialisation with peers.

One informant reports that many parents feel they do not have adequate education to support their children’s distance education program. The VISE tutors provide much needed support to these families. The importance of the VISE tutors is acknowledged by the Distance Education providers – ‘VISE is fantastic’.

It is also suggested by informants that financial difficulties have increased as a result of drought and that this is making it more difficult for families to support their young people away from home. Those who continue their high school education by distance education are far more likely to drop out. Enormous discipline is required of children and families to allow a successful education via distance education.

Families are under significant financial stress as a result of drought. Additionally properties are being amalgamated and bought up by companies, often leading to families moving away. There has been a noticeable decrease in population from remote areas. Despite the restructuring and financial stress, it was noted that families place high value on education.

\[ \text{The ones that develop the study skills and discipline themselves to put in the time do very well. But you've got quite a percentage who don't discipline themselves.} \]

\( \text{(VISE informant)} \)

4.3.5 Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association (ICPA)

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary national parent body dedicated to ensuring that all geographically isolated students have equality in terms of access to an appropriate education with other students. The Association has over 3,300 member families, residing in the more remote parts of Australia, focused on educating their children and ensuring the provision of services required to achieve this. Membership includes a cross section of Australia’s rural and remote population and includes fishermen, miners, itinerant employees, farmers, pastoralists and small business owners. Further details on this organisation are included on their website at http://www.icpa.com.au/about.asp.

The state president of the Queensland branch of the ICPA was one of those interviewed for this research. The Queensland Branch has 1,400 families and represents children studying by distance education as well as those in small schools and towns. The ICPA has lobbied hard for the rights of isolated children to excellence in education and has significant success in achieving their aims. Nonetheless –
...you feel at times a forgotten group.

(ICPA informant)

There is a feeling that the AIC tuition funding is not keeping up with the costs of boarding. Many schools in Queensland charge over $12000 (tuition and boarding) and this represents a significant cost over and above government allowances. For families with more than one child these costs are prohibitive.

In-home child care and safety issues for children in vehicles and on motorbikes, were also raised as areas of concern by ICPA informants.

4.4 Separating drought impacts from ongoing rural and regional restructuring

Several interviewees note the difficulties associated with separating the impacts of drought from ongoing rural and regional restructuring. The following section concentrates firstly on restructuring issues noted by interviewees which impact in a negative way on rural and remote young people’s access to education. Secondly, it separates drought impacts nominated by interviewees that either exacerbate restructuring or are unique to the drought crisis.

4.4.1 Rural and Regional Restructuring

4.4.1.1 General community decline

Those interviewees with an ongoing role in rural and regional communities note that rural areas have been experiencing population out-migration, particularly of young people; the aging of rural population; a decline in service infrastructure; and loss of jobs. The agricultural sector has also been characterised by the combination of smaller farms into larger units, resulting in the growth of absentee landlords, a drift away of families and workers and the consequent roll-on effects to communities. These include a loss of incomes spent in towns, a decline in student numbers in the schools and a general reduction in community engagement. Numbers of children in the remote schools in Queensland, for example, have been declining for several years suggesting significant rural restructuring.

4.4.1.2 Farm families / absentee landlords / blue collar workers

The researchers note from discussions with key informants that there are particular distinctions between the experiences of farm family children, the children of farm and other workers, and Indigenous children.

Farm families now run farms and properties with reduced, or no, hired workers, relying instead on family members for labour. This trend has resulted in population loss. There are implications for educational access of the need for women and children
to work on properties. For example distance education is premised on the assumption that one parent (usually the mother) is available to supervise lessons and that children devote several hours a day to their studies. Farms which are now run utilising family labour negate these assumptions as all are busy with the various and complex tasks associated with running a business. Unlike the farm families who may have lived on these properties previously, the workers who run the larger properties do not have the asset base to support sending their young people away to boarding schools even in normal times. This has resulted in serious educational disadvantage for these young people. There is anecdotal evidence that children may leave school to work on the properties, or the family may relocate to a larger centre for educational reasons. As one interviewee commented:

The squattocracy is gone – what we have are blue collar workers.

This question of educational access for young people whose parents cannot afford to send them away to boarding school raises the issue of the responsibility of the State Governments. One informant argued that parents can be fined for not sending their young people to school – ‘so where’s the school?’ This informant noted it was only a matter of time before this matter is tested legally. In the meantime the same informant felt that State Governments are not meeting their obligations to educate children in remote areas.

4.4.1.3 Educational profile and resources

Informants note that, in comparison to the past, more young people in rural and remote Australia are now going on to complete Year 12, a trend backed up by national statistics. However the Year 12 completion rates are still lower for rural and remote students than they are for urban students. Young people on isolated properties have traditionally completed their primary years by distance education before completing their high school education at boarding school. Some young people access education through the cheaper option of moving to hostels in regional centres and going to the local high school. However it was noted that several, particularly church run, hostels have been closed in recent times reducing this option.

There are fewer students now in all areas of rural and remote Australia. It was suggested, rather dramatically by one informant, for instance, that no new schools are being built west of the mountains in NSW. Furthermore, despite the rise in AIC funds, this does not constitute a significant increase in overall cost to government because of the declining numbers. While it was perceived by informants that governments are reluctant to close schools, there has been a loss of small schools. One interviewee suggests that the school is the last remaining
evidence of government presence in small towns and its loss will be resisted and keenly felt if lost. The reduction in the number of young people also has implications for school bus runs. Informants note that educational access has been restricted by the loss of unviable services.

4.4.1.4 Information Technology (IT) options

While those interviewed report that there are fewer young people in rural areas, they also argue that these young people want greater choices in their selection of subjects etc. This has led to various strategies being adopted including the ‘clustering’ option adopted by groups of high schools working together, combining their senior students into one cohort, thus allowing greater subject choice. These young people study through various distance education strategies to the feeder high schools in the cluster. Several interviewees note that IT options offer an opportunity to improve the experiences of rural and remote students and that their use should be vigorously extended. However there were several who caution that this should not replace existing services. As one wryly notes:

*Computers won’t play in your football team or marry your son or daughter.*

Also highlighted by several informants is the problematic IT access in rural and remote areas that impacts significantly on educational access. Many areas do not have broadband access and download speeds are slow. Others did suggest however that recent provisions had improved access greatly.

4.4.1.5 Valuing of education

Several interviewees want to make absolutely clear that parents value education for their children almost above everything else. This point is made to ensure that policy is not devised on an assumption that rural and remote people do not place high value on education. Rather it was made clear time and time again to the researchers that rural and remote people value education so highly they will reduce all other expenditure, relocate, take extra work etc in order to ensure education for their children.

4.4.1.6 Indigenous issues

Respondents note the significant disadvantage suffered by Indigenous young people in relation to education. Indigenous young people are less likely to go away for their education and hence must rely on local options. One respondent reports that Indigenous hostels provided in some areas do allow greater access, however there are issues associated with continuity for young people. The example given was a death in the community leading to many young people not returning for the start of the school year. It was also noted that Indigenous students going to an Indigenous college attract significant government funding. However Indigenous students going to a mainstream facility are not provided
with the same funding and that this has resulted in a significant drain on hostel resources.

Young Indigenous people have significantly lower high school retention and Year 12 completion rates and one respondent argues that education may not be valued as highly because of the lack of jobs and clear career paths for Indigenous young people.

Given these ongoing rural restructuring issues, isolating the impacts of drought on educational access for rural and remote young people may appear problematic. In fact it is clear from our interviewees that there are significant and readily recognisable impacts.

### 4.4.2 Impacts of drought on education access

#### 4.4.2.1 Financial

The loss of several billion dollars from the GDP as a result of drought has had a significant impact on all sectors (Botterill & Fisher 2003). Particularly affected are rural communities dependent on agriculture and the small businesses in these communities. It was noted that these businesses have not had access to the types of support offered to farm families as a result of Exceptional Circumstances (EC) legislation. It was pointed out that the financial impacts cannot fail to have an effect on education access for young people in farm families, on properties and in rural and remote communities.

**Farm families**

For farm families the most identified impact is the financial pressure as a result of the drought. Many families have been assessed as ineligible for EC funding because of strict guidelines around off-farm work and assets. This factor limits the ability of families to purchase education services and therefore limits choice. It was argued that there is no discretionary income to allow families to enhance educational choices. Rural and remote families are under significant financial stress, having little or no income, reduced equity and rising levels of debt as a result of drought. It was evident to informants that families will do without most things and live in poverty in order to keep their young people at school. However it was also noted that bank managers are less than sympathetic about lending money for education.

Unlike the 1990s there is a feeling amongst informants that there is less extreme poverty this drought because of the continued high price of cattle and the rise in the value of properties.

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In the nineties I had no shortage of people who were basically starving, whereas this time around the social support agencies are there and working effectively and some of the cash payments ... are stopping people from hitting the poverty line. ... back in '96 families were 28 times more likely to contact the school for support ... this time
around there are lots of other agencies that are working closely with families.

(Remote area informant)

Others feel that families are struggling and living in poverty.

Some of these families are coping on next to nothing ... properties are coping with less staff ... some of these families are basically subsistence. ... how do we help the ones who need the money so the kids don't have to work on the property? And they need money to send the kids to high school and uni.

(Remote area informant)

Small business

Small businesses in rural and remote areas face particular financial stresses and have no access to EC support. Businesses are carrying significant amounts of debt and are struggling to keep staff employed during the drought because people are not spending. Worried that staff will leave town if they are laid off, many retain their services long after it is a viable proposition. These efforts necessarily have an impact on the ability of small business owners to support their young people in education.

Effects on education

The costs of education for rural and remote families are high, particularly for those families where boarding school is the only option. Interviewees noted that families have adopted various strategies including seeking the waiving of boarding school fees, withdrawing their young people from boarding school, moving them from private to public options where available, bringing them back to hostels, one or both parents relocating with the children, or having them study by distance education on properties when no other alternative is available. It was noted that the likelihood of retention of young people studying by distance is significantly reduced. One person notes that she had observed tensions in families where older siblings had had the advantage of boarding school education not now available to younger siblings.

One interviewee suggests that this drought and resulting economic stress coincided with the closure of several hostels further reducing choices. Meanwhile those that are available, such as the Charleville hostel and several in Western Australia, have a significant waiting list, resulting in many young people who have been withdrawn from boarding school having to study by distance and in isolation on properties. As one noted:

I don't know how these kids will be educated

Several interviewees feel that the lack of income is restricting the ability of young people to stay at school. One notes that the financial difficulties in the Central Murray area have seen high school retention rates declining.
The problem is not limited to secondary school students with several reporting the impact on young people away at university. Because of the difficulties associated with young people accessing Youth Allowance at university, it was noted that many families are no longer able to support their young people at university. The result for the young person is either to withdraw from their course, take on extra work in an attempt to support themselves (resulting in problems with keeping up grades) or take time away from their studies to work full-time in order to try and qualify for independent status. Each of these options represents a particular disadvantage suffered by rural and remote students trying to access higher education. One parent reported they couldn’t understand why young people who had been eligible for AIC allowances were not automatically eligible for Youth Allowance for university study.

4.4.2.2 Emotional pressure

Almost all interviewees commented on the stress farm families face in dealing with the drought. The rise in male suicides and the stress on family members, particularly the male partner, were highlighted with comments such as ‘everyone is down’ and the ‘drought has sapped morale’. It was noted that young people are also feeling the effects of this malaise and picking up on the stress in their family, and this is impacting on their studies and educational choices. The pressure on mothers was also raised as a point of concern, particularly when mothers are expected to act as home tutors. Prior to the drought in the 1990s, up to 50% of School of the Air families had governesses. This is now down to about 7% and mothers are carrying the burden. Skill levels vary from highly skilled professional women to those who have had very limited education themselves.

It was also suggested that the cost of getting young people to TAFE courses was impacting on young people’s ability to take up apprenticeship courses and other TAFE options.

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I couldn’t understand why in the situation we were in that we weren’t eligible for assistance to keep a child at university ...we can do it but it means we haven’t had a holiday or anything and the same curtains are in the lounge room 25 years later ...

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If the mother has to take on the emotional baggage of a husband who is worried about the drought, as well as teach the kids and worry about whether or not she is doing the right thing or the wrong thing by the kids and living in the bush and doing distance education – if she falls over, it all falls over.

The emotional pressure on children was also highlighted as an area of concern:
The ones that have gone away … their parents are making all sorts of sacrifices to keep them there, the kids are feeling guilty … that they are a burden on their parents.

At uni I have friends who are going home because of financial reasons … they are fully independent but they feel obligated to go home as their parents are struggling and it’s hard to pay workers to do the work so they feel they should go home … and the kids think they shouldn’t be out doing this other stuff, they should be at home helping.

When kids are at boarding school and things aren’t going well at home kids worry.

4.4.2.3 Increased workloads

A significant drought impact noted by many is the increased workload on all family members. Fathers are working long hours on farms, mothers are working additional hours both on farm and off seeking income generating activity and young people are being drawn into work on farms. This additional work has implications for distance education students, with mothers and young people not available for the hours required to adequately address lessons. As one noted:

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The mother is usually the teacher. She often has to work outside carting water, feeding stock, hand feeding poddies, checking dams etc. She then has to teach the children as well as normal household duties. Some families have had to take their stock on the road, and if the family goes too, it’s extra hard for the students to keep up with their work. If the father is away droving then the rest of the family have all the rest of the extra work to do running the property.

An additional consequence of the increased workload is that it means people are not as available to undertake community work, leaving community groups and organisations faltering or moribund.

It was reported that one drought strategy adopted by many families is involuntary separation, where one partner, usually the woman, moves to a regional centre for employment. Some take their children and enrol them in local schools. Others leave them on the properties with the husband supervising distance education lessons and juggling farm work.

Another consequence of women’s work load is that they are not as available to visit their young people in boarding school or to attend school functions.

In general it was noted that families are less able to leave the properties because of the time factor, the need to feed and water stock, and the additional cost of being away. It was also reported that this extends to parents inability to get children to appointments such as speech pathology etc.
4.4.2.4 Children working

Several interviewees having critical interactions with young people on rural and remote properties report young people shouldering significant workloads. With the loss of hired labour, the possibility that their mother or father is away working, and the increased workload a drought brings, young people are being called on, and offer their services, to do considerable amounts of work. This has a significant impact on their studies, particularly for the distance education students who often fall behind with their assignments.

Another notes that the young people at boarding school and university ‘work to the point of exhaustion’ when they are home on school holidays. Several also extend their holidays, delaying their return to their studies, or for some university students, deferring indefinitely, to provide additional help on the property.

Most children on properties work outside, often for long hours, which leaves them with little time for school during drought.

When I was teaching there ... the kids were made to help outside ... the kids need to be on hand to work... the impact of the drought is all hands on deck ... I had to fight to keep the kids in class.

An additional impact is that many remote young people are not attending the camps provided for distance education students to socialise with peers. Yet this person also notes that those that do attend spend time discussing with peers their stress at being away from the property and their need to be at home helping their parents with the work.

4.4.2.5 Changing educational expectations

Interviewees report that there is evidence young people are being held back from boarding school either entirely or until Year 9 or 10. In many cases this necessitates undertaking secondary education by distance.

Several interviewees note that the lengthy drought has gradually eroded educational expectations, particularly in the minds of young people. Interviewees describe young people as astute, able to read the signs of stress and reacting to reduce the financial strains by opting out of education despite their own aspirations. For example boys, who it was felt still hold very traditional views of occupational choices, will leave school and take up apprenticeship or traineeship opportunities in the area. This is an option for boys not available to girls because of the traditional nature of occupational segregation in rural areas. Rural young people are also likely to choose to go away for work opportunities and to delay their entry to university until they qualify for independent status potentially jeopardising their access to university study altogether. One interviewee notes this as a particular rural disadvantage because urban young people can continue Pursuing their
educational aspirations by living at home while studying:

Our students have expenses going to uni – not only do they have HECS, but they have to travel away from home and that is a disincentive – rural workers aren’t paid terribly well ...

Another interviewee suggests that young people away at university are stressed at the drain on family resources their study represents. One notes:

Bush kids are very, very socially aware. Kids know these things [if parents are stressed, fighting etc]. They’re making the calls themselves. They have maturity way beyond their years. They slot themselves into something that is less resource demanding on their parents.

Another reports that this generation of rural and remote young people have significantly different expectations to previous generations. They are now far less likely to see a future in agriculture and see the need to drift to the city for work and education.

4.4.2.6 Educational resources

Researchers determined from discussions with informants that young people from rural and remote areas are having difficulty purchasing books and equipment necessary for their studies. Further it was noted that extra-curricular activities such as excursions are being reduced by schools to ‘what is really necessary’ because of the financial costs associated and the problems families face trying to pay for these.

Additionally it was noted that the rise in the price of fuel is seriously limiting the capacity of families to facilitate extra-curricular activities like sport and reducing parents’ ability to visit their young people at boarding school.

4.4.2.7 Impact on schools

Schools themselves are suffering impacts of drought. As people move away looking for work, and student numbers drop, some schools may lose teachers. This has an impact on subject choices available to remaining students.

Informants note that boarding schools, particularly those in regional areas, cannot continue to subsidise drought affected students without compromising the viability of the school. Many schools can no longer absorb the costs associated with the drought. Nonetheless boarding schools have worked hard to accommodate these children –

... there are schools that will not turn children away...they have been very tolerant and very considerate of the needs of these children.

The issue of bypassing in Queensland was raised as one that has divided communities. This policy allows parents who are in or near a town to claim AIC funding to send their children away to boarding school under
The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas

the following conditions: if the local school has less than 25 students in Years 11 and 12; and the full range of subject offerings are not available. The potential introduction of bypassing in Blackall has caused serious concern amongst those worried about the ongoing viability of maintaining the senior high school.

4.4.2.8 Pressure on services
It was also noted that the drought had placed significant pressures on services such as rural financial counsellors and on teachers to manage the family problems including educational access issues. These issues are often outside the professional capacity and training of these workers.

4.4.2.9 Valuing education
The view that education is a right was expressed by more than one interviewee:

\[\text{Education is a basic right and it shouldn't rely on a parent's ability to fund it.}\]

It was reiterated by many interviewees that rural and remote families value education highly and will try, to the limits of their capacity, to allow their young people to remain in education.

\[\text{Mortgaging the farm for the future of the children often means that there will never be a future for them back on the land – the viability of the agricultural business will be gone – eaten up by debt}\]

and drought. For many families the choice will be the dreams of one generation or the other – not both.

(Remote area informant)

4.5 Drought Taskforce findings

Included here is a summary of issues raised in the drought taskforce hearings as relayed by one of our interviewees. These are listed separately and illustrate that educational impacts have been long standing.

The Drought Taskforce conducted its work in 2003 taking submissions and holding public meetings across the country. The taskforce was made aware of drought impacts and policy implications for educational access for young people. Impacts included families being unable to provide financial support to students in their boarding facilities, both secondary and university, and having to withdraw them. While no dimension could be given to these phenomena, a taskforce meeting in Charleville was filled with parents who had had to withdraw children from boarding school. Although the school (in this case in Toowoomba) had tried to carry the families, they had not been able to continue this practice without threatening the viability of the school.

Regarding the hostel in Charleville, the taskforce was told that the numbers of children being brought back from
boarding school and needing hostel accommodation in Charleville had overwhelmed the hostel's capacity. The only remaining option was distance education for many of these children. The taskforce raised this matter in a letter to the Federal and State Ministers because they felt not only that the children’s educational access was compromised but also their socialisation experiences.

In Western Australia the taskforce was alerted to the practice of families setting up a second home in order that their young people could access education. Fathers became ‘fly-in fly-out farmers’. The acquisition of second homes to facilitate educational access had ruled these families out of benefits under EC.

A twist on the fly-in fly-out situation was picked up in one WA town where service providers, including the school principal and the police sergeant, were commuting from the city in order to ensure their children could access higher education, the cost of boarding school fees being prohibitive.

The drought has accelerated the involuntary separation of families because of the need to access income producing jobs and education. The emphasis that families place on education as the highest priority for disposable income meant that families were living in poverty in order to keep their young in education. The young people involved were reported to be feeling guilty and stressed not only because of the pressure this is placing on their families, but also because they were not available to help with work on the farm.

Access to Youth Allowance as a result of EC is valued by families. However the taskforce noted the inequity of other small business families not having the same access.

The taskforce noted that Indigenous families have suffered unemployment as a result of drought. While white employees are likely to leave town seeking work elsewhere, Indigenous families are less likely to leave. The ability of young people in these families to participate in education is constrained in these circumstances by financial impacts but also by the loss of services and loss of teachers and capacity at the schools. Subject choices are reduced in these circumstances.

The taskforce was also informed that the AIC subsidy was insufficient for the cost associated with boarding school fees and expenses. (It is noted earlier in this report that this was increased from $4,446 in 2004 to $6000 in 2005).

The taskforce was also informed that young people going to university from rural and remote areas are expected to work long hours to support themselves and that this factor significantly reduces their ability to pass their course and their likelihood of remaining at university.

The taskforce noted the need for financial support for rural and remote young people seeking education at high school and university.
4.6 Summary

It is clear that interviewees feel that drought has had significant impacts on rural and remote young people’s access to education. While rural restructuring has been ongoing for several years, the drought has exacerbated conditions of access, placing critical barriers including financial stress on families. In addition, in many families, all family members work long hours in difficult conditions. As a result many young people are withdrawing from, or delaying access to, their studies. Yet families value education highly, particularly because of the lack of employment options in rural areas and the drought has had serious and corroding impacts on the access of rural and remote young people to education.
5. Summary of Case Sites

NSW Sites
5.1 Cootamundra

5.1.1 About Cootamundra
The Cootamundra Shire covers an area of 1522.48 sq km. The main regional centre in the Cootamundra Shire is Cootamundra which is a regional town situated 375 km south west of Sydney. The area has a mixed farming agricultural base. It also has a canola processing plant, a freight company and a furniture factory.

5.1.2 Cootamundra Shire Demographics
In 2001, Cootamundra Shire had a population of 7,132 (3,431 males and 3,701 females). This represents a decline in population of 4.4% since the 1996 census and 10.7% since the 1991 census. The decrease was mostly due to falling numbers of residents aged 20-34. This was offset however by an increase of 22% since 1996 (43% since 1991) in those aged 70+.

Agriculture has remained the largest employer in the Cootamundra Shire since 1991. Other large industries include health and community services, retail and manufacturing.

5.1.3 Information for this research gathered from:
- young people at Cootamundra High School, Sacred Heart Catholic School, TAFE;
- principals, teachers and career advisers at various local schools and TAFE;
- the Mayor and other significant community members;
- welfare service providers;
- Job Network providers;
- Country Womens’ Association
- Business group; and
- Rural Financial Counsellor.

5.1.4 Drought history
Cootamundra is considered a ‘safe’ farming area by comparison with all other areas studied for this report. Many properties have been in the same families for generations and community representatives noted the area is traditionally wealthy. The drought has been evident in the area since 2000 although there have been periods of productivity during the ensuing years.

The area is covered by the NE Riverina Rural Financial Counselling Services. This service covers a much broader area than Cootamundra. Nonetheless

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3 Information derived from the Riverina Regional Development Board Riverina Regional Profile Cootamundra prepared by the Western Research Institute (http://www.rrdb.com.au/rivprofile/cootamundra.htm) and community representatives.

4 Information derived from ABS Census data for 2001 and the Riverina Regional Development Board (Riverina Regional Profile Cootamundra) prepared by the Western Research Institute (http://www.rrdb.com.au/rivprofile/cootamundra.htm)
its numbers have risen from 120 to 300 in recent years. Informants suggest that the impact of the drought was delayed in Cootamundra. In terms of EC areas Cootamundra comes under the Gundagai and Wagga divisions.

5.1.5 Summary of significant rural restructuring in Cootamundra
In recent years Cootamundra has lost most of its public service offices and the jobs that go with them. This has resulted in the loss of secure income into the community, a loss of infrastructure and the loss of entry level public service positions for young people. The significant decline in professional jobs and the diminution of a previously well-established ‘professional’ class has also resulted in a loss of community leaders and a loss of talented young people in the high schools. The drought has been overlaid on this already significant restructuring.

Several large employers have closed down eg Shepherds’ Woolskins and the Harden Abattoirs, leading to a significant loss of employment. This, and the loss of retail positions in the town, appears related to the drought. Cootamundra is experiencing an inflow of retirees who are selling elsewhere and buying houses in Cootamundra. This is contributing to high housing prices and to a mini-building boom with resulting additional employment in the building industry. It is also adding to the aging of the population.

5.1.6 Drought impacts
A loss of farm income is the most significant drought impact in Cootamundra. This coupled with low commodity prices and laying off of farm labour has resulted in high work loads on farms, additional off-farm work, particularly amongst women, increased stress and uncertainty about the future. An erosion of business confidence is evident in the area and was noted by several local key informants. This has resulted in noticeable impacts on businesses dealing in rural industry and product. The influx of retirees does shelter some businesses not reliant on agriculture.

A decrease in employment opportunities is evident particularly in the area of farm labour, shearing and other agricultural positions. A loss of employment is also evident in the closure of significant employers such as Shepherds Woolskins and the Harden Abattoir.

An erosion of well-being is also evident, and is particularly referred to by young people.

5.1.7 Impacts on educational access
There is a strong tradition of particularly farm children attending boarding schools for at least part
of their high school years. Some young people are not being sent away to boarding schools as a result of drought, although this is not a significant trend.

There has been a decline in the numbers of local students completing Year 12 although this may also be impacted by some increase in employment in the building industry. Access to TAFE courses is made more difficult by availability of courses, travel requirements and cost.

The most significant impact on educational access appears to be the transition period from Year 12 to tertiary study. Because of the guidelines governing access to Youth Allowance, many young people are ineligible due to the means testing of their parents’ income. Many families are asset rich, income poor, and their young people do not qualify for Youth Allowance. There are reports of young people not going to university, not doing the course of their choice for financial reasons, trying to support themselves whilst studying, or delaying their study so they can try and qualify for independent status and hence earn Youth Allowance in their own right. Our interviews reveal that many young people in Cootamundra are significantly disadvantaged by their inability to access Youth Allowance.

5.1.8 Summary of educational institutions in Cootamundra
Cootamundra has the following educational providers:

- 2 primary schools,
- two high schools –
  - Cootamundra High School has 420 students. It has lost up to 100 over the last decade;
  - Sacred Heart High School (Kindergarten to Year 10 only) has 355 students, with 156 of these being in the high school, up from 83 over the last five years;
- a local TAFE college providing a range of courses including Business Administration, IT, enrolled nursing, some engineering, and Year 10 and Year 12 equivalents. There is also a TAFE nearby at Young and the main Riverina campus is at Wagga Wagga, an hour away. Up to 600 students study (usually) part-time at Cootamundra in a year.

