

November 30, 2020.

The Hon. Paul Fletcher

Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts.

Minister, on November 26, 2020 I emailed you regarding a serious issue with the very poor service provided by the ACMA appointed entity, the Australian Maritime College (AMC) which is located at Launceston in Tasmania. Matters raised previously concerned the extraordinarily long processing times for Amateur Radio (A.R.) exam marking and administrative functions connected to that function.

I have received a response from the ACMA which utterly failed to address the woefully sub-standard service provided by the AMC. Indeed, it did no more than try to defend the AMC with very questionable excuses such as the Covid_19 pandemic. Tasmania was probably least affected by this virus, so that argument must be treated with suspicion. I believe the truth is rather nearer to the limited resources dedicated to processing A.R. examinations and associated call sign management. My understanding is there may be just one person responsible for doing that task, and being a service for profit, there cannot be extra staff allocated because that will drive the cash flow into the red side of the ledger.

The concerning part of the ACMA response is that the email appears to be 'pro forma', and has been sent to other persons making enquiries into the blown out processing times. It smacks very much of a condescending "Go away boy, you're bothering me!" statement.

The AMC cannot meet the legal obligations set out in the Deed between itself and the ACMA, such as a maximum 15 business day processing time. It is currently closer to 90 calendar days. By way of comparison, in New Zealand exams are sat for and graded on the same day and as well, the candidate selects a call sign. Processing time is minimal – a few days. In the UK, the candidate similarly sits the exam, it is graded immediately and a call sign is selected. This excellent service permits a candidate to go from examination to being 'on the air' all on the very same day. The USA has a same day service for exams and grading thereof. Call signs and licences can be issued within 24 hours – NOT 90 days. All three countries have an exam service run by their representative Amateur Radio organisation, not a profit driven private entity. And therein lies the very root cause of why our system has failed so miserably.

Minister, if you believe the Australian system is truly world class and best practice I would say that the ACMA is not just having the A.R. cohort on, but you are being misled in the bargain. As you are responsible for the policy and operational outcomes of the ACMA, I again need to ask a simple question "What are you going to do about it?"

Let me add one more dimension to this troublesome mess. A.R. was formed in the early twentieth century by experimenters who wished to push the envelope of radio technology. That purpose remains at its core, which is why it fits perfectly with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. Also known as ham radio, its emphasis on hands-on investigation and experimentation make it a perfect tool to help students understand complex technical subjects. The government of Malaysia actively supports the uptake of A.R. licences by school students. As an aside, both President Joko Widodo and Vice President Jusuf Kalla of Indonesia have A.R. licences.

The Federal Government takes pride in promoting academic excellence in our school system. In particular, the concept of encouraging students to study STEM subjects is an admirable one where this correlates with student aptitude. In my extensive time teaching Mathematics and Physics in Qld high schools, I wholeheartedly supported the thrust of Government policy re STEM outcomes. A not uncommon move by students is to engage in the technical hobby of A.R. particularly where teachers are familiar with the subject. These days it is often the transmission of digital data that attracts students' initial interest. For many who take up the hobby, there is a distinct pathway to a future in electronics and related technologies. However, the entry to this exciting world is immediately confronting for the Australian student. There is no short timeframe between assessment and the granting of an A.R. Licence. The appalling processing delays and unconscionable fees imposed by the AMC are a real deterrent to these students. There has been a major decline in new entrants being attracted to the hobby. Again, how do you propose to fix these defects in the system?

I believe there is ample to digest in this correspondence, and will therefore leave it for you to contemplate the next move. I do hope it to be a positive one, for the regrowing of our hobby that has been profoundly damaged by the incompetency of the AMC depends upon urgent and honest repair work by the ACMA.

Sincerely,

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