



# Progress Report 2023 Federal Conference Motions

Compiled March 2024

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## Introduction

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) annual conference was held on 26 and 27 July 2023 in Darwin, Northern Territory. At the conference 57 portfolio motions and two miscellaneous motions were carried by delegates from Branches and State Councils from all over Australia. All motions have been actioned by Federal Council since the conference. This Progress Report outlines these actions across each portfolio.

## Boarding/Hostels/Second Home Portfolio

In 2023, thirteen Boarding Schools/Hostels/Second Home Portfolio motions were carried at the Federal Conference. All of the motions related to educational affordability and financial assistance for geographically isolated students including the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance, the Direct Measure of Income (DMI) School Funding Model, Fringe Benefits Tax on boarding fees, the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program and funding for students with disability in boarding facilities.

### **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance**

Once again, a number of motions seeking an increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance – Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA) were presented at the Federal Conference, indicative of the ongoing and increasing affordability challenges geographically isolated families face to provide an affordable, equitable compulsory education to their children.

While this has been high on the agenda for many years, since conference Federal Council has continued on a dedicated campaign appealing for an AIC-BBA increase, citing that geographically isolated families are faced with unique costs to educate their children, not felt by those in metropolitan locations and these are ever-increasing. With the support and guidance of C7even who were engaged last year as communications and advocacy consultants, Federal Council has employed a variety of strategies aimed at compelling the federal government to restore the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance to its original value of 55% of average boarding fees. This has included the launch of an [e-petition](#) which now has nearly 4000 signatures and an open letter endorsed by other stakeholders, both directed to the Minister for Social Services, Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, who has jurisdiction over the AIC. We have also included this request, with supporting information, in the ICPA (Aust) [2024-25 Pre-Budget Submission](#) for the budget to be handed down in May 2024. Federal Council has also had two delegations to Canberra with ministers, members of parliament and senators since the 2023 Federal Conference at which the request for an AIC increase was the central advocacy and were pleased with the support received across all parties.

This campaign is ongoing, though unfortunately to date, we are unable to report success. However, at the time of writing Federal Council is pleased to have secured a virtual meeting with Minister Rishworth to raise the issue with her directly for the first time since she became the minister responsible for the AIC Scheme.

Alongside this advocacy, Federal Council also corresponded with Minister Rishworth to raise the request for AIC eligibility criteria and in particular criteria associated with the Limited Program Schools to be expanded to allow more disadvantaged rural and remote students to be eligible for assistance to access equitable educational opportunities. In our correspondence we noted the potential for an expansion of eligibility criteria to include students from those remote and very remote locations identified as severely educationally disadvantaged, in the "Educate Australia Fair", Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre Study, as cited in the conference motion presented on this topic. We highlighted that due to the nature of the educational facilities in some very remote and remote towns, students face limited subject choices and reduced educational opportunities. The expansion of the Limited Program Schools criteria to facilitate increased AIC eligibility for

rural and remote students would address the educational disadvantage some students face in these very remote and remote contexts. At the time of writing we had not received a response from the minister; however we will endeavour to raise this in future discussions.

While these long-term advocacies are ongoing for Federal Council, it is pleasing to report that a supplementary motion carried at conference requesting that Federal Council seek an update to the AIC Renewal Form to allow 'Assessment for Additional Boarding Allowance' to be selected when students transition from Distance Education to Boarding School has been actioned and the request fulfilled. Federal Council works closely with representatives from Services Australia and were able to raise this with them soon after conference. Pleasingly, the form was reconfigured to encompass this request, which members would have noticed when completing their AIC Renewal Forms at the end of 2023. Federal Council is tremendously grateful for the continued support and assistance we receive from the Services Australia team, along with Department of Social Services personnel.

### **Direct Measure of Income (DMI)**

The impact of the Direct Measure of Income (DMI) funding model for non-government schools and the flow on effect that this will have on school fees, particularly for boarding families continues, to be addressed by Federal Council. Following conference we wrote to the Minister for Education Hon Jason Clare MP and other relevant ministers raising these concerns. In our correspondence, Federal Council suggested that an increase of the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance could be a solution to address the expected increase in boarding school fees incurred by families as a result of the methodology.

In a response from Assistant Minister for Education, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm, it was noted that the DMI methodology is deemed to be a robust and accurate funding model. Concerns raised by Federal Council on the impact of the methodology were acknowledged by the Senator and he cited the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship (Pilot) Program as potentially helping to address these concerns. While Federal Council welcomes this Program, its scope in its first year has provided assistance to only a limited number of families. We firmly believe an increase to the AIC BBA would address the shortfall brought about by fee increases for the majority of families who must send their children to schools impacted by the DMI methodology.

As mentioned above, Federal Council is currently undertaking a dedicated campaign to the federal government requesting an increase to the AIC BBA and this is ongoing. Federal Council would welcome any further information or data related to the impacts of the DMI on schools and the families who must utilise them to access compulsory education which may assist our advocacy.

### **Commonwealth Scholarship Program**

In 2023, the federal government announced a pilot program known as the Commonwealth Scholarship program which aimed to provide scholarships for low and low to middle income families from regional, rural, and remote areas to assist with boarding school fees and associated costs. ICPA (Aust) worked closely with the Federal Department of Education as this program was developed and had the opportunity to suggest criteria for eligibility including those requested in a motion carried at conference. The program eligibility and criteria were finalised in late 2023. More information can be found here:

<https://www.education.gov.au/commonwealth-regional-scholarship-program>. ICPA (Aust) understands that the first roll out of the scholarship saw 100 recipients gratefully receiving the assistance.

Federal Council looks forward to future developments and liaising with the Federal Department of Education regarding this program as its pilot year is reviewed. However, we have some concerns as to the limited scope of the program, particularly the modest number of scholarships available. We will continue to maintain and advocate that all rural and remote families who do not have access to equitable education require adequate financial assistance.

### **Fringe Benefits Tax**

Members voted at Federal Conference for the removal of the Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) for businesses who assist their employees residing in geographically isolated areas, by providing financial assistance to enable their children to attend boarding school. This topic was raised in a motion letter following conference to the Treasurer Hon Jim Chalmers MP, along with other relevant ministers, members of parliament and senators, including the Minister for Agriculture, Senator the Hon Murray Watt. We followed up with a second letter earlier this year.

Federal Council highlighted that in many rural and remote locations, there is insufficient access to suitable compulsory education facilities and therefore boarding school is the only option available. Thus some employers offer valuable financial assistance to their employees to assist with the exorbitant expenses incurred to provide their children an equitable education in rural and remote locations, in order to retain staff. However this assistance is deemed a Fringe Benefit.

In our correspondence, it was noted that in recognition of conditions in rural and remote locations, the Australian Tax Office already offers certain FBT concessions and benefits such as for employer provision of housing where there is a lack of sufficient residential accommodation in remote locations and ICPA (Aust) requested similar concessions should be made for employers in geographically isolated locations to assist employees with the costs associated with expenses incurred for their children's compulsory education.

To date no response has been received regarding this issue, however we will persist in seeking a response and action.

### **Funding for students with a disability in residential boarding facilities**

Following conference, Federal Council wrote to the Minister for the NDIS & Government Services, Hon Bill Shorten MP seeking additional funding for geographically isolated students with a disability who must live away from home in a residential boarding facility to access appropriate education, so that their needs can be met, and reasonable adjustments and accommodations can be implemented in accordance with The Disability Standards for Education 2005. In this motion letter we highlighted that it is imperative that boarding facilities be equipped to adequately cater for geographically isolated boarding students with specific education needs. We followed up with further correspondence regarding this issue earlier this year, however are still awaiting a response.

*Portfolio Leader-Alana Moller*

## **Communications Portfolio**

Communications issues continue to be raised at ICPA Federal Conferences and this area remains a focus and dedicated effort by Federal Council.

ICPA (Aust) continues to engage with key communications stakeholders. This ensures we are able to raise both ongoing and more time-sensitive topics and issues. ICPA (Aust) also continues our involvement in the Rural, Regional and Remote Communications Coalition (RRRCC), Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) Consumer Panel, Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) and Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Consumer Consultative Forum, where we have the opportunity to raise members' issues. ICPA (Aust) also participates in regular meetings with NBN Co and Telstra. Recently a Telstra Roundtable was held, with representatives from Federal Council and all State Councils to discuss topics from across the country including the closure of the Telstra 3G network and the review into the Universal Service Obligation, to which ICPA (Aust) has made a submission. We also engage with the Regional

Tech Hub on a regular basis and are able to assist members with communications needs through this channel.

### **Internet Access**

Members continue to raise the necessity for adequate internet access commensurate to the educational needs of geographically isolated students. Following the 2023 Federal Conference, ICPA (Aust) wrote to the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, citing all motions carried at the conference, underpinned by an overall request that adequate internet access is available for all rural and remote students with regard to speed, quality, capabilities and cost of the services. A response from Mr Shervin Rafizadeh, the minister's chief of staff, in November 2023, referenced our meeting with representatives from the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, where we had raised concerns about the speed and quality of members' broadband services. Mr Rafizadeh detailed the responsibilities of retail service providers and the process to be undertaken for unresolved issues.

Mr Rafizadeh outlined that the upgrades to the nbn fixed wireless network and subsequent movement of premises off the nbn Sky Muster satellites will relieve satellite capacity and has allowed nbn to offer better services on Sky Muster Plus premium plans. However, broadband speeds can be affected by a variety of factors.

