



ICPA Briefing Papers

Tertiary

March 2021



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Introduction

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation working on behalf of our members for equity of access to appropriate education for children living outside metropolitan areas.

Engaging in tertiary education at an institution of their choice should be an option for all Australian students who have the ability, ambition, motivation and desire to pursue their goals regardless of socio-economic status, geographic location or circumstances.

Rural and remote students continue to be under-represented at tertiary level and have lower participation and completion rates compared to their metropolitan counterparts. They experience multiple challenges to access tertiary education which in turn influences their tertiary education aspirations, access, retention and success. The single greatest barrier to rural students' access to tertiary education is cost.

This briefing paper provides information on the key issues impacting engagement in tertiary education for rural and remote students. The recommendations herein seek to ensure rural and remote tertiary students have access to a high quality tertiary education commensurate to their needs and aspirations.

Summary

Key Points for Rural and Remote Tertiary Students include:

- The under-representation of rural and remote students in higher education.
- Barriers to accessing higher education include cost, socioeconomic status, distance, school experiences (interest in pursuing higher education), preparedness and aspirations. These are key considerations if a student can take up the option of tertiary education.

ICPA (Aust) believes that the following issues need to be addressed in order to alleviate these barriers for Rural and Remote Tertiary Students:

1. Appropriate financial assistance for Relocation and ongoing costs – the high cost of relocation and ongoing costs such as securing accommodation, travel to the place of study initially and travel home during the year and living away from home, upfront and ongoing living expenses.

2. Access to financial assistance

- Youth Allowance eligibility barriers including parental income limits.
- Centrelink Processes
 - Staff should be appropriately and well trained to provide accurate information and assistance in relation to allowances particularly Youth Allowance.
 - There is a need to address the issue of unacceptably lengthy waiting times when making contact with Centrelink.



Recommendations

ISSUE 1

APPROPRIATE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR RELOCATION AND ONGOING LIVING COSTS

To further their education, rural and remote students must relocate from home to access tertiary studies. The ability to access a tertiary education is one of the key considerations in determining whether a student can take up this option and the greatest barrier rural and remote students face is the lack of adequate financial means to fund this access. Appropriate financial assistance to relocate and live away from home is imperative to increase the engagement of rural and remote students at tertiary level and to address the under-representation of this cohort.

The findings outlined in a research report conducted by ICPA (Aust) - Tertiary Access Research, May 2013[1], found that the huge financial cost of relocation along with travel distance were the major barriers to accessing a tertiary education for rural and remote students.

The logistics for these students relocating to an institution offering tertiary studies of their choice include the high up-front set-up and ongoing costs associated with relocation from the family home: travel to the place of study initially and back home during the year, securing accommodation, relocation set-up costs (rental housing bond, electricity connection or residential college fees), ongoing living expenses and communication (telephone, internet) along with the rising costs of basic living commodities, all impact on rural and remote student access and often involves expenditure beyond their financial means. These costs are borne not only in the first year of a student's course but are recurrent over the duration of their tertiary education.

The current income support mechanisms for eligible students (Youth Allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY) and part-time work that many students undertake, contribute to supplementing the living costs of students once they can actually access their chosen tertiary institution but do not adequately recognise the additional costs incurred by all rural and remote students having to relocate each year to access higher education. While the costs associated with relocating have been recognised through the provision of Relocation Scholarships, only students receiving Youth Allowance as a dependent have benefited from this payment. Until recently there has been no specific standalone allowance which addresses the unique costs incurred by geographically isolated students when they must relocate and live away from home in order to access tertiary study, based solely on the fact that these students do not have access to tertiary study where they live and must relocate and live away from home in order to access this study.

[1] <https://icpa.com.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/Tertiary%20Research%202013.pdf>

TERTIARY ACCESS ALLOWANCE

ICPA (Aust) has been advocating for a Tertiary Access Allowance for many years and is immensely grateful for the inception of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) as part of the Job Ready Graduates Plan which serves to provide financial assistance to rural and remote students in the form of a \$5000 payment to assist eligible outer regional or remote students with the costs of relocating for study. However, there are some fundamental provisions which need to be included in the Tertiary Access Payment in order to address the aforementioned barriers for rural and remote students.

Despite recent changes to the Youth Allowance criteria, designed to assist rural and remote students, and the commencement of the Tertiary Access Payment in 2021, these measures still fall short in providing the well documented assistance needed by all geographically isolated students to relocate for tertiary study. ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for the introduction of a Tertiary Access Allowance or an enhanced version of the Tertiary Access Payment, equal to the Relocation Scholarship, for those rural and remote students who must relocate and live away from home to access a tertiary education and not be contingent on the receipt of Youth Allowance as a dependent.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the provision of this allowance should:

- Be available to all geographically isolated students regardless of whether or not they are a recipient of student income support payments such as Youth Allowance.
- Be an annual payment for the duration of the student's full-time course.
- Be equivalent to the Relocation Scholarship (2020 - \$4626 in the first year in which you are required to live away from home to undertake full time study in an approved scholarship course, \$2314 in the second and third years and \$1156 in the fourth or subsequent years).