5.1.9. Additional educational providers servicing Cootamundra residents
- Hennessy Catholic Senior High School is nearby at Young and a bus travels from Cootamundra each day.
- Some girls are weekly boarders at a Catholic High School in Wagga Wagga.
- Many young people from the district attend boarding schools in Sydney, Canberra, Goulburn and Wagga.
- Most students attending university do so in Wagga, Sydney, Canberra and Wollongong.
5.2. Balranald

5.2.1 About Balranald

The Balranald Shire covers 21,719 sq. km and includes the towns of Balranald (population 1,419), Euston (459) and Kyalite (150) as well as a vast outback area that takes in Oxley, Hatfield and Clare. The town of Balranald is located on the NSW side of the border on the Murrumbidgee River, 440 kms north-west of Melbourne and 160 kilometres from Mildura. The closest large centre, Swan Hill, is located 100 km south and has a population of 10,000. The Murrumbidgee, Wakool and Murray rivers all pass through Balranald Shire. The area has a diverse agricultural and pastoral base. Viticulture and horticulture and an expanding tourism industry supplement the traditional activities of wool, beef, wheat, fruit and timber.

5.2.2 Demographics

In 2001, Balranald Shire had a population of 2,770 people (1,515 males and 1,255 females). This represents a decrease in population of 6.5% since 1996 and 8.6% since 1991. Although there were significant population increases in the 40-49 year old age groups (30-40% increases in these groups), this was more than offset by the decreases in excess of 28% for each age group from 15-29 and a decrease of 25% of 30-34 year olds.

The Indigenous population in Balranald in 2001 numbered 171, evenly distributed between males and

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6 Information derived from ABS Census data for 2001.
females and representing 6.2% of the population. Although this is a slight decrease on the 1996 figure, it is a 50% increase on the 1991 recorded population.

Agriculture is by far the largest employer of both males and females in the Balranald Shire employing 37% of those employed (providing 45% of male employment and 25% of employment for females).

5.2.3 Information for this research gathered from:
- Young people at Balranald Central School
- Teachers, parents, principle and careers adviser at Balranald Central School
- Isolated parents in ICPA
- The Mayor and other significant community members
- The economic development officer
- Welfare service providers
- Job Network provider
- Small business operators
- Indigenous residents
- The Rural Financial Counsellor who covers the area

5.2.4 Drought history
The drought has been a feature of Balranald’s landscape for several years. Most people note that 2000 was a good year and this leads some people to suggest the drought has been five years in duration. However there are several engaged in agriculture who will note that the drought has been ongoing for 10-13 years. This period would encompass the period back to the last major Australian drought of 1994-5. For many there has not been much joy in the intervening period.

5.2.5 Rural Restructuring
Balranald and its surrounds are a very dry arid area particularly as one heads north and west of the small community. However in recent years there has been an increase in irrigation along the river country and
production here includes viticulture and horticulture. The Balranald area has been heavily dependent on wool production and so has been significantly impacted by the downturn in the wool industry. There has also traditionally been a significant industry related to kangaroo culling which has been affected by drought. Many workers, including ‘roo shooters, are reliant for income on wood cutting in the surrounding forests during the drought.

The population of the township has remained stable over several decades, remaining at around 1300 (approximately 47% of population of the shire). Despite this, there has been significant restructuring in the farming area since at least the early 1990s resulting in production areas getting bigger as small farms are bought up and amalgamated. This has led to a loss of population on properties in the sparse areas away from the township as fewer families populate these areas. Many larger farms are now owned by absentee landlords and are reliant on managers, usually young single men. The loss of population has had a number of social impacts, the most visible being the closure of small schools such as the one at Hatfield and the number of farm houses that stand empty.

5.2.6 Drought impacts
The most evident drought impact is the loss of income in the community affecting farm families and the local businesses dependent on them. Drought has had a significant impact for a long period of time on the workload of farm families. Families report they have had to feed stock and cart water for a long period of time resulting in pressures of work and stress related symptoms. Respondents report being very tired, a symptom corroborated by the financial counsellor and other welfare providers. There is a feeling in the community that many of the aging farm families will leave agriculture once the drought breaks. The drought appears to have accelerated the process of
restructuring as more farms are amalgamated and families leave the community.

There is very little employment available in the town, and very few apprenticeships or traineeships for young people. The kangaroo works had closed down at the time of our visit and work for ‘roo shooters has diminished.

It is noticeable that drought is not a topic of conversation because it has become so entrenched in life experience. People have become worn down by drought, both emotionally and financially and this has had devastating consequences.

Social problems have overwhelmed the drought - people report ‘the drought just is’. Welfare workers report high level of stress on marriages as a result of drought.

It is very evident that farm women are working on and off-farm and that this has increased during the drought. Many families have taken up the opportunity to secure second houses in town under the second home allowance and women and their children have moved to town for work and education. Involuntary separation of families has led to some marriage breakdown.

When it rained after a long dry spell, teachers reported the school children went out and played in the rain as if it were a new experience.

5.2.7 Impacts on educational access

The loss of families from the more sparsely populated areas has resulted in a loss of school buses, forcing families to drive up to 40 km one way (up to 160 km per day) to reach a school. It was noted that the roads are also deteriorating making these efforts more difficult. The loss of buses and the closure of the small schools have also resulted in some families involuntarily separating – the mother has moved to town, set up a second home and placed the children in the local schools. There is a high number of children traveling out of town for education – for example bussing to Swan Hill.

Education is prioritised and highly valued by parents. The lack of educational options (eg the closure of small schools and loss of bus runs) for isolated families has resulted in some families choosing Distance Education options. Many isolated families send their young people to boarding school usually at Year 7 because there is no alternative. Families report however that they have difficulty visiting their young people at boarding school because of the cost and the difficulties associated with leaving the property during the drought.

Families report significant difficulties for their young people accessing tertiary education. The nearest TAFE is at Swan Hill, Mildura or Hay. Those accessing university education report significant hardship because of the financial burden of supporting a young
person away from home when Youth allowance is not available. There is an increase in young people taking time off and trying to earn the nearly $17000 necessary to be declared independent for the purposes of Youth Allowance.

Isolation is a feature of Balranald, both geographically and experientially. This has resulted in a lack of government funding for Balranald that may have been more easily accessed by other communities.

5.2.8 Summary of educational establishments in Balranald

Balranald Central School also acts as a distance education centre. It provides education to primary and secondary students and to students studying by distance. It has a current enrolment of just over 300 and has just over 50 teachers. There is some contrary information on this – a drop in numbers from 270 to 220 pupils in recent years was noted but numbers have increased recently. The school is on a knife edge in relation to numbers and the loss of a primary teacher in the next twelve months looms large. Currently there are five primary classes, a reduction to four will have a significant impact on the way the school structures primary education. There is a feeling that another dry year will see the loss of another 20-30 students with consequences for the school.

The school receives additional funding under the Priority Schools Funding Programme (PSFP), a program designed to ‘provide additional assistance to school communities to reduce the achievement gap for students in schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds’ (Priority Schools Funding Programme http://www.psfp.nsw.edu.au/about/index.html). This funding is used to provide additional support for literacy and numeracy. The school also receives Country Areas Programme (CAP) funding based on isolation for additional support for students.

The high school uses a significant part of its operating funds ($15000) to provide a grass field for students to ensure students have some exposure to green grass.

The Distance Education centre allows an extension of subject choices for students, however there is a cost associated with studying by distance.

St Josephs Catholic Primary School is also located in the town.

A busload of high school students travel from Balranald to the private high school at Swan Hill each day. This is counterbalanced by a busload of young people who travel from the community of Euston each day to Balranald. There is no high school at Euston.

Some night TAFE classes are offered at the High School.
5.2.9. Additional educational providers servicing Balranald residents

- The nearest universities are at Wagga Wagga (400 kms) and Bendigo (300 kms).
- The closest TAFE campuses are at Swan Hill and Mildura.
- A busload of students travel to the private high school in Swan Hill each day.
5.3 Hay

5.3.1. About Hay

Hay is located about half way between Sydney and Adelaide and 400kms from Melbourne. It lies on the banks of the Murrumbidgee and is intersected by the Sturt, Mid-Western and Cobb highways. The Hay Shire covers an area of 11,348 sq. km The population is close to 3,000 with a further 900 in nearby villages (Booligal, Maude and One Tree) and on properties in the shire boundaries.

Hay is unique in that it has five museums – The Hay War Memorial High School, Shear Outback, Hay Gaol Museum, Bishop’s Lodge historical Home and Dunera POW camp and so provides opportunities for tourism.

5.3.2. Demographics

In 2001, Hay Shire had a population of 3,574 people (1,832 males and 1,742 females), a decrease of approximately of 6.5% on the population figures of 1996. The most significant declines were in the 20-24 year age group (36.7% decrease from 1996), the 25-29 year age group (24.8% decrease from 1996) and the 30-34 year age group (a 20% decline from 1996).

Agriculture is the predominant industry employer in the Shire employing 39.3% of employed males and 17.9% of employed females. Other strong industry employers are retail and government administration for males and retail; accommodation, cafes and restaurants; education; and health and community services for females.

5.3.3 Information for this research gathered from:

- Job Network providers
- School principals (Hay War Memorial High School and Booligal)
- Business focus group
- Hay War memorial high school student focus groups – girls and boys
- Isolated parents
- Hostel board member
- Women’s focus group
- Careers advisor, Hay High School
- Hay War Memorial High School teachers’ focus group
- Hay War Memorial High School parents’ focus group
- TAFE providers
- Community service providers
- Rural Financial Counsellor

5.3.4 Drought history

The drought has been evident in this area at least since 2001. People interviewed noted that 2000 was a good year but that the 1990s were dry. This led several to claim that the area

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8 Information derived from ABS Census data for 2001.
had been dry or in drought for up to fifteen years. This estimation is similar to the information gleaned from the nearby town of Balranald. The area was EC declared in December 2002. Some families have been hand feeding for 4 years. Debt loadings vary from $100,000 to $500,000 and many farm families have lost significant equity. Those who destocked early and put their funds into FMDs are better off. Informants suggest that up to 70% of the Western Division are in a high debt load situation and up to 30% will not survive the financial impacts of the drought. Many contractors are being put off.

Hay was ‘born on the sheep’s back’ and so has been heavily reliant on wool. In more recent times irrigation has enabled a move into rice and cotton and other industries.

Despite the drought there is evidence of business growth with one new business in 2001, four in 2002, seven in 2003 and nine in 2004. Shear Outback opened in 2002 bringing a tourism boost to the area and bringing to five the number of local museums.

5.3.5 Rural restructuring

The area is characterised by significant evidence of rural restructuring. The outlying areas have been denuded of population as properties are amalgamated into larger holdings, families have left the area, and
fewer workers and their families are employed on properties. Some large properties are now in the hands of absentee landlords and are run by workers. The depopulation of the outlying areas is best represented by a statistic quoted from a Uniting Church study of the area suggesting that from Hay to Ivanoe and across to the Darling River there are 211 empty farm houses.

The loss of employment on dry land properties has been substantial. The Hay area has been heavily dependent on wool-growing and the downturn in wool prices has had a devastating effect on farm prosperity. There has been an increase in irrigation in recent years along the river resulting in new industries highly dependent on water.

There are a number of social impacts resulting from the depopulation of the outlying areas including the struggle to keep open the Booligal school and local school bus routes. There is very little full-time secure work available for young people. The research team members were also surprised at the lack of welfare services in the town.

5.3.6 Drought impacts

The most evident physical impact of the drought is in the landscape. The Hay plains beyond the irrigation area are covered in saltbush and are often treeless. The big dry and the lack of green grass have made the landscape much harsher to the eye.

The irrigation area is affected by a lack of water allocation resulting in irrigators not able to plant and in serious financial stress. One strategy adopted by irrigators has been to transfer or trade water rights, often out of the community, and this practice is impacting on the town through the loss of water to the area.

The loss of income is the most evident social consequence of the drought and this impacts in a number of ways including a reduction in social interactions. We were told that the only income for many families is the interest rate subsidy. The increase in workloads for farm family members is also evident as families on farms do away with hired labour and absorb the work within the family resulting in increased social isolation and stress.

Up to 70% of the Western Division farms are in ‘high debt load’. A conservative estimate by informants is that 30% will not recover. Those who are feeding stock now have to continue because they have no other options. Informants predict massive, ‘catastrophic’ changes in the Western Division over the next 10 years as a result of the drought. Very few young people are coming into agriculture in this area and the farming population is aging.

The drought has accelerated the restructuring in the outlying areas with more families likely to leave once the drought breaks. Town businesses are affected by a loss of income and delays in the paying of bills. Those reliant on the farming community are the most noticeably affected. Workers have been laid off and many have left the community. There is little work in
the community forcing many workers to seek dole payments or move away. The economic downturn is also evident in subtle ways such as a change in the diet and clothing of some children at school. More women are working on and off farm. Many families are reliant on the income generated by women. There has been a recognisable trend for women from isolated properties to set up second homes in Hay so their children can be educated and they can seek work. This has resulted in a high level of involuntary separation of families in the community. Drought has become a way of life for people in this community.

5.3.7 Impacts of the drought on educational access

There have been a number of recognisable trends in educational access in the community. A movement of young people from city boarding schools to schools which are cheaper and closer to home e.g. Leeton has become a popular choice. There are a large number of students from the town traveling to Leeton and Yanco for their education. However some families have also withdrawn their young people from Leeton and brought them back to Hay as the drought bites deeply. Nonetheless there are a number of isolated children with no other option who still go to boarding school at Year 7. The numbers at the Hay War Memorial High School are increasing, apparently as a result of increasing numbers coming through junior years and a trend away from boarding school. Young people at the high school take some of their subjects by distance education out of Balranald. Most families give education the very highest priority. The closure of small schools, the loss of school buses and the introduction of a second home allowance have resulted in a number of families separating such that the female partner and children move to town for greater access to schools and work.

Families continuing with Distance Education/home tutoring on properties are disadvantaged because of the need for women to work on properties. Distance education is viewed as a last resort because women can no longer commit the time needed. Some families of hired staff on the larger properties experience difficulty providing the support needed to deliver the distance education material. We were told there were children not receiving any schooling. The hostel, Claughton House, has experienced a decline in numbers
over a decade or more. Because of AIC funding and support for non-government schools, it is cheaper to board at Leeton or Yanco than it is at Claughton. The hostel is unable to access funding support for tutors to assist young people with homework because they are not a school. They feel disadvantaged by the way educational funding access is denied. Young people are withdrawing from Saturday sport commitments and other extra-curricular events because of the time implications and the fuel costs.

We were told that the greatest problem for young people is the move to tertiary education. Young people at tertiary level must leave town for education and training. Many young people are unable to access Youth Allowance resulting in them either taking a ‘gap year’ to try and achieve independent status, or leaving to find work.

The lack of a TAFE facility in Hay has had a significant impact on choice in the community. Young people seeking TAFE training are required to travel to Deniliquin or Griffith. Without parental support this is not possible for many young people. The drought has resulted in a decline in apprenticeships and traineeships in the town.

5.3.8 Summary of educational establishments in Hay

Hay has two primary schools, the public and Catholic schools. Hay War Memorial High School was established in 1923 as a memorial to those in the district who served in the First World War. It has a significant war museum attached to the school. There are currently 287 students at the high school and these numbers are expected to rise each of the next three years based on numbers at the feeder schools.

There is no TAFE presence in the town although the area is covered by Deniliquin TAFE and offers literacy classes using a locally based teacher. Students can study by distance, however this is difficult for people in isolated circumstances and without tutorial assistance. Access to TAFE courses in other areas are affected by the inability of some families to prove eligibility for Exceptional Circumstances and hence not having the funds to pay course fees. Access is also affected by a lack of transport to distant providers. Students may attempt to take courses by distance, however it is argued that those with low skills have difficulty coping with DE.

Withdrawals from TAFE are high, because of access issues as well as families relocating for employment purposes. The focus on having certain numbers in courses at the expense of access is problematic for potential students in remote areas because of low numbers. The cost of covering very isolated, sparsely populated areas is also not necessarily recognised in TAFE funding.
Mortgaging the farm for the future of the children often means that there will never be a future for them back on the land – the viability of the agricultural business will be gone – eaten up by debt and drought. For many families the choice will be the dreams of one generation or the other – not both.

(Remote area informant)

Claughton House is a 64 bed non-government hostel that has been operating for over forty years. Currently there are 19 young people boarding at Claughton and going to the high school and primary schools. Nine of these children have parents on the show circuit and are called ‘showies’. ‘Enrolments are volatile’. Numbers have trended down for ten years.

Claughton was operated by the Uniting Church until 2004 when it was handed over to the community. Thanks to the local federal member, Kay Hull, the hostel has been saved for the short term. The addition of the government hostel subsidy of $2500 per student under a new funding scheme has given a greater degree of certainty to the hostel. However the facility is threatened by the financial cost of the hostel by comparison with St Frances at Leeton and Yanco.
Agricultural High School. They charge $8000, a bare minimum allowing them to operate, which nonetheless is more than that charged by the two schools. They receive no funding from the state government and hence the discrepancy in funding by comparison with the nearby boarding schools.

We would really like recognition from both governments that this is a legitimate form of access to school, like a bus or distance education or a boarding school. And it should be recognised and funded ... and that would immediately take the biggest worry off our shoulders. (Hay key informant)

Claughton is run by a voluntary body of community representatives. This body is committed to keeping the hostel open. They argue it is essential to provide access to local schools.

We would really like recognition from both governments that this is a legitimate form of access to school, like a bus or distance education or a boarding school. And it should be recognised and funded ... and that would immediately take the biggest worry off our shoulders. (Hay key informant)

5.3.9. Additional educational providers servicing Hay residents

The nearest TAFE is at Deniliquin. Residents also go to Griffith for classes.

Students wishing to access university education go to Melbourne, Wagga, Canberra, Sydney etc. University education is very hard to access.

St Francis, Leeton and Yanco High schools draw a number of Hay’s young people.
Queensland sites
5.4 Blackall

Blackall is at the heart of what has long been sheep farming country. Demonstrating its strong links to the wool industry, Blackall is renowned as the home of the legendary, record-setting shearer Jackie Howe. It was in 1892 that he blade shore 321 sheep in less than 8 hours. The blade shearing record still stands and machine shears did not beat the tally until 1950. A statue honouring Jackie Howe stands in the main street. Blackall’s economy continues to be based on agriculture and has retail business and a fast growing tourism industry.

5.4.2 Demographics

In 2001, Blackall Shire had a population of 1,822 people (915 males and 907 females), an overall decline in population of 10% from the 1991 figure of 2,045. The most dramatic impacts during the ten year period were in the 20-24 and 25-29 year age groups with reductions of 30.6% and 37.8% respectively recorded.

Agriculture is by far the largest industry employer for males in the Shire (42.5%). Although females are also strongly represented in agriculture (23.7% of female employees), they are also employed in retail (17.4%) and health and community services (14.7%).

5.4.1 About Blackall

Blackall is a small remote community with an official population of 1833 within a Shire boundary of 16,363 sq km. Blackall is approximately 950km north west of Brisbane via the Landsborough (Matilda) Highway, 800 kms from Rockhampton on the Capricorn Highway and 214 kms from Longreach. It is located on the Barcoo River.

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10 Information derived from ABS Census data for 2001
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5.4.3 Information gathered from:
- Young people at Balranald Central School
- Teachers, principal and guidance officer at Balranald Central School
- Isolated parents in ICPA
- The Mayor and other significant community members
- Welfare service provider
- Indigenous residents at Barcaldine

5.4.4 Drought history
The drought has been a feature of Blackall for four years with 2003 described as the ‘worst year’. Several properties in the area have destocked and all have reduced their livestock numbers. The community regard the drought as ‘one more hideous event’ on top of a significant period of restructuring. Blackall appears an area in crisis and this is evidenced in the changes in the community, the population decline, and the loss of services and infrastructure.

5.4.5 Rural restructuring
The area has experienced significant restructuring pressures in recent years and many of these precede the drought. The downturn of the wool industry has struck at the heart of the Blackall community. The population and income losses resulting from this downturn are significant. There is an increasing wild dog problem in the area which has further affected the sheep properties.

Many of the large areas/properties around Blackall have been sold and/or amalgamated into larger areas. Many properties have moved out of sheep and into cattle. The shift to cattle has led to a decrease in the number
of workers’ positions and a loss of shearing in the area. Where once there were several families, many properties are now run by a few stockmen. As a result of job losses, there has been a significant drift of people out of the community. The downsizing of the kangaroo shooting industry has also resulted in a loss of jobs.

The town is losing families, including many children, as a result of this drift. Government services have been withdrawn to the larger centres under processes of regionalisation. This withdrawal of government services has had a critical impact on the availability of professional jobs. Agribusiness companies, such as stock and station agencies, have also scaled back their services in the town. Westpac closed in the early 2000s. Small businesses are suffering, and a few established business people have left the town.

In recent years there is an increasing trend for older people to move into town. These tend to be older retirees, many from Victoria, who buy cheap houses in the town in which to spend their winters.

5.4.6 Drought impacts
The most evident impact of the drought is the loss of income from agriculture. People on the outlying properties are struggling through drought conditions with little income. Families report the high cost, emotionally, physically and financially of feeding and watering stock. Local shearsers have to go further to find work and many have left town.

The drought impact on town businesses has been significant. Drought conditions have exacerbated the loss of people from the town. The drought has accelerated the process of restructuring, with properties amalgamated and families leaving the community. People feel the drought is the ‘triple whammy effect’ coming after significant community restructuring.

5.4.7 Impacts on educational access
The most obvious impact on educational access in Blackall is the downturn in numbers at the school – approximately 100 students have left the school in recent years. The decline in student numbers has impacted on teacher numbers at the school, with the principal constantly having to juggle ways of running a K-12 school with fewer and fewer teachers. These losses have resulted in a decline in subject choices and more
The biggest educational issue in the community at the moment is that of ‘bypassing’ with some community members arguing for bypassing to be trialled in the community so that all parents can access the AIC allowances. Those associated with the school view this potential move as extremely threatening to the continuing viability of the school. Those in favour of bypassing refer to the issue of equity and access to funding for all students.

As with other communities, the barriers to tertiary education access are significant as parents struggle to support their young people into tertiary options. There is a culture of apathy among many community members in relation to education beyond Year 10. Most boys at the high school do not view ongoing education as their priority. There are few professional role models for boys. This has led to a significant shift away from education for boys. Girls are more likely to see their future elsewhere and education to be part of that future and so are more likely to complete high school.

ICPA parents are more likely to report the high value they give to education. The pressure on mothers who are home tutors includes a commitment of time that may not be possible given their need to also work on the property. It also may be beyond the capabilities/skills of some mothers. Mothers also report that their young people are exposed from a young age to dying stock and to the disruption to their schedule because of a need for mothers to take them to work on...
the property with them. The hostel in Blackall closed in 2003 because of declining numbers, insurance issues, fire safety issues and greater access to AIC allowances.

Indigenous parents report that their young people need enhanced access to literacy and numeracy training. Indigenous young people are less likely to continue their education and report needing support within their school to help them continue (students at Barcaldine). Indigenous people report the need for a bus to transport their young people to a breakfast program and to school. They also report the need for a homework program for their young people. Indigenous people also urge an increased celebration of Indigenous culture in local schools.
5.4.8 Summary of educational establishments in Blackall

Blackall has two schools – the State School (K-12) and the St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School.

Blackall State School has 146 students from K (or prep) to Year 12. There are 78 in the high school and 68 in the primary. The school has lost over 100 students in recent years, 70 in 2003 and 30 in 2004. This has had a significant impact on the number of teachers at the school. These numbers have dropped from 23 in 2000 to 16 in 2005. Many teachers at Blackall are young, new graduates.

Coping with the major drop in numbers has been a challenge for the principal and the school. The loss of teachers is largely accommodated through not filling vacancies when teachers leave and also forming composite classes. There are four teachers in the primary school and the rest work in the high school.

We went from being a single class primary school from Year 1 to Year 7 and ... a very traditional high school with very traditional subject lines. ... We will not sustain this, we’ve had a huge change.

(Blackall key informant)

I’m right on the cusp. This year has been a real juggling act ... you can’t resource a school that way and guarantee curriculum ... I can’t deliver ... I can’t deliver a curriculum if I don’t have some guarantee of basic resources.

(Blackall key informant)

The difficulty associated with loss of numbers is exacerbated by the formulaic approach of the Education Department to the allocation of resources. Not only has the school lost teachers, it has also lost teacher aid hours, a registrar position and even cleaning hours.

Choices for students at the high school are expanded through DE options. However the school is hampered in its use of technology through the failure of its telecommunications infrastructure. The telephone system ‘is archaic’. They do not have the resources to address this problem.

The Catholic Primary School, St Josephs, was established in 1917 by the Josephite Sisters. It runs from Preschool to Year 7.

There is no TAFE in Blackall. The closest vocational education establishment is the Pastoral College at Longreach.
5.4.9 Additional educational providers servicing Blackall residents

Longreach Pastoral College is 214 kms away. It provides courses in agriculture, automotive work, conservation and land management, horticulture and business.

Emerald College of TAFE also provides courses but is difficult to access because of distance and lack of transport.

The nearest universities are at Rockhampton, Toowoomba and Brisbane.

5.5 Longreach

5.5.1 About Longreach

Longreach is situated on the Thomson River and is part of the central west region of Queensland. Located 1,205 km northwest of Brisbane on the Landsborough (Matilda) highway and 689 km west of Rockhampton on the Capricorn Highway, Longreach is the largest town in central Queensland. The nearest regional towns are Hughenden (north), Barcaldine (east) and Winton (west). Emerald, located 400 km east on the Capricorn Highway, is the nearest major regional centre.

Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Service (QANTAS) was founded at Winton on February 10, 1921 but the operation was soon moved to Longreach where a hangar and the country’s first purpose-built landing field were constructed. QANTAS was registered as a passenger and mail carrier from Longreach in 1922.

Longreach is part of the Mitchell Grasslands region, with the environment characterised by a general lack of tree and scrub cover, clay soils and grasses. Though crops have been produced in the Shire, beef, sheep and wool are the main agricultural production areas. Since 1988, and the opening by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II of the Australian

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Stockmans Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre, the area has also become a popular tourist destination.

5.5.2 Demographics

In 2001, Longreach had a population of 4,368 people (2,237 males and 2,131 females). This is a decrease of 51 people since 1996 and one person since 1991. Although the total population has remained relatively stable, the profile has changed considerably with significant decreases in the 15-29 year age groups (e.g. a 29% decrease in 20-24 year olds) being offset by increases in those aged 40-54 and 75+ in the community. Agriculture is the largest industry employer for males in the Shire (21.45%). Other large employing industries for males are retail (12.4%) and construction (10.6%). Although agriculture is also a significant employer for females (13%), health and community services (16.4%), education (14.1%) and retail (14.09%) are important employers of women.