A recent development has been the announcement by nbn that the Sky Muster Plus premium plans now have three tiers all offering unmetered data at different speeds and price points.

In response to the introduction of LEOSat technology, Mr Rafizadeh acknowledged that there is no subsidy for these services. However, Services Australia offers a Telephone Allowance payment to eligible recipients to assist with phone and internet costs. He also referenced the government's \$4.5million investment in the School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI), which is offering free nbn services, now until 2025, for eligible families.

Our correspondence also outlined the disparity of internet connection costs to families for the delivery of education to children enrolled in distance education between the states and territories. ICPA (Aust) requested the federal government encourage state and territory governments to provide for the delivery and maintenance of a high-speed internet connection to geographically isolated families with children enrolled in distance education at no cost to families.

### **Telephone**

In rural and remote areas, telephone connections remain a significant and essential part of the communications services relied on by residents. Understandably, at the 2023 conference, ICPA members again requested for services to be reliable, fit for purpose and maintained at a fully functioning standard. In our correspondence to Minister Rowland following conference, we sought a commitment to ensure all communication providers fulfil their Universal Service Guarantee (USG) obligations in the provision and functionality of essential communication services to enable the delivery of rural and remote education. We sought assurances that until such time as viable alternatives are made available High Capacity Radio Concentrators (HCRC) and copper landline services for voice need to be maintained and upgraded as required.

We also sought reassurance that the USG be maintained to ensure rural and remote customers are not left without adequate communications due to stringent repair timeframes not being upheld and that new Universal Service Obligation (USO) voice service exceeds the reliability and quality of existing voice services.

ICPA (Aust) acknowledged that new technologies and alternative voice services are being investigated however, some of these alternatives seem to be reliant on access to a mobile service (which is not available to many rural and remote families) and other services would rely on satellite. ICPA (Aust) reiterated the imperative need for two communications services which are independent of each other in rural, regional and

remote locations. We continue to advocate that all residents living in geographically isolated areas should have access to two independent communications services and not be solely reliant on one communication source while stressing that a move from existing HCRC or copper line services to Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) services reliant on satellite is not a satisfactory replacement of legacy voice services at this time, where rural and remote residents currently only have satellite internet access.

ICPA (Aust) also highlighted a further barrier to digital technology use in regional, rural and remote areas is the concern that in order to access these services, the equipment required needs electricity to work. Both mobile and internet services require power (especially if using fixed Smart Antennae or Cel-Fi equipment) and if there is a power outage, which can be frequent in rural and remote areas, the service cannot be relied upon and many properties that are on self-generated power do not run their generators 24 hours a day.

We also emphasised that in considering alternative voice services it is imperative that any possible solutions are rigorously tested for robustness in areas where there remains no mobile coverage to prove that they can be relied upon and withstand the harsh weather and environmental events of rural and remote Australia. Testing their reliability, durability and quality in urban settings is not reflective of the environments in which they will be used and relied upon.

Ms Nicolle Power, Assistant Secretary, Universal Services Branch responded on behalf of Minister Rowland. Ms Power informed us the government is interested in looking at ways to improve the delivery of USO services and welcomed our views. ICPA (Aust) presented a submission to the Australian Government Review into the Better Delivery of Universal Services on 1 March 2024, emphasising the requirements of service delivery for regional, rural and remote families.

Ms Power also advised that, under current USO arrangements, Telstra is required to publicly report on its performance in delivering regional voice services at the local exchange level against key indicators, including service availability, connection timeframes, faults and outages, repair timeframes and appointment timeframes, as well as providing national complaint and customer contact handling performance data. Generally, this data across rural and remote areas suggests there is high availability, low fault rates and most voice services are restored within required timeframes. Ms Power is keen to hear if there are situations where Telstra are not fulfilling this requirement.

ICPA (Aust) was further reassured that while the federal government is carefully monitoring technology developments, including Low Earth Orbiting Satellites (LEOs) that Telstra is not currently able to decommission its rural and remote copper network where it is supporting voice services under existing USO arrangements.

In relation to the issue of power and reliability she explained the federal government is taking important steps to support more resilient telecommunications services, however the responsibility for broader regulation of the supply and generation of electricity rests with state and territory governments.

In the 2022-2023 Budget the federal government committed \$2.2 billion to regional connectivity over the next 5 years, including \$480 million towards an upgrade of the entire NBN fixed wireless footprint by the end of 2024. Additionally, this upgrade is resulting in improving broadband speeds on the fixed wireless network and greater data speeds to satellite premises.

The federal government is also investing \$656 million to improve regional connectivity under its Better Connectivity Plan for Regional and Rural Australia. This Plan includes \$400 million dedicated to boosting mobile coverage and resilience, \$200 million for place-based connectivity solutions under two new rounds of the Regional Connectivity Program (RCP), \$30 million for on-farm connectivity, \$20 million for an independent audit of mobile coverage to better identify and target blackspots, and a \$6 million boost in funding for the Regional Tech Hub, a platform serving as a trusted source of free and independent advice for regional

Australians on digital connectivity options.

Federal Council met with Ms Power in person at our October delegations together with Dan Irvine, A/g Director/Regional Broadband/Universal Services and Garth Donovan, Director, USG Reliability/USO Delivery. Discussions centred around the reliability issues of our members, trials of new technologies and reinforcing the need for the delivery of two separate forms of communication independent of each other. At every opportunity, ICPA (Aust) raises this topic.

We have also implored that any testing or investigation of alternative services needs to be undertaken in real life situations and in particular in remote locations where our members will be impacted by any changes. We have received assurance from Telstra that this will be the case. Federal Council understands this is a considerable concern for those members who may be impacted and will continue to ensure we maintain robust advocacy on this topic.

#### **Other relevant communications topics**

The Telstra 3G network is to close on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024 and Telstra have reiterated that in areas that currently only have a 3G signal they are committed to providing 4G before they close 3G. ICPA (Aust) will be monitoring this changeover closely.

ICPA (Aust) encourages members to raise with us specific connectivity challenges to ensure that future developments are meeting the needs of rural and remote families accessing education.

*Portfolio Leader-Sally Brindal*

## Curriculum Portfolio

There was one motion carried in the Curriculum Portfolio at the 2023 Federal Conference, pertaining to the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing.

In 2023, the dates of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing were moved to earlier in the school year, in term one. The motion presented at conference requested a review of NAPLAN reporting timeframes to enable schools to access students' results in a timely manner, preferably during term two in the year of examination, to better support the specific learning needs of rural and remote students. The motion cited that one of the expectations of the date change was that results would be provided to schools in a timely manner, so that they may review the results, identify the needs of the cohort and individual students, and provide necessary support as available. However, in 2023, the NAPLAN results were still not available until term three, limiting schools' capacity to review, act upon and support students. The motion expressed concern regarding the well documented widening gap between metropolitan and rural and remote students in relation to results of NAPLAN testing and that earlier reporting would provide improved opportunities for schools to address learning gaps.

ICPA (Aust) continues to have a representative on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Peak Parents and Principals Forum, which meets quarterly. Shortly after conference, Federal Council had the opportunity to raise this issue at an in person meeting in Sydney. It was also raised during meetings with the Federal Department of Education Regional School Policy team in October.

During these meetings, several points were discussed as influencing factors that delayed the release of NAPLAN 2023 reporting. NAPLAN underwent major reform in 2023, with the school testing window moved from May to March and the testing delivery transitioned to an online platform. Once the testing was

completed, the re-setting of the scales and baseline commenced, with the scales now using proficiency standards as opposed to achievement bands. Results are now reported against proficiency standards with four levels (exceeding, strong, developing and needs additional support) for each of the four assessment domains (writing, reading, conventions of language and numeracy) at each year level. The reset of NAPLAN scales and baselines now links it to the national curriculum so schools can see where the expectations are for years 3,5,7,9 students across the four domains. The use of proficiency standards provides clear information on a student's achievement against the national average for their year. It was explained that the key issue influencing the delay was the time required to reset this baseline.

The NAPLAN assessment processes were discussed, along with their influence on the final school/student reports. It is proposed, post the 2023 transition year, that NAPLAN reports (without the writing component - as it is still manually assessed) will be given to schools earlier than in previous years (suggested this could be the end of April). Once the writing component is assessed the school/student-based reporting should be finalised by June. The aim is for individual student reports to be completed before the end of term two, with consideration of barriers expected during terms one and two, such as Easter, Anzac Day and holidays, making the testing and assessment reporting timeframe a challenge.

It is anticipated that NAPLAN 2024 should not have the delays between the assessment and the reporting to schools, parents and students experienced in 2023. The Department of Education and all involved jurisdictions are working towards a term two delivery of reporting to schools, but it was acknowledged that this still needs improvement.

With NAPLAN testing occurring as this report is being written, ICPA (Aust) will endeavour to keep abreast of reporting timeframes and ensure to continue to raise concerns regarding lengthy periods within ACARA meetings.

*Portfolio Leaders- Anna McCorkle and Naomi Obst*

## Distance Education Portfolio

There were two Distance Education motions passed at the 2023 ICPA Federal Conference in Darwin, Northern Territory.

A conjoined motion presented by four branches, Western Australia State Council, Alice Springs Branch (NT), Far North Queensland Branch (QLD), Goldfields Eyre Branch (WA), Katherine Branch (NT), continues to highlight that the need for home tutor recognition and recompense is high on the agenda.

Post conference, a letter was written to the Hon Fiona Nash, Regional Education Commissioner seeking her support for the Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA), whose response explained that she had raised the issue of a DETA in her 2022 Annual Report and will continue to consider how best to assist with progressing this issue. Ms Nash continues to be supportive of DETA and we look forward to a meeting with her in March to discuss the issue further and potential opportunities to reframe the lobby.

