



Federal Secretary, ICPA (Aust)

'Lochnay'

CAMP CREEK NSW 4385

fedsecretary@icpaaust.org.au

13th March 2026

The Productivity Commission consultation on “Determinants of regional airfares”.

The Isolated Children’s Parents Association (ICPA) (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring all rural and remote students have access to the services required an an equitable, affordable, high-quality education from early childhood through to tertiary and training. The member families of ICPA reside and work across rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to an equitable education for their children, despite their geographic location. They often live great distances from the services required to support education and need specifically designed rural and remote programmes and initiatives to facilitate learning, development and thriving individuals.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Productivity Commission’s Review into Regional Air Services. With our foundations set in regional and remote Australia, we believe our members have the lived experience to provide robust and honest feedback into the efficiency and effectiveness of current air services across regional Australia.

ICPA (Aust) firmly believes that regional air services fit for purpose and place underpinned by affordability and reliability is essential to facilitate access to/from their place of learning. Anecdotal evidence, underpinned by member surveys, indicates to us that members value the availability of air services, often using them due to the advantage of time saving and ease of accessibility particularly during weather events when road access is unavailable. However, members also report challenges and issues in accessing seats, cost, issues with “local resident” fares and the detrimental impact storms and heat play on carriage of luggage and changes in route.

Australia has an expansive geographical footprint with the majority of its urban and peri urban communities situated along the coastal fringe and adjacent hinterland. By and large these centres are where universities are located and the majority of boarding schools - essential to many rural and remote students to allow them to complete their compulsory education (given that many rural and remote communities do not have ready access to K-12 schooling). Many apprentices also must travel to these same regions to complete portions of their training. In essence this requires students to travel several times a year, clocking up thousands of kilometres. In some states, they receive travel allowances and in others they receive no assistance from government.

With the exception of Western Australia, where the government subsidises four return trips per academic year for students up to the age of 26 studying full time, the allowances received barely cover one return trip per year if air is the best option for students to access schooling safely and in the shortest possible time frame.

CASE STUDY 1

A family sending 2 children from Mt Isa to Brisbane return each school term spent, on average \$1200 - 1400/child/term on flights. Given they were over 1500km from the boarding school, flights offer the most practical way for their children to travel. Close to \$10 000 was outlaid each year: a total of approximately \$60 000 over their time at boarding school. Subtracting the Living Away From Home Allowance received – approximately \$4 000/yr on average – this left the family with significant out of pocket expenses. In addition, because of their home postcode, they were not eligible to access resident fare rates.

For this family, given the time needed to take children to boarding school and on-property commitments, flying was the most realistic travel option to attend the boarding school that met their needs and circumstances. Therefore they weather the financial impost, and fortunately they were able to do so, in order to provide their children with this opportunity.

In addition to attending schooling, students often have to fly to major centres for allied health appointments such as speech therapy/dental/optical necessary to maximise positive learning outcomes. Depending on their location, some states have patient travel subsidy schemes but the rebate makes a minimal contribution to costs incurred.

ICPA (Aust) strongly recommends the embedding of student capped fares on commercial air routes to facilitate affordable access to educational services.

ICPA (Aust) strongly recommends that the fees and charges being applied on top of ticket prices, which are sometimes significant extra costs, be investigated and methods be considered to offset/reduce these in order to reduce overall ticket pricing.

One of the issues appears to be lack of competition on regional routes. ICPA (Aust) concedes that some routes may not be viable for more than one operator to cover. However, when flights are between larger centres such as Mt Isa to Brisbane, it may be prudent to look at enablers that would create competition and, potentially drive down prices.

Secondly, whilst there are resident fares offered by some operators, these must begin from their residential address. Students returning home from school cannot access these deals to reduce cost.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that resident fares apply for each way travel.

Additionally, when looking at route maps it can be clearly seen in many instances that, while there is connectivity between regional centres and capital cities, there is little regional interconnectivity. For a family in Central West Queensland sending a child to boarding school in Rockhampton, their closest centre offering those facilities, requires a trip from their closest town to Brisbane and then changing flights to travel to Rockhampton and vice versa when returning home. If a child is under a certain age, they cannot travel as an unaccompanied minor, so this transition to a second flight is problematic and, in many cases, impossible.

ICPA (Aust) firmly believes there needs to be consideration of interconnectivity between major regional centres to facilitate safe and efficient travel for students and families.

In addition, ICPA (Aust) recommends that consideration be given to providing extra services to communities which have no other passenger services available for the travelling public, particularly for remote or island communities impacted by prevailing seasonal conditions.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Government identify all regional airports, assess their current capabilities and shortfalls and the infrastructure improvements required to meet the current, and future, needs of modern aircraft to ensure programmes to facilitate this.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that Government investigate the shifting of responsibility for regional airport/facilities maintenance and support services for commercial flights with local governments and the disparity between costs incurred and costs reclaimed. The inability to recoup costs threatens the viability of regional airports and therefore the ability for commercial service providers to provide a service to rural and remote communities.

The weather and climatic conditions prevalent in Northern Australia over Summer play havoc with flight timetables, routes and travel conditions.