5.5.3 Information following gathered from:

- Young people at Longreach High School
- Principal, teachers, parents at Longreach High School
- Mayor of Longreach
- Royal Flying Doctor Service employees
- Hostel employee
- Welfare providers
- Parents and principal of Longreach School of the Air
- Unemployed young people
- Rural Financial Counsellor
- Members of Queensland Rural Women’s Network
- Principal Longreach Pastoral College
- Principal State Primary School

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Information derived from ABS Census data for 2001
5.5.4 Drought history
Drought has been a feature of Longreach for at least 5 years, however residents also speak of the weather being ‘dry’ for much longer. The drought has had a noticeable impact on the environment with the land parched and bare prior to rain in June 2005. Many farms have destocked, few farm workers are employed on the properties, and the shearing industry is in disarray. The drought has also had an impact on the ‘roo shooting industry.

5.5.5 Rural restructuring
The downturn in the wool industry in the early 1990s has had a major impact on Longreach resulting in families moving, farms sold and amalgamated and a movement away from sheep into cattle. The fine wool merino sheep industry has virtually collapsed. Many properties have moved from sheep to cattle. Big companies have bought up small family holdings and amalgamated them into larger conglomerations. This restructuring has had a major impact on employment of farm workers. Many farm workers have lost their jobs and the big properties are being run by fewer workers. Cattle properties
also require fewer workers than sheep properties so agricultural employment has eroded. Many workers have drifted to the mines at Emerald where they can earn high incomes. An Anglicare report notes that 50 rural properties in a region close to the town all had workers 5 years ago and today only 2 still employ workers. The downturn in the wool industry has also had a significant impact on the shearing industry in the area. There has been a major reduction in the number of shearing teams operating in the area. There has been a noticeable drift of people away from the area looking for work. Many New Zealand shearers who had come to the area to work are now moving back to NZ.

Meanwhile the government services in the region have also scaled down leading to a loss of professionals. Young people are leaving in large numbers for work and education. The tourism industry has created a number of jobs and it was not unusual for us to meet people who had more than one job. There do appear to be lots of part-time employment opportunities available. Holding down multiple jobs appears common. Some traineeships cannot be filled because young people are leaving. There are young people in the town who are not exposed to a wide variety of occupations and so aspire to what they see in their local communities – eg ‘roo shooting.

5.5.6 Drought impacts

The drought impacts have overlaid already existing restructuring. The drought is like an additional stressor for the community on top of major changes. The significant loss of income to agriculture is the most noticeable impact, particularly in relation to the downturn in wool. The loss of income is also being felt in the town businesses, with reports of business stress. This stress has had an impact on employment both on farms and in the towns with some businesses reporting they cannot take on apprentices.
Families report being overworked. Property people report the lack of workers has added to family labour at the same time as work is escalating as a result of the need for hand feeding. People are particularly tired and down. There are reports of involuntary separation of families as women and children move to local towns. Some property families report wanting to sell – they’ve had enough.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service has added five mental health workers to Longreach as a result of the changes in the community suggesting a significant rise in mental health problems.

The drought has accelerated the changes already existing within the community – loss of employment, amalgamation of properties, loss of people, downturn in the economy. The ability to attract skilled staff to the area is impacted by the drought conditions. Tourism is protecting the economy somewhat but tourist numbers are down. There is significant evidence of additional stress in the community.

5.5.7 Impacts on educational access

The lack of income is having an effect on young people in isolated areas. There is significant pressure on mothers in remote areas to home tutor at the same time as they are required more on the properties. There is some evidence of mothers moving to town, involuntarily separating in order to access education. Young people are also needed to work on properties affecting their home schooling. Some young people are being held back from going to boarding school when they reach high school and are either attending the hostel or doing School of the Air for longer. There is some movement from boarding school back to the high school. Numbers at the high school have gone down and there is a threat to the Deputy Principal position (due to the number formula). Many families are unable to afford the cost of extra-curricular activities and excursions. Parents are not able to visit their young people at boarding school because of financial pressures.

The loss of school bus routes consequent on loss of families in remote areas is a factor in declining educational access. There is some antagonism between town and property families around the issue of access to AIC. Some town families raise the issue of bypassing as a means of accessing the AIC allowances for their children.

There is a real gulf between secondary school access and tertiary. There is some evidence young people are moving into work rather than committing to going away to tertiary study. Tertiary access is affected by a lack of access to financial support. Many young people are unable to access Youth Allowance and struggle to be eligible for independent status. Young people going away to study must work to support themselves. Young people are suffering considerable hardship.
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TAFE access is problematic. Traineeships are for 12 months only and may not lead to secure on-going employment.

School of the Air has a very good reputation and provides good support to home tutors. Nonetheless there is significant pressure on mothers to educate their children at the same time as they are needed to work elsewhere.

There are additional drought pressures on young people – we noted some young people living on their own while parents are away working. Young people are working during their high school years often to fund their own needs. Young people also report going home each weekend to look after the property. Hostel kids report having to ‘jolly’ the farms kids when they come back on Monday mornings.

5.5.8 Summary of educational establishments in Longreach

Longreach has two primary schools – Longreach State Primary (Years 1-7) and Our Ladies College (P-7).

The Longreach School of Distance Education operates on the edge of town and is also a significant tourist site with daily guided tours. It currently serves 220 students across an area of 470,000 square km, twice the size of Victoria and Tasmania combined. There are 28 teachers on staff (24 FTE). The school offers several programs including: a) a basic
correspondence program; b) a digital program delivered via computer with teacher support and cluster days once a term in the local area and in-reach boarding at Longreach for a week at a time; c) home tutor support (usually the mothers) where workshops and training is provided on a regular basis. Teachers are allocated on a location and year group basis.

The School has two big days a year in Longreach – the swimming carnival and the athletics carnival days. The outreach days in the local areas allow the school to provide music, dance, drama, health, sport and PE. The mini schools at the Longreach facility also include an Art program and every second year a cultural camp is run. Years 1-5 have one mini-school per year, years 6 and 7 have two and the secondaries are also taken on an ‘away’ camp to a capital city.

The school is allocated $20,000 CAP funding (called PCAP in Queensland) and most of this is used for transport costs to camps.

The school has a counsellor, as well as a strong representative P&C. No school fees are charged. Meanwhile almost all of the students have access to satellite and have recently changed from HF radio. However they still have problems with video streaming. Students have half an hour a day on the telephone with their teacher and a one on one session for 15 minutes per day. Years 6 and 7 are allocated a chat room.

Most of the students studying through Longreach are in the prep to Year 7 classes with only 22 studying at secondary levels. It is acknowledged by most associated with remote children that undertaking secondary education through some form of Distance Education is at best challenging and
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At worst impossible. Where students have no alternative, they are likely to drop out long before completing high school.

Numbers at Longreach School of the Air have not changed significantly during this drought unlike the 1994-5 drought when they dropped from 330 to 180. Since then numbers have stabilised to 220. The losses in the last drought are attributed to the complete devastation of the wool industry following the removal of the floor price and the rapid loss of people from the area.

Unlike the last drought, when up to 50% of families had a paid home tutor (or governess), this time around only 7% have that service. There is, therefore, more pressure on mothers to be a resident home tutor at the same time as they are juggling other responsibilities on the property. In response, Longreach has made a deliberate attempt to recruit mothers to their teaching staff in order to provide additional emotional support to mothers. The level of skills among the mothers varies from a very high level of skill to very limited. Where the school feels the task is beyond the home tutor they will make suggestions about other options including moving the children to a hostel or boarding facility or the mother moving to town with the children.

The worst case scenario is the mother tries to do an outside job as well as the teaching job. Some of them are just economically obliged
to do that ... they will start early and do the school work in the morning and have the afternoon outside ... the bottom line is that these parents are prepared to do anything to give their kids a good education.

(Longreach key informant)

There is some concern that in their anxiety to keep everything going, mothers will sometimes complete the assignments for students.

The parent helps too much in their hurry to get the mustering done and they fill in the papers.

(Longreach key informant)

There is also some concern that students will ‘drop off the radar’ and that there are students in remote areas who are not undertaking education at all.

The Longreach High School operates from Years 8-12 and currently has 190 students. This represents a drop from 245 in 2001 and poses a threat to the retention of the Deputy Principle’s position. There are currently 20 teachers, some of whom are long term residents and many of whom are inexperienced new graduates. Because of teacher numbers, some staff are required to teach in areas for which they are untrained. The teachers are committed to providing a standard of
excellence at the school. There are an additional 18 staff providing ancillary services (cleaning, tuck shop etc).

Longreach hostel operates within the town and provides accommodation for 31 students from 23 families. The youngest student is 8 and the oldest are doing senior high school. The hostel is run by the Longreach Shire Council, a point of some contention as the young people in the hostel are largely from outside the shire. The hostel charges $9500 per student, $1500 over and above the AIC allowance. It ‘just breaks even’. It is staffed by house parents and by a cleaner (3 hours a day) and a cook who does afternoon tea and dinner (25 hours a week).

Longreach Pastoral College provides practical agricultural and vocational training. It is funded from the Department of Training and covers about 48% of the state. They are a separate organisation unlike TAFE.

Western Queensland College of TAFE operates some courses out of the Pastoral College.
Victorian sites
5.6 Cohuna

5.6.1 About Cohuna
The township of Cohuna is located in the Loddon Murray Region of Victoria, 270 km north of Melbourne. Cohuna is a town of some 2200 people and is part of the Gannawarra Shire. Major regional centres of Kerang, Bendigo, Echuca and Swan Hill are within 1 hour by road. The town overlooks Gunbower Island, a flora and fauna sanctuary which is covered with magnificent Red Gum and Box Forests, boasting the second largest River Red Gum Forest in Victoria. The Island is 50km long and is sandwiched between Gunbower Creek and the Murray River.

The area is thought to have been occupied by the Baraparapa people long before white settlement. The region was thrust into the international anthropological spotlight in the late 1960s with the discovery, in a Kow Swamp prehistoric burial site, of human remains dating back 15,000 years. Those finds rekindled world interest in the origins of the first Australians, and subsequent research now indicates a continuous Aboriginal culture has existed for up to 70,000 years.

Cohuna is part of one of Victoria’s most diverse agricultural regions. The main industries are dairying, livestock and horticulture. Dairying is the biggest industry by far and milk is sold to Nestle for export.

5.6.2 Demographics
Cohuna is part of the Gannawarra Shire for purposes of Census data aggregation. Demographics for the Shire are included under information for Kerang.

5.6.3 Information following gathered from:
- Parents, teachers, principal and students at Cohuna Secondary College

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• Drought support worker
• Progress association

5.6.4 Drought history
Cohuna is a small town 40kms from Kerang. It has traditionally been a significant dairying community and has relied on irrigation. The recent deregulation of the dairy industry has not necessarily impacted the industry so much as the drought has done. In fact the money distributed to dairy farmers during the deregulation process has been welcomed by farm families who have used the money to diversify, to improve and expand their dairies, to establish off-farm assets, or to assist in leaving the industry. The drought came on top of this significant period of restructuring leaving those who had expanded or exposed themselves to some financial risk in a precarious situation. These people have been battered by the drought, in some cases seriously crippled. The consequences have been difficult for the community. Poverty levels are high and food parcels were distributed during drought.

5.6.5 Rural restructuring
The amalgamation of the Gannawarra Shire brought together Cohuna, Koondrook, Kerang, Murrabit, Lalbert, Quambatook and Leitchville with a combined population of over 12,500. This amalgamation removed valuable infrastructure, employment and political power from Cohuna. The Progress Association is the town’s attempt to bring some form of localised decision making back to the town.
The dairy deregulation benefited farm families in Victoria much more than those in other states. Families received the dairy bonus money and used it to either to get out of the industry or to expand. For those who have expanded and stretched themselves financially, the drought has been crippling.
There has been a steady loss of services from the community, leading to a loss of jobs, professionals and leaders.

5.6.6 Drought impacts

The drought couldn’t have come at a worse time for dairy farmers who have expanded their holdings and/or their dairy. Financial costs incurred during expansion have been exacerbated by the debts incurred in buying water and feed. Water trading has impacted on the community with some farms selling off their water.

The drought has had a very evident effect on the landscape. Small farms have been amalgamated into larger conglomerations.

Small businesses in town are suffering from the flow on effects from farms. Staff have been laid off and there are fewer jobs available. There are a few examples of businesses expanding, for example water saving businesses. Contractors are not in a position to put on apprentices or trainees. The mood of the town is depressed, morale is low.

5.6.7 Impacts on education

Cohuna has a well-resourced high school and students have access to senior high school classes and to extra subjects by distance education. The significant problem raised by all informants is the lack of access to tertiary education that is affordable and accessible. Students must move away to access any form of tertiary education.

5.6.8 Summary of educational establishments in Cohuna

Cohuna Consolidated School is a primary school with approximately 230 students. The Catholic primary school has about 100 children attending.

Cohuna Secondary College provides high school education and has 280 students, a decrease from 500 in 1982. There are 24.7 staff allocated to the school. Twenty senior high students do DE subjects. There is no formal allocation of resources to support students studying by distance. Nonetheless teachers allocate their time on a voluntary basis. Staff development opportunities are problematic because of distance and low numbers of staff to cover classes. Staff try to take students on an excursion to Melbourne and back in one day to save costs. Cohuna shares a School Chaplain with Kerang High. A bus also goes on a daily basis to the Catholic High School at Echuca. There are few young people who go away to boarding school.
5.7 Kerang

5.7.1 About Kerang\textsuperscript{14}

‘Kerang is a town of some 4400 people situated on the Loddon River 279 km north-west of Melbourne at the northern tip of Victoria (25 km from the state border). It is the commercial centre of an irrigation district given over to dairying, horticulture, lucerne and grain. ‘Kerang is known as the ‘Gateway to the Northern Waters’ due to its location on the Murray River, and the extensive series of lakes and water ways around the town. Many of these lakes are used for watersports such as skiing, fishing and swimming, and are popular picnic and camping areas. Eight kilometres north of the town the 3 Reedy Lakes, part of the Kerang Lakes system, comprise the Torrumbarry Irrigation network, providing agricultural water to a vast farming system. The main products of Kerang and area are wool, wheat and grain, sunflowers and citrus. Industries also include dairying and horticulture.

5.7.2 Demographics\textsuperscript{15}

In 2001, Gannawarra Shire recorded a population of 11,394 people (5,674 males and 5,720 females). This is a decrease of 528 people (4.4%) since 1996 and a decrease of 1,066 people (8.6%) since 1991. Significant increases in 70+ age groups in the shire have been more than offset by dramatic decreases in other age groups, the most marked being in 20-24 and 25-29 year olds (a decrease of 34% in each group).

Agriculture is the largest industry employer for males and females in the Shire (32.9%) representing 1,133 males (39.5%) and 504 females (23.9%). Other large employing industries are manufacturing (12%), retail (11.4%) and construction.


\textsuperscript{15} Information derived from ABS Census data for 2001.
The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas

(7.7%) for males, and retail (16.8%) and health and community services (16.35%) for females.

5.7.3 Information following gathered from:
- Mayor, CEO, CDO and EDO of Kerang Shire Council
- Teachers, parents and Students at Kerang Technical High School
- Welfare service providers
- Job Network providers
- Kerang Learning Centre staff.

5.7.4 Drought history
Kerang has been in drought for three to four years, with conditions particularly severe in the last two years. The lack of water for irrigation is one of the key issues in this community. With no irrigation water, agricultural production has been critically impacted by drought. Many properties have destocked and dairy farmers are also affected by the lack of irrigated pasture.

5.7.5 Rural restructuring
Kerang is an area that has historically been heavily involved in dairying and irrigated agriculture. The restructuring of the dairy industry had a major impact in the community prior to drought. However Victorian farmers seem to have benefited from the restructuring more than their NSW
counterparts. There is an evident change in the agricultural production in the community, some of which is related to dairy deregulation and the movement out of dairying. Farms are getting bigger as parcels of land are amalgamated. The loss of irrigation water from some farms has resulted in a much more barren landscape. There is a diversity of crops now being grown in the area including vegetables, grapes, crops, etc, much of which is reliant on irrigation.

Water is a big feature of the area’s agricultural production. The introduction of water trading has resulted in the separation of water and land as commodities. In some cases the water rights have been sold separately out of the district leaving unviable small parcels of land with no water. There is evidence of older farmers making a business decision to trade their water and move away. This has eroded the practice of inheritance.

Kerang has experienced a significant loss of government departments and this has led to an out-migration of a significant number of professionals estimated at ‘about 200 families’. Traditionally Kerang offered progression for middle managers who could then move on to higher level positions elsewhere. The loss of these positions has resulted in a significant ‘brain drain’ in the community. Population decline, and the significant loss of young people has
led to an aging population. There is some movement into the area by retirees. The loss of people has led to a decline in volunteering, in club memberships and social activities. Young people have to travel further to play sport. There has been an erosion of agricultural positions on farms and a loss of employment in town businesses. Attracting skilled staff to the community remains a problem.

5.7.6 Drought impacts
Drought is an additional stressor following a period of significant restructuring in agriculture and in the community. In the Kerang region it has resulted in lost production and income, and also in a loss of access to irrigation water. Many families on properties are overworked and reliant on family labour.

Kerang is a community in crisis as a result of drought and depressed conditions. The significant loss of income is evident in the community and is noted in lack of spending and downturn in businesses. The drought has also resulted in a loss of employment in agriculture and in town businesses. Farm women are retraining, and are seeking employment in the town in large numbers. Farm men are also seeking off-farm employment in large numbers.

People report that the community is tired and depressed. The research team was informed on more than
one occasion about the high rate of suicides in the area in recent years and this was linked to drought conditions by many. It is arguable that the rapid rate of change, and the drought overlaid on this, has led to significant distress. The suicides have resulted in a number of strategies being developed in the town and visits from outside professionals and Beyond Blue.

5.7.7 Impacts on educational access

Fewer young children are attending preschool because of cost. A very noticeable impact on education however is the drop in numbers of children at the local high school from 1200 in the 1970s to under 500 in 2005. The loss of children has also resulted in a loss of teachers. Teachers report positions not being replaced and having to teach outside their area. Some subjects are only available by distance education and students must travel to Melbourne for some classes. There are no resources available for distance education within the school. Staff note small things like the deterioration in uniform and children not able to afford uniform items such as shoes. Staff note also an increase in stress and bullying in the school. A suicide prevention program has been run at the high school.

A busload of young people go to the private high school in Swan Hill each day. Some young people board at Bendigo for high school. There is not the same culture of boarding school attendance at Kerang as there is in, for example, Longreach, so few go to Melbourne. There is an increasing culture of apathy amongst the high school students because they feel unable to go on to tertiary and so are dropping out of high school or losing interest in education. Access to extra-curricular activities is seriously reduced by an inability to pay for additional activities. We were informed that even purchasing basic things such as books is beyond some families.

There is no TAFE in Kerang although the Learning Centre offers some programs. There are reduced numbers of apprenticeships because of businesses not employing people during the drought. Access to TAFE is problematic because of finances and a lack of public transport.

The biggest hurdle in relation to education is access to tertiary education. Despite the circumstances in their communities, many young people are classified as ineligible for Youth Allowance. Students are much more likely to delay entry to university while trying to gain independent status under Youth Allowance. Many of these young people are missing out because of their inability to earn the income required and giving up their places at university. Those who do go away are working to support themselves, sometimes in more than one job, seriously compromising their studies.
5.7.8 Summary of educational establishments in Kerang

Kerang has two state primary schools and a Christian Community school. Kerang Technical High School has about 480 students. There has been a steady decline in student numbers over the last three decades. Respondents noted there were 1200 students in 1972. There were 90 teachers in 1978, there are now 40. There is a Koori educator at the school and this person provides support for Indigenous young people in the classroom. The current Year 10 enrolment figure is 70-80 students (there were 120 in this group in Year 7).

The Learning Centre is linked to the Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT) and acts as an outreach for BRIT. They offer a Certificate level course in literacy and numeracy which is taken by a number of students who have dropped out of high school before the end of Year 10. They also offer a Certificate 2 in Business and a Certificate 1 in IT and also accommodate women and some men looking to retrain. They have more demand than they can meet and oversubscribe classes as a result despite having reduced funding.
6. Findings
Part 1: The Drought Story

Before moving into an analysis of the impact of drought on the education access of rural and remote young people, this chapter sets the scene by describing the drought and its impact on the people living in the case study sites, using their own words as much as possible. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that these communities have been subject to ongoing restructuring.

6.1 Restructuring

The communities under study had been experiencing significant restructuring in their areas for several years prior to drought. In all communities visited informants commented on long-standing and ongoing changes in their area. This includes the loss or erosion of industries (eg the wool floor price crash and dairy deregulation); the selling of properties (as a result of industry changes and the downturn in commodities) by farm families, many of whom had been in agriculture for several generations; the amalgamation of several farms into larger properties often owned by absentee landlords and managed by stockmen; the move into alternative production (eg from wool to cattle); the consequent loss of people (both workers, shearers and farm families) and the loss of services and professionals. This restructuring is particularly evident in remote communities.

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It used to be 70% sheep and wool and the balance cattle, now it would be 10% sheep and 90% cattle
(Longreach welfare worker)

Pastoral Companies are taking over ... they put managers in ... the partners have a lot of trouble dealing with the isolation issue.
(Longreach welfare worker)

Instead of having five farms, all of a sudden there are four in that little area and a couple of years down the track all of a sudden there are three farms and it gets reduced. ... Instead of having five or ten families in that area it has reduced down to two or three families.
(Kerang welfare worker)

A lot of these properties are being run by the old caretaker type of bloke.
(Longreach welfare worker)
The cattle industry is nowhere near the labour intensity as sheep.
(Longreach welfare worker)

There were at least 10 shearing teams in Longreach. You would be lucky to find 2 now.
(Longreach welfare worker)

These towns are built on the wool industry … our assets are water and grass.
(Blackall community informant)

My family farm still sits there … but there’s not one person that was there when I was a child. All the farms have changed hands.
(Kerang teacher)

In ten years time this whole region will be made up of five properties because the only ones who can afford to buy them are the big companies.
(Longreach community informant)

It decimates communities. If you lose the stability of small holdings … generally the owners don’t reside in your region … so the profits are actually extracted from your region and not generated back into it.
(Kerang community informant)

Many informants alerted us to the loss of banks, public service agencies, health and welfare services from their communities. One community had lost its shire office in local government amalgamations resulting in a significant loss of professionals and their families from the town. Another had lost several state government offices and most could point to the loss of banks and other services. The loss of services is perhaps most starkly evident in the declining access to maternity services even in very remote communities. For example women cannot have their babies in Blackall but must travel to Longreach, Charleville or Brisbane.

Regionalisation – it’s hurt us badly. … if you want to see a government person you’ve got to go to Longreach ... and it takes up a lot of time and it costs. … we need a good standard of education and we need a good standard of health.
(Blackall community informant)

Informants note structural changes in agriculture have had dramatic impacts on the health and welfare of their communities. In particular the downturn of an industry has ramifications for community members that extend beyond farm families and this often involves major implications for small business. However tourism has provided something of a cushion for several towns. There has also been significant industry diversification in various areas. Nonetheless the loss of young people, professionals and families has resulted in an aging population profile in the communities visited.
6.2 Onset of drought

Overlaid on years of restructuring is a drought described by many as the worst in Australia’s recorded history. In several communities young people, their parents, teachers and other community informants note the drought had been going for so long they didn’t remember what it was like pre-drought. Five or more years of drought for fifteen and sixteen year olds means that they were young children pre-drought. For them drought is almost ‘normal’.

People talk about typical years, but we haven’t got a clue what one is because it’s always different.
(Cootamundra young person)

We’re used to it now. It’s just kind of normal to live like that now, ‘cause its been a drought for a very long time and you just get used to it.
(Balranald young person)

I think because it’s been going on for so long we’ve just adjusted and now it seems like it’s life.
(Balranald young person)

It’s as long as I remember.
(Kerang young person)

I moved here when I was five and it has been drought since then [16 year old].
(Kerang young person)

The past few years have been even worse than previous years ... because we are older and understand it more.
(Kerang young person)

I can’t remember when there wasn’t a drought.
(Longreach young person)

Some kids have had drought the whole time they have been at high school.
(Hay teacher)

I think emotionally a lot of them aren’t coping really. And I think they’ve just been in drought for so long ... out here its really been going on for probably ten or fifteen years ... I think people are just bugged quite frankly; they’ve had enough – particularly anyone in excess of sixty years, which most of them tend to be ...
(Balranald welfare worker)

The effect of the drought is so hard – it’s been going on for a few years now, it’s not just a one off thing. And everyone’s settled into a little way of coping with it ... but the difference between the pervasive
impact of drought and a tsunami or flood is very visual – everyone can see the effects [of tsunami or flood] immediately and understand their impact. Whereas a drought – someone driving past and looking at a dry paddock – what does that mean?

(Kerang community informant)

6.3 Mood of community

In all communities people commented on the mood of their town, noting that people are feeling down, there is less community interaction and that people are seriously stressed.

People are a lot more insecure.
(Kerang teacher)

Generally the kids are pretty resilient but there’s pockets of kids that need a lot of support.
(Kerang teacher)

There’s a sense of insecurity and unpredictability that they really don’t like and don’t have a name [for], don’t know what to do with.
(Kerang teacher)

My guess is that if Mum and Dad are down … the kids can easily pick up from them.
(Longreach teacher)

My husband said to me the other day ‘I basically talk to myself all day’. He said ‘when you come home I want to talk to you because what I have seen all day is pretty depressing’. But then I am really careful about what I say because the slightest little thing can cause an argument. ... So you get to the point where you don’t say much because you don’t want to upset the applecart. But then if you don’t talk it makes them even more isolated.
(Farm woman and welfare worker)

He is working as hard as he can, but can’t change what is happening and I think that is hard for the kids … they sometimes think ‘Why is he so cranky?’ and then they feel a bit guilty because they have got upset with him.
(Farm woman and welfare worker)

I was describing the mood of the community as very tired, which in a lot of ways is a symptom of depression. ... Now farmers recognise stress, they’ll even accept anxiety, but they won’t recognise depression.
(Cootamundra welfare worker)

A lot of stress … people not socialising as much as they normally would ... right on the edge of tears all the time ...
(Cootamundra welfare worker)
Problems of mental health are evident in many communities but many of the rural areas visited do not have the services to deal with the mental health problems associated with drought. There is some suggestion of associated alcohol abuse.