The DETA lobby has been on the table for over 30 years, with extensive directions, actions and advocacy being undertaken over that time in an attempt to bring it to fruition. However thus far no traction has been made and discussions this year have revolved around how the topic can be reframed and presented in a potentially more progressive manner. ICPA (Aust), alongside the State Councils have had lengthy discussions regarding DETA over many years, and again at the most recent Joint Council meeting in February.



At this meeting Federal Council provided State Councils with an overview of the federal advocacy currently, primarily that feedback continues to be that it is a state and territory government issue. The risk however if state and territory governments are approached separately is that they might fund at different levels, and some may not fund at all. ICPA (Aust) has also requested on several occasions that the topic be added as an agenda item at an Education Ministers Meeting (EMM), which is a periodic meeting of all state, territory and federal education ministers.

Given the current financial climate, complexity and longevity around the DETA advocacy, it was agreed that the direction of the advocacy needs to be revisited, reconsidered and adjusted with some fresh methodology in order to have more impact and certainty in future, particularly regarding the distance education tutor role, terminology and details on what a DETA would actually look like. Federal Council has also taken the feedback from the Joint Council meeting to our public relations and strategic planning consultants, who we have also asked to advise on ways forward with the DETA advocacy. Federal Council is absolutely committed to resolving the DETA issue for home tutors all over Australia.

ICPA (Aust) has spent many years advocating for some form of allowance for distance education tutors and a variety of avenues have been investigated over this time. At the Federal Conference, a motion was also carried requesting that ICPA (Aust) investigate the existing precedence of the Centrelink Jobseeker payment which is available to single principal carer with exemption from mutual obligation requirements because they are a home or distance educator of child/ren in their care, and its possible application, adaption and or leverage for the creation of an applicable Distance Education Tutor Allowance for geographically isolated families. In the first instance, Federal Council has written to the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, regarding this recommendation. At the time of writing we have not yet received a response from the minister; however we have a meeting scheduled with her in April.

*Portfolio Leader- Louise Martin*

## Early Childhood Education and Care Portfolio

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Portfolio has addressed the motions tabled at the 2023 Federal Conference, through consultation with the federal government departments and ministers and collaboration with other stakeholders including the Department of Education, Early Childhood, Social Services, Attorney General and Employment and Workplace Relations, Immigration and Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, The Parenthood, Thrive by Five and Grain Growers. Correspondence has been sent to relevant ministers and issues raised through our delegation and departmental meetings. The motions presented continue to highlight longstanding issues that rural and remote families face when accessing early childhood education and care.

The Federal Department Early Childhood Education and Care has continued with the comprehensive review of all early childhood programs and systems in the process of developing an Early Years Strategy. The process of developing the Strategy is outlined below.

### **Previous consultation and engagement**

The government has consulted widely to develop the Strategy. This has included:

- The [National Early Years Summit](#) held on 17 February 2023 at Australian Parliament House, bringing together over 100 delegates.
- A pulse survey in early 2023, which received over 2,240 responses.
- A [discussion paper](#), which received over 350 [public submissions](#).

- 39 roundtables held in person and online, with over 750 participants.
- Consultation with 115 children aged 3 to 5 years about what matters most to them.

[The Early Years Strategy Consultation Report 2023](#) provides a summary of what we heard during the consultation process to inform the draft Early Years Strategy.

### **Advisory Panel**

An expert 14-member [Early Years Strategy Advisory Panel](#) was established to provide advice to government to inform the development of the Strategy. Members of the Advisory Panel work collaboratively to share their insights and expertise on how to best support children and families in the early years.

The aim of the Strategy being to shape the services provided in an integrated and holistic way that supports the education, wellbeing and development of Australia's children. The Executive Summary of the Draft Strategy which was released in December 2023 states:

### **Why an Early Years Strategy**

*The Australian government has developed the Early Years Strategy to articulate the value we place on the early years and early childhood, what we want for all young children, and our understanding of success. The Early Years Strategy wraps around everything we value about early childhood, with what we know about its importance and what we know about how to make a difference.*

Correspondence went to Minister Aly in September 2023, outlining members' issues with In Home Care (IHC), Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance, Mobile Early Learning, Family Day Care Legislation and insufficient funding and staffing of remote and very remote Early Childhood Services. A reply received in October 2023 outlined plans to analyse and consider all recommendations from the various reviews completed in 2022/2023/2024.

### **Reviews complete or underway:**

[Family Assistance Legislation Amendment \(Cheaper Child Care\) Bill 2022](#)

[Early Years Strategy](#)

[ACCC Price Inquiry into Childcare](#)

[In Home Care Review](#)

[Productivity Commission Review of Early Childhood Education and Care](#)

ICPA (Aust) contributed to these reviews and will also continue to submit members' issues with ECEC at every opportunity. Advisors to the Hon Dr Anne Aly MP, Minister for Early Childhood Education met with ICPA (Aust) in October 2023 and February 2024 and continue to reassure our members that they are committed to reforming ECEC to make it more accessible and affordable for families.

ICPA (Aust) has continued to support the Minderoo Foundation's Thrive by Five campaign by attending their rural and remote meetings and being a signatory to their media campaigns and advocacy letters.

ICPA (Aust) has partnered with The Parenthood in:

1. the release of the report '*Choiceless*' *The plight of parents in accessing regional, rural and remote early learning and care*. which details the barriers to accessing quality ECEC for families across Australia.
2. The development of their Access for Every Child: Regional, Rural and Remote Coalition Joint Statement for Government Action.

## In Home Care (IHC)

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) were engaged to conduct a review of the In Home Care program. The final report was released in August 2023. The review found IHC partially met its objective. However, the report stated the program was hampered by workforce shortages, affordability, and access issues. It recommended the program is tailored to serve the three cohorts it seeks to serve.

From the report:

Finding 4: There is a shortage of educators available to provide IHC to geographically isolated families. To access educators these families incur significant, additional costs that are not covered under the CCS.

Demand for IHC for geographically isolated families is trending up with a 162 per cent increase in the number of geographically isolated families accessing the program from July 2018 to December 2022. These families tend to have limited changes to their circumstances and engage with the program for extended periods of time, in the absence of there being other forms of ECEC available to them.

The increase to the family hourly rate cap in 2019 (from \$25.48 to \$32, indexed annually) has enabled IHC providers to be better remunerated for their services, while improving affordability for families<sup>16</sup>. However, the current rate cap is often too low to cover additional costs associated with penalty rates for non-standard hours, and additional costs to access IHC in rural/remote areas.

*Families accessing IHC in regional and remote areas often face higher out-of-pocket fees with the average gap payment for a 4.2-hour session in Very Remote Australia being \$49.00 per session and \$42.04 per session for Remote Australia in 2022. It is important to note that these out-of-pocket costs to a family exclude the additional costs incurred by families in remote areas relating to transport, board, food and other ancillary costs to access an educator that are not reimbursed as part of the IHC program. This creates affordability challenges for families to utilise the program. Despite already experiencing a shortage of educators in these regions, the current guidelines prohibit IHC educators from providing care for more than one family. This requirement means that multiple families who live on a remote station are unable to 'share' an educator for their children.*

*Some of the options presented in the final IHC Review report under Mechanisms to address the needs of geographically isolated families in government programs.*

- *IHC could consider collaborating with other programs such as FDC or CBDC to consider whether there are some cohorts that can be serviced through these other programs.*
- *Incentive structures for career progression should be considered for IHC educators in rural and remote communities, such as providing fast-tracking for certifications, to encourage educators to work in geographically isolated communities.*
- *As one of the key cohorts of the IHC program is families in remote and regional areas, a higher subsidy rate or similar initiatives could be considered to address the costs of servicing such areas and families.*
- *Funding through loadings and incentives, including the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme, which is a group of payments for parents and carers of children who cannot attend a local state school due to factors such as geographical isolation have been used to tackle thin market challenges. Reviews into rural and remote education have identified the importance of providing additional loading and funding to schools in remote and regional areas. A Review of the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings is being conducted, and the paper will be released assessing the current settings for the loadings. To address thin markets in rural and remote areas, additional funding is provided to support provision of services in these geographically isolated areas, where it generally costs more to offer education. Similar loadings could be considered for IHC for families in remote and regional areas.*

The review also considered the introduction of a new version of Family Day Care to meet the needs of geographically isolated families and concluded this would present a moderate risk to government and a moderate impact on services. The exploration of alternative versions of an In Home Care program was deemed to have a high impact on equity, affordability and accessibility of ECEC while presenting a high risk to government requiring changes to both legislation and regulation and a long term implementation.

Federal Council has been part of the Department of Education In Home Care Quality and Safety Project implemented by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). The pilot program is currently running and a Federal Council representative will attend a professional development workshop with IHC providers in March 2024.

ICPA (Aust) has continued to develop a valuable working relationship with key staff members of the Department of Education IHC team and value their support and guidance, which helps us support our members in navigating the entire IHC program. The IHC team remain open to communication and supportive in providing what information they can to help with our queries.

