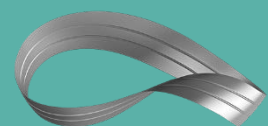


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SUPPORTING  
STRONG AND  
SUSTAINABLE  
REGIONS - REVIEW  
OF REGIONAL  
MIGRATION SETTINGS  
DISCUSSION PAPER

ISA SUBMISSION

26 July 2024



INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOLS  
AUSTRALIA

### Acknowledgement of Country

Independent Schools Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and commit to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.



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## 1. ABOUT ISA

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Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body for Independent schooling in Australia. ISA represents the sector on national issues and engages with the Australian Government, national agencies, media, key stakeholders, and the wider Australian community.

Working with the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), ISA represents 716,800 students, over 1,215 schools and a workforce of 122,000 people.

Independent schools are long-established partners in Australia's education system, alongside government and Catholic schools. They make a valuable contribution to society and the learning and wellbeing of Australian children.

The Independent school sector is diverse, and schools serve a wide range of communities. The latest available data shows that more than one in six Australian school students attends an Independent school. For secondary students, it is over one in five.

Students at Independent schools reflect the full diversity of Australian society – including those who experience one or multiple forms of disadvantage. These students include:

- high-needs students with disability attending special schools,
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending remote Majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student schools,
- students living in regional, rural and remote locations, and
- highly disadvantaged and disengaged young people attending Independent special assistance schools.

Most families with children enrolled in Independent schools are middle-to-low-income earners, increasingly from culturally diverse backgrounds, and residing in outer-suburban and inner-suburban communities. Many of these families are currently facing economic stress and are making substantial sacrifices for their children's education.

According to the most recent data, the majority of Independent schools charge annual fees of less than \$6,000, and there was a greater number of schools charging less than \$1,200 per year than those charging over \$20,000. Some Independent schools charge no fees at all. More than half of the sector's recurrent income comes from parents and families.

Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or alternatively recognised curriculum. Some have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example, Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the sector but the majority of schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

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ISA prepared this submission in response to the Department of Home Affairs' Review of Regional Migration Settings Discussion Paper - *Supporting strong and sustainable regions*.

## 3. THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLING IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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Schooling plays a crucial role in regional education by providing children with the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for personal and community development. It ensures that students in rural and remote areas have access to quality education, which can help bridge the gap between metropolitan and regional areas. Through fostering critical thinking, literacy, and numeracy, schooling also empowers students to pursue higher education and better job opportunities, contributing to the economic and social growth of their communities. Additionally, schools often serve as community hubs, promoting social cohesion and cultural preservation.

There are 414 Independent schools located outside of the major capital cities in regional and remote areas or one in three schools in the Independent sector. These schools enrol 141,045 students and employ 19,784 teachers and other staff.

Half of the Independent schools located in regional and remote areas have enrolments of fewer than two hundred students. Independent schools in regional and remote locations assist in creating real schooling choice for families in these areas. They include for example Anglican, Lutheran, Christian, Montessori, and Steiner schools.

For many regional parents and families, the issue of whether to educate their children locally or in another location is a significant and difficult decision. In making this decision, these families weigh the benefits, opportunities, and disadvantages that may be presented by children boarding away or by staying at home.

### 3.1 The Education Gap

The 2018 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education found that the outcomes for students from regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas are measurably worse than their metropolitan counterparts and have been so for decades.

This divide "is exemplified in the National Assessment Program- Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results, and two international tests of school students- the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)...

...The national statistics show there is a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures is aggregated."<sup>1</sup>

As ISA noted in our submission to the 2020 House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's Inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments, "It is likely that the inability of various policies to effectively address this gap is partly because the reasons underlying and contributing to the gap in outcomes are complex and multi-faceted. The OECD's What makes urban schools different? PISA in Focus paper states that "socio-economic status explains only part of the performance difference between students who attend urban schools and other students." The paper goes on to identify school size, responsibility of the school for resource allocation, and

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, p8, <https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>

staffing issues such as teacher shortages and staff qualifications as relevant differences and challenges for regional and remote schools.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 Regional boarding schools

The Independent sector includes 139 schools which enrol over 15,204 boarding students. The Independent sector is by far the largest provider of boarding school education for Australian school students. A considerable number of Independent school boarders are from regional and remote areas. Independent boarding schools provide these students with pastoral and emotional support while they access an education.

Independent boarding schools are frequently the only option for students from regional and remote communities, including many farming families, who must board away from home to further their education. Due to issues of remoteness, for many parents, there is little choice but to enrol their children in a boarding school. Many of these parents are acutely aware that access to education underpins their children's future success, and that boarding helps alleviate issues connected with isolation in Australia's regional and remote areas.

Additionally, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote communities, there is limited or no access to school education, particularly at the secondary level. An Independent boarding school is often the only option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote and regional communities who must board away from home to access education.