_I think particularly the blokes, I think, you know, the women, tend to communicate much much better than guys do. Guys sort of tend to bury their head in the sand. So, but it probably impacts both, the female and the male. I think there’s a fair bit of alcohol abuse, a lot of alcohol abuse out there._
(Balranald welfare worker)

_With depression and high stress levels and also ... unfortunate times, hard times ... history shows that people usually turn to alcohol and other unfortunate means to survive. So there’s been an increase in that ... with mental health, particularly with the males, we’ll often have a lot of contact with the wives over the phone who are concerned about their partner, but it’s fairly hard to get in through the door._
(Balranald welfare worker)

_Women are stressed, women are really, really stressed. I think a lot of women ... are just about as far as they can be pushed. And I am seeing from a health worker’s point of view, a large amount of women who are so, so stretched that they come to me and then refuse to talk. You have got to ask them how they are going. They have just got so much emotion pent up in them. A quick release of emotion, they cry, [then] they tell me what is going on._
(Longreach welfare worker)

_Just trying to keep your stamina and optimism up is very, very difficult. ... It’s affected our family, my husband more than any of us – sleepless nights that sort of thing._
(Kerang community informant)

_[It has had] a huge impact on our development goals. It puts people in that negative frame work straight away. People are negative ... ‘there’s no future’. Drought is just holding all the people down, there’s no money, or there’s a reduction in money, a reduction in opportunity ... I think we underestimate the stresses. ... it’s absolutely critical that we get government support and government understand just what’s going on._
(Kerang community informant)

_Five years of ... lots of families actually struggling to put food on the table. They rely on welfare handouts to be able to survive._
(Kerang community informant)
We’ve got the highest suicide rate in Victoria. Within a three month period last year we had seven suicides. ... a lot of them seemed to be drought related and that had a significant impact right through the community.

(Kerang community informant)

It is not surprising then that all the young people interviewed refer to the impact of the drought on people’s spirits and the mood of the town.

Drought kills a community!
(Cootamundra young person)

Everywhere you go everyone is talking about how dry it is.
(Kerang young person)

There’s a change in people’s minds.
(Cootamundra young person)

The town’s much quieter.
(Balranald young person)

Everybody just seems to be down.
(Cootamundra young person)

Every time Dad is on the phone, if he is talking to one of his mates, he says, “So when do you reckon it is going to rain?”
(Kerang young person)

We feel really helpless sometimes.
(Cootamundra young person)

Informants report that these stresses impact on young people.

There are a whole lot of reasons why kids are super stressed. ... not enough food in the house is a major issue.
(Kerang teacher)

A bit touchier than usual ... a bit withdrawn.
(Cootamundra teacher)

The major thing for the kids is the morale. Go home to your families and families are stressed and down and Mum and Dad are talking about how things aren’t happening and kids are deep, they take a lot of that stuff in.
(Cohuna parent)

I think there is a real need for [counselling support for young people]. I have felt on a couple of occasions in desperate need of help [for my children] ... the first call is probably the GP ... there was not really anywhere else to go. ... I think especially for girls
(Cohuna parent)

During 2002-2003 the stress was really quite high and I think there were elements of kids that were
suffering from depression – I know there was a lot of counselling going on.

(Cohuna parent)

A greater majority of them actually share the burden with their children, they understand all the stresses so the kids don’t like to go out into the community and amongst their peers. the kids actually isolate themselves, and they make that choice that they want to stay home as well.

(Kerang community informant)

6.4 Impact on farms

The impact of drought on farms is extensive in all areas visited and the dry and dusty paddocks are ever-present visual reminders. Also evident in our conversations with informants is the loss of production on farms, the high debt levels, the inability to afford workers, and the consequent need for all family members to be drawn into farm work. Off-farm work is a strategy adopted by many families, and this is usually done by the female partner.

We can’t afford to employ a station hand because of the money we are spending on agistment.

(Longreach young person)

It’s so dry that no matter how hard [parents] work, or no matter what they do, everything’s dying. And they’ve spent thousands and thousands of dollars on feeding everything, keeping it alive. There’s no water, everything’s dying ... so no matter how hard they work they’re not going to get anywhere. Just running backwards.

(Balranald young person)

Predominantly our fathers are the ones who have been affected ... like I stayed away from Dad last night. I didn’t want to talk to him.

(Cootamundra young person)

We used to employ people. We don’t now. I am a dairy farmer. My wife works as hard as I do. She gets up the same time that I do every morning and usually works a lot later because she is doing all the things that she should do later on. She is president of the basketball and president of the hockey ... she has to do that later on because she doesn’t have time during the day.

(Kerang parent)

Dad does a lot of stuff by himself because Mum and my brother are working and he’s the only one there during the week. We know he needs a hand and sometimes he ends up not in the right mood and you get a bit worried.

(Longreach young person)
Many women on farms have gone back to work – ‘in supermarkets and anything they can get’.

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I am a teacher because I am a farmer.
(Kerang teacher)

More and more of our property wives are having to come into town to work.
(Longreach teacher)

My Mum works in town but whenever she has a day off she will help Dad out and so they will arrange stuff for those days she can help him.

(Kerang young person)

I have huge admiration for the women out there, they just work so hard. And without them, you know, the family unit will probably just break down.

(Balranald welfare worker)

We’re seeing more farmers’ wives coming in looking for a bit of part-time work – trying to meet the grocery bill.

(Kerang welfare worker)

Particularly in remote areas this has resulted in high levels of involuntary separation. Involuntary separation of families is a high impact feature of the drought experience. Families are able to establish second homes with the Second Home Allowance and this funding assists families by providing the avenue for mothers to move to town and seek work and their children to access local schools. This income is often needed to support the family.

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The second home allowance is enabling some people to make a choice. They don’t want, or couldn’t, teach correspondence.
(Hay parent)

There’s a lot of wives who come to town and set up in town and get a job. Things being tight it’s very good for them to have a second income coming into the family. But it also left a lot of lonely old men in the bush.

(Longreach welfare worker)

I’ve got more instances than I care to see where Mum and the kids live in town through the week.

(Longreach welfare worker)

People on the blocks are suffering… all the people who have come off blocks into town or Dad stays on the block and Mum brings the kids into town.

(Longreach welfare worker)

Informants note that there is a high level of debt amongst property families and small businesses. The rise in debt levels is estimated in one community at 50% with an average debt of $495 000 (based on a study done by the
Rural Financial Counselling Service). Other areas report similar high figures.

Some of the people live on constant overdraft and the overdraft is actually getting bigger, not reducing. ... debts of $600 000 to $1 million ... the debt is not reducing. It is not staying stable ... they have got to keep borrowing money.

(Longreach welfare worker)

Over the past five to ten years things have been really tough. When you are sitting on a farm and you are concentrating on an overdraft, you have no actual cash flow ... for a couple of years you can do that ... for maybe five or even ten years, and some are even longer. It is a weight on your shoulders.

(Hay welfare worker)

My husband – he thinks he is a failure.

(Cohuna parent)

Things that you might have done a couple of years ago you’re not doing because you know the money’s not coming in.

(Longreach parent)

I think we just became so focused on ourselves and money that there wasn’t a lot of joy in our family this year. ... just one month to the next we really didn’t know how we were going to pay our bills ... I felt that [small business] were forgotten.... I don’t know if people realise the impact that they were having by not paying their bills. ... we certainly weren’t able to get any assistance.

(Cohuna parent)

Despite the stresses many farm family members and welfare workers reported that access to Exceptional Circumstances payments for farm families had been problematic. Establishing eligibility for EC payments for their clients is one of the frustrations of welfare workers particularly as several communities are covered by more than one board area and matching need to guidelines is felt to be difficult.

The changes to the off-farm assets test allowing more flexibility in off-farm earnings has been welcomed and has made more community members eligible for interest rate subsidy. However welfare workers report the new criteria do not take account of the number of families on a farm – only the business is eligible for interest rate subsidy, not the individual families. Income support is available per family, however the increase of off-farm asset limit has not been applied to income support, only to interest rate subsidy. So women’s off-farm income is still problematic for eligibility for income support. For many families, this income is essential to pay for education for their children, so they are caught in a bind.
It's almost impossible to get drought assistance ... so I went back to work.
(Kerang parent)

Women are actually working off farm to try and compensate for the lack of money on the farm, so they are using the money to pay bills. But they are actually then losing out because they then can't actually access [EC] – so it is sort of like a no-win situation.
(Balranald parent)

EC funding ...gets up people's noses because it sounds fantastic on the news when its announced. Getting EC – any assistance – is very, very hard. They make it sound easy and it isn't.
(Kerang parent)

The drought assistance package isn't accessible unless you are absolutely starving!
(Cohuna teacher)

Centrelink are a law unto themselves.
(Cootamundra welfare worker)

However it is important to note that many families did not even try and apply even though it was obvious they would qualify. Their decision was made on the basis of the complicated process and on the notion of pride.

EC has been really hard to get and a lot of people have been very reluctant to apply because, that is what they were saying, a lot of people said well we can't get it, but they have actually just worked that out themselves, they haven't actually asked. There is an awful lot of people out here who won't even apply for it because they think it is demeaning – it is a welfare payment and everything like that. There are a lot of farmers who are very proud and that becomes an issue.
(Balranald parent)

Most people have had to find some way to support themselves ... there wouldn't be too many people who were actually getting the drought assistance.
(Cohuna parent)

They're very proud and very strong.
(Longreach welfare worker)

It was very difficult to get them to apply. [But] the majority of them don't qualify for anything ... they have got off-farm income. [But] it was good where you had the husband and wife at home, a couple of kids, maybe she was teaching the kids, to put bread on the table.
(Longreach welfare worker)
I am saying to them ‘shut the gate, come into town, take the pressure off. You don’t have to teach the kids. Send your husband to get a job in the mines. You get a job and go back when things brighten off’.

(Longreach welfare worker)

6.5 Impact on small businesses

In all communities we were informed that the drought has had significant impacts on small businesses. Many report having to lay off workers, to make do with family labour and increased stress associated with their financial position. Many also report that they feel they are acting as a quasi-credit agency for customers who cannot pay their bills and are carrying a lot of debt. Business people in all communities were quick to tell us that the restructuring and drought has had an impact on town businesses and on spending in the town and that small business confidence is down. There is of course some growth. For example, in one community there was some optimism in the water saving area. In another, an influx of retirees has brought new vigour to the town, and in others tourism was providing alternative business opportunities. Several people laid off in recent years have attempted to establish their own businesses but the drought has impacted on their ability to succeed. One result is a decline in the number of traineeships and apprenticeships. The lack of drought support for businesses creates hardship and community division.

[Farmers] use the [small] business as a bank. They use them to carry their debt load and manage their farms.

(Cohuna small business)

The majority of work my husband has done is for farmers and we found they began using us as a bank and we found it really hard.

(Cohuna small business)

With our business there’s a lot of stress from the drought but its not something I’ve discussed with my friends because it’s sort of all in-house ... with people owing money, and because people owe money, they can’t pay their bills. And then it puts a strain on us because it’s harder for us ... It does make it a lot harder when there’s money owed Dad. Yeah it puts a lot of stress on Mum and Dad. They work pretty hard but it’s not something I come to school and discuss with everyone.

(Balranald young person)
6.6 Employment

Drought has had a significant impact on employment availability in small communities. Because farms and small businesses were forced to reduce hired labour during the drought, there are fewer jobs available. At the same time, contractors, such as shearsers and fencers, have found little work is available in drought times. Rural workers who stay in their communities are viewed as particularly vulnerable and welfare providers note that help is being given to many families in the form of groceries and bills being paid. There is a decline in casual employment opportunities and few jobs for young people in the town resulting in most leaving to find work. There are also fewer jobs for itinerants with the result that they may need welfare support when they arrive in town. It was noted that workers who have lost their jobs need access to counselling but that there is little available.

Regional communities like Longreach have been protected somewhat by the government departmental jobs in town (‘400-500 government employees pulling their wages into town’) and the tourist industry. Other communities, like those visited in Victoria and New South Wales, have witnessed the loss of government jobs. Some communities have been more successful than others in attracting tourists, however the increase in fuel prices has impacted on tourist numbers.

Shearsers, fencers, rouseabouts, farm workers and contractors are particularly affected and we were told that men in the 40+ age group have great difficulty finding new areas of employment once they have been laid off or contracting work has dried up. Some contractors have taken on other work to get by. In Balranald we were told that some of the local ‘roo shooters have turned to wood cutting to maintain income.

So the people that’ve moved out of employment such as shearing, shed building, working on rural properties ... where that work’s dried up because of the drought, tractor driving etc. ... [they] have in fact been able to go into the forests and cut wood, which has to a large extent sustained the working population, the unskilled labourers around the district, that might have otherwise left.

(Balranald welfare worker)

Particularly middle-aged women, very hard to find work for. ... and those that have got jobs tend to stay in them for a very long time because there’s not a lot around ... and the smaller the towns get the more you see that. And even young women, if they’re not prepared to do whatever it takes, they often find it hard. It’s definitely a male-dominated workforce.

(Balranald welfare worker)
But the drought’s definitely taken its toll because there’s not the same amount of stock and there’s not the same amount of work, in everything from fewer shearers to, you know, trucks using less fuel because they’re carting less stock, I mean it sort of flows right on.

(Balranald welfare worker)

People are just frightened to go ahead and give people opportunities to actually start work.

(Kerang welfare worker)

It has such a ripple effect in a rural community ... years and years of drought circumstances ... and it just has a ripple effect. People are cutting down their spending, they’ve got to downsize a lot of organisations and even commercial industry in town they’re not getting the throughput, so they’re putting off staff.

(Kerang welfare worker)

All the jobs in a country town we used to have are gone.

(Cootamundra welfare worker)

Instead of replacing [workers who move] straight away, they might come down and look down the track for a traineeship because they know they’re going to get that labour component and maybe there’s some funding behind it ... and that’s been created by the drought.

(Kerang welfare worker)

There just aren’t the jobs around because people just don’t have the work so ...

(Kerang teacher)

6.7 Loss of population

Some communities visited were experiencing loss of population, and in two this was dramatic. In one shire there had been a steady drop in population calculated at ‘4% over the two censuses to 2001’, and this is put down to the loss of farm workers and young people. In one community it was estimated that as many as 35% of the population will be over 65 in the next 15 years. It was also suggested that the average age of dairy farmers is 59 years and of dryland farmers 65. A decline in the birth rate as a result of drought is estimated in one community to be 10-15%. One result is that many small rural towns are reliant on aged people to keep community organisations operating.

In all communities there is a steady loss of young people and we were told that keeping young people in remote areas is a challenge. The loss of a future on the land for young people is viewed with great sadness by many informants. This results in an aging
town profile and in some communities this is exacerbated by an influx of retirees coming to small communities for lifestyle reasons.

The people that play sport, the people that take on new initiatives, all the young people [are leaving].
(Blackall community informant)

A few years ago more people were employed on the rural properties. Some had a very large labour force and some even employed governesses to look after the staff’s children.
(Hay community informant)

There is no rural future for my kids.
(Longreach community informant)

We’re losing families and we’re gaining middle-aged and elderly. … People are deciding that this is not a bad spot to retire. They can buy a house, by city standards, extraordinarily cheap – your average house is between 60 and 100 thousand. The security is good here, the environment is good and the winters are good.
(Blackall community informant)

All our changes came with the downturn of the wool industry. When the 1970 slump took effect we had 3,300 people here and over the next ten years we lost a thousand people.
(Blackall community informant)

Builders have left, farmers have left, electricians have left and teachers have left. School numbers have dropped. Farming families have left. Old farmers have sold out – got out.
(Longreach welfare worker)

6.8 Rising levels of poverty

As a result of the pressures on farms, small businesses and communities, many informants report rising levels of poverty.

I hide the fact that I haven’t got any money. I bought this jumper the other day. I really needed a jumper. I went to the Op Shop and bought it for $4 because I knew that that was $50 dollars that I could maybe spend on the kids. But I am not going to tell people.
(Cohuna parent)

This year we’ve distributed a greater amount of drought relief materials and foods to those
services for distribution – we’ve networked with St Vincent de Paul as well as the rural counsellors. (Kerang welfare worker)

People are really struggling to even feed their families ... I think emotionally too a lot of people are almost at the end of their tether ... It’s been too much of a struggle ... they just don’t want to do it anymore. (Kerang parent)

I think the town has been financially [impacted] ... they’ve had to rely on Centrelink a lot. (Cohuna parent)

You can see kids – their pants are too short or their sleeves are worn out on their jumpers but they will continue to wear them rather than ask for a pair that fits properly. (Kerang teacher)

[One] family had been selling furniture and the inside of the house was starting to look like a skeleton. They were selling their furniture to live – to eat. (Longreach teacher)

You have a large number of kids with difficulties one way or another. You are trying to provide even lunch for the kids whose parents don’t send lunch for them each day. (Longreach teacher)

The ones who have a second income on farms are better off than the ones on farm with no other income – they have money to put food on the table and pay bills. (Kerang teacher)

There are kids at the hostel who really can’t pay ... there are families who are just strapped. (Longreach teacher)

There are a number of students who are very, very poor ... and unfortunately they’re the very children who never have a voice and often don’t have their needs addressed. (Longreach teacher)

There is also a view that local houses are being bought by people who cannot afford to buy elsewhere increasing the numbers of welfare dependent people in rural communities. They have moved to the area for the cheap rent and find themselves in a situation of long-term unemployment.
6.9 Declining levels of social capital

Several informants noted that the drought and resultant poverty has resulted in declining levels of social capital. Welfare providers report an increase in social isolation as a result of increased workloads and the loss of people from the remote areas. Community groups such as CWA are experiencing a drop in numbers and those remaining are more likely to be older. This factor limits the ability of these groups to continue. Blackall CWA, for example, has given their accumulated funds to the local retirement village and to Maroochydore and Charleville branches because of their low, and aging, numbers.

Volunteering is also down because of the cost associated with running a car and because people feel they need to be earning money for their families rather than volunteering. Volunteers therefore tend to be older. Informants refer to the loss of community functions because of the decline in the number of volunteers, many blaming this on drought.

They haven’t had the Gymkhana there now for two years. Partly because of the problem of getting the volunteers, so there are some activities that are not going ahead.

(Balranald community informant)
The product of drought is the fact that there is no agricultural hands on deck, so mum and dad do it all themselves now, they don’t have time to be on the committee for the gymkhana. So it is directly related in that sense to the drought.

(Balranald community informant)

People are unable to attend some of the events in town. It is almost self enforced isolation to a degree by having to work all weekend now, that the idea of coming in to support one of our workshops or even going to the rodeo or the show is a big ask, particularly if they both stay overnight in town. Yes, to attend and support community events is a bit harder than it used to be.

(Longreach community informant)

My husband would normally be at the athletics carnival and all the other things that are there. He has to prioritise what he comes to because we have to feed sheep. We can’t come in.

(Hay parent)

People also refer to the decline in social capital in their areas as a result of people leaving or being unable to interact in community.

People aren’t seeing their neighbours like they used to. They are not having the interaction that used to be there and maybe there was a small school or a bus run – those have gone because of the numbers decreasing. The social isolation aspect is getting worse.

(Longreach welfare worker)

Over the last two decades your tennis clubs, your football clubs, all your social backings in a small community are not there because the people are not there. I mean they are nothing without the people.

(Kerang welfare worker)

We have lost so many people out of our community through drought and other things. It has really strangled us. We haven’t got the football clubs, we haven’t got the netball clubs and we haven’t got the social things we had. We haven’t got an Apex Club anymore, Young Farmers have gone … they’ve left and taken their kids with them, which has deflated the football teams and things kids need to do.

(Kerang parent)

In several communities we heard of the large number of empty farm houses in the wider district resulting from the loss of people from these areas.

They have actually sold a lot of [the farm houses]. They take the houses off the properties and they come into town and are renovated and
The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas

sold off. An enormous amount of houses in Longreach are relocated off properties.

(Longreach welfare worker)

In all communities we were aware of tensions between town and farm people. This is due largely to the inability of small businesses to be able to access any form of support similar to Exceptional Circumstances. It is also clear that townspeople felt significantly disadvantaged by their lack of access to AIC allowances.

6.10 Impacts on young people

For young people the most evident impact of drought is the high levels of work being done outside school hours. Young people in rural and remote areas are helping out on farms, and for some, this has led to irregular school attendance. We were also informed that some may be staying home because they are worried about their parents and several teachers report higher levels of school refusals. The following comments from a focus group with Longreach teachers and another with Blackall parents demonstrate the effects of young people working.

Some of the kids, their parents get them to stay at home and help because they can’t afford to pay somebody else to do the work. I mean that is their living - that is how they sustain their family ...

That places a bit of stress on the kids as well.

[Some] kids have gone out to work in dry spells on their property and they are away for three or four weeks. They come back to school and they are very unsettled.

Life is so hard for these children. Home is such a hard place to be.

They have gone home and had to spend five or six hours on a bulldozer digging a hole to push all the lambs into, having to shoot the sheep ... a nine year old telling me she only had to pull three or four dead sheep [out of a bog]

I have got 10 and 11 year old boys here that can drive anything from a forklift to a grader to a tractor, any kind of car, any kind of truck and incredibly, incredibly smart. Then you have 15 or 16 year olds where Mum and Dad will go away to sell cattle or whatever and they will stay and run the property.

They see animals dying every day ... because you can’t leave them at home if you’re going to get a sheep out of a bog, they have to go with you.

They’re aware of the financial state, and what we could have and what we couldn’t have. You know you
Margaret Alston and Jenny Kent

come to town and couldn’t have an icy pole because there was no money.

I think my daughter at home has a much better understanding of what we are going through than my daughter away [at boarding school] has.

We’ve got a nine year old who can drive ... we’ll be on the back with the feed and she’ll be driving the vehicle ... she’s keen to help, she’ll say “Can I help dad, can I come?”

Young people in all communities reported the level of their workload and their need to do this because of family circumstances and their own feelings of responsibility.

I’d rather stay home and help [Dad]. Just give him a hand. It would be over quicker and he could do more things.

(Cootamundra young person)

It’s hard ... because families are always working and you feel like you can’t bludge around the home watching television or anything. You’ve got to go out and do something.

(Cootamundra young person)

Feeding the sheep, helping with the shearing.

(Kerang young person)

My Dad’s got a bad back that he had an operation for and I would rather go out and help him so he doesn’t strain himself and do all the heavy stuff.

(Cootamundra young person)

... driving the tractor and helping in the shearing shed. Even like helping in the house when Mum’s helping on the farm.

(Kerang young person)

I help Mum and Dad mustering sheep and cattle.

(Longreach young person)

It’s not so much that they expect you to do it. It’s like you want to do it to help out.

(Cootamundra young person)

Any work I do at home doesn’t have to be done by someone employed.

(Longreach young person)

We just get home and go and get dressed and we’ve got to do something and we just do it.

(Cootamundra young person)

Sometimes this means significant farm responsibilities.
My Dad’s a contractor, he’s away 2 and 3 months at a time. It’s my job to look after the fences and look after the cattle. It’s basically my job to run the place when I come home. (Longreach young person)

Even just things like shearing, because Dad can’t afford to pay other people. You have to stay at home to help and miss out on going to school. (Cootamundra young person)

Last year I took nearly a week off and had to go home ... we had a big fire and basically it was all hands on deck. (Longreach young person)

I stayed at home for nearly a month. (Cootamundra young person)

If it was raining when it was supposed to rain and ... there were heaps of workers, we’d always be coming to school. Yonks ago it used to be normal but now it’s changed things. (Balranald young person)

For some young people the responsibilities are extraordinary.

Both my Mum and Dad are going through post-traumatic stress from watching the drought ... and they’ve both had to move away ... just to get away from it all... I’m just by myself in a house in town. (Blackall young person)

My parents have been away a lot because they have been shifting cattle to different properties so I am left home alone ... for weeks sometimes. So I have to do the cooking and cleaning up and try and keep up my studying as well. ... For instance this afternoon I have to go and fix a tank ... and on top of that I have to get all my homework and things done tonight. (Longreach young person)

Many of the young people in the towns are also working part-time in the community.

They work there and save to be able to go away to uni – from their work, not from their family. (Kerang teacher)

If I want to buy something I don’t go to Mum and Dad any more ... I use my own money. (Kerang young person)

I’m a kitchen hand during the winter, and then during the summer I do maintenance work. (Longreach young person)
These kids are working after school. They are shooting off straight after school, belting home, getting their uniforms on, and they are there in the afternoons and they are working tremendous hours. It is impacting on their school work.

(Longreach teacher)

When money is getting low … their kids actually have to go out and work and that affects their schooling. How can you work 30 hours a week and come to school and do your best there? I also think it affects kids' mental health.

(Kerang teacher)

You see it their home work, you see it in incomplete homework, incomplete assessments, not prepared for exams … especially during the tourist season there are a number of jobs available for kids. It's cheap labour during the tourist season.

(Longreach teacher)

Many informants were anxious to point out the maturity of young people in rural and remote areas and their resilience in the face of extraordinary circumstances.

I think it makes the children older … you say to them well you might not be able to do that because we can’t afford it … they are aware of the situation.

(Cootamundra welfare worker)

A greater majority of them actually share the burden with their children, they understand all the stresses so the kids don’t like to go out into the community and amongst their peers .. the kids actually isolate themselves, and they make that choice that they want to stay home as well.

(Kerang community informant)

They’re not demanding

(Blackall community informant)

6.11 Resilience

It is evident from this research that the communities visited and their people exhibit remarkable resilience in the face of what has been the worst drought on record. Students, parents, teachers and other community members were keen to describe the circumstances of drought and we have done our best to outline this above. At the same time, through their words and actions, we became aware of the remarkable strengths of the people with whom we came in contact, their resourcefulness, their perseverance and their innate sensitivities to each
other. We were humbled by the enormous challenges faced by people affected by drought and the fortitude as well as humour displayed. We have come away with enormous respect for the people we met while doing this research, particularly the young people who are the main focus of this project. They are remarkable Australians who have risen to the challenge of drought and are responding in ways that must make their families and communities very proud. Our project also reveals the challenges these dynamic young people face seeking educational access which we take up in chapter 7.
7. Findings

Part 2: Access to Education

In this chapter we present the findings on drought impacts on educational access for rural and remote young people. This is done by focusing on the various educational stages and using the voices of the people in the case study communities.

7.1 Primary School

In discussing primary school access we focus very much on remote young people because of the significant issues associated with accessing education in remote areas. Our research quickly revealed that drought is forcing farm families to draw heavily on family labour, including very young children. On remote properties where young people study by School of the Air and their mothers are their usual home tutor, the competing demands of property work and schooling are very difficult for both mothers and children to balance. We were informed that even as little as fifteen years ago over 50% of families employed governesses, now only 7% can afford this. This has exacerbated the pressures on mothers at a time when they are needed elsewhere.

Adding to the stresses on remote families is the fact that many properties are now operated by stockmen and managers. There is some suggestion that there are parents struggling to meet the demands of home tutoring because of their own limited educational background. There are parents in remote areas who do not have the skills to teach their children.

The loss of families has also resulted in lower numbers studying through School of the Air and therefore more limited peer groups for remote children.