The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) continued with a price enquiry into Childcare to discover the drivers for the cost of centre based childcare, out of school hours care, family daycare and In Home Care. As part of this enquiry, they conducted three roundtable consultations in September 2023 (two virtual and one face to face) of approximately 30 people each:

- Roundtable 1 – First Nations, face to face in Darwin
- Roundtable 2 – Virtual on Teams Guardians and Parents
- Roundtable 3 – Virtual on Teams In Home Care

The topics to be covered during the IHC roundtables were:

1. Barriers to access for families
2. Issues for educators
3. Provider viability
4. Workforce pressures

The ACCC wanted to hear from ICPA members using or having difficulties accessing IHC and users of rural and remote childcare. Federal Council representatives and ICPA members attended the virtual roundtables and contributed valuable anecdotal evidence of the need for a more relevant version of IHC for rural and remote Australia.

The [ACCC Price Inquiry into Childcare final report](#) was released in January 2024. From the Final ACCC report: *Participants in the educator roundtable shared that some services in regional and remote areas spend a lot of money to attract educators only to find that the educators do not stay long in the job, noting that government support would be useful for rural and remote locations to build an educator workforce among the existing community.*

The Productivity Commission has continued its review of ECEC and delivered an interim report in November 2023 with consultation open until February 14, 2024. ICPA (Aust) joined with the National Rural Women's Coalition in lodging a joint comment on that draft report and leader of the ECEC portfolio Julia Broad presented our comment at a public hearing of the Productivity Commission in late February 2024. Members' issues with IHC were raised and discussed with the Productivity Commission.

ICPA (Aust) submitted the ECEC staffing issues identified by members to the Consultation Paper for Jobs and Skills Australia's Early Childhood, Education and Care Capacity Study in January 2024. This will assist Jobs and Skills Australia to gather critical evidence and insights and make recommendations as appropriate to support

current and future workforce planning in the ECEC sector. The next steps for this capacity study include targeted stakeholder engagement in February and March 2024 and a final report in May 2024.

### **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) for 3-4 year olds.**

The recommendation below was tabled in correspondence to The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Social Services.

#### Recommendations:

The extension of the AIC Distance Education Allowance to 3-4-year-olds undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program in order to:

- create more affordable access to early childhood programs the year before rural and remote children start school.
- provide an opportunity to meet the Preschool Reform Agreement.
- give educators the opportunity to deliver early intervention where needed.

In November, members of Federal Council met online with the Minister's Senior Advisor Kirsten Johnson to outline all our advocacies around the AIC. Minister Rishworth's reply to other Members of Parliament has detailed that the AIC is available for full time study and pre-school does not qualify as full time and that funding is provided to states and territories through the Pre School Reform Agreement for the provision of preschool.

These recommendations were also raised during several delegation meetings in October 2023 and February 2024, including with the Hon Dr Anne Aly MP, Minister for Early Childhood Education. We also advocated strongly for this measure to be implemented in the ICPA (Aust) [2024-25 Pre-Budget Submission](#).

The Productivity Commission has requested further information regarding the costs, benefits and practicalities of expanding the Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education Allowance to include children receiving a preschool education in geographically isolated areas. [**Information request 6.4**] ICPA (Aust) has used distance education preschool enrolment numbers to present an estimate to the Productivity Commission of possible 3-4 year olds who might be eligible for AIC – DE.

Excerpt from Productivity Commission Supplementary Paper

#### **Families in remote areas experience unique affordability barriers when accessing preschool.**

Early learning programs can also be delivered by distance education for the year prior to a child starting compulsory schooling. For many geographically isolated families, this is the only avenue available to access early childhood education. Children that receive primary or secondary schooling by distance education are eligible to receive the Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education Allowance which 'contributes towards incidental costs incurred by geographically isolated families' (DSS 2023b, p. 57).

However, children attending preschool via distance education are ineligible to receive the Distance Education Allowance as it is not an approved course (DSS 2023b, p. 20).

[Children attending distance preschool] are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance as they are not recognised by the Australian Government as participating in compulsory schooling and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) either, as these children are still in their parents' care while participating in distance education. (Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, sub. 58, p. 5)

An online meeting with Minister Rishworth has been scheduled for April 2024. The estimated number of 3-4 year olds and benefits to families of receiving this allowance will be again detailed to the minister in this meeting.

### **Pay parity and incentives**

Pay parity and the need for staff incentive programs to help address ECEC staff shortages in rural and remote areas were addressed in correspondence to the Hon Tony Burke MP, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations in September 2023. This letter was referred to Minister Aly.

Minister Aly's reply provided assurance that the federal government was committed to improving our ECEC system, including outcomes for families in rural and remote areas, to ensure all Australian children have the best possible start in life and that families are supported to work, train or study and that the ECEC workforce are valued as professionals, with rewarding career opportunities. Further, the minister advised that the government has strengthened the ability and capacity for the Fair Work Commission (FWC), the independent workplace relations tribunal responsible for setting minimum wages and employment conditions, to order pay increases for workers in low paid, female-dominated industries through the *Secure Jobs, Better Pay Act 2022*. The changes give the FWC powers to support lower paid sectors, such as ECEC, to bargain for better pay and conditions.

The FWC recently delivered their Annual Wage Review for 2022–23, which included a 5.75 per cent increase to awards from 1 July 2023. This was a historic pay rise, which included awards covering ECEC educators and teachers.

In the reply, Minister Aly also referred to the Productivity Commission review which will make recommendations to support accessible, affordable, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children's learning and development. The Productivity Commission will consider the impact geographical factors have on families' access to ECEC, including in regional and remote locations and is an important step in identifying and addressing systemic issues in the ECEC sector.

ICPA (Aust) highlighted the need for pay parity in the joint comment on the PC draft report A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care. ECEC portfolio leader, Julia Broad discussed pay parity as a barrier to delivery of rural and remote ECEC during the public hearing of the Productivity Commission in February 2024.

Minister Aly claims to be aware that attracting, developing, and retaining staff is a significant challenge currently impacting the ECEC sector, with workforce issues felt particularly in regional and remote areas and believes the co-design of the 10-year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (released in October 2021)

<https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/early-childhood-workforce/national-childrens-education-and-care-workforce-strategy>

will help to address this. The Strategy includes 21 practical actions that aim to address the long-term and persistent issues impacting attraction, retention, and quality of the ECEC workforce. Action 1-1 of the Strategy involves research to investigate options to improve pay and conditions in the ECEC sector. Action 2-1 of the Strategy focuses on reviewing and developing targeted programs to support studies and placements for specified groups of potential educators and teachers, one of these groups being those from regional, rural and remote communities. Key findings were discussed at the first ECEC Biennial National Workforce Forum hosted by ACECQA in November 2023, on behalf of all governments and sector stakeholders. Participants in this forum included representatives from all nine governments, peak bodies, unions, Australia's largest children's education and care providers, service leaders and educators, research organisations and teaching institutions. A summary of the forum can be found here: <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-workforce-forum>

Minister Aly's reply continued to detail the government's belief that the ECEC sector will further benefit from the government's commitment to improve workforce supply through Fee-Free TAFE, additional university places, teacher bursaries, expanding the migration program and the establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia to support workforce planning.

ICPA (Aust) also submitted the issue of pay parity amongst other ECEC staffing policy to the Consultation Paper for Jobs and Skills Australia's Early Childhood, Education and Care Capacity Study in January 2024. The steps for this capacity study include targeted stakeholder engagement in February and March 2024 and a final report in May 2024.

A Professional Development Subsidy is available via ECEC services to help qualified staff to complete training that adds to their skills as of 1 July 2023. This is initially only available to services and staff in regional, remote and very remote locations, and First Nations services and educators.

### **Working with Children Check**

The need for a National Working with Children Check has been making what seems to be slow but steady progress. Correspondence detailing the barriers created by state-based working with children check (WWCC) systems was sent to the Attorney General, the Hon. Mark Dreyfus KC MP in September 2023 with a response received in December 2023. The response detailed that while the WWCC is, constitutionally, a state and territory government responsibility, the National Office for Child Safety within the Attorney-General's Department is working collectively with states and territories to improve national consistency of WWCC. The reply detailed the work of the Care and Support Economy Taskforce with National Cabinet to establish a national strategy for the care and support economy. The Attorney-General hosted a Ministerial Forum on Child Safety in November 2023 with all state and territory ministers to promote national consistency in WWCC and renew commitment to embed the National Principles for Child Safety Organisations into legislation. The Attorney-General advised that states and territories have been progressively implementing the National Standards for WWCC and that he is fully committed to improving the frameworks that underpin child safety in Australia.

ICPA (Aust) has raised this issue as a barrier to accessing ECEC staff in rural and remote Australia in the submission to the Productivity Commission (PC) into Early Childhood Education Care and public hearing discussions with the Commissioners. The final report from the PC is due 30 June 2024.

ICPA (Aust) submitted this issue amongst other ECEC staffing policy to the Consultation Paper for Jobs and Skills Australia's Early Childhood, Education and Care Capacity Study in January 2024. This consultation will continue through until the final report is due in May 2024.

### **Mobile Early Learning Services**

The lack of surety of funding to maintain mobile early learning services in rural and remote Australia has been raised at every opportunity. Correspondence went to Minister Aly in September 2023, outlining members' issues with and need for mobile early learning services. The minister's reply outlined plans to consider all recommendations from the various reviews completed in 2022/2023/2024 as detailed earlier in this report.

ICPA (Aust) continues to submit member's issues with the lack of mobile early learning services at every opportunity.

The lack of surety of funding for mobile early learning services has features significantly in submissions and consultation with the Productivity Commission's review of ECEC.

ICPA (Aust) also submitted this issue to the Consultation Paper for Jobs and Skills Australia's Early Childhood, Education and Care Capacity Study in January 2024.