### 3.3 The cost of provision of regional education

In its Report on *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, the Productivity Commission recognised that regionality and remoteness increase the cost of delivering human services such as schooling. "Remoteness poses a number of challenges for service provision. It increases the costs of delivering services and prevents some services from being delivered at all. The size and remoteness of these communities means that they may not be able to support full-time services. Isolation also poses challenges, with some communities cut off from services for weeks or months each year. Even when they are accessible, travel can be difficult, costly, time consuming and for some people ... impossible."<sup>3</sup>

The cost of running regional schools is determined not only by substantial factors such as the expense and difficulty of transporting people and resources to and from the school location but also by something as seemingly simple as a slight rise in the cost of diesel to power generators, an issue that can have a significant impact on the school's budget and subsequent operations

### 3.4 Teachers and staffing

There are significant expense and resource implications for regional and remote schools associated with recruiting and retaining quality long-term and temporary staff and providing them with high-quality professional development and learning opportunities.

A lack of locally available and/or qualified applicants means that schools must search widely for staff. The process of advertising for and attracting potential staff, and the relocation of successful applicants, add a substantial cost to schools which is paid for directly by the school community. Unlike government or other school systems, the stand-alone nature of most Independent schools means that they do not have the resources to offer financial or other incentives above a standard award-based salary to attract staff.

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<sup>2</sup> ISA submission to the Inquiry into the education of students in remote and complex environments, p14, <https://isa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ISCA-submission-Inquiry-into-the-education-of-students-in-remote-and-complex-environments.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/human-services/reforms/report>

The costs of attracting and moving staff to schools in regional and remote communities are often multiplied due to other factors including costs related to:

- a high turnover of staff,
- provision of stable and secure ongoing housing for staff,
- retaining existing staff, the higher proportion of younger and/ or inexperienced staff employed,
- and the provision of professional learning and other support for staff.

Ensuring the provision or availability of adequate teacher housing is also an issue that regional and remote schools grapple with.

## 4. THE NATIONAL TEACHER SHORTAGE

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All schools in Australia are currently dealing with a national teacher shortage. The latest data from the Australian Teacher Workforce Data initiative shows that teacher workforce growth cannot meet the growing demand of student enrolments. Fewer people are entering the profession and the high proportion of registered teachers aged 50 years and over (38% of all registered teachers) will contribute to future workforce shortages.<sup>4</sup>

A 2022 Australian Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) survey also found that most staff departures were those staff aged 41-50 years old. It is predicted that the demands on the current workforce will continue to increase alongside shortages, placing additional pressure on existing teachers and the broader sector.

The national teacher workforce shortage has been widely discussed at the Jobs and Skills Summit and is a national priority for Education Ministers. As a result, there is now a Ministerial Direction to deliver more efficient visa processing for skilled applicants and their sponsors across industries, particularly those in schools.

According to the 2022 Skills Priority List Key Findings Report, the labour market has tightened for school professionals. The number of suitable applicants for school professionals more than halved between the 2021 and 2022 period and employers had greater difficulty filling vacancies.<sup>5</sup> This includes early childhood teachers, primary school teachers and secondary school teachers.

Staff shortages were also exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and border closures with the pandemic placing significant additional pressures on the sector and the teacher workforce. Many principals and teachers brought forward retirement plans or simply left the profession after COVID.

To address these teacher shortages, Australia now has the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (NTWAP) which was agreed to by all Education Ministers in 2022.

“The Action Plan builds on a range of initiatives already underway in jurisdictions, sectors and individual schools. It is the first step of an ongoing strategy to attract more people to the profession and retain more teachers in the workforce.”<sup>6</sup>

Prioritisation of visa processing for skilled visa applications in the education sector to improve teacher supply is part of the NTWAP.

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<sup>4</sup> AITSL, “Latest Data Reinforce Teacher Workforce Pressures,” AITSL, accessed December 16, 2022, <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/secondary/news-and-media/media-release---latest-data-reinforce-teacher-workforce-pressures>.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Government, National Skills Commission, “2022 Skills Priority List: Key Findings Report,” 2022, <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.education.gov.au/national-teacher-workforce-action-plan>

#### 4.1 Regional and remote schools

In 2020, 23% of overseas-trained teachers worked in regional or remote areas. This was a decrease of 5% since 2018.<sup>7</sup> One-third of Independent schools are located outside of metropolitan areas and the attraction and retention of teachers in 'difficult to staff' regional and remote locations is a critical issue for these schools.

The Independent school sector is quite different to the larger systemic government and Catholic sectors as Independent schools have the sole responsibility for hiring suitable and experienced staff. They are not able to encourage staff within a large system to take up positions in schools in non-metropolitan areas or to move staff to address specific shortages. Attracting overseas teachers and staff is one way that regional schools can fill critical staffing shortages.

## 5. OTHER SCHOOL STAFF

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Schools are not only experiencing teacher shortages but also shortages of other skilled school staff in a range of key areas.

### 5.1 Boarding schools

The Independent school sector is by far the largest provider of boarding schools for Australian school students (74% of the total number of boarding schools). Half of Independent sector boarding schools are in non-metropolitan areas and many metropolitan boarding schools enrol students from regional and remote areas.