The drought then has impacted in a number of ways. The need for all family members to work on properties is one result, the lack of disposable income and high cost of fuel has resulted in families limiting their trips to town and also limiting their involvement with excursions and other interactions with peers. Another issue for remote families is that the high cost of fuel limits the ability of some families to run the generator and hence the satellite for the School of the Air lessons.

We were told that there may be some pressure on families to complete assignments for their young people so that they can all go out to work on the properties. It is clear from our research that the pressures on mothers to deliver education and to work on the property are extraordinary. They find themselves pulled in various directions and struggle with giving an adequate education to their children.
The Allowance for Home Tutors does not allow them scope to deal with these pressures. It would need to be significantly higher for them to be able to contemplate employing a governess for schooling or a worker to free them up to undertake home tutoring more effectively.

A lot of people haven’t the experience and don’t know how to teach anyway ... the pressure on the husband, wife and kids – it’s an added burden they don’t need.

(Longreach welfare worker)

Mum [might] quickly do the assignments and send them back and the student is illiterate.

(Longreach welfare worker)

Mothers who do home tutor note the pressures of establishing a school routine, being the resident tutor and keeping up with property work.

Dragging the children out of bed ... keeping them positive ... into the school room at 8, then you work through the day with the papers and on air lessons and disruptions that might occur. We work until your day’s papers are done and then they go back to being Mum or Dad’s hired help.

(Longreach parent)

It’s very difficult for us to be there [in the school room] all the time. They are quite independent little workers but then as soon as we leave to hang washing on the line or whatever it’s “Mum I need your help”. If you’re with them you might set them work and they might be right for fifteen minutes.

(Blackall parent)

You’d have to have at least a good hour, maybe an hour and a half [to prepare lessons even before you start] ... you prepare any sheet work or there might be cutting out to do ... there’s a lot of getting prepared. ... as the children get older its not as intense because you’re not having to do as much reading and stuff. ... but those first three years I’d say you have to give a good hour and a half [preparation time].

(Longreach parent)

Many mothers noted that they are not trained in teaching and yet their children’s education is largely dependent on them.

Not coming from a teaching background ... the expectations you put on yourself as a mother and a home tutoring mother ... the expectations you put on your children because you know that if there’s a failure it’ll come back to me. Trying to be home tutor, Mum, the jillaroo for the husband, trying to be wife, trying to be so many things and no matter they all over flow into one another.

(Longreach parent)
They didn’t learn a damn thing [from me] by distance.
(Hay parent)

When I first started you stayed at home and just did it. You were left to your own devices pretty well.
(Hay parent)

Not everybody who lives out here on a property is well educated. There is a real hidden issue of literacy.
(Hay parent)

Distance education works very well if your child is academic, if you are well educated yourself, if you are well organised, if you have good organisational skills, if you don’t have a lot of younger children. ...
I feel very sorry for some Mums out here because there is such pressure on them that they should be able to do it.
(Longreach parent)

However inevitably mothers rued the amount of work they have and the pressures this creates.

For most of our families these days you are the jillaroo as well. You’re the one that answers the phone, you’re the one that does the books. ...
If there are people there working you’re doing the extra feeding – and that’s the thing, if you could go in and just do the school and that’s it, it would be fine and you could keep up. But because we’re not in that situation ...
(Longreach parent)

This is made even more complicated when one partner has to leave to find paid work.

My husband actually went away working from October until March this year and when he was away it was me. The kids were out doing the feeding and the watering ...
We were running the fence lines that needed to be checked ...
We’re doing what we can without employing anyone. ...
[and he went away] purely to get education money.
(Longreach parent)

Mothers note that the School of the Air is very supportive – there are tutor workshops organised regularly, and mini-schools for the children. The tutors also provide support for each other.

However most felt that teaching into high school is beyond them. They also feel strongly about their children’s need for the socialisation of other children, and so boarding school becomes a necessity for most remote families. The problem is funding this.

Grade 7 – that’s my limit. ... we would have shot each other if we had have gone any longer. Plus
you can see them – when they get to year 7 you know that they need more. They need social interaction.

(Longreach parent)

I wanted them to see what was out there … to get out there to see that it is different.

(Longreach parent)

This pressure to look after their children’s education at the same time as the drought was drawing them out to work on properties or seek income has resulted in women making difficult choices. For many distance education is seen as the last choice.

They don’t want to be tied to the house. Well they can’t be because of the drought … parents choosing to stay at home with their children should be receiving every bit as much money as those that choose to send theirs away. … she stays at home and can’t afford to put on a governess with that money. And with the drought she’s helping her husband.

(Hay parent)

Give her a choice [through funding support] whether she can teach or do outside work. She can employ a governess, go outside and help with the sheep, or employ a man [to do farm labour].

(Hay parent)

I tended not to go to a property for a [School of the Air] workshop because I couldn’t get groceries or I couldn’t make use of that time. I couldn’t sort of justify the trip … whereas if there was a mini-school in town I would come in … It was because of the drought impact … you’re trying to save every buck you can, particularly when you’ve got boarding school fees rolling in time after time.

(Hay parent)

Every day you’re not at home [doing lessons] that’s a day lost … and they don’t have relief teachers. … you can only do what you can do.

(Hay parent)

So Mum is doing the home schooling as well as everything else. And they don’t have a hand on the place and they have to pull beasts out of the dam or something, then Mum might have to go off with Dad and some of the kids will probably have to come along, so the schooling gets [abandoned] … I am seeing a lot more depression and stress related and anxiety kind of illnesses in women.

(Longreach community informant)

So that’s putting more pressure particularly on the wives … so therefore it’s Mum and Dad running the show plus educating the kids.

(Longreach welfare worker)
It was pointed out that women are also now adding the BAS statements to their workloads since the introduction of the GST.

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*They are doing all the home bookwork and doing a BAS Statement every month, it is a hell of a lot of work. On top of that just running a household on a day to day basis. There is her sanity as well that needs to go into there. Some of them are then carers for a mother, a father, a mother-in-law, a grandmother.*

*(Longreach community informant)*

Women also note that there is a lot more travelling required now for distance education activities, for sport and other extra-curricular events. They are also aware the numbers of children now studying by distance is declining, disadvantaging those who are studying this way because their classes are smaller etc. The loss of children is recognised by some women as a product of drought.

The VISE tutors who voluntarily visit isolated properties for short periods are viewed as a very good service and many go back to the same families more than once, becoming close family friends. However a few parents note that the cost of accommodating VISE tutors is sometimes prohibitive during drought because of the need to provide food and precious water and some families report withdrawing from the program for these reasons.

Mothers say that distance education is an ideal way for their children to study, but only if they have the time and resources to do it properly.

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*I think the limitation is only there in the sense of what you as a tutor put into their education.*

*(Longreach parent)*

Where there used to be a network of small schools dotted across the outback, many of these have now closed, thus reducing the educational choices for remote families. Experiences with educational access for children vary for those in remoter areas but include the closure of small schools as a result of the loss of families. This has left some remote young people without access to primary or secondary education other than through distance education or boarding school. Others note the loss of school bus routes, cut because of the loss of families from remote areas, leaving many either driving their children long distances, moving to town (involuntarily separating) or taking on the teaching of their children through the distance education facilities.

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*It was private vehicle to get the kids to and from school. And mostly on dirt roads.*

*(Balranald parent)*

*And that knocks into your day as well. You have to be down here at a quarter to nine. By the time you go back home again and then you have to be back down here at,*
what time did we finish – I can’t remember that – so like from lunch time on, you never did anything because you were always watching the clock to get down here in time. If it rained, well, not that we had that much rain, well yes that was a problem [on dirt roads].
(Balranald parent who traveled 40 kms each way twice a day)

A friend of mine was saying three out of five neighbours they had when they were first married are gone and her support system, her friends she relied on.
(Hay parent)

Well you look at the options I suppose, do you have them at home and do distance education?... Distance education is full time and it is a big responsibility. I don’t know how some mothers ever do it. I really don’t.
(Balranald parent)

As a result of the difficulties associated with distance education several women had taken advantage of the second home allowance provided to remote families to allow them to move to be near schools. This has the added bonus of allowing women to work for much needed income. Thus second home allowance and involuntary separation allows children to access local schools and their mothers to find paid work. This income is often needed to support the family.

The second home allowance is enabling some people to make a choice. They don’t want, or couldn’t teach, correspondence.
(Hay parent)

The impact on the remaining isolated small schools is significant. As numbers decrease, remote areas must fight to keep their schools open. The only alternative is home schooling and this is not appealing to a lot of busy families. One of the effects of loss of population is the number of empty farm houses in remote areas. Another is the loss of school bus routes. The small community of Booligal near Hay has no bus service and children are brought to the little primary school by their parents. At the time of our research one student had been unable to attend for several days because recent rain had left the road impassable. These issues of low cost access are very real concerns for teachers. Some families give up and revert to home schooling because of access issues.

[When interviewing workers] they’ll ask two questions – what are the wages and is there a school bus. That’s all they want to know. And if you say no to the school bus, the whole tone of the conversation changes. ... you’ll only get a couple that have no children.
(Hay parent)
We went down to X and they have a school of seven which is just enough to keep the school going. But because one of the families is trying to sell, that will be three children going ... I don't know what will happen. ... the parents then have to teach them and if they are feeding stock and carting water, how the hell are the kids going to get an education?

(Longreach welfare worker)

7.2 High School

In most of the small rural high schools visited there is a noticeable decline in student numbers and this has implications for teacher numbers. Teacher numbers are determined based on enrolments at day 8 of the school year making it difficult for rural and remote schools to plan their time tables until this point. At one school the decline in teacher numbers from 23 to 16 since 2000 has had major impacts on resourcing and planning. At another school the load had been calculated at 27.6 staff. This formula creates a particular problem for isolated schools – attracting a fractional appointment to a remote community is nearly impossible and they therefore must use sparse local resources thus further depleting the pool of casual teachers and they are ‘scarce as hen’s teeth’. In addition teachers note that they are inadequately staffed and that the formula discriminates against rural schools.

At another school, numbers were at a point where the retention of the Deputy Principal’s position was an issue, at another the staff were trying to protect subject choices in senior years by reducing choices in lower grades and at another they were deciding which academic discipline they might cut entirely. Teacher numbers have been dropping at many of the schools because of declining student numbers and the reduction of teachers is often achieved by not filling vacated positions and consequently these schools are not getting ‘new blood, new ideas’.

We need to work differently here... the package cannot just be resourced on numbers. That’s too simple. Our numbers will - we’ll always be on a sliding scale... I can do the best I can but I can understand people saying “you can’t offer me [the subjects I want], I’m going somewhere else”. I understand that.

(Blackall teacher)

Often the teacher formula results in teachers having to teach outside their area of expertise. It also means there are limited people in each discipline and staff are having to do more tasks.

You can be the only one in your subject area which can be very daunting. When the syllabus comes
out ... you are the one who has to make it work ... you are going to have to figure it out.
(Longreach teacher)

So I have more jobs than I have people and I just worry that I am asking people to do too much.
(Longreach teacher)

Subject choice is a vexed issue for a school. On the one hand they want to provide wide choice, on the other they do not wish to put too much pressure on teachers.

The broader you make it the more taxed your staff are.
(Longreach teacher)

Often teachers coming into remote schools are not experienced teachers, meaning that these extra pressures are more difficult. Attracting experienced teachers, and attracting teachers away from the coast, remains a difficult proposition.

Professional development of teachers is problematic in smaller schools with lower numbers of teachers as their colleagues must pick up the load if they go away for a course, or scarce casual allocations must be used and casual teachers found. It is also problematic in remote areas where a professional development day on the coast may mean two additional days travelling. In order for teachers to access professional development opportunities from Longreach for example, they must take an expensive plane trip to Brisbane or other coastal centres and spend at least three days away. Yet teachers note that because of their isolation they need additional professional development activities such as Year 12 marking opportunities in order to keep abreast of educational developments.

Professional support - support the people who are here that are trying to deal with the coal face. If you have inventive, resourceful, resilient people at the coal face they will make [the most] of the resources they have got.
(Longreach teacher)

While it is hard to attract teachers to the country, we were told that staff retention has been good in many remote communities when teachers realise the value of the community lifestyle. Teachers also argue there are significant benefits to teaching in remote schools including the ability to take risks and to be innovative in their approach.

It’s a nice place and they prefer to stay rather than bolt.
(Longreach teacher)

Declining student numbers impact not only on teacher numbers but also on infrastructure support. For example as a result of the large and sudden drop in numbers at one high school, the budget allocation for administrative support and cleaning was reduced despite the fact that these tasks don’t change. School personnel at another
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school pointed out that charges for water have risen as a result of drought forcing the schools to pay higher utilities bills. One school is paying an additional $15000 to keep an outdoor area watered because they felt it was so important to the well-being of their students to see green grass. No additional allocation was received for this.

School personnel were clear that the problems associated with a decline in student numbers are not solely drought related. The loss of 100 students at Blackall for example, was associated with a loss of employment on properties and this decline in employment was in turn associated with the downturn in wool and a change from sheep to cattle. Cattle stations tend to only employ additional people at peak times. Additionally it was noted that the Queensland move to regionalise services has hit Blackall hard with services pulled back to Longreach and Charleville resulting in a loss of population.

Subject choice is also affected by the drop in the numbers of students. Because of the decline in numbers of students and teachers there is some tension evident in high schools about maintaining subject choices. The possibilities of an extensive curriculum are often limited – ‘pretty basic’. Yet the high schools visited make a strong commitment to subject choice in the senior school, with some subjects having very low numbers (sometimes as low as 2 or 3). However one of the issues associated with small classes is the need to share classes eg between Years 11 and 12. Some students find this frustrating. Nonetheless the effort made to provide subjects to senior students in the schools visited is praiseworthy.

In the end it’s a numbers issue and you can’t offer the full range of subjects.

(Hay teacher)

In almost all of the high schools visited students’ subject choices were being extended through access to distance education subjects allowing students to receive help via telephone and computer. In Queensland these are sourced from Brisbane, Charters Towers or Longreach; in the NSW communities visited from Balranald; and in Victoria from Melbourne. In one school, students note that about ‘three-quarters’ of students are studying a subject by distance. Some children take one or two distance subjects but ‘they [often] just can’t cope with it’. However, teachers are confident using distance education options means choices are as good as a larger high school where choices may be constrained by subjects placed into lines and hence restricting choice.

There are concerns that student do not achieve the same grades as they do in their face to face classes and the cost (quoted at $300 - $400 per subject) is making this option prohibitive.

In some schools teachers note that technology at the school to facilitate greater access for students to DE options is hampered by poor infrastructure. ‘Our telephone systems
are archaic’. They also note that there is no dedicated teaching allocation for distance education students at the school.

The only way we have been able to manage is because teachers have volunteered to take an extra lesson. (Cohuna teacher)

However student themselves note the complexities of this form of study and parents worried that there is little support for their young people taking this option other than telephone access.

You get a booklet with set work in it and that work takes you about a week to do and then you just hand it in and it gets marked and you get given another one. (Balranald young person)

It was too much workload so I dropped it. ... Teacher is in Brisbane that you can email whenever you want and contact on the phone ... but it is still very difficult to try and teach yourself ... because it is a complex subject. (Longreach young person)

The teachers are here but you might be the only person to do that so there’s not enough for a class to run. ... [The teacher’s] got other stuff to do with other DE students and she calls them and talks to them and, yeah, you’re kind of by yourself. (Balranald young person)

I could have done virtual tutoring online but it just didn’t fit with my timetable. (Longreach young person)

You can sit and not do anything ... and the teacher’s not there to tell you to do your work. (Balranald young person)

It is on the kid’s shoulders [whether they ring] (Cohuna parent)

I personally have said [to my children] if you need to do a subject by correspondence choose another one or go to a different school. (Cohuna parent)

These problems suggest that while students have access to additional choices, the supports are not optimal. Students note this is a very difficult way to study particularly if you are the only student taking a subject with no local teacher support. Students report that studying by distance is ‘really hard’. Those doing languages for example note:
It’s hard because you can’t just practice with other people…. You don’t learn as much because you don’t have the teacher/student classes.

(Balranald young person)

Other than the Distance Education schools, no schools officially provide staffing support for DE. However teachers at all the schools have extended themselves to provide some support in their own time. With virtual school (as opposed to DE), the students do have a teacher on-line and lessons timetabled. The addition of virtual school timetabling in some cases has meant schools having to extend their hours from 8am to 5pm.

We’re looking at a different way of teaching … but we need infrastructure to support what we are going to do and [our needs] are going to be different here to on the coast.

(Blackall teacher)

In all schools the issue of extra-curricular activities was raised. Students from remote areas, and to a lesser extent, from rural areas, must travel significant distances to access these activities, often requiring at least one night’s accommodation. CAP funding is available to assist with additional costs, yet young people are not accessing extra-curricular activities in the same way as they did before the drought and fewer are taking the option for excursions. Many feel this is drought related and that this has led to financial difficulties for some families. Schools have responded by reducing activities to try and ease the financial pressures on families. Nonetheless many young people are unable to represent at higher levels in sport and cultural activities because of associated costs and transport problems, thus restricting their exposure to extra-curricular activities and representative honours.

We have a number of students who are interested in art … and I believe they don’t have stimulus … our kids have never been to an art gallery.

(Longreach teacher)

There’s a huge impact on sport because they can’t afford it.

(Blackall teacher)

If you can’t pay for the excursion on the spot they let you pay $10 off or $5 off a week over the twelve months … most schools do that anyway. Just we’ve needed it a lot more here.

(Balranald young person)

However many students report that access to extra-curricular activities remains difficult and they note they often make decisions about things they know they can’t afford to go to and don’t bother asking their parents. Access to inter-school sport is also problematic. The cost of some sports plus the cost of petrol to access distant schools or venues makes them
prohibitive for many students. They are reliant on their parents to drive them and provide this resourcing. Parents expressed real concern about their young peoples reduced exposure to city life and their lack of socialisation or exposure to other opportunities.

"There needs to be some compensation for distance – everything a country kid does, whether it is going to a school sport or going to a theatre performance or going to work experience or going to a career expo, or to have tuition to assist them, involves distance and cost and time. That is a real inhibiting factor for them." (Cohuna parent)

"Certainly we had to really look at whether she needs to do that or can we afford for her to go there." (Cohuna parent)

"Several times the trips have been cancelled – there's not much support." (Longreach young person)

It was noted, however, by teachers that often families are too proud to receive assistance and that young people, often at a very young age, are making decisions about what they will attend so their parents are not exposed to additional financial pressures.

"The school will make arrangements for paying things but for a lot of people it is not an honourable option."

(Kerang teacher)

"There is an embarrassment involved in it. You don't want to 'fess up to not being able to pay for something’ because then your mates aren’t your mates anymore." (Cohuna teacher)

Funding vocational education courses has been difficult for some students, although schools do subsidise these. However there is no transport supplied to get students to the vocational education courses and students are reliant on parents. For this reason many reported pulling out of vocational education opportunities. Another problem raised in one school is that some young people cannot afford to buy books. The financial difficulties of many families is seriously limiting young people’s access to educational opportunities.

The immense changes in the community and the problems many families are experiencing have led several schools to seek out welfare options. Schools have chaplains and counsellors, although for many of the schools, because they are small, the time these people are in the school may be limited to one day per week and this is said to be too little. Some schools work closely with social workers in their communities and regions, again however this is limited by a lack of local services.
7.3 Allowances

Informants referred to access to AIC allowances as problematic. Those who are eligible report that the amounts available are very limited relative to fees charged by boarding schools.

The amount of money that we get, if we wanted to send them to [hostel] to go to the local school, we would still be out of pocket to come to the local school. Now that is wrong. I think families should be given enough to access their closest local school.

(Hay parent)

It’s never sufficient ... I’m not a welfare seeker ... but it’s never really enough.

(Hay parent)

Those who are not eligible report feeling the allowances are discriminatory. The lack of access to AIC allowances for farm workers’ and shearers’ children is seen as a significant inequity in the system by welfare workers as these comments from Longreach and Hay informants suggest.

But you do see the shearer’s kids, like there are drover’s kids – where the graziers get propped up by the Government, these families don’t. So it is probably affecting those kids more, even though they don’t realise it because there is no top-up for Dad or Mum’s wage.

A lot of resentment in the town about the townspeople not qualifying for any of the boarding school allowances. They do get really annoyed about that. There is a lot of angst.

A lot of parents realise that to live in town you are discriminated against basically, and they are saying if you live out of town it is going to cost you 85% less to send them away.... they call them “Johnny’s Kids” – John Howard’s kids and the ones who actually work and rely on parents to pay – they are the poor ones, the ones whose parents are home paying for them.

But you do see the shearer’s kids, like there are drover’s kids – where the graziers get propped up by the Government, these families don’t. So it is probably affecting those

It is annoying ... small businesses work their backsides off and get no assistance for their kids.

One day we packed up and went to [regional centre to visit Centrelink] – took every bank statement to try and see what we were entitled to – to help us out because my husband is working in small business – nothing!! ... I don’t want a million dollars ... allowances would help. And tertiary education is hard!

Parents also point out that when their children reach 16 the move from Family Allowance to Youth Allowance
is problematic because the guidelines are prohibitive for many families.

When your child turns 16 your Family Allowance stops and you have to go in and apply for Youth Allowance and that is far more complex.

(Balranald parent)

7.4 Bypassing

In remote areas the issue of ‘bypassing’ the local high school is one that causes significant community conflict. Bypassing is a strategy being lobbied for by parent groups as a response to declining numbers in the local high schools and increasing use of distance education. These groups are calling for parents to be eligible for AIC allowances despite being close to a high school. However the issue alarms local teachers and students at the high schools who feel their high school may be under threat. It also is a concern for older community members who remember being involved in intense campaigns to secure senior high schooling in their towns.

People who not only cannot afford to go away but don’t want to go away – they’re going to be the ones that are disadvantaged.

(Blackall community informant)

We won’t have Year 11 and 12 and we won’t be able to afford to go away.

(Blackall young person)

I just wouldn’t go to school in Year 11 if they shut it down.

(Blackall young person)

[There is] inequity between rural people getting allowances to send their kids ...

(Longreach parent)

Living away from home allowance being applicable to kids in town ... that is a sleeping dragon that rears its head in the community.

(Longreach parent)

Nonetheless in several communities students note the inequity associated with access to AIC – the ‘lines on the map approach’ – and bypassing will introduce some equity into this system. Bypassing is a vexed issue for all concerned and one that needs very careful consideration.

7.5 Hostels

Some remote young people are able to access high school education because of the availability of a hostel in a small town. In the case study sites there are hostels at Hay and Longreach and one had recently closed
at Blackall. Keeping the hostel open is something that students, parents, teachers and community members view as highly desirable not only to allow greater choice for geographically disadvantaged young people, but also because it brings a boost of numbers to the local high school.

One of the hostels visited also provides accommodation for young people from the show circuit – ‘showies’. Another draws in young people whose parents are in the shearing industry or are from remote properties. These hostels bring an additional 20 to 30 students to the local high school and, without these the schools would really struggle. The closure of the third hostel in 2003 had reduced the options for isolated students in that region.

The issue of access to education is a concern for teachers in remote areas. In some very small communities there is no high school and therefore no alternative other than hostel accommodation in a nearby town or boarding school. Teachers feel that governments should be providing a no-cost and equitable option to these children. For young people in Isisford for example, there is no high school. The nearest high school at Longreach requires families to send their young people to stay at the hostel and to be out of pocket $1500 per child after allowances are taken into account.

It just seems unfair that because people choose to live in a rural area and make a valuable contribution to society and a valuable contribution to the agricultural industry, then tyranny of distance means they have to send their kids away and pay for the privilege of it ... if you live in an isolated community and that is your only option, why are you penalised for living there?

(Longreach teacher)

Because our research was conducted in small communities, we did not meet with students away at boarding schools. We did however have some contact with students who had returned to the local high school because of the financial impact of drought. We also spoke with students from remote areas attending the hostels in two of the communities visited. An informant spoke of being withdrawn from boarding school because of the high cost and students attending the hostel spoke about their worry for their parents at home.

People that choose [the hostel] choose it for two reasons. They choose it because they financially can’t afford $20 000 for boarding school and they choose it because they want their children close.

(Longreach teacher)

I used to be in boarding school and basically we found it financially hard ... so now I’m here.

(Longreach young person)
The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia’s rural and remote areas

You’re always wondering what’s happening at home … whether you should be there helping.

You just worry about it. You ring up and find out and then they say something is wrong and you sit in your room and think ‘I should be home fixing that’.

7.6 Boarding school – family view

There are significant differences in numbers of students going to boarding schools from rural areas compared to remote areas. In the remote communities, tradition dictates that isolated property students will go to boarding school after Year 7. Nonetheless parents agonise about keeping their young people at boarding school in drought times and some younger siblings are not going away.

- particularly if they have had other children going away to boarding school and now they can’t afford it – they don’t feel they are offering this child the best educational opportunities that they were able to offer their other kids. The mother carries all this – the father too – carries this guilt. The grief …

(Longreach community informant)

Our research suggests that drought has had an impact on choices for remote students. Some families are delaying sending their young people to boarding school until Year 9 or later, and / or using the local hostel to access the high school. They may also be choosing a cheaper regional boarding school rather than the expensive capital city options. Alternatively, mothers might move with their children to town to access the local school or, in a few cases, they remain in distance education. These choices are clearly being made for financial reasons.

For remote young people there is often no alternative but to go away, and access to AIC is critical to their ability to access this form of education. Nonetheless in many remote communities there is strong agreement that those who want boarding school education for their young people would find some way of doing this. This includes negotiating with boarding schools over fees, delaying the payment of fees, or sending their children to a less costly boarding school. Parents in remote areas are more likely to pursue
boarding options noting that their young people need to be socialised as well as educated.

Remote kids] They’re always going to think that people further in are scary. They’re not street wise.

(Blackall parent arguing the need to socialise her children)

By contrast, in rural communities property children are more likely to go to the local high school at least until Year 10 and often for all their high school years. These rural students have access to good choices in their local community. Nonetheless we did note that some young people in the rural communities who might normally go to boarding school are not going away.

Many parents point out that while they had sent their young people away, visiting them at boarding school is difficult for remote families because of the drought workload, the lack of hired help, the cost of travel and accommodation and, of course, the need to be home tutor to younger children. Parents feel that the drought has added significantly to the difficulties associated with visiting their children.

Well you just can’t go away from the place for more than a day, you know, someone has to be there.

(Balranald parent)

She is school prefect and we missed her induction into that and missed her dinner for that and then she was in a cabaret performance the other night, we missed that – it just goes on and on – and that is just one of them. Yes that is when it is really hard.

(Balranald parent)

While many parents stated that they have negotiated for the fees associated with boarding school to be paid off over a number of years, they also point out that this seriously restricts their ability to even contemplate the provision of tertiary education support. Parents feel that boarding schools in Queensland are sensitive to the experience of drought and that this is largely due to the fact that country children make up a significant proportion of their cohort.