### **Working Holiday Maker Visa**

The inclusion of distance education tutors and nannies on the eligible employment list has been included in all submissions and delegation meetings. Correspondence outlining this request was sent to the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, The Hon Andrew Giles MP in September 2023. A follow up letter was sent in February 2024 following no response from the minister on this issue.

ICPA (Aust) has raised this issue in its submission to the Productivity Commission into Early Childhood Education Care and Public Hearing discussions with the Commissioners.

ICPA (Aust) also submitted this issue to the Consultation Paper for Jobs and Skills Australia's Early Childhood, Education and Care Capacity Study in January 2024.

### **Lack of CCCF (Community Child Care Fund) for rural and remote ECEC centres**

The lack of adequate funding to cover extra operational costs of rural and remote ECEC centres has featured heavily in the advocacy this year.

Correspondence went to Minister Aly in September 2023, outlining members' issues with insufficient funding of remote and very remote Early Childhood Services. A reply received in October 2023 outlined plans to consider recommendations from the comprehensive review of ECEC.

Minister Aly's advisor met with ICPA (Aust) in October 2023 and February 2024 and continue to reassure our members that they are committed to reforming ECEC to make it more accessible and affordable for families.

The Federal Department of Education (Department of Education) undertook a review of the Community Child Care Fund Restricted (CCCFR) grant to examine how the grant is meeting its goals to:

- improve early childhood development outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children
- increase workforce participation by vulnerable and disadvantaged families.

As part of this review, Deloitte Access Economics consulted with a broad range of stakeholders across government and non-government organisations to ensure a broad range of perspectives were considered across the review's research and overall findings.

ICPA (Aust) participated in an interview to give any feedback around the CCCFR grant, as well as broader opportunities to ensure that all children across Australia have access to safe, affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care. Even though Deloitte were informed that ICPA (Aust) policy is focused on CCCF and not the Restricted program, as a national body committed to advocating for children and students in rural and remote Australia, Deloitte wanted to get our overall feedback on funding of ECEC centres in rural and remote Australia which was a great opportunity to detail this issue.

The Productivity Commission's interim report delivered in November 2023 outlined the many issues with funding ECEC centres in thin rural and remote markets. They are committed to making recommendations that prevent short falls in funding. The PC acknowledged that in the pathway to universal care improvements are needed to the CCCF.

The suggestion has been made on page 49 of the Draft report from the Productivity Commission, that an ECEC Commission could have responsibility for advising on the need and where funding should be available through a redesigned CCCF. There have been many suggestions of components of ECEC funding should be improved on pages 52-55.



ICPA (Aust) submitted this issue of rural and remote ECEC centre funding amongst other ECEC policy to the Consultation Paper for Jobs and Skills Australia's Early Childhood, Education and Care Capacity Study in January 2024.

### **Flexibility in legislation for rural and remote Family Day Care**

Correspondence went to Minister Aly in September 2023, outlining suggestions for changes to the Family Day Care Legislation. A reply received in October 2023 outlined plans to analyse and consider all recommendations from the various reviews of ECEC as detailed earlier in this report.

This solution along with a request for it to be discussed at an Education Ministers Meeting (EMM) was tabled during delegations with Minister for Education the Hon Jason Clare MP and Minister Aly's staff in October 2023 and February 2024. Minister Aly's staff continue to assure our members that they are committed to reforming ECEC to make it more accessible and affordable for families.

This suggestion was also raised in the submission and during the public hearing with the PC in February as an interim measure that could have positive impact on availability of rural and remote ECEC. The PC requested further information about this solution during the public hearing discussion and the motion explanation was forwarded.

ICPA (Aust) submitted this issue amongst other ECEC staffing policy to the Consultation Paper for Jobs and Skills Australia's Early Childhood, Education and Care Capacity Study in January 2024.

*Portfolio Leader- Julia Broad*

## **Rural Schools Portfolio**

At the post conference Federal Council meeting the Rural Schools and School Travel portfolio was separated into two separate portfolios with two councillors to lead each one separately.

We thank Minister Clare for including ICPA (Aust) as a stakeholder in the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) Ministerial Reference Group. The National School Reform Agreement is a joint agreement between the commonwealth, states and territories to lift student outcomes across Australian Schools.

<https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/review-consultations/ministerial-reference-group>

Federal Council participated online and in person in these discussions and look forward to continued involvement.

A Summary report can be found here: <https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/better-and-fairer-education-system-consultation-paper>

The above report echoes the concerns of many members. Attraction and retention of teachers in our rural, remote and regional schools is difficult due to the complexities of the environment they find themselves in. The report acknowledges that some schools find it hard to attract and retain skilled teachers, these schools are often in rural, regional, and remote locations.

The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (December 2022) was developed by all education ministers across Australia. This plan is well underway and is designed to attract teachers in all areas of education, both in the

metropolitan and rural areas. There are five priority areas – two that deal directly with improving teacher supply and keeping the teachers we have.

ICPA (Aust) is encouraged that all governments are finally recognising the shortage of teachers in our schools and are putting plans in place to address this worldwide concern. Unfortunately, it is rural and remote schools that are often at the wrong end of the supply chain when teachers are deciding which school best meets their needs and metropolitan schools are often favoured over rural and remote schools for teaching placements.

### **Incentivise experienced teachers into rural, regional & remote positions**

The Rural Schools portfolio received one motion from the Goldfields Eyre branch in Western Australia at the Federal Conference in Darwin in 2023.

A letter was sent to the Minister for Education, Hon Jason Clare MP in October 2023 acknowledging the December 2022 Education Ministers' Action Plan to address the national teacher shortage and that government have recognised the unique needs and made this a priority for regional, rural and remote areas.

ICPA (Aust) requested that the federal government run an incentive program to attract experienced teachers to rural, regional, and remote schools, similar to that recently implemented by Rural Health Outreach Fund (RHOF). This program could be run in line with some of the current state and territory programs which would in time assist with the attraction and retention of experienced teachers for our geographically isolated students.

Assistant Minister for Education, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm replied on behalf of Minister Clare. In this reply, Senator Chisholm mentioned the recently announced Commonwealth Teaching Scholarship Program and special measures to reduce the HELP debt for teachers in very remote areas of Australia.

More information on these programs can be found on the following links.

<https://www.education.gov.au/teaching-scholarships> <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-loan-program/reduction-help-debts-teachers-very-remote-areas>

He also explained that addressing teacher shortage is a national priority, state and territory governments are responsible for employing teachers and may also have initiatives in place to attract and retain teachers in rural and remote communities. Some of these initiatives may have similarities to RHOF and Senator Chisholm encouraged ICPA (Aust) to reach out to the state and territory governments with our concerns.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to follow the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and the National School Reform Agreement. We invite members to contact Federal Council for any further information.

*Portfolio Leader- Naomi Obst*

## **School Travel Portfolio**

The School Travel Portfolio has continued the advocacy for students living in rural and remote locations who are required to travel for their education throughout 2023 and into 2024. At the 2023 Federal Conference held in Darwin two motions were presented relating to School Travel.

### **Student Concessional Fares**

Student concessional fares continue to be a topic of concern for many of our members. Since the pandemic, the climate of very high airfares and an unusually high demand for air travel has seen airfares continue to rise and, in many cases, they are now increasingly expensive than fares pre-pandemic.

In October 2023 the portfolio team issued letters to all major domestic Airlines within Australia requesting they introduce capped fares for students from rural and remote areas when flying to and returning home from boarding school.

In early November, ICPA (Aust) was contacted by the Senior Manager, Government and Public Affairs, Qantas Airways Limited Chris Kwong in response to this letter. ICPA (Aust) has since been in a number of conversations with Mr Kwong, and he and his team are developing a new flyer to help ICPA members with their understanding of the current Resident fares program.

At the request of Mr Kwong in December the Student Travel portfolio sent out a survey to ascertain which flights were being accessed by our members and which flight routes had since been cancelled (due to covid) but were still needed. ICPA (Aust) has shared this information with Mr Kwong and his team and are looking forward to a favorable outcome.

Federal Council will be inviting Mr Kwong to the 2024 Federal Conference. This will provide him the opportunity to witness for himself the impact that your motion becoming something tangible for rural and remote students would have on our members and their families.

Various programs continue to be available from various airlines and state and territory governments which have assisted with the high cost of airfares for regional, rural and remote students. Federal Council is currently in talks with Qantas in the hope that the airline will recognise the needs of geographically isolated students and that with continued advocacy we will eventually see a Student Concessional Fare from one if not all our domestic airlines.

Federal Council would like to draw members' attention to some of the current programs available:

**REX:** It is pleasing to see that the expansion of the airline REX throughout Australia has enabled the introduction of the "Community Fare." There are various rules that need to be followed in order to qualify which can be found on their website [here](#).

**Qantas** has introduced the "Australian Resident Fares" program which offers residents from Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia discounted domestic economy return airfares from their local regional airport to their nearest capital city or major town. More information can be found [here](#).

**Western Australia:** The Western Australian Government has introduced a Regional Airfare Zone Cap which will extend to June 2025. More information can be found [here](#).

ICPA (Aust) hopes these programs have been beneficial for some members to date. We would especially like to thank those members who completed and returned the survey and shared their experiences. The information collected may have the ability to not only tell stories but also give airlines a realistic number of our rural and remote students using flight as a way of transport for their education.

### **Sensor Devices on School Buses**

Following conference a letter was sent to the Hon Catherine King MP, Minister for Transport concerning this very important issue.

