

New South Wales Inc. (ICPA-NSW)

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On behalf of
New South Wales State Council ICPA

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Submission to the Inquiry into the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture

Introduction

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of New South Wales Inc (ICPA-NSW) is a voluntary, parent group that lobbies for access to equal educational opportunities for geographically isolated students. It is part of the larger national organisation ICPA-AUST, formed in 1971 when the rural industry was experiencing a severe downturn.

Children were being withdrawn from boarding school and mothers supervising their children on Correspondence (Distance Education) were simply not able to cope with the demands of working on the farm and continuing to teach their children. The school hostel at Bourke was threatened with closure and this was the catalyst for the formation of ICPA. Access to education for isolated children was disappearing and Mrs Pat Edgley MBE, from Bourke, called a public meeting from which ICPA was born. It quickly became a national organisation as parents across Australia came together to fight for their children's right to education.

Drought is a fact of Australian Life - it is something that rural families take into consideration in their planning. However a drought of the magnitude experienced in NSW from 2001-2004, is so devastating and debilitating to many farming families that it will take considerable time to fully recover from its effects.

Australia needs a productive, innovative rural industry, run by dedicated young people just as their parents have been. There must be assistance and encouragement to enable our young people to survive and even grow as a result of drought. Now more than ever it is vitally important that there is the opportunity for them to develop new skills and to keep abreast of changing trends in agriculture. This can only come from training facilities such as Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture where the practical development of those skills goes hand in hand with the theoretical knowledge needed in training these young people.

ICPA-NSW made personal representation to Members of the Government, Opposition Independents and the Department of Education and Training, expressing its outrage and dismay at the closure of the residential full and part time courses at Murrumbidgee in December 2003.

A deputation of the full council of ICPA-NSW on Wednesday 29th October and Thursday 30th October 2003 provided information as to the effects this proposed closure would have on students, staff, community of Leeton and the farming community in the south and central west of NSW. ICPA called for a 12 months moratorium on the proposed closure, as did The Hon Rick Colless in the Legislative Council. This was ignored by the Department of Agriculture and the Government.

The process by which the decision was made to close the residential training

The announcement by the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, the Hon Ian Macdonald MLC, on the 3rd September 2003 that the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture at Yanco would cease providing fulltime and part time residential courses for students from the western areas of the state was greeted with disbelief by all.

The closure was to be effective from 2 February 2004.

No consultation had taken place with:

The Advisory Council of MCA

The local community

Students

Parents

Staff

The wider agricultural community

Prior to this announcement being made.

ICPA has had representation on the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Advisory Council since its inception. The ICPA representative in 2003, Mrs Helen Withers, had played a significant role in the establishment of the

Pastoral Property Management Course - the only one of its kind in NSW. Helen also represented the interests of the Western Division of NSW and western areas generally.

This advisory council, along with the Principal and Staff or families of students were not consulted at all as to the Minister's intentions. On this advisory council the community representatives are Ministerial appointments but no attempt was made to consult with them prior to this decision being taken and announced.

Concern was expressed to ICPA-NSW when key teaching staff positions were not replaced. There were long periods of vacancies including the positions of Manager - Continuing Education (almost 4 years), Deputy Principal (vacant for just under two years) and several Education Officers, which varied from 7 - 54 months

The decision to close MCA was based on figures provided to the Minister by NSW Agriculture. It was claimed that there were declining full time student numbers. Numbers rose from 28 in 2002 to 39 in 2003.

It was claimed that the cost of educating students at MCA was \$24,500 whereas a student at Tocal cost less than one third of this amount. The figures quoted were inaccurate with the actual cost for a student educated at MCA being only \$12,000, comparable with the cost of educating a student through TAFE.

Students at the College in 2003 were simply told at an Assembly that their courses would be terminated at the end of the year. Students wishing to continue their Certificate IV courses were offered a place at Tocal with no guarantee of accommodation or the continuation of the course they were undertaking.

Tocal has never provided and does not have the facilities to provide Pastoral Property Management courses, Irrigation techniques or Broadacre farming. The courses offered at Tocal are geared to a city based clientele, horse management, dairy or small hobby farms.

Many of the students are not old enough to hold a driver's license and Tocal is not easily accessed without a vehicle.

Students planning to finish their secondary schooling at Year 10 were suddenly left without a facility which provided a safe learning environment, accommodation and training to equip them for employment at home or in other positions within the agricultural industry, particularly in western NSW.

There were 44 people who lost their jobs and 39 full time students and 95 part time students who were forced to move to Tocal (only 1 student has done this) transfer to another college interstate or simply leave their uncompleted studies to try to find other courses.

b. Preceding community and industry consultation

There was **no prior public consultation** or any **Rural Community Impact Statement** carried out prior to the announcement. Two weeks after the decision was announced a Rural Community Impact Statement (RCIS) was released. This clearly was at odds with the Premier's announcement in 1996 that Government decisions affecting rural communities would require a RCIS.