We have actually finished boarding school but we will probably pay for that 10 years after we have finished. The worry about that is the cost of tertiary education as well on top of that. ... so things like Youth Allowance become so much more relevant ... and so [you say to children] maybe it is easier to take a year off, qualify for Youth Allowance.

(Balranald parent)

One year our boarding house offered us a discount from our fees due to the drought conditions.

(Blackall parent)
Most of the schools, especially those that deal with a high rural boarding would be open and conducive to trying to work something out.

(Longreach parent)

7.7 Boarding School – school view

As part of our research we surveyed fifty-six boarding schools in Queensland, NSW, Victoria and ACT receiving a response rate of 37.5%. It is evident from this survey that boarding schools are aware of, and have been responding to, the hardships created by drought. Regional boarding schools have a more intimate awareness of the issues because rural and remote young people form such a significant part of their cohort and many noted the drought had cost them dearly. Capital city boarding schools report that the decline in numbers of rural and remote young people attending their schools is compensated by introducing new cohorts such as overseas students.

Of the boarding schools that responded to the survey, 40% reported a drop in numbers of rural and remote students since 2000; 75% reported rural and remote students come to boarding school at a later year level; 90% are aware of critical financial stressors on rural and remote families; and all but one of the respondents noted the need to increase bursaries, scholarships, discounts, sibling discounts, delayed payment schemes (often over several years) or tolerance of bad debts for rural and remote families. One third reported that rural and remote young people have great difficulty accessing extra-curricular activities. Respondents reported worries about the mental health of rural and remote students and the stresses these young people were under associated with worrying about their parents. As a result, 45% noted that rural and remote young people needed greater pastoral care and many had introduced increased counselling. One-third subsidise uniforms for rural and remote young people and 26% subsidise excursions. Respondents also noted a disturbing trend towards young people from rural and remote areas not going to university for financial reasons. Schools estimated the costs of the drought to their school as varying from $30,000 to $500,000. It was evident that the financial impact was greatest in regional schools.

This survey reinforces the information received from our case study sites. Parents in rural and remote areas are struggling to provide education for their young people. Those who must send their children away are often under significant financial stress and this stress is eased somewhat by schools providing fee alleviation strategies. However some young people from rural and remote areas at these schools have been under significant stress because of their parents’ financial difficulties and worries about their parents. One result
has been a decline in numbers going on to university because parents are paying off boarding school debts over several years.

7.8 Leaving school

Rural and remote young people now face significant decisions concerning staying at high school or leaving. Many young people report that they feel compelled to relieve their parents of the cost of education by leaving school early. Teachers report worrying trends towards early school leaving associated with drought and the cost of education.

"Kids are dropping out of school. We have quite a number at risk – they look for employment early because of the pressure of drought on their family."

(Kerang community informant)

Those who do leave early face the prospect of finding work in a very limited labour market. The rural labour market is characterised by very high levels of gender-segregation. Students tend not to challenge the gendered workplace and gendered stereotypes and most hold traditional views of their employment options and future occupation. Thus boys have far more choices with a number of male designated apprenticeships and jobs. Many boys aspire to do a trade and most note that they would leave school early. However there are fewer

of these now during the drought and ‘a desperate shortage of tradesmen’ to provide the training.

Girls are more likely to aspire to university education and prefer to keep studying, but they also point out that there are very few jobs available for girls in their community ‘unless it is a family business’. Teachers note ‘girls have aspirations’.

"Girls are more determined ... they know what they are doing."

(Cootamundra teacher)

An important point raised by girls is that the gendered rural job market means that they don’t ‘see’ a breadth of female role models in their community. It is difficult for them to envisage their future when they don’t see many women employed in their communities in jobs to which they aspire. They report little diversity in role models and limited employment options for girls most of whom necessarily see their future elsewhere. Most want to complete high school and then leave town for work or further education.

"I think most of us are planning on staying on just so we can get out of this town ... go to somewhere bigger and better with more opportunity. I know for a fact that half our class is actually going to go to Year 12 so they can get a UAI and then go to a bigger and better"
town ... Most of us want to go to uni ... there’s not much for our age any more.

(Balranald young person)

I don’t reckon anyone could stay around here straight after school.

(Balranald young person)

In most communities the girls felt that the boys had lost interest in education and that many will leave at the end of Year 10 or during Year 11 to take on apprenticeships.

They are just not interested. They would rather be out working, earning money.

(Kerang young person)

Even for those young people who leave school early and seek apprenticeships or full-time employment, these opportunities are often located outside their small communities in larger regional centres or capital cities and this requires parental assistance. Most of the young people interviewed consider leaving as their main option because the choices offered by their town are too ‘narrow’. Nonetheless the move is not necessarily a smooth transition.

There are not many young people on Job Network books in the 15-25 age groups for several reasons. Because they are means tested against their parents’ income for Youth Allowance, many young people are not eligible for benefits and so do not have to register with a Job Network provider; additionally many leave town to find work or to study. Yet there are still a number of young unemployed people in these communities who are not being represented or assisted because of their lack of benefits and these young people are felt to be at significant risk.

There just seems to be a large group of kids that aren’t working, are not getting any income support but they are also not affiliating themselves with a job network organisation.

(Cootamundra welfare worker)

Nonetheless informants felt the younger people are hardest to place in employment because they lack experience and there are so many older ‘seasoned’ workers now seeking employment because of drought. There is also the problem of a lack of jobs designated for young people, for example, there are fewer apprenticeships available in most towns studied. One respondent also felt that young people are turned off apprenticeships that are available by the low pay for apprentices, remuneration that makes it impossible for young people who must also live away from home in order to access their apprenticeship training.

The employer can only pay $200 - $300 a week for a wage and that person has a car to get to and from work and the cost of fuel here is astronomical. They have to pay for the car and they may
have to pay for accommodation, especially if they have to move from somewhere else and especially if they’ve had to move from their parents ... so they have to pay rent, car fuel, living expenses out of a very small wage. ... but if the employer had to pay a higher wage they simply wouldn’t be employed in the first place because the employer couldn’t afford to put them on.

(Kerang welfare worker)

The result sometimes is they take better paying unskilled jobs and so do not receive skills training. Regardless, the vast majority of young people usually have to go away for employment or education. Yet traveling away for work poses some problems for young people because of financial cost, low wages for apprenticeships and the emotional drain involved in leaving their community and some may be giving up.

There are kids who won’t leave. They stay here and say, ‘ no I am not allowed to leave home,’ or ‘I don’t want to leave home’.

(Hay teacher)

They’re too young to leave home [at year 10] and the cost of setting them up in a unit or a flat of their own at that age just makes it almost impossible.

(Hay teacher)

I see lots of kids who don’t necessarily want to go away probably have to go away. I think that’s a very sad thing ... I think that’s the saddest thing - that’s one of the things I worry about most.

(Kerang parent)

It’s a shame because you have a close knit family ... and then if one has to go away to work it almost breaks up the family to a degree. I know a lot of families where the boys have had to go away and they’re probably kids who would have stayed if they could have found work.

(Kerang parent)

Several students note that the prospect of going away was quite difficult. Having been brought up in a small town, the thought of moving to the big capital cities is fraught with emotional turmoil for many of the young people interviewed.

I don’t want to leave!

(Cootamundra young person)

It’s too busy, too rushed. If I go there [to a capital city] I close my eyes when we’re driving around. It’s just madness and I’ve always said since I was like ten or eleven years old, I’m never driving in Melbourne, never driving in Sydney.

(Balranald young person)
It’s scary!
(Cootamundra young person)

Balranald – it’s different. It’s got wide streets and open spaces and the houses aren’t all squished together ... then you go to the city ... it’s got narrow streets and all different exits and nobody has a lawn and everyone lives in apartments ... and you get lost really easily ... so it’s a big difference.
(Balranald young person)

The result of this fear is often that young people will choose to work or study closer to home at a regional city /university. Often this means that students will tailor their career options to what is available at that particular site.

7.9 Access to TAFE

The lack of access to TAFE in all but one of the communities is of great concern to young people, their parents, teachers and other community members, described by one as ‘a massive problem’. In the Queensland communities for example, the nearest TAFE is several hundred kilometres distant. In many communities this means that those undertaking apprenticeships must travel and stay away for long periods. In all communities, lack of public transport further restricts access and the rising cost of fuel makes access financially prohibitive. In rural areas it usually means parents have to provide transport for their young people who are too young to hold a licence. The cost associated with this for families is very difficult. Additionally, the need for large slabs of time away impacts on employers’ willingness to put apprentices on in the first place. One view expressed is that local TAFE colleges don’t match training to local business needs.

Young people note that access to TAFE is complicated by cost and travel. Courses are not always available at the nearest campus and, for some, this means travelling a long way from home. For others, getting to the course, particularly if it is at night, is complicated by a lack of public transport and needing to rely on family to provide transport if they are too young to hold a licence. For most the cost of accommodation and course costs are significant barriers.

Like there’s education, there’s a school, but that’s it. There’s no TAFE, there’s no college, or no uni ...
(Blackall young person)

I think we would have so many more satisfied school leavers if we had TAFE locally. ... we need greater access to TAFE.
(Hay teacher)
TAFE would be the only other option. I would have to go away for that though.
(Longreach young person)

Kids haven’t got the finances, they haven’t got a licence, they haven’t got a vehicle. They have to rely on their parents and some are single parents who simply can’t afford it. ... Of course if they’re in a labouring job they can’t find the time to get away and do a pre-apprenticeship course and it sets a precedent for the rest of their life.
(Kerang welfare worker)

When they go away they simply cannot afford the accommodation when they are away, because it is a couple of hundred dollars a week for the six weeks.
(Longreach welfare worker)

One kid is 16, so every day his parents have to drive him up there – so it is a cost to his parents. His parents are only on a single wage so it is a big expense.
(Kerang welfare worker)

It may not necessarily be a choice. It may be a financial or social situation where they have to stay in the community. So it’s about providing training for them, training beyond school. ... They can’t afford to go away and there needs to be some sort of opportunities within the community.
(Hay community informant)

[The need to travel] starts a whole lot of new issues like even finding transport to get from one centre to another and safety issues. Young kids on the road driving, being tired after a long day in class ...
(Hay community informant)

A TAFE presence is absolutely essential because the best way out of the rut is education.
(Hay community informant)

7.10 Access to university

By far the biggest disadvantage targeted in each community by all stakeholders is the access, or lack of it, to university education. While students, parents, teachers and others know and accept that their young people have to leave the community to access university education, they are universally outraged at the financial barrier presented by the Youth Allowance system. Very few students note that they will be eligible for Youth Allowance and hence their access to university is restricted not by motivation or capacity, but by reduced financial circumstances. While many families do not qualify for Youth Allowance, they cannot provide the
funds to support a young person away at university because of accumulated debt, high costs and high levels of poverty. Where there is more than one child, the financial issues are compounded. Students at local high schools note that the drought has not impacted as much on their high school education as on their tertiary aspirations. Far more significant are their worries about tertiary education access where their options are critically affected by rurality and financial circumstances. They note being privy to conversations between their parents over funding for further education. Where there is more than one child requiring tertiary access, this puts a significant strain on family finances because of the need to support young people away from home. This leads some young people to make decisions that may make it financially easier for their parents.

There is ample evidence in this research that students are reassessing their commitment to tertiary study not because of lower aspirations but because of financial pressures. Students, parents, teachers and other informants see the lack of access to university as a major problem for young people. In addition, many families who have struggled to support their young people at boarding school have debts they are paying off over an extended period. There are also families who have been able to support older children to tertiary study but not younger ones. The financial pressures on parents imposed by a lack of access to tertiary allowances are mentioned in all communities visited.

The problem is some of them have borrowed the money to get them through [boarding] school and think that’s the end of it, and a lot of debt to start with. Now they’re facing university and they’re not ready for it.

(Blackall community informant)

A lot of it is financial. Mum and Dad can’t afford to employ them to come back on the farm although they probably could do with the help physically, financially they can’t.

(Kerang welfare worker)

People don’t have the money for those costs … they need some living away from home assistance … in a couple of cases [young people] haven’t gone [to uni]. … they were quite bright and would have been able to do whatever they wanted to do, but because Mum and Dad couldn’t afford the rent, or to support them while they were away, it didn’t happen.

(Blackall welfare worker)

I do see these families that become underprivileged because of the financial hardship that’s been created by drought and they’ve got
a child that wants to go to uni. ... I see some kids defer and work for twelve months.

(Kerang welfare worker)

If you want to go on to further education you have to have some sort of back up.

(Cootamundra welfare worker)

Parents are having the second job or both parents are working to send their kids away to Uni.

(Longreach welfare worker)

This leads many young people to try and qualify for Independent Youth Allowance by earning the more than $16000 necessary to be classified as independent. In all communities we were informed of the problems associated with trying to qualify for independent Youth Allowance because of reduced employment options in remote communities. The issue of problematic access to Youth Allowance for young people to study away from home was raised by a majority of respondents. Even in rural towns that are well served by high schools, this is viewed as the greatest barrier for young people attempting to access education. Young people who do take a year off may not find work, lose touch with their peers and move in a direction away from university study and hence the young person and their community do not get the skills training it needs. The issue of young people taking time off to try and earn independent status is mentioned in all communities. Teachers and parents note the prevalence of this strategy.

The kids who do that and then have to defer, earn the money so that when they go to uni they can get that funding – it worries me that they become entrenched in their community and its harder for them to go away. ... the kids who defer it really worries me that then go away and they've got nobody.

(Kerang parent)

Some of these rural kids should actually be classed as independent as soon as they leave school rather than this 18 months that they have to earn – what is it I think $16,000 before they can become independent? And a lot of families would probably encourage the kids to do the gap year because that is the only way they could access Youth Allowance because there was no way they could do it any other way.

(Balranald parent)

I have noticed a lot are taking a year off so that they can afford to go to Uni. Then a percentage aren’t going on with it then because they have settled into the work.

(Longreach welfare worker)

Kids are saying I will defer for a year while I earn some money and then go in twelve months and
rarely is that working because of financials and it’s just too scary. It’s just too scary!
(Longreach teacher)

I think a lot more are deferring. There’s no allowance made by the government to help country kids out. ... some kids I know don’t go at all.
(Blackall teacher)

A lot of kids are taking 12 months off and working ... they are basically putting their training on hold, I suppose to try and get enough money to be able to afford to go because the parents aren’t in financial situations to be able to. ... Yes some kids are disadvantaged, especially in rural communities like this one.
(Cootamundra teacher)

Young people note that the need to try and earn independent status is a common strategy among young people.

There are not a lot from this area that go straight off to Uni. You don’t have a fair amount of Year 12s finish at the end of the year and go straight away. They have to get money ... they defer and go out and work and try and get a bit of money.
(Cohuna young person)

Anyone that was from a farm that might have wanted to go away to uni ... they deferred for a year to try and get some more money – farmers don’t have the money to support people away.
(Cohuna young person)

While some young people in the communities had deferred, many had been unable to get a job causing them significant anguish and the threat of having to give up their university places is very real.

The job opportunities are limited out here.
(Longreach young person)

It’s hard to find work. It’s just ridiculous.
(Hay young person)

Parents are angry that this issue discriminates against their rural young people and note the cost of living away from home is a rural issue.

It is a cost that people in Melbourne haven’t got.
(Kerang parent)

They really need to look at bringing in a first year tertiary scholarship rather than [us bear] the $12000 - $15000 costs in that first year. It is standing between kids going on to university.
(Kerang parent)
Because their young people’s access to Youth Allowance is means tested against assets rather than income, often rural and remote young people are classified as ineligible for assistance. This leads rural and remote parents to feel a strong sense of disadvantage associated with access to Youth Allowance as the following comments from Hay parents suggest.

Why can kids in the city get it from word go and we can’t. What do our kids need to do?

The family home is exempt in the cities. But your family home on a property is not. That’s why we all live in falling down homes … their kids don’t leave home in the city … why would they? They don’t have to. It’s much more comfortable at home.

That is the problem that the government is refusing to address … is that kids who do have to live away from home to access their tertiary education.

Financially it is a huge cost … it probably stops a lot of kids going.

A few girls in town are interested in pursuing a nursing career but they can’t afford it – the family can’t afford to send them away to somewhere like CSU.

It’s extremely difficult because
It’s so dear … both my kids aren’t eligible [for youth allowance] and it costs us about $40 grand a year to have 2 kids at uni.

The cost of a child going to uni … that’s where we need assistance if you are talking about the country areas. We don’t have the option of a child living at home and going to uni.

I am fortunate – my wife is a full-time X. If she wasn’t working there would be no way. … we have cut 6-7 years of our life to help them and its frustrating. Someone living in Sydney doesn’t have to make that choice. Their kids can live at home and go to uni.

Someone on the farm who wants their kids to have an education at tertiary level. Imagine how they feel – their spirit – there would be nothing worse in the world [if they couldn’t afford to support them] …

Having to travel for everything. We wish everything was more accessible and more courses were available. The kids travel and then have to pay for accommodation.

These comments about financial disadvantage suffered by rural and remote families accessing education are strongly supported by informants in all communities. Teachers are particularly angry that their charges
are disadvantaged not by capacity but by financial impediments.

When it becomes a no choice thing and they have to go away, they should be subsidised.

(Longreach welfare worker)

They’d like more choices and I think that they know that to have the choices they have to go further afield and unless they’ve got family support, both in a financial sense and the moral support, it’s very difficult and the kids know it’s very difficult.

(Hay teacher)

For any of the students from Hay to undertake tertiary education they must leave home, find a place to live and find financial support and that is a massive cost. I think the drought would have possibly made people reassess whether they’d do that straight away.

(Hay teacher)

University is not an option for a lot of the kids …financially. Capability’s no problem.

(Kerang teacher)

It’s outrageous that students that live rural and remote don’t have direct access to a living away from home allowance

(Blackall teacher)

There are kids that can’t go to university, yes and there are kids who can’t go to TAFE … transport and financial…. There is support but nothing like the money that is required. Everyone has to go and live off-site if you go to university.

(Hay teacher)

Rural kids … have to find accommodation. A lot of city kids live at home and continue to live at home … financially they are better off in the city … it is much, much harder for a child in the country.

(Cootamundra teacher)

These comments are also supported by the young people themselves. In all focus groups students were most vocal when the issue of university access was raised. The barriers created by current policy make access tenuous indeed as the following comments from Hay students suggest.

(HECS is) an added disadvantage for everybody but it certainly is for rural kids. … You think well this is how much I’m going to owe after I’ve been there three years and the mind boggles. I think it’s easier for kids who live in the city because it’s closer to them and they can live at
home if they want. They don’t have to worry about paying to live on campus or to get their own place.

It’s not fair. If you’re from overseas and you’ve got a father who’s a CEO of a huge corporation and he can buy you a car and then pay for twelve years at university ... but if you’re out here, and my parents are on one income, and you think, well if I go to university I’m going to have to get a part-time job ... and they all say don’t get a part-time job in your first year because you’ll be stressed out. But when you don’t have a choice, and you have to go and do something like that, and there’s very little money to try and do it...

Universities can set their own HECS fees. They can charge as much as they want and they can put the UAI’s down for people who pay full fees ... and then someone who isn’t paying full fees and has to be out here and work their butt off in an environment that is at times less than desirable because there aren’t a tremendous number of happy people around ... how is it fair that that can happen?

They [politicians] go out and stand in a paddock that’s got no grass on it or anything and they’ve got an Akubra on and say ‘look we’re aware of the issues in the bush’ and ... they don’t grasp the complexity and the entirety of what’s going on.

I mean an Akubra doesn’t mean you understand!

There are a number of single income families in small towns whose ability to borrow against their houses is reduced by the low cost of houses in town making the funding of tertiary education impossible. In some cases this had led young people to withdraw or to make other choices. Many young people feel the dream of going to university will never be realised and they make a hard decision.

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Well, in our family, like there’s four children in my family, there’s only one going to uni this year, so it’s got me thinking that I probably shouldn’t go, because it’ll be hard on Mum and Dad, they don’t have enough money. So...

(Kerang young person)

Informants feel that young people away at university do not want to ask their parents for funding and therefore are either living in poverty, or working long hours in addition to studying and being reliant on public transport for work and university. There is also concern that students who do manage to go away don’t last the distance once they do get there because of the pressures of supporting themselves and being on their own. It was argued that rural young people are more likely to drop out of university because of financial pressures and missing home. Parents feel that this seriously disadvantages their young people when it comes to choice of course and
grades achieved. Parents feel that their young people should be classified as eligible for independent status if they must live independently. Parents also note that once at university their young people must work, thereby increasing the stresses associated with tertiary study and reducing their likelihood of success and academichonours. Informants are concerned about the strain placed on parents as a result of the financial cost of having a child away from home and parents are angry that their young people’s access to higher education is thwarted by their own financial problems. They also note that, in order to keep their jobs, their young people may have to stay in the city during the holidays.

And I think the finance for a lot of rural families is the hardest because you can only stretch your money so far and then it is really, really hard.
(Balranald parent)

Well it is just so much harder for any remote or isolated child to access Uni or tertiary or any – to move to a city or a bigger town is just, I mean it is just so difficult all the way through.
(Balranald parent)

At 18 you suddenly then send them off into a completely different environment, where sometimes they don’t know anybody, they have got no friends as such, they have no family support or whatever and they have to live and do all those normal living things besides study.
(Balranald parent)

X has been working two jobs, doing a morning shift while maintaining her university course and she has just not been able to get Youth Allowance.
(Hay parent)

They’ve got the same right to be there and to be doing the course and they shouldn’t be disadvantaged by it. ... you know they’re disadvantaged. And I can’t see any other way around it other than the government giving us an allowance.
(Hay parent)

The drought seems to have an effect in terms of the aspirations of the kids.
(Longreach parent)

My daughter had three jobs when she went to uni in Melbourne.
(Kerang teacher)

She [daughter at uni] is absolutely drained and I am drained.
(Cohuna parent)
It's a huge step from the comfort of a small community where you know everybody to branch out into a university environment and a lot of them can't handle that transition.

(Longreach parent)

I said, ‘I would have found it’.

‘I don’t like to ask’.

Kids aren’t stupid- they pick up on that. I think, ‘that’s my child’. That’s probably other kids as well. They know not to ask.

(Cohuna parent)

The figures of the retention of rural kids is shocking isn’t it – it is very, very light and if you ask most of the kids why they drop out I would say that most of them would say that it is financial, because it is a burden on their parents and if they can’t get work or whatever then it becomes a big thing and then at the end of the four years you are left with a big massive HECS fee as well.

(Balranald parent)

I’ve had parents sit down and they are just beside themselves and say, ‘I don’t know what the kids want to do next year but I hope they don’t go to uni, but I really hope they do ... but if they do go how am I going to afford it?’

(Cohuna parent)

It is clear from the focus groups in all communities that many students are choosing university location first and then the course from the range available in that town/city. This is driven by financial constraints because it is cheaper to live in a regional centre than it is in a capital city. They also note that the financial implications for their families mean they will choose shorter courses – 3 years rather than 4 or 5. What this means of course is that regardless of ability, regional options and financial circumstances mean that most rural and remote young people will not do courses such as medicine, engineering, law or dentistry – skills that are scarce in rural communities and yet courses are only available in capital cities. Few families have the resources to sustain their young people at university for extended periods. Many women note they are working off the farm to allow their young people to study, and students report their

It makes me absolutely bitter ... one of [the reasons] I've been a teacher for many years was that I hoped that I would be able to put my kids through Uni and I can't! They are struggling and having all sorts of crises and I see that as my failure to provide for my kids.

(Cohuna parent)

When my daughter said, ‘I had to go to the Salvos and ask for food last week,’ I was just mortified, absolutely horrified.

I said, ‘Why didn’t you ask for some money?’

She said, ‘Mum I know you haven’t got it.’

(Cohuna parent)
decisions are being driven by a desire to make it easy for their parents, and so young people are allowing it to affect their choices in very evident ways.

I am working for [daughter] at the moment.  
(Hay parent)

A lot of people look at it that way – you have to base it on cost, especially if you have more than one child.  
(Kerang parent)

‘Mum and Dad couldn’t afford to support me that long’ and I hear that all the time. A lot of the kids say I’ve got to have money saved up for when I go to Brisbane, when I go to uni. There are kids saving money hand over fist because [they know] Mum and Dad won’t be able to afford it.  
(Longreach parent)

One parent noted with shame her secret relief when her son received a poor TER grade.  

He didn’t get a really good TER ... we wouldn’t have been able to send him off anyway ... but we were secretly pleased he didn’t get a good mark .. we never thought we wouldn’t be able to put our hands in our pocket and help them. ... none of mine have ever been able to get [youth allowance].  
(Cohuna parent)

The UAI system was criticised as an inadequate way of linking students to courses. Rural areas need doctors and other professionals. It was felt that rural young people are available to fill these roles but are not being given the opportunity. Parents also pointed out that being able to achieve the required UAI to get into courses of their choice is difficult for remote young people.

It is absolutely illogical that you would need 99 to be a doctor. I know kids that would get 75 who would make excellent doctors. ... if this is going to the powers that be, then whoever you may be, you need to start thinking a little more realistically about the needs of the community. ... it is bunkum to think that you have to have a UAI of this to be a good doctor. Ridiculous. That to me is repulsive – that is unjust.  
(Cootamundra teacher)

There are very able young people from rural and remote communities missing out on their university education for financial reasons. There is also no doubt that their parents, teachers and others in their communities are angry at this situation and view it as highly discriminatory.
If the money was there a large number of kids would go to university. ... kids have said to me 'well Mum and Dad would hate me to stay but I simply couldn’t do that because I know what a sacrifice they are making'. They were aware of what has to happen and so they make a choice [not to go].

(Kerang parent)

7.11 Indigenous young people

In all communities visited for this research, Indigenous families and their children make up a significant proportion of the population and, therefore are a major interest group in this research. The clearest route out of poverty and disadvantage is through education. It would, therefore, appear essential that education for rural Indigenous students be a very high national priority.

Our consultations with Indigenous young people and adults took place predominantly in three communities – Hay, Balranald and Barcaldine. The following issues were of concern to Indigenous participants and outline continuing educational disadvantage that precedes drought, but is impacted in various ways by the drought circumstances of rural communities.

One of the problems associated with low socio-economic status raised in all communities is the conditions of poverty in which many young people live. This affects their education in a variety of ways, but perhaps the most disturbing is that many young people go to school hungry.

A lot of them go without breakfast ... and I think that’s why a lot don’t go to school. They’re probably tired ... and I mean you can’t concentrate when you’re hungry ... and they probably haven’t got lunch, and they don’t want to sit while others are eating in front of them ... they’re too embarrassed to go if they’ve got nothing ... that’s why they have two or three days off.

(Indigenous informant).