ICPA (Aust) has not received any feedback from the correspondence sent, however we will continue to pursue this concern and raise the issue whenever possible.

For members information, ICPA (Aust) is pleased to draw attention to the Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) - A stricter vehicle safety system for 2023. This includes an alert system that notifies the driver or emergency services if a child has inadvertently been left in a locked car.

According to the ANCAP [Fact Sheet](#) the **Child Presence Detection** system monitors the rear seats and/or doors and provide a visual or audible warning through the vehicle's infotainment system upon exiting, a honk of the car horn, a notification or alert to an app on the driver's mobile phone, or an 'eCall' alert to emergency services. More advanced systems may also have the ability to automatically open the windows of the vehicle or activate the vehicles air conditioning system.

### **Look Before You Lock**

Prior to the return of the 2023 school year, it was pleasing to see that the Queensland Government took steps towards education and awareness that may assist in the prevention of further tragedies, launching a campaign with the catch cry "Look Before you Lock". More information on this initiative can be found [here](#).

### **New Passenger-check alarms in NSW Buses**

Transport for NSW has specified for all new rural and regional buses to be procured through the next generation of Bus Procurement Panel (Panel4) are legally required to have a passenger-check alarm system installed.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to put forward the School Travel Portfolio motions at every opportunity and invite members to contact Federal Council with any further information.

*Portfolio Leader- Jennifer Ruska*

## **Specific Education Needs Portfolio**

Four motions were presented and carried in the Specific Education Needs Portfolio at the 2023 Federal Conference.

### **Federal Funding for Access to Specialists**

Following conference Federal Council wrote to the Minister for Health, Hon Mark Butler MP, recommending that financial assistance and incentives be implemented (or made available) for qualified health graduates to encourage recruitment and retention in rural and remote Australia to ensure children are receiving adequate specialist services and educational and mental health needs are met, following a motion carried at conference by members. In a response, Minister Butler acknowledged the difficulty that many communities are facing in attracting and retaining health professionals to provide local primary care services and outlined a range of current measures which the federal government has in place to attract and retain health workers, including:

- Tripling the bulk billing incentive, to support free GP consultations for 11.6 million children under 16, pensioners and other Commonwealth Concession Card holders along with other measures to address doctor availability, support the viability of general practices, and start to rebuild primary care as the core of an effective, modern healthcare system for all Australians.
- Several different government programs and incentives which doctors practising in rural areas can access including:
  - Workforce Incentives Program - Doctor Stream payments, worth up to \$60,000 per year for very remote areas, increased incentive payments through both the Rural Bulk Billing Incentive (for very remote areas worth up to 190% of the bulk billing rebate received in metropolitan locations) and rural loading of up to 50% on Practice Incentives Program payments, as well as several targeted

training programs and incentives.

- From 1 January 2024, a new Workforce Incentives Program payment - the Rural Advanced Skills payment - will be available to GPs with advanced skills in a range of disciplines (including child health and mental health) that practice in rural and remote locations.
- Further information can be found at [www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/incentives-and-support-for-gps-and-general-practices-in-mm-locations](http://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/incentives-and-support-for-gps-and-general-practices-in-mm-locations).
- The National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People 2020-2030 (Action Plan) outlines the government's approach to improving health outcomes for all children and young people. The Action Plan recognises the difficulties experienced by communities, in accessing health services because of social, geographical and other determinants.
- The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (Children's Strategy) is guiding the federal government's investment for supporting the mental health and wellbeing needs of children and families across Australia. The government is currently implementing several key recommendations in the Children's Strategy, including the creation of a national network of Head to Health Kids Hubs (mental health and wellbeing centres), and providing access to integrated, multidisciplinary care for children 0-12 years and their families with outreach to improve access to regionally dispersed families.

### **MBS item number for telehealth**

Federal Council also corresponded with Minister Butler regarding the need for permanent Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) item numbers for telehealth consultations for Allied Health Services, specialists and consultations, including but not limited to Speech Pathology, Paediatricians and Psychologists, where they are not already available.

In a response the minister explained that the federal government recognises that telehealth can significantly improve access to primary and allied health care services for those living in rural and remote locations. He advised that from 1 January 2022, many of the telehealth services implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were made permanent on the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS), including allied health services by phone and video in relation to chronic disease management, autism, pervasive developmental disorder and disability, allied health follow-up for people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, and mental health. Factsheets that describe the changes to MBS telehealth are available at [www.mbsonline.gov.au](http://www.mbsonline.gov.au). The minister also highlighted that in response to recommendations from the MBS Review Taskforce (Taskforce), from 1 March 2023, several improvements will be made to M10 (face-to-face) and M18 (telehealth equivalent) items of the MBS currently available for children with potential complex Neurodevelopmental Disorders (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder) and other eligible disabilities, including:

- the eligible age limits will be increased from under 13 years old for assessment, and under 15 years old for treatment, to under 25 years of age for both.
- there will be an increase in the number of allied health assessment MBS services from four to eight per lifetime.
- inter-disciplinary referrals between allied professionals will be supported during the assessment phase to facilitate timely diagnosis. Fourth, the list of eligible disabilities will be expanded to include Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Lesch-Nyhan Syndrome & 22q deletion syndrome.
- expansion of access to include stuttering and Speech Sound Disorder to the list of eligible disabilities under these M10 items and this is currently being considered.

The minister also suggested that ICPA (Aust) contact private health insurers seeking benefits be paid to their members. ICPA (Aust) has already contacted Private Healthcare Australia in response to a previous motion seeking that private health insurers recognise the importance of telehealth appointments for geographically isolated children, fund telehealth services beyond COVID-19 and ensure no disparities in refunds between telehealth and face-to-face appointments.

Federal Council would appreciate feedback and case studies from members who experience issues with Medicare telehealth claims in order to substantiate further requests for expanded Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) item numbers for telehealth consultations.

### **Early Childhood Intervention Funding**

Following conference, Federal Council corresponded with Minister for the NDIS, Hon Bill Shorten MP requesting improved access and utilisation of Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) funding, currently managed through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) scheme for geographically isolated children. A response received from Minister Shorten's office acknowledged that support for children with disability and developmental delay was vitally important to have the best start in life and that the minister was committed to improving the experience of the NDIS for children and families. Further, the correspondence agreed that the NDIS plays an important part in providing children with disability and developmental delay the supports they need to meet their milestones and supports work alongside health and education systems with the child and their family to build their capacity and support greater inclusion in community and every day settings, so that each child has opportunities to grow and learn.

The minister's office also acknowledged that more needs to be done to support participants living in remote and geographically isolated areas and in response to this challenge, several measures are in place to address this, including:

- \$7.6 million has been committed in the 2023-24 budget to pilot new opportunities to improve access to supports in remote and First Nations communities, an activity expected to begin by the end of 2023.
- The NDIS commitment to remote participants also includes activities such as the Remote Community Connectors (RCC) and Remote Early Childhood Services (RECS) programs. The RCC Program is geographically expansive and supports 461 remote communities through promoting awareness, understanding and connection between participants, providers and the NDIS. The RECS Program is Kimberley-based and dedicated to supporting children younger than 7 with developmental delay or concern, or disability as early as possible.
- the NDIS Review has been tasked to specifically examine the issues of market and workforce in remote and regional areas and findings from this review will be used to inform the long-term Remote and Very Remote Strategy. The final report from this Review "Working together to deliver the NDIS" was published in December 2023 and can be found here: <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/resources/reports/working-together-deliver-ndis>. Recommendation fourteen of twenty-six referring directly to the need to improve access to supports for remote and First Nations participants and communities.

### **Federally Funded Health Clinics**

Once again, Federal Council corresponded with the Minister for Health, Hon Mark Butler MP on the issue of accessing Commonwealth-funded health care clinics. A response explained that the federal government funds organisations under the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme (IAHP) to provide culturally appropriate, comprehensive primary health care services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and eligibility to access health care services under the IAHP is a matter for individually funded organisations to determine at the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and/or Board level. The IAHP does not prescribe requirements around access, or eligibility of access, to IAHP funded services. It was suggested any grievances or complaints in relation to accessing health services be addressed directly to the CEO or Board of the relevant organisation in the first instance.

*Portfolio Leader- Miffy Waugh*

## Tertiary Portfolio

All the tertiary motions carried at the 2023 Federal Conference and previous unresolved motions have been actioned through letters sent to relevant ministers, members of parliament, senators, and government departments, quarterly meetings with the Department of Education, Services Australia and Department of Social Services, submissions and consultations. Where we have not received official replies at the time of writing, we will follow-up.

### **Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)**

The TAP is available for eligible school leavers from inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote areas who relocate more than 90 minutes by public transport from their family home to undertake a full-time, eligible higher level tertiary education course (Certificate IV or above) following year 12 or equivalent and whose parental income is below \$250 000. The TAP is to assist eligible students with the costs of relocating to undertake tertiary study including start-up expenses, costs of living, direct costs of education or training and the cost of travelling home in semester breaks.

In correspondence to the Minister for Education the Hon Jason Clare MP, ICPA (Aust) recommended the expansion of the TAP to include those rural and remote students who take a gap year and ensuring that TAP payments are paid in a timely manner (ideally prior to commencement date) to assist with the high upfront costs of relocation. Pleasingly recommendations from the Australian Universities Accord Final Report, to which ICPA (Aust) provided a submission, included these two recommendations:

- removal of the requirement to commence eligible course within 12 months of leaving year 12 and
- amend the timing of payments to provide timely assistance with the cost of relocation for tertiary study before moving.