The following are anecdotal stories from members regarding their experiences at this time of year:

1. When the weather is hot, it affects aircraft performance and the ability for aircraft to take off. To counter this, the airline restrict luggage and freight including mail resulting in passengers reaching their destination with no luggage etc upon arrival at school. The offloading of mail affects students undertaking Distance Education who rely on mail to send/receive learning and support materials.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that consideration be given to:

- **Earlier timetabling for regional flights**
- **Queue prioritisation**
- **Use of alternative airports for regional services to allow flights to mitigate impacts brought on by weather conditions prevalent in route**

Major airports face congestion at peak times - there is a lot of pressure on landing slots and larger commercial flights receive priority. While there is minimal impact at departure, for regional flights, this can have ramifications at destinations where much higher temperatures impact tarmac quality (requiring the offloading of luggage/freight) and also increases the likelihood of running into inclement weather. If regional flights could utilise alternative airports such as Archerfield in Qld, Laverton in Victoria, Badgerys Creek in Sydney and there were shuttle buses running regularly between airports to facilitate connecting flights this may provide an alternative, as would building more airstrips at existing facilities.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that clearly identified educational materials be given priority mailing status and that the Federal Government Education Department work with its State counterparts, in collaboration with Australia Post, to develop a process that facilitates this.

2. During storms or wet weather, flights may be shortened, rerouted or cancelled often at short notice. This impacts students who may become stranded at airports, potentially with no support as boarding schools that are not open during non-term time or stranded in communities far from home.

CASE STUDY 2

A student travelling to Mt Isa from Burketown on a regional flight was stranded in Doomadgee due to an issue with the engine. (They were due to be met in Mt Isa by a family friend who was going to look after them until they could catch a flight to their Brisbane boarding school the next day). Passengers were left at the airport until late at night with no food/water, in a community where safety is challenging at night, and no notification to passengers (in the case of a minor, their family) of the delay. It was only

when the person waiting in Mt Isa phoned the student's family to ascertain what was happening that the family became aware of the situation. Fortunately for the family, a paramedic in Doomadgee, who was dropping someone off, became aware of the young person being stranded and took them to their residence and looked after them until the flight resumed several hours later.

ICPA (Aust) suggests that young travellers (as unaccompanied minors) should be clearly identified and supported during instances such as this through the development of policies enforced on commercial providers. Instances such as this should never occur and placed that young individual at heightened risk and caused great distress to their family.

ICPA (Aust) is aware that First Nations students are supported through the provision of flights to assist them to travel to/from boarding schools. In remote areas, indigenous and non-indigenous often live side by side in communities and geographically isolated students are often as equally if not more challenged to access travel schooling than their indigenous cohort. Flights arranged through charter aircraft can often have spare seats on them but these, under current policies are unavailable to non-indigenous students living in the same community (even when families have indicated they are willing to pay).

CASE STUDY 3

A family property is home to three generations. The second generation each have children of their own – one has a partner who is indigenous and one does not. The family with indigenous heritage is fully supported to travel to/from home and school each term at no cost to the family. The other family must find their own way, resulting in either separation for quite some time as one parent and student/s leave home when Wet Season sets in and access to the closest commercial service becomes problematic or the hiring of a helicopter to take student/s and possibly a parent to a commercial airport to fly to school. As there are no direct flights and at least one transfer is required, the students cannot travel unaccompanied now. Both families are equally disadvantaged when it comes to accessing schooling but only one family is assisted to do so. This is causing great angst within the family dynamic.

ICPA (Aust) suggests that policy change is required to allow rural and remote students to affordably access these flights, currently available to ABSTUDY eligible students only, in order to allow all to travel safely and reliably to and from their place of learning. Geographic isolation in remote areas is just as limiting a factor to accessing educational opportunity as cultural background.

Regionally, FIFO workforces are an integral part of the travel dynamic. In addition, State and Federal government departments regularly prebook seats for staff to travel to and from remote areas to undertake activities/visit clients. These two cohorts take up a significant number of seats applying downward pressure on seat availability for other travellers and driving up the price of remaining seats. Encouraging these consumers to use alternate travel options, including commercial charter operations, would free up seats.

ICPA (Aust) recommends the development of flexible and capable policies in a frameworks that encourage general aviation/charter operations in regional areas to provide alternative travel methods for frequent travellers.

ICPA (Aust) is also aware there is a shortage of pilots across the country. **ICPA (Aust) recommends investment into training facilities to meet the needs of the aviation industry now and into the future.**

ICPA (Aust) recommends the Government to investigate ways it can partner with FIFO operators to provide an opportunity for other consumers to purchase a seat, should there be seats available, on these flights.

In closing, ICPA(Aust) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's review and also the recent opportunity to speak with you regarding the experiences of our members. We would be happy to speak with you further should you require. We look forward to learning of the outcomes of the review and to seeing affordable and accessible air travel available across regional and remote Australia.

Addendum:

Hierarchy of Regional Airline Issues

- Affordability for passengers / profitability for airlines
- Some government financial assistance will be required
- Timely service
- Access to seats
- Connectivity to major seaboard centres
- Connectivity with regional centres
- Maintenance of smaller airfields by local government
- Curfews and their impact on arrivals and departures