Indigenous informants report there is some work available in the communities but this is not necessarily with farmers. Consequently, as with non-Indigenous young people, we were alerted to the drift of young people to the cities and regional centres in search of work and better opportunities.

In one community informants report:

- Indigenous young people begin disengaging from education in high school finding it alien and irrelevant;
- absenteeism climbs from early high school years onwards;
- parents don’t get involved because their young people are not interested;
- the school doesn’t mediate between the education system and Indigenous people;
• over the past 5 years approximately one Indigenous student per year has reached Year 12;

• most Indigenous students complete Year 10 level.

In another Indigenous community informants reported the following educational access issues:

• young Indigenous people are missing out on literacy and numeracy skills in primary schools;

• poor attendance of Indigenous students may be related to their parents’ embarrassment over their young people knowing more than they do;

• school attendance is strongly affected by social conditions;

• our informants reported no complaints about the school or how their young people are treated, yet they did note that ‘lots’ have been kicked out of school for poor behaviour.

In another we were informed of the following issues for Indigenous young people:

• high absenteeism associated with hunger and alienation;

• problems with literacy and numeracy;

• lack of support at home;

• a lack of cultural awareness on the part of teachers; and

• a perceived lack of support for Indigenous young people in the classroom, an issue backed up by the young people who participated in our study.

They should be starting [literacy] in lower primary. It’s too late once they get into high school.

(Indigenous informant)

They don’t get the one-on-one sort of attention anymore.

They need an Indigenous person in the school.

They don’t get on with the teachers and the teachers have got no understanding of Indigenous culture.

We need someone at school, someone the kids can talk to ... someone that they know ... not bring someone in from out of town or anything like that ... it’s got to be a local ... it’s got to be someone they know.

A lot of teachers do give them a hard time ... that’s why I let mine pull out because I thought, well if they’re not happy there, they’re not going to learn are they?

Even the little ones now don’t want to go to school. They just don’t want to go because the teachers plus the school kids bully them. A lot of bullying.

(Comments from Indigenous informants)

Indigenous informants offered the following ideas to assist their young people to achieve their potential:
• Homework classes should be offered at the local Aboriginal Centre to assist the young people with their work;

• Funding should be made available for an Indigenous person in the school to help students and to advocate on their behalf with teachers;

• More parent involvement is needed if the young people are to stay engaged in education;

• Remote young people require greater access to TAFE;

• Literacy and numeracy classes should be offered for Indigenous young people in lower primary to ensure they keep up with curricula;

• Indigenous young people note they need more time in class to do their work and report feeling flustered by being hurried;

• Indigenous young people report that they may not have access to computers at home and therefore they need more access to computers at school or, preferably, in the Indigenous centre;

• Young people and their parents would like to see a greater celebration of Indigenous culture in the schools;

• Indigenous people note that if there were higher employment of Indigenous people in the community, this would provide young people with role models and career aspirations, and hence a desire to continue with their education;

• Young people report they need help to stay at school. It’s acknowledged by Indigenous parents that many have ‘an attitude problem’ but it is felt they need more support in the school;

• All Indigenous people interviewed for this project report the need for an Indigenous advocate at the school;

• Barcaldine informants note that they need a breakfast program at the Aboriginal Centre to ensure that young people have adequate nutrition.

7.12 Special Needs Children

This report would not be complete without acknowledgement that young people in rural and remote areas with special needs receive very little support to assist them with their education. Parents in remote areas report there is no funding allowance that would allow them additional in home support for their young people and access to services is often at a considerable distance.

Even in rural communities where young people are able to attend local schools, there is limited classroom support and funding for special needs children. This is an area of major concern to parents and rural educators and service providers.
8. Discussion

Prior to commencing our research, our summary of existing literature revealed that the greatest cause of educational disadvantage is low income. Our research reinforces exposing the impact of drought reinforces the significance of this point - many rural and remote families have survived on low or no incomes through the years of drought and this has effected their ability to afford education for their young people. For farm families educational disadvantage results from the high assets / low income basis of their enterprise which renders access to supports such as Youth Allowance problematic. For small business families and the families of rural workers, their income, and hence children’s access to education, is significantly affected by drought. The literature also suggests that rural schools may be disadvantaged in a number of ways that render them less attractive, and which reduce the options available to students and teachers. Curricula and funding formulae based on urban situations critically disadvantage rural and remote schools, their students and teachers.

While there is limited literature on drought impacts, what is available reveals that rural poverty remains problematic, that rural and remote student numbers are declining and that there remains a disparity between participation and completion rates for rural and remote young people by comparison with urban young people.

Our case studies confirm this evidence and reinforce that there are critical points of disadvantage for rural and remote young people in their educational progress. Our research also reveals significant flaws in the construction of, and assumptions underpinning, guidelines for various AIC and Youth Allowances. Our research indicates that the AIC allowances are deficient at all levels – the home tutor allowance, the second home allowance and the boarding school allowance all of which do not match the costs associated with education for rural and remote young people. We would argue the need for all AIC allowances to be at least $8000 giving the recipients increased options in relation to employing governesses or workers, or to relocate to a second home. In the case of boarding allowances, the deficiency in funding is being underwritten by boarding schools at considerable cost suggesting a need for the allowance to be significantly higher if they are to match the reality of education costs for remote students.

This research reveals that access to university education is the issue that stakeholders see as most discriminatory for rural and remote students. On the evidence presented
here we therefore argue that Youth Allowance must be available to rural and remote young people immediately they leave home for higher education because the lack of access to financial support has led to a serious erosion in the numbers of rural and remote young people going on to, or contemplating, university.

Our research shows quite clearly that funding to rural and remote schools, and all allowances to families, fail to take account of the costs associated with rural and remote education and that means testing does not adequately pick up on the amount of disposable income available for education. Youth Allowance, for example, does not take account of the impact of drought on income available for higher education, it does not take account of the numbers of children in a family seeking education, it does not take account of the need for rural and remote students to have to leave home and establish themselves at a distance with all the associated costs involved. It certainly does not take account of the innate potential of rural and remote students to fill the skills shortages in rural communities.

Families and communities are under significant financial stress as a result of drought and the current assistance programs fail to overcome these disadvantages.

This research reveals that local schooling options provide significant resources into rural communities but that these might be better used to enhance community cohesion and advancement through strategic alliances with other education providers and additional out of school hours options.

We remain convinced that current school based programs are well delivered by committed teachers and other staff. School of the Air is an example of international best practice and operates to deliver a quality product. The problem for remote students is that remote schooling is heavily dependent on the capacity of, and time available to, the home tutor.

Local schools provide significant sites for learning and development, and deliver a quality product to their communities, but there are pressures beyond the control of staff and this includes the financial circumstances of their students. School programs in rural and remote areas remain limited by comparison with urban options because of associated costs in rural and remote areas, financial circumstances of students and teacher formulae based on urban circumstances.

This research raises a number of issues affecting the access of rural and remote young people to education at all levels. It is clear that the students taking part in this research, their parents, teachers and community members feel that educational access is restricted for these young people largely through financial circumstances exacerbated by distance and isolation. Is this an impact of drought? Or are there issues of ongoing rural restructuring that have made these young people vulnerable?

Part 1 of this section presents a
summary of these issues, noting the various restructuring factors impacting on communities, and hence on young people. It also outlines the additional impacts of drought on already stressed communities. Part 2 provides a summary of the various points of educational disadvantage raised by participants. Actions to improve the access of rural and remote young people to education are included.

8.1 Rural restructuring and drought

8.1.1 Ongoing rural restructuring

In all communities visited there is evidence of long-term and significant restructuring, much of which preceded drought. For example, Cootamundra has experienced a major loss of public service organisations and jobs during the decade preceding drought as have several other communities studied; Longreach, Blackall, Balranald and Hay have all suffered consequences of the wool price crash in the 1990s and the restructuring that followed; and Kerang and Cohuna have been through a major period of restructuring in the dairy industry and have also been subject to local council amalgamations. The consequences of these events have been wide-ranging.

Loss of public services

The loss of state and federal government public service infrastructure and professional positions has had a significant impact throughout communities. Together with the loss of services such as banks, this has resulted in a significant loss of professionals from communities. Not only have jobs been lost, the communities have also seen families and young people and professionally trained people from their community organisations move away. The withdrawal of public and private services from small communities also results in a decline in the number of career oriented, secure, full-time jobs. These jobs were often the first rung on the ladder jobs for young people wishing to establish a career close to home. They also provided professional, career focused jobs for professionally trained women in rural communities and on farms. The decline in these jobs has ramifications throughout the communities and implicitly affects the viability of family farm based agriculture because of the difficulties associated with finding secure second income jobs.

Local council amalgamations have taken place across Victoria in recent years and are beginning to occur in NSW. The two Victorian communities visited have been part of this process with Cohuna amalgamating with Kerang and losing its local government infrastructure to the larger town. This has resulted in Kerang gaining positions and Cohuna losing local
leadership positions, infrastructure and employment.

Drought, and the associated need for assistance, has exposed the loss of health and welfare services in recent years. The privatisation of many government services and processes of tendering to non-government organisations have resulted in a piecemeal approach to service replacement. Thus the onset of drought has exposed the loss of professional services at a time of significant community vulnerability.

Wool price decline
Several communities visited have been affected by the removal of the wool floor price in the 1990s and the subsequent destabilisation of the industry. Wool has been the major industry in many remote small communities. Hay, for example, celebrates its wool history through the Shear Outback Museum, Longreach through its Stockman’s Hall of Fame and Blackall via a large statue of legendary shearer, Jackie Howe, in the main street of the town. These communities have grown on the ‘sheep’s back’ and celebrate their historical fortunes accordingly. The crash of the wool industry has therefore affected not only the towns’ economic viability, but also the community psyche and sense of history and achievement.

The fallout from the decline of wool has been wide-ranging and includes the sale, or closing down, of historically significant studs and breeding lines; the loss of families who have been involved in the wool industry for generations; the sale of properties and the amalgamation of farms into larger holdings and the loss of large numbers of shearing teams. Often these amalgamated holdings are taken up by absentee owners and run by managers and stockmen, resulting in a large-scale drift of families away from these remote areas. This loss of people is evidenced by the large number of empty houses dotted across these massive areas.

The movement from sheep into cattle in these areas has had significant implications. Cattle are less labour intensive than sheep and so fewer workers are needed to run larger holdings, again leading to a loss of people. Some locals view these moves into other industries with scepticism and sadness. However, the movement away from wool has eroded the shearing industry in these remote areas. This is evidenced by the loss of shearing teams – the shearers, wool-classers, rouseabouts, cooks and musterers who have drifted away from their communities in search of other work; to Victoria seeking shearing work, to the mines for a career change, or, for some, back to New Zealand. The result has been a loss of working families from the communities that have traditionally been underpinned by the sheep industry.

Dairy deregulation
In the Victorian communities studied, dairy deregulation preceded the drought and again has had a significant impact on communities. For
Victorian dairy farmers, deregulation is regarded as a bonus, unlike the impact in some other dairying areas, because of the security of the Victorian industry and favourable environmental conditions. Dairy farmers received a significant bonus at the time of deregulation in 2000 and could use this money as they wished. While many chose to exit the industry and set up somewhere else, others used their bonus to buy out their neighbours and/or expand their herd and dairy and upgrade to more sophisticated machinery. Those who remained committed to dairying did not count on drought hitting them in 2001-3 when they were most financially vulnerable.

Water trading
In the early years of the twenty-first century, water trading was introduced as a direct response to environmental concerns in irrigation areas. Water trading allows the separation of water entitlements from the land on which it is based and facilitates the buying and selling of water allocations with a view to creating more sustainable practices. In theory this allows water to be used in other areas for higher value purposes and gives irrigators more flexibility over their operations. They have the potential to buy more water or to trade unused water for financial gain. It would appear that this policy was established for clear environmental and productivity purposes. What was not anticipated was the onset of a major drought in the irrigation areas making water trading a drought strategy with unintended environmental and social consequences.

Loss of population
The changes outlined above have resulted in a migration of people from rural and remote areas. The departure of workers and families, the decline in the number of farm families, and the ongoing loss of young people from rural and remote areas preceded the drought. However there is evidence of some drift of people back into communities – in Cootamundra and Blackall we were alerted to an influx of retirees, in Longreach it is tourists, and in several communities welfare dependent people are moving in to buy cheap houses. What is clear, however, is that communities are aging. Many voluntary and community organisations are kept alive by aging workers and there is concern about the long-term viability of many of these towns unless younger people can be attracted back.

8.1.2 Onset of drought
The preceding discussion outlines the ongoing restructuring underway in rural and remote areas prior to, and during the drought. The onset of a drought, classified as the worst in Australia’s recorded history, has had major consequences in these already stressed communities. How has the drought impacted on communities already undergoing major processes of restructuring and how can the two processes be separated?
Accelerated restructuring

The longevity of drought (in some communities it is noted as up to 15 years, but for most is up to five years) has exacerbated and accelerated these processes of change. For example:

- more farms are being sold, more are being amalgamated, holdings are becoming larger;
- more farms are changing their industry base – from sheep to cattle for example;
- water trading is being used as a drought strategy and more farmers are retiring land from irrigation in an attempt to alleviate their debt crisis; the result is unsaleable parcels of land and a further loss of families from rural communities;
- more families are leaving agriculture and workers and contractors are moving away.

Debt, workload and stress

As well there is widespread evidence of declining production, mounting debt levels and destocking of large areas. Many families report being ‘locked in’, unable to escape debt, unable to retire, and living under significant stress. Drought has increased the levels of poverty in rural and remote communities both in towns and on farms. Families report being unable to take holidays or even to get away from their properties for more than a day because livestock have to be fed and watered. The workload of families on properties has escalated as farm workers are retrenched because of the associated costs.

Small businesses in these communities are experiencing downturn as well, some reporting they are acting as credit agencies at the same time as they are forced to reduce staff. All rural people interviewed speak of increased workloads, a lack of disposable income and consequent stress in their communities.

Farm impacts

Impacts on farms and properties include the increased workloads on all family members including children, a loss of productive capacity, declining income, high costs associated with feed and water, and stress. Some report an inability to retire and many the loss of a future for their young people on farms. Families report adopting various strategies including the sourcing of off-farm work (most often by women but not exclusively); belt-tightening strategies such as not taking holidays; not going away from the farm; reducing visits to town and increasing levels of social isolation particularly amongst men.

Community impacts

In communities, the drought impacts are reflected in a number of ways, perhaps most obviously in employment and particularly decreasing numbers of full-time jobs. Most small businesses, but not all, report a decline in levels of business activity and the need to carry debts for longer.
Drought impacts are also evident through mounting levels of poverty, reflected in the rise in workloads amongst welfare workers, rural financial counsellors and charities and also noted in schools. The mood of our drought affected communities is described as ‘flat’ or in one case ‘desperate’. Levels of stress and escalating mental health issues are of increasing concern. Rising levels of social isolation are reported particularly amongst men, but women are also now using their time for increased work related activities.

As a result communities are experiencing a decline in social capital evidenced by declining participation in social organisations, sporting clubs and community organisations, and in lower numbers available for volunteering, and the aging profile of volunteers.

Clearly evident too are town/country divides consequent on support being available through Exceptional Circumstances and AIC allowances to farm families but not to small business owners and townspeople.

**Impacts on young people**

Informants in all communities spoke of the impacts on their young people reflected in their levels of maturity, their awareness of drought circumstances and their responses including work input. Drought has impacted on young people in a number of ways evident to the researchers through this study. These include manifestations of poverty expressed by community members to include young people’s standard of dress at school, lack of disposable income, declining ability to participate and the need to work on farms and in town. For many it has resulted in family separations as one or both parents move for work, in a very few cases resulting in young people living alone and/or having significant responsibilities for farm management. It is also evident in educational access issues discussed below.

In all communities visited young people in high schools have work responsibilities. Farm children are likely to be drawn into farm work as a result of high drought workloads and lack of hired labour. Even from a very young age (as young as 9 and 10) young farm children are driving vehicles and machinery, pulling sheep out of bogs and generally engaging in the family’s drought response. Many young people spoke of the need to help and support their parents and relieve them of some of the stresses associated with the drought. Many are exposed to the ravages of drought from a very young age. They see dying stock, stock needing to be put down and livestock caught in bogs. Parents worry about the effects of this on their young people.

Young people in town are also likely to have part-time jobs in town from Year 9 upwards. They spoke of using the income for their social life, their basic needs and to save for their future, a future that almost always means leaving town.

Young people also spoke of their paid work interfering with school work in
various ways including being late in handing in assignments, being tired, doing homework late and, for farm children, needing to miss school for extended periods during shearing, lamb marking and mustering. Because of their workloads, the high cost of fuel, and pressure on parents, some young people are withdrawing from community involvement in sports and other activities. Their level of participation seems to decline at the same age as their workload increases. While not part of the brief of this project to make recommendations about issues beyond education, there is a need for greater community awareness of drought circumstances in rural and remote areas, of associated mental health issues and the need for additional mental health services. There is also a need to provide additional social work services co-located with rural financial counsellor services to address issues relating to rural restructuring and drought. Small businesses in rural and remote areas have largely been left out of drought support measures and this research reveals that there is need for support based not only on need, but also on equity grounds.

8.2 Impacts on educational access

The cumulative effects of the issues raised in Part 1 have had a significant impact on educational access for rural and remote young people. These impacts vary by level of isolation and the family’s financial situation. This section will address the issues raised and look at the impacts at various educational stages from primary to tertiary levels.

8.2.1 Remote young people – primary

Young people in remote areas have restricted choices in relation to educational access at primary level. If there is an accessible small school they have access to a teacher and peers. However the number of small schools remaining open is limited and many are under threat from low numbers as a result of the migration of families from remote areas. The loss of families has also had an impact on school buses, with many routes closed down. The state of the roads influences access as many remote roads are largely impassable during wet conditions. As a result families may be left with only two options. These are to home school their primary children or to set up a second home in the nearest centre so mother and children can relocate.
Home tutors (generally mothers) report a number of difficulties associated with educating their children and these include:

- inability to afford a governess;
- the need for mothers to be available during school hours;
- the increasing need for mother and children to be working on the property replacing hired labour;
- the need to find additional time for lesson preparation;
- the lack of training of many mothers for this responsibility;
- the cost of going to mini-schools and other extra-curricular activities;
- the need to put their own lives on hold during their children’s primary years;
- the incredible time pressures they are under from competing demands.

The second home allowance has provided a welcome resource to families in drought areas allowing (usually) the mother to relocate with the children to the local town so children can attend the schools and so that she can find work. This allowance enables the family to deal with educational access issues at the same time as they source additional income. This issue of involuntary separation of families is not without cost however. Families report the emotional strain of split families and the loneliness of fathers. They also report their young people have difficulty doing extra-curricular activities such as Saturday sport because of the need to go to the farm on weekends.

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Remote Educational issues raised by this research –

- Maintenance of small schools
- Maintenance or re-establishment of school bus routes
- Allowances enhanced to allow the employment of a governess or farm worker
- Allowances for home tutors and second home to be equitable and raised to reflect the costs associated with remote education
- Professional development and financial support for home tutors
- Development of a travelling teacher scheme to enhance the VISE program
- Remote children to have access to face to face in home teaching time
- Ongoing funding support for VISE
- Doubling of CAP funding for additional support for extra-curricular activities for remote young people
- Remote students be encouraged to participate in sports and extra-curricular events with their closest school
- Enhancement of telecommunications into rural and remote areas at least to broadband standards for educational purposes
- Additional funding for School of the Air to provide additional support eg video streaming and counselling for families
- Families are restricted in access to satellite by high fuel costs – so additional support is required to allow adequate educational access

- Second Home allowance preserved and enhanced and left out of EC calculations

**8.2.2 Remote young people – hostel**

Young people are also able to access primary and high school through hostel accommodation. The drought has impacted on these young people and their families in a number of ways including:

- the cost of hostel accommodation being approximately $8000 and so being more than the AIC allowance;
- young people report being stressed about their parents while away from home;
- young people often have to go home at weekends to work on properties;
- hostel informants report the need for additional resources including upgrading works to meet fire safety standards, computing facilities, homework tutors.

**Educational issues for hostels raised by this research** –

- Additional funding to allow costs to be same as AIC allowance
- Need for capital works and recurrent Federal funding to allow additional structural resources and repairs and after school tutoring and counselling

**8.2.3 Remote young people – high school**

Most remote young people go to boarding school for their high school years after several years of home schooling. Parents cite the need for them to be socialised with peers as well as educated. The AIC allowance provides significant funding to facilitate this - $6000 plus State Allowances. However it does not cover costs associated with most boarding schools and families must find additional funding to support this expense. This is particularly difficult if more than one child is involved. Parents report that the boarding schools have provided assistance during the drought including delaying dates for payment of fees, fee waivers and scholarships.

Parents in remote communities who are not eligible for AIC allowances because they live in, or close to, town report disquiet about their own lack of access and this causes significant community divisions.

**Educational issues for remote young people accessing high school raised by this research** –

- AIC funding for boarding school access to be raised significantly to reflect costs associated with access
- Funding to boarding schools under the SES arrangement raised to enhance financial, emotional and social supports for rural and remote young people
Financial incentives to encourage boarding schools to take rural and remote students

That rural and remote young people be transited from Family Allowance to Youth Allowance under same criteria

EC funding to include educational funding support

High Schools

The drought has had a noticeable impact on all but one of the high schools visited during this research. For most, the loss of population has had a significant impact on numbers at the school. In one case this resulted in the loss of nearly a third of the students during a one year period. This has major implications for education in the following areas:

- teacher numbers are affected and most schools reported a loss, or non-replacement, of teachers;
- other supports such as administrative time and cleaning hours are affected;
- subject choices are reduced as a consequence of declining numbers of students and teachers;
- teachers may be teaching outside their area of expertise and/or be the only one in their discipline;
- students are taking distance education subjects to extend their subject choices;
- bypassing is a critical issue for small local high schools because of the potential impacts on school numbers and the flow on effects to teaching numbers and resourcing.

Schools are also affected by lack of coordination and resourcing:

- schools are under-resourced to provide essential facilities such as air-conditioning;
- there is no uniformity across states in funding for rural and remote education;
- IT access is at best patchy in remote areas.

Another impact of drought in high schools is young people’s reduced access to extra-curricular activities. Concern is also expressed at a rise in bullying and other antisocial behaviours amongst young people in drought areas. Informants also express concern about young people’s emotional health during drought and note the need for greater welfare support for rural and remote young people in schools.

Indigenous young people also report major problems associated with high school access which are not necessarily drought related but which require urgent attention. Young people with special needs also require additional resources and attention to their needs to improve access of young people in rural and remote areas.

Educational issues for rural and remote high schools raised by this research:

- Rural and remote schools be viewed and funded as hubs in their communities to provide additional services and to enable adult
education, internet access and government service advice

• Attention to teacher funding formula to reflect rural and remote circumstances
• Attention to teacher formula be relaxed where schools experiencing sudden decline as a result of natural disaster such as drought and that the formula not disadvantage schools in areas of administration support and cleaning
• Introduction of flexibility in areas of fractional teacher allocations (rounding up)
• Attention to additional teaching staff in rural and remote areas where casuals are scarce
• Attention to professional support for rural and remote teachers
• Incentives to attract experienced teachers to rural and remote areas
• Attention to the need for additional numeracy and literacy support in rural and remote primary and high schools
• Introduction of mental health first aid courses in all high schools
• Introduction of social workers in rural and remote high schools to work with students and families
• Increased time allocations for school counsellors in rural and remote high schools
• Significant extension of CAP funding for extra-curricular activities
• Attention to the costs of utilities in drought affected areas

• Attention to the needs of students studying distance education subjects in the form of formal staff time at school, email access at school, enhancement of computing facilities in schools to include broadband access as a minimum standard and IT access improved through satellite technology and broadband

Educational issues for Indigenous students raised by this research –

• The need for homework classes in local Indigenous Centres to assist young people with their studies
• Indigenous support people in rural and remote schools to assist students and to advocate on their behalf with teachers
• Increased involvement of Indigenous parents in rural and remote schools
• Literacy and numeracy classes for Indigenous and other rural and remote young people in lower primary
• Increased consultations with Indigenous young people about ways they might complete their work more efficiently and about more adequate learning environments
• Computer resources for Indigenous students at local Indigenous Centres and support staff funded to facilitate their access
• Increased celebration of Indigenous culture in schools and in consultation with local Indigenous people
• Local communities resourced to provide increased employment for Indigenous people, providing role models and career aspirations for Indigenous students and a desire for them to complete their education

• Local Indigenous centres in rural and remote areas should be resourced to provide a bus to collect Indigenous students for school and to provide a breakfast program for young people

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Educational issues for Special Needs Children raised by the research –

• The need for each child with special needs in rural and remote communities including those being home tutored to be provided with a one-on-one teacher’s aide

• The need for increased consultation with parents of children with special needs about their priorities for support

• Access to respite services for young people with special needs in rural and remote areas

Bypassing

The issue of bypassing is one that conflicts communities. The desire of some parents to have access to the AIC allowances and hence to bypass the local school, conflicts with the needs of the local high schools to maintain numbers, teachers etc. Young people at the high schools where bypassing is discussed, report being anxious about their ability to stay in education if bypassing forces the closure of the senior school in their town.

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Issues relating to bypassing raised by this research –

• The need for a thorough investigation of the impacts of bypassing before it is introduced into a community

• The need to protect senior high school classes in those communities affected and the access to senior high school for students in those areas

Vocational education

Vocational education is provided in many high schools, however students report the need for high levels of parental support because of extensive travel and financial pressures associated with course costs.

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Issues raised in relation to vocational education raised by this research –

• The need for additional funding for vocational education for rural and remote schools

• That pre-apprenticeship training be considered as part of vocational education

• That consideration be given to resourcing schools in rural and remote communities where there is no TAFE to provide vocational education beyond school years
• That in these deliberations consideration be given to gendered choices and diverse career options

• That in any deliberations about extending the role of rural and remote schools, the needs of academically gifted rural and remote young people not be sacrificed

**Teachers**

There are additional impacts of drought on teachers that deserve to be highlighted separately. As the drought has impacted on student numbers, teacher numbers have been affected. Teachers report teaching outside their field of expertise. They may also be the only member of their teaching discipline. In many remote high schools there are fewer experienced teachers to guide new graduates and beginning teachers. Therefore the professional development of teachers in rural and remote areas is an area that requires significant attention. However schools are not resourced in a way that would allow teachers significant travel time and time away at courses.

The drought’s impact on student, and therefore teacher, numbers has been based on a formula that does not take adequate account of the impact on remote schools. There needs to be greater flexibility in the formula for rural and remote schools to take account of crisis times.