### **Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships (RRES)**

The RRES program closed for new applicants after the 2022 round. An ongoing commitment to a permanent equity-based scholarship program is required, particularly for undergraduate tertiary and Vocational Education and Training (VET) students, to assist with the financial costs to undertake their course of study and relevant internship and to increase the access to educational opportunity, engagement, participation and attainment of students from regional and remote areas.

A response from the Assistant Minister for Education, and Assistant Minister for Regional Development, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm did not confirm a plan for a similar program.

### **Recommendations from the *Education in remote and complex environments Report***

The *Education in remote and complex environments Report* – Recommendations 9 and 12 relate to the implementation of recommendations and actions from the Halsey and Naphine Reviews to ensure all rural and remote tertiary students are able to access their course of choice. The implementation of these additional recommendations would further reduce the disparity in access to a tertiary education and ensure equity and improved participation, achievement and affordability for rural and remote students aspiring to and undertaking tertiary education including:

- A Review of the current government income support policies and arrangements for students that relocate from the family home to access further study or training and improvement of income support information.
- The provision of greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for Independent Youth Allowance:
  - access to Youth Allowance as an independent for rural and remote students who successfully complete their first year of tertiary study externally if they relocate to continue study for a further minimum of one year,

- the reduction of the earnings required for rural and remote students who are qualifying for independent Youth Allowance under the Concessional Workforce test and
- the review of the changes to the parental means test cut-offs for independent Youth Allowance under the Concessional Workforce test.
- Improvements to the quality and range of student support services including pastoral care, mentoring programs and academic support.
- Improvement and support of high quality career information and advice.
- Improved availability and information on accommodation support for relocating tertiary and training students.
- Improved access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet services.
- Improved access to high quality VET programs in regional, rural and remote Australia.
- Support for tertiary providers to implement tailored initiatives for those experiencing rural hardship.

We have had a response from the Assistant Minister for Education, and Assistant Minister for Regional Development, Senator the Hon Anthony Chisholm reassuring that the federal government is working on areas identified by the Naphthine Review such as student support services, geographical classification, internet access and affordability, Year 12 retention and career mapping for rural, regional and remote students. The Regional Education Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash has also been briefed on all tertiary motions and recommendations as these issues come under her responsibility including communications issues for tertiary students.

ICPA (Aust) continues to urge the federal government to implement all of the recommendations made in the Report, which is available here:

[www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report](http://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report)

### **Regional University Centres**

Regional University Centres, provide physical, campus-like spaces and supports for students to access courses at university or vocational education and training while they remain closer to or within their community, social and family supports. The government has committed to investing in the Regional University Centres with a further 20 announced at the end of 2023 and further support recommended in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report released recently.

### **HELP Debt reduction to all rural and remote health professionals**

The current scheme to reduce the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt for rural doctors and nurse practitioners needs to be expanded to include all health professionals including speech pathologists and those who work with geographically isolated children with specific education needs in rural, remote or very remote areas of Australia. This would assist in incentivising these health professionals who are vital in rural and remote locations to support the educational and developmental well-being of children, particularly in the early assessment, identification and management of those with specific needs.

A response on behalf of the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP, reiterated the federal government's commitment to improving access to health services and the recruitment and retention of medical and health professional staff across Australia. The current HELP debt reduction for doctors and nurse practitioners is still in the early stages of the program and at this stage there is no plan to expand it but it will be reviewed in 2025 and 2028. This evaluation process will assist in whether an expansion will attract and retain other health professionals to rural and remote Australia.

Information on several ongoing programs and initiatives particularly for the rural health workforce can be found at: [www.health.gov.au/topics/rural-health-workforce/programs](http://www.health.gov.au/topics/rural-health-workforce/programs)



### **HECS-HELP Debt Repayments**

Members expressed concerns relating to the repayment of the HELP loans on completion of a student's course. The HELP Policy Team within the Department of Education explained that the HELP loan repayments are made through the income taxation system and HECS debt repayments are not credited to an individual's HELP account at the time they are withheld and forwarded by the employer because the compulsory repayment for a financial year can only be calculated once an individual completes their tax return. The PAYG objective is to allow an individual to meet their tax obligations when they fall due and reduce the likelihood of a large tax bill when individuals complete their tax return.

There are recommendations in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report which will address these issues:

- Reducing the burden of HELP loans by introducing a fairer and simpler indexation and repayment arrangements.
- Reducing student contributions on high-cost courses e.g. humanities, communications and moving towards a student contribution system based on projected potential lifetime earnings.
- Changing the timing of indexation for HELP loans so amounts withheld are accounted for before indexation is applied.

### **Availability of 'Certificate IV in School Based Education' in all tertiary institutions**

The inclusion and availability of a 'Certificate IV in School Based Education Support' in tertiary institutions across Australia will support the role of geographically isolated distance education home tutors who educate children enrolled in distance education with the understanding, knowledge and skills to manage the home distance education school room, so they can effectively deliver the components of the school day and strategies to support the child's education.

In correspondence received from Universities Australia, it was pointed out that the majority of universities do not award qualifications at the Certificate IV level whereas dual sector universities offering both higher education and VET courses do. Universities Australia have passed our letter onto these universities. Dual sector universities include:

- Charles Darwin University
- Central Queensland University
- Federation University
- RMIT
- Swinburne University of Technology
- Victoria University

### **Diplomas and ECEC Degrees more accessible**

Early Childhood diplomas and degrees need to be made more accessible by offering targeted programs and incentives including financial support, scholarships, flexible learning options, professional development opportunities, mentorship programs and community engagement initiatives to encourage early childhood educators to work in rural and remote communities and to address the shortage of Early Childhood educators in rural and remote Australia.

Universities Australia have made recommendations to the Australian Universities Accord Review concerning teacher education including Early Childhood Education. The Accord has recommended increased and improved access to higher education for regional and remote students including students studying education to stay in regional or remote areas for their studies and placement.

The Minister for Education has announced the commencement of the Commonwealth Teaching Scholarships designed to address the teacher workforce shortages including early childhood teaching. Over the next five years, 1000 scholarships worth up to \$40,000 each will be allocated annually. Recipients of a Commonwealth Teaching Scholarship will need to commit to work as a teacher in government schools or government-run early learning settings, for the equivalent duration of their teaching degree.

More information can be found here: [www.education.gov.au/teaching-scholarships](http://www.education.gov.au/teaching-scholarships)

### **Australian Universities Accord Final Report**

On Sunday 25 February 2024 the Australian Universities Accord Final Report was released outlining 47 recommendations to reform and improve the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of Australia's Higher Education system. ICPA (Aust) contributed to the Australian Universities Accord with a submission and consultation with the Regional Education Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash.

Key issues addressed in ICPA (Aust)'s submission included Regional University Centres, online learning and services to support this mode, Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships or equivalent program and financial assistance; Tertiary Access Payment (TAP), Relocation Scholarships, Youth Allowance including eligibility criteria, liquid assets waiting period, rent assistance, HELP debt and transitioning to tertiary education.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the recommendations, particularly those specific to the rural and remote cohort that will address some of the issues that ICPA members have been requesting for a long time specifically:

- Financial Support for unpaid work placements.
- Increasing the Parental Income Free Area for dependent Youth Allowance.
- Expanding the income support eligibility by providing pro rata student payments to students who study part-time.
- Further review by the Minister for Social Services and the Minister for Education:
  - Focus on students with the most need with eligibility criteria regularly monitored.
  - Allowing students to undertake reasonable amount of work while studying – reviewing arrangements such as the income bank.
  - Eligibility criteria for youth payments should take into account regional students have specific needs including high relocation costs and that they are effectively independent once they have left home.
- Needs-based funding model that takes into account the location of higher education delivery.
- Continued expansion of Regional University Study hubs for both VET and higher education.

It is pleasing to see regional, rural and remote tertiary education has been again identified as under-represented group and separate priority area.

The Final Report and Summary report can be viewed here: [www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report](http://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report).

ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for rural and remote students to ensure these recommendations are implemented.

The following issues were presented as motions and actioned but to date we have had no response:

### **A review of the Liquid Assets Waiting Period**

Rural and remote students who have proven their independence through part-time work or earnings and have been assessed as eligible for Youth Allowance as an independent, require their saved income to fund the relocation and ongoing costs of living and attending university including high set-up costs associated with relocation: travel, accommodation set-up costs (rental housing bond, electricity connection or residential

college fees), living expenses and communication (telephone, internet) along with the rising costs of basic living commodities. Applicants who have saved funds over the \$5500 are penalised for having these saved funds when the Liquid Assets Waiting Period is applied. This is impacting the ability of rural and remote students to meet these high up-front set up, relocation costs and ongoing living costs. The Liquid Assets Waiting Period should be removed for rural and remote students who have fulfilled the self-supporting criteria for Youth Allowance as an independent and who have to relocate to access tertiary education.

### **HELP Debt Reduction for all Rural and Remote Teachers**

The extension of the current HELP debt reduction to include teachers who commit to 'rural' not just very remote areas will assist in the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers to these areas, improve the teacher shortage and the educational outcomes for students.

ICPA (Aust) suggests this reduction in HELP debt by either the waiver of the indexation on accumulated HELP debt or the reduction of accumulated HELP debt could be pro-rated based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Remoteness Structure.

### **Independent Youth Allowance (YA) Parental Income Limit**

Members once again requested the removal of the Parental Income Test from the eligibility criteria for rural and remote students qualifying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the workforce participation criteria. ICPA (Aust) continues to raise that this Youth Allowance category recognises these rural and remote students have earned the required amount in a 14-month period and proved their independence from their parents, therefore their parental income should not be a criteria.