Recommendation

That the Federal Government maintains and enhances the current financial assistance for rural and remote students who must relocate from home to access tertiary education.



ISSUE 2

ACCESSING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

PARENTAL INCOME LIMIT FOR YOUTH ALLOWANCE

Dependent Students: ICPA (Aust) welcomed the changes to Youth Allowance (YA) eligibility criteria for dependent students (removal of the Family Assets Test and the Family Actual Means Test and the changes to the Family Pool), however, the current parental income limit (\$54677 to receive the full Youth Allowance payment if only one child is in the family pool) is extremely low.

When rural and remote students need to relocate from their home to access tertiary education, it can be extremely challenging for families to financially support these students. This situation is further exacerbated when families are also supporting other dependent family members either through tertiary education or compulsory education away from home impacting their financial capacity.

Recommendation

That the parental income limit for dependent students applying for Youth Allowance be immediately increased to reflect the actual cost for families of supporting a dependent student at tertiary level.



Independent Students: ICPA (Aust) welcomed the increase to the parental income cut-off limit from \$150,000 to \$160,000 and the family pool arrangements of \$10,000 for each additional dependent child in the family, for those regional, rural and remote students who are applying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the part-time work or earnings criteria, that commenced 1 January 2019.

However, when students apply for Youth Allowance as an independent, parental income is still assessed despite these students having proven their independence by working for 14 months and earning the required amount.

Many rural incomes are not reflective of a family's ability to support their children through a tertiary education and this is exacerbated by the unpredictability of rural incomes particularly with the current rural economic climate. Unpredictable weather, commodity prices, bushfires, drought, floods and other rural hardships which are entirely uncontrollable and unpredictable in nature and impact on family income and expenditure and financial implications can last for years. For example, commodity prices and forced sale of stock due to drought can exaggerate incomes in one given year and this may not be reflective of income in the future for many of these struggling rural families and businesses. Often this income may need to carry a rural family through several years when times are difficult, and no further income is received.

If rural and remote students are assessed as independent, ICPA (Aust) believes their parental income should not be considered. Those students, who must relocate to access a tertiary education should be able to access income support in their own right and should be considered independent of their parents for the purpose of accessing financial assistance once they commence their tertiary studies.

Recommendation

That the Parental Income Test be removed from the eligibility criteria for rural and remote students qualifying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the workforce participation criteria.



Tertiary students and their families from geographically isolated locations face unique disadvantages and barriers to accessing a tertiary education, indeed rural and remote students continue to be under-represented in higher education. While ICPA (Aust) acknowledges and appreciates the current support mechanisms in place to assist these students, it is essential they are recognised as a separate and unique disadvantage group and that support continues and is improved to address these unique disadvantages.

Recommendation

Students isolated from tertiary education due to location, must be recognised as a separate disadvantaged group when being assessed for support mechanisms such as Youth Allowance to address the distinctly unique requirements of rural and remote students.

CENTRELINK PROCESSES

Issues and difficulties associated with making contact with Centrelink in order to access and clarify information regarding Youth Allowance and other Centrelink allowances have been identified by members as a significant barrier for rural and remote tertiary students.

ICPA (Aust) members report lengthy wait times, calls being answered by general Centrelink staff not conversant in Youth Allowance criteria and applications, misinformation being given and callers not being forwarded onto specialist staff in the particular payment type such as Youth Allowance. This is negatively impacting on our rural and remote students. ICPA (Aust) is aware of cases where applicants have “given up” furthering their application because they have found it too hard or have been given incorrect information that indicates they are ineligible when in fact they are eligible.

Staff should be appropriately and well trained to provide correct information and assistance around allowances particularly Youth Allowance.

It is imperative that personnel at Centrelink Service Centres and Call Centres are well trained to provide appropriate service and assistance for students. Staff must be able to competently answer student-related queries on the Youth and Student line (132490) to assist student and apprentice applicants who are enquiring about or applying for Centrelink allowances including Youth Allowance. It is important to bear in mind that accessing Service Centres can require lengthy and time-consuming trips for rural and remote students as they often live large distances from the closest centre.

Addressing issues with unacceptably lengthy waiting times when making contact with Centrelink.

ICPA (Aust) suggests a solution to the lengthy wait times experienced is the establishment of a call-back service for Centrelink related Call Lines such as Assistance for Isolated Children and Youth Allowance, so that callers can hold their place in the queue and receive a call back when they reach the top of the queue. A call back system works very well in other areas and could result in callers being able to speak to a trained Youth Allowance staff member when they were available.

Recommendation

That issues associated with Centrelink processes in accessing and clarifying information regarding Youth Allowance and other Centrelink Allowances, identified as significant barriers for rural and remote tertiary students, are addressed.