The RCEP and public services

1. Almost all services will be affected

The RCEP could set rules affecting almost all service provision including education, healthcare, transport, water, telecommunications, postal services, aged care, child care, energy, retail and banking services. These are services which many of us use each day. It's claimed that "public services" are not included in the negotiations but the definition of what constitutes a public service is very ambiguous.

2. De-regulation is the aim

The RCEP aims to reduce government regulation on services, by freezing regulation at current levels and reducing it over time. This suits global services corporations but not peoples' needs.

Many services require regulation or public provision to ensure that they are delivered safely and equitably. For example, in democratic societies like Australia we expect governments to ensure that everyone has access to services like healthcare and education. Likewise, natural monopolies, such as electricity generation, water and transport require regulation to ensure access and protect consumers.

The RCEP could prevent or limit future regulation needed to achieve these goals.

3. Hidden privatisation agenda

The RCEP supports privatisation of public services in many ways: through its ambiguous definition of what constitutes a "public" service, by allowing greater accesses to services markets for global corporations and through rules which will make reversing a decision to privatise almost impossible.

Privatisation is a politically sensitive issue in Australia where, according to the chair of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, it has often failed to deliver [5]promised outcomes, led to price rises for consumers and damaged the economy. Any decision to privatise or to reverse a privatisation should be made through an open democratic process and should not be bound by rules made in secret trade negotiations.

4 .Re-regulation not an option

The RCEP would stop governments from putting stronger regulations in place in the future, limiting their ability to respond to future crises or changed circumstances.

For example, such rules would have limited government regulation of the financial sector in response to the global financial crisis in 2008.

Deregulation and private tendering for Australian vocational education services [6] resulted in fraudulent advertising, failure to provide courses to students and misuse of government funds. If the RCEP had been already in force, it could have prevented the government from re-regulating [7] the vocational education sector, because of commitments which prevent future increases in regulation

7. Race to the bottom on quality, safety, more temporary workers

The RCEP rules for licensing, qualifications and service standards not to be "burdensome" for emplloyers could prevent future improvements in staffing and qualifications in industries like child care and aged care.

The RCEP may also have provisions to increase numbers of temporary overseas “contractual service providers” without testing if local workers are available. Studies show these workers are vulnerable to exploitation [8], which can undermine wages and conditions in those industries.

9. Limited regulation for future services

Trade agreements like the RCEP bind governments for decades, limiting their ability to respond to future challenges like climate change, corporate tax evasion or another financial crisis. TISA could also prevent regulation of future new services [10]- that is, services which have not even been invented yet.