### **Rent Assistance**

Despite the recent increase to Rent Assistance in the 2023 Federal Budget, rural and remote students relocating to major regional and large cities for tertiary studies are finding accommodation is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, the rental market is very competitive and accommodation costs are rising significantly. Rent Assistance has not kept pace with the increases in rental costs and does not reflect the real living costs for this cohort who have to live away from home in order to access a tertiary education and the actual rental market. Affordable rent is paramount to these students' retention and success at tertiary level and increased support is critical.

ICPA (Aust) applauds the federal government's continued commitment and prioritisation of Higher Education in Australia and its focus on rural and remote tertiary education. The introduction of all the above measures would ensure equity of access for rural and remote students to a tertiary education. ICPA (Aust) will continue to pursue and raise the profile of these current, previous and ongoing issues to ensure our rural and remote students have the opportunity to access, participate and complete a tertiary education of their choice commensurate with their aspirations and career plans. Federal Council will inform members of any developments as they come to hand.

*Portfolio Leader- Kate Thompson*

## Training Portfolio

Following an informative presentation at the 2023 Federal Conference on the capability and resilience of rural and remote students as lifelong learners, four motions were presented and carried in the Training Portfolio. The 2023-24 Council year has been focused on the current and previous motions, which continue to highlight the difficulties rural and remote students face when choosing to continue with their post school education as apprentices and trainees.

### **Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)**

ICPA (Aust) wrote to the Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP with recommendations for the expansion of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) criteria to include Australian Apprentices who must relocate from a rural or remote location to access their apprenticeship. Australian Apprentices relocating to undertake training face similar relocation and set up costs (travel, bond/rent, uniforms) as students relocating to undertake tertiary study. It is imperative that apprentices are well supported financially to attract rural and remote students to take up apprenticeships and to increase retention and completions rates.

Our letter was forwarded to the Assistant Minister for Education and the Assistant Minister for Regional Development the Hon Anthony Chisholm to reply.

The Assistant Minister's response to ICPA (Aust) cited the government's commitment to a 12-month review of Australia's higher education system, the Australian Universities Accord (the Accord). Further that one of the Terms of Reference for this review focused specifically on supporting greater access and participation for students from underrepresented backgrounds, including students from regional and remote areas.

The Accord Panel held a consultation facilitated by the Regional Education Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash to hear directly from regional voices on the unique challenges of regional higher education delivery. ICPA (Aust) participated and highlighted that the eligibility criteria of the TAP can be a barrier to some regional students, specifically, flagging that eligibility for TAP should not include parental income, and should extend to students who choose to take a gap year, and who are undertaking an apprenticeship.

TAP for Australian Apprentices remained unaddressed in the Assistant Minister's response but has continued to be raised by ICPA (Aust) at every opportunity.

It was pleasing to see in the February 2024 release of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report that the many of the unique needs of rural and remote students have been considered in the recommendations, although it did not address the eligibility of Australian Apprentices to the TAP

### **Australian Apprenticeship Support Networks (AASNs)**

ICPA (Aust)'s advocacy following the 2023 conference combined Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) issues in a letter to the Minister for Skills and Training, the Hon Brendan O'Connor MP, making the following recommendations:

- The implementation of regular comprehensive audits of AASNs to ensure that the delivery and support intended by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) is actually received by rural and remote apprentices/trainees.
- That DEWR mandate specialist support structures for regional, remote and rural apprentices and trainees from within the AASNs.

It was also requested that there be trained rural and remote specialist support staff within the AASNs who are contactable by employers, trainers and apprentices/trainees (and their families if the contract is signed before the apprentice is 18 years of age) in rural and remote areas, and for those who must relocate and live

independently from their family to undertake their on and off-the-job training.

ICPA (Aust) has recommended that assistance for the rural and remote apprentice requires mandatory actions from the AASNs including (but not limited to):

- visits to the workplace and/or training facility to check that the apprentices are being suitably trained, educated and supported.
- documented semester reviews on all parties involved.
- knowledge and assistance with state and federal support programs.
- knowledge and assistance with state and federal financial support such as the Living Away From Home Allowance (LAFHA).
- follow-up contact and interviews should the apprentice/trainee or employer terminate the contract prior to its completion.
- knowledge and documentation of the residential addresses of apprentices - it is concerning that some employers and trainers do not know and subsequently do not support apprentices who have relocated vast distances from family and supports to undertake the working and training aspects of the Australian Apprenticeship.

ICPA members expressed concerns that in their rural communities there are many examples of minimal AASN support, contact or follow-up for apprentices, trainees and their employers once they commence a training contract.

To date ICPA (Aust) has not received a response from the minister.

On the back of the 2022 Skills Summit the government reviewed the non-financial supports available to Australian Apprentices during 2023, focusing on apprenticeship supports from contracted ASSNs. It is pleasing to see the 2024 ASSN Contracts which commence on July 1, include focus on four new key client groups:

1. Women in male-dominated trades,
2. First Nations Australian Apprentices,
3. Australian Apprentices with disability and
4. Australian Apprentices located in remote Australia.

As part of the above review, ICPA (Aust) lodged a [submission](#) to the Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports Discussion Paper inquiry and also consulted extensively with the department on the Future Directions consultation process.

A much-awaited Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System has recently been announced by the government. We encourage members to view the terms of reference [here](#) and to individually submit or offer case studies to support ICPA (Aust)'s submission. ICPA (Aust) will be making a submission to the Review containing the 2023 and previous motions.

### **Trade Support Loan Scheme**

ICPA (Aust) wrote to the Hon Brendan O'Connor MP, Minister for Skills and Training recommending an increase to the discount of Trade Support Loans on trade completion from 20% to 30% for rural and remote-based Australian Apprentices. This adjustment to the criteria would not only be of benefit to apprentices but would also assist in the attraction and retention of apprentices in rural and remote areas thus boosting local economies.

Minister O'Connor responded with the following:

*“While we are not considering changes to the 20% discount at this time, additional support will be available to Australian Apprentices through the upcoming Trade Support Loan legislation changes, (up to \$5,000) which are intended to increase access to the scheme for important cost-of-living support, including for those living in rural and remote locations.*

*From early 2024, ... more apprentices and trainees will be able to access... Australian Apprenticeship Support Loans, with the program expanding eligibility to include non-trade apprenticeship critical skills areas, such as aged care. The Australian Skills Priority List will be utilised as the source for occupation eligibility, ensuring relevancy and timeliness in the identification of current and future demand areas.*

*In addition to the loans themselves, available supports relevant to rural and remote apprentices include:*

- *The New Energy Apprenticeship Support Payment which provides up to \$10,000 over the course of an apprenticeship for those training in an eligible occupation in the clean energy sector.*
- *The Australian Apprentice Training Support Payment which provides up to 2 years of direct financial support to Australian Apprentices commencing an Australian Apprenticeship in priority occupations experiencing national skills shortage.*
- *The Living Away From Home Allowance*
- *In-Training Support Services*

*For further detail on the above, please see [www.apprenticeships.gov.au](http://www.apprenticeships.gov.au)*

We recommend rural and remote apprentices, trainees and their families look carefully at the government's Australian Apprenticeships site to ensure they are familiar with the Australian Apprenticeship Priority List and the updated Incentives System. Australian Apprenticeship Support Network Providers are tasked with establishing assistance but may need prompting for specific rural and remote supports available.

All issues within the Training Portfolio continue to be raised through every avenue available to ensure all rural and remote young Australians have the opportunity to pursue a VET pathway, apprenticeship or traineeship of their choice, regardless of their geographical location.

*Portfolio Leader- Anna McCorkle*

## Miscellaneous

There were two miscellaneous motions carried at the 2023 conference. One was a thank you to Federal Council which was gratefully received. The other was a Federal Council motion for the organisation to move from a fixed membership model to a rolling membership model, enabling the utilisation of the 'automatic renewal' feature as an option for members, reducing issues around renewing memberships and simplifying processes for ICPA volunteers who manage the back of house memberships and database.

Moving from a fixed membership model (Jan 1<sup>st</sup> to Dec 1<sup>st</sup>) to a rolling model where membership expires 12 months from the date of payment was successfully introduced for the 2024 membership year. This change is part of some significant upgrades to the website. However, the option for members to set up a recurring

Payment option (where membership automatically renews every 12 months) has been delayed. Once the ICPA web developer had completed the upgrades and testing commenced, a bug was identified in the recurring payment option, which has been reported to the module developers. Our web developer is doing



everything he can to address the issue as soon as possible. Members will be updated once this option is available and running smoothly on the website.

## Conclusion

As outlined above, since the 2023 Federal Conference, Council has undertaken a variety of actions to pursue the current and previous issues that were raised through members' motions. These include correspondence, submissions, media releases and face to face and virtual meetings with politicians, government departments and organisations.

All portfolios will continue to follow up on those motions where no response has been received and raise the profile of our members' issues through all available avenues. Federal Council remains committed to advocating on behalf of members. We will also keep members informed of any development following this motion update.

Federal Council welcomes all members to the 2024 Federal Conference in Sydney on 24 and 25 July. Please do not hesitate to contact portfolio leaders if you have questions regarding the issues outlined in this document or in relation to formulating motions for the upcoming Federal Conference.

Contact details can be found [here](#). Updates on various lobbies and other related issues are regularly posted on the ICPA (Aust) [Facebook](#) page and listed on the website at [www.icpa.com.au](http://www.icpa.com.au).