Independent boarding schools sometimes must look overseas for staff who have strong boarding school experience to engage qualified workers. Overseas recruitment is the most common way to address staffing shortfalls of teachers and boarding staff for many of these schools.

ISA's 2021 Report, *Independent Boarding – A National Perspective*, which was based in part on extensive discussion with boarding schools, identified attraction, training and retention of boarding school staff as a key workforce issue. The report noted challenges with the employment of sufficient supervisors, tutors and specialists as well as attracting high calibre heads of boarding and managing the workload of those staff who often have a teaching load in the school in addition to their boarding leadership role.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.2 Allied health professionals

Student wellbeing and the provision of adjustments for students with disability are significant concerns in Australian schools and it is accompanied by a lack of access to allied health professionals. There is a range of work underway to look at workforce issues in allied health services<sup>9</sup> and inclusion of these occupations on the CSOL must also be a priority.

### 5.3 Early Childhood and Care

Based on data provided by the AISs in 2022, ISA estimates that two thirds of Independent schools provide early childhood services, which overall equates to approximately 790 schools.

Most Independent school providers operate early learning services for 3- to 5-year-olds. Some Independent schools operate both Long Day Care (LDC) and sessional kindergarten/preschool or may have Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) available for both preschool and school aged children.

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<sup>7</sup> AITSL, "ATWD: Key Metrics Dashboard," AITSL, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data/key-metrics-dashboard>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://isa.edu.au/documents/independent-boarding-a-national-perspective/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/allied-health/what-we-do>



Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that in 2022, there were 8,251 children aged 4- and 5years enrolled at Independent sector preschools. This represented approximately seven per cent of the total number of preschool enrolments across all sectors and almost eleven per cent of the total number of preschool enrolments in the non-government sector.<sup>10</sup>

## 6. SKILLED OCCUPATION LISTS

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Since changes made to skilled migration visas in 2017, ISA and other independent sector bodies have raised concerns about the omission of several school-related occupations from skilled occupation lists associated with longer visa lengths. This change has significantly impacted Independent schools' ability to recruit internationally to fill staffing shortages.

And in the intervening years, it has become clear that not only is Australia experiencing a national teacher shortage but there is a global teacher shortage. This means that more needs to be done so that skilled migration can be used effectively, and Australia can attract highly skilled school professionals. Without this change, Australia is at risk of potential school staff choosing to work in other countries.

Skilled occupation lists, including the work currently being undertaken by Jobs and Skills Australia in the development of the Core Skills Occupation List (CSOL), are integral to schools' ability to recruit and employ overseas principals, teachers and other school staff from overseas. However, ISA is concerned that the draft CSOL released for consultation in March 2024 did not include a range of school-based occupations as well as school support staff and allied health professionals.

Inclusion on the CSOL would make it easier for all schools to employ much-needed staff and would also enable schools to recruit teachers for hard-to-staff specialist areas such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and for boarding schools and importantly, regional and remote schools to recruit teachers and staff to fill workforce shortages.

ISA also is of the view that there is a need for more consultation with schools and their representative bodies to ensure that all areas of skills shortage, including the differing needs of regions, are considered when skilled occupation lists are being developed.

## 7. VISA TYPES AND SETTINGS

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The 2021 Australian Teacher Workforce Data National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report notes that seventeen per cent of the total number of teachers employed in the school sector were born overseas. Furthermore, 15% of school leaders in Australia were born overseas.<sup>11</sup> These school staff are a critical component of Australia's school workforce.

As with all regional industries and sectors trying to manage skills shortages, consideration should be given to the circumstances of regional schools and the additional difficulties they face in recruiting suitable staff. The temporary and permanent visas available to teaching and other professionals should encourage applicants and make it easy for regional schools that wish to sponsor visa applicants to do so.

Any simplification of the current process for schools, as sponsoring bodies, would also be welcome.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://isa.edu.au/documents/a-path-to-universal-early-childhood-education-and-care-draft-report/>

<sup>11</sup> AITSL, "Australian Teacher Workforce Data National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report," December 2021, [https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/atwd/national-teacher-workforce-char-report.pdf?sfvrsn=9b7fa03c\\_4](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/atwd/national-teacher-workforce-char-report.pdf?sfvrsn=9b7fa03c_4).

## 8. CONCLUSION

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Regional Independent schools offer diverse and inclusive environments that cater to the unique needs of their communities. They provide high-quality teaching and learning, despite the complexities of regional and remote provision. Independent schools in regional areas are also vital resources to the local communities they serve.

With national and global teacher shortages and a lack of other allied health and pastoral care staff, Australian schools must be assisted to meet areas of workforce shortage through migration settings that recognise the workforce needs of schools and support schools to fill those gaps through access to appropriately trained individuals from overseas who might wish to come to Australia on a temporary or permanent basis.

This means skilled occupation lists must accurately reflect existing skills shortages in all geographic locations and the visa system should both encourage applicants to apply and meet the skills needs of regional Australia and make it easier for sponsoring bodies to attract and retain staff from overseas.

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