**Leaving or staying? – retention at high school**

Young people are making short term decisions about their futures with long term consequences and basing these on their understanding of the financial impact for parents. One of the more evident consequences of the drought on young people concerns their decision about remaining at high school or leaving. This decision is shaped by both the family’s financial circumstances and by gender. Because of the precarious state of family finances, many young people report that their decision is determined by what might be easier for their parents. Thus if there is employment available, they might decide to leave school and take secure employment in an apprenticeship or traineeship. However this decision appears highly gendered and boys are more likely to find such work than girls. As a result, girls are more committed to remaining at school and see their future somewhere else. In all the high schools visited, senior years are dominated by girls and the gender imbalance is marked.

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**Issues raised in relation to retention at rural and remote high schools** –

• That consideration be given to resourcing rural and remote schools to provide mentoring programs, special support staff and other resources designed to enhance retention and completion of high school
Leaving or staying? – leaving town

The decision to leave their community is one all young people discuss. Most, both boys and girls, see the need to leave home for work and/or study. There are fewer apprenticeships in most of the communities visited and the lack of accessible TAFE or university education means those who want further skills and education must leave. However this decision is driven by financial concerns in a number of ways. The low wages of apprentices, for example, means that (usually) boys will need family support to either relocate and establish themselves elsewhere, or for transport assistance to TAFE training.

Young people with limited financial resources at their disposal are staying in their communities. The work available to them is limited and their ability to access Youth Allowance is often restricted. Many of these young people are not likely to be registered for Job Network and so do not show up on unemployment statistics. These young people are at risk.

Those seeking university education are making decisions based on family finances to the extent that they are choosing regional universities, cheaper courses and shorter courses. Many are also trying to qualify for independent Youth allowance by taking a gap year and others are working at the same time as studying and living independently.

Issues raised by this research about early school leavers

- That consideration be given to raising the wages of apprentices above the poverty line to allow those young people in rural and remote areas the ability to support themselves when they must leave home
- That consideration be given to providing employers in rural and remote areas with additional incentives in the form of wages for the employee, assistance with paperwork and advice on TAFE access to increase the likelihood they will put on apprentices and trainees
- That Youth Allowance be made available to young people in rural and remote areas from the age of 16 to increase their options to travel to training and support programs
- That there be consideration given to enhancing the training and support programs for rural and remote young people within their communities
- That consideration be given to ensuring young people from rural and remote communities who must leave their communities for study be automatically eligible for Youth Allowance including a living away from home allowance
8.2.4 TAFE
The lack of accessible TAFE education in all but one of the communities visited is a significant barrier to ongoing education. Because of the drought, families are under financial pressure and many find the costs associated with getting their young people to training, or relocating them to another community, prohibitive. Many young people are missing out on skills training.

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**Issues raised by this research in relation to TAFE**
- The lack of TAFE presence in rural and remote communities and the need for same
- The need to address local skills shortages through training programs in local communities
- The problems associated with failure to run programs with low numbers of students in rural and remote communities

8.2.5 University
The drought appears to have had a major impact on the access of rural and remote young people to university education. The financial costs associated with moving away and the difficulties associated with accessing Youth Allowance have made this increasingly more difficult for young people during drought.

Many young people are taking a year off attempting to earn enough to be classified as independent under the Youth Allowance guidelines. However, the shortage of jobs in communities makes this target unlikely.

Young people, their parents and teachers report:
- not taking up their university places;
- choosing courses at cheaper regional universities;
- choosing shorter courses;
- working long hours while at university jeopardising their chances of passing;
- dropping out because of the financial and emotional pressures associated with this regime.

It is apparent from this research that young people who are capable and eligible for university are missing out at this level and that rural communities are also missing out on the potential skilling of their own.

What is also made clear is that some families are now choosing which children they can afford to educate if there are more than one; or children are making this decision for them by choosing other career paths. It is also clear from this research that many women are working off farm to pay the high costs associated with education.

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**Issues raised by this research in relation to university access** –
- the problems associated with trying to earn over $16000 in small rural and remote communities to become eligible for independent Youth Allowance
• the need for students to be automatically eligible for Youth Allowance if they must leave their communities to study

• the lack of acknowledgement of the increased costs associated with living in a capital city and the need for this to be incorporated into Youth Allowance for rural and remote students

• the problems associated with rural and remote students accessing longer courses such as medicine, law, dentistry, social work – skills needed in rural and remote areas

• the need for rural and remote young people to be exposed to a wide range of occupations through extra-curricular activities and excursions

• the need for university campuses to be resourced to provide additional safe, affordable on-campus accommodation for rural and remote students, rural and remote support officers, additional counselling staff and a network of older rural and remote students to act as tutors

8.2.6 Gender issues

This research exposes the significant gendering of educational choices in rural and remote areas. Boys are more likely to leave school early taking up apprenticeships where they are available or unskilled work. The lack of access to TAFE in all but one of the communities studied suggests the need for a reconfiguration of education options. Schools are already spreading themselves very thinly around vocational education. However there is an identified need in this research for an enhanced vocational training role for schools that would also keep boys engaged in education.

Girls are more likely to remain in education and see a future at university level. Because of the decline in numbers of young people at high schools in remote areas many are taking subjects by distance, a mode neither they, their parents nor teachers are entirely happy with because it jeopardises their ability to gain high grades and is often not adequately resourced. There is an identified need for enhanced support for distance education options.

Issues raised by this research in relation to gender –

• the need for rural and remote young people to be exposed to a variety of career options through extra-curricular activities

• the need for excursions to capital cities to allow exposure to a range of occupations

• the need for rural and remote students to be exposed to a range of role models and additional careers advice

8.2.7 Resilience

This research demonstrates the enormous resilience of young people in times of extraordinary crisis. The research team couldn’t fail but be
impressed by the young people who took part in this research. These young people are now more likely to be working while at school, to be privy to the stresses on their families as a result of drought, to have experienced the loss of friends from their schools, to be studying subjects by distance and to be uncertain about their futures. Yet they demonstrate remarkable courage, resilience and wisdom. These are young people that deserve support to achieve their educational ambitions. That their educational futures are dependent on their family’s ability to pay is problematic in the extreme.

Additional issues raised by this research –

- the need for a summit on rural and remote education bringing together federal and state bodies, community groups and representative bodies to discuss rural and remote education
- that there be concerted attention to declining educational access for rural and remote students and attention to the financial basis for this decline
- that attention be given to the need for rural and remote areas to have special consideration where formulaic measures are used
- that attention be given to developing tertiary study centres in rural and remote communities for local people studying by distance and that these be co-located with local schools, but resourced and staffed separately

8.3 Key Actions Required

We are of the view that allowances can be streamlined into one common AIC allowance that covers home tutoring, second home or boarding. We believe that, while the options differ, the costs are similar and include time allocated and lost production and relocation costs. These allowances should be substantially higher than current figures because our research reveals that families, particularly in remote areas, are paying dearly for education. We are of the opinion that all AIC allowances should be raised to $8000 with consideration being given to raising the Boarding Allowance even higher. This will allow equity between allowances and give families increased options about how they might educate their children. The current system places too much pressure on mothers in remote areas and on families where boarding is the only option. Increased remote tutoring allowances will extend opportunities to provide governesses for example. Increased boarding allowances will take pressure off boarding schools to compensate for inadequate allowances and give families some relief from financial stress associated with education costs.

We also strongly urge that rural and remote young people who must leave home for tertiary study be immediately eligible for Youth Allowance. Our research shows this is an acute area of disadvantage and that rural and remote young people’s access to university study is in decline.
We also advise of the need for apprenticeship and traineeship wages to be raised to a level to cover costs associated with the need for rural and remote young people to travel for their skills training and for many to have to leave home to undertake their apprenticeship in a distant location and thus live independently.

Our research reveals that mothers are often required to work in properties because of the reduction in hired labour and increased drought workloads. Attending to home tutoring is problematic in these circumstances. Other women have chosen to move with their children to regional centres where they can access work and education for their children. The drought has had a significant impact on women’s work in remote areas and hence their ability to deliver education to their children. We therefore urge that the increased pressures on women as a result of drought have seriously increased the pressures on them in the area of education provision. There is a great need for this issue to be factored into any determination of education policy and allowances.

Rural and remote schools face significant pressures in a variety of areas and we raise the following issues for further attention.

- Rural and remote schools face additional pressures in relation to staffing formula and subject provision. There is ample evidence in this research that rural and remote schools should be funded and staffed under a more flexible arrangement so that rural and remote students are not educationally disadvantaged.

- Students studying distance education subjects at their local high school require additional resources such as dedicated teaching time and fast, efficient internet access.

- There is also ample evidence of the need for CAP funding to be significantly increased to cover the provision of extra-curricular opportunities to students.

- Hostels require additional funding for infrastructure upgrading and to provide additional staffing for tutoring support and counselling.

- Children on remote properties gain enormous value from the VISE program. Our research suggests this should be supplemented by additional travelling teacher programs to provide additional educational resources to remote families.

Our research reveals that Indigenous students have high levels of absenteeism and feel alienated in the school environment. Suggestions from Indigenous people include the need for a bus for local Indigenous people to pick up the children, take them to a breakfast program and then to school. Indigenous support people in the classroom are also required at rural and remote schools. Additional literacy and numeracy classes in primary levels are an urgent need and a celebration of Indigenous culture.
in curriculum are also necessary to engage students in their local school. Special needs children in remote areas are especially disadvantaged and require teacher’s aide assistance, respite services and special programs to the same level as young people in urban areas. This research reveals that this is little support for parents and young people with special needs in rural and remote areas and that the need for extensive provision is urgent.

We therefore urge the following key actions.

1. Review of interactions and interrelationships between all allowances for rural and remote young people’s education to ensure equity of treatment.

2. Review the level of funding for educational allowances to ensure that all families can choose effective quality educational options for their children at similar costs to urban families. In doing this particular attention must be paid to special groups such as Indigenous children and children with special needs.

3. Address the pressures being placed on mothers in remote areas to deliver education to their children at the same time as they are working on and off properties.

4. Provide additional funding and infrastructure to rural and remote schools or schooling alternatives to ensure that learning options and motivational activity are similar to metropolitan schools. Where this is impractical, ensure that the necessary infrastructure for distance education, home learning and other options such as boarding and hostels is provided to a high standard.

5. Provide additional supports for Indigenous students and children with special needs.
Appendices

Appendix 1: Government Funding and Support Schemes and State and Federal Government Policy on Rural and Remote Education

Appendix 2: Key Informants
## Appendix 1: Government Funding and Support Schemes and State and Federal Government Policy on Rural and Remote Education

### Government Funding Schemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Access/Delivery</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Eligibility Requirements</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country Areas Program</td>
<td>Students attending primary and secondary schools, who are educationally disadvantaged by geographic isolation.</td>
<td>Australian Government grants administered by States and the Northern Territory</td>
<td>CAP aims to help schools and school communities improve the educational outcomes and opportunities of students who are educationally disadvantaged because of their geographical isolation so that their learning outcomes match those of other students.</td>
<td>$117 million over 4 years from 2005 to 2008 (announced 2004 budget)</td>
<td>Funding is available to government and non-government primary and secondary schools which are located in geographically isolated areas, or are distance education facilities servicing these areas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Government School Term Hostels Programme</td>
<td>Non-government school term hostels that provide accommodation to rural primary and secondary school students.</td>
<td>Australian Government Grant administered by DEST</td>
<td>To assist non-government school term hostels to provide a high standard of care to rural primary and secondary students. Funds should be used for the maintenance and operational costs associated with the non-government school term hostel.</td>
<td>Eligible hostels will attract $2,500 per eligible student per year.</td>
<td>Not-for-profit non-government school term hostels with open residency policies which operate principally to accommodate geographically isolated primary and secondary students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Target</td>
<td>Access/ Delivery</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme</td>
<td>Families with primary, secondary, or tertiary students who cannot attend an appropriate government school because they are geographically isolated</td>
<td>Centrelink</td>
<td>To provide financial assistance in recognition of the additional expenditure incurred by mainly geographically isolated families for the education of their children.</td>
<td>5 Allowances Boarding Allowance: $6,000pa  Additional Boarding Allowance: Up to $1,069pa  Second Home Allowance: $4,557pa  Distance Education Allowance: $3,000pa (primary and secondary)  Pensioner Education Supplement: $1,627pa.</td>
<td>Allowances are dependent upon personal circumstances. However, the family home must be considered to be geographically isolated from an appropriate government school, or the student must have a proven special health-related or educational need that cannot be catered for locally. Additional Boarding Allowance is subject to an income test and students claiming Pensioner Education Allowance must be in receipt of a Disability Support Pension or a Parenting Payment (single).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payments</td>
<td>Farmers in Exceptional Circumstances declared areas</td>
<td>Centrelink</td>
<td>Provide income support for the period of a rare and severe drought event.</td>
<td>Centrelink</td>
<td>EC declaration and satisfy Centrelink income test.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Program: Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payments

Target: Farmers in Exceptional Circumstances declared areas

Purpose: Provide income support for the period of a rare and severe drought event

Value: Centrelink

Eligibility Requirements: EC declaration and satisfy Centrelink income test.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Access/Delivery</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Eligibility Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth Allowance Scheme</td>
<td>Young people aged 16-24</td>
<td>Centrelink</td>
<td>For young persons studying, undertaking training, looking for work, or sick.</td>
<td>Under 18, at home: $178.70/fortnight Under 18, away from home: $326.50/fortnight</td>
<td>This payment is subject to an income and assets test. Young people not considered independent must be assessed to get the away from home rate. Payment is generally made to a parent for those under 18 years who are not independent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstudy Scheme</td>
<td>For Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander descent persons</td>
<td>Centrelink</td>
<td>For Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander descent persons studying an approved course at an approved education institution</td>
<td>Under 18, at home $178.70/fortnight Under 18, away from home $326.50/fortnight</td>
<td>Income and assets test apply as for Youth Allowance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Away From Home Allowance</td>
<td>NSW children who are required to board away from their home</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Provides assistance to parents who, because of the location of their residence, are required to board their children away from home so they obtain an appropriate secondary education.</td>
<td>$1,101 for the 2005 school year An allowance of $259.00 is payable to all Year 11 and 12 students receiving the basic allowance who are geographically isolated.</td>
<td>The adjusted family income level must not exceed $44,832 (2003/04). The student must be following a normal secondary course at a government school or a registered non-government school.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Access Scholarships for Isolated Students</td>
<td>Students in Years 9 to 12</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Students who wish to attend a NSW government specialist secondary school, or students who are disadvantaged by a low family income and board at a school term hostel to access a government secondary school.</td>
<td>40 scholarships offered annually with a value of $1560.00</td>
<td>Students must qualify for the Living Away From Home Allowance. Students must be attending a government secondary school. Students must be in Years 9 - 12. The adjusted family income level must not exceed $44,832 (2003/04).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Away from Home Allowances Scheme (LAFHAS)</td>
<td>Provides assistance to parents whose children must board away from home to attend school on a daily basis because of the geographic isolation of their homes and they do not have reasonable daily access to a government school with the appropriate level of primary, secondary or special schooling</td>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>Remote Area Tuition Allowance (RTuA) is available for students who board at approved non-state primary or secondary schools and pay fees for tuition at the school. Remote Area Travel Allowance (RTrA) is provided where distance travelled from home to boarding location is at least 50km. Remote Area Disability Supplement (RADS) compensates for the additional costs associated with educating, away from home, students with disabilities.</td>
<td>RTuA Full costs up to $1190 (primary) and $1716 (secondary) pa. And balance of tuition fees exceeding these levels will attract payment of 50c/$ to maximum total of $2381 (primary) and $3431 (secondary). RTrA: Up to $938 pa depending on location and distance. RAA: $5000pa maximum</td>
<td>All payments are dependent on applicants’ homes meeting distance eligibility criteria or being approved by the Minister for Education for special circumstances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boarding Away From Home Allowance</td>
<td>Families with children attending primary, secondary school or respite care centres.</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>To assist families meet the costs of children boarding away from home.</td>
<td>The state allowance for 2005 is $767 for students who board away for the full year, with payment made in Term 4.</td>
<td>Available to resident Western Australians who have qualified for the Commonwealth Government AIC Boarding Allowance or Second Home Allowance (Centrelink).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarding Away From Home Allowance (Agricultural College Special Subsidy)</td>
<td>Families with children attending Agricultural Colleges</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Assist with boarding costs/ Apply for subsidy through the Agricultural College where child is boarding. If a student only for part of the year, a pro-rata payment will be made.</td>
<td>Apply for subsidy through the Agricultural College where child is boarding. If a student only for part of the year, a pro-rata payment will be made.</td>
<td>Parent/student not in receipt of Youth Allowance at the Away from Home Rate or AIC Allowance (through Centrelink) or Abstudy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australian Rural Student Accommodation Program (SARSAP)</td>
<td>Secondary students who must live away from home to attend school.</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Provides full board, hostel-style accommodation without students having to move to the city or attend boarding school. Available at Burra Community School, Cleve Area School, Cowell Area School and Lucindale Area School.</td>
<td>Costs subsidised by SA's DETE</td>
<td>Costs may be covered by commonwealth assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wiltja Program</td>
<td>In-school and out-of-school educational experience for Anangu students</td>
<td>Tri-state area of WA, NT and SA.</td>
<td>Students attend Woodville High School and reside at Wiltja Residence which caters for 63 students.</td>
<td>Apply to principal</td>
<td>Anangu secondary students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Student Travel Scheme</td>
<td>Isolated students</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>The NT Student Travel Scheme provides travel assistance for isolated students to be used at the beginning and end of each semester or half semester.</td>
<td>Reimbursement of travel costs from the student’s principal centre of residence to the school will be payable to a maximum of four return fares per year for students at NT schools.</td>
<td>Students in receipt of ABSTUDY grants are not eligible for this allowance. For primary or secondary students who are approved for AIC Basic Boarding Allowance, or Second Home Allowance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Mid-Term Travel Scheme</td>
<td>Parents or guardians of isolated children who board away from their home</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Provides assistance to parents or guardians of isolated children who board away from their principal centre of residence in order to attend a NT primary or secondary school on a daily basis. Financial assistance is provided towards the cost of journeys made for the purpose of reuniting students and custodial parents or guardians at times other than half-semester or semester breaks.</td>
<td>A maximum of four return trips per year will be allowed. The scheme may be used to enable the student to return to her or his principal centre of residence or the custodial parent or guardian to visit the student at the centre of boarding.</td>
<td>The student must be eligible for Basic Boarding Allowance under the AIC scheme. Students in receipt of ABSTUDY grants are not eligible. Students who are approved for AIC Second Home Allowance are not eligible for this allowance.</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>NT Supplementary Boarding Allowance Scheme</td>
<td>Isolated children boarding away from home</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Provides assistance towards boarding costs for isolated children boarding away from home in NT institutions in order to attend school on a daily basis.</td>
<td>The maximum payable is $600 per annum per student at the nominated NT institution.</td>
<td>Students in receipt of ABSTUDY scheme grants are not eligible. Students who are approved for AIC Second Home Allowance are not eligible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT education allowances for students with disabilities – travel and boarding schemes</td>
<td>Students who live away from home in order to receive special education</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Provide assistance with the cost of boarding and travel for students who are required to live away from home in order to receive education at a NT special school unit or an approved special school or unit interstate.</td>
<td>Payment of the Boarding Allowance of up to $45 per week per student.</td>
<td>Students receiving benefits under this scheme who are less than 16 years of age and approved for the AIC scheme will also be eligible for the NT Supplementary Boarding Allowance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Correspondence Site Allowance</td>
<td>Distance education students</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Assists students who are approved for Distance Education Allowance under the Commonwealth’s AIC scheme or Youth Allowance.</td>
<td>$350 per annum for each eligible primary and secondary correspondence student</td>
<td>Student must be studying in a NT school and be approved for Distance Education Allowance under the AIC scheme. Secondary students enrolled in correspondence lessons may be eligible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Schools of the Air Student Functions Allowance</td>
<td>Distance education students</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Assists students to attend up to two approved schools of the air functions. Based on calculations for each family - not per student, which has children attending approved school of the air functions.</td>
<td>Reimbursements will be made at student discount rates for the most direct and economical service.</td>
<td>This allowance will be paid for travel from the student’s principal place of residence to the approved function. Student must be approved to receive NT Correspondence Site Allowance.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>NT Remote Area Travel Allowance Scheme</td>
<td>Isolated students who are not eligible for receipt of other forms of travel assistance.</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Provides travel assistance for isolated students not eligible for receipt of other forms of travel assistance, providing reimbursement of four return trips per annum.</td>
<td>Allowance, reimbursement of travel costs at the most economical rate made from the student’s principal place of residence to the nearest major centre.</td>
<td>Students receiving ABSTUDY are not eligible. The student must be enrolled full time in a primary or secondary school and live away from his or her principal place of residence in order to attend that school on a daily basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNT Correspondence Materials Delivery Assistance Scheme</td>
<td>Distance education students</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Provides assistance towards costs associated with the delivery of materials required for correspondence schooling</td>
<td>A maximum of 200 kilometres per week.</td>
<td>The student must reside in the NT be enrolled at a NT school of the air or the NTOEC. The student must be approved for Distance Education Allowance under the AIC scheme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT Isolated Students Education Allowance</td>
<td>Primary and secondary school students who need specific assistance.</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>To increase access to well-supervised educational opportunities within the NT for students who need specific assistance in the areas of homework supervision and recreational and social development.</td>
<td>The benefit available is $2400 per student per annum, payable in two instalments.</td>
<td>Students must be in receipt of AIC assistance (excluding students in receipt of Distance Education Allowance). Students in receipt of ABSTUDY are not eligible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Maintenance Allowance</td>
<td>Parents/guardians of students under 16 years of age with low income</td>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>Parents/guardians of students under 16 years of age with a low income. The students must be attending a government or registered school in Victoria.</td>
<td>Two payments of $140 and $60 (secondary students)</td>
<td>Applicant must be in receipt of a benefit from Centrelink and is a holder of either a Health Care Card or a Pensioner Concession Card.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Online Access Subsidy policy</td>
<td>Enrolled distance education students</td>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>A subsidy to defray the costs of accessing Distance Education Tasmania online classes.</td>
<td>A maximum of $6 per week and for a family a monthly rebate of $25</td>
<td>Students must be enrolled and actively involved in online classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conveyance Allowance</td>
<td>Full-time students requiring assistance with transport</td>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>Helps with the cost of transporting students between home and school or to the nearest bus stop (whichever is the closer), by private car where a bus service is not available. May also be claimed to assist with the cost of Air Travel.</td>
<td>Full time students who have to travel at least 5 kilometres (that is, 10 kilometres return) by private car.</td>
<td>The Conveyance Allowance is not income tested. Students must be attending the nearest educationally appropriate school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### State and Federal Government Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Aims/Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Framework for Rural and Remote Education 2001</td>
<td>A framework for the development of nationally agreed policies and support services; promote consistency in delivery of services; provide reference points for non-government providers</td>
<td>MCEETYA Task Force on Rural and Remote Education, Training, Employment and Children’s Services</td>
<td>Framework developed following recommendation in HREOC Report that allows for local differences and provides flexibility in implementation by individual state and territory systems and sectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country Roads: Pathways to Better Education and Training for Rural and Remote WA 2000-ongoing</td>
<td>The WA government plan for education and training in WA’s rural and remote areas</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>A plan to guide and coordinate the activities of all those with a role in ensuring fair, equitable and reasonable access to, participation and achievement in, education and training by people who live in rural and remote WA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Children’s Services Statement of Directions 2005-2006</td>
<td>Statement defines key strategic directions for 2005-06 and identifies the targets to pursue to support the educational agenda.</td>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Includes references to initiatives in rural and remote education. Such as specific staffing and student programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Training</td>
<td>No exclusive rural and remote education policy.</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Initiatives located throughout selected DET programs, eg, Staffing, Curriculum and Distance Education policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dept of Education (Equity Standards Branch)</td>
<td>The Branch is responsible for ensuring that all students have equitable access to the benefits of education irrespective of their sex, culture, linguistic background, race, location, socio-economic background or disability.</td>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>Equity Standards has a responsibility in policy development, monitoring and assessment, funding allocation and support in curriculum development and provision to help all state teaching institutions to achieve the equity goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Training Corporate Planning Framework ‘6-point plan’ 2004-2005</td>
<td>A plan to align activities and outcomes with government directions and corporate priorities.</td>
<td>NT</td>
<td>Build and protect the NT workforce; DEET workforce development and capacity building; Infrastructure development and maintenance; Improved educational outcomes for all students; Improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education and Training</td>
<td>Rural and remote education policy integrated into broader policy.</td>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>Rural and remote schooling initiatives in selected DET programs, eg, Staffing and Distance Education policy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Key Informants

Interviews with the following key informants took place from late April until late May, 2005:

- Marie Hird, Director, Learning Needs Section, DEST
- Graeme Smith, NSW Country Areas Program
- Wayne Hill, Distance Education Centre, Victoria
- Gerard Herrick, Central Murray Area Consultative Council
- Peta Belan, Riverina Area Consultative Council
- Debra Lewis, Southern Inland Queensland Area Consultative Council
- Peter Arkle, Policy Manager, National Farmers’ Federation
- Jack Beach, Federal President, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association (ICPA)
- Carina Kopke, Federal Vice President, ICPA
- Gary Stoke, National Association for Rural Student Accommodation
- John Halsey, Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA)
- Beth Woods, Chair of Drought Taskforce
- Mike Taylor, Secretary, Department of Transport and Regional Services
- Mike Stock, Volunteers for Isolated Education (VISE).

Two additional questionnaires were received from volunteer tutors.

Interviews with the following key informants took place in Longreach in June/July during the case study site visit:

- Keith Boucher, North West CAP
- Ian Beilenberg, Principal, Longreach School of the Air
- Rosemary Philip, Queensland President, ICPA
- Rowena Arthur, Longreach District Education Office.
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Alston, M & Kent, J 2004, The social impacts of drought: a report to the NSW Department of Agriculture and NSW Premier’s Department, Centre for Rural Social Research, Wagga Wagga

ANTA – see Australian National Training Authority.


Birrell, B & Dobson, I 1998, ‘Equity implications of the new Youth Allowance legislation for higher education students’, *People and Place*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 61-70.


Birrell, B, Calderon, A, Dobson, I & Smith, FT 2000, ‘Equity in access to higher education revisited’, *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 50-60.


DAFF – see Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries


Department of Transport and Regional Services 2005, *Drought Impacts Beyond the Farm Gate: Two Regional Case Studies* Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

DEST - see Department of Education Science and Training.

DoTARS – see Department of Transport and Regional Services.


HREOC – see Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, Sydney.


MCEETYA - see Ministerial Council on Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs.


NSW DET – see NSW Department of Education and Training.

QLD DET – see Queensland Department of Education and Training.


SCRGSP – see Steering committee for the Review of Government Service Provision.


Sher J P & Sher, K R, 1994, ‘Beyond the conventional wisdom: Rural development as if Australia’s rural people really mattered’, *Journal of research in Rural Education*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 2-43.