The Premier's policy "*Staying in Town*" gives a commitment to ensure that "government services respond better to local needs, not the needs of any region." And to "ensure government agencies are focused on strengthening local communities."

"*Working Together for Stronger Rural Communities*" gave a commitment to "achieve social justice for the people, families and communities of rural NSW". Where are the "*effective training and educational opportunities and improved access to educational services to enhance educational outcomes for rural students?*"

It was blatantly obvious that this decision to close MCA full time and part time residential courses contradicted the Premier's so called "concern" for the future viability of rural communities and our young people.

The 2001 report “**Extending Education: Review of the Agricultural Colleges within NSW Agriculture**” had no consultation with the public, MCA Advisory Council or rural industry groups. It was full of inaccuracies and was not accepted by either Principals of Tocal College or MCA.

A number of the courses offered at Murrumbidgee College are not and cannot be offered at Tocal or through the Riverina and Western Institutes of TAFE. This was not checked before the announcement of the closure of the Residential courses at Murrumbidgee College.

The provision of Accommodation at Tocal had not been checked and a number of enquiring students were offered caravan accommodation, which was just not acceptable.

c. The impact on the Leeton and Yanco communities and districts

A public meeting attended by well over 500 people from the Leeton community gave their support to the continuation of MCA courses. The impact on the district is significant:

Social impact on affected staff, schools, town businesses and community services

43 families lost to the district

Loss of a conference facility, including accommodation and catering facilities used by the town, seminars and other community groups,

Loss of sporting teams within the community

Nursing staff - crucial in most areas lost as a result of families moving.

Facilities used by State Rescue Squad and Fire Service Training

Smaller attendance at Murrumbidgee Farm Fair in 2004 - no sheep dog trials held as MCA students responsible for organising and running this event

No accommodation available for exhibitors at the Farm Fair in 2004.

Security risk with unoccupied buildings

St Francis College and Yanco Agricultural High School have lost the use of facilities. Students at MCA often had siblings attending one of these boarding schools.

Loss of community groups through families moving from the area

LOSS of TRAINING FACILITY providing courses relevant to the agricultural industry in the southern and western areas of NSW. Yanco is the centre of the highly productive irrigation area but also adjacent to the dry area cropping region from which many students are drawn. The Pastoral Property Management Course was NSW's answer to Longreach (Qld)

d. Reasons why MCA and Tocal Colleges have not been transferred to the Department of Education and Training

It is essential that if there is a transfer of the Colleges to TAFE that the agricultural focus remains dominant. MCA and Tocal are training facilities for young farmers - practical skills and on the job training must remain a priority for these students.

It is essential that accommodation is provided - the facilities are already in place - outside catering could be utilised if necessary from the Leeton community but a safe place of residence is essential. Many of these students are 16-18 years of age without a driving license.

Home stay accommodation is not the answer for the majority of these students and is far from suitable in many cases.

Other

ICPA is concerned that there is now no training facility in the south west of the state

Tocal cannot provide the courses that were unique to MCA

Many students find an alternative pathway to further study through their MCA course.

The links with CSU are to be welcomed.

ICPA expressed concern at the lack of consultation and the refusal by the Minister for Agriculture to implement a 12 month moratorium prior to the closure of the College

The students of MCA entrusted their savings to ICPA to be held in trust in the hope that the College would reopen to admit full and part time residential students. This money was earned through various activities including running the Dog Trials at Murrumbidgee Farm Fair.

Conclusion

February 1963 saw the first intake of 38 students for the Farm Certificate course, which aimed at providing training to equip sons of farmers who wished to return to the family farm. After undergoing several name changes, the introduction of female students and the provision of Advanced Courses (renamed Certificate IV courses), Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture had expanded to meet the ongoing needs of its students. With the introduction of Rural Traineeships some students elected to be employed at home and come in for the shorter residential periods. For many students this was due to the rising costs of study and the inability of many farms to employ outside labour due to low commodity prices and bad seasons.

For those students who attended MCA it provided alternative educational opportunities to the HSC. The full time courses enabled students to gain skills and qualifications that equipped them for employment within the agricultural industry. Skilled young people are needed to carry on and advance our rural industries. MCA provides not only the theoretical knowledge needed but also the practical application and development of the skills needed.

In February 2004 - 41 years after the establishment of this facility, which has assisted so many rural students, we had its forced closure against the will and desire of the students, staff, parents, Advisory council and the wider community. It “specialised in vocational training for people requiring practical skills” and built up to receiving recognition as the 1998 NSW Training Provider of the year and the Inaugural National Indigenous Peoples Training Award.

The continuing drought has devastated many areas of the state and it is more essential than ever that our young people obtain the relevant skills and knowledge to equip them to continue to make our agricultural industry viable and keeping pace with developing technologies.

ICPA urges the Minister to re-open the residential full and part time courses at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. If the College re-opens, under the umbrella of the Department of Education and Training or TAFE, the emphasis must remain on the agricultural needs of the surrounding districts and enterprises.

ICPA-NSW is willing to speak to this submission and to take part in further discussions affecting the future of Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and its students.